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The Narrative Histories of the Female Grotesque in Margaret Atwood's "Hairball" and Colonial Narratives in the Windigo Myth

Margaret Atwood's short story "Hairball," originally published in *The New Yorker* in 1990, exists in the specific narrative tradition of the female grotesque. The story deals with the female body in flux; the titular Hairball is an ovarian cyst filled with hair, bones, teeth, and tissue removed from the body of the protagonist, Kat, who finds this generally unpleasant corporeal function and its connection to her fierce, feminist demeanour lead to her being let go from her job. The subtle body horror at play in the story evokes the narrative history of the female grotesque while simultaneously subverting the tradition's complicated legacy. Atwood also employs non-direct references to the Indigenous myth of the Windigo in "Hairball," which itself has an interesting literary history not dissimilar to that of the female grotesque; both have had a history in writing of being elements used for misogynistic or racist means, but have in certain ways been reclaimed by female and Indigenous authors in more modern works through a reexamination of their histories and repurposing these tropes to take the power away from the oppressor. Both the Windigo myth and the female grotesque also have interesting literary relationships with colonial history, as colonial perspectives and narrative traditions are important in the historically negative connotations of both elements. These big questions of narrative history are explored in three articles that will be examined in this paper: Yael Shapira's "Hairball

Speaks: Margaret Atwood and the Narrative Legacy of the Female Grotesque," which focuses on the literary history of the female grotesque and how Atwood makes use of it in "Hairball," Joe Nazare's "The Horror! The Horror? The Appropriation, and Reclamation, of Native American Mythology," which examines the history of Indigenous myths in colonial writing and the ways in which they are being employed in modern works by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors, and Brady DeSanti's "The Cannibal Talking Head: The Portrayal of the Windigo "Monster" in Popular Culture and Ojibwe Traditions," which focuses specifically on the Windigo and how it is used and portrayed in popular modern works. Through "Hairball," Atwood examines the complex history of the female grotesque and her own story's position in the tradition while employing indirect references to the Windigo of Indigenous mythology to develop the unruly feminine body elements while also calling attention to the comparable literary history between Indigenous myths and the female grotesque and their relationships to colonialism.

The idea of the female grotesque has a long and layered literary history that Atwood reflects upon in "Hairball" and Shapira dives into in "Hairball Speaks." One of the most important elements in the female grotesque tradition is the connection between the metamorphosis of the female body and female transgression. Shapira states that, in literature, "the biological flux of the female body" is directly connected to "legitimiz[ing] the containment or punishment of the transgressive woman" (Shapira, 52). I agree with Shapira as I would argue that this connection is the most important aspect of the female grotesque tradition as it is what connects the changing female body to patriarchal systems and colonialism. The long literary history of the female grotesque can be seen even going back to Shakespeare; Lady Macbeth, one

of the most famous female characters ever, demonstrates this idea. In her legendary "unsex me" soliloquy, Lady Macbeth calls upon spirits to change her body so she can be less feminine and gain the ability to commit atrocious acts for the sake of gaining power. The link here between female transgression and the changing female body is fairly obvious, and Lady Macbeth is, of course, punished seemingly by nature or the will of the world for attempting to challenge the social hierarchy through bodily manipulation. Elements of "Hairball" evoke these aspects of *Macbeth* in interesting ways. Kat is almost like the Lady Macbeth to Gerald's Macbeth; in both cases, she is the one filled with ambition who changes the man for her benefit, though it ultimately leads to her being punished for unruliness and deviance in a patriarchal system. An interesting point mentioned by Shapira that can tie into the narrative similarities between these two works is that "[Kat] not only loses her job when she is recovering, but—the story hints—is exposed as repugnant, anomalous, lacking a "properly" feminine capacity to reproduce" (Shapira, 61). Kat's inability to bear a child evokes Lady Macbeth's plea to take away her reproductive abilities, which is extremely transgressive under a patriarchal system in which the value of a woman is largely based on her maternal abilities. These narrative similarities between a work from the 17th century and a much more modern piece highlights the ways in which Atwood simultaneously plays into the female grotesque tradition while also being a subversive reclamation of the concept. Shapira notes that the ways in which ""Hairball" evokes the traditional narrative paradigm but also revises and challenges it . . . raises some startling questions about the relevance of the female grotesque to the stories told about and by contemporary women" (Shapira, 59). These questions Shapira suggests Atwood is raising involve the extent to which the belief that the world and literature have moved on from punishing

female transgression is true. The relative laxness in Atwood's description of rather unpleasant topics suggests it is true and the female body in flux is natural and undeserving of such scrutiny. An example of this type of description comes when Kat is examining Hairball. It is described that "[t]here were little bones in it too, or fragments of bone; bird bones, the bones of a sparrow crushed by a car. There was a scattering of nails, toe or finger. There were five perfectly formed teeth" (Atwood, 34). The description is extremely matter-of-fact and does not frame the contents of Hairball, which to most would be rather putrid, as anything out of the ordinary. Though the language may suggest the female body has been normalized in modern literature, the trajectory of the narrative may lean in the other direction. It is, after all, Kat's changing body and her defiant nature that leads to her being fired from her position and being replaced by the man she helped build up. This is not Atwood arguing that women do deserve to be punished for their changing bodies and transgressive attitudes; rather, through the discrepancy between what the language suggests and what the narrative suggests, Atwood suggests that the patriarchal system domineering over women's bodies is still present in the narrative history still being written.

In a similar fashion to the history of the female grotesque, Indigenous mythology, specifically the Windigo, has a very interesting and complicated narrative history. I say complicated because the Windigo's narrative history is nearly entirely written from a colonial perspective as opposed to being from Indigenous writers. In this sense, the Windigo acts almost like an appropriated folk tale; there are many different versions of the myth of the Windigo but since these various interpretations come from a colonial writing perspective, the authenticity of the original version has likely been lost over time and has been changed so that a Western audience can more easily consume depictions of the Windigo. In "The Cannibal Talking Head,"

DeSanti notes that pieces of popular culture such as Marvel superhero comics or television shows like *Charmed* and *Supernatural* make it so the "majority of the Windigo's features and characteristics are derived from werewolf imagery" (DeSanti, 192). DeSanti also discusses how this can be traced back to French fur trappers and Ojibwe people sharing stories of the werewolf and the Windigo, respectively (DeSanti, 191). In a more modern context, I would argue that popular works apply werewolf characteristics to the Windigo as a way to familiarize the unfamiliar; Western audiences may find the Windigo easier to understand when compared to the werewolf, but the two are not the same, so elements of the Windigo will be lost when the two legends are combined in such a way. Taking a step back, it is important to understand how the Windigo has been depicted in narrative history to understand its position today. Early writing on the myth clearly shows how colonial narratives influenced Western understanding of the subject. A missionary named Egerton Ryerson Young wrote "Windagoos! Cannibals!" in 1893 in essentially the form of a diary entry. The piece is remarkably condescending and states that Indigenous belief in the Windigo is "[a]mong the many errors and superstitions into which they have fallen [into]" (Ryerson Young, 32). Ryerson Young uses Indigenous myths like the Windigo as a justification for the belief that he and other colonists are superior to the Indigenous population, which is similar to how the female body in flux was a justification to shut down female transgression; both cases have roots in colonial literary history. Other pieces of writing on the Windigo demonstrate colonial writing patterns that have influenced modern perspectives on the subject, including Ruth Landes' "The Windigo Personality," which is an anthropological study on the Windigo. A part of the myth may be lost when written about this way, but the article is very thorough and is less obviously racist than other early colonial writing on the topic.

Another interesting piece of writing on the Windigo is August Derleth's "The Thing that Walked on the Wind," which is a short story about the Windigo that uses a horror/science-fiction narrative framework to make sense of the myth. An example I find rather humorous is discussed by DeSanti, who writes about the Windigo in Marvel comics and how "Marvel canon limits the windigo and its concomitant curse to Canada" (DeSanti, 190). The idea of canonical information in a fictional world, though a somewhat more modern concept relative to other writings aforementioned, is so uniquely Western; it reveals how applying Indigenous myths to colonial writing rules ends up just being rather silly.

Much of the colonial writing on the Windigo treats the myth as more of a novelty than anything, which is part of why the subject was somewhat taken away from Indigenous people. Nazare notes in "The Horror! The Horror?" that "the presence of Native American mythology in modern horror narratives often speaks to something more nefarious than an enlightened regard for another culture" (Nazare, 25). The focus of Nazare's article is in Indigenous mythology in modern horror, but I feel that his point here applies to the broader narrative history of Indigenous mythology and the Windigo. The nefarious elements at play are a part of how colonial writing on Indigenous people and their mythology was a pretext and justification for cultural domination. As seen in pieces like "Windagoos! Cannibals!," there was a clear idea portrayed that the colonists were superior beings to the Indigenous people, and something like the Windigo, a cannibalistic entity, could be used to perpetuate the idea that Indigenous people are savages and colonizers are civilized. One of the weaker elements of DeSanti's article is its failure to grapple with concepts like this; the piece includes strong description of how the Windigo is used in modern popular works, but a discussion of the narrative history preceding these depictions is

noticeably lacking. Based on the traditional narrative history of the Windigo, it is no surprise that modern Indigenous writers have reclaimed the myth by taking the cannibalistic elements at play and turning them from being used against Indigenous people to applying these elements to the concept of colonialism. Colonialism now becomes a cannibalistic entity itself, devouring Indigenous history and leaving Indigenous people a dispossessed group.

In "Hairball," Atwood recognizes the similar narrative histories of the female grotesque and the Windigo myth and amalgamates the two in order to understand them each on a deeper level. The story undoubtedly has a heavier focus on the female grotesque tradition than to the Windigo's history, as the Windigo and Indigenous mythology in general are never explicitly referenced, but they still have an important bearing on the story. Atwood's implicit use of the Windigo myth allows for a more nuanced approach to the subject that succeeds at not falling into the trappings of appropriation due to how Atwood confronts colonial history in the story through the exploration of the female grotesque, which comes around to show how the two narrative histories have a symbiotic relationship with one other in the story. One of the most interesting ways in which Atwood applies elements of the Windigo to "Hairball" is through the theme of consumption. In relation to this theme, the Windigo is projected onto both Kat and the society that fails her. At times in the story, Kat seems to be like a consuming monster with her ambition. This is most notable when Kat tells the magazine board that "[f]ashion is like hunting . . . it's playful, it's intense, it's predatory. It's blood and guts, it's erotic" (Atwood, 42). There is also an interesting link here between the monstrous and the sexual, which evokes how parts of the story suggest a female reclamation of the female grotesque tradition in which women's bodies and female sexuality no longer become taboo topics. The society at large in "Hairball" is represented

as being a consuming force primarily through the character of Gerald. Gerald was made who he is at the end of the story by Kat but after he has extracted what he needs from her, she is kicked to the curb. Even when Kat tells Gerald that her name is "Kat as in KitKat" (Atwood, 40), the idea of her being a treat for him to consume is evoked. These ideas in the story are reminiscent of the theme of consumption present in the Windigo's literary history; it brings to mind the modern notions of colonialists representing a Windigo devouring Indigenous people and culture. The two narrative histories at play also share the similarity of being directly linked to colonialism. The link is seen through the justification for oppression; writing dealing with the Windigo and other Indigenous subjects have been used to justify domination through colonialism and the changing female body has been used to justify putting down transgressive women by patriarchal systems (patriarchy and colonialism are inseparable subjects, from my point of view). "Hairball" makes note of patriarchal systems denying unruly women through the "company board of directors, who were all men" who decline Kat's ideas for being "too feminist" (Atwood, 42). Though progress has been made in moving past the traditional narrative histories of both the female grotesque and the Windigo myth, Atwood suggests by recognizing the link between the two in "Hairball" that the reclamation process is still a work in progress.

The narrative histories of the Windigo myth and the female grotesque call into question if writing dictates reality or if reality dictates writing. While the scope of this question may be a bit too large for the purposes of this paper, I would argue that the two histories at play reveal the importance that writing bears on society. The narrative histories of both of the topics in question have been used as justification for the marginalization and oppression of Indigneous people and women through colonialist ideas. But at the same time, the reclamation of these narrative

histories can serve as emancipating forces in the world for marginalized groups, as seen through the subversive nature of Atwood's "Hairball" and how its depiction of the female body and evocation of Indigenous myths like the Windigo. Though they may seem small or unimportant, narrative histories have large implications for the ever-changing world.

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