

The Grotesque As a Means of Revelation in Atwood's "Hairball", in *Wilderness Tips*, and "The Headless Horseman", in *Moral Disorder*.

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"Hairball," she [Katherine] says. "You're so ugly. Only a mother could love you." She feels sorry for it. She feels loss. Tears run down her face. Crying is not something she does, not normally, not lately. Hairball speaks to her, without words. It is irreducible, it has the texture of reality, it is not an image. What it tells her is everything she's never wanted to hear about herself. This is new knowledge, dark and precious and necessary. It cuts.

Margaret Atwood, "Hairball" (54).

I loved the sensation of prowling abroad in the darkness – of being unseen, unknown, potentially terrifying, though all the time retaining, underneath, my own harmless, mundane, and dutiful self.

Margaret Atwood, "The Headless Horseman" (27).

The studies of the grotesque in literature can be seen as a means of revelation of hidden information embedded in the narrative. At a first moment, the grotesque image in literary works may cause repulse and fear on the reader. After this confrontation with the ugly, it is possible to bring meaning from something that was seen at first as a threat, as something that does not correspond to what is normal in western societies. The Canadian authoress Margaret Atwood uses the grotesque in her short stories "Hairball" and "The Headless Horseman" as a device to hide the inner emotions of the female protagonists who actually suffer in silence and are longing for an absolution or freedom from some kind of restraint. The grotesque in literature is actually a powerful tool to criticize the straitjacket of norms that dictate what is normal in female behavior.

Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa in 1939 and spent much of her early life in northern Ontario and Quebec. Atwood's books have been published in over thirty-five

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countries. She is the authoress of more than forty books of fiction, poetry, and critical essays. Atwood's *Cat's Eye* was short-listed for the 1989 Booker Prize, *Alias Grace* won the Giller Prize in Canada and the Premio Mondello in Italy, *The Blind Assassin* won the Booker Prize in 2000 and *Oryx and Crake* was short-listed for the 2003 Booker Prize. *The Tent* and *Moral Disorder and Other Stories* are her latest books of short stories, both published in 2006. Most Atwoodian narratives deal with the grotesque in different levels, portraying characters who, after facing their fears, find some kind of enlightenment, exorcising the evil spirits that metaphorically haunt their lives and their minds.

In the short story "Hairball," which appears in Atwood's collection of short stories *Wilderness Tips*, the protagonist, Katherine, gradually loses her identity as she accepts the male impositions in her job and love life. A possible way out of the patriarchal straightjacket that Katherine finds herself tied onto is grotesquely behaving in accordance with the imposed rules of female normality. Symbolically killing her old victimized self and resurrecting anew, Katherine rejects her past and faces a new life where "she doesn't feel guilty." On the contrary, Katherine "feels light and peaceful" (56). In "The Headless Horseman", in *Moral Disorder and Other Stories*, two nameless sisters deal with their differences of age and temperament. One sister, who is 11 years older than the other, unwillingly plays the role of a mother figure as well as that of a monster. The younger sister gradually learns to face her fears and to take control of her adult life, instead of being "in the front hall closet, weeping, afraid to come out" (39). In both narratives the grotesque has a symbolic shape that turns out being a way of facing and questioning what actually oppresses the female characters in evidence.

The studies of the grotesque in art and literature have been mostly developed by Wolfgang Kayser, Mikhail Bakhtin, Geoffrey Galt Harpham, Margaret Miles and Mary Russo. It is important to highlight that such critics claim that the grotesque, despite being very difficult to define, is identifiable once the work in question is framed in its time, space and culture. Another common agreement is that the grotesque is a tool for enlightenment. When facing something that does not belong to one's reality, s/he "has the power to subdue it and answer it, bringing logic to something that seems unexplainable" (Adams and Yates 19). Miles and Russo add to the studies on the grotesque the notion of gender in the realm of what is not considered to be normal for women's behavior in western societies. (Miles 89). Whenever a female protagonist rejects the feminine roles designed as normal in western cultures, she is bound to be held as devious, as a threat, as the grotesque one.

The narrative of "Hairball" opens with Katherine, a thirty-five-year-old woman, going to Toronto General Hospital to have an ovarian cyst removed from her body. It turns out to be what doctors call a Teratoma. Instead of permitting the medical doctor to discard the tumor properly, Katherine makes sure that he saves it in a jar containing formaldehyde to preserve it. With this action, it is possible to understand that Katherine is not acting in accordance with what is stereotypically seen as a normal behavior. Katherine's ovarian cyst also has an intriguing humanoid shape. As Katherine describes it:

It was big as a grapefruit, the doctor said. "Big as a coconut." said Kat. Other people had grapefruits. "Coconut" was better. It conveyed the hardness of it, and the hairiness too. The hair was red – long strands of it wound round and round inside,

like a ball of wet wool gone berserk or like the guck you pulled out of a clogged bathroom-sink drain. There were little bones in it too, or fragments of bone; bird bones, the bones of a sparrow crushed by a car. There was a scattering of nails, toe or finger. There were five perfectly formed teeth. (42)

Katherine names her tumor Hairball and she uses it to make up for her losses in life while working with Gerald, a married man with whom she has an affair. As a grotesque test, Katherine places the tumor on the mantel making it look like a shrine. She knows that Gerald will feel confronted when he sees it, pushing him to take a final decision on whether he leaves his wife for good and stays with Katherine, or returns to his married life which was somewhat unsatisfying for him. Gerald feels disgusted looking at Hairball displayed in her living room and “tell[s] Kat to throw Hairball out”. Challenging his authority, Katherine replies that “she’d rather have Hairball in a bottle on her mantelpiece than the sappy dead flowers he’s brought to her” (43). Gerald leaves her house claiming that she has gone too far.

Hairball also stands for the times Katherine had to give up motherhood. She poignantly remembers that she had aborted twice when she was starting her career as a fashion photographer in England. Not having a stern relationship with a husband, she “learned to say that she didn’t want any children anyway, that if she longed for a rug-rat she would buy a gerbil” (46). Fantasizing that she is Hairball’s mother, Katherine sees in it a possible means to recover all the plans she had to give up in her life — one of which seems to be motherhood. The men in the jobs she has had in Canada and England treated women

as “whinge receptacles.” As Katherine recalls, she “could play it, but that didn’t mean she liked it” (46). Gerald was never up to any serious commitment with Katherine, and Hairball may stand for all the emotional pain and grief that she has been enduring in her life.

When she returns to work after the surgery to remove Hairball from one of her ovaries, Katherine is surprised by Gerald who has taken her position as the editor of the fashion magazine for which they work. She ends up fired by him. While leaving her office, which now belongs to Gerald and already has his belongings in it, Katherine looks angry and brokenhearted at the picture of Gerald with his wife, Cheryl, and their child framed on his desk. She realizes that what she has always longed to have with Gerald was suddenly taken away from her. On her way back home, she thinks about all the times she had encouraged him to study, to dress properly, and to make his way up as an accountant in the magazine editorial. She feels like a mad scientist that has given life to his creature which then becomes a monster and turns on its own creator (52). In simple terms, Katherine feels betrayed.

Feeling extremely upset about the whole situation, Katherine gets home and takes a bath. The very action of bathing suggests that she wants to cleanse her life and start things anew. She starts pondering about her love affair with Gerald and the tumor that has grown inside of her. Katherine “pictures it [Hairball] as a child. It has come out of her, after all. It is flesh of her flesh. Her child with Gerald, her thwarted child, not allowed to grow normally. Her wrapped child, taking its revenge” (54). This tumor that her body produces is the last bond that Katherine has with Gerald. Hairball now becomes a device to retaliate Gerald for the bad things he has done to her. In addition to getting her revenge, Katherine

is also freeing herself from her poignant past into another possibility of life with nothing that had once belonged to Gerald. It is definitely Hairball the one that helps her get even with Gerald but it also represents more than a simple revenge: it carries a hidden message of refusal of being a victim – a message which Gerald is likely to understand but not willing to accept.

At the day she gets fired by Gerald, Katherine receives the invitation to a party that Gerald's wife is giving to celebrate his return (53). Katherine knows what she has to do then in order to give her payback. She takes a taxi to the David Wood Food Shop and buys a dozen chocolate truffles. She has them put in an oversized bag with the store logo printed on it. Then she goes home and takes Hairball out of its bottle, drains it in the kitchen strainer and pats it damp-dry, tenderly, with paper towels. After that, she fixes hairball to become a large grotesque chocolate truffle by sprinkling powdered cocoa all over it, which forms a brown pasty crust. Katherine realizes it still smells like formaldehyde, so she wraps it in clinging film and then in aluminum foil, to prevent Hairball's smell from coming out, and places it in the center of the box, wrapped in pink tissue paper, which she ties with a mauve bow, amid the real chocolate truffles.

Finally, she seals the box with sticky tape, puts it into the bag stuffed with shredded sheets of pink paper. She calls a delivery taxi to do the job of handing her present to Cheryl and Gerald. She thinks to herself that "It is her gift, valuable and dangerous. It's her messenger, but the message it will deliver is its own. It will tell the truth, to whoever asks. It's right that Gerald should have it; after all, it's his child too" (55-6). Katherine assumes that Cheryl is a sophisticated person and will not resist the temptation of opening, in the middle of Gerald's welcome party, a David Wood Food Shop box of chocolate truffles.

Just as Hairball is a symbol of Katherine's grief, it is also a symbol of Gerald's lack of ethics.

Similarly to "Hairball," Atwood's short story "The Headless Horseman" comes with the same notion that once one confronts his/her fears, the grotesque may get out of the realm of ominous elements into a tamed reality of something familiar and harmless. As the grotesque theory points out, what once caused fear and awe becomes a device to free oneself from another kind of restraint: a no longer threatening situation.

The narrative of "The Headless Horseman" flows like a hopscotch game in which the reader jumps from present to past and, inside each square of the game, it is given to him/her bits and pieces of information to complete the final picture in the end. It is interesting to notice that the names of the protagonists are not given. The members of the family are shown through the gaze of the older sister, which she calls mother, father, brother and the younger sister. Only the names of the sisters' friends, who don't belong to the family sphere, have names: Annie and Leonie.

The first patch of narrative describes a Halloween episode that has traumatized the little sister for some time. The older sister, who at the time was 13, decided to go trick-or-treating for the last time, once the adults of the neighborhood started to believe that she was too old for dressing up in Halloween. She wants to make a costume that would differ from the ordinary, such as ghosts, fat ladies, or Raggedy Ann, which her friend Annie decides to wear and calls herself "Raggedy Annie" (28). Instead of wearing a commonplace costume, the older sister plans to dress herself as The Headless Horseman, which was the title of a story she read in school and "was a grisly legend and also a joke" (24).

The Headless Horseman outfit, at starters, is not difficult to be shaped. The older sister borrows her mother's jodhpurs and riding boots and her father's black winter gloves. The final touch is a cape, made "out of a piece of black fabric left over from a now-obsolete puppet stage". The hard part was confectioning the head with paste glue. At the end of the process, the head does not come out as planned. It is crooked, it smells funny, the eyes are a little crossed, and its black enamel hair looks like brilliantine. She also places a neck stub at the bottom with shiny enamel blood coming out of its mouth and neck (26). The cape covers the whole body of the older sister with two holes for her eyes, and she holds the head embracing it with her arm. For her disappointment, the adults are able to recognize her friend Annie immediately as Raggedy Ann while she has to repeat under the muffling effect of the cape that she is The Headless Horseman (28).

The older sister's costume fails to scare the people out of her family circle. On the other hand, the younger sister, who is only 2 years old at that day, finds The Headless Horseman's head very scary. At the moment the older sister enters her house, returning disappointed because she was not able to scare anyone from her neighborhood, the younger sister starts screaming in horror. Even after the older sister removes the cape showing that it is actually herself dressed up as The Headless Horseman, the little sister screams even more (29). The flashbacks of the narrative, from this point on, revolve around the younger sister's frailness, her difficulty to sleep, the times she has to look up for her older sister as a mother figure, and her recovering from addiction to drugs.

The symbolic part in which the younger sister starts to face her traumas in order to transform them into something manageable starts when she is around the age of seven. The older sister does not discard the costume that she has made to participate in her last



Halloween party. To avoid another hysterical scene with her younger sister, the older sister hides the head of The Headless Horseman costume in the trunk room and, one day, for her surprise, she finds out that her younger sister has adopted the head (35). She does not take the decision of adopting the monstrous head alone. The younger sister is guided by her friend, Leonie, who is actually a copy of herself. As the older sister describes, “My sister had a friend who was a lot like her – another quiet, shy, anxious, big-eyed fairy child, dark where my sister was fair, but with the same china fragility. Leonie was her name (34). Together, Leonie and the younger sister manage to transform the ominous image of The Headless Horseman’s head into a shape with which they both can deal. The grotesque image acquires another meaning once they decide to face it. Just like Katherine in “Hairball,” Leonie and the younger sister play the role of a mother figure to the monster and learn to appreciate it.

The head looked out of place but comfortable: everything was done to make it feel at home. A table napkin would be tucked around its neck stump, and it would be served cups of water tea and imaginary cookies just as if it had a body. Better still, it answered when spoken to – it said, “Thank you very much” and “Could I have another cookie, please” and replied to the white bunny the Sparkle Plenty doll when they asked it if it was having a good time. Sometimes it was made to nod. When the party had been too tiring for it, it

was put to sleep in the dolls' bed, with a crocheted quilt pulled up over its receding chin. (36)

I understand that in both short stories, "Hairball" and "The Headless Horseman", the protagonists use their potential of motherhood towards the monster figure in order to subdue it and transform it into something less threatening. Playing the role of a mother, either towards the ovarian cyst or to the deformed head, is a possible means to answer the grotesque riddle that they both represent. Hairball stands for the oppression that Katherine has to face in a patriarchal society whereas the head of The Headless Horseman may represent all the fears and insecurity developed by the younger sister. It is interesting to notice that the biological mother of the sisters is physically present in the house but she is, at the same time, an emotional void for her children. The older sister is the mother figure of the house. She is the mother figure when her parents travel to Europe, and she has to take care of the house, and she is the mother figure even after the younger sister is an adult. Symbolically, the first image of the mother of the sisters given to the reader is that of a woman who is bedridden and blind (28). In simple terms, her body is present but she does not see what goes on between her daughters nor does she interact with them.

As a conclusion, it is possible to understand that both short stories deal with some of the female matters of western societies, in which motherhood and exorcising ghosts from the past are paramount elements to come to terms with a painful reality and to reassure their female identities. The grotesque elements in these narratives are a device used by the protagonists to question their fears and evolve from a passive position into a person who confronts the cause of their sorrow and finds a possible solution for it.

In “Hairball,” the idea that the protagonist frees herself from what is preventing her from growing into a mature and assertive person is given through the grotesque figure that Hairball holds along the narrative. Hairball embraces all Katherine’s fears and oppressions that she suffers in her society. As the narrative unfolds, Katherine’s name becomes shorter, suggesting that she is gradually losing part of her identity. She changes from a “romanticized Katherine” (44) to Kathy, then from Kathy to Kath, and then from Kath to Kat; in the end of the short story, she signs her name simply with a “K”. The very last line of the narrative puts her in a transitive position claiming that she is “temporarily without a name” (56). Therefore, Katherine will symbolically die and resurrect as a new person, facing a different reality from before. Hairball, the monster she displays in her house, works as a device to help her see, question and understand her roles in society.

In “The Headless Horseman,” both sisters learn with one another how to question their roles. The older sister is seen both as a mother figure as well as some sort of monster. The younger sister is portrayed as an emotionally weak and sick person. The fact that neither of them has names suggests that their identities still need to be shaped. As it is pointed out by the older sister at the end of the narrative, the younger sister “takes a pill everyday, for a chemical imbalance she was born with. That was it, all along. That was what made the bad times for her. Not my [the older sister’s] monstrosity at all. I [older sister] believe that, most of the time” (48). Both sisters are aware that their realities still need some improvement, that the head of The Headless Horseman “is still down there somewhere”(49), waiting to be decoded, waiting to be cracked, waiting for an absolution that might come someday, when the monsters inside themselves are finally defeated.

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