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## **UNIT 9 DEVELOPMENT OF THE CANADIAN NOVEL**

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### **Structure**

- 9.0 Objectives
- 9.1 Canadian Novel : Initial Phases of Development
  - 9.1.1 First Phase : Beginnings to 1900
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  - 9.2.2 Postmodernistic Tendencies and Native Fiction
- 9.3 General Lines of Development
- 9.4 Summing Up
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### **9.0 OBJECTIVES**

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In this Unit, we will trace the development of the Canadian novel and the basic issues and concerns that come up in it.

The organisation of the material will be done according to the periods of the development of the novel in Canada – namely, the first phase : from the beginnings to 1900, the second phase from 1900 to 1960; and the third phase from 1961 to the 1980s.

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### **9.1 CANADIAN NOVEL : INITIAL PHASES OF DEVELOPMENT**

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Canadian novel primarily consists of two major components categorized as Anglophone and Francophone which means novels written in two officially recognized languages, English and French. As a matter of fact, these belong to the so called 'founding nations', the English and the French, sharing since the middle of the eighteenth century, the same geographic space and both having vital but diverse European roots and a typically colonial origin. In addition to English and French, there are quite a good number of other writings available in Canada in the languages of immigrants such as South Asians, Ukrainian, German, Icelandic, Yiddish, Norwegian which form part of Canadian fiction.

However, as assessed today, Canadian novels written in English and French form the mainstream of Canadian Literature. The merit of the eminent English Canadian novelists may be referred to from the beginning to the present day in the vast and rich production of the authors such as Frances Brooke, Major John Richardson, Susanna Moodie, Sara Jeannette Duncan, Sinclair Ross, Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, Robertson Davies, Robert Kroetsch, Margaret Atwood, Rudy Wiebe and many more. Similarly, in the Canadian novel in French, the centre-stage position is occupied by novelists such as Gabrielle Roy, Yves Thériault, Hubert Aquin, Marie-Claire Blais and Anne Hébert.

#### **9.1.1 First Phase : Beginnings to 1900**

The earliest English Canadian novel records the British influence in its formation as the writers who published fiction while in Canada included visitors and immigrants from Great Britain. The first English Canadian novel published was Frances Brooke's

*The History of Emily Montague* (1769). The novel is an epistolary romance and describes the garrison life, sleigh rides, delightful balls and flirtations. The novel also describes the 'politics of Canada' which then aimed at anglicizing the Canadian and influencing them by the gentle arts of persuasion.

Frances Brooke (1724-1789) was followed by some more representative novelists of the early period namely: Thomas Chandler Haliburton (1796-1865), Major John Richardson (1796-1852), and Susanna Moodie (1803-1885). Thomas Chandler Haliburton, a Nova Scotian, was by profession a judge but he gained popularity as a writer. His fictional works are: *The Clockmaker of the Sayings and Doings of Sam Slick of Slickville* and *The Old Judge*. *The Clockmaker* is known an anecdotal form of a picaresque novel with Sam Slick as a clever and democrat protagonist.

Subsequently, Major John Richardson, an army officer and military historian, made a great debut by his spectacular novel *Wacousta*. The wide-range of enigmatic and complex themes and the gothic ambience that the novel constitutes make it a monumental Canadian novel. It is a revenge tragedy playing out themes of false love, dubious honor and enduring passion, against a frontier setting that engenders monumental antipathies - order against chaos; natural against unnatural; justice against mercy; sentiment against reason against emotion against will; the demonic against the civilized ways of society, the demonic against the national order of things.

Susanna Moodie, an early Canadian settler is best known for her classic novel *Roughing It in the Bush*. This is an extraordinary Canadian fictional work which represents the wilderness of Canada's frontier and it also denotes the sentimental narrative of Canadian society.

### 9.1.2 Second Phase : From 1900 to 1960

As the twentieth century began and advanced, the Canadian novel in English started taking on a variety of shapes along with the socio-cultural, economic and political development in the country. Two accomplished novelists Sara Jeanette Duncan (1862-1922) and Stephen Leacock (1869-1944) became more visible with their significant contributions with the dawn of the twentieth century. Sara Jennettee Duncan was one of the foremost Canadian novelists who made a substantial contribution to Canadian English fiction by her novels : *The Imperialist* (1904), *The Burnt Offering* and *The Simple Adventures of a Memsahib* (1893). Her fiction depicts the political and social condition of Canada and also of India where she spent sometime with her husband who was posted as a curator in a museum in Calcutta. *The Imperialist* is an important fictional work that makes a candid statement about a proposed "Federation of the British Empire" in Canada. *The Burnt Offering*, on the other hand, is the first novel from a Canadian writer that shows India on 'the brink of nationhood'. *The Simple Adventures of a Memsahib* is indeed an interesting novel that describes Duncan's stay and experiences in India.

Stephen Leacock (1869-1944) remains one of the most prolific, finest and widely celebrated novelists of this period. Of his many works of fiction; the two novels *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* and *Nonsense Novels* are well known. *Sunshine Sketches* is often valued for its narrative that scintillates with fun, idyllic and ironic descriptions.

The large corpus of English Canadian novels that appeared during this period dealt with the themes of social and political concerns, regionalism and national identity, feminist issues and native Indian concerns.

Regionalism was a dominant theme for the prairie-setting in West Canada. Laura Goodman Salverson's *The Viking Heart* (1923), Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* (1921), Frederick Philip Grove's *Over Prairie Trails* (1922) and *Settlers of the Marsh* (1925) and Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* (1941) are some good fictional works focussing on regional aspirations and local colours. *As For Me and My House*

is ranked amongst the best Canadian novels on many counts. It depicts the social reality of grain-elevators, railway tracks of an isolated prairie town, but more convincingly the novel brings to the fore some sensitive issues arising from the oppressive effects of the Depression of that period. Frederick Philip Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh* is known for depicting psychological realism of the characters who are described at the farms located on the northern Manitoba landscape. Grove provides evocative details to the regional Canadian reality. Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley* (1961) is described as a *tour de force* of regionalism. The novel is admired for depicting an excellent fusion of the regional reality with the region of imagination. Mordecai Richler's *Son of a Smaller Hero* (1965) is located in an area around St. Urbain Street and the Main in Montreal, an immigrant Jewish Ghetto. In the narrative of the novel, the characteristics of satire and social realism are juxtaposed against the working class Jewish environment. The novel is known for making a conscious effort of the protagonist for attaining his personal identity.

Set against the thematic background of regionalism are two accomplished novelists of the period: Morley Callaghan and Hugh MacLennan who moved on to the themes of affirmations and understanding. Morley Callaghan wrote: *Such Is My Beloved* (1934) and *More Joy in Heaven* (1969). Hugh MacLennan became popular by his best known novels; *Barometer Rising* (1969) and *Two Solitudes* (1959). Morley Callaghan in *Such Is My Beloved* provides the virtuous aspect of love and grace, charity and redemption ultimately leading the concerned characters to the realization of the importance of faith and affirmation in human life. Hugh MacLennan became known for his novel *Two Solitudes*, in which he noted the fragmentation of Canada into Anglophone and Francophone. He presented a vision of the unification of the two parts, which he termed as Two Solitudes, on account of the exclusionary tendencies at work in each. The novel underscored the possibility and the need for the Anglophone and Francophone Canada to become a unified entity. His futuristic novel *Voices in Time*, also attracted a great deal of critical attention in the eighties after its publication. The geographic and temporal locales of the novel are Quebec and 2010 respectively. The novel depicts a world which has survived a devastation of cities around 1990. The past of the novel functions as the present of the reader. We find the hero John Wellfleet reconstructing the past from diverse sources such as tapes, diaries, letters and documents. These sources stand for the voices in time which novelists want us to hear. The process of reconstruction constitutes the novelist's analysis of the self-destruction which has been brought about because of the demise of traditional values and beliefs and in the gradual marginalisation of the Greco-Christian worldview. The novel could be criticized on account of its overt didacticism. It might appear to some as the summation of values MacLennan cherishes and wants to hold forth in this work. But the novel indisputably remains an important landmark in pinpointing the malaise afflicting the contemporary society, and the direction which the crisis-ridden society needs to take. Both Callaghan and MacLennan participate in and contribute to the Canadian imagination and their achievement is continuous with the larger tradition of World Literature.

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## 9.2 RECENT CANADIAN NOVEL : 1960 ONWARDS

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### 9.2.1 General Tendencies

From the 1960s onwards starts a phase in which the English Canadian novel gains in quality, authenticity and maturity. Several Canadian novelists came to be known in the world better than they were at any other time since the heydays of Mazo de la Roche and Stephen Leacock. The novelists who acquired fame in this period included both white Canadian and diasporic writers. The novelists in the former category are: Robertson Davies, Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, Norman Levine, Mavis Gallant, and Mordecai Richler while the diaspora category includes Rohinton Mistry, Uma Parameswaran, Michael Ondaatje, and some others. This period produced greatly diverse novels both in forms and themes. The range and sensitivity of themes and competence in craftsmanship of these novels could

favourably compare with fiction produced in any other part of the world. It would be useful to discuss a few of the major novelists and some of their celebrated works.

Robertson Davies published his first three novels in 1950s, but he earned renown as an accomplished novelist and serious thinker only when his later works were published. He introduced into the novel writing the elements of comic vision and satire, but in the later works, *Fifth Business* (1970), *The Manicore* (1972) and *World of Wonders* (1975) - Deptford Trilogy - he added psychological and religious dimensions as well. Making use of the psychology of C.G. Jung, Davies argued in the later novels which became ideological and complex, that it was important to pay attention to and realise the importance of the emotional, irrational and unconscious side of the self. For example, Liesi tells Dunstan Ramsay in *Fifth Business* that it is necessary to shake hands with one's own devil. This idea operates in his later fiction in which the characters realise that it is essential for them to recognize and come to terms with their side which forms part of the totality of self. Not doing so, would involve psychic complications and confusions leading to a fragmented self which would adversely affect people's capacity for affirmative action. The style of writing of Deptford Trilogy novels is easy, witty, and aphoristic and the imagery and symbols are drawn from relatively arcane lore. In the next phase of his writing, Davis becomes scholarly and didactic. The manner of telling in these novels is magisterial and can be categorized as elegant, informed and entertaining.

Margaret Laurence is yet another major figure in the history of Canadian fiction who, with her impressive stories, travel writings, novels enjoys a unique place among the galaxy of modern Canadian novelists. Her well-known novels which were acclaimed as literary masterpieces include *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, *The Fire Dwellers*, *The Diviners*. The range of thematic engagements in her fiction span her extended experience in Africa, the search for spiritual freedom, the exploration of human identity and feminist revisions. She shares the feminist concerns with Margaret Atwood. And therefore, we find that her *Stone Angel* like Atwood's *Surfacing* intersect on the point of monotheism of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and the non-ritualistic aspects of Protestantism which women find problematic.

Laurence's early works are located in the Canadian Prairies which is a region represented as both harsh and beautiful. These writings show the steady growth and maturation of her way of seeing. *A Jest of God* ostensibly has an apolitical surface, but underneath this novel makes a powerful political statement. *The Fire Dwellers*, marks the beginning of Laurence's exploration, from a distinctly female - motto suggest feminist - perspective, of language and of the reality and fictions of human identity and the female body. *The Fire-Dwellers* projects Laurence as a forerunner in feminists' concern with the revision of language, reality and fiction. *The Diviners* has a mythic dimension and foregrounds Laurence's belief in the close interweaving of history and myth in literature. It is the streak of gritty realism in Morag Gunn mat lifts *The Diviners* to the mythic level. Morag is one of the few heroines who attains the apocalypse of knowledge knowing of own life, not through the agency of a man, but through her own experience. The female heroine is given the position of subjecthood and agency - two major demands of feminists.

Alice Munro is found to be an enigmatic writer by the critics. She writes in a lucid and uncluttered style. As writer, she exercises complete control over the narrative voice and situation. She effortlessly evokes mood and succeeds in manipulating response. It could be said of Munro's style that it does not contain stylistic gymnastics, no surprises; it is simply competence raised to virtuosity.

Her writing has a sense of déjà vu because her past, her worlds of girls and women are made available to us not through confession or revelation but as experience shared in recollection. This quality of heightened realism which is a characteristic of her narratives is a kind of 'perceptual realism.' The major themes she takes up in her writing are of growing up, of the friction between personal integrity as a woman and repressive femininity, of innocence lost and self attained, of the shattering impact of

passing time, and of time reclaimed through memory. Her style of heightened realism which is exact, direct, haunting, is the means by which she makes the truth so concretely self-evident-Munro was influenced by the writers of the American South and this influence is responsible for her sense of kinship between the American South and rural Southwestern Ontario. Actually her literary form was also influenced by them and is manifest in her short collection : *Lives of Girls & Women*. This collection has been described as one of a fairly wide-ranging variety of 'open forms', organized books of prose fiction made of autonomous units. These autonomous units take on extra resonance and sign significance when combined with other related units, *Lives of Girls & Women* chooses to emphasize a single character. The stories in the volume are presented from a first-person point of view. The unity of this collection is achieved from Munro's focusing on the single consciousness of Del Jordan, *Lives of Girls & Women* could be called a self-portrait of a young woman as a young artist in rural Southwestern Ontario.

### 9.2.2 Postmodernistic Tendencies and Native Fiction

Margaret Atwood effectively strides the international scene as a novelist (and as a poet, too) and her novels are appreciated for their psychological depth, woman's experience and woman's positioning in the male-dominated patriarchal society, the question of Canadian identity, and complexities of living in the fast changing modern world, which is marked by confusion and even to a certain extent loss of human values which she thinks are essential for sustaining a dignified and meaningful existence.

Though Atwood denies that she is a feminist novelist, she shows deep concern with the women's issues in her fiction. For example, her novel *The Edible Woman* depicts the difficulty a woman experiences to find her identity in an artificial society, in which the novel places her. Of course, the excellence of the novel lies in problematizing the question of identity for both men and woman. However, the focus largely remains on the heroine, Marian MacAlpine, her confusion, and her inability to commit to the various roles - career-woman, submissive fiancée, competent nurse - she tries. But at the same time, Marian is a rebel. In the latter part of the novel it is her rebellion that dominates the novel. She is in conflict with the social conventions and as a thinking woman attaches importance to her true self. Her successful flight from Peter's party, her refusal to eat, first steaks and chops, and then a wide and illogical variety of foods, are testimony to her being a rebel and her search for authenticity of being. Of course, Marian is not able to change her society, or even escape from it. But one positive result of her struggle with her self is that she learns to live effectively within this society. Even though written in the comic mode, the novel concerns itself with serious questions about the identity and freedom of women.

The second celebrated novel of Atwood, *Surfacing*, became a classic in the field of feminist studies. Highly symbolic, with extensive use of imagery from different areas of existence, and dealing with contemporaneously relevant issues - more prominently with the woman question - the novel attracted worldwide attention and praise from critics and lay reading public. Beginning with the unnamed heroine, her betrayal by her lover, her decision to give birth to a child to atone for the earlier abortion at the behest of her love, and her eventual rebellion against the sham of society, make this unnamed heroic and representative of all those women who are constantly inferiorized and are deprived of choices that can make them whole and authentic. The final break of the protagonist from society and her rejection of the oppressive patriarchal structures like love, marriage, and language make her truly heroic and a role model for other victimized women.

The other major post-modernist novelist is Robert Kroetsch who is famous for his novel *The Studhorse Man*. This novel is discussed at some length in Block 8.

This survey of English Canadian novel will remain incomplete if some information about the development of Canadian Native Indian novel is not imparted. This body of fiction has indeed risen both in quantity and quality. Since 1960 both Non-Native and as well as Native Indian writers have enthusiastically responded to this genre. Many significant contributions have been made by Native women novelists. The most applauded work by a non-Native novelist is *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973) by Rudy Wiebe. This is indeed a great novel, which contributes to the historical fiction of the native Indians that became popular. The novel deals with the crucial issue of the three hundred thousand square miles of Prairie, covering Canada's history from 1876 to 1888. Written with an authenticity of historical facts, the novel emerges as a masterpiece that portrays the bafflement faced by the Native Indian chief Big Bear when he asked to sign the legal act about the transfer of land to the colonial masters, Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed*, Jeannette Armstrong's *Slash*, Beatrice Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree* are some of the best novels which grapple with the challenges posed by the master-narratives. Thematically these novels deal with the vivid and authentic description of the and provide a critic of the appalling condition of the native communities.

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### 9.3 GENERAL LINES OF DEVELOPMENT

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Before 1960, the tendency to conflate identity with place was noticeably there. Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House* (1941) was important from that point of view.

In 1959 *The Apprenticeship* of Duddy Kravitz by Mordecai Richler appeared. In 1970 a psychological romance came in the form of Robertson Davies's *Fifth Business*. From the point of view of experimentation Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* was important. Much more recently we have had Carol Shields's *Stone Diaies*.

Works by writers who are expatriates to Canada from other countries are important. Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*, M.G. Vassanji's *Gunny Sack* - all belong to this category. So does the work of Michael Ondaatje.

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### 9.4 SUMMING UP

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In the beginning the concern was with location and identity. There was during the modernist phase. That was followed by post-modernistic writing. Native Fiction is also getting its due these days and so is fiction by expatriate writers.

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### 9.5 QUESTIONS

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1. What concerns dominate Canadian fiction in the period upto 1900?
2. Discuss the main contribution of Margaret Laurence and Margaret Atwood to Canadian fiction.

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## UNIT 10 MARGARET ATWOOD: LIFE AND WORKS

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### Structure

- 10.0 Objectives
- 10.2 Early Childhood and Education
- 10.2 Reading and Influences
- 10.3 Literary Apprenticeship
- 10.4 Works
  - 10.4.1 Novels
  - 10.4.2 The Special Place of *The Blind Assassin* in Atwood's Overall Achievement
  - 10.4.3 Poetry
  - 10.4.3 *Survival*: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature
- 10.5 Questions

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### 10.0 OBJECTIVES

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This purpose of this unit is to give our students basic familiarity with important aspects of Margaret Atwood's life. They will also be told about her major works.

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### 10.1 EARLY CHILDHOOD AND EDUCATION

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Margaret Eleanor Atwood was the second child of three children who were born to Carl Edmund Atwood, a Professor of Zoology, and Margaret Dorothy Kilam, who was a former dietician and nutritionist. Harold Leslie, her elder brother, was born on February 15, 1937 in Montreal. Carl Atwood was in the process of completing his *Ph.D.* at McGill University's Macdonald College, in Montreal. While Margaret was born in Ottawa on November 18, 1939 at the Ottawa General Hospital, her younger sister, Ruth Kathleen Atwood, was born in Toronto in 1951.

Margaret's intimate knowledge of 'the Bush' was due to her father Carl's research career with the government. He ran a research station set up to study tree-eating insects. Carl was one of the first to insist that spraying insecticides was of no use. Margaret's first contact with the bush was at the age of six months. Margaret got frequent chances to go to the north Bush during summer months, when the ice melted. Sometimes, Margaret lived there with the family in tents. Carl built a cabin there "on a granite point a mile by water from a Quebec village so remote that the road went in only two years before I was born." It was Carl only who constructed the road with the help of dynamite. It took several years for the cabin to be built and it was only when Margaret was twenty seven that it was finished. Still it had neither a phone nor running water. We come across this cabin in her novel *Surfacing*, where a large part of the action takes place.

Margaret's memories of the cities - particularly of Ottawa - are their being snow-covered as she visited these places only in winter.

Margaret's schooling remained piecemeal, on account of growing up in and out of the bush, travelling between Ottawa, and Toronto. She did not attend a full year of school until she was in grade eight. This situation turned out to be to Margaret's advantage as she and Harold spent plenty of time playing with each other and reading books. Their father had to leave for work for days-on-end, leaving the children to roam around and explore the bush on their own. Books were for them a means of

escape and entertainment, as there were not many alternative activities. In Margaret's own words: "Thus my brother and I did not have many other children to play with. We could not go to the Saturday afternoon matinees so fondly remembered by some people, nor could we listen to the radio; although there was a radio, reception was so bad in those remote areas that the radio was turned on only for the weather, and for news of the War. There were no art galleries, special classes of plays, and television had not yet been invented. Books were it."

It was their mother who acted as the teacher of Margaret and Harold when they lived in the bush. This pattern of life is quite reminiscent of that adopted by the early Canadian pioneers and is unique to the lives of Margaret and her family, as not many born in the mid-twentieth century have experienced. This kind of experience played a crucial role in fostering a desire in Margaret to establish herself as a writer within the context of the Canadian landscape. Atwood was influenced by Susanna Moodie, a nineteenth century writer, who also had the experience of living in the bush. Atwood often turned to Moodie's life and writings.

This moving into and out of the bush provided Atwood with a paradigm for the kind of double existence familiar to many Canadians. She was able to separate one life from another, to organise and compartmentalize her activities. Later, as she attempted to manage various aspects of her career and family life, this ability to shift contexts served her well.

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## 10.2 READING AND INFLUENCES

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Atwood's intense desire to read comics motivated her to learn reading. Besides avidly reading comics, she also got a chance of to read fairy tales at a fairly young age of five when her parents ordered a collection of fairy tales. These fairy tales exercised an important influence on her in her later life, as these tales contained men and women who played a wide range of roles, from stupid to intelligent, virtuous to evil. These tales served as the springboard for Atwood's infatuation.

Atwood's interest in reading was fostered by her parents who read to her a diverse range of books including classics including Alice in Wonderland. In her later years, she read herself Edith Nesbit's *The Phoenix* works of Edgar Allen Poe. She also discovered Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Twain's *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, Sir Charles G.D. Robert's *Wild Animals I Have Known*, Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, and the tales of Conan Doyle. She also read Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and *Moby Dick*. When she went to school, she devoured *Wuthering Heights* and D.H. Lawrence's and James Mitchener's works. When she finished high school, she was given a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. Later, she made use of her father's library and read Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, and Orwell's *Nineteen Eight-Four*.

Together with serious literature, Atwood also read and enjoyed a lot of mystery fiction, crime stories, and other popular stories. Additionally, she, together with her brother Harold, read a lot of comic books. These readings played an important role in her growth as a writer.

Atwood did not attend school full time till she was eleven. She started writing quite early in life and scribbled, experimenting with words and her imagination. She began with wanting to be a writer, took up painting also for some time, then wanted to become a dress designer and becoming more practical wished to go into Home Economics. Finding Home Economics boring, she reverted to her writing.

In 1945, the family moved, for a year to Pim Street in Sault Ste. Marie, where Carol (her father) worked as the director of an insect laboratory. Margaret composed her poems called 'Rhyming Cats' here. In 1946, the family settled in Toronto and Carl Atwood joined the University of Toronto, as faculty. That year, Margaret wrote

poetry and a novel. After moving about from the city to the bush, Carl Atwood moved the family on just after Margaret's eighth birthday and settled permanently just south of the eastern extremity of the Mount Pleasant Cemetery.

Atwood spent grades 3, 4 and 5 at Whitney School. It was at Whitney that Margaret was taught by Miss Macleod, whom she identified as "the good teacher" in *Cat's Eye*.

Margaret also took piano lessons and went to Miss Pickering's Dane School for ballet and tap. At school Margaret was an accomplished all-rounder, with the abilities of an athlete and a musician.

Atwood spent grades 6 and 8 at Bennington School, skipping grade 7. During the period she was at Bennington School, life took a dramatic turn for the Atwood family. Atwood's younger sister, Ruth Kathleen, was born in 1951. Atwood attended school full time beginning with grade 8 and started to spend less time up north in the summers - although a northern holiday in August was a ritual that she would maintain for the rest of her life.

Margaret's parents were not churchgoers, so she went to church with her friends and their families on weekends. Apart from Sunday School Margaret imbibed religious knowledge at school, as in the Canada of the 1950s, religion and the Bible were a central component of the educational system at all levels. Students in schools were required to take a course in religious knowledge. Atwood was taught by an Anglican minister. Reverend Reisberry. In a short fictional piece she wrote for Toronto's *Now*, Atwood describes the religious musings of a young schoolgirl during morning prayers. Her father was a Darwinist by training and, therefore, he inculcated among his children a spirit of enquiry and questioning. He believed that children should not be baptised. It should be an adult choice when a person grew up and understood things better. Carl and Margaret had extended discussions on the subject of faith and institutional religion and these are enacted in detail in both *Surfacing* and *Cat's Eye*.

Having skipped grade 7, the girl who entered Leaside High School in grade 9 was one of the youngest in her class. Joan, one of her friends, was the same age, but the others were much older. Except for a few Armenian students, the Leaside students came from middle-class WASP homes. And although Leaside was a public high school, it had a real Scottish flavour. The school newspaper, for which Atwood wrote was called *Clan Call*.

In grade 13, Margaret took ten exami examinations and obtained high scores : English composition 83%, English literature 94%, French composition 84%, French literature 85%, Latin composition 78%, Latin literature 69%, history 80%, Botany 92%, Zoology 86%, Chemistry 87%. During grades 10,11 and 12, Margaret also took German lessons during the lunch hour and although she did not appear for the examination, these lessons proved useful in later years. Atwood finished school with an extremely good 85.4% average (a high A) and left Leaside with an English award, a university entrance scholarship, and an award for good citizenship.

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### 10.3 LITERARY APPRENTICESHIP

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Margaret is remembered for having been a shy and serious girl in high school, but her papers suggest that she had another dimension to her personality: she was witty, mischievous, playful. In grade 12 she wrote: "Three Cheers for Corona!" which was a shy piece about a woman who smokes cigars to the great surprise of her conservative, cigarette-smoking friends. Collected in *First Words*, this rhetorical exercise is a strong testimony to the Atwoodian sense of humour and her healthy scepticism towards conventional roles. However, there are some serious pieces of writing from this period, the best of which can be found in *A Quiet Game* (Juvenilia Press, 1997).

a collection which has two of her early short stories and an early poem. All three introduce some of the central themes which appeared in her mature work, which contains the rage and overpowering sadness lingering just under the surface of calm demeanour of the average 1950s Toronto resident.

Another example of her early writing is the poem "A Representative", which was written around 1956 and published in her collection *First Words*. The poem enacts the tension which is described in it: the tension arising from the desire to escape the crippling grasp of inertia through its use of a tightly controlled rhyme scheme and the repetition of sounds "(down/dark"; "sewerage of men/For one small spark.../ Potential, silent, still and sad") and phrases (lack the power to use the power)" the poem.

When Atwood began her first attempts at writing seriously, she was influenced by Poe and Shelley. She had read Poe well before high school and remembers the horror she felt at the encounter." "This experience disturbed me in a way that Grimm's Fairy Tales had not, possibly because Poe is obsessive about detail and sets out to horrify. I had nightmares about decaying or being buried alive, but this did not stop; me from reading on."

During this period, Atwood produced pretty bleak prose which she later described as "grit-fitted," as she herself described it later. D.H. Lawrence exercised a significant influence on her writing. Her piece, "First North American Rights Only" suggests hopefulness and a certain ambition. One story "A Cliche for January", describes the pain of a mother when her daughter gets becomes pregnant and is compelled to marry. Another story, "The English Lesson" is about a middle-aged English teacher, Miss Murdock. This story has a grimness which is reminiscent of D.H. Lawrence.

Margaret's family played an important role in the formation of her mature thinking and in imbibing certain positive values of life. She grew to be an intelligent and well-read young woman who was prepared to meet the challenges of life. That Atwood was able to bear the pressures of life was the result of the firm footing her family had given her. She, therefore, committed herself to the hard work and dedication involved and through the rest of her life, she stuck to that commitment. All of this could be attributed to the type of moral environment in which she was raised. Her family taught her the value of hard work and made her appreciate individuals who could take independent decisions who could take responsibility for their own actions. Strength of character as a value was the gift from her family.

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## 10.4 WORKS

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### 10.4.1 Novels

Margaret Atwood's earliest work reflects a number of concerns which have remained central to her works written during the later years. Some of the major concerns are: a profound respect for the natural world, a firm commitment to Canadian culture, and a strong belief in the rights of the individual. Such concerns take the form of themes like nature's triumph over civilisation. Canadian nationalism and feminism. They are the outcome of Atwood's own experience as well as the times in which she has lived. Her love of the natural world can be easily traced to her childhood. The experience of working as a camp counsellor each summer during her early university years linked her respect for the wilderness with a growing social conscience.

Canadian nationalism is the most obvious cause celebre in Atwood's early fiction. It was rather ironical that these feelings were aroused in her during the years of study at Radcliffe. Cambridge, (Massachusetts). She had gone there in 1961 to do graduate work in literature supported by Woodrow Wilson fellowship in the first year and a Canada Council grant in the second. It was here that Atwood resolved to reflect on who she was and who and what she wanted to be. Her experiences at Harvard

(Radcliffe had become part of Harvard by 1963) gave rise to a fictional manuscript which became a watershed in her literary career. *The Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopian fiction set in an imaginary and futuristic New England, was served as an crucial element in Atwood acquiring the status of an international best-selling writer. The ambivalent feelings towards Cambridge and Harvard were assuaged by writing this novel, just as her troubling childhood experiences were purged with *Cat's Eye* (also some of her other novels) which uses the bildungsroman (the coming-of-age- novel) form.

Atwood played a crucial role in institutionalizing Canadian literature in the late 1960s, as till then it was not really recognized as a distinct body of writing or a worthy of serious consideration at all. The process of acquiring a name for herself as a writer, and earning respect for Canadian literature started with her *The Edible Woman*, which appeared in 1969. *Surfacing* followed in 1972 and then *Lady Oracle* in 1976, *Life Before Man* in 1979, *Bodily Harm* 1981, *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1985, *Cat's Eye* in 1988, *The Robber Bride* in 1993 and the latest, *The Blind Assassin* in 2000 which won her the prestigious Booker Prize. Atwood stands as a towering creative writer among the literatures of the world and Canadian literature has come to occupy an important niche in the body of world literature today.

#### **10.4.2 The Special Place of *The Blind Assassin* in Atwood's Overall Achievement**

From within Atwood's overall fictional output *The Blind Assassin* is special. This is a novel of extraordinary intricacy and it combines romantic suspense, science fiction and gothic drama. In sections offering science fiction fantasy a blind assassin and a mute sacrificial virgin conduct a journey of their own. Iris Chase Griffen is the sole surviving descendant of a once-distinguished Toronto family. She recalls the events of her life and the death of her sister Lawran. We are offered a novel within a novel in the form of Laura's posthumously published novel *The Blind Assassin*.

The language is graphic. One example from page 301 of the 2001 Anchor edition will suffice:

Hot-dog stands with yellow umbrellas, pretzel-sellers, hawkers of earrings and woven bags and leather belts, beggars hung with crayoned Out of Work signs: among them they've staked out the territory. I passed a flute player, a trio with electric guitars, a man with a kilt and bagpipes. At any moment I expected jugglers or fire-eaters, lepers in procession, with hoods and iron bells. There was a blare of noise; an iridescent film clung to my glasses like oil.

It can be quite naturalistic too as in:

March at last, and a few grudging intimations of spring. The trees are still bare, the buds still hard, cocooned, but in places where the sun hits there's meltdown. Dog doings unfreeze, then wane, their icy lacework sallow with wornout pee. Slabs of lawn come to light, sludgy and bestrewn. Limbo must look like this. (p.377)

*The Blind Assassin* is a searing indictment of some aspects of Canadian society. The two Chase sisters, Iris and Laura are on the receiving end most of the time. Richard Griffen, who marries Iris, is a leading Toronto businessman and represents most things Atwood attacks in the novel. Richard's sister Winifred completes the picture, more or less.

Laura represents defiance of the prevalent order and of a number of prevalent mores. In her own way she is also an avenger on the part of the wronged ones. As wrongs are too many. Iris was virtually forced into a marriage whose husband was terrible. Then her husband was terrible. Then her husband was terrible.

a kind of clinic where an abortion is brought about. Aimee is Iris's daughter and the father is supposed to be Richard but a question mark comes up against this. Iris hits back in her own way. Alex Thomas is a fugitive from the law, a kind of anarchist. He dies later.

A number of deaths are reported at the very start of the novel. Newspaper reports alternate with plain narrative all the time. That in turn, keeps alternating with 'the novel within the novel' authored by Laura. A love-story and a fantasy are also 'run' throughout.

Richard's politics is attacked throughout. Canadian attitudes to most things, at home and abroad, are attacked too. The general apathy and the general 'chill' that marks Canada out as a space are foregrounded. Pitted against it is the solidarity of the have-nots and the search for (and providing of) warmth against the chill. The amount of improvisation that goes on all the time is remarkable. The way Reniue comments on most things and the way she mediates between attitudes and domains is striking. A kind of domesticity is pitted against the hollow flashy lifestyle of rich Canadians, especially Ontario businessmen. Toronto, the showpiece for all this, is treated by the novelist herself with a chill.

The caring which a number of characters get from some other character in the story is one of the major points made by *The Blind Assassin*. The way Reenie, Walter and Myra care for Iris and the way she makes her peace with the circumstances every time they change is really touching. Being fine with a shrunken life is also one of the major points of the novel.

There is a lot of back-and-forth movement in the novel when it comes to the narrative. Most of the narrative keeps the War at the centre of it.

Tonal effects are the main stylistic strength of the novel. The very first line sets the tone:

Ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove off a bridge.

This kind of a tone goes well with newspaper reports, which are scattered all over the novel. Whenever the narrator reports disasters (this is apart from newspaper reporting), there is certain put-on detachment to the tone. The same thing Irish starts doing with Richard and Winifred. Marlow as narrator in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Iris come quite close to each other though Iris's direct suffering is much more. The lovers' story and the science fantasy are 'framed' and a different tonal shade emerges.

What enables Atwood to pack so much of lived life and comment on it in this remarkable novel is the dexterity with which the narrative is handled. The economy is cinematic and the 'cuts' quite appropriate. The imagery is most striking, more so when it relates to chill, warmth and domesticity. The ruthlessness and the sinister nature of Winifred's kind of people is beautifully brought out through metaphors like 'reptile'. The hollowness at the core of Richard's life is also objectified quite well.

*The Blind Assassin's* celebrity does not wholly rest on the premature death of its author, nor on the whiff of scandal that attaches to the family (the Chase daughters were the surviving remnants of a wealthy, industrial line, and Iris, at the time of its publication, was married to a prominent businessman and would-be politician). From the fragments we are given, we begin to understand that it is also a compelling love story, in which the participants in a clandestine affair scurry from park bench to squalid borrowed room, forever fleeing unnamed pursuers. She, weinfer, is a prisoner of some kind of domestic regime, while he is under threat of imminent arrest following a botched strike action. During their meetings, they comfort one another with escape into the imagined world of the planet Zycron, where the city of Sakiel-Norn teeters on the brink of disaster. In one strand of their shared story, a blind

assassin – one of the city's children, made sightless through enforced labour sewing carpets, rescues a sacrificial virgin who has had her tongue cut out.

Margaret Atwood :  
Life and Works

We can see, as Iris wryly points out, what fun the women's studies brigade would have had with that subplot, and indeed, the symbolism of the lovers' inspired science fiction resonates with their own position and with the events Iris retells as she traces the sisters' lives from childhood to catastrophic adulthood. Yet at times there are simply too many threads for Atwood to weave into the carpet, as she muses on themes of authorship and confession, the simultaneous empowerment and impotence of secret storytelling, and the hopeless position of women whose fates, through blood, money or love, are tied to men.

Where Atwood succeeds, and succeeds magnificently, is in the evocation of childhood, the territory that she mined so productively and memorably in *Cats' Eye*. Here it is invested with all the drama and intensity of a gothic horror story, as we spy on Iris and Laura in Pavilion, their monstrous Victorian castle of a home. There, saintly mother slips away in childbirth, war-wrecked father shuts himself up in the turrets with the whisky bottle, and a succession of ill-fated tutors attempts in vain to drum Tennyson and calculus into their unruly charges.

Atwood is terrific on the circumstances that cause the sisters to wander down different but equally doomed paths; pragmatic Iris offering herself up to a forced marriage in mute, furious self-sacrifice, wayward Laura engaged in 'loony metaphysics', driving bargains with God to stave off further loss and destruction. Their creator, knowing well the love, hatred and indifference of family bonds, draws a relationship that goes deeper than sibling rivalry and into the far more treacherous waters of mutual dependence.

But as the present day Iris (stumbling around her ramshackle cottage and fending off the attentions of do-gooders) continues with her tale, it mutates into all-out melodrama, complete with a pair of grotesque villains – emissaries from the world outside Pavilion – who infiltrate the family and appropriate the sisters with all the ease of asset-strippers closing down a factory. Iris's story now comes to resemble something from the world of *Dynasty* or the Kennedys, with plutocrats found dead aboard yachts, privileged heiresses discovered with their necks broken in grimy houses, snaffled telegrams, renegade political activists and wrongful inheritances. For the reader, this uncontrollable proliferation of events makes for urgent, fast-paced narrative; but it also distracts and detracts from the novel's more subtle themes.

Atwood has always sought to collapse and subvert different genres, so it isn't surprising that her family saga should encompass pulp sci-fi, clue-strewn detective novel, newspaper reportage and tragic confessional romance. The ingenuity of its chameleon narrative, and Atwood's assured handling of atmosphere, constitute an impressive attempt to cover an awful lot of ground – not least the whirlwind of social and political change that makes the sisters' rarefied childhood a dangerous anachronism – at the same time as exploring the hidden history of one family. *The Blind Assassin* also contains a sophisticated meditation on the uses and perils of fiction: this ushers in a daring ambiguity about the nature of authorship that ups the novel's ante and all but breaks the bank. What we have, at the end, is a mystery story whose chief character is absent. If Atwood hasn't quite managed to pull off this vanishing act, it is largely because her particular brand of fictional magic making relies on stealth and invisibility; and in this novel we get a little too close to seeing how the trick is performed.

*The Blind Assassin* is a tremendous novel in which romantic story, gothic drama and fantasy all merge in a heady mixture handled with consummate intricacy and artistry. A poet's touch is unmistakably present.

### 10.4.3 Poetry

Atwood's poetry also needs a quick general glance at this point. *The Circle Game* appeared in 1966 and *The Animals in That Country* in 1968. The year 1970 saw the appearance of *Power Politics*. Her poetry has an epigrammatic edge. It is notable for powerful images evocations of physical disgust and gothic consciousness her images was sometimes be surrealistic.

Two more recent volumes of poetry *Two-Hundred Poems* (1978) and *True Stories* (1981). The former deals with the essential questions of being a Canadian. The latter deals with the political aspects of survival.

Atwood is modernist in her demonic diction and conversational idiom. Discontinuity is at the core of the utterance. You get jagged sentences. The syntax is sometime elliptical. Hers is, on the whole, an analytical rather than a visual imagination. Violence is a usual subject and so is temporality.

### 10.4.4 *Survival*: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature

Here Atwood sees Canadian culture as being characterized by a failure of nerve. To avoid the responsibility of self-definition one chooses to be a victim. The central image of Canadian culture is that of a collection victim struggling for survival. Hostile natures environment and the colonial past contribute to such a predicament. Canadian writers are seen as exiles in their own country.

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## 10.5 QUESTIONS

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1. Is there a connection between Atwood's reading and the general orientation of her novels?
2. Comment on Atwood's overall artistic achievement.

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## UNIT 11 *SURFACING*: THEME, STRUCTURE, TECHNIQUE AND CHARACTERIZATION

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### Structure

- 11.1 Themes
- 11.2 Structure
- 11.3 Narrative Technique
- 11.4 Analysis
- 11.5 Characterization
- 11.6 Summing Up
- 11.7 Questions

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### 11.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit will offer a detailed analysis of *Surfacing* in the matter of various features other than the language of this novel, which would be taken up in the next unit.

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### 11.1 THEMES

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The year 1972 was the most significant year in the career of Margret Atwood, when she published *Surfacing*, her first "successful novel" and *Survival*, her first critical work which made a mark. It is noteworthy that *Survival* illuminates the novel, as far as the thematic thrusts of the novel are concerned. Atwood came to be regarded as an influential and accomplished woman of letters – a status which she richly deserved. Atwood is not only an artist, but she is also an intense writer. Most of her novels and other works are marked by concerns which relate to the oppressed and marginalized. Her morality does not remain confined to human beings, but extends to the flora and fauna of Canada, as one can witness her anxiety about the degradation in the environment and her sensitivity to living creatures in the interior of Canadian landscape.

Atwood wrote her *Edible Woman* before she penned *Surfacing* and the latter novel was followed by *Bodily Harm*. *Surfacing*, like the other two, has a woman-protagonist, who is burdened (or shackled, to be more correct) by the mores of the twentieth century consumerism, insensitivity and exploitative nature, but who eventually succeeds in getting her release from such an oppressive context. The price of the release is heavy – she experiences a psychic breakdown, and a disintegration of her society, but what is more important is that she is able to launch on her quest for her true self – an authentic, autonomous self, unfettered by patriarchal sexist and hypocritical norms.

*Surfacing* has been considered as a novel of 'rite de passage' (a novel of initiation into maturity) and has been placed within the tradition of initiation and metamorphosis. The heroine's quest for her true self is framed in a satirical portrait of society. *Surfacing* has a special significance in the context of Atwood's life and work. One witnesses in this novel biographical influences on Atwood – her childhood in the Canadian northland, an entomologist father, graduate study of Gothicism.

Atwood's essays collected in *Second Words* published in 1982 reflect her attitude to the role of the writer and the purpose of fiction. One can clearly see in these essays Atwood's early commitment to such social issues as colonialism and nationalism,

sexism and feminism, ecology and exploitation. These issues continued to engage her attention and provided grist to her novels.

It would be more appropriate to talk of themes in relation to *Surfacing*, because being a richly textured novel, it includes in its ambit diverse themes and issues. This section will deal with the following themes which one comes across in the novel: Feminism; Environmentalism; Anti-Americanism; the question of Canadian Identity; Civilization vs. Primitivism; Filial Relations; and Indian Elements/Shamanism.

Atwood builds into *Surfacing* certain silences which attempt to gloss over the exploitative excesses over the Native Canadians, who have come to be called, rather euphemistically, 'The First Nations'. In fact, the novel enacts the guilt of the Anglophones, who blithely sweep under the carpet what needles their conscience. For example, In the novel David acknowledges the exploitation of blacks at the hands of Americans and recognizes the black slaves' unpaid labour as the source of American wealth. He, however, does not acknowledge the exploitation of native peoples and resources as the root of the Canadian economy. David's erasure of a prior Native presence also required a deliberate forgetting. Harold Cardinal's book *The Unjust Society* (published in 1969) constitutes a direct rebuttal to Pierre Trudeau's slogan of Canada being 'just society'. Cardinal documents the government's failure to honour its treaty obligations towards Natives and their veiled reluctance to recognize aboriginal rights. Further, Cardinal blasts Canadians' self-image as being fair-minded and tolerant. He questions the sincerity of Canadian concern over Third World hunger or racial problems in the U.S. when Canadians ignore the plight of the Indian or Metis or Eskimo in their own country. At a time when, many non-Native Canadians were thinking about justice issues, Native organizations such as the National Indian Brotherhood forced white Canadians to recognize that the U.S. was not only North American nation marked by racial violence. Readers of *Surfacing* are guided to a similar recognition as they piece together the buried past of the narrator and her country. The novel suggests that recognizing Canada's heritage of violence is painful but necessary, if English Canadians are to escape from their recurrent, paralyzing fantasy that "through no fault of my own I am doomed".

The notion of post-coloniality involves victimization and suppression of culture. While on the one hand, the novel points to the suppression of Natives' culture by the white Canadians, it also projects Canada as the victim of the Big Brother, the U.S. the only country with which it shares its borders and on whom Canada is largely dependent for its economy. There is always a lurking danger of Canada losing its identity by losing its culture which is increasingly being Americanised. Americanism is all pervasive and American values, mores and attitudes are being absorbed by the young Canadians. Canada finds itself in the position of other post-colonial countries which have independence from foreign rule, but still remain cultural colonies of their erstwhile rulers. Instead of political imperialism, what the West especially the United States of America, are following is economic and cultural colonialism in their erstwhile colonies. Canada is no exception. And this feeling is strong among white Canadians.

### ANTI-AMERICANISM

The protagonist's anti-Americanism is obvious. At the end of chapter 18. She says:

...it wasn't the men I hated, it was the Americans, the human beings, men and women both. They'd had their chance but they had turned against the gods, and it was time for me to choose sides. I wanted there to be a machine that could make them vanish, a button I could press that would evaporate them without disturbing anything

else, that way there would be more room for the animals, they would be rescued.\*

*Surfacing* : Theme,  
Structure, Technique  
and Characterization

About the novel's anti-Americanism Jaidev has this to say :

Americans are projected as people against innocence, nature and life-giving gods; they are also against all cultures of peoples that happen to be relatively weak and vulnerable. They are evil and spread themselves like a virus, not just militarily but also by contaminating people's minds, by corrupting their tastes, by alienating them from and sowing disaffection for their own cultures and roots. Thus, they displace their value system itself. This promotes the growth of pastiche culture – a purposeless, schizophrenic and unauthentic culture whose 'cultural logic' is in fact an extension of the power logic. This pastiche culture ensures pastiche people, people whose language, fashions, values are all imitative, borrowed, clichéd, soulless – all imitation American. This is a new dimension of imperialism and it assumes culture to be an exportable commodity. In any case, it is an inevitable product of power-lined political bossism or big-brotherism which eventually must permeate all spheres. This may denote a success for the dominant nation as well as its privileged culture but, for Quebec, it is nothing less than a disaster.

America in *Surfacing* is 'the disease from the south' and shows itself in Quebec through a persistent imagery of death, destruction and senseless mutilation. Power corrupts neighbours by arbitrarily privileging one's own culture, cultural artifacts and fetishes – and by diminishing the neighbours. Canada has geographical proximity to America, but industrially it is not awfully inferior to USA. In a situation where physical distances signify nothing, the cultural ramifications of America's political domination are manifest everywhere and suggest a global disease. An arrogant and all-arrogating culture interferes with the arbitrarily marginalized ones and damages their souls.

-- *Ambivalence*, p.277

### Religious Roots

Margaret Atwood appears to be a radical when it comes to her feminist ideology. She appears to espouse a total break with the Biblical tradition, and encourages people to evolve their own theology out of their own lived experience. The protagonist of *Surfacing* has been raised to be an atheist. She regards Jesus as a "wooden Christ" and "the alien god". It was inculcated into her that "Jesus was a historical figure and God was a superstition, and a superstition was a thing that didn't exist.

However, though the Atwood narrator must discover her own personal religious value system, it is not that traditional religion has become non-viable because it empowers the male. It becomes non-viable because it has lost its truly religious power altogether. Therefore, we notice that the background sections of *Surfacing* focus not only on the atheistic nature of the narrator's upbringing, but also on the decadence of rituals and symbols becomes a marker of weakening of religion.

Atwood links the narrator's problem of identity crisis to the age of "Enlightenment" There are recurrent references to the city of the abortion as a "tiny company town, neatly planned with public flower beds and an eighteenth century fountain in the middle, stone dolphins and a cherub with part of the face missing." Atwood's point is that the roots of the narrator's identity crisis go back not to the Bible but rather to the eighteenth-century Rationalist attack on traditional religious and related concepts

\* All page references are to the 1979 Virago Press edition of *Surfacing*

of man, nature and society. To Atwood, therefore, if the feminine is allied with the irrational, so also is pre-Enlightenment religion. Thus it becomes so clear in the novel that the chief instrument of oppression of women is not the Judeo-Christian tradition per se, but rather the eighteenth-century demystification of religious.

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## 11.2 STRUCTURE

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The narrative of *Surfacing* has been divided into three parts and each part delineates the narrator's search for her father and for her own real self. The novel, dramatically, has a balanced structure in its tripartite division.

Part I consists of the characters and the physical background and sets in motion the groundwork for the action of the novel. The problem of the disappearance of the narrator's father causes a rising action as she searches for clues, which could lead to his whereabouts. It portrays the intense experience of the narrator, which has the impact of the immediacy. This immediacy of the experience is communicated through the use of present tense. However, the narrator alternates between the present and the past, and the change of tense from the present to the past is noticeable.

Part I consists of the first eight chapters. It presents the narrator as an alienated person. She is alienated not only from others, from her family who are referred to by her as "they", but also from herself. She is depressed, disconnected and believes she is disintegrating. She feels that it is a "relief to be exempt from feeling" She decides that her father is insane and is watching them from the bushes. Her decision coincides with the group's decision to stay and the section ends on a note of suspense. The travails that afflict the protagonist press on her so hard that she finds that "being in the air" is more painful, than "being in the water, and slips into the water.

Part II consists of chapters 9 to 19 and spans a period of one week. In this part, the narrator reflects on her disintegration, which is experienced in the bodily fragmentation. She begins to feel that she has been cut into two halves that her head has been severed from her body. She comes to realize that she has been living in the head which is the "wrong half". However, the confrontation with the dead body of her father brings her back to reality. In this part, the narrator makes three significant discoveries. She sees the dead body of her father, the crippling truth of the abortion dawns on her with full force and her need to keep diving into water, so that she can surface. These have symbolic significance which would be discussed in Unit 13 (dealing with imagery and symbolism). These discoveries serve an important purpose they move both the protagonist and the reader deeper into her mind and past. Objective, concrete surroundings and the present are back grounded in favour of mental exploration of the narrator. Thus we see that Part I describes the descent, while part II explores the world, existing at the bottom of the lake.

Part III extends from chapters 20 to 27 and describes the narrator's return; spread over a period of a few days. A new realization comes to the heroine. She believes that reality has to be faced and it is not possible to go on living in the cocoon of the past. So she moves into the present, nourished and prepared to take on life with all its vicissitudes and live life on her own terms. She has learnt that withdrawal is neither possible, nor desirable. She is ready to love, and to talk, and to trust. This concludes her search for her self. She acquires an identity of her own.

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## 11.3 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

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Atwood has chosen to narrate in the first person point of view for a variety of reasons. This facilitates a greater identification of the reader on account of its being

informal and conversational. The narrator talks to the reader directly, giving an account of events and situations, and motives. Diaries and autobiographies written in the first person have a conversational tone and have a ring of authenticity. However, Atwood controls the tone of the narration, and we feel the distance in the narrator's voice which sound somewhat cold. This coldness in the narrator's tone is indicative of her personality. We learn later that the narrator realizes the value of getting in touch with her emotions.

The reader is not in a position to receive any other information about a character or a situation than that which the narrator chooses to provide. This rather limits the scope for the reader to form a judgement, which is autonomous and his own, because the information is filtered through the consciousness of the narrator. Therefore, the feelings and ideas of the narrator the reader's opinion as well.

We need to remember that there are both reliable and unreliable narrators. The narrator in *Surfacing* is an unreliable narrator, and therefore we cannot be certain as to truthfulness of what she tells us. Through the progress of the story, the readers finds out that the narrator lies about others and also about herself. This is demonstrated by the fact that many of the memories in the first half of the novel are actually fantasy. The lies the narrator tells include her marriage and the birth of her child. She is also a biased narrator and her bias tends to distort reality. One example of her distorting things is her confrontation with the "American" fishermen. She indulges in distortion in order to suit her own interests. She had thought the fisherman to be Americans, but when they turn out to be Canadians from Sarnia, she does not reproach herself for lack of judgement, but instead gets angry at them for "disguising ht themselves".

### Style

A few words about the style of the narration of *Surfacing* would be in order. One can discern Atwood's experience as a poet. The language Atwood employs gives the impression of being cool, impersonal and precise. The kind of language that is used indicates the personality traits of the narrator, Atwoods presents the language as the narrator's choice of words, and therefore, Atwood wants to convey that the narrator has a cool approach to life and that she is unable to feel.

However, the language undergoes a radical change towards the end of novel. The narrator undergoes a visionary experience and there is a corresponding in the style of writing. We do not find the use of the witticisms and the confusing strands of memory, which proliferate in the first part of the book. The language becomes simpler, more direct, short shorn of embellishment, less intellectual and more emotional. This is to suggest the crucial changes that have taken place in the narrator: she has become clear headed, uncomplicated, and simple to the extent of being a primitive. Atwood cleverly avoids the use of period, and instead tries to use spaces instead to try and communicate what cannot be spoken. An example of this to be found in chapter 24, when the narrator experiences an intense vision.

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## 11.4 ANALYSIS

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*Surfacing* has a story line which is simple but linear and the story spans several days. The novel can be divided into three parts, for the purpose of analysis. The three parts make the novel well-balanced

Part one : consists of chapters 1 to 8

Part two : covers chapters 9 to 19

Part three : consists of chapter 20 to 27

## *Surfacing*

In part one, as generally happens in novels, we are introduced to the various characters in the novel. The physical background against which the action takes place is also described. The forces which propel the action in the novel are set into motion. The starting point of the action constitutes the disappearance of the father of the narrator. This becomes the source of the rising action in the novel, as the narrator sets for herself the task of finding her missing father. This has symbolic significance the female narrator is tied up to her father without whom she feels inadequate. She is under the sway of her father, which is indicative of the power of the patriarchal system in which either the father or the husband become essential parts of the identity of the female. She searches for clues which could lead to her discovery of her father. And this becomes the stuff of the action. She begins to get an uncanny feeling that perhaps her father had gone insane, left the cabin and was hiding somewhere in the bushes. She feels his gaze on her from behind the bushes. This becomes. These feelings become instrumental in the group's decision to stay on and continue the search. The narrator becomes obsessed with the 'sin' abortion which she once committed. She feels guilty about it, but she tries to deceive herself and the reader by creating a new network of lies. She talks about her marriage, and divorce and the existence of her child. It is important to note that in this section, the narrator helps Joe and David in killing living things. It is significant that towards the end of this part, the narrator drives into the lake. This foreshadows the change that is going to take place in the next part, when the narrator would dive into the thick of things. This section creates suspense. One does not know what will be the end result of the narrator's search.

Part two reverses the thinking of the narrator. She learns that her father was not insane and the act of his disappearance was not caused by his having lost his mental balance. In fact, she finds out that he was a committed researcher and was engaged in research work concerning rock paintings. Chapter 17 constitutes a climactic moment. The narrator reaches the stage of self-discovery. She comes face to face with the truth about herself and also the truth about her father's disappearance. The narrator also begins to realize, on finding a dead heron, that she is as guilty of killing the living creatures as the Americans because she has been going fishing. Another reversal that takes in this part is her admission of the sin she had committed. She experiences a vision of her baby and comes to the conclusion that she, too, is a killer. Thus, the vision of her child links the narrator with the past which was absent in the first part. It is noteworthy that she knows now that she is not "innocent". This section concludes with the American finding the body of her father, and the narrator not believing it. The section contains clues as to the direction the novel will take in the next part. The narrator's words pointing out that nothing is dead and that everything is alive point to her own rebirth, and her pregnancy.

In part three we witness the effects of the climax on the narrator. The story moves towards some sort of a conclusion. Joe appears which points to a vague, but possible resolution to the dramatic conflict which had developed and extended up to the second part. The narrator attempts to atone for her "sin" by becoming pregnant from Joe and deciding to give birth to the child; She believes it is the same child that she had aborted, who is coming to forgive her of the sin. In this part, we witness certain crucial changes in the narrator. In part one, it was different about coming to the wilderness, but now she has completely identified with Nature. Also we found her to be rather dry and detached, but in part three, we find that she has transformed into a warm person, with feelings and emotions. She performs a journey towards her humanization. Atwood seems to be emphasizing here that facing the truth, self-discovery, and taking up responsibility are essential for becoming a complete human being, which the narrator of *Surfacing* becomes at the end of the novel.

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## 11.5 CHARACTERIZATION

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Characterization in *Surfacing* has some post-modernist elements in it. Identity is fluid so the narrator (kept unnamed) is not a very reliable narrator. Apart from her, other notable characters are David, Joe and Anna. Of these David alone is allowed fuller treatment. In Joe's case some of the aspects of his personality start clearing up only towards the end. Anna is shown as a weak character.

The narrator returns to Northern Quebec to the remote island of her childhood with her lover and two friends. She wants to investigate the mysterious disappearance of her father. She ends up coming face-to-face with her own past. In that past there was a brother, parents and a marriage. All that is over. She never was quite close to them.

David has a touch of fatness as most things that he does. He is domineering. He is a teacher of communication in an adult education programme. He appears to be a radical but in reality he is not one. He rarely reveals what his real feeling are. His conversation mostly is forward of insults and political commentary. The narrator sums him up thus:

'...he was an imposter, a pastiche, layers of political handbills, pages from magazines, *affiches*, verbs and nouns glued on to him and shreadding away, the original surface littered with fragments and tatters. In a black suit knocking on doors, young once, even that had been a costume, a uniform; now his hair was falling off and he didn't know what language to use, he'd forgotten his own, he had to copy. Second-hand American was spreading over him in patches, like mange or lichen. He was infested, garbled, and I couldn't help him: it would take such time to heal, unearth him, scrape down to where he was true.' (pp-146)

Anna is in a victim position where her relationship with David is concerned. She unquestioningly accept that she must follow the rules of the power games which David sets up.

Joe is compared by the narrator to the buffalo on the US nickel. He is sometime gloomy and sometimes surly. Speech to him is a task, a struggle, yet he has emotions.

The narrator herself is cold uninvolved and utmost unemotional. She had an early love-affair and abortion. When she starts moling peace with her past she starts feeling responsibility for her life and coming out of a guilt-feeling. She decides to be no longer a victim. At the end she is in a bit of a fix whether to return to the city or not.

The way she does not allow David to have his way with her (physically) is something to be noted. That brings out the worst in hum

Then there is Paul who is to narrator's father's best friend. His wife is called simply 'Madame'. There is also Evans, the owner of the Blue Moon Cabin's Claudio is the some of the village motel and bar. Mr. Percival is the narrator's employer.

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## 11.6 SUMMING UP

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Thematically *Surfacing* is about consumerism, identity, environmentalism, and relationships. Structurally it has three parts. These three describe descent exploration, and return.

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## 11.7 QUESTIONS

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1. Comment on the overall thematic thrust of *Surfacing*.
2. Structurally, what are the three broad sections into which *Surfacing* can be divided?
3. Comment on Atwood's handling of characterization in *Surfacing*?

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## UNIT 12 *SURFACING*: LANGUAGE

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### Structure

- 12.0 Objectives
- 12.1 Language (General)
- 12.2 Imagery
- 12.3 Symbolism
- 12.4 Questions

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### 12.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this brief unit we shall focus on the language of *Surfacing*.

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### 12.1 LANGUAGE (GENERAL)

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Atwood is fully aware of the importance of language in life and literature. In *Surfacing* she focuses on several issues concerning language. These are: the process of acquiring language, the power that language commands, the gap between language and reality, the use of language to mask or deform reality. She is so conscious of the importance of language that she believes that no human being can survive without it. She understands that language helps preserve mutual interdependence of self and the world. She is simultaneously aware of the fact that language does not contain expressions for all the ideas and that there can be occasions when language may end up communicating nothing - occasions when "To be deaf and dumb would be easier."

Atwood is a consummate poet and, therefore, she uses language in a poetic way even when she is writing prose narratives including fiction. The poetic language lends to her prose a lyrical quality, which one generally finds in poetry, that is copious use of imagery and symbolism.

At the grammatical level, Atwood's prose contains a mixture of sentences: both lengthy and very short sentences, consisting of just one word. The very short sentences are used generally for conversations which most of the time are about unserious topics and some of the examples are : "Don't", "No", or "Any news?" "Now what?" Aren't I awful?" Long sentences are used for articulating complex ideas and experiences of the narrator. Thus the complexity of the sentences mirrors the complexity of the thoughts of the narrator. Atwood does not use many connectives in the language to symbolize the inability of the narrator to relate and connect. However, the novelist makes copious use of connectives, while describing physical reality.

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### 12.2 IMAGERY

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Atwood makes use of a wide variety of images to build for the reader perspectives on the novel. These images reinforce the fact of her being a poet who incorporates the poetic elements in her novel and makes it absorbing and imaginative and communicate her ideas in a more effective manner.

We find copious use of the image of mirrors. Mirrors function in the novel as the agents of the division of self. At the same time, they distort reality. To quote Atwood's own poem "Tricks with Mirrors":

It is not a trick either,  
It is a craft:  
Mirrors are crafty.

One example of the image of mirrors is found in the in Anna's use of mirrors. She leads a false and artificial life. The narrator perceives Anna's soul as trapped in her compact mirror just as her body is trapped by the celluloid image created through the camera. Anna, therefore, not surprisingly is a "seamed and folded imitation of a magazine picture that is itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere ... captive princess in someone's head. She is locked in ... she is not bored... she has no other interests." (pp 191-92) This is why Anna is found repeatedly opening her "gilt compact" and thereby "unclosing her other self, which is trapped in the mirror. The protagonists has always been keen to release the trapped beings. Therefore, she feels sorry for Ann's soul, which is closed in the gold compact. The narrator regrets that instead of the camera breaking, the gold compact should have broken, and then the trapped soul of Anna would have found released. The protagonist feels restless to bring about Anna's liberation from all illusions and masks she wears, so that somehow Anna could confront her real self.

The protagonist realises that the mirrors alienate us from our real selves and, therefore, decides 'I must stop being in the mirror. I look for the last time at any distorted glass face.' (203) She finds the reflection 'intruding between my eyes and vision. Not to see myself but to see. I reverse the mirror, so it's towards the wall; it no longer traps me.' (203) The narrator has been making efforts to heal the split in her and is attempting to attain her real whole self. Therefore she cannot stand a "trick done with mirrors" (124) - the trick of distorting the splitting reality. Once she has come to the stage of accepting both the halves - head and heart (feelings and emotion), she just cannot afford being in the mirror and . Her rejection of mirror helps her in shedding the wrong form that encases her.

We find the images of dividing and splitting interspersed in the novel. The following line from the novel is revealing: "I'd allowed myself to be cut in two. Woman sawn apart in a wooden crate...." (124). These images of dividing and splitting are, however, closely related to the parts of the body. The neck divides the head and the body. The narrator's statement on this aspect is relevant here: "I am not against the body or the head either; only the neck which creates the illusion that they are separate." Because of the split in herself, she notices the "split cedar," "split beans," that watershed which divides the lake, dividing water for fishing and dividing the fish. When she views the sky through the window, she finds the sky divided, too. Talking about the sky, she says: 'sky visible through the window, divided by the window squares and then by interlacing branches, leaves overlapping leaves.'

Repetition of certain words or expressions such as 'battered', 'cut off', 'amputated', 'cancelled', 'chopped', 'sliced off', and 'sawn' point to the splitting or fragmentation of the self. The genesis of the feeling in the protagonist that she became a split identity in the abortion she underwent. The feeling of emptiness took hold of her, because the baby who was part of her was ripped from her. She is disturbed by this split, wants to heal it, but can do so only if she regains her baby somehow. So, she decides to conceive again and Joe does it for her. The decision to give birth to the baby and bring her up in her own way, heals the split and the two divided parts to rejoin and she becomes whole again.

We have also several images of the parts of the body in the novel. The divided self of the protagonist makes her unable to respond as a whole. To become a whole, she has become handicapped: she can she can perceive only other parts and the writer stresses by using images of parts of the body. The self-image of the narrator is not a unified whole: she thinks of herself as just 'a head' or as 'a severed thumb', reconfirming her belief that she is fragmented. Not only does she look at herself as fragmented parts, but she perceives Joe, too, in terms of parts of his body. She not notices her hands and then categories them as peasant hands. The hand then becomes for her only a

palm which she finds to be 'broad' and late still later fingers which are 'short'. She focuses on her feet which are 'lean' and sees that his toes have the "deprived look of potatoes sprouted in the bog". Similarly, examination of Joes' face, reveals an eyelid and side of his nose, the skin pa the pallid skin, his dark brown almost black beard, his back she finds is more hairy than many other men. Also a it has a warm texture, and it is like teddy-bear fur.

The narrator continues with the description of the different parts of the body of Joe: his 'heavy teeth', 'thick shoulders', 'unexpectedly slight hips' hands ... roughened and leathery because of handling of clay. The perception of Joe, not as a whole body, but as parts, persists even in a very intense moment of love in its physical aspect. She says: 'My hand touched his arm. Hand touched arm.'

The narrator talks of her body also as segregated parts: 'arms without hands', 'the cut off pieces of early martyrs' 'the toes of saints', 'the severed breasts', the genitals detached 'like kitchen appliances'. Especially noteworthy is the image of a 'a cherub with part of the face missing'. Importantly, this image is presented by the protagonist twice in the narrative. These perceptions of the body not as a unified whole, but as parts are 'the consequence of our alienation from our environments, our bodies, other people and finally even ourselves'.

Then we have the images of war interspersed in the novel One reason why we have so many images of war spanning the novel is the period- location of the novel: *Surfacing* is a post-Second World War novel. The writer shows intense concern for the unavoidable ravages of war. Notwithstanding the protagonist's efforts to keep the minds of his children unaffected by war, the minds of young children were impacted by war : Witness the sentence "In the car that time we sat with our feet wrapped in blankets, pretending we were wounded." A very potent image of war appears in the novel in the form of bonfires made by the narrator's father to burn the weeds. The children threw sticks into flames and chant "Hitler's house is burning down. Also the protagonist recalls having played "war games" in her childhood.

The protagonist is keenly concerned with the destruction wrought by war. Even she knows that during the war, I would be able to do nothing," we have the images of "splintered bones," "seaplanes" "the leaders rearing at the crowds from inside their uniforms," soldiers", "concrete bunkers" "bullet holes" "weapons" "airplanes" "tanks" generals" "granite" "the powerlines," "rockets" "concentration camps" "swastikas" "bazooka" "a cartridge, "the newsreels of parades at the end of war," "the winners joyful with victory and relief " the Revolution" " a real war" " Hitler" "Germans" "Fascist" "treaties and alliances" etc. The narrator feels extremely upset that the war destroys not only human beings, animals, but also nature.

A recurring image in *Surfacing* is the jacket of the narrator's mother. The reason that the image of the jacket is repeatedly used is because the author wants to convey to us that the protagonist cannot forget her mother. In fact, the image of the mother and that of the jacket become inseparable. Her mother is dead and the loss is irreparable. Since the jacket belonged to the narrator's mother, it has the smell of her mother, which both reminds of her mother and also of the irrecoverability of the loss. When the narrator finds Anna wearing this jacket, she finds that the head attached to the jacket is incongruous. Also a crucial difference is foregrounded by the fact that while the protagonist's mother used to keep sunflower seeds in the pickets of the jacket, all that Anna fills her jacket pocket with are an empty metal aspirin container and an ancient Kleenex, a charred filter from one of Anna's cigarettes. While on the one hand, this contrast highlights the difference between the love for nature in the narrator's mother, and Anna's sickly city civilization, it also serves as a pointer that Anna cannot fill the place of the place of the narrator's mother's leather jacket serves as the symbol for the protagonist for the value her mother values her mother stood for cherished.

The image of island in *Surfacing* functions as an objective correlative for the protagonist's state of mind and symbolises her alienation, as the island the island is a place which is cut off from other spaces. The island, therefore, in the novel stands for an alienated condition.

The protagonist herself has turned into an island, cut off from others, and even from herself. Her remark in this context suggestive : "At some point my neck must have closed over, pond freezing or a wound, shutting me into my head, since then everything had been glancing off me, it was like being in a vase." Even though she is in the company of her three companions, she feels virtually alone. Also we notice that there is a constant desire in her the protagonist to be all by herself on the island. She has turned into an island herself, enclosed, aloof.

She has been cut off from her family completely for the last nine years, with no interaction with them. Therefore, her family members have become 'they' for her, which is indicative of her emotional distancing from them. Even though the narrator realises that she is imprisoned in her own island, but she also is conscious that that she is imprisoned in her false self or the wrong half. To enforce the feeling of enclosure, the novelist has used expressions like, 'bottles', 'jam-jars', 'tin cans', 'cage', 'chicken wire', 'borders', 'gate', 'fence', 'cabin' etc. which reinforce the situation of alienation of the protagonist.

The narrator becomes conscious of the dangers of leading a life, alienated both from others and herself, just as it is unsafe to be living on the island, which is populated by bears and wolves. It is only when she decides to be a mother again, and bring up her child, that her alienation comes to an end. The impending motherhood restores her to life, people and herself. The realisation that she needed a man to conceive, makes her accept Joe's love and with this comes the awareness that living enclosed and isolated, for ever is not possible nor desirable.

She appears to be now prepared to leave the island and to go to the city with Joe. She is prepared to socialise in the city with people, interact with them, to begin life anew 'to live in the usual way'. Her decision is guided by her realisation that 'we can no longer live in spurious peace by avoiding each other.' Human contact, and give and take, are essential for a sustainable and fulfilling existence.

Atwood also uses the image of the city to underline the conflict in the mind of the protagonist between the city and the bush. In fact, all along she has experienced a split between the anonymity offered by the city and that offered by the bush. However, the contrast between the city and the bush prioritizes the bush as in the city one wakes up to hear the noise caused by the heavy traffic. in the island 'Birdsong wakes me' and that makes the day different. When David, having watched the beauty of the setting sun exclaims: 'This is great ... it's better than in the city.' The narrator also agrees with him, saying : 'it's better here than in the city with the exhaust pipe fumes.'

The novel also contains the images of disease and death. The image of the disease refers to the growing Americanism, which is debilitating and destructive. This disease has not only affected her companions, but other Canadians, too. The narrator compares this disease to a virus, which is spreading fast: "They spread themselves like a virus, they get into the brain and take over the cells and the cells change from inside and the ones that have the disease can't tell the difference." The form this disease takes is the sprouting of summer cottages like measles. The narrator herself is suffering from many diseases. She is presented in the grip of an emotional paralysis at the start of the novel. Ironically, the cure she finds for her disease which causes her pain is inventing another pain, which would act as anaesthesia.

Atwood uses the images of death to stress the wasteland character of the country that is presented. There are the dying white birches and dead elm skeletons. The narrator recalls the death of her mother after she underwent hospitalization. When she returns

home after nine years, she feels that 'old priest' is dead, too. She is not sure whether her father is alive or dead. It is for the purpose of looking for her father that the protagonist goes to the wilds, but having reached there she realises that it was not the death of her father, but her own that became her overriding concern. This is borne out by the fact that she is not presented in mourning when she finally learns about the death of her father. She thinks that she has come to the island, with the seed of death planted in her. Her belief is that ever since the abortion of her child which she carried out, she carries death inside her and that she was not alive. If any part of her self lived, it was her wrong self.

The novelist does not present the images of death of human beings, but also for animals and birds: 'dead animal', 'dead bird', 'dead fish', 'death beetle', 'dead beavers'. The narrator draws our attention to a dead heron through a vivid visual image.

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## 123 SYMBOLISM

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Atwood makes use of symbolism to effectively articulate the themes of the novel. We find four major symbols that have been used: two are conventional, drawing their power from traditional associations and two are private, which become progressively important in the course of the novel. Though all the four symbols are part of the story on a literal level, they work effectively on a symbolic level.

The novel proliferates with the images of separation and dualism, but one symbol comes to represent the idea of unity or wholeness: the fish. Fish appear frequently in the novel. There are frequent fishing expeditions undertaken by the narrator and her friends and during fishing, they meet other fishermen, too. In one of the Indian paintings, referred to by the narrator, there is a figure which has the likeness of a fish. The reader begins to understand the symbolic value of fish steadily as the novel progresses.

The fish begins to symbolise 'wholeness' for the narrator, the unity between mind and body which is seeking. For the narrator, the symbolic significance of the fish lies in the fact that, fish, like frogs, snakes or worms, has head which extends directly into the shoulder. The head is not seen separately from the body. And this stands for the unity of the head and the body. It is perhaps for this reason that the protagonist does not approve of the killing of fish; Fish represents for her the goal of unity: 'neckless headbody, the fish is whole'.

Heron is used as an image, but it has symbolic value, too. The narrator herself becomes aware of the symbolic role heron performs in the novel. It was believed that the flight of birds constituted an omen. In folklore, also the heron is associated with the symbolic value of an omen. In *Surfacing* the herons acquire this predictive role. On two occasions, the narrator, sees, herons flying overhead, which is followed by her which is followed by her traumatic dive into the water. The discovery of the mangled body of a heron by the narrator, the symbolic significance of heron, serving as an omen, increases.

The heron begins to symbolise suffering, by being associated with the figure of the Christ. The narrator recalls the 'unsacred cross, the shape of the heron flying above us the first evening we fished, a blue-grey cross, and the other heron or was it the same one, hanging wrecked from the tree'. The sighting of the first heron forecasts the death of the second and the second heron symbolizes the suffering in human existence, as the narrator repeatedly alludes to Christ on the cross. The death of the second heron also serves as the symbol of man's senseless devastation of nature. The heron is neither a source of food, nor is it a creature, which could harm anyone. But significantly, the heron, as is the case with the Golden Phoenix, also functions as a

traditional symbol of regeneration and rebirth which points to both the narrator's suffering and her eventual rebirth.

Natural aspects, too, are made to serve as symbols. For example, water and air function as powerful symbols. Air is associated with consciousness or reason and water is the representative of the unconscious or feeling. Through these traditional associations, the writer supports and foregrounds the narrator's psychological quest into herself.

There is a split in the narrator in these two areas. She continues to deny the abortion she has had and according to psychoanalysis the repressed ideas travel from the conscious part of the mind into the unconscious. At the end of part One, the narrator's first dive into water symbolises her plunge into the unconscious. She says: 'finally being in the air is more painful than being in the water and I bend and push myself reluctantly into the lake.' The narrator reinforces the symbolic significance of water and air by frequently referring to the act of waking up or coming out from under the influence of anesthesia as 'surfacing'.

Metaphors and symbols keep enhancing the impact of the novel, till the end. During her dive into the lake in chapter 17, the body of her father turns into the body of her aborted child, whom she has been attempting to forget, but not successfully. Therefore, it can be argued that she moves from the conscious world into the unconscious where she encounters what she has been repressing. It is only after, she has confronted her unconscious, faced what she has been trying to evade consciously that the process of her recovery starts. After she surfaces from the unconscious into the conscious world, she finds herself attaining her humanness and wholeness. She is now able to feel emotions like a normal human being, as against the deadening that gripped her post-abortion of her child. Surfacing in fact in itself becomes a powerful multi-layered symbol: it refers to her acquiring a surface and substance which could be linked to visibility and identity as against her identitylessness and the void that she had become: she now gains an identity, (ii) it dramatizes her coming out from the turmoil and turbulence of her to the calm surface, (iii) it enacts her journey from the conscious to the unconscious and return to the conscious, and (iv) it symbolizes her courage to come out of the dark underworld of fears and face the world on her own terms. Her excavation is nevertheless tortuous.

*Surfacing* is built around a compass of metaphors – an aborted foetus, a dead frog, a drowning brother, a loss father – all of them associated in a young woman's mind. She has a climactic descent into water which amounts to a descent into her subconscious. The connections made by her between them lead her into madness. Her constant search is for her identity as woman, daughter, and mate. Her spiritual search is for an identity different from the conventional roles available. For the reader the novel functions as a map made out of hieroglyphs about living. The entire novel is structured by ceaseless journeys, excursions and outings. The ostensive quest for the father turns into an oedipal discovery of the self. The protagonist virtually 'goes mad' herself in her ultimate gesture of sanity. The protagonist's encounters lead her to a self-knowledge. That in turn liberates her from palter us of victimization which had earlier entrapped her. All that are patterns of oppression. These include a failed monist and deeply wounding abortion. The figurality makes Atwood's language poetic and there are plenty of examples of it. In chapter six, for example, we have this:

Clean water in a glass, brushes in another glass, water-colours and acrylics in their metal toothpaste tubes. Blue-bottle fly near my elbow, metallic abdomen gleaming, sucker tongue walking on the oilcloth like a seventh foot. When it was raining we would sit at this table and draw in our scrap-books with crayons or coloured pencils, anything we liked. In school you had to do what the rest were doing.

On the crest of the hill for all to see  
God planted a Scarlet Maple Tree

printed, thirty-five times, strung out along the top of the blackboard, each page with a preserved maple leaf glued to it, ironed between sheets of wax paper. (p.47)

The density of imagery and metaphor, the powerful symbolic dimensions, the fusion of psychological with larger cultural-social theme are all striking facts of the novel.

One important thing to note about Atwood's overall use of language is that she tries to build a language of transgression. Sumeal elements are strongly there and a find of undercurrent of hysteria (firmly kept in check) is also evident often. It is a ler like the poetry of Robert Lowell or that of Sylvia Plath. Atwood's figurality is of a startling and refreshing kind and this boldness marks the language both on the novels and of the poems.

Most of these elements of language are present in the following description from Chapter 21 (p.159):

Rump on a packsack, harem cushion, pink on the cheeks and black discreetly around the eyes, as red as blood as black as ebony, a seamed and folded imitation of a magazine picture that is itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere, hairless lobes angel in the same heaven where God is a circle, captive princess in someone's head. She is locked in, she isn't allowed to eat or shit or cry or give birth, nothing goes in, nothing comes out. She takes her clothes off or puts them on, paper doll wardrobe, she copulates under strobe lights with the man's torso while his brain watches from its glassed-in control cubicle at the other end of the room, her face twists into poses of exultation and total abandonment, that is all. She is not bored, she has no other interests.

The person being talked about is Anna and deadly figurality comes into play here.

The imagery have is sparkling and the symbolism surreal. The following group of phrases from Chapter Seven is almost imagistic in its structure:

Tackle box, smelling of stale fish, old captures; worm can and frog bottle, knife and heap of bracken fronds for the fish to bleed on. Joe in the bow, Anna behind him on a life-jacket facing me, David on another life-jacket with his back to me and his legs tangled in amongst Anna's. Before I push off I clip a silver and gold spinner with glass ruby eyes to David's line and hook a worm on, looping its body seductively. Both end twirl.

It's all noun-phrases. The syntax is imagistic.

Let us take another example of figurality from the novel. The closing words of Chapter Seven configure the registering impulse:

Loon voices in the distance; bats flutter past us, dipping over the water surface, flat calm now, the shore things, white-grey rocked and dead trees, doubling themselves in the dark mirror. Around us the illusion of infinite space or of no space, ourselves and the obscure shore which it seems we could touch, the water between an absence. The canoe's reflection float with us, the paddles twin in the lake. It's like moving on air, nothing beneath us holding us up; suspended, we drift home.

The second paragraph in Chapter Ten has this:

Sun rising, drifting across the sky, shadows changing without help, uninterrupted air, absence of defining borders, the only break an occasional distant plane, vapour streak, for them it must have been like living in a hammock.

The imagistic impulse is dominant here also. What is striking is the graphic quality of Atwood's descriptions and its general thrust in the direction of accuracy.

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## 12.4 QUESTIONS

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1. What is poetic about the style and language of *Surfacing*?
2. How does the use of symbols reinforce the thematic side of *Surfacing*?

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## SUGGESTED READING

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## NOTES