

Psychic Assimilation in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud believed that man's behavior and personality derive from the constant and unique interaction of conflicting psychological forces that operate at three different levels of awareness: the preconscious, the conscious, and the unconscious. According to Freud the unconscious influences our behavior and experience, even though we are unaware of these underlying influences.

The unconscious mind is a reservoir of feelings, thoughts, urges, and memories that lie outside of our conscious awareness. Most of the contents of the unconscious are unacceptable or unpleasant, such as feelings of pain, anxiety, or conflict. Freud described the phenomenon of repression, in which the conscious mind turns away from a painful thought or memory, pushing it down into the unconscious, because it is socially unacceptable. The thought does not go away, however, and energy from the libido (life energy) is consumed by keeping it repressed. This energy can be released, Freud thought, when a repressed memory is re-admitted to consciousness.¹

Everyone represses some things: bad childhood memories or traumas, for example. But some people repress so much that repression becomes a major component of mental disorders, affecting a person's day-to-day activities: "He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his finger-tips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore."²

The quote demonstrates Freud's conviction that despite repression, unconscious desires eventually work their way to the surface. A common example of this phenomenon is what is now known as the Freudian slip or *parapraxis*. A person will make a verbal mistake that reveals an unconscious thought or emotion. A person may call his spouse by a different name, exposing his attraction for another woman. Unconscious desires are also expressed by nonverbal communication.

The present paper seeks to establish that the heroine of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* violates standards of behavior, represses her bad memories and suffers as a consequence, learns her lesson and resolves to live in light of it, unembittered by her pain.

A character without a name is hardly a character at all. The nameless narrator who appears at the beginning of *Surfacing* is a voice rather than a person, and presents through her narrative involving two time spans—past childhood juxtaposed with present adulthood—the eternal dilemma of man-woman relationship.

While the protagonist attempts to unravel the mystery behind the disappearance of her botanist father on a remote island in northern Quebec, along with her lover Joe and another young couple, David and Anna, the reader struggles to make sense of the often conflicting stands of her story about her marriage, her husband and her child.

At various points in the novel she relates incidents from her past. She remembers her inability to return home after her wedding and keeping her child hidden from her parents. The image of her brother as he nearly drowned recurs- although the incident took place before she was born. She remembers her husband treating her like an invalid – instead of bride- after their wedding ceremony; she feels herself to have been betrayed by him. The incidents do not form a coherent whole. Her narration seems to have characteristics of a dream-vision, rather than a realistic portrayal based on a cause effect sequence.

Freud likened the unconscious to a storage area for repressed desires. Despite their place outside of conscious thought, these desires are full of emotional charge and constantly seek a means of expression.³

When the narrator, along with her friends, stops at the gas station with ‘three stuffed moose’, noticing that they were dressed in human clothes, the narrator described a father moose, a mother moose and a little boy moose, but fails to notice ‘a little girl moose’ on the roof until it is pointed out her. She does notice the father-mother-son constellation, but not the daughter or herself.

A similar separation occurs at the end of this chapter when, in the middle of a sentence in the present tense, she switches to the past: “At intervals the old road crosses us, it was dirt, full of bumps and potholes...”⁴ Remembering a family that had travelled on this road, she calls them “they”, only to break off: “That won’t work, I can’t call them ‘they’ as if they were somebody else’s family: I have to keep myself from telling that story.” (*Surfacing* 12)

These time switches in the mind of a narrator whose perception screens out significant objects, and who has to remind herself of her identity, introduce a narrative technique to dramatize the tension of internal conflict: her struggles to keep herself “from telling that story” are what tell it.

Also the narrator constantly checks and corrects bits of her own narrative. She herself brings her propensity for distortion to full consciousness: “I have to be more careful about my memories, I have to be sure that they’re my own and not the memories of other people telling me what I felt, how I acted, what I said: if the events are wrong the feelings I remember about them will be wrong too, I’ll start inventing them and there will be no way of correcting it, the ones who could help are gone. I run quickly over my version of it, my life, checking it like an alibi...” (*Surfacing* 70)

Thus, the reader of *Surfacing* must work at untangling the real from the unreal.

The news of the mysterious disappearance of her botanist father, from his cabin on a lake island, gives the narrator an excuse for revisiting the environ that surrounded her early years. This journey of discovery and exploration revives her memory of the unhappy past from which she feels estranged. Her ‘divorce’ has alienated her from the concept, so that she no longer believes in it: “He [the art teacher] said he loved me, the magic word, it was supposed to make everything light up, I’ll never trust that word again.” (*Surfacing* 44)

In her relationship with Joe she is devoid of any emotions: “Perhaps that was what he liked about me... What impressed him, cool he called it, was the way I took off my clothes and put them on again later very smoothly as if I were feeling no emotion. But I really wasn’t” (*Surfacing* 24). Joe is just her sexual companion and not an emotional companion. She tolerates him only as a physical necessity: “Everything I value about him seems to be physical: the rest is either

unknown, disagreeable or ridiculous" (54). At one point of the narrative he is referred to as: "...merely an object in the bed, like a sack or a large turnip" (92).

In search of her missing father, the narrator of *Surfacing* finds among his papers drawings, what she believes are copies of Indian petroglyphs, now underwater in a deep lake. Diving in search of the originals, she finds her father's drowned corpse instead, and thus her search for him ends with a final acceptance of his death. But this incident serves to release her own blocked senses.

The image of her dead father corresponds to the memories of her nearly drowned brother, the latter of which she suddenly recognizes as a substitute for her memory of her aborted fetus. The protagonist can then recall the correct facts surrounding the other incidents. The man she remembers was her lover, not her husband, there was no wedding, no childbirth—only the abortion, which she had had on his instructions.

Repression, argued Freud, maintains equilibrium in the individual by repressing inappropriate, unfeasible, or guilt-causing urges, memories and wishes to the level of the unconscious, where they will be out of sight, if not out of mind. The ability to repress dangerous or unsettling thoughts turns out to be vital to the individual's ability to negotiate his way through life. Only the timely repression of harmful impulses and urges gives the individual the capacity to move on and meet the demands of an ever-changing world.⁵

The whole of the novel is thus an account of the unnamed and highly unreliable narrator's journey into her past, an imaginative location that had become so painful to her that she had insulated herself from it through numbing her feelings and rearranging her memories into forms which she could bear. It is only towards the end of the novel we find out that she was a mistress, not a wife, and instead of a baby, she had an abortion. Atwood allows us only gradually to understand—as the narrator herself confronts it—that she had imaginatively transformed an affair with a married man and the abortion of a child into marriage, childbirth, and divorce.

Having been offered some guidance by her father, it is to another woman, her dead mother that the protagonist must look for the completion of her vision. Sensing that this guidance will be found in an old scrap book she had made as a child, she opens it to find pictures she had drawn of "a woman with a round moon stomach: the baby sitting up inside her gazing out" (*S*, p. 159). She decides to conceive a child. Having confronted her complicity in death, she now recognizes her potential for creativity. She sees that "nothing has died, everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive." (160) She requires the possibility of the actual birth of a child as symbolic negation of her abortion, and this possibility in turn requires that Joe became an acceptable lover.

Although repression functions as a vital coping tool, says Freud, it also can cause great anguish. A repressed urge, though it may be in the unconscious, still affects the actions and thoughts of the individual. Indeed, conflicting urges or painful memories thus repressed have the potential to cause great anxiety, though the individual will not understand what causes it. As the repressed items teem and surge beneath the conscious surface, they sap vital psychic energy and constantly force the individual to maintain lines of defense mechanisms against his own unconscious. But as the urges boil up, the individual eventually will find release, through some external displacement, displaced emotion, or other mechanism. This release, coming as it does from uncontrollable and often unfathomable depths, can cause unpredictable, sometimes unimaginable reactions.⁶

The narrator's longing to see her parent's ghosts and to identify her father with the Indian god defines two other parts of what it means to be human: the presence of death and the

absence of the gods. She cannot resurrect either her parents or the gods of the dead past, but before accepting these two hard truths, she moves through the same repression, distortion, accusation, and projection that she did about the abortion. By refusing to attend her mother's funeral, she refused to accept her death. This childishness impels her determination to force her parents' out of hiding. By denying herself food and sleep, she induces the visions she wants.

The narrator does see her mother, feeding the jays, an image associated with her throughout the novel, but she has no words for her daughter: "She looks at me, past me; as though she knows something is there but she can't quite see it" (188). Finally, her mother can be released to death, not in a coffin, but into nature itself, as one of the jays, the narrator thinks. Her encounter with her father is similar to that with her mother. He has no message except to liberate the protagonist unto herself: "It does not approve of me or disapprove of me, it tells me it has nothing to tell me, only the fact of itself" (193). As with her mother, he returns into nature: "A fish ... no, antlered flesh ... flesh turned to icon, he has changed again, returned to water" (193). As she releases her parents to their death, she acknowledges that they are not "gods"; they dwindle, grow, become what they were, "human" (196). To accept their humanness is to accept her own, with all her frailties and subsequent guilt.

Freud believed that regardless of the consequences, the release of the repressed urges and memories does more good than harm, resulting in a new balance and distribution of psychic energy.⁷

Sin, kept secret, thrusts the sinner out of community. Alone, alienated, afraid, he can find his answer in letting others know him as he really is and making amends for harm he has caused. The nameless narrator of *Surfacing* has thus reached a stage in her life when she decides to live in the usual way, "defining them (her parents) by their absence and love by its failure, power by its loss, its renunciation" (195). What stirs and excites us about *Surfacing* is its human centrality, with its rare view of a woman's enormous capacity to confront heroically the ghosts of her psyche and to conquer them.

Notes

¹Dewey, Russell A. "Personality". *Psychology: An Introduction*. Web. 6 Dec. 2014.

²Freud, Sigmund. *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963. p.69.

³Stevenson, David B. *Repression*. *Victorian Web* <<http://www.victorianweb.org/science/freud/repression.html>>. Web. 6 Dec. 2014.

⁴Atwood, Margaret. *Surfacing*. New York: Random House, 1998. p.10. All further references to this work (S) appear in the text.

⁵Stevenson, David B. *Repression*. *Victorian Web* <<http://www.victorianweb.org/science/freud/repression.html>>. Web. 6 Dec. 2014.

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷Martin, Paul. "Sin, Guilt and Mental Health: Confession and Restitution as Means of Therapy." *Religion Online*. William F. Fore., 21 May 1975. Web 4 Dec. 2014.

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