The complexity of the female role

- A study of Margaret Atwood’s short stories
  Wilderness Tips, Hairball, True Trash and The Bog Man
Abstract

Throughout history women have been the object of oppression by patriarchal society. Men have had more privileges than women and although women in earlier days have tried to resist they have been the object and not the subject. The Madonna/Whore complex is still present in many ways as there are restrictions of how women are entitled to behave according to patriarchal society. However involves a third factor; the intellectual or the universal woman who faces nearly the same problem as courtesans and prostitutes did in earlier days in order to obtain a lifelong partner. This study will shed light on the dilemma that a great deal of women encounter when struggling with love and relationships. I have analysed four short stories from Margaret Atwood’s *Wilderness tips*; Wilderness Tips, Hairball, True Trash and The Bog Man. The women in these novels experience subordination in their relationship to men either as a Madonna, whore or intellectual.

To come to this conclusion I have examined the short stories from different perspectives in terms of which role they each portray, how they reveal their implications in the narrative and how projective identification empowers women in relationships.

Keywords: Madonna/ whore complex, patriarchal society, narratology, voice, projective identification
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s roles</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilderness Tips</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True Trash</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bog Man</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hairball</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books cited</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

“What is a woman? Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but in relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being . . . Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without a man. . . She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other”
(Beauvoir:16)

One may think that this perception of gender roles has changed. But has it? Or are women still fighting for their own identity, especially in their relation to men? Women are in many ways still being objectified and told how to act in society. In earlier days a woman was told to love her husband and make him happy. This was her duty towards society, family and herself. The second feminist wave in the 60’s and 70’s gave a great number of women the opportunity to change this stereotypical role. Nonetheless, patriarchal society, which still rules, silently imposes restrictions on women who try to balance an ambitious career with family. First of all women have to fight in order to achieve a worthy status on the job market and then it is difficult for them to find a mate that will support them in their struggle to achieve this. As Beauvoir points out she is not the subject she is the Other, meaning that she is forced to choose either career or family because she cannot have both: only a man has this privilege. Margaret Atwood, a feminist writer, lays the emphasis on women’s suppression by patriarchal society and she elucidates the dilemmas women encounter when trying to balance love with feminist and egalitarian values.

We all search for a life companion although it seems as if men and women have different expectations on their spouses. Men in general will not be subordinate to a woman, especially not the woman he sets out to live with. He will choose a woman of whom he can take care and who will cover his needs of establishing a family, a proper woman who in many respects equals his mother - not one who will question his manhood or in any way is superior of him. An intelligent and sexually free woman is something that frightens many men and she will find it difficult to find a man who can handle a woman in power. She is a fantasy a man can satisfy his sexual desires with. However, she is not real to him and she will often face
casual sexual relationships that cannot lead to marriage. In many respects this is synonymous to the Madonna/whore complex which revolves around the outmoded paradigm of how a man can view a woman as either the whore/the sinner or the Madonna/the saint. However, this phenomenon has changed its character, the woman defined as the whore might not only be sexually attractive, but might also be very intelligent or resemble any ordinary woman.

In analysing some of the short stories taken from Margaret Atwood’s *Wilderness Tips – True Trash, Hairball, Wilderness Tips and the Bog man*, I will draw on different theories in order to reveal how the different women appearing in these short stories are equally trapped in their stereotypical roles either as Madonna, whore or intellectual. These short stories can be seen as a modern version of the Madonna-whore complex, where the women appearing in these stories resemble any other women in society. Furthermore it is apparent that an analysis of the different voices operating within the narrative indicates these women’s dilemma. Therefore, it is essential to discuss these novels from a narratological perspective. I will analyse what these women feel about their roles and how they fail to escape, whether being a Madonna or a whore. By looking at these novels from feminist and psychological perspectives my aim is to view how these women become victims of a male-dominated norm where the man is stronger than the woman and where the man has to win in order to protect his manhood.

**Women’s roles**

Someone with a Madonna/whore complex is defined as a man who will sleep with a beautiful woman, he will lust and crave for her, and he may even be in love with her; nevertheless, he will never marry her as she is improper and unworthy of the status of wife. The one he will marry will resemble his mother- the Madonna, a proper girl, who will be excellent at domestic things, such as cooking and cleaning - a woman who is proper and worthy of bearing his children¹. This complex excludes ordinary and intelligent women, who are neither Madonnas nor whores. She is not sufficient sexually attractive to fit into the role of the whore, too intellectual to fit into the role of the Madonna and due to her power men will feel intimidated by her. I will refer to her as the intellectual.

Both men and women wish to marry. However, as Beauvoir argues, Kierkegaard points out that men and women have different perceptions of marriage. A man who is in love decides whether he wants to marry if the woman can assure him of providing the harmony and obligation he wishes. However, when a woman falls in love she wishes to marry (Beauvoir 457), as a woman is forced to follow the rules of her upbringing and marry in order to secure her status as a “proper” woman. Beauvoir argues that a woman in marriage is denied the prospects of independence that a man will always have. As one cannot have love and independence without liberty, she is obliged to abandon her independence to console herself with the enduring protection of some man. The husband expects his wife to give herself entirely to him; however, he is not obliged to do the same for her. His demand is that she should belong to him and grant his wishes, thus not be a burden to him (Beauvoir 454-455).

The Madonna is, according to the patriarchal norm, a woman who is pure and perfect, one men in general compare to their mother. A man may unconsciously seek a wife who resembles his mother so that those unmet needs he had as an infant concerning intimacy may at last be met. So not only in his own opinion is she worthy, but also in his mother’s opinion. The Madonna is not only seen as a religious term, more an unconscious norm for most men. The wife is similar to the virginal mother, whom he will protect and treasure, although he does not feel sexually attracted to as she is as pure and good as his own mother. A good description of this is provided by Pat Gaudette; she states that, for some men, love and sex do not mix. Love should be wholly reserved for good women and sex for bad women (CME).

In contrast to the married woman there is the mistress who in earlier days was portrayed as the prostitute; despite the contrast the same rules apply to her. Beauvoir observes that prostitutes way of living can be compared to males. Part from delivering sex “which gives them over to the males as objects, they come to be subjects” because they are free to choose in what they believe and can attain intellectually. Nonetheless, they are not able to establish this freedom in the institution of marriage (Beauvoir 581). Marriage may be an emotional burden to woman, however it also means integration in society, which a young woman has been brought up to seek and of which the mistress will be deprived. The adolescent woman, who marries as a Madonna, may not have even the slightest clue that there is something wrong within her relationship. She may be thrilled to have found a man who places her on a pedestal, who worships her and who is concerned for her well-being. However, as Beauvoir also observes the married woman and the prostitute pay almost the same price, the only “difference between women who sell themselves in prostitution and
those who sell themselves in marriage is in the price and the lengths of time the contract runs” (Beauvoir 569).

Beauvoir refers to the courtesan as being reputed as frigid since she is in control of her heart and sexuality, in many ways she is equal to the intellectual career woman. She will not risk subordination to a man, whom she knows will exploit and dominate her. She relies on her own dependency, consequently no man is her master and today she represents intelligent and universal women. Nevertheless, as Beauvoir argues her need of a man is still most urgent as love and sex are natural forces in life (Beauvoir 582). Deborah Tanzar has, in relation to this phenomenon, tried to analyse how the strong and intelligent woman finds it difficult to find a mate. Whenever this woman finds a man she desires he suddenly changes his mind and disappears. Tanzar does not refer to the “stereotyped liberated woman-aggressive, hostile, ball busting, creating impotent men”; in fact she refers to the nice, tender, vulnerable and sexual woman- the real woman. This strong and real woman represents wholeness for womanhood. However, as an individual seeking for companionship she is not able to fulfil her wishes of being happy and living in an equal loving relationship. Because of the political and cultural development, women have created for themselves a new identity which means that they cover many of the previously male types of attributes as intelligence, courage, directness and integrity. These women advocate wholeness and they become an object of attraction and fear, to men, other women, and paradoxically to themselves. They threaten patriarchal society, which is formed by the male norm, where the Madonna belongs in the home, the whore belongs in the whorehouse and the intellectual belongs in the school (Tanzar 487-491).

Margaret Atwood explores women’s issues using irony, sarcasm and symbolism. The different voices operating within the narrative reveal implications of how women are subordinated in relation to men. In order to imply inferiority in literary texts the voice of the narrator is often a third person, a heterodiegetic narrative which implies that the story is told by a narrator who is not present as a character in the story, unlike a homodiegetic narrative, where the story is told by a narrator who is present as a character in the story (Manfred 14). The narrator is the one who establishes communicative contact with the narratee or addressee and who administers the exposition (Genette 186). When a heterodiegetic level of narrative is chosen it is often created in order to establish a private channelled female voice. Both the narrative structure and the writings of women are determined by complex and changing conventions that are produced by the links of power that implicate writer, reader and text. Lanser argues that in modern Western societies these relations must include gender, race,
sexuality, class and marital status interacting within a given social construction (Lanser 69). The narrative voice often negotiates between patriarchal essentials and individual needs, and establishes the divided identity of the character who is struggling against her own desires (Lanser 26). Furthermore, Lanser observes that the narrative embraces several voices which are brought out through the characters within the text. Focalisation is one way of doing this as it seems as if the narrator is moving into one character and the feelings and thoughts of this character is narrated (Lanser 33). Mezei also discovers that in feminist narratology there is a struggle negotiating between narrators and focalisers for control of the word, the text, and the sympathy of the reader, as well as a conflict between traditional gender roles and the resistance to conventional authority where male subjects speak for female objects (Mezei 65).

Therefore, there are other voices to be found when analysing the narrative. A text can therefore be on a public or a private level, but can on an additional level address the “real” reader, who as a result can create a third level of reading (Lanser 38). This textual battle Mezei refers to as the “free indirect discourse”, which covers the free structural form and content, in which the narrator disappears from the scene and represents the intimate relationship the character-focaliser shares with the reader (Mezei 69).

When discussing relationships it is important to examine what one actually gains from a relationship. In these stories it is elucidating that the men have specific interests in a relationship with each of the women. The concept of Projective Identification (PI) is useful here. One of the things it describes is how a person absorbs the strengths of another person and then abandons the other because it threatens this person’s new position. A typical example of this is what happens between a mother and her child being in a healthy emotional communication form (Segal 6). Nevertheless, PI may continue in adult life where in Mary Morgan’s article: “The Projective Gridlock”, Rosenfeld explains it as a component in “the process where couples unconsciously bond to form a relationship” (Morgan 2). This has been understood as the process where couples make an unconscious choice of partner as they recognise aspects in their partner which they do not hold or aspects which they have previously rejected (Morgan 2-3).

One example is that an attractive, outgoing and intelligent man or woman might choose a partner who is depressed and may even be the direct opposite of him/herself, because this person cannot acknowledge these feelings in him or herself and is therefore ready to find these in his or her partner. At the same time the other part might feel apprehensive of his or her own self-confidence and attempts to find it in his or her partner. “The unconscious
hope behind such a choice is the opportunity for each partner to gradually take back and reintegrate these split off parts of the self “(Morgan 2-3).

Joseph Berke explains that in a destructive PI relationship the one party, who is most trapped in the relationship will also come to the understanding of how fatal the relationship is and consequently the only solution will be to end the relationship. However, breaking the relationship may lead to this part being unable to function alone. It is not only hurtful to lose a partner, but when it involves PI, it also means losing a part of one self and the anxiety over functioning independently becomes distressing (Morgan 3).

Wilderness Tips

In Wilderness Tips the reader encounters a perfect example of a man with a Madonna/whore complex. George is an immigrant from Hungary who found the perfect place in Wacousta Lodge and the perfect wife in Portia. Portia represents the pure and very innocent little sister. In her he has found what he is looking for, a virginal mother and Madonna. “A woman of courtesy and tact and few words, who would cover up for him; who would be kind to him and pick up the things he had dropped” (WT 205). Prue is the contrast to Portia; she is a flirtatious and promiscuous woman, whom cannot deal with relationships or marriages. George will never marry Prue due to his lack of faith in her. “Its lunch time … a bell is ringing, the lunch bell. For once in her life, Prue is telling the truth” (WT 199). She is sexually attractive, “but Prue does not understand obligations . . . you [Portia] understand them, however” (WT 216). From George’s perspective Prue represents the whore; her smile is “an innocent smile, a mischievous smile, a smile with a twist of real evil in it” (WT 198). The story opens with Prue smiling encouraging at George:

The smile is an invitation, but it's not something George will follow up on - not here, not now. Later, in the city, perhaps. But this lake, this peninsula, Wacousta Lodge itself, are his refuge, his monastery, his sacred ground, here he will perform no violation. . . he did not want to desecrate Wacousta Lodge: he wanted to marry it (WT 199 -205).

George does not only marry Portia, he also marries Wacousta Lodge, and, as Faye Hamill puts it the forest in Wilderness Tips is seen as a “virgin - a place of purity and a refuge from
the city” (Hamill 1). George wants the pure land of Canada, and his liaisons with the sisters reinscribe the female representation of wilderness and the parallel between sexual possession and colonization.

Beauvoir observes that polygamy has always been more or less tolerated; man may sleep with whores and mistresses; however, he is required to respect certain privileges of the legitimate wife (Beauvoir 447). Portia can accept George and Prue’s affair as long as it is not at Wacousta Lodge. “He knows where she draws the line; he knows the price of her silence” (WT 217). When Portia realises that her sister Pamela, who is seen as an independent feminist, is having sex with George, she realises that she lives in an illusional world. Nevertheless, she cannot believe that Wacousta Lodge, the sacred place where she thinks her husband will be faithful to her, will be violated by Pamela. Pamela’s universe seems not to revolve around men, but freedom. ”Pamela does what she wants, nothing more and nothing less. It’s a good thing there’s one woman who can take George and leave him alone” (WT 217). However, even Pamela is trapped in her role and when she tries to escape it by sleeping with George, she violates her sister. Still, Portia knows that she is unable to leave George as she has nothing but him and being independent would leave her without protection. She is scared of having being left with nothing and “to question him would turn her cynical and hard. She would rather be kissed; she would rather be cherished. She would rather believe” (WT 215).

Sharon Rose Wilson argues that the three sisters represent three different types of women, that of the Madonna, the whore, and the intelligent and liberated woman. All fall for the same man and all fall short in supporting each other as sisters and women (80). George maintains control over them, they are locked in their stereotypical roles and become victims of their own decisions. The simplistic views of women are confronted by Atwood in Wilderness Tips and she illustrates the difficulties women encounter in relationships with men. The three sisters are in their equal respect representing the three types of women as Tanzar speak of: Prue the sexual whore, Pamela an intellectual academic, and Portia, the loving, betrayed Madonna. The roles are something that these women would like to change, though it is seemingly impossible, suggesting that they are lost in the wilderness and cannot find their way out.

Portia wanted to do things, the way Prue did; she wanted to get her hands dirty. When she picked up George glasses, he looked at her in the wrong way; with reverence, not with passion- a clear gaze with no
smut in it . . . when Portia expects the first kiss to be filled with passion “The shock of collision”. She did not get it “it wasn’t that kind of kiss; it wasn’t sex George wanted of her. He’d wanted the other thing- the wifely white cotton blouses, the bassinets (WT: 216-217).

Realising that she is in George’s possession, Portia wish she could go back and “would not say I do, but I am” (WT 220). Nevertheless, she succeeds in rejecting one aspect of her role as mother and Madonna, as she and George never get any children. Beauvoir argues that when a couple fails to reproduce, the link of an endless chain of generations is interrupted (Beauvoir 503). George’s manifestation as a man is not fulfilled and it is therefore evident that his manhood has been jeopardised by not being able to perform officially, which in turn justifies his betrayal.

Portia is not the only one who would like to change her stereotypical role, Prue and Pamela are not either content with their present roles. Prue is jealous of Portia’s role of the Madonna and indicates that Portia “always had the best of everything” (WT 219). However, would she be able to conform to this role? It seems as if she is like Portia and is trapped in the role, as George’s sexual possession, she chose long ago. Moreover, Pamela rejects her identity as an intellectual, liberal woman as she releases her desires in the end and sleeps with her sister’s husband. George would like to go to bed with Pamela, “not because she is beautiful. . . but because he has never done it. Also, he wants to know what she would say” (WT 201). This is what Tanzar describes as the intelligent free woman, who the man is attracted to and lusts for just like a whore. The man in power desires what he cannot otherwise achieve. In this context Pamela fails to rise against the patriarchal dominance just as much as her sisters.

Wilderness tips is written in a heterodiegetic narrative voice, and as Lanser describes, a private female voice is channelled through the characters in order to imply the divided identity of the female characters (29). In this connection Portia’s stereotypical female voice addresses several readers, who can identify with her traumatized story, where a woman fantasises of a romantic relationship which her husband is unable to fulfil. However, George is also focaliséd, his male voice is direct and sexual. In his mind sex is a means to obtain the pure land of Canada to which Portia is synonymous. Mezei argues that despite male focalisers, who often speak out authoritatively and reduce the female characters to objects, it is possible for the female focalisers to become genuine speaking subjects and attain agency due to the intimate relationship they establish with the reader (Mezei 71). In this manner
Portia establishes an immediate relationship where the narrator possibly represents Atwood´s message corresponding to the ambiguous gender roles in a society in which women are subordinated.

The relationships in Wilderness Tips is interrelated with projective identification. Portia is a victim of this phenomenon as she learns and thinks in accordance with George’s desires and has no confidence in being an independent woman. She is the married woman and thus the Madonna; as a result George, projects his assets on her as she cannot live these out on her own. It is evident that she has not been able to decide for herself; as Prue puts it “when mother married you off. You just stood there and let the two of them do it, like the little suck you were” (WT 219). Portia knows this to be true, she was smitten because George was not like other men, who “seemed blank, unwritten on, compared to him” (WT 217). When she was little she used to come up with stories, “now the only stories she ever makes up are about George” (WT 215). She is not self-determining and has always had someone to protect her, first her brother Roland, then - slipping into the role of the “innocent deer” (WT 217), being taken care of by George. Portia, the one “who would pick up the things he had dropped” (WT 205). Joseph Berke explains that one party will be most devastated if the relationship ends, as this person cannot function without the other part. This explains Portia’s choice when realising that she cannot confront or leave George, although she should not tolerate his betrayal, as she will rather have an uncompleted love than be left alone. She understands that her whole universe is being disrupted “everything’s coming apart, you’re sinking. You’re finished, you’re over, you’re dead! She would be invisible of course. No one would hear her. And nothing has happened really, that hasn’t happened before” (WT 221). Portia is unable to free herself from the discomfiting situation in her life and she is prompted to surrender whatever independence she has in order to gain some stability through marriage. Marriage provides the social security that she cannot ensure for herself through her own efforts. She therefore finds herself trapped in a way that compels her to surrender to male domination and whatever she decides she will be left with nothing

*True Trash*

The title refers to the “true” romance magazines the waitresses working at a summer camp read out aloud to each other. The magazine’s indicates the frustrated feelings the girls have, suppressing their real fantasies by laughing and mocking the girl who has sex with a “bad” man. A proper girl should not allow herself to let go like that, although subconsciously they
are dreaming of letting go and letting their sexual desire take over. They suppress their fantasies by only laughing. The title also refers to Ronette and her story, as she follows her desires and rejects her obligations towards patriarchal society. She is designated as true trash, a whore. She is the one that all the boys in the camp dream of: “Ronette the tartiest, Ronette the most forbidden” (WT 10). She is mysterious and does not even has a nickname unlike the rest of the girls. A nickname indicates intimacy; you are familiar with him or her. Ronette is difficult to grasp, she does not say much and is not particularly clever. On the contrary, “she knows other things, hidden things. Secrets … closer to the bone” (WT 19).

Donny is the only one who seems to respect her. He defends her when Darce and the others are watching her and throw the binoculars away in order stop them. “He knows he’s supposed to feel lust for her, but this is not what he feels” (WT 10). On the other hand, he does desire her and when Darce pursues Ronette it “makes him feel sad. Sad, and too young” (WT 17). In many ways he respects her, but is unable to understand her. Nevertheless, he is influenced by how a proper girl should be according to society and his mother. When she is doing his table, he notices her earring that goes through her ear. “Only Italians and cheap girls have pierced ears, says his mother” (WT 16). Pat Gaudette observes that a man compares women to his mother, a mother is always right and she sets the standards of how a proper girl should be (CME 1). Even though Donny thinks she is brave getting the earring through the ear “he wonders what the inside of Ronette’s room looks like, what other cheap, intriguing things she’s got in there” (WT 16). He judges her an indecent woman and this is one reason why he does not tell anyone about the sexual incident until he sits with Joanne eleven years later. Another reason is that he feels used by her, why should she otherwise pick him and not Darce. Although he feels guilty not writing to her, his inability to comprehend her makes him think: “They’re right she’s a slut” (WT 36). Darce, on the other hand, completely forgets about Ronette as she is not marriage material and therefore he erases every memory of the girl who turned him down.

Joanne is the contrast to Ronette. She has always been the good girl, doing what she has been brought up to do. In the framework of the Madonna/whore complex, Joanne is the Madonna and does not let her feelings overcome her values. The circumstances surrounding Ronette’s pregnancy with Donny is far from Joanne’s image of the natural order, hence she judges Ronette just as much as Donny. Ronette’s action is looked upon as a crime and as Beauvoir argues, illegitimate motherhood is a frightful fault, which means that no penalty will prevent most girls from getting rid of it (Beauvoir 505). Ronette might not be seen as an intellectual woman in fact she is described as the direct opposite; nevertheless, she
stands up for herself by having the baby and this implies courage and integrity and. Nonetheless, even though she exhibit courage, she is judged even by Joanne and Donny due to their inability to comprehend her.

Joanne is split in her personality: on one hand she knows what is right, on the other hand she wants “what Ronette has: the power to give herself up, without reservation and without commentary . . . Everything Joanne herself does is surrounded with question marks” (WT 25). She wants the other thing, the forbidden thing what she mocks, and she fantasises of how it would be like to let go like Ronette. Although she tries, she realises that she cannot, as she is held back by the patriarchal norms and knows that even an innocent kiss would be crossing the line “would it hurt so much to kiss him? Yes it would” (WT 25). Furthermore, even though she wants to let go like Ronette, she claims that: “She ought to have a caption too. Was I too easy”? (WT 25). When she figures out the “missing piece” (WT 36) and looks back on what went on at the time: “sex lurking dangerously. It had been dangerous then. It had been a sin. Forbidden, secret, sullying. Sick with desire . . . on the other hand there had been marriage, which meant wifely checked aprons, play-pens, a sugary safety”(WT 37). Joanne seems to realise that marriage was not for her either, although she cannot fit into either of the roles.

True Trash has also an extra heterodiegetic level of narration; the focalisation of Joanne shows what Lanser explains as the dilemma between social norms and individual desire (Lanser 26). The focalisation of Donny also delivers a dilemma as he cannot come to terms with how he feels about Ronette. The perspective of the two revolves around Ronette, as she becomes the main character of the story and represents the needs and desires that Joanne and Donny cannot live out on their own. Hence, Ronette never has a voice of her own and is not focalised either. They can judge her, they can speculate on why she did it and what she is like, but they can never fully come to terms with her. The fact that she has no voice at all clearly reinforces her role of subordination, which only leaves her to be cast in the stereotypical role which she has no control. Wilson considers Ronette to be Joanne’s double: Joanne’s double name indicates her split personality. What Wilson also suggests is that Joanne does not know what has become of her other [Ronette] and what her true life story is. When she encounters Donny she tries to piece together Ronette’s life story. “‘The melodrama tempts her, the idea of a revelation, a sensation, a neat ending” (WT 37). She wants to finish Ronette story and use the traditional narratological terms of “revelation”, “sensation”, “neat ending” (WT 36). Instead she realises that the story is old “an archaic story, a folk tale, a mosaic artefact. It’s a story that would never happen now” (WT 37). She is too sophisticated
for such a story and withholds the revelation of the truth from Donny as it does not fit into her story. The effect of Joanne telling the story of Ronette emphasizes on what Mezei describes as a free indirect discourse, a complicated interchange appearing between author, narrator, focaliser and reader in order to accentuate the resistance to conform to conventional gender roles (Mezei 67). Her split personality is thus emphasized through her focalisation as she cannot decide in which role she belongs to Madonna or whore as she realises that she will never be able to conform and she will never be Ronette.

The term of PI does not only occur in connection with relationships between a man and a woman and *True Trash* does not really revolve around this term as there are no so called relationships in the story. However, Wilson discusses Joanne is split in her personality and she perceives Ronette as her double. She indicates that Joanne’s split name is a metaphor for her split personality where Ronette is her second half living out her desires. Rosenfield explains that in a relationship where PI occurs the relation comes to revolve about projecting and receiving feelings and attributes with the other part. Similarly Joanne tries to associate with Ronette; however when she tries to enter her world, Wilson observes that “her borrowed dress, becomes indelible stained as she enters the world of a folktale” (Wilson 75). She therefore fails, as she cannot identify the missing link in Ronette’s life story and is therefore unable to identify herself with Ronette.

Donny also fails when trying to comprehend what happened. Being only fourteen at the time of the sexual incident with Ronette, he is split in his feelings for her partly because he felt used and because the norm demands that the man seduces the woman, not the other way around. This made him think, “They’re right she’s a slut. Part of him had been profoundly shocked by what she’d done. He hadn’t been ready for it” (WT 36). He might not have been, nevertheless when he meets Joanne, Ronette is the only one he wants to hear about. In later life his complex and split view of women also comes to affect how he leads his present life, as he is leading a double life, being a lawyer and a pot smoker. In this context Atwood shows that Ronette, the whore, really influences two persons and the outcome is their split personalities. Ronette represents the devil in their personalities living out their forbidden desires. Nevertheless, as Joanne indicates, times have changed and it is “celibacy these days that would raise eyebrows” (WT 37).

*The Bog man*
In *The bog man* Julie falls in love with an older professor with wife and children. In the beginning she does not seem to mind, but then the pictures of the stable wife with the children indicate what she longs to have “Julie has Connor’s sexual attention, but the wife has Connor” (WT 94). When she confronts Connor, he simply ignores her and tries to sleep with her. The passion he feels for her and not for his wife seems to overwhelm him when she abandons him. He does not comprehend that he has violated her by only seeing her as a sexual object, she wants to be the subject of his life, and when she turns away from him he is devastated. This does not fit into the stereotypical image, which is the man leaving the woman, not the other way around as the case is in *The Bog Man*. Beauvoir argues that in the classical male perception it is not for the woman to choose and she also claims that love mean two different things for a man or a woman (Beauvoir 17). Even though Julie leaves Connor and not the other way around, she cannot escape her role as a “Whore”.

As Julie is remarried, she continuously retells the story of her tragic affair with Connor, as she cannot comply with how the story ends, thus is unable to let it go. Not surprisingly, Julie leaves out the past or, rather, the inconvenient elements of the past that are buried when she later, as a mature, twice-married woman, retells the story of her affair with Connor to her female friends. Though “how can she explain him, him and his golden aura? She no longer tries . . . She skims over the wife, who is no longer a menacing rival of the piece: Julie has now become a wife herself, and feels a sneaking sympathy” (WT 105). Because she is now a married woman, a mother and a saint, the damage she caused him and his wife no longer fits into her life. She thought she desired to be his wife; however he broke her romanticized perception of love and marriage. She cannot marry Connor as he is not ready to fight for her and becomes pathetic, thus she is unable to love him again as he is not enough man for her anymore. She keeps retrieving the elements from the past, not because she loves Connor, but because she is caught between her past and her future, being a “whore” before and now being a “Madonna” and cannot adjust to be both since it does not fit in the social set up.

What can we as readers believe of Julie’s strong focalization in *The Bog Man*, is she feeling sympathy towards Connor’s wife because she has become a wife herself, or is she trying to distance herself from what she did? Do the norms of society not demand of women to be generous and as Wilson argues: is it right that “Julie takes her revenge out on him as he declares his love for her while he pounds on the door of the phone both?”(Wilson 79) Wilson might have a point, though when Julie retells the story,
She leaves out entirely any damage she may have caused to Connor. She knows the damage was done, was severe, at least at the time, but how can it be acknowledged without sounding like a form of gloating? It was unintentional on her part; more or less. At any rate, it does not really fit into the story (WT 105).

How can she retell the real story when she herself is traumatised and feels like she is the victimizer? Do we as readers have concern for her? Wilson observes that even though Julie sees the story as an “anecdote” because it is old to her, we as readers can relate to the story and therefore our sympathy lies with her (Wilson 79). She is not reliable, though that is not necessary to get the message through. The sympathy lies not in the truth, but in her story. The story is, as Lanser detects, an example of creating a third level of reading, which addresses the real reader, who is able to read beyond what is actually written. (Lanser 38). The confusion of voices and the confusion of gender roles creates a dilemma, but as Mezei observes, we discover that the struggle between narrator and focaliser is in reality a battle between sexes (Mezei 66). A male narrative authority would never have beseeched sympathy in the same fashion as Julie, who is required to gain sympathy of the reader as she is a woman - the oppressed, not the oppressor. Hence she is unable to let the story go because the patriarchal norm makes her feel guilty. Lanser describes this as the inner struggle between the social formation and individual desires that the narrative voice in *The Bog Man* portrays (Lanser 26). It does not correspond to a woman’s nature to be the dominant and Julie is, as a result, haunted by her decisions from the past.

Connor and Julie are also participating in projective identification. She is the young student falling in love with an elder professor, who, as it turns out, is rather concerned about his love handles. “The curse of the middle-aged” (WT 99). He is truly afraid of losing her due to the fact that he is older than her and his manhood will be jeopardised.

One of these days you will run off with some young stud . . . Does he want to hear from her that he is still young? Or is he telling her something real? Julie has never before thought of him as middle-aged, but now she that there might be a difference between her idea of him and his own idea of himself (WT99).

Many women are afraid that there men will run off with some young woman.. Men are seen to be like Connor, who will not embrace middle-age as it will put his manhood at risk. Julie
was the woman that could assure him of his manhood, which whom he falls in love in order to relive his youth. But, in contrast to the theory, where one partner absorbs the other and thereafter abandons this person, it is Julie who leaves Connor, realising that he will never marry her and that she is just an object of his fantasies of youth. Connor is in agony, being abandoned by his younger mistress only jeopardise his manhood even more. Connor appears to be the victim, as it is clearly Julie who is punished by remorse several years later.

Hairball

The story confronts the simplistic views of personal struggle with identity that countless of women face, when trying to survive in male dominated world. The protagonist Kat, who is a trendy fashion photographer, faces a deep emotional crisis when she gets her tumour removed. She realises that she is alone in her life and there is no one to console her in her pain. Her existence in society is embedded in superficiality and has caused her an emotional imbalance in her personal life. Although her affair with Gerald has nothing to do with romantic love she realises that she needs to change her life in order to survive.

She sees now what she’s been missing . . . the stable, unfashionable, previous, tight-assed Gerald. Not Ger, not the one she’s made in her own image. The other one, before he got ruined The Gerald with a house and a small child and a picture of his wife in a silver frame on his desk. She wants to be in that silver frame. She wants the child. She’s been robbed

(WT: 52)

Kat feels in her wounded flesh that she cannot go on with her existence. However, she is trapped in the role she chose in order to survive in a male dominated job sphere. Realising she has no emotional commitment to Gerald; She makes Hairball her companion, the ovarian cyst which she has preserved from an operation. It becomes the one that understands and consoles her in her pain. When Gerald tells her to throw Hairball away, Kat denies “and says she’d rather have Hairball in a bottle on her mantelpiece than the soppy dead flowers he’s bought her, which will anyway rot a lot sooner than Hairball will . . . It was hers, it was benign, it did not deserve to be thrown away”(WT 43). She realises too late that she will never be in that silver frame, the only one she can trust is Hairball and it hurts. The sarcastic and tragic story of Hairball is an example of the coldness ambitious women encounter when being as strong and tough as men. When Kat is revising the story of her life, she realises that for once she has
no control. She becomes emotionally distressed and the bizarre act of sending Hairball to Gerald and his wife’s drinking party reflects Kat’s depression.

Kat is a victim of her own “wholeness” she is intelligent, liberated, sexual, strong on the outside and, she has a tender and loving side though she does not show it. She is a combination of the whore, the Madonna and the “masculine” traits such as intelligence and courage. She is needed for the magazine, to give it an extra lift; however the advisers call her “Too bizarre, too kinky. Tough” (WT 43): she is simply too much according to society. Gerald is infatuated with her from the beginning; however, when she gets sick she is less stimulating. “Her insolence used to excite him . . . But he isn’t exited now” (WT 43). He feels she is too bizarre in the way she handles the tumour, when she only tries to be strong in the only way she knows, as he is unable to support her. “One of these days, he says, she will go too far. Too far for him, is what he means” (WT 43).

Kat appears to be a strong liberated woman who knows what kind of values she stands for; still her feelings are strongly repressed. Beauvoir observes that the female values regarding abortion are that the feminine values are being disowned; the whole moral universe is being disrupted. A man seems to take abortion lightly; a child can be a handicap in his prospect future especially if he might be having it with the “wrong woman” (Beauvoir 508-509). Kat has met several men who cannot cope with her and therefore she chooses abortion, not as an option, but as a necessity.

English men. Charm the knickers off you . . . once they’d get them off, panic and run. Or else stay and whinge. She was too smart of course. The English men were very competitive; they liked to win. Several times it hurt. Twice she had abortions, because the men in question were not up for the alternative. She learned to say she didn’t want children anyway. (WT 46)

This shows us how women may subvert their own needs and best interests in the way they interact with men. Being too smart and too much for men, she is abandoned and as Tanzar states, the men run off because they are not up for it (Beauvoir 488). Beauvoir detects that universally men forbid abortion, though individually, when pregnancy threatens their male position, they can acknowledge it: they accept it, as it is a solution to their own problems. “They are able to contradict themselves with careless cynicism. But a woman feels these contradictions in her wounded flesh” (Beauvoir 509). Abortion is still looked upon as a class
crime in many societies and the norm which we unconsciously follow condemns abortion as it removes life. Those who get abortions pay for their choice with pain and guilt. Even though, having an abortion today is something that many women have gone through, it is still something that we would rather not talk about. The situation is even more difficult and tragic if the woman is alone with her decision and has no one there to support her.

Julia Kristeva explains in Stabat Mater that motherhood is the only function in which a woman can testify the relevance of her existence to the other sex (Kristeva 133). For Kat it is a conscious choice not to let the men win. However, Beauvoir argues that according to society a woman fulfils her psychological destiny in maternity and it is the natural calling for a woman to have a reproductive function in society (Beauvoir 501). This is not the case for all women though, as there are a great number of women these days who choose, without consideration, not to reproduce. Nevertheless, the missing link in Kat’s life becomes love and understanding meaning that Hairball is synonymous to the child she wishes she could have with Gerald. When she in the end sends Hairball to him, it is a metaphor for what he has deprived her of. Hairball becomes entrenched in her personality and is her bizarre link to the established life she desires.

The focalisation of Kat highlights the sarcastic and absurd story of her emotional distress. The narrator describes her tragic story, not with feelings, but with sarcastic humour, which is very male. Kat has a male focalisation authority and this is embedded in the “male” personality she is required to have in order to survive emotionally. Mezei describes the narrative authority as masterly male subjects speaking for and over female objects (Mezei 66). Kat exists in a male world, forced to take care of herself and it is impossible for her to victimise herself if she wants to survive. There is no room for her to be female and weak and as a consequence she knows she will lose the battle. The description of her relationship with Gerald as very sexual, not romantic, proves that she is unable to conform to the stereotypical gender role. She does not fit into the picture of the stable wife and it hurts as she wishes she could be both strong and loved. When she is revising the story of her life, she realises that for once, she has no control: “Hairball speaks to her, without words. . . . What it tells her is everything she's never wanted to hear about herself. This is new knowledge, dark and precious and necessary. It cuts” (WT 54). She recognises that she has lost, the physical and mental crises she faces leaves her in alone in emotional distress.

This PI in Hairball is also related to the Madonna/whore complex as Tanzar states it is evident that this intelligent, free and tender woman is abandoned because she is superior to the man (Tanzar 488). Kat, the very successful and intelligent woman with her
own ideas and a unique persona, is abandoned after Gerhard has absorbed all her assets. When she met him “he was eager, he was tractable, he was blank paper” (WT 49). He was Gerald at first; she “transformed him, first to Gerry then to Ger” (WT 44). He absorbs her thoughts, way of dressing and articulation. “He is her creation. As she is her own” (WT 44). He is now what she wanted him to be; he is now “a money man who lusted after art, and now he’s got some, now he is some. Body art. Her art. She’s done her job well; he’s finally sexy” (WT 52). What Kat does not realise is that she has adopted or allowed herself to adopt unconscious wishes for a different lifestyle, which is a stable marriage and a child. Morgan explains this as a process, which is conceived by a fantasy of being one with the other (Morgan 2-3). “That is why you hired me … Because I go too far” (WT 43). He takes over her job, hence Kat becomes devastated and full of rage and she realises that she was only used by Gerald in order for him to obtain a life of his own. “The monster has turned on its own creation. I gave you life!” (WT 52) The distressing and horrible feeling of being rejecting becomes fatal to her, though in the end “she feels light and peaceful and filled with charity, and temporarily without a name” (WT 56). Kat is able to fight back and the struggle between sexes is not lost; however, it has caused her a lot of pain and her story becomes a tragic truth for other women as well.

Discussion

The novels in “Wilderness Tips” illuminate the difficulties for women to survive in a male dominated world. I have tried to analyse these short stories from the perspective of the Madonna/Whore complex. However, updating the theory so that the whore is not a prostitute, the Madonna not a saint, in fact they represent any ordinary woman. This woman is forced to choose whether she wants to be a female object for a man or if she wants to be a subject without one, as she cannot have both.

The stories represent universal women, who are trapped in their role either as a Madonna or whore. George, Donny, Darce, Connor and Gerald are men, who separate love from sex, and “good” women from bad women. These four men all represent in larger or smaller degree men with a Madonna/whore complex. Kat, Prue, Pamela, Portia, Ronette, Joanne and Julie are the women they interact with, who learn that marriage and sex are not necessarily expressions of love. These stories resemble each other as the protagonists look back in time and the reader discovers that men have dominated their lives.

The common ground for these female characters, who are put into one of the roles of the Madonna, the Whore and the intellectual, is that not one of them is satisfied with
herself or her identity. They cannot settle for what they are because they wish to have more, but no man will let them. Gerald abandons Kat because she becomes weak and Julie is left with guilt after leaving Connor. The same applies to Portia, Prue and Pamela, who all fall for the same man, and fails to support each other; in the end George is sovereign. Joanne fails to become like Ronette, as it is not appropriate according to patriarchal society. Even though one can only speculate of Ronette’s destiny it is likely that she has faced moral guilt. It is apparent that these female protagonists are fighting with the roles they are expected to pursue in society, as wives, mistresses, or liberated women.

The narrators in these four short stories show us that the relationship between men and women in the twentieth century is a power struggle in which one part is privileged at the expense of the other. In the stories we encounter different perspectives of narrative, the main part of the stories are set in the 1990’s with flashbacks as the protagonists think of earlier stages of their lives in connection to their present lives. The different voices operating within the narrative in these novels reveal the stereotypical roles, which these women encounter. The strong social oppression of these women is elucidated by the fact that they cannot seem to escape these roles. Additionally, these women do not have their own voices, which further indicates their subordinate role. The four novels are all written on a heterodiegetic level of narration with a strong focalisation of, Joanne, Julie, Kat and Portia, respectively the narrator moves into their minds as we learn about their feelings and thoughts. In this context the reader feels that it is these four women’s stories that are told; An omniscient narrator with a public voice has been chosen, since their stories resemble any other woman’s. Even though the voice is public, the stories seem to be controlled by a private voice, almost as if these women have written diaries or letters to others. In this framework the characters might seem unreliable. However, it is their feelings and inner struggles that are important, not their unreliability. As Lanser points out these women establish a contact with the readers that can identify with their battles between patriarchal society and their own desires (Lanser 26). The stories of these women have one common feature; being a Madonna or a whore is irrelevant because it is all about men’s endeavours to subordinate women in order to maintain control.

The inner conflicts these women encounter is elucidated by the discourse, which includes the feelings and thought in their focalisation. The stereotypical Madonna, Portia, is holding back all her frustrations and her female voice indicates her failure to confront George, proving that she cannot escape her role. Julie is unable to leave the past, as she feels guilty for the pain she has caused Connor and his wife, which leaves her unable to conform to the role
of the Madonna. Similarly, Joanne tries to finish Ronette’s story and fails to become her, as she cannot deny the restrictions on women she has been brought up to follow. Kat’s focalisation proves that in order to win the battle, she needs to act and think like a man, even though it leaves her alone and in emotional distress.

Projective identification proves that opposites attracts, although the ones who gain from the relationships are the men. Writing on a blank paper is a metaphor for the winnings and losses in the relationships appearing in these stories. Kat writes on Gerhard, but when he has received her assets he abandons her. Portia is the blank paper, which is being projected on by George, and in the end she realises that she has nothing but him. The middle-aged Connor trying to absorb the youth out of Julie is also an example of PI, and even though he fails, she still feels guilty. None of these relationships ends happily and the frustration of being left either trying to project or receive the assets of one’s partner becomes grave. What is most tragic, in the context of PI, is that it is the men who win no matter how the relationship ends.

Atwood’s short stories examined in this study explore the victimization of women. This is something Atwood frequently explores in her writing: in particular, victimization through physical and mental manipulation. The short stories in Wilderness Tips show how patriarchal society sustains victimization by holding power over women. What is interesting about these female characters, who are placed into the roles of the Madonna, the Whore and the intellectual, is that not one of them is satisfied with their situation, and as they explore the reasons for their discontent. They come to realize that they are victims of social and patriarchal discrimination. Once they have recognized their victimization, they attempt to reject it and try to survive in the wilderness, only to discover that they cannot overcome the social norms. I believe that the Madonna/whore complex still exists. Women are still being subordinated to men, though feminists try to rise against this, a great number of women are still reluctant to change their identity in order to maintain a man. It is, moreover, still difficult for many men to be equal with his future wife and therefore it might take some years before we will get rid of the stereotypical gender roles once and for all.
Books cited


