The “defiant but insane look of a species once dominant” – The Problems of Emancipation in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*
Abstract

Margaret Atwood’s novel *Surfacing* has received considerable critical attention on the issue of “a positive female identity” in a patriarchal society. However, given Atwood’s own stress on the fact that the novel is about the ways both genders work in relation to each other, this criticism has lacked in scrutiny of the novel’s male characters. With a relational approach to the female and male characters, this thesis argues that while creating a positive identity for its female protagonist, the novel effectively creates a rather negative one for its male characters. In order to examine certain sets of relations and the qualities which represent the most honored way of being a man in the novel, I apply the concept of “hegemonic masculinity,” which can be understood as the pattern of practices that explain male domination over women. It is indeed this hegemonic masculinity that the Surfacer rejects in her quest for emancipation. By looking at the hegemonic masculinity in *Surfacing*, I argue that the novel depicts very typically patriarchal characters in Joe and David and that the society is typically patriarchal.

The thesis is divided into three main sections, each examining the most important sets of relations concerning Atwood’s female emancipation. First, I analyze hegemonic structures in the world of the protagonist, including the issues of power, emancipation, and complicity. Then I look into the sexual division of labor to show that the characters assume their default roles without much reflection. Finally, I scrutinize the characters’ relation to the Symbolic and how it affects their sense of identity. In each section, the analyses show that the male characters are reduced to tropes who only serve one function: to be stereotypically oppressive, patriarchal figures in order to facilitate the protagonist’s positive change and empowerment. I argue that Atwood’s failure to imagine male emancipation somewhat taints the development of female identity because the female emancipation becomes arrested.

**Keywords:** Surfacing; Margaret Atwood; Gender; Hegemonic Masculinity; Emphasized Femininity; Complicity; Male Dominance; Identity; Power; Patriarchy; Feminism; Sexual Division of Labor; The Symbolic; Language
Margaret Atwood has rejected the notion of being a “feminist writer” because she has always found the scope of the term too broad. For her, a feminist position “really can mean anything from people who think men should be pushed off cliffs to people who think it’s O.K. for women to read and write” (Conversations 140). Whether or not she wants to label herself a feminist writer, the fact that Atwood’s novels seriously deal with women’s quests for emancipation cannot be denied. Various elements of such quests are “clearly at work in Atwood’s novels, poetry and short stories, in obvious ways in novels such as Surfacing as well as in more subtle ways” (Macpherson 22). Atwood herself has categorized her novels: “the first trio [The Edible Woman, Surfacing, and Lady Oracle] has to do with women and men, last trio [The Handmaid’s Tale, Cat’s Eye, and Robber Bride] with women and women, and then [one] in between [Life Before Man] ha[s] to do with both” (qtd. in Callaway 2). As Macpherson notes, it is indeed “impossible to consider Atwood’s work without considering the central importance she places on women as characters” (22). It is therefore not surprising that a great deal of variegated feminist criticism has been directed towards Atwood’s body of work, and especially towards the novel Surfacing, which will also be the main object of analysis in this paper.

The different approaches to analyzing Surfacing and its’ protagonist’s self-exploration and struggle to ascertain a strong sense of (female) identity, as well as the ways in which she has been oppressed by the men in her life, have created a rich field of research. However, what has been lacking in criticism of the novel is analyses of
its’ male representation. Since Atwood has claimed that her first three novels, including *Surfacing*, have to do with women and men, I find it important to scrutinize the male characters of the novel, mainly Joe and David, and do it in relation to the female characters. I hope to argue that even though the protagonist may find a strong sense of identity for a woman in a society that marginalizes her, the same potential is not given to the male characters who seem to service one function.

The lack of research on Atwood’s portrayal of masculinity is evident from the first glance at the bibliography of articles on *Surfacing*, which is Atwood’s second novel. It was published in 1972, conveniently at a time when a new women’s movement – known as Second-Wave Feminism or Women’s Liberation Movement – had emerged. The genesis of the new women’s movement had to do with the acknowledging of “the political dimension of women’s private oppression [...] Proponents of Second-Wave Feminism viewed the personal as the political” (Callaway 14-15). In many ways, the novel explores how the personal is political and it especially focuses on how its’ unnamed protagonist struggles to find a strong sense of identity in a world where she as a woman is, as Mordeca Pane Pollock puts it, “expected to enter into a monogamous marriage, live in a nuclear – often emotionally isolated – family, and limit her activities to domestic concerns, volunteer work, and social interests that [are], in the final analysis, severely circumscribed” (qtd. in Callaway 13). Sufficient criticism has thus been directed at how exactly “the Surfacer” struggles and is able to achieve her sense of identity in the novel, especially in terms of her gender. *Surfacing* aligns itself quite easily with the branch of feminism known as Separatism, which purports that “women’s actions were the result of ‘continual, daily pressure from men’” and by “removing themselves from the sphere of male influence, expectation, and judgment, women could freely express their true femininity and female identity” (18, emphasis mine). As Emma Odenmo notes “it is first when [the Surfacer] leaves her everyday life behind for a while that she can step back and observe her role in a society that has oppressed her for so long”, in an attempt “to regain power over her life” (10). Odenmo is but one prominent

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1 In a paper from 1993, “The Machinery of Patriarchy: Masculinity in the Fiction of Margaret Atwood”, David C. Bieber, gives an overview of some of the issues concerning masculinity in some of Atwood’s work, including a chapter on *Surfacing*. However, the paper only briefly touches on some of the issues in the novel and it focuses mostly on male roles. The weakness of focusing solely on sex role theory has been increasingly recognized as far back as the 1980’s since it included the blurring of behavior and norm, had a homogenizing effect in regard to individuals and difficulty in accounting for power (Connell and Messerschmidt 831).

2 Former board member of the National Organization for Women.

3 The unnamed protagonist will henceforth be referred to as “the Surfacer”.

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example of critics who have looked at *Surfacing* as a novel about empowerment of an oppressed woman as she finds a sense of *positive feminine identity* in a society dominated by men.

Ambika Bhalla, Vijeta Guatam, and Jyotsna Sinha, among others, all look at how the novel is a story of self-exploration. They all apply an ecofeminist perspective in their analysis, which, according to the Collins Dictionary of Sociology, “suggests that an end to the oppression of women is bound up with the ecological values, and that women should be centrally concerned with ending the exploitation of the ecosystem” (qtd. in Tandon and Chandra 160). The oppression of women is linked with the oppression of nature. Guatam and Sinha note:

Eco-feminists argue that two very defined, contradictory, and dualistic worlds exist in the patriarchal society the feminine and the masculine; on the one hand, the feminine principle represents Mother Nature, the body, irrationality, emotion and mysticism. On the other hand, the masculine principle represents rationality logic, separation from nature, the head, intellectualism, language and concrete reality. The protagonist tries to re-unite these two dualities. (2)

The Surfacer’s desire to re-unite the two dualities is especially evident in a passage where she explains that she is “not against the head or the body either: only the neck that creates the illusion that they are separate” (Atwood 75). Her connection to nature and the emphasis on men’s domination over both women and nature are indeed evident in the novel: for instance in her disgust towards the men who string up a dead heron “like a lynch victim” (118) and her conviction that “the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it” (118); or the “unnatural” act of the abortion that was forced upon her by her former lover, and her description of the (male) doctors who perform it as “technicians, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or snickering practicing on your body” (79). Guatam and Sinha make a valid claim that

Atwood seems to be questioning the existing power politics, the traditional notions of male superiority, and the mutilation of women by men. She is trying to assert that women can refuse victimization and gain transcendence from the male defined world and can hope to breathe freely in a world defined by them. (3)

It may be evident that Atwood is trying to assert that women can potentially refuse victimization and gain such transcendence, but given that she herself claimed that she does not write her characters as de facto role models, no more does she “try to resolve the problems of the living [or] deal out the answers” (*Waltzing Again* 33). Still, one cannot deny that *Surfacing* deals with its’ own kind of heroine who questions her current role in a male defined world.
A male defined world is what is commonly referred to as “a patriarchal society”, which Allan G. Johnson defines as a society that “promotes male privilege by being male dominated, male identified, and male centered. It is also organized around an obsession with control and involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women” (5). He further notes:

As the patriarchal story goes, women are essentially feminine and men are essentially masculine, and as long as each stays in their own designated territory, life goes on as it’s supposed to ... patriarchy is men acting masculine and women acting feminine; and the freedom to break the bonds of narrowly defined ways of being is key to women’s liberation ... and ... men’s liberation as well. (85)

Women can only hope to breathe freely by transcending a patriarchal order, but since men are also expected to always act masculine they too, in my view, can be victimized in a society which promotes certain types of masculinity – that is, when they do not act masculine. It is important to begin with this distinction, that even though a patriarchal culture is male-dominated it is not men the society promotes, but rather a form of hegemonic masculinity, which is understood as embodying the currently most honored way of being a man and it also ideologically legitimizes the subordination of women to men (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). If Atwood’s novel is to be taken as a work that questions the existing power politics and the traditional notions of male superiority, by virtue of being about women and men, it is disappointing to note that that her male characters are often simplistic, stereotypically masculine patriarchal figures. That is, as Johnson puts it, men who are “aggressive, daring, rational, emotionally inexpressive, strong, cool headed, in control of themselves, independent, active, objective, dominant, decisive, self-confident, and unnurturing” (86). Odenmo argues that Joe displays many of the features traditionally referred to as masculine, such as “physical strength” and inability to “feel or display emotion”, emphasized in the Surfacer’s remark that Joe is like a packsack (11). David displays these features in an even more obvious manner and both men do seem to convey their overall dominance throughout the book. There is little diversity in Atwood’s male representation and one could go as far as to refer to Joe and David as male “tropes.”

Joe and David function as masculine and oppressive figures in relation to whom female identity is reworked in the novel.

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4 A trope is a common pattern in a story or a recognizable attribute in a character that conveys information to the audience. A trope becomes a cliché when it’s overused. Sadly, some of these tropes often perpetuate offensive stereotypes. (Sarkeesian, “Tropes vs. Women”)
It may be the case, as Erinc Özdemir argues, that masculinist gender theory “is a discourse that defines human identity in terms of masculinity, thereby defining woman negatively. Narratives of ‘quest for self and identity’ such as *Surfacing* problematize this notion of identity in an endeavor to create a sense of positive identity for women” (72). In my view, this is true but somewhat reductive. If we take Atwood to task that her novel is about the way women and men contribute to any such quest, one should question whether the creation of a positive identity for women in *Surfacing* is at the expense of a positive identity for men. One needs to question not only the purpose but also the effectiveness of such a move on the very reworking of feminine identities. For this reason, I am going to employ the theory of “hegemonic masculinity” to elucidate Atwood’s shortcomings in her intended portrayal of women and men.\(^5\) In order to examine the potential, the success, and the shortcomings of Atwood’s narrative in terms of gender identity and female and male emancipation, I will begin by giving a brief overview of the concept of hegemonic masculinity and how it can be detected in a given social setting. I offer a comprehensive analysis of the kind of hegemonic masculinity that is depicted in the novel by looking at both discursive and nondiscursive practices.\(^6\) Following this, I will address the model of femininity that is defined in contradistinction to hegemonic masculinity, and then show how women and men both can show a complicit behavior in regard to patriarchy. In the second section, I will then go into a discussion of the sexual division of labor in order to show that the society in the novel is overwhelmingly patriarchal which puts certain expectations on men and women and thus affects their sense of self. Finally, I will analyze the so-called Symbolic – with focus on language – which is quintessentially a masculine sphere, and how that affects both men’s and women’s sense of gender identity.

I will argue that in order to create a positive identity for a woman in *Surfacing*, Atwood sacrifices a positive gender identity for men. I will show that the male characters are in much sense very typically oppressive and patriarchal, to the point of being clichéd tropes: as tropes, they may facilitate the Surfacer’s journey to some extent, but ultimately their reductive male image somewhat taints the female one because the female emancipation becomes arrested. In other words, one may

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\(^5\) As assumed by the majority of critics referred to in this paper. Of course, Atwood’s real intention cannot be presumed.

\(^6\) Worth noting is that this is a rather new theory that I am employing on a novel that has mainly been related to the second wave of feminism. This is not related to my own status as an informed white male Swede. I believe that the notion of hegemonic masculinity sheds a new light both on the specific characterizations in the novel and the context in which it was written.
argue that Atwood shows just how oppressive patriarchal structures are and how inescapable they may seem, and there seems to be in the novel something of a failure of the imaginative nerve to open up cracks in the system to a sort of emancipatory agency.

The Hegemonic Masculinity

In the 1980s, R.W. Connell popularized the term “hegemonic masculinity”, which “was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue” (Connell & Messerschmidt 832). The concept “embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men” (832). It could be seen as an ideal to which all men position themselves but “only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative” (832). This will form hierarchies of masculinity among men where hegemonic masculinity will be on top and whoever comes closest to embodying it will receive the most benefits in a patriarchal society. The idea of “a hierarchy of masculinities grew directly out of homosexual men’s experience with violence and prejudice from straight men” (831) but the theory was quickly extended to include analysis of men’s relations with women. However, Connell and Messerschmidt are quick to point out that hegemony does “not mean violence, although it could be supported by force; it meant ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion” (832). Even seemingly insignificant acts can be political and point towards a form of hegemony.

In Atwood’s novel there seems to be a predominant form of masculinity that can be described as “a way that men position themselves through [for instance] discursive practices” (841). It is evident that Atwood’s characters Joe and David do seem to value certain masculine qualities more than others and I will take a further look at what those qualities might be below. As Özdemir argues, the “underlying thesis of Surfacing is that the protagonist is already marginal to the hegemonic culture in virtue of being a woman” (72), and the novel focuses on how she manages to create a sense of positive identity for a woman in spite of it. However, this culture also puts certain demands on the male characters in the novel. Although they may not be marginalized, they do seem to be somewhat trivialized since they more or less
embody specifically patriarchal male tropes. There is little diversity between the male characters, and what in many ways defines them as men is that they are stereotypically masculine and that they oppress women.

Connell and Messerschmidt are quick to point out that even though it is normative, hegemonic masculinity is “not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense” (832) since very few might actually enact it. It is rather an image of how one should be that affects how one is since all men (and to some extent, even women) position themselves in relation to it. It is also important to understand that masculinity “is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (836). Many men might not fit exactly into the major categories of hegemonic masculinities, in fact “many men who hold great social power do not embody an ideal masculinity” (838). However, they do “demonstrate complex relations of attachment and rejection to those categories” (837). Therefore, hegemonic masculinity will always be a source of tension since hegemonic patterns of masculinity will always be both engaged with and, perhaps, contested. Even though hegemonic masculinities are formed in social settings, they might not correspond closely to the lives of actual men in that setting. However, “these models do, in various ways, express widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires. They provide models of relations with women and solutions to problems of gender relations” (838). Thus, in order to analyze hegemonic masculinities one needs to look at how it is constructed in social interaction not just between men, but also between men and women. Given Atwood’s statement that her book is about women and men, it seems appropriate to take her up to task and see how she deals with these sets of relations that define hegemonic structures.

When analyzing Surfacing, I follow Connell and Messerschmidt’s argument that it is important to not “dichotomize the experiences of men and women” in relation to masculinity and proceed “as if women were not a relevant part of the analysis, and therefore to analyze masculinities by looking only at men and relations among men ... The cure lies in taking a consistently relational approach to gender” (837). This relational approach will allow me to not only evaluate how the male characters position themselves to a hegemonic masculinity in the novel, but also allow me to make a brief analysis of how the female characters position themselves to a model of femininity, which is sometimes referred to as “emphasized femininity” (848). Neither a model of masculinity, nor one of femininity, should be defined “as
object[s] (a natural character type, a behavioural average, a norm).” Indeed, “we need to focus on the processes and relationships through which men and women conduct gendered lives,” because “[g]ender is social practice that constantly refers to bodies and what bodies do” (Masculinities 71). In other words, there are many different aspects of both masculinity and femininity, and specifically “the concept of hegemonic masculinity was formulated within a multidimensional understanding of gender … it should not be regarded as only a cultural norm. Gender relations also are constituted through nondiscursive practices” as well as “constructed in discourse” (Connell and Messerschmidt 842). In this section, I will now focus on a number of issues regarding the construction of hegemonic masculinity. First I will look at how hegemonic masculinity is formed discursively, such as to promote domination over women and show how men are (supposedly) more decisive. Second I will look at how it is constructed through nondiscursive practices, such as sexuality and through unreflective routinized actions that do not only further men’s domination over women, but also show how men are supposed to be physical, strong, self-assured and strong-minded. However, it is important to point out that discursive and nondiscursive practice are not always mutually exclusive, in fact, most times they are not. Yet, in order to facilitate the discussion I have decided to make a distinction between discursive practices as things expressed in discourse, and nondiscursive practices as things expressed in behavior and (possibly) discourse as nondiscursive practices (even though it is obviously also discursive practice). Finally, I will look at the type of emphasized femininity in the novel, and discuss how both women and men can be compliant towards patriarchy even though they do not enact a strong hegemonic masculinity.

**Discursive practice**

According to Michel Foucault, power is “widely dispersed, and operates intimately and diffusely. Especially, it operates discursively through the ways we talk and categorize people. It impacts directly on people’s bodies as ‘discipline’, as well as on their identities, constituting subject positions that people take up” (Gender 77). How people talk to and about each other demonstrates much about their position to one

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7 It could be seen as problematic to make the division between discursive and non-discursive practices because discourse concerns so much more than just spoken word. For instance, in Lacan’s view all social behavior and actions are too regarded as being part of discourse (Simpson 33). I did consider instead dividing the two sub-sections into Verbal and Non-Verbal actions but that too is problematic. I opted to follow Connell and Messerschmidt and use discursive/non-discursive with an awareness of the potential problems inherent in the use of this terminology.
another, and this is something that is definitely discernable in *Surfacing*. By looking at how David and Joe talk, one can see not only how hegemonic masculinity is constructed but how it is used in discourse, such as to promote their domination over women. In fact, being dominant seems to be a very important quality of hegemonic masculinity. Consequently, men somewhat deprive women of their voices. This can be observed relatively early in the novel, especially in regard to David and Anna’s interactions. Their power dynamic becomes prominent quite quickly, such as when Anna is singing in the car:

> Earlier she was singing ... trying to make her voice go throaty and deep; but it came out like a hoarse child’s. David turned on the radio, he couldn’t get anything, we were between stations. When she was in the middle of St. Louis Blues he began to whistle and she stopped. (Atwood 6)

This seemingly inconspicuous passage shows much about Anna and David’s relationship. First, Anna is trying to make her voice go throaty and deep, which is typically masculine. However, David’s whistling quickly interrupts her after the radio fails him, which signals to Anna that she should stop. No matter how masculine Anna tries to make her voice, it is evident who is closer to the hegemonic ideal of masculinity and thus has the power in their relationship, or, in other words, who is the man. Anna is more like a child. This small exchange demonstrates that being masculine means being the more dominant one. David is clearly more assertive than Anna who quickly folds.

The way David quiets Anna by whistling is very interesting, because it has to do with men silencing women and not even having to use words. The whistling itself becomes a form of speech. This is also only the first time that David quiets or does not listen to Anna, and their relationship continues in a similar fashion throughout the novel. As Anna and David later sit down on a bench, she is “playing with one of his hands while he [is talking].” She tries to interject a question: “Did I ever tell you that you have Murderer’s thumb?” and he simply tells her to “Don’t interrupt” (98). She does however manage to get him to answer her question by making a “whimpering face”, but as she attempts to carry on the conversation David instead changes the subject. This demonstrates not only that David can simply tell Anna to be quiet, but he can also easily change the conversation that she initiated. Both means practically make Anna invisible in the conversation, since David controls whether she is allowed to speak and for how long she can do it. He emphasizes her inferiority and insignificance.
In contrast, the Surfacer comments on David’s negligence towards Anna, noting that Anna is trying to get his attention by “teasing him, she does that a lot; but he doesn’t hear” (25). David is no doubt the more dominant one in their relationship, and in a similar manner he is also the one who decides that the entire party should stay an extra week at the cabin:

‘I like it here,’ David says. No sound from the others. ‘Let’s stay on for a while, a week, it’d be great.’ ...

‘I don’t think we should,’ Anna says.
‘How come you never want us to do anything I want to do?’ David says, and there’s a pause. Then he says ‘What d’you think?’ and Joe says ‘Okay by me.’

‘Great,’ says David, ‘we’ll do some more fishing.’ I sit down on the bed. They might have asked me first, it’s my house ... Anna makes a last feeble attempt. ‘I’ll run out of cigarettes.’

‘Do you good,’ David says cheerfully, ‘filthy habit. Get you back into shape.’ (67)

Once again Anna’s voice is not heard and she is yet again made somewhat invisible in the conversation. She clearly does not want to stay at the cabin an extra week, but David completely disregards her opinion and he even slightly mocks her reasoning for not wanting to stay by cheerfully telling her that she might get back into shape if she runs out of cigarettes. Even more interesting about this passage is that the Surfacer’s opinion on the matter is not even considered even though it is her house that they are staying in. The only person’s opinion that David does seem to care about is Joe’s, who is of course the only other present male. This clearly demonstrates that both dominance and decisiveness are qualities of the hegemonic masculinity that is perceived in the novel. These passages show not only how it is constructed, since especially David clearly positions himself in a dominant role, but also how it is used and can be understood as the pattern of practice that allows men’s domination over women.

However, it is possible to assume that the Surfacer’s opinion would have been considered, and that she would not have been made invisible as Anna was. She never does give them a chance to ask her since she overhears their conversation from another room and then joins in by simply saying that they will have to “pay Evans the five anyway” (68) for showing up at the previously appointed time. Nonetheless, based on their conversation it does not seem to occur to them to ask her first, and it remains questionable whether or not David would give her the same treatment as he gave Anna. Either way the passage shows a discourse that does point to a type of hegemonic masculinity which perceives men as dominant and decisive, which is
emphasized in David’s “triumphant and appraising” look (68). Anna’s voice, on the other hand, is once again subdued which testifies to a pattern of practice that allows men’s dominance over women.

Promoting hegemonic masculinity through discourse is not only seen in the way women are silenced and made invisible in conversation, but also in the way they are spoken to. Something that is certainly normative in Surfacing is men’s rather sexist way of speaking about women. Especially David often makes sexual advances or remarks on both women, such as patting Anna’s rear as a way of showing gratitude (32) or commenting on the Surfacer’s “nice ass” as she bends over (90). Connell argues that “[o]ne of the crudest ways of deploying gender is through sexual harassment - an exercise of power, directed to the body of the target” (Gender 69) and the “concept of multiple masculinities and hegemonic masculinity [has been] increasingly used to understand men’s ... risk-taking sexual behavior” (Connell and Messerschmidt 833). Johnson further argues that it is considered masculine “to bond around a common view of women as objects to be competed for, possessed, and used” (60), which is certainly a valid claim when considering David’s remarks. Johnson continues:

When men tell sexist jokes, for example, or banter about women’s bodies, they usually can count on other men to go along (if only in silence), for a man who objects risks becoming an outcast. Even if a joke is directed at his wife or lover, he’s likely to choose his tie to men over loyalty to her by letting it pass with a shrug and perhaps a good-natured smile that leaves intact his standing as one of the guys. (60)

In Surfacing, it is apparent that Joe too regards women as objects or possessions and chooses his tie to David especially when David comments on how the Surfacer’s behind “turns him on when she bends over” and Joe simply replies, “You can have it”, as if she is his to give away (Atwood 90). The Surfacer does not contest this sentiment and when Anna later complains to her what a “schmuck” David is she is surprised as he “hadn’t said anything at lunch that could have upset [Anna]” (98). This shows how habitual the sexist remarks are, even to the extent that the Surfacer does not even realize that what David said could possibly have upset Anna, even though he has just paid attention to another woman in front of her and told her that she is “eating too much” (98) in an attempt to put her down. The sexist remarks are obviously an exercise of power that David uses in order to promote his masculinity, and Johnson’s claim that men bond around a common view of women as objects and possessions certainly rings true.
The two women are also pitted against each other as they get compared by David, and Anna is quick to point out that “he’s hot for” her because “it’s all about me really” (99). The fact that neither woman pays attention to how the men’s behavior is inappropriate emphasizes “the belief that when men engage in predatory or selfish sexual conduct they are only doing what is natural for men and cannot be expected to change” (Gender 60). Anna expects David to make a move on the Surfacer, and instead of focusing her attention on him she instead turns it towards the Surfacer and warns her not to think anything of it. In effect, it is not David’s sexual remarks towards the Surfacer that are negative, but perhaps the Surfacer’s potential reciprocation. Or, as it turns out, the fact that she does not surrender to his advances when he finally attempts to sleep with her:

I didn’t want to join. “It’s not what you think,” I said to Anna. “He asked me to but I wouldn’t.” I wanted to tell her I hadn’t acted against her.

Her eyes flicked from him to me. “That was pure of you,” she said. I’d made a mistake, she resented me because I hadn’t given in, it commented on her.

“She’s pure all right,” David said, “she’s a little purist.”
“Joe told me she won’t put out for him any more,” Anna said, still looking at me. Joe didn’t say anything; he was eating another potato.

“She hates men,” David said lightly. “Either that or she wants to be one. Right?” ...
“Aren’t you going to answer?” Anna said, taunting.
“No,” I said. Anna said, “God, she really is inhuman,” and they both laughed a little, sorrowfully. (Atwood 155)

This passage perhaps best demonstrates how power works in accordance with Foucault’s notion that it operates discursively through the ways we talk and categorize people. The Surfacer is clearly being disciplined in the way that David and Anna talk about her. This is especially clear from the way Anna is trying to categorize her as “inhuman”. Connell and Messerschmidt argue that “[a]ny strategy for the maintenance of power is likely to involve a dehumanizing of other groups and a corresponding withering of empathy and emotional relatedness” (852), which one can definitely observe in how David and Anna approached the Surfacer for not acting as she is expected to – that is, to be sexually compliant. In Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman’s classic article, “Doing Gender”, they argue that “the ‘doing’ of gender is undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production” (126). On that account it follows that when the Surfacer does not do (gender) as she is expected, her competence as a member of society is
questioned, ergo she is “inhuman”. When the Surfacer refuses to have sex with David she threatens his dominant position. He then maintains his sense of power by accusing the Surfacer of hating men or perhaps even wanting to be one. Gloria Onley appropriately argues that by “[r]ejecting her assigned sex role, Atwood’s protagonist becomes the modern equivalent of the heretic or witch – the mentally ill or ‘inhuman’ person, the deviant by means of whose existence ‘normal’ values are asserted and maintained” (30). Indeed, it is the fact that the Surfacer is condemned for not being compliant that further shows how power works in relation to hegemonic masculinity.

That hegemonic masculinity can be understood as the pattern of practice that allows men’s continued domination over women is definitely evident. In fact, dominance seems to be one of the most important features of masculinity, specifically over women. It is considered masculine to comment on women as if they are objects and possessions. Men are clearly supposed to always view women as potential sexual partners and they should themselves be very sexually potent. Hegemonic masculinity provides models for how to be in relation to women, and it is evident from Atwood’s novel that it is not a model that promotes equality with women. However, the fact that the men are so obviously oppressive throughout the entire novel makes it seem like their only function is to represent the negative aspects of patriarchy. The way the male characters talk to the female characters makes it abundantly clear why the Surfacer would want to refuse a relationship. The male representation becomes even more trivial when the interactions between the Surfacer and the more minor male characters continue in the same fashion, such as when Paul asks whether the Surfacer’s husband is with her so that a man can handle the search for her father, which shows that competence is something that is also deemed masculine (Atwood 19). By representing all men as being more or less oppressive towards women in their rather derogatory speech the male representation seems fairly limited. The effect is a model for masculinity that is reductive and depreciatory since it suggests that hegemonic masculinity serves to maintain men’s power over women in discourse.

I will now look into the ways hegemonic masculinity is constituted in nondiscursive practice.

Nondiscursive practice
As previously mentioned, “nondiscursive practices” that construct hegemonic masculinity refer to what is expressed in the things an individual does, for instance, in
regard to one’s sexuality or through unreflective routinized actions. Many of these things assert men’s domination over women even further, but through men and women’s interactions and behavior in the novel other hegemonic features than the ones previously noted can be detected.

Throughout the novel it is clear that men are supposed to be certain things and women others. For instance, it is evident that men are most often regarded to be more competent than women. That was not only demonstrated above in Paul’s indicative comment about whether or not the Surfacer’s husband is with her to handle the search for her father, but it is also evident in regard to who gets to do what. Specifically when it comes to the handling of different tools that require strength or technical skill. Not only is chopping wood the only chore that the men do voluntarily around the cabin, but the way in which they pride themselves in their work and pose with the log as if with their prey, emphasizes the notion that they have done something remarkable and “manly”. The other chores, such as cooking, doing the dishes or gardening are deemed more as feminine tasks. There is a perception that men and women differ in physical skills and that women are much better at such “fiddly work” (Gender 53). I will delve further into a discussion of the sexual division of labor at a later point in this paper, but it is worth pointing out here that since men are those who do most of the more physical labor it is clearly a part of the construct of hegemonic masculinity. This even seems to be mocked by Atwood’s narrator when the party is out with the canoes and Joe and David respectively seem to always be the ones in the steering position, even though they “still couldn’t paddle very well but there wasn’t much wind. I had to use a lot of energy just to keep us pointed straight, because Joe didn’t know how to steer; also he wouldn’t admit it, which made it harder” (Atwood 85). The image of the Surfacer desperately trying to keep them on course while Joe reluctantly pretends to know what he is doing is quite comical, yet his persistence to steer even though the Surfacer probably would be more fit to do it certainly speaks volumes about the way he positions himself vis-à-vis the women. Technically, he is supposed to be more competent and physical than her and he sat down in the steering position without reflecting about who has the most experience.

As noted before, hegemonic masculinity is not only an image of the most honored way of being a man, but it also gives men a model for how to be in relation to

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8 I want to remind the reader that these actions are often accompanied with verbal discourse as well and the examples discussed here will therefore also include issues of what I referred to as discursive practice, but for the sake of emphasis I opted for a more narrow meaning.
women. Marriage is one of those distinct models and Joe thinks that by marrying someone he will also strengthen his masculinity. Keeping in mind Johnson’s statement that men bond around a common view of women as objects to be competed for and possessed, then marriage can be seen as a means to an end, a way of declaring victory over a women and hopefully maintain or bettering your social position. The Surfacer even remarks that rather than loving her, Joe loves some kind of “an idea of himself … and he want[s] someone to join him, anyone would do” (111). She refuses his proposal since she relates marriage to her former lover who “controlled and suppressed her reproductive urge and power, thus damaging her self-identity, which is inseparable from her gender identity” (Özdemir 64). To avoid that relationship dynamic to be repeated, she keeps Joe “at a distance and by refusing to give herself to him, reduces him to an object” (64). Özdemir claims that there “is in fact a reversal of stereotypical gender roles in the protagonist’s attitude to Joe revealed by words reducing him to a sexual object and domestic partner” (73) and he refers to the Surfacerb’s comment that all she “values about him seems to be physical … He’s good in bed, better than the one before; he’s moody but he’s not much bother, we split the rent and he doesn’t talk much, that’s an advantage” (Atwood 54, 39). For Özdemir, the Surfacer “feels an affinity with the deficient masculinity of Joe, which makes him feminine in so far as femininity is the failure of masculinity” (Özdemir 73). Bhalla goes as far as to claiming that the Surfacer is together with Joe because he “according to her estimate is a profeminist man” (5). This is an overstatement. Even though Joe does indeed possess qualities that are perhaps to a degree “feminine”, it is quite evident that he is not comfortable in that position and he frequently tries to assert his masculinity.

After having his marriage proposal rejected, Joe seems to be able to compromise and once again approaches the Surfacer, saying that they can be together anyway: “‘Do you love me, that’s all,’ he said. ‘That’s the only thing that matters’” (Atwood 107). Yet, she rejects him again, and he misinterprets this as him not measuring up – not being man enough for her – and he claims that she does not want to marry him because he is not successful enough: “you think my work is crap, you think I’m a loser and I’m not worth it” (107). His reaction “reveals him to be a victim of the stereotype of masculine worth measured in terms of social power – wealth, status, professional success” (Özdemir 73), in other words, hegemonic masculinity. However, it is evident that the model for masculinity is not affected by women’s perception of what is considered appealing in men. Joe for one does not realize that
his failure actually makes him more appealing to the Surfacer, as “his failure makes him less self-assured, therefore less masculine, less threatening and more vulnerable” (73) and thus also less likely to try to be as controlling as her former lover was. Even so, Joe believes that she rejects him for not being masculine enough, and his misconception causes his desperate attempts to assert his masculinity to reach a climax as he attempts to rape the Surfacer:

His hands descended, zipper sound, metal teeth on metal teeth, he was rising out of the fur husk, solid and heavy; but the cloth separated from him and I saw he was human, I didn’t want him in me, sacrilege, he was one of the killers, the clay victims damaged and strewn behind him, and he hadn’t seen, he didn’t know about himself, his own capacity for death ...

“What’s wrong with you?” he said, angry; then he was pinning me, hands manacles, teeth against my lips, censoring me, he was shoving against me, his body insistent as one side of an argument. (Atwood 148)

As noted previously, sexual harassment (or in this case, abuse) is one of the crudest ways of deploying gender and asserting men’s power over women. By failing to understand that it is his more obscure position to the hegemonic masculinity that actually attracts the Surfacer to Joe, he here becomes exactly what she is afraid of. It is the ultimate assertion of masculine power and dominance over women. Joe here, at least temporarily, becomes completely immersed in the masculine system – he is one of the killers – damaged by a tainted model of masculinity – and he censors the Surfacer by force. Thus, it is rather hyperbolic to refer to Joe as profeminist, as Bhalla does, when he clearly has a very complicated relationship with masculinity and regards as failure all those qualities that the Surfacer herself deems positive. Joe does not go through with the rape, as the Surfacer manages to fend him off by arguing that she will get pregnant if he continues. The fact that these words stop him, paints a rather stereotypical image of men only wanting sex but fearing the commitment that a child would bring: “flesh making more flesh, miracle, that frightens all of them” (148). Sadly enough, this is not the only instance in Surfacing where rape is used as a typical assertion of men’s power over women.

Power, and notably the “analysis of rape as an assertion of men’s power over women” have been central to the Women’s Liberation concept of patriarchy (Gender 76). The fact bears scrutiny when considering that there is not one but two attempted rapes in the novel – one by each male character. David’s attempted rape is not as vicious as Joe’s; one might even argue that it is not rape. Nonetheless, David’s attempt is to sleep with the Surfacer and he continues to make distressing advances
even though she frequently dismisses them. When the Surfacer first attempts to refuse him he tells her to “don’t give [him] a hassle”, and then not to “get uptight” (Atwood 152). He is also under the impression that she “wanted him to follow” and when she refuses him he calls her a “tight-ass bitch” (153). The scene is definitely alarming as he mirrors the classic rapist telling his victim that she is “asking for it” and the Surfacer fails to perform her “duty, an obligation on [her] part” (153) when she is not being sexually compliant in a society where women are supposed to be (Impett and Peplau 87). When she is not, David berates her: “Keep it to yourself then ... I’m not going to sit up and beg for a little third-rate cold tail” (Atwood 154). The passage is clearly related to discursive practice as well, as David fails to dominate the Surfacer sexually and instead attempts to do it verbally. He later apologizes for blowing his cool and deferentially tells her that he “respects [her] for it” and that there is “[n]o need to tell Anna”, yet the Surfacer notes that she can tell that he is lying (154). As discussed in the previous section on discursive practices, David later does try to insinuate to Joe and Anna that they did, after all, have relations anyway. The Surfacer has clearly gone against the model he has for relations with women. Men are supposed to be dominant, and when she rejects him, “the terms of the attack and the power behind it are based on men’s standards of patriarchal manhood” (Johnson 58). His manhood is put into question, because “when women don’t play along – when they criticize or question or merely lose enthusiasm for affirming patriarchal manhood – they risk the wrath of men, who may feel undermined, abandoned, and even betrayed” (57). As discussed above, in the passage where the Surfacer is called inhuman, rape is David’s retaliation for her not affirming his manhood.

The deploying of gender through sexual harassment is clearly an assertion of power, and that is even more apparent when David forces Anna to get naked in front of the camera, claiming that they “need a naked lady with big tits and a big ass” (Atwood 135) so she should “just take it off like a good girl or [he’ll] take it off for [her]” (136). David more or less reduces Anna to her body parts, and it is clear that Anna will only be “a good girl” if she does as he tells her to. He also embeds his request with a threat of removing her clothes himself. Joe attempts to get David to step down, telling him he will not shoot her with the camera if she does not want to and then tells him: “‘Leave her alone,” Joe said, swinging his legs, bored or excited, it was impossible to tell’” (136). His attempt to interfere comes off as somewhat bleak or insincere as the Surfacer cannot decide whether he is bored or excited. It seems likely that Joe will not go out of his way to align himself against David. Either way, David
disregards it and simply tells Joe to “[s]hut up, she’s my wife” (136) which yet again further establishes women as objects/possessions. Anna finally caves, and Joe “swivell[s] the camera and train[s] it on them like a bazooka or a strange instrument of torture and press[es] the button, lever, sinister whirr” (137). However, she will not give them “a little dance” and instead sticks “her middle finger in the air at them and [runs] to the end of the dock and jump[s] into the lake” (137). David asks whether Joe got all of it or not, to which he replies: “Some of it ... Maybe you could order her to do it again.” I thought he was being sarcastic but I wasn’t sure” (137). The Surfacer might be unsure, but the comment takes a satirical tone to highlight the absurdity of the gross power abuse that David has just committed.

According to Bhalla, “David’s camera has raped Anna’s female image, it has forever entrapped her distorted self within its luminous lens. The camera is used as a phallic symbol, representing the male power over the female body” (173). The camera becomes a symbol for male power over the female body and the likening to some kind of weapon of torture emphasizes this notion. When the Surfacer asks David why he just did that, he resorts to blaming the victim: “You don’t know what she does to me,’ he said with a slight whine. ‘She asks for it, she makes me do it’ ” (Atwood 138). Once again, he mirrors the words of the typical rapist. The power dynamic in their relationship is obvious. Anna does not have much choice of whether or not to strip naked, as David makes it quite clear that she will strip either of her own doing or by his. It is also clear that he will not take any responsibility for what he has done. Anna did it to herself by forcing his hand. The passage remains one of the most obvious examples of men’s dominance over women, and it is evident that a version of masculinity that is open to equality with women is not one that has been established in Surfacing. The power differentials are obviously gendered.

Based on the examples in this section, hegemonic masculinity at work in Surfacing demands from men to always be dominant, self-assured, decisive, competent, strong, physical, sexually potent and strong-minded. The examples discussed in this section show that Joe and David both do position themselves in relation to this hegemonic masculinity, and just as in the discussion of how discursive practice constructs masculinity I want to stress the fact that Atwood’s male representation is rather bland. Just the fact that both men attempt to rape the Surfacer, barely five pages apart, is next to absurd. Once again, it suggests that hegemonic

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9 As mentioned, this passage also refers to aspects of discursive power as well as nondiscursive behavior.
masculinity completely determines how men will behave and that they will continually assert power over women. Even Joe, who in many ways appears as more subdued than David in that he does not frequently assert his power discursively, clearly positions himself to the hegemonic masculinity and measures his worth in quite stereotypical terms of power. It is as if it is something that is arbitrary and impossible to dodge, which is not only reductive but also taints the Surfacer’s quest for a positive identity since the model for femininity is clearly not as difficult to dodge. The following subsection will look closer into how a positive identity for the Surfacer is created because she is depicted as being able to dodge the emphasized femininity in the novel, whereas the hegemonic masculinity does not seem to be something that men can adopt when it is desirable but distance themselves from when it is not.

*Emphasized Femininity and Complicity*

The construction of gender is always relational, and accordingly the concept of “hegemonic masculinity was originally formulated in tandem with a concept of hegemonic femininity – soon renamed ‘emphasized femininity’ to acknowledge the asymmetrical position of masculinities and femininities in a patriarchal gender order” (Connell and Messerschmidt 848). This model for femininity embodies the currently most honored way of being a woman, and its’ features can be detected in social practice just like hegemonic masculinity. I will here look at what those features are, and argue that the concept of emphasized femininity can be used to explain compliance among women towards the patriarchal gender structures. I will also look at how men who do not enact a strong hegemonic masculinity can still receive some of its’ benefits by adopting a “complicit masculinity”. I will argue that the Surfacer manages to achieve a positive identity by not enacting a complicit behavior towards these structures.

Generally speaking, Joe is much more subdued throughout the novel than David is. For instance, he does not make the same sexist remarks as David does and he also remains silent when David and Anna confront the Surfacer for being inhuman. In fact, it is interesting that Anna is more active in that confrontation than Joe is even though he has clearly been shown to value the same idealized image of masculinity as David. Connell and Messerschmidt offer an explanation of both Joe’s more subdued behavior and Anna’s obvious positioning during the confrontation:
Men who received the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of masculine dominance could be regarded as showing a complicit masculinity. It was in relation to this group, and to compliance among heterosexual women, that the concept of hegemony was most powerful. Hegemony did not mean violence, although it could be supported by force; it meant ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion. (832)

One could argue that Joe and Anna both express complicity in relation to hegemonic masculinity. Even though Anna does show signs of resistance, she always ultimately folds. It is clear that David is the more dominant one in their relationship, and although Anna sometimes voices discontent she does not do much to change her position. According to Özdemir, it is important that David assert himself as the dominant one and “while David uses Anna’s femininity against her to uphold his sense of masculine superiority by putting her down, Anna uses her own body and sexuality as her sole resource to keep David” (64). David himself comments on how Anna uses her sexuality to assert power, noting that he married “a pair of boobs, she manipulated [him] into it” (Atwood 138) and he believes that her devious behavior makes her unequal to him. However, given that gender is always relational, Anna’s behavior has less to do with her being devious or manipulative and more to do with the kind of power that she is given in a patriarchal society. It is important to look beyond the activities of men and also focus on the ways different practices of women affect “the construction of gender among men” (Connell and Messerschmidt 848). Some researchers have therefore looked at how the concept of emphasized femininity is constituted in that it “focuse[s] on compliance to patriarchy” (848), as in Anna’s case.

Based on the examples discussed previously, the emphasized femininity is clearly perceived as being subordinate, nurturing, service-minded, good at fiddly work (but otherwise incompetent), sexually compliant and pretty. Anna is very concerned about her looks and frequently choses discomfort in order to look good, such as refusing to wear jeans because she looks fat in them (Atwood 7). Her perception is that she always needs to put on make-up because David “doesn’t like to see [her] without it”, but then remarking that he does not even know that she wears it (41). Taking care of her looks seems to be Anna’s greatest effort, which is closely related to her power being tied to her body and sexuality. As the Surfacer notes, Anna “was desperate, her body her only weapon and she was fighting for her life, he was her life, her life was the fight: she was fighting him because if she ever surrendered the balance of power would be broken and he would go elsewhere.” (155). The model
for femininity is clearly defined in contradistinction from the model of masculinity, and it is evident that it is more affected by what men’s image is of what women should be than the model of masculinity is affected by women’s image is of what men should be. Thus, the understanding that emphasized femininity focuses on compliance to patriarchy is certainly conclusive.

Anna becomes the quintessential stock character of a compliant woman, which is especially striking when she tells on the Surfacer for dumping out the film of Anna being forced to strip naked (170), which was the ultimate symbol for male power over the female body. Yet Anna does not (openly) show gratitude with the Surfacer, but rather remains loyal to David. However, that passage does demonstrate that emphasized femininity does not seem to be as socially deterministic for women in the novel as hegemonic masculinity is for men. In contrast to Anna, the Surfacer cannot be described as expressing an emphasized femininity with strong compliance towards the hegemonic masculinity. In fact, she shows great disapproval of it since hegemonic masculinity ideologically legitimizes women’s subordination to men. The Surfacer will not express a strong femininity based on men’s ideas of it. Rather, she attempts to find a way to valorize the feminine values that have been regarded as negative in a masculine culture, as well as showing that she is capable of being the one with the upper hand in the relationship when she refuses Joe. As Özdemir notes their relationship is clearly different in its’ power dynamic compared to Anna and David’s:

"The balance of power in the protagonist’s relationship with her present lover, Joe, is quite the reverse. While Joe strives painfully to assert his masculinity, it is the protagonist who in her impassivity has the upper hand in the relationship. She keeps him at a distance and by refusing to give herself to him, reduces him to an object. (Özdemir 64)"

It is she who has the upper hand in the relationship and refuses to give Joe the attention he demands. It is obvious that Joe struggles more than David to assert his masculinity, but what Joe fails to understand is that the Surfacer’s interest towards him is because of his less masculine behavior. She describes him in a more feminine fashion, such as likening him to a teddybear or referring to him as “Beautiful Joe” (Atwood 4). Nonetheless, in a similar fashion as David becomes upset when the Surfacer does not sleep with him, which calls his manhood into question, Joe becomes upset in regard to the teddybear comment since it questions his manhood by suggesting that he has a soft quality, which is clearly not part of the hegemonic masculinity: “His back is hairier than most men’s, a warm texture, it’s like teddybear
fur, though when I told him that he seemed to take it as an insult to his dignity” (39). Basically, his hirsuteness, which is a typically taken to be a masculine trait, is feminized. It is not only that a teddybear is soft and comforting, but being compared to it is also somewhat infantilizing. The comparison is rather insulting to Joe because those qualities are obviously not part of the most honored way of being a man. He fails to understand that the Surfacer finds it positive, and rather takes it as her not thinking that he is man enough for her.

On the contrary, the Surfacer asserts that feminine traits should not be regarded as negative or as being separated from and opposed to masculine ones. As noted in the introductory part of this paper, the Surfacer’s desire is to re-unite the two dualities because she is against “the illusion that they are separate” (75). She wants to blur the notion that they are not both part of the natural state of being. Her desire is to become whole (147), which entails having elements of both masculinity and femininity. Or rather she shows that character traits should not be labeled as masculine or feminine in the first place. That is why she finds Joe agreeable, because he clearly has elements of traditional masculinity such as physical strength, but at the same time he has elements of femininity such as “vulnerability” and the ability to feel emotions (106), as opposed to David who “pretends he doesn’t feel those things” (99). The problem is, from the point of view of a critique of hegemonic masculinity, that Joe obviously does not feel content that way. Albeit he does not enact a hegemonic masculinity himself, he is till very complicit towards it and enjoys some of its’ many privileges. He also does not reflect much on the negative aspects of it, especially in regard to women, which is why he fails to understand what the Surfacer wants from him. Consequently, he does not manage to find a positive identity since he is focusing on enacting a complicit masculine behavior towards a hegemonic masculinity which essentially “excludes ‘positive’ behavior on the part of men – that is, behavior that might serve the interests or desires of women” (Connell and Messerschmidt 840). The hegemonic masculinity in Surfacing rather enhances men’s dominance over women. It is more the pattern of practice used to make the women subordinate to them.

Considering Joe’s struggle to assert a strong masculine identity, as well as David’s constant assertion of his, hegemonic masculinity seems “to be associated solely with negative characteristics that depict men as unemotional, independent, non-nurturing, aggressive, and dispassionate – which are seen as the causes of criminal behavior” (Connell and Messerschmidt 840). As argued above, this is rather disappointing since it depicts all masculinities as being essentially negative, if not
even ‘evil’. Their behavior “is reified in a concept of masculinity that then, in a circular argument, becomes the explanation (and the excuse) for the behavior” (840). Connell and Messerschmidt further argue that this can spawn a misconception that hegemonic masculinity is “a scientific sounding synonym for a type of rigid, domineering, sexist, ‘macho’ man” (840). This is certainly valid in regard to my reading of *Surfacing*, as the type of hegemonic masculinity that occurs in the novel seems to mostly refer to “men’s engaging in toxic practices – including physical [or sexual] violence – that stabilize gender dominance in a particular setting” (840). This could be regarded as a weakness in the novel. The male character’s ideas for how to be with women are practically reminiscent of a teenage boy learning about sex from pornography. The hegemonic masculinity is in effect quite reductive since neither Joe nor David has the same potential as the Surfacer to move outside its’ frameworks. This is my point of critique. Atwood seems to be able to imagine cracks in the oppressive structures that allow the Surfacer to partly escape the emphasized femininity, but the two men are so ingrained in it that there is not even an inkling to a possible reshaping of male-female relationships. In other words, Atwood may be right in showing the immensity of the hegemonic culture, but in the end this makes the narrative appear largely deterministic.

Connell appropriately points out: “[a] structure does not mechanically decide how people or groups act. That is the error of social determinism, and it is no more defensible that biological determinism. But a structure of relations certainly defines possibilities and consequences for action” (*Gender* 74). Hegemonic masculinity “is based on practice that permits men’s collective dominance over women to continue .... However, violence and other noxious practices are not always the defining characteristics, since hegemony has numerous configurations” and even more importantly, being a bearer of hegemonic masculinity does not mean that one does not want to be an active part of wanting to change it (Connell and Messerschmidt 840, 853). Neither Joe nor David indicate that this could be the case, and Atwood’s conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity does not “acknowledge the possibility of democratizing gender relations” but rather reproduces hierarchy (853). It is as if all the male characters in the novel more or less serve one function and one function only, to be oppressive, patriarchal tropes with singular functions in the narrative. That certainly facilitates the Surfacer’s journey; it is true that she goes through a positive change which certainly signifies the desire to abolish power differentials between men and women, but in order to truly achieve that Atwood would have had to attempt to
represent “a version of masculinity open to equality with women” which would have made it possible “to define a hegemonic masculinity that is thoroughly ‘positive’” (853). However, as I have demonstrated with the above examples, she does not.

The lack of another and more positive form of masculinity makes the ending of the novel somewhat wistful. Even though the protagonist returns with a determination to refuse victimhood and shows “signs of empowerment resulting from her spiritual journey” (Özdemir 76) her future with Joe does not come off as prosperous since he has not gone through the same turn as she has. In fact, his position seems to have remained static throughout the novel, together with the other male characters, and the Surfacer seems to be aware of this: “For us it’s necessary, the intercession of words; and we will probably fail, sooner or later, more or less painfully” (Atwood 198). However, the fact that he does seem to have some kind of inner struggle, and that he does not completely enact the hegemonic masculinity, shows a potential for possible change within him: “For him truth might still be possible” (160). Whether or not he will manage a reform towards a positive hegemony is never resolved. It is however difficult to argue for his possible change when all examples suggest that he believes what will preserve him is strengthening his position to the hegemonic masculinity.

It can consequently be concluded that *Surfacing* depicts a very typically patriarchal society that valorizes a certain type of masculinity and puts certain expectations on both women and men. The patriarchal structure does seem to be rather deterministic in that it decides how men and women are supposed to act and position themselves against each other. In what follows I will make a more comprehensive analysis of the sexual division of labor in order to see how embedded the characters are in traditional gender roles and argue that it too affects their perception of themselves and their sense of identity.

**Sexual Division of Labor**

The default position of any feminist theory, as Johnson notes, is that a patriarchal society is male-dominated, male-identified, male-centered, organized around an obsession with control, and involves the oppression of women. The previous section

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10 I am here referring to ‘sexual division’ in the same sense as Judith Butler who does not make a distinction between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ since sexed bodies cannot signify without gender (Butler 6). I had the alternative to call it simply “Division of Labor” but I wanted to keep it in the same vein as Connell does in *Short Introductions Gender*. 
argued for this position and showed that there is a hegemonic masculinity in the novel that not only allows for men’s dominance, but also affects their identity in terms of both discursive and nondiscursive practices. In the discussion of nondiscursive acts I briefly noted how certain expectations are put on men and women in how they should behave. I will here delve further into a discussion of how the characters most often fall into their default positions in regard to work. I will argue that Atwood’s characters follow typical divisions of labor, which is left more or less unchallenged and therefore seems to betray a certain sense of social determinism in the narrative.

The Women’s Liberations movement from the 1960s made the point that the personal is political and in order to see that men have the most of the power and influence in Surfacing one needs to look at different dimensions of the characters’ personal relationships. Raewyn Connell argues that there is a gender politics in our most intimate relationships and decisions. Struggles here are not susceptible to seeping gestures; the complexities are many, the price of change can be high, and sometimes one just wants to forget it. But this intimate politics always underlies the more public politics and cannot be abandoned. (Gender 137)

In other words, all the seemingly small things in our day to day lives say something about our society as a whole because some “issues about power and inequality are mundane, such as who does the dishes, who puts out the garbage and who writes the shopping list” (135). As previously noted, gender relations are not always constituted actively, but also through unreflective routinized acts. Thus, one can further see how society is essentially male-dominated by looking at how it regulates who is recruited to do what work (72).

Indeed, the sexual division of labor is one of the first structures of gender, which was recognized in social science and still remains at the center of discussions of gender today. Issues of power and inequality are certainly mundane, and in Surfacing the gender arrangements are quite clear, especially in regard to the division of labor. When the party of four first arrive at the cabin, David quickly drops “his packsack on the floor, unfold[s] himself along the sofa, ‘Christ, am I wiped,’ he says. ‘Somebody break me out a beer.’ Anna brings him one and he pats her on the rear and says ‘That’s what I like, service’” (Atwood 32). The Surfacer goes ahead and starts cooking “the hamburgers and we eat and I wash the dishes in the chipped dishpan, Anna drying; then it’s almost dark. I lift the bedding out from the wall bench and make up our bed. Anna can do theirs” (34). This description very much reinforces the stereotypical idea, as Connell notes, that “in many situations, certain tasks are
performed by men and others are performed by women”, and that “domestic life is defined as a woman’s world (regardless of the presence of men in it)” (Gender 79). Atwood’s four characters have all travelled the same long distance and one could argue that they are all equally exhausted from their travel, yet it is appropriate for David to just drop his packsack on the floor and unfold himself on the sofa and inexplicably “order” someone to fetch him a beer. It is also clear that when David asks of someone to break him out a beer, he is not referring to Joe. Typically, Anna brings him one and she is rewarded with a somewhat sexual gesture by being patted on her rear end. David’s remark that her giving him service is exactly what he likes positively reinforces her behavior. The two women continue doing the housework, while the men, presumably, just sit around. The Surfacer cooks and does the dishes and Anna dries them. Then they make the beds, while David has already fallen asleep on the sofa (Atwood 34).

One might argue that no one is explicitly asking or ordering the women to do the housework, but that they choose to do it. However the fact that they choose to do it without objection – and especially the fact that none of the men do it even though they are present – clearly shows and defines what is normative and expected. The two women seem to assume their default roles without reflection. The men never offer to help and the women never complain. However, the Surfacer does comment in passing on the dubious normality of the division of labor later in the novel when saying, “I washed and Anna dried, as usual” (98). This may be one of the only instances in the novel with some kind of discontent towards the arranged roles. Most often she refrains from commenting on what happens, but this minor comment at least alludes to some form of reflection about the normality of the women always doing the dishes. It makes the minor comment all the more important, since the narrator wants to point to the fact that this arrangement is “usual” and make it worthy of reflection. However, except for this one instance the arrangement seems to be more or less unquestioned with not many cracks in the system. It is also apparent that the women’s work around the cabin is not considered much in the way of work at all, since the gratitude they get from the male characters – mainly David – most often involves some kind of sexual advance. For instance, when the Surfacer “got up and started to collect the plates”, David said, “It turns me on when she bends over … She’s got a nice ass” (89-90). These kinds of remarks should not be considered as acts of gratitude, since the previous section showed that David is rather attempting to act masculine by asserting his dominance over women. The sexist remarks are frequent throughout the novel,
regardless of the situation; in other words, they do not always follow instances where David has been serviced and is showing appreciation. Hence, the men do not take much note of what the women do, and since being service-minded is regarded more of a feminine quality, it does not cross their mind to offer their help.

Instead of doing any of the housework Joe and David get to do more of the physical labor around the cabin, which is more in line with the hegemonic masculinity they exemplify. When David notices that the firewood is starting to run out he offers to be useful: “I see your woodpile’s gettin’ low. You could use a handyman” (77). The fact that he claims she could use a handyman is especially noteworthy, as it emphasizes that the physical labor involved in chopping wood is something reserved for men but needed by women. Joe grabs a small hatchet and joins him in the same way Anna joins the Surfacer in the housework, by default. While they are away the Surfacer takes the opportunity “to weed the garden, another job that had to be done ... Anna could tell she was expected to help” (77). The gender arrangement is normative to such extent that neither Anna nor Joe even considers the opposite arrangement. They both feel compelled to help and it is obvious to them where their assistance is expected.

Not only is there a division of labor, but David belittles female work: “‘You’ve hardly done anything,’ David said, unquenchable, ‘you call that a garden?’” (80). Men’s own work, however, calls for special attention, as David wants to be filmed with the freshly chopped log, “one foot on it as if it was a lion or a rhinoceros” (81). Obviously, Atwood here mocks the image of the stereotype of man-as-hunter, man-as-provider. The satirical tone here serves to highlight gender specific division of labor and make fun of it, but there is not more to it than mockery. Satire itself serves to fix the male tropes. In the same scene, there is an argument about who is going to work the camera. Joe claims that the women “couldn’t work the camera. David said all you did was press a button, an idiot could do it” (80). Worried that the women could potentially wreck the camera, Joe and David decide to take turns filming each other with the log. This is especially interesting if compared to the first instance in the novel where the camera is used: “Joe is doing the camera work, he’s never done it before” (6). In other words, Joe has had just as much experience with working a camera as the two women have but since he is a man no one questions his competence. This is obviously related to the hegemonic masculinity of what to be. Men are supposed to not only be physical and strong, but also self-assured and competent. Whether they have the experience or not it is important for them to appear
as if they know what they are doing. This is also evident when Joe is the one steering the canoe even though he clearly does not know what he is doing. Women are regarded as less competent than men when it comes to physical and technical skill, but they are better at fiddly work. It also remains somewhat unclear whether or not David considers the two women to be less competent or more competent than an “idiot” when he remarks that even an idiot could work the camera.

Handling different tools is clearly reserved for men. But not any tools. Tools themselves are gendered and some that either require strength or technical skill are male. This is also evident during the party’s first search for the Surfacer’s father, where David gets to handle the machete and Joe the hatchet (43). David also dislikes receiving criticism for how he does something, which is made clear when Anna questions his hiding place for the pot and he simply replies “Up your ass ... that’s where they’d look first, they grab a good thing when they see one. Don’t worry, baby, I know what I’m doing” (35). David undermines Anna as she is somewhat infantilized by being referred to as “baby” and someone who should not worry about a thing since her man knows what he is doing. As Johnson noted, men do not appreciate criticism from women as it puts into question their manhood (57). Further, David is once again quick with the sexual remarks, which in this case is a way for him to assert his masculinity after it has just been questioned. Atwood demonstrates that this behavior is indisputably not a question of competence, but rather one of gender. In a male dominated society men are considered more competent than women, and they deserve more credit for their work than women do.

That men are considered more competent than women is established quite early in the novel, not only when it comes to handling different tools, but when it comes to most tasks in general, unless it is housework. This is especially evident in the Surfacer’s first meeting with Paul: “‘Your husband here too?’ he asks irrelevantly .... What he means is that a man should be handling this” (Atwood 19). The Surfacer is back in her childhood town in order to find her missing father, but it is quickly made clear that no one thinks that she is really capable of handling this task because she is a woman. Paul not only asks whether she has a man with her who can really handle the task, but he also dismisses her mission completely because he has looked himself “three times already” (20), and if he cannot find her father she certainly cannot. Other than remarking that Paul’s question is irrelevant, the Surfacer does not put much judgment into Paul’s rather sexist conception that a man should be handling this, but is instead calmed by the fact that Joe will do as a stand-in and that
she is safe because she is wearing a wedding ring which will maintain the illusion that everything is in order (19). However, this is also one of the few instances where the narrator alludes to some form of discontent to how male centered the society depicted is and towards what she is deemed capable of. She is not shown to be deeply offended or much bothered by Paul’s notion that she is not capable of handling the situation because she is a woman, but she does note that his entire notion is irrelevant. Nonetheless, this is once again only a very minor comment that only points to some minor tension. The Surfacer is after all calmed by the fact that she does have a man by her side who can reassure Paul.

The sexual division of labor in the world of Surfacing is made quite obvious, but other than the minor comments it is not regarded as a problem or depicted as any real form of struggle. The gender relationships are well defined but the protagonist rarely reflects or comments on what she sees. I find Atwood’s neatly divided labor between men and women problematic. Since there is a failure in the female characters to voice much discontent towards this division, one can argue that the gender arrangement in Surfacing is quite stereotypical. Both men and women fall too easily into their clichéd gender roles to the point that they begin to appear as functional, that is, as vehicles for a feminist critique of certain social structures. A structure does not mechanically decide how people act, yet the division of labor is so conveniently expected that the characters do come off as tropes of what is female and what is male. The question is whether Atwood’s narrative merely serves the function of showing the state of affairs, or does it have a greater mandate to crack open such structures and show possibility of change?

Since the novel is written in a homodiegetic narrative, which makes the Surfacer, as Seymour Chatman noted, the “filter” which the fictional world passes through, she could have shown more, if not a bias, at least discontent towards the stereotypical division of labor or lack of help from Joe and David (Fludernik 105). The only discontent that the narrator does express towards her typically assigned labor is only vaguely present in comments such as her and Anna doing the dishes “as usual” and noting that Paul’s question is “irrelevant.” Given that the story is focalized from the Surfacer’s point of view and, according to Mieke Bal, “the subjective nature of storytelling is inevitable” because “one’s position with respect to the perceived object, the fall of the light, the distance, previous knowledge, psychological attitude towards the object; all this and more effects the picture one forms and passes on to others” (145) one could have expected her to be less appeasing in regard to the status quo.
One might have expected more criticism, especially since she is the quintessential rebel in regard to her traditional role (if not towards having to do all of the housework and the lack of help and gratitude from the men, at least towards David’s fairly sexist remarks). By not condemning the behavior, one can argue that the Surfacer finds it acceptable. At the same time, it is very important to note that if all the characters appear stereotypical to the reader, it is because the narrator sees them as such. The structure is so stereotypical it takes a rather satirical tone sometimes which serves to highlight gender specific division of labor and even make fun of it. However, reproducing a cliché by making fun of it and then never offering any potential of resolving it does not make the depiction of the characters more positive, as they are still essentially gender specific tropes.

If the purpose of Atwood’s novel is, as Özdemir argues, to depict a more positive identity for women one would have expected her to make her protagonist more critical towards the current gender arrangements in the novel. Perhaps the purpose is to show that it is normative to such extent that the Surfacer does not reflect upon it. For this reason, the point that men and women have their default roles that are taken as a matter of course is driven even harder. The reader is following a consciousness that sees the world in exactly that way, and any objection, any rebellion, is under the surface of this worldview. Consequently, issues about power and inequality in relation to the sexual division of labor are not fully confronted. The issues are clearly present, but due to the Surfacer’s lack of engagement (verbal or physical) they are not really portrayed as issues. A reader less aware of gender trouble as such would be able to read the story as a matter-of-course piece on men and women.

The only instance in the novel where the Surfacer actually does act out is when she notably destroys the camera (170) after David has forced Anna to be filmed while undressing (137). As mentioned earlier, the camera becomes the ultimate symbol for male dominance over women when David forces Anna to strip on camera, but another interesting aspect to point out is that the camera also symbolizes something which the women were not allowed to touch, so the Surfacer demonstratively destroys it. That remains one of the most prominent examples of when the Surfacer actually rebels against the current gender arrangements. Joe’s concern that the women will wreck the camera is met, but not due to their incompetence. It is an assertion of agency that one otherwise finds lacking in the female characters. Nonetheless, her act is more of an act of rebellion towards male
dominance as a whole, rather than the sexual division of labor. The fact remains that the division of labor in *Surfacing* very much reinforces the typical structures between the sexes, to a degree of social determinism. As a critique of the sexual division of labor, the novel leaves more to be desired. The male characters come across as stereotypical tropes with little to no diversity. If the previous section of this paper demonstrated that men are supposed to be certain things and women others, this section has demonstrated that those models for masculinity and femininity also decide what men and women do.

Even if the division of labor leaves for more to be desired, the tension between the sexes is more apparent when looking at their relation to the Symbolic. In the final section of this paper I will look further into that tension and show that the Surfacer’s sense of positive female identity is achieved by temporarily leaving the Symbolic behind. I will discuss whether the male characters are given the same potential.

The Symbolic

That language plays a part in how one’s identity is formed has certainly been established in this paper. The way characters talk and categorize people affects their sense of identity and language becomes a tool for dividing people. For instance, referring back to David’s claim that the Surfacer is in need of a “handyman” it is interesting to note the way in which the word “handyman” naturally excludes women. It is clear in the novel that gender is something that is also going on at the symbolic level in the *language* they use. According to Connell,

> All social practice involves interpreting the world ... nothing human is ‘outside’ discourse. Society is unavoidably a world of meanings. At the same time, meanings bear the traces of the social processes by which they were made. Cultural systems bear particular social interests, and grow out of historically specific ways of life.

> This point applies to gender meanings. Whenever we speak of ‘a woman’ or ‘a man’, we call into play a tremendous system of understandings, implications, overtones and allusions that have accumulated through our cultural history. (Connell 83)

When one speaks of “a handyman” it is understood that the handy (hu)man cannot be a woman. “Man” here refers to gender, not mankind. There is no such thing as a handywoman, which clearly demonstrates that language in itself is male-centered. This is further emphasized when the Surfacer explains her relationship with Anna, since she is quick to point out that Anna is “my best friend, my best woman friend” (Atwood 6). Saying that Anna is her best friend would be sufficient since it is already
evident that Anna is a woman, yet it is important for the Surfacer to explicitly state that she is her best “woman friend”. This suggests that the Symbolic is male-centered to such degree that there are “friends” and there are “woman friends.” Anna is clearly set aside from the men, who the Surfacer does not assign gender to when she describes her relation to them. The Symbolic is undeniably more than language, however, in the context of this paper I have decided to focus on language as an aspect of the Symbolic. When I refer to the Symbolic in this paper I am talking exclusively about language.

It is evident in these examples that the Symbolic realm further deals with notions of masculinity and femininity, since it appears that language in itself is a masculine sphere. In this section, I will look at the use of language as the realm of the Symbolic in the novel to show that my complaint from the previous section that the narrator does not even express discontent may have to be reinterpreted with regards to power structures within language itself. In fact, she seems to have a very strenuous relationship with the Symbolic and as Özdemir puts it, her attempt seems to imply:

an obliteration of the divisions of subject and object, of mind and body, of self and other threatening the logic of identity upon which the Symbolic order of language and culture is based. Hence by intuitively and discursively becoming nature, or the body ['a place'], the protagonist steps momentarily outside the Symbolic. Yet soon she realizes that she must regain her separate identity, and finally acknowledges that she must re-enter the Symbolic. (Özdemir 75)

Following Özdemir, I will here look at how exactly she attempts to step outside of the Symbolic in order to escape a sphere that is overwhelmingly masculine and therefore always puts her in a lower position of power. Furthermore, I will take a look at Joe and David’s relationship with the Symbolic and show that they can too be seen struggling with language, yet are not offered the same potential to step outside it and move towards a more positive identity.

In terms of language as the Symbolic, critics such as Connell, have drawn inspiration from Jacques Lacan’s “analysis of the phallus as a master-symbol [which] gave rise to an interpretation of language as ‘phallocentric’, a system in which the place of authority, the privileged subjectivity, is always that of the masculine” (Gender 84). That is, the “potentially infinite play of meaning in language is fixed by the phallic point of reference” (84). Just as in other dimensions of gender “[g]ender symbolism is constantly involved in social struggle” (85). As the previous discussion of discursive practice that constructs hegemonic masculinity established, power works in discourse. The Symbolic is certainly a sphere of male dominance; even so I have
shown that Joe and David both struggle to assert that dominance. Being male does not necessarily mean that one enacts a hegemonic masculinity, and in what follows I will argue that albeit the Symbolic is a masculine sphere that further promotes male dominance, it is not only the female characters that can be seen struggling in relation to it and whose identity is affected by a society that valorizes masculinity over femininity.

That language can be seen as phallocentric is certainly a valid claim in regard to *Surfacing* as the Surfacer frequently voices her own struggle with language. She has a sense that it is not hers, that she cannot express her agency through it because it is always already putting her in a lower position of power:

‘Do you love me, that’s all,’ he said. ‘That’s the only thing that matters.’

It was the language again, I couldn’t use it because it wasn’t mine. He must’ve known what he meant but it was an imprecise word ... I did want to, but it was like thinking God should exist and not being able to believe. (Atwood 107)

She cannot relate to the word “love” because she believes that it only has a meaning in a language that does not belong to her. If, as Özdemir argues, in a male-dominated society “women, as well as men, are ‘masculine’ in so far as they enter the Symbolic realm” (72), the Surfacer is in constant struggle with the Symbolic realm. She does not only feel like language is something that does not belong to her, it is also something she cannot trust because it is imprecise, and its’ meaning is ambiguous. Her distrust towards words and their meanings is a recurring theme throughout the novel, even when it comes to words that usually have a positive connotation such as “love.” This distrust stems from previous experience, since her former lover used the word in order to put her into a false sense of security and control her: “the magic word, it was supposed to make everything light up, I’ll never trust that word again” (Atwood 44). Joe’s use of the word now makes her wary because she does not understand what he means, just like she did not understand her former lover. The word’s meaning is thus fixed by the phallic point of reference.

Although the Surfacer is distrustful of language, it is evident that she understands the necessity of using it in order to survive in society. In fact, her narrative itself is in a sense an attempt to appropriate a certain masculine language. While she may not always succeed, the narrative itself betrays her particular struggle. Language in this novel forms culture and divides it. When talking about the men who killed the heron, the Surfacer states: “It doesn’t matter what country they’re from, my
head said, they’re still Americans ... If you look like them and talk like them and think like them then you are them, I was saying, you speak their language, a language is everything you do” (130). This is in line with the notion that women too are masculine in so far as they enter the Symbolic, since it is a masculine sphere and they are forced to speak masculine language. Language is a set of rules, and if one follows them one cannot declare independence from it. Consequently, if you do not speak the language, isolation is inevitable, which is evident from the Surfacer’s own family’s relationship with the locals. Being English-only speakers in a bilingual French-English community somewhat alienated the family. This can be seen in the Surfacer’s first conversation with a local, where she attempts to speak French but fails:

She grins then and the two men grin also, not at me but at each other. I see I’ve made a mistake .... I’ve been so easily discovered, they’re making fun of me and I have no way of letting them know I share the joke. Also I agree with them, if you live in a place you should speak the language. But this isn’t where I live. (22)

While this is clearly not a matter of gendered language, it does demonstrate how language both includes and excludes. In a similar fashion the Surfacer comments on how their family not attending mass is probably ”why [the locals] didn’t waste any sweat searching for my father ... Les maudits anglaise, the damned English, they mean it; they’re sure we’re all damned literally” (53). The Surfacer acknowledges that in order to be part of a culture one needs to speak the language, but she is also obviously uncomfortable with it. Language does not only separate people from different cultures and nations, but words themselves separate and exclude: “I’m not against the body or the head either: only the neck, which creates the illusion that they are separate. The language is wrong, it shouldn’t have different words for them” (75).

Referring back to ecofeminism, the body here refers to the feminine and the head to the masculine and the Surfacer here seems to be talking about how language is wrong because it separates them and treats them as two very defined, contradictory and dualistic worlds. It is “basically a symbolic division that precludes any absolute attribution of the characteristics of either gender to the corresponding sex” (Özdemir 60), but it is wrong for doing so because “there are no such things as ‘men’ and ‘women’ in any theoretically pure sense; as split subjects we all have elements of both” (72). With the discussion about compliant masculinities in mind this is certainly valid, since Joe clearly seems to possess both masculine and feminine elements. It is language that divides and categorizes, forces the feminine and masculine to appear to be something separate and concrete. The protagonist realizes that she can never be
complete and find a strong sense of identity as long as she is part of the masculine symbolic realm and she asserts that “[l]anguage divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole” (Atwood 147). This suggests that only by stepping outside of language, into a new kind of Symbolic, the Surfacer will find a sense of “wholeness.”

Accordingly, Özdemir suggests that only with “a total rejection of the masculinist culture” can she fulfill her desire to be “whole” and “change from a sense of negative femininity tied to powerlessness” (73). This masculinist culture obviously refers to more that just language, but the Symbolic seems to be one of the spheres in which a lot of power over women operates. In order to escape that and refuse to be a victim the novel takes quite a separatist feminist notion as the Surfacer needs to find an alternative symbolic structure. In what follows I will show how she manages to do that, and thus creates a positive female identity for herself. Then I will show how the same does not seem to be true for the male characters.

Felski points out that the “defining feature of the feminist text is ... an attempt to develop an alternative narrative and symbolic framework within which female identity can be located” (qtd. in Özdemir 76). This desire is certainly evident within the Surfacer, as she wishes to “immerse [herself] in the other language” (Atwood 159). This can especially be seen when she is contrasting the first meaning she had of some old pictures she has found with how she now needs to read “their new meaning with the help of the [new] power” (159). That this power lies within what is considered to be a more feminine symbolic realm is stressed in that she believes that she will obtain it with the help of pictographs that her mother has left behind for her as her guides (159). The former way of meaning came from her father, and its’ “intercession wasn’t enough to protect [her], it gave only knowledge and there were more gods than his, his were the gods of the head, antlers rooted in the brain. Not only how to see but how to act” (154). In other words, she was immersed in the masculine sphere (the head), and, as has been shown frequently in this paper, she cannot be protected from male domination as long as she is part of that former structure. It shapes everything we are: how we see and position ourselves to ideals such as hegemonic masculinity, and how we act such as the division of labor. In order to escape this she first needs to find the new meaning, which she believes is the legacy from her mother (the body) as opposed to her father. However, as previously noted the Surfacer wishes to obliterate the division of mind and body, erase the neck, and in order to do so she first needs to have been completely immersed in both: “It would be right for my mother to have left something for me also, a legacy. His was
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complicated, tangled, but hers would be simple as a hand, it would be final. I was not completed yet; there had to be a gift from each of them” (150). By uniting the two legacies, she will finally erase the notion that they are separate and be able to locate a female identity within a masculine sphere, because as I will show it is essentially impossible to forever reject the Symbolic.

As Connell argues in regard to Lacan’s notion that language is phallocentric, “culture itself embodies the ‘law of the father’” (Gender 84) and in Surfacing it is clearly the case that it is men who hold the most power and influence in regard to culture and language. It is also evident that it is something that they enforce onto women, as can be seen when the Surfacer notes that her ex-husband is “writing his own initials on a fence, graceful scrolls to show [her] how, lettering was one of the things he taught” (Atwood 44). Odenmo comments on the passage and claims the ex-husband “would, just like a teacher educating a pupil, teach her lettering, the very basics of written language ... she, an adult woman, needed him to educate her in something so basic” (7). Nonetheless, it is interesting that the Surfacer also states that it was first their mother who taught her and her bother to read and write (Atwood 104). This suggests that even though she believes that her mother will guide her towards a new meaning, her mother participated in the building of the structures she now finds herself trapped in, which relates back to complicity among women. With that in mind, it becomes even more absurd that her ex-husband is teaching her lettering, since her mother already has, which suggests that he did not consider what she already knew to be good enough. This refers back to the notion that men are more competent than women, and that women are inferior in the symbolic realm. However, the passage also demonstrates that even if her mother represents a feminine legacy that the Surfacer wishes to attain, her mother is still a part of the masculine sphere, perhaps alluding towards a form of union rather than partition.

Either way, the Surfacer wishes to leave her old teachings behind – leave the law of the father – and find a way to immerse herself in “the other language.” Özdemir notes that this new language is “a way of being outside the Symbolic – a preconscious, mythical awareness that will endow her with archetypal knowledge of the feminine principle” (74). Since the Symbolic is essentially man-made, the solution to get to the other language is to reject everything man-made. She figures that the best way of doing this is to isolate herself in the woods, and only then will she become “a natural woman, state of nature” (Atwood 196). Since she is looking for her mother’s legacy, it is noteworthy that her mother is also closely tied to nature. For example, her
mother was the only one who was able to feed the jays by the cabin from her hands; they trusted her (93). As her mother is on her deathbed the Surfacer even likens her to a bird “skin tight over her beak nose, hands on the sheet curled like bird claws clinging to a perch” (18). In other words, similarly to how the masculine and feminine is contrasted through the novel, so is culture and nature. The Surfacer believes that masculinist culture has made people impostors because they are no longer their “true” or natural selves, which entails acceptance that individuals naturally have elements of both. Through the Symbolic one diminishes oneself, because language divides and categorizes; it suppresses the feminine. This is why the Surfacer wants to leave it behind, since it ultimately means no longer being a victim of male domination and shattering the illusion that the masculine and feminine is separate.

According to Meera T. Clark “Atwood displays a profound distrust of language as a means of communication between people, proposing, instead, a non-verbal or meta-language as infinitely superior” (3). In Lacanian terms this non-verbal/meta-language “represents the pre-Oedipal state before the intervention of the law of the father, or entry into language, which disrupts the dyadic unity between the child and her/his mother” (Özdemir 74). Furthermore, this “turn implies a radical return to the mother’s body, or nature” (74). When the Surfacer decides to escape into nature, she enters this pre-Oedipal state which has not yet been influenced by masculine language. She emphasizes the notion that this new (feminine) Symbolic realm does not have words. Words have so often been used as power over her, but here “there are no nouns, only verbs held for a longer moment. The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word? I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning” (Atwood 187). There is no need for words because this natural state of being is the greater symbolic achievement, beyond the concrete. Even she herself “no longer ha[s] a name” (173). A name that, in a sense, was an identity within a masculine sphere that marginalized her. However, it is notable that the Surfacer’s name has never been mentioned before she abolishes it either, which could be seen as Atwood emphasizing the Surfacer’s earlier lack of a female identity within the Symbolic.

Even if the Surfacer seems somewhat content within this new sphere, she does however realize that she needs to return in order to regain her own separate identity. Culture and language cannot be entirely abandoned. By entering into “a state of mystical communion with nature” (Özdemir 75) the Surfacer is able to be in touch with an earlier devalued and suppressed femininity. However, she realizes that “withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death” (Atwood 197) since
the new sphere essentially alienates her from the society in which she attempts to define her own identity. This can especially be seen when she overhears her search party and fails to understand anything they are saying: “They are talking, their voices are distinct but they penetrate my ears as sounds only, foreign radio. It must be either English or French but I can’t recognize it as any language I’ve ever heard or known” (190). Her return is inevitable and Özdemir thus concludes that:

The novel recovers no symbolism or new language informing and enriching the present, no sense of continuity with the mythological roots of the past, no lasting intuition from the momentary healing of the division between self and nature ... nature and culture, she finds, are permanently opposed. (76)

The problem here is that Özdemir underestimates the change that the protagonist has gone through, and the way that she has finally surfaced with a strong sense of self as she returns. Atwood’s narrative does not allow her protagonist to permanently leave the masculine sphere, or enforce a new (feminine) language on it, but rather find a way where the Surfacer can be in touch with both. When the protagonist leaves the law of the father, it is not for the law of the mother, but rather to unite the two by having been immersed in both. When she finally completes her “spiritual journey” within the new sphere she sees “the ghosts of her mother and father … and leaves the realm of myth” (75), which is what she was determined to do – attain a gift from each of them, which the two ghosts symbolize. Finally, she has received a legacy from each of them and she returns hopeful to the old Symbolic sphere, since she now feels like she is completed. Nature and culture, the feminine and the masculine, are still opposed, but in a sense they are united within her. She can “refuse to be a victim” within the Symbolic since the “word games, the winning and losing games are finished” (Atwood 197). When the Surfacer was first a part of the Symbolic she stated that she “was seeing poorly, translating badly, a dialect problem, I should have used my own” (76), but as she later returns this is evidently no longer a problem of hers. She now feels like even though she has returned she now knows about the other language and it is still a part of her: “They were here though, I trust that. I saw them and they spoke to me, in the other language” (194). In other words, the Surfacer does in fact seem to believe that she has recovered a new language, which enriches her existence in the old. Thus Atwood has been able to create a positive identity for a woman with a strong sense of self – one that no longer has “the old belief that [she] is powerless” (197) – in a society where the feminine is devalued and women are marginal to the hegemonic culture. Her sense of positive identity stems from her
realizing that there can be forms of masculinity that do not involve oppression of women, that is, one that does not devalue the feminine. This is reminiscent of the idea that the hegemonic masculinity could be reformed towards a type of masculinity that promotes equality with women. This is why she effectively goes back to Joe, since he is the only one she knows who most expresses this kind of man.

However, she realizes that he is not at the level of awareness that she is and for “the moment there are no others [like her] but they will have to be invented” (197). That is also why she has so much hope for her future child, because it might be a new kind of being where the masculine and feminine is not separate, it “might be the first one, the first true human; it must be born, allowed” (198). That is, it might be the first human embedded within a new Symbolic realm that valorizes neither masculinity nor femininity. This possibility in the Surfacer’s narrative, however, remains just a hint, or wishful thinking. Nothing concrete happens, not even in terms of an imaginative rethinking of such a possibility. Atwood does seem to create some form of positive identity for a woman in Surfacing but consistently fails to reimagine masculinity, especially in relation to the Symbolic. As noted before, Surfacing is written in a homodiegetic narrative and the view is thus restricted to that of the protagonist. The Surfacer does however comment on Joe and David’s relationship to language, and I will look into their respective relationship to the Symbolic in order to show how it fails to be reimagined.

David does seem to be a rather static character throughout the novel, and Atwood does not put much effort into making him all too complex. Nonetheless, there is quite an important passage in the book where he interacts with the Surfacer, which is one of the few instances where the narrator comments on men’s relationship with the Symbolic. That is, after the Surfacer has rejected his sexual advances:

“You,” he said, searching for words, not controlled anymore, “tight-ass bitch.”

The power flowed into my eyes, I could see into him, he was an impostor, a pastiche, layers of political handbills, pages from magazines, affiches, verbs and nouns glued on to him and shredding away, the original surface littered with fragments and tatters ... 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 ... He was infested, garbled, I couldn’t help him: It would take such time to heal, unearth him, scrape down to where he was true. (153)

David is obviously a man, but the Surfacer suggests that even men do not know their own language. Just like she, he has forgotten his own and he has to copy words he has learned in the Symbolic realm in order to speak. In other words, even though the
Symbolic can be used as a tool for male domination not all men are successful. In fact, men may feel it even more incumbent on them to re-enact the Symbolic through language. Just like women are forced to be a part of the masculine sphere, even though it is a structure to which they are marginal, so are men forced to be a part of it. Being a man in patriarchy means acting masculine, and as has been shown previously men and women both are forced to position themselves to models of how they should be. The Surfacer herself shows an awareness of this: “it wasn’t the men I hated, it was the Americans, the human beings, men and women both” (155). As Americans do seem to represent a negative structure that is enforcing itself over everything the Surfacer values, including nature, they do seem to be a symbol for patriarchy. This is emphasized when David is referred to nothing but a second hand American, as he attempts to shame the Surfacer for not being sexually compliant in a society where women are supposed to be. In other words, David is attempting to use the Symbolic to his advantage but the Surfacer sees through him and realizes that his identity is just as “incomplete” as she is, especially in relation to language. He is not being his “true” self, but rather an (masculine) act. Men might have fashioned the world to be masculine but clearly not all men are able to always use it to their advantage. The Surfacer notes that they are not “whole” because they are forced to always act masculine, renouncing femininity. The Symbolic has made David garbled, deformed and beyond her help. For him to truly surface it would take even more effort than it does for the protagonist. He would have to give up all forms of power granted through the structures already in place.

Joe displays a similar struggle with the Symbolic:

Joe followed me out and watched as I spread the crumbs. He put his fingers on my arm, frowning at me, which may have meant he wanted to talk to me: speech to him was a task, a battle, words mustered behind his beard and issued one at a time, heavy and square like tanks. (77)

Like the Surfacer, Joe seems to find speech somewhat foreign. It is something he has to do, a task, but each time is a battle as he struggles to find the right words. Often he merely makes a gesture instead of communicating with words, like twitching or grunting (92). His struggle is more apparent than David’s who is more depicted as an impostor not using his own language. Joe, on the other hand, struggles to find any words at all, and he is visibly uncomfortable with the Symbolic that seems to be operative in the language they are all using or supposed to use. Very much like he struggles to enact the hegemonic masculinity in the novel, he struggles to
communicate within the masculine sphere. Since he is not successful in using the Symbolic as a means to assert his male dominance, the Surfacer finds him less threatening and she declares that he might even have the same potential for self awareness as she has achieved: “For him truth might still be possible, what will preserve him is the absence of words” (160). That is also why she feels that it is safe to return to him in the end of the novel, because she can see that “he isn’t an American ... he isn’t anything, he is only half formed, and for that reason [she] can trust him” (198) to not try to influence or control her within the Symbolic.

However, that is rather lenient of her since he has still been shown to have a complicated relationship to the masculine domain and has tried to assert power over her through nondiscursive practice as I analyzed earlier, and by the end of the novel that is not something which has been resolved. As David, Joe remains static throughout the novel and since he clearly positions himself to a hegemonic masculinity that is overwhelmingly negative, I am not sure that, even with the absence of words, he expresses an identity that should be regarded as worth preserving.

Although it is evident that men too struggle with the Symbolic, the novel does not seem to allow the reader to reach any proper solution for how a positive identity for men can be created. The Surfacer manages to create a positive identity for women by leaving the Symbolic behind temporarily, which she could do because the masculine sphere was never truly hers anyway. As Simone de Beauvoir stated in her famous work *The Second Sex*: “[t]he world is masculine on the whole; those who fashioned it ruled it, and still dominate it today, are men” (557). This means that the Symbolic preserves male privilege, and even men who might not enact a strong version of masculine dominance will still receive some of the benefits, especially in relation to women. As in one of my first examples, when the men demand to be served and the women are servile, one could argue that they enjoy their sense of privilege and each gesture is extremely symbolic of sociality as a whole. However, through a number of narrative gestures that I discussed above, Atwood seems to suggest that they are not content. By only being allowed to be masculine they become limited in that realm, and they feel pressure to constantly affirm their manhood. The Surfacer’s strong sense of self comes from her finding a feminine identity within a masculine world, thus contesting the notion that they must be opposed. She describes herself as thus becoming “whole”, whereas Joe remains “half formed” since he fails to resolve any of his issues. It remains unclear whether the male characters can “become whole” as well. Both men are shown to be in some kind of struggle with the Symbolic
realm, but by the end of the novel that struggle has never been resolved. Consequently, Atwood only manages to create a positive identity for women in the novel. Since the male characters remain largely static, one can argue that she fails in emancipating them and thus makes them unable to do anything other than to position themselves in relation to the masculine in a hegemonic culture. This could be taken to mean that the hold of the Symbolic on men is stronger and change practically impossible, at least from the point of view of the Surfacer. Given this understanding, she does not quite ask for an emancipation of men as a part of her surfacing. Given the strong first-person narrative, Atwood may allow the reader to access this particular (albeit representative) consciousness, but in the process she deprives the reader of a possible inlet into male emancipation and its possible significance for female development.

Conclusion

Using the concept of hegemonic masculinity, I have here attempted a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which Atwood manages to create a positive identity for a woman in a society that marginalizes her, but fails to realize or imagine a positive identity for men. My focus on the hegemonic masculinity, as it is depicted in the novel, provides an understanding of why only the protagonist finds a sense of positive identity, whereas the male characters remain static in their rather negative function as representatives of hegemonic structures.

To begin with, I have tried to show how hegemonic masculinity can be understood as the pattern of practice that explains the ongoing power structures that allow for male dominance over women. It is clear that the novel deals with many dimensions of gender, but I have specifically looked at the sexual division of labor, as well as men and women’s relation to the Symbolic in order to further demonstrate that the male representation lacks any potential for emancipation as opposed to the Surfacer. Atwood depicts a very typically patriarchal society that puts certain expectations on both women and men. These hegemonic structures produce somewhat default behaviors. The characters seem to have a clear perception of what “normal” is in terms of gender roles, and anyone who diverges is perceived as alien.

Departing from the critical focus on the female character, I have tried to understand the image that the male characters have of how to essentially be a “real man”, that is, a model for how they should be as individuals, but also in relation to
women. By looking at how the characters interact in *Surfacing* I have identified that Atwood’s depiction of the hegemonic masculinity has to do with dominance, decisiveness, physicality, strength, self-assuredness etc. It was equally important to look at the practices of women, as the construction of gender is always relational. Atwood shows that certain models of femininity can be seen as being complicit in patriarchy, which is especially true in regard to Anna who is a woman who does not manage to achieve the same positive change as the Surfacer but rather demonstrates the kind of heterosexual female who is clearly subordinate in her relationship that the Surfacer regards as negative. The type of emphasized femininity in the novel has to do with being subordinate to men, nurturing, being service-minded and concerned with personal looks. The model for femininity is clearly more affected by men’s image of how a woman should be than the hegemonic masculinity is affected by women’s image of what a man should be.

As a part of the overarching hegemonic structures in the novel, I have analyzed the division of labor to show how for Atwood men and women quickly assume their default roles. Certain tasks are performed by men and others by women. Typically, women’s labor is limited to the domestic sphere, whereas men are assumed to be more competent in physical labor and technical skill. The men are also serviced, while the women do the serving. This arrangement continues throughout the novel, and the characters come off as male and female tropes. It is only the Surfacer who voices a slight vexation towards the rather clichéd gender roles. Atwood seems to want to depict what already is the case in the real world and she does it in a sometimes slightly satirical tone. Nonetheless, given that her protagonist points at an aspiration of what could be, it is rather disappointing that the stereotypical division of labor is left largely unchallenged and unresolved since it reinforces the old gender arrangements.

Even if the division of labor leaves more to be desired, the tension between the sexes is more apparent in their relation to the Symbolic. The division between the masculine and feminine is essentially a symbolic division in *Surfacing*. The Surfacer cannot express her agency through language since the Symbolic is a masculine sphere that reinforces male domination and thus always puts her in a lower position of power. In order to escape male influence over her through language, she immerses herself into “the other language”, meaning the feminine sphere that precedes language. It is strongly associated with nature, a stark contrast to man’s culture, and the Surfacer becomes “whole” only by temporarily rejecting the Symbolic which
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diminishes people by suppressing femininity. However, she understands the necessity of language in order to communicate and understands that one cannot truly abandon culture, which causes her return. Yet she feels whole because she can still feel the presence of “the other language” she gained in the process. She feels as if she has finally gained both a masculine and feminine legacy. Because of that she manages to create a positive identity for a woman by no longer being a victim of male dominance. The male characters too seem to struggle in relation to the Symbolic, but Atwood does not imagine the same potential for change. I have shown that the Symbolic can be understood as having a stronger hold on the male characters. Simply put, the Symbolic is not fashioned to oppress them so there is no incentive to subvert it.

Consequently, Atwood’s male characters remain static throughout the novel and a positive identity is only created for a woman. By still being part of the already established structures, which are essentially depicted as ruling out a sense of a “whole” self, they remain, as the Surfacer notes of Joe, “half formed”. The very patriarchal structures do however highlight the Surfacer’s journey from being a woman in a society that marginalizes her to no longer being a victim of male domination. That Atwood’s other characters are quite typically part of the old structures does however make it come across as rather deterministic. Atwood has indeed asserted that her characters are not role models and that she does not try to resolve problems or deal out answers, but the beginning of the novel sets a false sense of hope and it is regrettable that a larger potential for growth within the other characters is not acknowledged since the reductive images of the male characters hampers the proper surfacing of a positive female identity.
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