

“A Singing Spirit:”



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Female Rites of Passage in

Klee Wyck, Surfacing and The Diviners

Tribal rituals of initiation have disappeared from modern society only to reassert themselves in dreams, literature and the life of the imagination. In three works by Canadian women, Emily Carr's Klee Wyck, Margaret Atwood's Surfacing and Margaret Laurence's The Diviners, a ritual encounter with Indian culture prepares the central character to understand her role as woman and creatress. Contact with the Indian culture releases deeply buried sources of power that white culture fears and denies. In Klee Wyck Emily Carr sees three different versions of the totem D'Sonoqua, "the wild woman of the woods,"(1) and from D'Sonoqua learns the mystery of her own womanhood. The narrator of Surfacing dives down underwater looking for Indian pictographs; instead she has her own shamanic vision and from this descent to the underland she returns ritually reborn, the severed pieces of herself reintegrated into wholeness. In The Diviners the Métis Jules Tonnerre is the initiating shaman whose lovemaking frees Morag from "the inner chains which have kept her bound and separated from part of herself."(2) In these three works, contact with Indian culture completes the central character, carrying her across a threshold of awareness. She comes to understand both her own creative energy and the vital energy of nature flowing through

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all things. The narrator of Surfacing speaks for the others too when she says, "But nothing has died, everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive."(3)

White establishment culture has withheld something each central character needs to know in order to become a complete woman. To penetrate to the

deepest sources of power, each must learn a new secret language unknown to the civilizers who try to regulate nature with their technology. Klee Wyck shows the many contrasts between the language of the totems and the language of the white missionaries and surveyors who come with their clocks and geometry to teach "time and obligation" (p. 3):

Then the missionaries came and took the Indians away from their old villages and the totem poles and put them into new places where life was easier, where they bought things from a store instead of taking them from nature.

. . . the poles were left standing in the old places. But now there was no one to listen to their talk any more. By and by they would rot and topple to the earth, unless white men came and carried them away to museums. There they would be labelled as exhibits, dumb before the crowds who gaped and laughed and said, "This is the distorted foolishness of an uncivilized people." And the poor poles could not talk back because the white man did not understand their language. (pp. 52-3)

Throughout the book Emily Carr is learning the language of the totems. The totems speak of primitive things deeply buried by white technological culture--sexuality, fertility, violence, irrationality and death--things which must be acknowledged and made

part of the mature identity.

Accordingly the narrator of Surfacing claims that the damaged language of technological society "divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole." (p. 146) Technological America with its machinery and its hydroelectric towers and its skyscrapers is a vast Tower of Babel which will collapse in a confusion of tongues. The narrator realizes that she must "immerse herself in the other language." (p. 158) Similarly, in The Diviners, Morag has created for herself a false image and a false language suitable for her husband Brooke and the Danish Modern of Crestwood Towers. But this persona betrays the Black Celt in her and leaves her, like the narrator of Surfacing, separated from herself. We learn that "she hates it all, this external self who is at such variance with whatever or whoever remains inside the glossy painted shell." (p. 248) And later: "Morag has experienced increasingly the mad and potentially releasing desire to speak sometimes as Christie used to speak, the loonly oratory, salt-beefed with oaths." (p. 255) Morag's disguise is so successful that her real self is hidden even to her: "I do not know the sound of my own voice. Not yet anyhow." (p. 257) Outcast from establishment culture, Jules Tonnerre is the guide of souls who releases Morag from her glass tower and helps her to recover the lost language of ritual and myth--

Christie's language.

Emily Carr's encounters with D'Sonoqua, the underwater shamanic vision in Surfacing, and Morag's lovemaking with Jules are all rites of passage during which the central character hears the secret language and is initiated into a knowledge of her own womanhood. Emily Carr undergoes the initiatory ordeals described by Mircea Eliade in Rites and Symbols of Initiation:(4) after a sleepless night, she is stung by nettles, falls, and sees for the first time D'Sonoqua towering above her through the mist; the third time, she sees D'Sonoqua after a boat trip which she says is "like being swallowed again and again by some terrible monster." (p. 37) The stages of her initiation are marked by her differing responses to the three appearances of D'Sonoqua. First she sees fierceness: "It was not the fall alone that jerked the 'Oh's' out of me, for the great wooden image towering above me was indeed terrifying." (p. 33) The second time she sees power:

I knew her by the stuck-out ears, shouting mouth, and deep eye-sockets. . . . The whole figure expressed power, weight, domination, rather than ferocity

I saw Indian Tom on the beach, and went to him.

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"Who is that big carved woman?"

"D'Sonoqua."

"Who is D'Sonoqua?"

"She is the wild woman of the woods."

"What does she do?"

"She steals children."

"To eat them?"

"No, she carries them to her caves. . . . When she cries 'OO-oo-oo-oeo', Indian mothers are too frightened to move. They stand like trees, and the children go with D'Sonoqua."

"Then she is bad?"

"Sometimes bad . . . sometimes good," Tom replied.

I went back, and sitting in front of the image, gave her stare for stare. . . .

A shadow passed across her hands and their gruesome holdings [two human heads]. A little bird with its beak full of nesting material, flew into the cavity of her mouth, right in the pathway of that terrible OO-oo-oo-oeo. Then my eye caught something that I had missed--a tabby cat asleep between her feet. (pp. 35-6)

D'Sonoqua's mouth that lures away children is also a nest for birds and thus a source of life. Both creator and destroyer. D'Sonoqua eludes our need for clear moral categories. The white person says good or bad, alive or dead, but D'Sonoqua answers with unity. Life and death are held together in the circle of unity of her open mouth and fixed stare.



EMILY CARR
Courtesy, Provincial Archives, Victoria B.C.

When Emily Carr has learned this, she is ready for the third encounter. Because she recognizes D'Sonoqua as a source of life and energy, this time she sees feminine grace and beauty:

She appears to be neither wooden nor stationary, but a singing spirit, young and fresh, passing through the jungle. No violence coarsened her; no power domineered to wither her. She was graciously feminine. . . .

She caught your breath, this D'Sonoqua, alive in the dead bole of the cedar. She summed up the depth and charm of the whole forest, driving away its menace. (pp. 39-40)

Emily Carr recognizes this same womanliness later in the totem mothers on the Kitwancool poles: "The mothers expressed all womanhood--the big wooden hands holding the child were so full of tenderness they had to be distorted enormously in order to contain it all." (p. 102) Klee Wyck is dedicated to Sophie, the eternal mother of so many dying children, and so finally the book is Emily Carr's own celebration of the role of women as creators of life.

Emily Carr comes to understand and celebrate woman's role as an expression of the energy of life. The central characters of Surfacing and The Diviners, in contrast, are engaged in discovering fruitful and creative roles for themselves personally. Their rites of passage carry them from a way of life

that is fragmented and sterile, through a ritual death, to a renewal of energy that is confirmed by the conception of a child. In contrast, the aborted or denied child, an important motif in both Surfacing and The Diviners, represents the sterility of the establishment culture.

In Surfacing the abortion is the narrator's personal experience with Americanization. Americans are those who believe that they can solve the problems of existence by engineering and technology and have consequently defended against the deepest sources of life itself: they have "turned against the gods." (p. 154) The narrator realizes that Americanization has brought her to "an evil grail"--the complete destruction of all human life that, for her, the abortion represents:

It was there when I woke up, suspended in the air above me like a chalice, an evil grail and I thought, Whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn't a child but it could have been one, I didn't allow it. (p. 143)

For a long time she conceals the abortion even from herself: "I couldn't accept it, that mutilation, ruin I'd made, I needed a different version." (p. 143) She splits herself in two, rolling back into her subconscious all the rejected elements of her past, her guilt, the dead baby and her own spiritual death:

. . . I'd allowed myself to be cut in two. Women sawn apart in a wooden crate. . . ; only with me there had been an accident and I came apart. The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal. I was nothing but a head, or no, something minor like a severed thumb; numb. (p. 108)

The key event in the book is the ritual dive underwater to find this lost double who is locked away. Earlier her friend Anna had asked, "Do you have a twin? . . . because some of your lines are double." (p. 8) And now the narrator, preparing to dive, says, "My other shape was in the water, not my reflection but my shadow." (p. 141) In her dive she is reunited with the shadow elements of her identity. Her successful integration of heart and head, feelings and rationality, past and present is indicated by her recovery of the lost child in the new one that she is now able to conceive: "I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long." (pp. 161-2)

Indian Shamanism is the ritual that releases the narrator's energies. She has dived underwater looking for the pictographs that her father's maps indicate should be there. She sees instead her own vision which is at once her father, her lost baby, her own past and the Indian past of this

country, submerged by American technology but still down there waiting to be rediscovered. Her gratitude, she says, is all for the Indian gods: These gods, here on the shore or in the water, unacknowledged or forgotten, were the only ones who had ever given me anything I needed; and freely.

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The Indians did not own salvation but they had once known where it lived and their signs marked the sacred places, the places where you could learn the truth. (p. 145)

The Indian gods have been her guides to what she repeatedly calls "the power." American technology has "the power to kill," (p. 116) but this new power which is a knowledge of the sacred makes her a participant in nature's energy and fertility: "everything is waiting to become alive." (p. 159)

The pattern in The Diviners is similar, as Morag receives from the Métis Jules Tonnerre the power to free herself from a sterile marriage to Brooke. Like the narrator of Surfacing, Morag has denied her past and cut away part of herself. She first tells Brooke: "I'm twenty . . . I just feel as though I don't have a past. As though it was more or less blank." (p. 194) Later, of course, asking herself how much of one's childhood remains, she admits. "All. It always does." (p.

229) Just as Shamanism restores to the narrator of Surfacing her own past and the Indian ancestors of this country, so here in The Diviners Jules is Morag's link with the past and he helps her to recognize her true heritage:

She reaches her hand across the table and puts it very lightly on his hand. . . . She only wants to touch him, someone from a long long way back, someone relating to her in ways she cannot define and feels no need of defining.

(p. 267)

When they make love she thinks that this joining is "some debt or answer to the past, some severing of inner chains which have kept her bound and separated from part of herself." (p. 271) Jules recognizes this and says, "Magic. You were doing magic to get away. . . . I'm the shaman, eh?" (p. 273)

The shaman, according to Eliade, is a "specialist in the sacred" and knows the roads that lead to Heaven and Hell.(5) He is the mediator between the earthly world and invisible powers. Jules as shaman can help Morag make a breakthrough to the upper world. But equally important he can help her find her way back to the lower world represented by Christie and the Nuisance Grounds. Therefore he gives Morag access to deep sources of power that Brooke has kept repressed. Morag turns to Jules for the child that

Brooke has denied her. Here, as in Surfacing, conception is the sign that the central character has assumed the condition of womanhood and has learned the mysteries of childbirth and fertility. After this initiation into the sacred, Morag goes on to become herself a shaman and diviner. Morag, Emily Carr and the narrator of Surfacing are all artists who discover the primitive origins of their art in ritual and magic.

Three significant women writers, Emily Carr, Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence, have turned to Indian Shamanism for the ritual that will release the energy of their central characters. In all three books the Indian culture has access to primitive powers that white civilization, to our great cost, has denied. The central scene from each book uses some of the traditional elements of an initiation ceremony: separation from one's family and solitary retirement to the wilderness in Klee Wyck and Surfacing; the initiatory ordeals of being swallowed by a monster in Klee Wyck and psychic chaos in Surfacing and The Diviners; learning the secret language of communication with the spirits in all three; and, most important, ritual death followed by rebirth to a new spiritual condition. The initiate, according to Eliade, is the one "who knows, who has learned the mysteries, who has had revelations

. . . . Initiation is equivalent to a spiritual maturing."(6) In the three works I have been discussing, the initiate matures to an understanding of her role as a woman. The three central characters discover that they have something to learn from D'Sonoqua, "the wild woman of the woods," because D'Sonoqua stands finally for womanhood, birth, death, children, continuity and creative energy.

NOTES

1. Emily Carr, Klee Wyck (Toronto: Clarke Irwin & Co., 1941; 1972), p. 35.
2. Margaret Laurence, The Diviners (Toronto: Bantam, 1974; 1975), p. 271.
3. Margaret Atwood, Surfacing (Don Mills: PaperJacks, 1972; 1973), p. 159.
4. Mircea Eliade, Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth, translated by Willard Trask (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958; 1965).
5. Ibid., p. 95.
6. Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion, translated by Willard Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1957; 1959), p. 188.