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“My Monster Self”: Violence and Survival in Margaret Atwood’s *Moral Disorder*

ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood’s novels are usually celebrated for their blunt feminism. However, in *Moral Disorder*—a series of interconnected stories that forms a novel—feminist concerns are replaced with worries about territory and survival. The protagonist is an insider whose sole concern is to survive and to protect her territory. The confrontation between the narrator as the insider and the outsiders does not occur directly but could be inferred by her cruelty toward other characters and her violence against the animals under her care. The present study argues that this cruelty, which abounds in the novel, could be viewed as a substitute for violence against the outsiders. The narrator’s gaze at the Indian boy who entered the protagonist’s territory manifests a garrison mentality. The frequent references to axes in the novel are compared to the use of axes in “Wilderness Tips,” a short story by Atwood in which axes also have a metaphoric significance. The beheading and dismemberment of domestic animals could be the punishment awaiting the intruder. The novel establishes a division between the insider/outsider, here/there, self/other and civilized/barbaric to call for action and awareness about the importance of protecting one’s territory.

Keywords: caregiving, outsider, insider, garrison mentality, gaze, survival.

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's novels have inspired and invited feminist readings. They typically demonstrate the restraints that society places on women and the façade that women adopt in response to them. Atwood's female protagonists are portrayed in unfavorable circumstances occurring in patriarchal societies. They are marginalized in their private and professional lives, and are unable to adjust to the social expectations imposed upon them. Typical Atwoodian characters might experience a psychological breakdown and slowly detach themselves from the mechanisms of society (*Surfacing*), refuse to eat (*The Edible Women*), become obsessed with their weight (*Lady Oracle*), become entangled in negative relationships (*Bodily Harm*) or have trouble coping with their identity (*Surfacing*, *The Edible Women*, *Lady Oracle*). Some of Atwood's manipulated, devastated and vulnerable female characters try to reconstruct themselves in order to overcome the obstacles they face in a hostile patriarchal society. Characters like Elaine in *Cat's Eye* or Joan in *Lady Oracle* are characterized as being either on a journey to selfhood or involved in a quest for identity. In some of Atwood's novels like *Surfacing* and *The Robber Bride*, the individual quest for identity coexists with the quest for Canadian identity. Although these novels deal with the construction of Canadian identity, as well as the formation of personal identity, their rendering of this theme is somewhat ambiguous. As Fiona Tolan observes:

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Canada is caught between two opposing power positions. It is both the ex-colonial nation (that is, the colonial other to Britain's colonizing self), and it is also undeniably a First World nation, with a position of privilege and power in the world (and therefore is the First World self to the Third World other). (143)

Bennett also argues that "English Canada has played an oddly doubled role: subjected to an imperial power, it has also been an agent of that power in the control it has exercised over populations within Canada's boundaries" (Bennett, "English" 116). In some of her novels, Atwood mainly deals with Canada as an ex-colonial nation—as the other to Britain and America—but ignores Canada as the self to colonized nations. Similarly, there are two sides to some of Atwood's protagonists: although victimized and marginalized in patriarchal societies as outsiders, they can become cruel and cold-hearted when they try to protect their territory. This transforms them into insiders.

The narrator of *Moral Disorder* plays this double role. On the one hand, she tries to define herself as a free woman in a traditional society where relationships and social roles are gendered. In this role, she is in

a victim position and invokes sympathy. On the other hand, she creates sharp distinctions between the self and others, and exercises power over other characters, as well as violence against animals. The book is informed by concerns about territory and the importance of survival, rather than feminist issues. The narrator writes from inside a position of power, confronting members of her family, foreigners and animals.

Moral Disorder tells the story of a female narrator called Nell during different phases of her life through a series of short stories. These stories may appear unrelated, but can be considered as one novel when taken together because they are interconnected and recount the experiences of one central character. Except for the first story set in the present, the others depict flashbacks to the narrator's past and could be read as selected chapters from a *Bildungsroman*. The flashbacks occur chronologically—from the time when Nell was 11 years old until the time that she is a middle-aged woman. Although each story could stand alone, they are all part of a greater narrative and have a recurring theme in common: a woman exploring her relationship with the world and the individuals around her. These stories are open to different interpretations by the reader, contrary to those implied by the narrator.

“The Art of Cooking and Serving” depicts the 11-year-old Nell trying to cope with the increasing demands of her family and her final liberation from the duties imposed upon her. “The Headless Horseman” explores Nell's relation with her sister, “My Last Duchess” is about Nell's self-realization, and “The Other Place” depicts Nell in search of her place in the world. “Monopoly,” “Moral Disorder” and “White Horse” are Nell and Tig's farm experiences told in the third person. “The Entities” is about the effect of Oona's death on Nell's life. The last two stories, “The Labrador Fiasco” and “The Boys at the Lab,” depict Nell's father and mother when their health has deteriorated. The last two stories are significant because they deal with survival in the wilderness. In “The Labrador Fiasco,” the predicament of Nell's father overlaps with the doomed mission of the explorers Hubbard and Wallace. “The Boys at the Lab” is also about wilderness and survival. It depicts the incongruous presence of an outsider in the wilderness. Nell's mother tells her about a recurrent dream in which she is left alone in the wilderness. This dream emphasizes the importance of finding one's path in wilderness. The lab boys have names, Cam and Roy, but the Indian boy has no name and is not in the pictures. The story ends with the narrator keeping an eye on the Indian boy and demanding that action be taken against this outsider. The text can be studied as a novel because all of the stories are selected chapters from Nell's life.

“The Headless Horseman” tells the story of Nell dressing up as a strange headless figure for her last Halloween. Her choice of costume

might initially seem accidental, but becomes quite meaningful in the light of other stories. The significance of her choice is the severed head which was kept in the trunk room years after the costume was made. Nell sees the head through the door and narrates that it is “staring out at me through the gloom, blood dripping from the corner of its mouth . . . it seemed malignantly attentive, as if it was . . . putting a sour construction on my motives” (*Moral Disorder* 32). After a while, the head is taken into her sister Lizzie’s dress-up box and triggers a series of nightmares for the four-year-old girl. Why and how the severed head “migrates” into Lizzie’s room is never mentioned. Once the game started, her sister could not distinguish between Nell and the monster, and remained terrified and disturbed for days. Recollecting the events some years later, Nell asks herself: “Why did I behave like this? . . . My excuse . . . was that I was simply giving in to . . . a demand made by my little sister . . . Did she believe she’d finally be able to face down my monster self . . . ? Did she hope that I would finally-at last-transform myself . . . into who I really was supposed to be?” (39).

This is a significant question because it is the closest the narrator ever gets to acknowledging her dark side. This dark side remains hidden throughout the novel as the narrative voice falls into contradictions and omissions in attempting to conceal it. As Nell discloses her relations with her sister and Oona, contradictions in her speech and behavior become more obvious. Lizzie accuses her of being egoistic: “You used everything up. You used up all the good parts . . . There was nothing left over for me” (45). This proves true as Lizzie depends on Nell even when she is grown up. She visits the farm frequently, expecting Nell to solve her problems. Other characters, like local farmers, see Nell as a very powerful woman who can handle every situation and outlive everyone. The structure of the novel emphasizes the narrator’s capacity to survive, with Nell and Tig leading the first story which is set decades after the events depicted in the novel. It is ironic that Nell who is most unfit for taking care of others is either asked by other characters to tend to their needs or assumes the role of a caretaker willingly.

CAREGIVING

As a young girl, Nell shows her dissatisfaction with accepting responsibility and caring for others when she refuses to attend to the needs of her baby sister. When her mother asks her to put the baby to sleep, she says: “Why should I? . . . She’s not my baby. I didn’t have her. You did” (23). There is a general consensus among critics about caregiving. Nischik sees this and similar remarks as declarations of independence and signs of

rejecting traditional domestic roles assigned to women (87). Regarding the relationship between women and caregiving, Halwani argues that caregiving could be a method for abusing women (2). In a similar critical vein, Bowden asserts that the values of care naturally assigned to women are manifestations of patriarchy and their acceptance implies women's lack of identity and self-respect (8). Brabeck criticizes traditional assertions about the moral superiority of women because these remarks reinforce the stereotypes of men being reasonable and women being emotional; thus implying the superiority of men (33–34). Mann suggests a solution to the problem: women should practice “fair-caring” in order to create a balance between caring for others and caring for themselves (107). De Falco highlights this theme in *Moral Disorder* and observes that all the stories revolve around the question of care and conflicts consequent upon caring as the narrator cares for various family members, strangers, friends, and animals. Stating that caring is essential to survival and identity, and emphasizing that it is about feeling and action, she concludes that the self is harmed in the process of caregiving. She believes that this is the experience of the narrator of *Moral Disorder* who has a conflict between selfishness and sacrifice (“Moral Obligation” 236–63). De Falco later modifies her evaluation of the narrator as a caregiver and observes that Nell tries to avoid ethical responsibility (*Imagining Care* 57). Because sexual politics has always been central to Atwood's fiction, the issue of care was informed by the traditional division of roles between genders. Consequently, the female character's rejection of care has been celebrated as a manifestation of women's independence and quest for identity. Although the narrator of *Moral Disorder* is a woman, she is not a typical female caregiver.

A survey of Nell's relationship with Oona could perhaps demonstrate that Nell is not an angel of mercy. When Nell meets her, Oona—Tig's wife—is a successful woman living a happy life with him. Soon the couple breaks up and Nell replaces Oona. The narrative voice remains silent about the circumstances that brought about Tig and Oona's separation. As the narrative voice in “The Entities” gives a relatively different view of Oona and Tig's breakup, the possibility of Nell's active role in the separation comes to mind. Nell's denial of her role in the breakup becomes meaningful when the narrative voice suddenly changes from the first person to the third person. The point of view changes in “Monopoly” where we learn about Nell and Tig's decision to get married. The title of the story was symbolic as Monopoly is the name of the game that Nell plays with boys for the first time. She refuses to lose to them, and shows she will monopolize their father. Nell's role in Oona's degradation becomes evident when she decides to buy her a house using the money she deposited in a bank, money that “sat there accusingly” (*Moral Disorder* 179). In buying Oona

a house, she not only frees herself from feelings of guilt, but also takes revenge upon Oona, who had always behaved as if she were superior. The once attractive, efficient and rich Oona who has changed into a fat, sickly woman dies in Nell's house. After Oona's death, Nell admits that she is "not a generous person at heart" (180). In another occasion, in "The Other Place," Nell is unable to sympathize with Owen who spoke to her about a horrible childhood experience. "Surely, I lacked empathy, or even simple kindness" (88), she says about herself when she does not say a word to the man who expects sympathy from her. This confession, like the time she admits to having a "monster self" or not being "a generous person at heart," reveals her as cold-hearted and cruel. Her sole concern is to survive in circumstances in which everyone and everything are sources of potential dangers.

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SURVIVAL: THE GARRISON MENTALITY

Atwood believes that Canadian identity is inextricably intertwined with the idea of survival. Canadians have to overcome many obstacles in order to survive and this has given their literature its special characteristics. The problems of unknown territory, people's need to physically and mentally master the land they inhabit, and their need to protect it against the intrusion of outsiders are the main concerns of Canadian literature. Atwood observes that Canadians come to a realization of what Canada really is through their literature:

Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind. Our literature is one such map, if we can learn to read it as our literature, as the product of who and where we have been. We need such a map desperately, we need to know about here, because here is where we live. For members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive. (*Survival* 19)

The importance of literature in the formation of Canadian identity has been identified by many critics. W. L. Morton, for example, speaks about the "psychology of endurance and survival" which allows Canadians to adhere to "the essentials of the greatest civilizations in the grimmest of environments" (qtd. in Goetsch 170). These views were influenced by Northrop Frye's theory of the garrison mentality, a common theme in Canadian literature that depicts characters on their guard against the dangers of the outside world. Frye describes that communities likely to develop a garrison mentality are "small and isolated communities

surrounded with a physical and psychological ‘frontier,’ separated from one another and from their American and British cultural resources, communities that are . . . confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing and formidable physical setting” (350–51). Many critics have drawn attention to the fact that Frye’s concept of the garrison mentality is the foundation of the ideas that Atwood developed about survival as a unifying symbol for Canadian literary identity (Alter 159; Bennett, “Criticism” 161; Cooke 26; Goetsch 171; Howells 23; Jurak 29; Macpherson 18; McWilliams 138). Aware of the deficiencies of survival as the main theme of Canadian literature, Atwood admits that “*Survival* was fun to attack. In fact it still is; most self-respecting professors of Can lit begin their courses . . . with a short ritual sneer at it” (*Second Words* 105). Although Atwood seems to be modifying her views, her fiction is still informed by survival and garrison mentality. As one critic claims, *Survival* has made no significant changes in later editions, giving a misguided view of Canadian literature (Mathews 119).

Atwood’s survival theory has been criticized for being mythical, naïve, tendentious, restricted in scope and not being grounded in reality or the history of literary tradition. The garrison mentality has also been denounced as it encourages an austere mentality, implies a Canadian moral superiority, is related to colonialism, acknowledges a primarily white Canadian character and could be used to marginalize and silence minorities. Jones rejects the garrison mentality because writers obsessed with it have been “haunted by the sterility of an overly ascetic order resulting from a complete withdrawal from life” (10). Cavell regards Frye’s theory as colonial because it reasserts the superiority of European cultural exercises by sacrificing local modes of expression (14). Pell criticizes the garrison mentality as a celebration of an indispensable white Canadian character (53–71). Selmon warns against the potential danger of a garrison mentality because it creates a link between the Canadian landscape and uncivilized others, making allowances for the status quo to silence and marginalize minorities (qtd. in Pell 54). Although critics like Mount believe that Frye’s influence is exaggerated (75), Frye seems to remain an influential figure in contemporary Canadian criticism. In an interview with Barry Cameron, John Metcalf states that because of Frye’s influence that has sealed Canadian literature in protective isolation, reviewing in Canada is considered an outrageous act (407).

The narrator of *Moral Disorder* proves ruthless, cold-hearted and irresponsible to the suffering of others. Always contemptuous of weaker characters, teenager Nell does not care about her sick mother and sister. As an adult, she is insensitive to the feelings of Tig’s sons. She was also the cause of Oona’s death. Her character proves fallible when she voices her sympathies for the Duke who has killed the Duchess in Robert Browning’s

“My Last Duchess.” In the short story, “My Last Duchess,” Nell sees the Duchess as “a disgusting Dumb bunny” (*Moral Disorder* 71) who deserved what she got. When she reads *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, she finds similarities between Tess and the Duchess, and has the same callous attitude:

Tess had serious problems. . . . She got taken advantage of, at night, in the woods, because she’d stupidly accepted a drive home with a jerk, and after that it was all downhill. One awful thing after another, turnips, dead babies, getting dumped by the man she loved, and then her tragic death at the end. . . . Tess was evidently another of those unlucky pushovers, like the last Duchess and like Ophelia. . . . These girls were all similar. They were too trusting. . . . They smiled too much. They were too eager to please. Then they got bumped off, one way or another. (73–74)

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By placing the duchess, Tess and Ophelia into the category of naïve and simple-minded girls doomed to fail, Nell distances herself from them. These girls are “unlucky pushovers” unable to survive. Nell is repelled and irritated by Oona’s smiles. To her, Oona is a naïve woman who trusts everybody and is doomed to fail. She thinks it is natural that loving and trusting would lose in the struggle for survival because only the “fittest” can survive. Nell is a character of low morality who justifies stealing Ted from Oona: “By the former rules, you did not steal other women’s husbands. . . . But there was no such thing as husband-stealing now, it appeared; instead there were just different folks doing their own thing and making alternate life choices” (105). The moral disorder of the title refers to Nell who lacks a clear moral orientation and exploits other characters. Violence arises from this lack of morality.

VIOLENCE

Violence is the inevitable consequence of the garrison mentality. It seems inevitable for survival and the protection of one’s territory. It remains hidden in the novel’s deepest layers, but surfaces in images of sharp implements and in the way animals are treated. In “Moral Disorder,” Nell strikes the deformed chicks using a shovel and buries them (135). Tig beheads a hen that “ran around in the yard, spouting blood from its neck like a fountain” (132), an incident that is later told to cheer up a company of friends. Cows reared on the farm are sent to the slaughterhouse and served in the next meal: “Susan the cow went away in a truck one day and came back frozen and dismembered” (131). Nell takes the lamb she has reared to the slaughterhouse and later enjoys her as a meal. “I’m a cannibal, she thought with odd detachment” (141). According to De Falco, who sees no

hope of moral order in farm stories, Nell's cannibalism shows "the most extreme perversion of care since it involves destroying another for one's own substance" (*Imagining Care* 71). The farm stories manifest a lack of moral order because animals under Nell's care are destroyed or eaten by her. Farm stories show an obsession with beheading and dismemberment, which is reminiscent of the time Nell dressed up as a headless horseman for Halloween, a figure that terrified her sister for years. After this period of initiation on the farm, the narrative voice comments on the necessity of Nell learning to use an axe, which becomes indispensable to farm life:

Maybe she would grow cunning, up here on the farm. Maybe she would absorb some of the darkness, which might not be darkness at all but only knowledge. She would turn into a woman others came to for advice. She would be called in emergencies. She would roll up her sleeves and dispense with sentimentality, and do whatever blood-soaked, bad-smelling thing had to be done. She would become adept with axes. (*Moral Disorder* 141)

Nell gradually finds herself taking an "interest in sharp implements—shears and clippers, picks and shovels, pruning saws and pitchforks. Not axes. She didn't think she could handle an axe" (120). It took Nell some time to realize the importance of axes. When she reads about local pioneers, she thinks of them as people who "had never used an axe before" (121). After living on the farm, she realizes that axes are important as an inseparable part of colonial life. In a photo, Nell's father pretends to "shave himself with his axe" (139). In spite of this joking gesture, axes seem to serve a more serious purpose. Although they are never put to use, they take on metaphoric proportions and become closely related to the garrison mentality and the theme of survival.

Animals in the text are abused and treated violently. They are beheaded, killed, buried alive, dismembered, frozen and eaten. Because these numerous episodes of violence against animals do not serve any narrative or structural function, they hint at a hidden layer of meaning. The equation made between animals and human beings can explain the importance of these episodes. Black speaks of an equation between animals and human beings as victims of ideological systems. Referring to Bosmanjian, Black observes that if colonized people are regarded as "animalistic," then the animals can be seen as colonized. He supports his argument by drawing upon the similarities between the places where animals are kept and those in which the colonized are kept (124). Nibert views animal cruelty as a consequence of the expansion of capitalism and observes how cruelty toward Native Americans and Native Canadians is closely related to cruelty toward

domesticated animals (124–25). Nibert also maintains that colonization has relied on the slaughter of domesticated animals, mainly cows and pigs, for the domination of European colonizers (63–64). Wrenn also points out that the exploitation of animals is a justification for the exploitation of human beings (22). The belief that there is an equation between the domination of animals and that of the colonized subject is shared by many other critics (Chidester 93; Huggan and Tiffin 135–39; Mbembe 236–37; Putnam 81–84; Wadiwel 178; Walters Denyer 52). The novel is not openly postcolonial, but the violence that lurks beneath its surface and might erupt at any moment shows that it is about power relations.

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GAZE AS A MARKER OF SELF/OTHER DIFFERENTIATION

The treatment of animals recalls the problem of binary opposition between human/nonhuman and the civilized/non-civilized. “The Bad News,” the first story in the collection, draws a clear boundary between the self/other and good/bad, oppositions that overlap other polarities. The enemy in the modern world is the equivalent of wolves that threaten the existence of deer. The novel does not explicitly mention the importance of territory, or measures that must be taken to prevent possible attacks. However, the consistent presence of sharp implements with which animals are tortured or killed hints at the conflict mentioned at the beginning of the novel. The presence of axes in the novel raises thoughts about their functions. In “The Bad News,” Tig and Nell’s peaceful life is disturbed by the bad news of the murder of the leader of the interim governing council. Nell imagines a “herd of deer in the meadow, heads down grazing peacefully. Then . . . *wolves approaching* is the news. Quick . . . into a circle! Females and young to the center! Snort and paw the ground! Prepare to horn the enemy” (*Moral Disorder* 5–6). Although both the victim and victimizer are animals in this analogy, the self and the other are distinctly divided into herds of deer and wolves. This sharp division between victim/victimizer, and the self/other not only realizes where the self belongs to but also points at a place outside the here from which the enemy attacks. This also justifies the exercise of violence on the other. When the enemy attacks, there is a desperate need to use a weapon to defend one’s territory. Atwood creates sharp boundaries between “good” and “bad,” an opposition which overlaps that between the civilized and the barbaric. Referring to the murder of the leader of the interim governing council Tig says: “We shouldn’t have let so many barbarians into the army. You can’t depend on them” (8). The conflict between the civilized and the barbarians takes on different forms in the

stories that follow “The Bad News.” The analogy in the first story prepares the reader for one such opposition, but the actual confrontation is between the narrator and other characters and animals. These animals, which are slain cold-bloodedly, become substitutes for the enemy—the other—and all violence against them is made to look natural. The first story sets the tone, and the last story, “The Boys at the Lab,” reveals a resolution. An Indian boy in the last story is placed under the surveillance of the narrator. With the emergence of this foreigner, an explanation could be provided for so much cruelty and violence. Animals function as substitutes for the other that is not directly confronted. The self/other and human being/animal opposition is extended into the opposition between the civilized and the barbaric and that between the insider and the outsider.

“The Boys at the Lab” confirms these binary oppositions by introducing an Indian character represented as an outsider. Atwood changes the position of the barbarian and the civilized, viewing the boys at the lab as barbarians from the point of view of the Indian. As she is constructing the story of the Indian who proposed to buy the insect-diagnostic-lab, she imagines that he must have returned to India and told his country-men a story about “the black flies and the log-cabin lab, and the two young barbarians with their bare feet sticking out of their tent” (224). Atwood, however, has already characterized these lab boys as adventurous, interesting and full of life, and compared them to movie stars. If her father’s “incongruous assistant”—the Indian—sees these lovely boys as barbarians, then he is probably a barbarian himself, an alien in a harmonious scene. The necessity of taking action against this intruder becomes obvious when the writer completes her imaginary story about real characters by having her father, the lab boys and the Indian move downhill to the dock at the lab: “The Indian man looks back over his shoulder: he alone can sense me watching. But he doesn’t know it’s me: because he’s nervous, because he’s in a strange place” (225). The fact that it is the Indian she is watching out of all the men shows her sensitivity to the presence of a stranger and the possibility of him being a potential threat. The narrator is so conscious about the “hereness” of the region that she feels endangered when an outsider enters her territory. Critics such as Wilson have already mentioned the relationship between watching and survival in Atwood’s major novels in which vision plays a vital role in the survival of the self-conscious narrator who is usually the gazer (180). Gazing is important because it helps to locate and control the intruder.

The importance of taking action against the intruder, even at an imaginary level, is obvious. In “Wilderness Tips,” one of the stories in Atwood’s short story collection of the same name, Hungarian George, who is sly and calculating, seduces three Canadian sisters. However, he is hated by their brother who relieves his hatred for him by imagining himself

beheading the intruder with an axe. “Down comes his ax on the head of George” (*Wilderness Tips* 195). As in *Moral Disorder*, the violent games the characters play go back to their childhood. The axe game is what Roland and Prue used to play as children. Roland can never forgive Prue for bringing George to their territory, wishing he had killed her back then: “He had his stone axe. He could have brained her. She was not Prue, of course, she was treachery, she was the enemy” (197). Beran points out that in Portia’s vision at the end of the story, Canada could be seen as the sinking Titanic where passengers are unaware of the lot that has befallen them. Beran argues that this story and similar ones could be seen as manifestations of the native Canadians’ fear of the presence of strangers, non-natives and foreigners (70). As in *Moral Disorder*, axes exist in the imagination of a character whose territory is endangered. Although they are not used, they seem to suggest a possibility of confrontation with an enemy.

When the narrator’s gaze identifies the Indian as a potential source of threat, Atwood expects the reader to respond and take action against the intruder. In Beran’s words, the role that Atwood assigns readers is “responding with rage and then transcending it” (74). The wide range of sharp implements and the axe could be used against anyone who endangers the territory. The Indian does not know “it’s me.” Atwood invites a whole nation to take action against the intruder who has come “here,” where he does not belong and where he might be a threat to the peaceful community.

CONCLUSION

In its deep layers, *Moral Disorder* is about the importance of protecting one’s territory. Although it describes the life and experiences of a woman from her childhood to her middle age in the first person, these experiences are not specifically female experiences. Throughout her life, the narrator not only evades all ethical responsibility, but also destroys the lives of people and animals that she is supposed to take care of. Critics generally embrace a female character’s rejection or denial of the responsibilities and roles assigned to her because of her gender, but Nell goes far beyond rejecting gendered identity. She destroys people and animals who are related to her or are under her care. She destroys the life of her younger sister, and brings to complete ruin the life of the woman whose husband she stole, and kills, beheads, dismembers and eats farm animals that she reared and took care of. The frequent cruel practices in the novel hold significant meaning with the appearance of the Indian boy who Nell gazes at and places under her surveillance. The narrator writes from within a context where binary opposition abounds. The novel clearly distinguishes between the here and

there, the inside and the outside, the self and the other, and the civilized and the barbarian. The narrator defends her territory against anyone or anything that might threaten it. The cruelty towards animals and frequent references to sharp implements such as axes could be seen as a substitute for the cruelty that the novel suggests should be exercised on a stranger. A line is drawn to divide the civilized from the uncivilized, the here from there, and the insider from the outsider. The narrator writes from within the safe side of the line, controlling the situation, gazing at the others and destroying them if the circumstances necessitate it. The book advocates the garrison mentality that has been criticized for being white, supremacist and colonial.

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