

A Self-quest of Hero's Mythological Pattern

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ABSTRACT: In *Surfacing*, the narrator's journey of returning to her hometown to search for her missing father also symbolizes a journey to search for and rediscover her self-identity in nature. This journey follows the same pattern as Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousands Faces*: separation, initiation and return.

KEYWORD: Separation; Initiation; Return

1 INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* is contemporary female Bildungsromane. (Bildungsromane means a novel whose principal subject is the moral, psychological, and intellectual development of a usually youthful main character). It exemplifies patterns of personal transformation which are strikingly similar to the pattern of heroic quest in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousands Faces*. In his opinion, the hero's mythological journey is described as a three-fold process of separation-initiation-return, which Campbell calls monomyth:

a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

The first phase, separation or departure, begins with the call to adventure and is described by Campbell as a "form of self-annihilation". The hero leaves a world which is familiar and moves into a realm which is unfamiliar, mysterious, and unconscious. In the language of myth, departure is characterized as descent into the well, into the forest, into the "belly of the whale". The period of initiation, the second phase, is a period of purification. It is a "process of dissolving, transcending or transmuting the infantile images of our personal past". In the language of myth, this is the period where the hero battles dragons, solves riddles and outwits ogres. Crucial to this phase of

initiation is meeting with the Queen Goddess and murder or atonement with the father. When the quest has been accomplished the hero must return, in the final phase, to the world with elixir or boon for the restoration of society. Not all heroes survive the impact of crossing the return threshold, but that is what must be done to complete the adventure. In the language of myth this is the time of the return of the Golden Fleece, the time of wisdom and salvation.

The external, literal process of the hero's journey becomes a metaphor for the universal, internal quest for self-awareness.

2 A QUEST OF HERO'S MYTHOLOGICAL PATTERN

2.1 Separation—in search of her missing father

The narrator's external journey begins when she receives a letter telling her that her father is missing. The unnamed heroine accompanied by her lover Joe and a married couple named David and Anna, returns to the Canadian wilderness. Then she begins her separation, a journey of a quest for her father. Though it is a return home, she is stranger. As the narrator explains: "Now we're on my home ground, foreign territory. My throat constricts, as it learned to do when I discovered people could say words that would go in to my ears meaning nothing." During the trip, the narrator is discomfited by the way in which everything has changed. "nothing is the same, I don't know the way any more". That she feels alienated by the location of her past is not surprising, for she is an outsider in a number of telling ways: of English descent in French territory; a non-Catholic, indeed nonreligious person among the devout; a

woman in a man's world. Her French is so halting that she could be mistaken for an American, representing yet another form of alienation, displacement by foreigners. Most of all, she is a stranger to herself. Her journey of seeking identity begins from searching for her father.

2.2 *Initiation—transformation from divided self to completed self*

The beginning of the initiation for quest charts the narrator's inability to feel or express emotions of suffering, her sense of extreme isolation and psychological dislocation, her divided self, as well as the difficulty she experiences in accepting her parents' death. Her father's sudden disappearance has recalled her from a city life marked by personal and professional failures which have left her emotionally anesthetized. It is from the very beginning of search that we apprehend the existence of the protagonist's divided self. To avoid pain, she has allowed herself to be split into two, in a kind of emotional suicide. In the very beginning of the novel, when her friend Anna looks at her palm, Anna says, "Do you have a twin? Some of your lines are double. You had a good childhood but then there's this funny break." Although the protagonist denies this, Anna insists: "Are you positive...because some of your lines are double." This "double" could certainly be inferred as the protagonist's "other" self. The protagonist doesn't have a twin, but she does have a divided self and live a double life: her present life and her past life which are separated by that "funny break"—her unfortunate love affair. The narrator attempts to expand the false personal history that she has created to save herself from its true harshness. She tries to regard her family as others by calling them "they", and detaching them from herself. Immediately, however, she says "that won't work. I can't call them 'they' as if they were someone else's family. I have to keep myself from telling that story." As additional protection, the heroine has distanced herself from everyone. Her relationship with Joe is notable for its coolness, and she has only known Anna, described as her best friend, for two months.

The narrator suffers the separation of mind from body, and the mind/body split infuses her a sense that she has lost her real self, or in other words, she is facing identity crisis. To some extent, it is from this part that she begins to rediscover her real self. The initial search for her father becomes a search for her denied past. She has disassociated herself from her mother's death, and she has repressed a more recent event in her past, too painful for her to remember. In her quest she is assisted by two "gifts", one from her father and the one from her mother. With these gifts she is able to find her father and

accept the truth about her past. She begins her real initiation, when she discovers several primitive cave drawings that had belonged to her father. With the thought that her father may have left her some enlightenment in the rock paintings, she dives deep into the lake to look for the paintings following the direction of her father's drawings. Her dive into the lake signals her active and determined quest for change. Her diving symbolizes the deep inner search she makes for the discovery of herself. But instead of paintings, she discovers an image deeply hidden in her memory:

It was there but it was not a painting, it wasn't on the rock. It was below me, drifting towards me from the further level where there was no life, a dark oval limb. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I know about, a dead thing, it was dead.

A dead father not only causes her to acknowledge his sanity, but through it she also finds her memory. Firstly, the open eyes recall the bizarre image of her brother's drowning, but with a shock she recognizes that, "it wasn't ever my brother I'd been remembering, that had been disguise." As she recognizes her father's body, the protagonist's past suddenly becomes very clear to her and her fantasy past disintegrates. "I killed it." This revelation unlocks the mystery of the confusing stories of her failed marriage, husband and child. The shock of the vision forces her to remember the event in her past which she has had an affair with a married man, and has had an abortion. But because she cannot accept the abortion she has constructed a story about her past marriage, divorce and the child she has left in the city. It was only a lie, woven by her to kill the pain she suffers from the guilt of having killed a life. Like a criminal pleading innocence, the protagonist creates an alibi to avoid the inevitable confrontation with her own guilt. The narrator's recognition of the truth gives her the opportunity to revitalize her brain and, thus, live again. When she surfaces her encounter with the creature, she is inspired to sacrifice some of her clothing to the gods of the ancient people of the region, with whom she feels that she and her dead parents have a spiritual bond, to mark the death of her previous, dead "urbanized" form. She then begins to awaken to her new self, saying: "feeling was beginning to seep back into me, I tingled like a foot that's been asleep." And she realizes why she has hidden her past in false memories. "it was all real enough, it was reality enough forever, I couldn't accept it, that mutilation, ruin I'd made, I needed a different version". Now she not only sees clearly what she has done, but understands that her redemption comes from facing the truth directly and accepting the pain, guilt and

responsibility it entails. From now on, she rejects her brother's distinction between "good" leeches that deserve to live and "bad" leeches that deserve to be burnt and die writhed. And she rejects her lover's distinction between a "legitimate" fetus which should grow up to have birthday parties and an "illegitimate" fetus which must be killed. She has now experienced feelings of her own and will no longer use male morality to define reality for her. But her resurrection is not yet complete: "I wanted to be whole."

The shock of seeing the apparition in the lake marks the end of phase of the narrator's initiation. The second gift from her mother completes a second phase. In order to be reborn, to become whole, the protagonist must find the gift from her mother: "it would be right for my mother to have left something for me also, a legacy. His was complicated, tangled, but hers would be simple as a hand, it would be final. I was not completed yet; there had to be a gift from each of them." Later she finds in an old album of her mother's picture she had drawn as a child.

She perceives the picture to be a message, a gift, from her mother, she interprets the message of drawing as an instruction: in order to be alive and whole she must replace, resurrect, that part of herself which she has killed—the aborted fetus and the fertility aspects of the female principle which it represents. Early in the novel the protagonist has found it "impossible to be like my mother": Now she must become her mother, the "miraculous double woman," giving birth to herself as well as to new life. Her mother's gift is a reminder of the powers of her body. The protagonist thus seeks out her lover and takes him to the shore of the lake, carefully arranging their positions so that the moon, representing the female principle as in the childhood drawings, is on her left hand and the absent male sun on her right. By this act she takes control of sex and reduces Joe to a begetting machine. To show her resolution to repel women's image of frailty, the protagonist claims that "this isn't a country of princess." She even adds fangs and moustache to her illustration of princess and asks "what's the alternative to princess?" Here we can see she is already become a powerful figure. According to Carol P. Christ the conception itself is a religious act: As she conceives, the protagonist resembles the Virgin Mother goddesses of old: at one with her sexual power, she is complete in herself; the male is incidental. The conception is also, however, a psychological rebirth, a healing of divided self:

He trembles and then I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it had been prisoned so long, its eyes and teeth phosphorescent; the two halves clasp,

interlocking like fingers, it buds, it sends out fronds.

If the first stage of her initiation is recognition and remembering, the second stage is reconciliation. With the knowledge that she has gained from the spiritual and psychological journey, images of cutting, splitting, division, fragmentation have dominated the novel to this point, now images of unity, joining, completeness begin to supersede. The protagonist has united the two halves of herself, reconciled the male and female principles within the self. She comes to accept her parents, their lives, their humanness, their deaths. Like the fetus being transformed in her body, the protagonist now will change herself into a different state in which she can see not only comfort the past, but also face the future and the society. After undergoing a transformation, all the boundaries between herself and other form of life are abolished, she now even becomes the transformative energy: "I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning...I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow." She puts it, "when I wake in the morning I know they have gone finally, back into the earth, the air, the water, whatever they were when I summoned them." As the novel draws to an end, a boat comes up to the dock, and Joe is in it. He comes ashore, and calls her name, the first time it is called in the book, which symbolizes that she has regained her real self. She thinks: "he's here, a mediator, an ambassador, offering me something: captivity in any of its forms, a new freedom?" With the knowledge getting from the gifts, the protagonist has achieved the rebirth of self through the process of searching for father.

2.3 Return—go back to nature

The result of her days of solitude is her acceptance of her own power. This is the elixir or boon with which she returns from her journey, just like the hero of the mythological quest. She recognizes her own power and the fact that she can refuse victimization. "This is above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone." As Carol P. Christ says, the protagonist is "awakening from a male—defined world, to the greater terror and risk, and also the great potential healing and joy of a world defined by heroine's own feeling and judgment."

In order to become an autonomous, completed self, however, the protagonist must heal yet another kind of split—that between 'good' and 'evil'. "She must come to terms with herself as a perpetrator as well as a victim, or at least as a correspondent in her own victimization".

She must “get over” her own ideas of female innocence, for she, too, is guilty of a sort of “killing”. In the end she wishes to be non-human because she recognizes that to be human means to be guilty. In her descent into nature, the protagonist attempts a total shedding of anything associated with humans so she can “try again”. Quigley suggests that “complete return to nature is the only solution for regaining wholeness.” This is exactly what she does. In a ritualistic act of self denial, she cleans herself of all the negative human qualities and memories that have been repressed for so long.

3 CONCLUSION

The mythological journey, then, begins in *Surfacing* as the literal quest for a missing father, and becomes a metaphorical quest for selfhood. In the end of the novel, the protagonist has overcome many obstacles and surfaced as a survivor. She has found the answers that she has been seeking about her father; she has faced her long-repressed memories of her past and consequentially has been forgiven by her aborted child; she has basically refused to play the role of victim any longer. She is no longer divided but a whole person, which means a much stronger

one. She is determined to try this new life, one with words, feelings, power. She has repaired her divided self and gained her rebirth. Most important, she has successfully achieved her quest in the end. In the course of self realization and self affirmation, women must find that they are no longer subordinate to the male, but they can think, respect her own choice and have the courage to attempt in their lives. The debate between feminists and male hegemonism has become a very dull topic, and in such a case, the majority of women find that what they need is not a theory, but a common sense. What Margaret Atwood suggests here is actually the adjustment of one’s life style. As Goethe said in 《Faust》 “Only with inflexible groping in their lives, can woman get true realization.”

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