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PAST AND PRESENT IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *WILDERNESS TIPS*

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Abstract: Margaret Atwood's short story collection *Wilderness Tips* contains ten stories which, among other topics, deal with the way the past and the present overlap in human life. In most of them, middle-aged characters look back at the events from their childhood or adolescence that shaped them as human beings, changed their destiny, and affected their present life. These characters, at a safe distance from their past and with the benefit of hindsight, are finally able to understand these crucial events and, as a result of this, they revise their personal histories and retell their stories. This paper will explore how stories from this collection tackle the relationship between the past, tradition, and history on the one hand, and the present time on the other. In order to analyze this relationship, the paper will survey some of the discoveries that postmodern literary theories, such as new historicism, made regarding the study and representation of history, the truthfulness of fiction, the selection and interpretation of facts, the possibility of different perspectives, etc. The focus of the paper will be the story "The Age of Lead" since it presents both the personal (hi)stories of its characters and a true historical event connected to their lives.

Keywords: past, present, history, tradition, memories, historicism, historiography

1. Introduction

With the advent of Postmodernism, history has re-entered the world of literature. First, according to J. D. Kramer, this postmodern return to history was not "recuperation or nostalgia or revivalism" (qtd. in Hutcheon 2004: 93), but more of "a response to the hermetic ahistoric formalism and aestheticism that characterized much of the art and theory of the so-called modernist period" (Hutcheon 2004: 88). Second, the renewed interest in history has led to some meaningful discoveries: first, history still matters, so it cannot be simply erased; second, past and present constantly overlap and influence each other; third, history is not an exact science firmly based on facts; and finally, our view of history needs to be reinterpreted. While Eco suggests revisiting history "with irony, not innocently" (qtd. in Hutcheon 2004: 90), Hutcheon believes that the postmodern should "problematiz[e] the entire notion of historical knowledge" (Hutcheon 2004: 89).

Библид 0350–6428, Год. 53 бр. 175 (2021), стр. 375–396. / оригинални научни рад
УДК 821.111(71).09-32 Етвуд М.
https://doi.org/10.18485/kis.2021.53.175.16

1. 1. History and Literary Criticism

The increased focus on history and its representation in literature became especially visible with the appearance of *new historicism*. Considered mostly as a reaction to the formalism of structuralism and post-structuralism, this trend in American academic literary studies appeared in the 1980s out of fear that "American educational institutions and culture are rapidly forgetting history" (Newton 1989: 153). Led by Stephen Greenblatt, new historicists established new connections between literary and non-literary texts, "breaking down the familiar distinctions between a text and its historical 'background' as conceived in established historical forms of criticism" (Baldick 2001: 171), and emphasized "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history" (Montrose 1989: 20). Comparing the practices of old and new historicists, Parker comes to the following conclusions: first, while old historicists relegate history to mere background and context, with literature merely reflecting history, new historicists try to read history and literature together, with each influencing the other; second, unlike old historicists, who see history as a set of secure facts, for new historicists, history is just as uncertain and complex as literature; third, according to new historicists, the same principles we bring to literary interpretation should also direct how we read history because history already has as much multiplicity and nuance as any work of literature (Parker 2008: 219). Similarly, new historicists claim that "what makes a fact depends on the perspective we look from; it is a construction, not an essence" (Parker 2008: 220).

History is also in the centre of *historiographic metafiction*, which has an original method of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction:

> It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity. (Hutcheon 2004: 93)

Some of the most important features of historiographic metafiction can be best understood when compared to those of the historical novel. First, the protagonists of historiographic metafiction are not proper types, "they are the ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history" (Hutcheon 2004: 114); second, historiographic metafiction plays upon the truth and lies of the historical record and, unlike historical fiction, which usually incorporates and assimilates detail or historical data in order to lend a feeling of verifiability to the fictional world, historiographic metafiction incorporates, but rarely assimilates such data; third, the narrators of historiographic metafiction are trying to make sense of the historical facts they have collected, and we, as readers, see both the collecting and the attempts to create narrative order (Hutcheon 2004: 114). Furthermore, historiographic metafiction

seems to prefer two types of narration, both of which problematize the entire notion of subjectivity — multiple points of view or an overtly controlling narrator. However, in neither "do we find a subject confident of his/her ability to know the past with any certainty" (Hutcheon 2004: 117). In addition, historiographic metafiction relies heavily on *intertextuality*, which is "a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context" (Hutcheon 2004: 118). It also uses *paratexts*, such as newspaper clippings, legal statements, or photographic illustrations, whose purpose is to de-naturalize the archive and to "pose once again that important postmodern question: how exactly is it that we come to know the past?" (Hutcheon 2001: 92).

Historiographic metafiction is also determined to establish whose history survives. In this way it problematizes almost everything the historical novel once took for granted and destabilizes received notions of both history and fiction (Hutcheon 2001: 120). Therefore, it is, in a very real sense, ideological fiction: "To write either history or historical fiction is equally to raise the question of power and control: it is the story of the victors that usually gets told" (Hutcheon 2012: 72). Similarly, history is mostly located in the public sphere, "associated with the activity of men (who are recognized as citizens) and excludes the domestic sphere, associated with the activity of women (who are not citizens)" (Nealon and Giroux 2003: 104) Because of this, second-wave feminists created the term *her-story* in an attempt "to convey the idea that for too long history has been a male preserve, telling stories of men for men" (Black and MacRaild 2017: 142); as well as to alert "the reader to the fact that alternative narratives and historical perspectives affirming women's point of view must be articulated" (Wolfreys et al. 2006: 50). In conclusion, when writing about history, literature should give the floor to the defeated and powerless and let them tell their version of events, which has mostly been recognized as the mission of historiographic metafiction since its beginnings.

1. 2. Truthfulness and the Presentation of History

The most debated issue regarding the relationship between history and literature is the truthfulness of knowledge. It stems from the early assumption that history tells the truth while literature (fiction) makes up things or lies. However, some authors such as Aristotle or Philip Sidney see this as advantageous to literature. Aristotle believes that while the historian speaks of things that have happened, the poet speaks of things that might happen: "For this reason too, poetry is a more philosophical and more serious thing than history, since poetry speaks more of things that are universal, and history of things that are particular" (Aristotle 2006: 32). Similarly, Sidney claims that the historian is so tied to the particular

truth of things, that his example draws no necessary consequence (Sidney 2006: 266). On the other hand, the poet "coupleth the general notion with the particular example" (Sidney 2006: 266). Furthermore, Sidney famously maintains that the poet could not be a liar, even if he wanted to, because "he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth" (Sidney 2006: 276).

The second problem with the relation between history and literature is the way history is presented. According to Gottschalk, "[t]he process of critically examining and analyzing the records and survivals of the past is … *historical method*. The imaginative reconstruction of that process is called *historiography*" (qtd. in Hutcheon 2004: 92). Before the French Revolution, historiography was regarded as a literary genre, more specifically, as a branch of rhetoric. The crucial opposition here, in White's opinion, was not between *fact* and *fancy* but rather between *truth* and *error*, "with it being understood that many kinds of truth, even in history, could be presented to the reader only by means of fictional techniques of representation" (White 1978: 123). However, in the early nineteenth century, historiography appeared as a distinct scholarly discipline due to a profound hostility to all forms of myth caused by the excesses and failures of the French Revolution (White 1978: 123–124). Historians started to identify truth with fact and to believe that history represents "the actual", whereas literature is more concerned with "the 'possible' or only 'imaginable'" (White 1978: 123). This further resulted in the opinion that historical discourse "consist[s] of nothing but factually accurate statements about a realm of events which were (or had been) observable in principle" (White 1978: 123).

Nevertheless, postmodern theories reaffirmed what had been known before the French Revolution, namely "that the facts do not speak for themselves, but that the historian speaks for them, speaks on their behalf, and fashions the fragments of the past into a whole whose integrity is — in its representation — a purely discursive one" (White 1978: 125). Furthermore, there seems to be a clear distinction between *facts* and *events*: "Facts are events to which we have given meaning", so "[d]ifferent historical perspectives therefore derive different facts from the same events" (Hutcheon 2001: 57). In addition, since the past is available to us only through its traces, such as "documents, the testimony of witnesses, and other archival materials" (Hutcheon 2001: 58), or through representations, such as "words, images, symbols — whether these derive from film, advertising, legal records, oral history, or personal recollections" (Nealon and Giroux 2003: 96), writing about history involves selection and interpretation: "histories are *narrated* from a point of view; 'important' events are *chosen* according to certain criteria; and those events are *explained* in terms of certain paradigms that promote particular visions of the past, present, and future" (Nealon and Giroux 2003: 97). Because of this, history is probably the least scientific of all social sciences, and it bears a strong resemblance to literature.

Another frequently addressed topic is the relation between the past (history) and the present. Given that the past can only be seen or interpreted from the present point of view, this creates the problem of keeping the present knowledge of events from contaminating the representation of the past. This is usually referred to as *present-mindedness* or *presentism*, and, according to Butterfield, it is the worst method of studying history: "The study of the past with one eye, so to speak, upon the present is the source of all sins and sophistry in history, starting with the simplest of them all, the anachronism" (qtd. in Black and MacRaild 2017: 15). However, some scholars maintain that the only possible way to observe the past is through the lens of the present:

> [P]resentism can offer a strategy for doing historicism better, with an alertness to how our view of history depends on our position in the present. Or it can make a deliberate strategy out of keeping a measured distance from the past and asking, not what happened then, but how what happened then looks through the lens of our interests now or how what happened then speaks to what is happening now. (Parker 2008: 226)

In other words, we need to move from learning *about* history to learning *from* history. The purpose of this would be to avoid repeating the past, which "requires both thinking about how to use the past to alter present conditions … and thinking about the future society we'd like to live in" (Nealon and Giroux 2003: 102).

2. *Wilderness Tips*

The postmodern concern with historical knowledge has also contributed to the realization that history and past determine not only the destinies of nations or countries but also play a significant part in the lives of ordinary people. According to Schmidt, history is necessary for us to create and preserve our identity because "we live in a beginningless and endless chain of (hi)stories such that we need the sequence of previous stories in order to interpret our present story with regard to its continuation in terms of stories to come" (Schmidt 2001: 458). So, Schmidt concludes, if we want to preserve our created identities, we have to constantly tell ourselves and others who we have been, are, and will be — we have to tell our stories (Schmidt 2001: 458).

2. 1. Telling Personal (Hi)stories

Telling her characters' (hi)stories is exactly what Margaret Atwood does in her 1991 collection called *Wilderness Tips.* It includes ten stories which display a strong connection with the characters' past: "There is a clear evocation of childhood in these stories, as well as decades such as the 1960s. … there is a focus on lost love, as well as an increasing sense of

narrativization" (Macpherson 2010: 97). What Atwood explores here is the ways her female characters deal with their past life, especially the ways in which it influences and shapes what they are today. That is why one of the most common topics is the changes that the passage of time makes in their personal life. These changes can be physical, like putting on some weight or becoming weaker and losing one's health, and they are mostly a consequence of getting old. Still, more profound are psychological or internal changes, which represent characters' transformation and the development of their unique identity. Even though most heroines experience this, the most striking change happens to Kat from "Hairball", whose various identities can be easily traced through different versions of her name:

> During her childhood she was a romanticized Katherine, dressed by her misty-eyed, fussy mother in dresses that looked like ruffled pillowcases. By high school she'd shed the frills and emerged as a bouncy, round-faced Kathy, with gleaming freshly washed hair and enviable teeth, eager to please and no more interesting than a health-food ad. At university she was Kath, blunt and no-bullshit in her Take-Back-the-Night jeans and checked shirt and her bricklayer-style striped-denim peaked hat. When she ran away to England, she sliced herself down to Kat. It was economical, street-feline, and pointed as a nail. (Atwood 2014: 42–43)

Time also brings changes in the opinions and practices of every society, which also influence the lives of individuals and form them as people. "True Trash", the opening story, talks about Ronette, a girl who had sex with a fourteen-year-old called Donny. She got pregnant, decided to keep the baby and never to inform Donny about it. Eleven years later, her friend Joanne concludes that the times have changed and that nowadays Ronette's destiny would not be as scandalous as before: "Sex has been domesticated, stripped of the promised mystery, added to the category of the merely expected. It's just what is done, mundane as hockey. It's celibacy these days that would raise eyebrows" (Atwood 2014: 36). The opposite thing happens in "The Bog Man", a story about a female student called Julie, who has an affair with her university professor Connor. Years later, Julie is still wondering whether she was used by someone older and more experienced. She knows that society has become more sensitive about these things and that today their relationship would cause more problems:

> In that era such things happened more easily between students and their professors, without any fear on the part of the professors that they would be accused of sexual harassment and lose their jobs. There was no such phrase as 'sexual harassment', even. There was no such thought. (Atwood 2014: 95)

Other general changes presented in this collection are the rise of feminism, the advancement of technology, and the change in the workplace. For example, in the story "Hack Wednesday", Marcia, a middle-aged journalist, has to deal with the fact that her workplace has become more efficient and less friendly:

> There are no more typewriters, no more clatter, not much of the casual hanging around, the loitering and chit-chat that Marcia links with the old sound of the news being pounded out, drilled out as if from rock. Everything is computers now … The journalists, the new breed, are crouched in front of their computers at their open-plan desks, cooking up the news. (Atwood 2014: 263)

There is also the change of social issues, which means that new topics become part of the zeitgeist. Some of these, such as caring for the aged at home, breast-feeding in public, wife-beating, AIDS, drug addiction, bulimia in the workplace, malnutrition in kindergartens, overcrowding in prisons, child abuse, homeless people, and global warming, are discussed in Marcia's column called "Lifestyles".

On a personal level, another relevant aspect of our past are life-changing events, which are often recollected with the feeling of regret. The heroine of every story is permanently affected by one of those events, however, Lois from "Death by Landscape" has the most damaging experience. When she was fifteen, her American friend Lucy disappeared during their canoe trip. This had a lasting impact both on the owner of Camp Manitou, Cappie, who was forced to close it after this tragedy, and on Lois, whose life was changed irrevocably. The event is still fresh in Lois's memory although she is now a married woman with grown-up children. She has been living two lives since then: "her own, and another, shadowy life that hovered around her and would not let itself be realized — the life of what would have happened if Lucy had not stepped sideways, and disappeared from time" (Atwood 2014: 141). The final conclusion is that Lois will never be able to forget this terrible event, and that she will remain trapped somewhere between her past and present.

Stories that deal with past events often use memories both as a link between the past and the present and as a very valuable tool for providing the background to a character's story. However, the message of this collection is that memories are generally deceptive and inaccurate, which frequently turns the characters of these stories into unreliable narrators. Since memories, like other remnants of the past, do not faithfully represent what actually happened before, most heroines have to revise their past lives and retell their (hi)stories. This also affects the way these stories get narrated, and it seems that in this collection "the strategy of rewriting past narratives emerges as a more successful way of escaping linear scripts" (Ridout 2009: 52). Furthermore, "[a] number of stories … are narrated retrospectively, demonstrating on the one hand how experiences from the past are reinterpreted in retrospect, and on the other how formative they can be" (Nischik 2006: 151). This kind of narration is mostly based on the characters' distance from the past, which can make past events either clearer or murkier for them: "[I]t is only with the benefit of distance that these relationships can be seen differently, though there is no guarantee that this distance makes anything clearer. It can, in fact, obscure or reform the truth of the moment, so that it becomes something else entirely" (Macpherson 2010: 100).

The heroines who are really forced to take a long look at their past and re-evaluate it are Susanna from "Uncles" and Julie from "The Bog Man", both middle-aged women, whose faulty memory can be attributed to the fact that the events they try to remember took place when they were children or young adults. Susanna, a married woman and widely successful journalist and presenter, is so shaken up by the fact that her former colleague and mentor Percy Marrow wrote a very vile book about her, that she starts questioning her own nature and qualities. What bothers her the most is that Percy makes her doubt the love of her three uncles. Because of the way they treated her when she was a child, she developed a pretty good opinion of herself. However, devastated by Percy's treason and cruelty, she now delves into the memory of her childhood recital and sees herself "in her sailor suit and her flapping red hair-ribbon, on top of the cheese box in the glare of the lights, hopping up and down and grinning like a trained monkey, making a fool of herself" (Atwood 2014: 174–175). She wonders whether her uncles really enjoyed her performance or they actually saw her for what she really was, "[s]assy and obsolete; a show-off, an obnoxious brat" (Atwood 2014: 175).

From this example we can conclude that memories are often inaccurate, and that the real truth can be discovered only in hindsight. Besides, our failure to reach the truth about past events might be connected with our inability to fully comprehend the situation we are currently involved in, which suggests that by distancing ourselves from that situation, we might get a better grasp of it. So, by becoming older and wiser or by currently living in much altered circumstances, Susanna is able to realize something she failed to understand earlier because she was trapped in the misleading immediacy of her childhood. In addition, this proves that past and present influence each other because it is not only that Susanna's character was formed as a result of her past, but rather it is her present character that changes her understanding of the past.

A more extreme example of revising one's past life appears in the story "The Bog Man", whose heroine Julie, only after having her own children and going through two marriages and one divorce, is finally ready to tell the story about the affair she had with her married professor. Even though she is now a wiser woman, she still does not know what exactly happened between them. Still, this uncertainty does not prevent her from creating her own story. She removes from it some unpleasant details, invents some others which fit better, and creates new versions both of the story and Connor. For her, the real event becomes inferior to the story about it:

> The story has now become a story about her own stupidity, or call it innocence, which shines at this distance with a soft and mellowing light. The story is now like an artefact from a vanished civilization, the customs of which have become obscure. And yet every one of its physical details is clear to her … For all of this, she has total recall. With each retelling, she feels herself more present in it.

> Connor, however, loses in substance every time she forms him in words. He becomes flatter and more leathery, more life goes out of him, he becomes more dead. By this time he is almost an anecdote, and Julie is almost old. (Atwood 2014: 115–116)

This example leads to two additional conclusions — first, there is always a possibility that the "real" truth about past may never be fully recovered; and second, our personal history is just another story or, to be more precise, just one possible version of that story.

That is why the importance of talking and writing about past events is something that Atwood emphasizes throughout this collection. For instance, the opening story, "True Trash", focuses "on resisting readers — readers who know the story and plot that they are supposed to find pleasurable or fulfilling, but who read against the grain of the stories' narratives" (Macpherson 2010: 97). The topic of storytelling is here addressed on two occasions. First, the girls who work at a summer camp read a magazine called *True Romance*, which is, because of its trashy content, referred to as *True Trash*. In one of those stories, a girl called Marleen gets impregnated and deserted by a bad boy called Dirk, which means not only that Ronette, the protagonist of the story, in a way relives Marleen's (hi)story, but also that life every so often imitates fiction. Because of this, we can say that this story demonstrates the universality of human experience, our tendency to repeat the traditional behavioral patterns, as well as our failure to learn from the past, which is considered by postmodern historicists to be the true purpose of studying history. Second, even Ronette's life can be viewed as an old-fashioned story, whose outdated message is another proof of the change in social mores: "It's an archaic story, a folk-tale, a mosaic artefact. It's a story that would never happen now" (Atwood 2014: 36).

A different view of storytelling is given in "Isis in Darkness", which is the title of the book that Richard, a university teacher and failed poet, writes about Selena, another poet and his lifelong crush. In spite of the fact that Selena died alone, sick, and poor, she is now considered a great and successful poet, which is actually a consequence of the fact that there are many books written about her posthumously. First, this example reveals one of history's many absurdities, namely, that some people become more famous and respected after death, which again comes from the re-evaluation of their life from a more recent perspective. Second, it also emphasizes the creative power of telling stories as Selena's identity is actually (re)created through Richard's book and, at the same time, Richard himself is (re)created through writing about her:

> He will exist for her at last, he will be created by her, he will have a place in her mythology after all. It will not be what he once wanted: not Osiris, not a blue-eyed god with burning wings … He will only be the archaeologist; not part of the main story, but the one who stumbles upon it afterwards … He is the one who will sift through the rubble, groping for the shape of the past. He is the one who will say it has meaning. (Atwood 2014: 89)

This actually means that the story of one's life, or the record of the past, becomes more important than the past itself because it is through these accounts, and not through personal experience, that we usually get to know about history.

Similarly, "Death by Landscape" stresses the importance of telling stories as a way of dealing with painful events from the past. After her friend Lucy disappears, Lois is pressed by the police to repeat her account of the event so many times that it becomes a story that other people will be telling in the future, getting further from the actual event with every repetition. It becomes one of those old legends or urban myths that everybody knows and no one actually believes. Furthermore, the adult Lois, removed from the actual event by the years passed as well as by the impact of this trauma, realizes that Cappie, the camp owner, needed to interrogate her about this event in order to provide herself with some believable explanation about why it all happened, which would eventually help Cappie to put it all behind and move on:

> She could see Cappie's desperation, her need for a story, a real story with a reason in it … Cappie wanted Lois to supply the reason, to be the reason. It wasn't even for the newspapers or the parents, because she could never make such an accusation without proof. It was for herself: something to explain the loss of Camp Manitou and of all she had worked for. (Atwood 2014:140)

This also means that writing about historical events and studying history in general could be therapeutic in the way that it enables different people and nations to deal with past traumas, heal metaphorical wounds, give or except forgiveness, and continue with their present life.

2. 2. History: Science and Tradition

This collection also deals with history as a science and the way we get to learn, interpret, and write about it. The best example is the story "The Bog Man", in which Atwood combines reality with fiction by sending her character Connor, an archaeology professor, to Scotland in order to explore some real-life historical sites. On the island of Orkney, Connor analyzes some stone circles which are believed to be primitive calendars erected to determine the solstices. For Julie, Connor's student and lover who accompanies him on this trip, these stones evoke the images of her ancestors "running around naked and covered with blue tattoos, offering cups of blood to the gods, or whatever they did" (Atwood 2014: 98–99). She thinks that "[t]he blood made them authentic, as authentic as the Mayans; or at least more authentic than all that clan and tartan and bagpipe stuff, which [she] found tedious and sentimental" (Atwood 2014: 99). In a way, these stones "speak" to her directly and help her learn the history of the area better than history books.

Another artefact is the titular two-thousand-year-old bog man, who is also based on real-life facts. He died by being strangled with a noose and sunk in the bog, most likely as a sacrifice to a goddess to insure the fertility of crops. Julie sees him lying on a piece of canvas, like a human exhibit, a visitor from the past:

> His eyes are closed. He does not look dead or even asleep, however. Instead he seems to be meditating, concentrating: his lips are slightly pursed, a furrow of deep thought runs between his eyes. Around his neck is the twisted double cord used to strangle him. His two cut-off feet have been placed neatly beside him, like bedroom slippers waiting to be put on. (Atwood 2014: 104)

Julie believes this to be invasion of privacy, especially when Connor and his Norwegian colleague inform her that the bog man's stomach will be removed with the purpose of examining its content in the hope of drawing conclusions about his way of life. For her, the bog man is proof that dead can "speak" and that historical artefacts are silent witnesses, teaching us lessons about the past. The only problem, according to the Norwegian archeologist, is whether we are capable of making them speak because, like other historical artefacts or documents, the bog man needs to be analyzed and interpreted by experts, who provide him with a voice: "However, they are shy, like other men. They don't know how to convey their message. They must have a little help. Some encouragement" (Atwood 2014: 105). In addition, Atwood manages here to create her own interpretation of these artefacts. First, she opts for just a few out of many available real-life facts about the Orkney site; second, she approaches this topic from a female perspective by choosing Julie as her protagonist. In this way, she highlights only those aspects of the story that fit into her view of things, thus creating parallels between the past and the present, or the bog man and Julie, who both seem exposed, vulnerable, and abused by powerful men such as Connor.

History as a science is also explored in the last story entitled "Hack Wednesday". First, a number of historical references are evident — for example, Marcia calls her husband a *Luddite* because he does not allow computers at home; her colleagues at the paper call their editor *Ian the Terrible*, probably referring to his need to introduce strict rules; and Marcia's colleague Gus, talking about Eric's "communist" views, nicknames him *Eric the Red*. These references prove that famous historical characters continue to live in the present because their specific traits are so familiar that people constantly recognize them in others. Second, the story reveals that Marcia's husband Eric is a history teacher who makes his books controversial in order to earn money:

> He writes engorged and thunderous books of popular history, about things like the fur trade and the War of 1812, in which he denounces almost everybody. His former colleagues, the academic historians, cross the street to avoid him, partly because they may remember the faculty meetings and conferences

> at which he also denounced everybody, before he resigned, but partly because they disapprove of him. He does not partake of their measured vocabularies. His books sell well, much better than theirs, and they find that annoying. (Atwood 2014: 266)

What this passage shows is that there is a significant difference between popular and academic history. Ordinary people are more inclined to popular history because such books are similar to literary works. Unlike academic histories, these books present historical information in a more appealing way, with exaggerated characters, far-fetched speculations, and conspiracy theories. Because of this, people find it easier to learn history from such books, not really caring whether it is true or not. This again proves that there are many different ways of writing about the same thing, and that the truth about a certain event is a matter of interpretation. Moreover, it shows once more that historiography should be perceived as a literary genre.

Another link between the past and the present is tradition, which could be defined as imitating customs and rituals of the past in the present time. This topic is addressed in two stories, "Death by Landscape" and "Wilderness Tips". The first one focuses on the traditions of the Native Americans, who were exploited by Cappie, the white owner of Camp Manitou. The girls who attended it learned skills such as swimming, sailing, canoe-paddling, horse-riding, or making pottery, many of which can be seen as connected to Native American culture. Lois as a child believed that such camps were of great importance because they helped girls build strong characters and maintained the tradition of early settlers and their survival in wilderness. However, the grown-up Lois realizes that these camps were wrong. Although she enjoyed pretending to be an Indian, now she understands that the rituals they performed there, such as painting their faces, putting feathers in their hair, and wrapping themselves in blankets, were a form of stealing or *cultural appropriation*.

However, the significance of tradition as a building block in one's identity is stressed in the titular story "The Wilderness Tips", which is set in Wacousta Lodge, a house built by the family's great-grandfather, whose portrait still hangs in the washroom. The lodge was named after the book written by a certain Major Richards in the nineteenth century and it displays traditional décor. In addition, all the characters value tradition and want things to stay the same. They all dislike motorboats; even Prue, who likes new things and drives like a madman on land, thinks that "all those motorboat people should be taken out and shot. At least the ones who go too fast." (Atwood 2014: 228). Tradition is respected even by George, Prue's lover and her sister's Portia's husband, who, as a rootless Hungarian immigrant, wants to become part of something stable and old. He genuinely cares about the lodge — he does not want to make love to Prue at this sacred place; he carefully puts away deckchairs in case there is

bad weather; he reads the old books from the lodge's library; and, in his wife's opinion, he is "[a] robber king" (Atwood 2014: 246), just like her great-grandfather.

On the other hand, their brother Roland admires the rituals and traditions of the Native Americans. As a boy he read *Wilderness Tips*, a book from their library which portrays them as noble and brave, making him want to be like them. As an adult, he still enjoys doing "Indian" things, like chopping wood or hunting, and it makes him sad to see Native Americans westernized. Besides, his love of tradition can be seen from the fact that he hates foreigners like George, who come to his country and take over things. Similarly, he feels as a failure in the eyes of his great-grandfather, because unlike him, who was wealthy and respected, he works as a banker and counts other people's money instead of making his own. He represents all those people who feel complete only in the context of their nation's history and tradition.

3. "The Age of Lead"

The seventh story in the collection, "The Age of Lead", is different from others because it is built around a central historical event and has various overlapping time lines. It begins with a short piece set in the past, explaining how John Torrington, one of the three sailors who had died in the early stages of the Franklin Expedition, was buried in a hole in the permafrost a hundred and fifty years ago. Then it moves quickly to the present time, describing the current appearance of Torrington's body after he has been dug out by scientists. This turns out to be a part of a TV show about the Franklin Expedition that Jane, another middle-aged protagonist, is watching. After this, the narrative line gets more complicated. Because of the exhumation of Torrington's body, the story goes deep into the past and we get to find out the first pieces of information about the expedition. At the same time, since Torrington reminds Jane of her friend Vincent, her memories go back to her childhood. From this point on, there is constant overlapping of three timelines: the present, with the scenes from the TV show and Jane's thoughts about it; the recent past, following Jane's development and her relationship with Vincent and her mother; and finally the more distant past dedicated to the fate of the doomed expedition. This variety of timelines and perspectives is best described by Dvorak: "The story … conceals the speech of current opinion underneath the speech of the protagonist's mother which is filtered through the young girl's understanding, while the whole is masked by the omniscient narratorial voice" (Dvorak 2006: 120).

Because of the central historical event and different time lines, the treatment of history and past in "The Age of Lead" is rather complex. On the one hand, this story examines many of the topics which appear in the

rest of the collection. For example, it talks about the passage of time and the changes that happen because of it. Some of them, like the changes of Jane's TV habits, are results of personal development. Others are more general and caused by the growth of society, culture, or industry. Some of them are positive, like the feeling of freedom in the seventies, when "the old heavy women's world of girdles and precautions and consequences had been swept away" (Atwood 2014: 191); and some are bad, as in the eighties, when things started to get worse, and Toronto became less fun:

> There were too many people, too many poor people. You could see them begging on the streets, which were clogged with fumes and cars. The cheap artists' studios were torn down or converted to coy and upscale office space; the artists had migrated elsewhere. Whole streets were torn up or knocked down. The air was full of windblown grit. (Atwood 2014: 194)

In addition, friends and acquaintances start dying of various diseases and conditions, "as if they had been weakened by some mysterious agent, a thing like a colourless gas, scentless and invisible" (Atwood 2014: 194). This seems to be a consequence of the changes in the environment caused by its mistreatment and exploitation:

> Maple groves dying of acid rain, hormones in the beef, mercury in the fish, pesticides in the vegetables, poison sprayed on the fruit, God knows what in the drinking water … She thought about moving out of the city, then read about toxic dumps, radioactive waste, concealed here and there in the countryside and masked by the lush, deceitful green of waving trees. (Atwood 2014: 194–195)

Another familiar topic is a life-changing event, and in this story, it refers to the fact that Jane's mother had got pregnant before marrying Jane's father, who later abandoned her. This happened during World War II, and although Jane's mother could have been forgiven for this because different rules always apply in wartime, her life was ruined by this event to the extent that she turned into a bitter and unhappy woman, who, fearing that Jane would repeat her story, disapproved of the boys Jane dated. Strangely enough, at the same time, she almost wanted Jane to experience the same, so that she could tell her in the end that she had been right. Besides, her past "transgression" affected Jane's life too, and she became a woman who feared commitment and, as a result, remained single and childless.

Other topics concerning the relationship between the past and the present are mostly connected with the lost *Franklin Expedition*. The story about this unfortunate voyage is narrated in the past tense and it comes from two main sources: Jane's memories of her history lessons and the TV programme she is currently watching. From the first source we discover the following information: the expedition took place in the nineteenth century; it involved two ill-named ships, the Terror and the Erebus; and its real purpose was money:

> What the Franklin Expedition was looking for was the Northwest Passage, an open seaway across the top of the Arctic, so people, merchants, could get to India from England without going all the way around South America. They wanted to go that way because it would cost less and increase their profits. (Atwood 2014: 182)

Additional information is prompted by the TV show. Whenever Jane sees a new scene, she starts thinking about it, and this way we are provided with new details regarding this mysterious event, which are mostly a product of speculation. The story begins with a description of John Torrington's thawed body, which is followed by the information that he had a proper burial and a coffin because he had been among the first to die. His close-up brings new data: he has no socks, his arms are tied to his body, and his ankles tied together to keep the body tidily packaged for burial. The next scene shows two black-and-white etchings: the first one of Sir John Franklin, the leader of the expedition; and the second one of the two ships locked fast in ice.[1] The final scene is of the scientists proudly revealing the main cause of the sailors' irrational decisions and death — lead-poisoning, which they contracted from poorly soldered tin cans:

> It invaded their bones, their lungs, their brains, weakening them and confusing their thinking, so that at the end those that had not yet died in the ships set out in an idiotic trek across the stony, icy ground, pulling a lifeboat laden down with toothbrushes, soap, handkerchiefs, and slippers, useless pieces of junk. When they were found ten years later, they were skeletons in tattered coats, lying where they'd collapsed. They'd been heading back towards the ships. It was what they'd been eating that had killed them. (Atwood 2014: 197)

However, the most important topic of the story is the parallels between the past and the present, which imply that history repeats itself because we never seem to learn from it.[2] First, there is a strong resemblance between Torrington and Vincent. Torrington's frozen body still has eyeballs, but since the skin around his eyes is pushed away because of the freezing water, he looks like Vincent, who was hollow-eyed even as a teenager. Another parallel can be found in the fact that both of them are pioneers and explorers. This is quite obvious when it comes to Torrington — he was a member of an explorative expedition — but in Vincent's case, this seems to be connected with his being gay:

> [T]here is certainly a connection made in this story between pioneering (both in terms of discovering new lands and in terms of exploring new relationships) and the risk of illness. Atwood seems to imply that there is risk involved in deviating from society's traditional life scripts. (Ridout 2009: 54–55)

1 These etchings also serve as silent witnesses and could be perceived as frozen in time.

2 It is interesting that the protagonist of the story and Sir John Franklin's wife have the same name, which Beran sees as another example of human tendency to relive other people's (hi)stories: "Atwood's choice of Lady Franklin's first name for her modern character suggests the story is a retelling of Jane Griffin Franklin's efforts to rescue her lost husband" (Beran 2009: 72).

Of course, the strongest parallel is linked with their deaths. First, both of them were in a way treated with ice. At the beginning of the story, the TV programme shows Torrington's body in the coffin, completely enclosed in ice. Similarly, there is an image of Vincent in his wintry hospital room, lying packed in ice because of the pain. Second, both of them died of mysterious causes which could not be discovered at the moment of their deaths. In Torrington's case, it turned out to be lead-poisoning caused by cans, which were at the time "a new technology, the ultimate defence against starvation and scurvy" (Atwood 2014: 197). In regard to Vincent, it was an unknown virus, which, like Torrington's lead-poisoning, could be attributed to the negative consequences of modern technology. Also, Torrington's death was caused by something he ate, which is exactly what Vincent gives as a reply to Jane's question about his disease. Finally, it seems that these two characters send the same message: "[t]he most troubling warning", according to Grace, "is that there are some secrets, mysteries, truths that will always escape our desire to possess, label, control" (qtd. in Beran 2009: 72), which could be connected with the postmodern realization that truth, especially about historical events, is often unattainable.[3]

Still, the most intriguing topic is the way Atwood decides to write about the Franklin Expedition. Like most other postmodern authors, she decides to present this event from multiple perspectives and to offer less familiar interpretations. First, she selects John Torrington to be a silent witness of past events despite the fact that he is just a peripheral character in the story of the Franklin Expedition. Second, the story is told from the perspective of two women — Atwood's "external" omniscient voice and Jane's "internal" thoughts — which indicates that women are finally given an opportunity to present a historical event the way they see it. Consequently, Atwood's account of the expedition can be considered "her-story", especially if we perceive Jane as the modern, fictional alter ego of Jane Franklin. As a result of this, it can be stated that Atwood's story does not do the typical thing of emphasizing the heroic nature of the Franklin Expedition but instead it deals with some of its less researched aspects, such as the sailors' loneliness, their need for love, their feelings of fear and confusion, and their clothes and shoes. In addition, Atwood plays with different impressions of the doomed expedition, making it seem both serious and comical. On the one hand, this story is "the historical examination of a curious piece of Canadian exploration lore" (Nischik 2006: 152); and, on the other, the expedition "is comically diminished from the stuff of epic and legend into that of the banal through understatement reinforced by a closing sentence which emphasizes the low registers of the carnivalesque" (Dvorak 2006: 121). The sentence Dvorak is referring to reveals Jane's simplistic notion of this event:

3 The same message is conveyed through another parallel — namely, both sailors and Jane's friends die of unknown causes.

> [S]he knows what the Franklin Expedition was. The two ships with their bad-luck names have been on stamps – the *Terror*, the *Erebus*. Also she took it in school, along with a lot of other doomed expeditions. Not many of those explorers seemed to have come out of it very well. They were always getting scurvy, or lost. (Atwood 2014: 182)

Besides, this event serves as a basis for a fictional story, which implies that Atwood here assumes the role of a historiographer who gets to choose how to present a historical event, as well as which details to use and which to disregard. She also determines what to fictionalize in order to make her point come across. Here she distributes the information about the expedition by means of a TV programme based on the findings of the exhumation of Torrington's body. However, it turns out that the programme is fake, which is clearly stated on the copyright page of some editions of *Wilderness Tips*. What this suggests is that Atwood mixes facts and fiction with the purpose of producing a certain effect. Since her agenda is to make people aware of the environmental problem, which is created by people abusing technology in order to earn money, she selects only those historical facts which can deliver her message. That is the reason why the scientists in the fictional programme claim that Torrington and his fellow sailors died of lead-poisoning they got from eating canned food.[4] Since cans were modern technology at the time, it can be assumed that technology killed them. Furthermore, the same issue is underlined through the revelation that the sailors from the story, like human beings in general, tend to pollute the environment by littering:

> Increasingly the sidewalk that runs past her [Jane's] house is cluttered with plastic drinking cups, crumpled soft-drink cans, used take-out plates. She picks them up, clears them away, but they appear again overnight, like a trail left by an army on the march or by the fleeing residents of a city under bombardment, discarding the objects that were once thought essential but are now too heavy to carry. (Atwood 2014: 198)

The additional question regarding history is how we learn about it. In this story the main source of information is not a book but rather a TV show,[5] which "places the past at the centre of public life in the medium of popular culture" (Black and MacRaild 2017: 6). Since it provides us with plenty of information about the destiny of the doomed expedition, we can see Torrington as a silent witness of the event, the one who "speaks" about

4 In reality, there were many other probable causes of death, including pneumonia, tuberculosis, hypothermia, starvation, scurvy, and general exposure, and it is actually believed that lead-poisoning only aggravated other diseases and conditions.

5 Since the factual material about the Franklin Expedition and exhumation of John Torrington used in this story comes from the real book titled *Frozen in Time* (1987), by Owen Beattie and John Geiger, this could be considered an example of *intertextuality*, although the TV programme mentioned in the story is not real. In addition, another remarkable illustration of the way history and literature overlap is the fact that Margaret Atwood wrote the introduction to the 2004 edition of *Frozen in Time*.

it in spite of the fact that he, at that point of time, has been dead for a hundred and fifty years. What enables him to "speak" is science and modern technology, which analyze the gathered information and present their results. Since this technology was not available before, the message of the story is that today we know more about historical events than the people who lived at the time. In addition, although science enables Torrington to help us "shed light on the past, present, and future" (Beran 2009: 71), he is also a constant reminder of our tendency to repeat the same mistakes since "he seems to symbolize how we retell and revise the past but forget to learn from it" (Beran 2009: 76).

Finally, this story shows another time paradox, which is best exemplified by Torrington, who seems to exist both in the past and the present. Because of this, Atwood finds it difficult to choose the appropriate tense to write about him:

> The man they've dug up and melted was a young man. Or still is: it's difficult to know what tense should be applied to him, he is so insistently present. Despite the distortions caused by the ice and the emaciation of his illness, you can see his youthfulness, the absence of toughening, of wear. According to the dates painted carefully onto his nameplate, he was only twenty years old … He was, or is, a sailor, a seaman. (Atwood 2014: 181)

Further confusion occurs when we compare Torrington with Vincent. Because of the dark circles around his eyes, Vincent looked old even when he was young. Moreover, although Vincent died in the eighties, his body now seems to be older than Torrington's because it was not preserved in ice: "Vincent has been dead for less than a year. He was not put into the permafrost or frozen in ice … Right now John Torrington, recently thawed after a hundred and fifty years, probably looks better than Vincent" (Atwood 2014: 195). Similarly, Torrington's "eternal present" is confirmed by the TV programme Jane is watching. For her, it seems as if Torrington is alive again because the nature of television is such that, even when it is not live, it creates the feeling of false immediacy with every broadcast. This means that the programme revives Torrington every time it appears on television, which makes the unfortunate sailor both a historical character and our contemporary.

4. Conclusion

This paper proves that in her collection of stories entitled *Wilderness Tips*, Margaret Atwood approaches history and past by taking into consideration all the postmodernist discoveries and conclusions regarding this topic. By making it a significant theme of each of her stories, she emphasizes the vital role that history and past have in our everyday life, and illustrates the unbreakable connection between the past and the present. Similarly, she highlights the fact that neither in our private life nor in gen-

eral history can past be simply relegated to the background of human existence, considered merely a context, or completely forgotten and erased.

When it comes to our personal life, all of Atwood's heroines show that what we become as grown-ups is largely related to different aspects of the past. We develop through time, change both physically and emotionally, and acquire new views. On the one hand, this transformation can be attributed to our education, the influence of our family and friends, the choice of our profession, the places we visit, the people we meet, and, generally, to our experience of the world. In addition, our personal growth is frequently caused by some life-changing, usually traumatic event, such as teenage pregnancy or the disappearance of a childhood friend. Besides, the formation of our individual character or identity is generally based on tradition. Some of Atwood's characters are highly respectful of tradition and customs of the past because they believe that these are deeply ingrained in their genes and present a big part of what they are today. Still, there are others who exploit the human need for tradition and stability in order to satisfy their own needs — for example, outsiders or foreigners who want to be accepted within the dominant society, or entrepreneurs who only seek financial gain. On the other hand, our transformation reflects the changes happening in our society or the world in general. New social topics, such as drug addiction, eating disorders, AIDS, child abuse, homelessness, global warming and pollution, become part of our everyday conversations and, consequently, we either change our previous attitudes or form new ones. For example, we become more lenient towards unmarried mothers or illegitimate children but less accepting of professors who have affairs with their students.

However, Atwood's characters demonstrate that our bond with the past goes far beyond the role it has in our personal development. First, the past is a constant part of our everyday life — we either learn from our previous experiences, or history in general, and use those lessons to improve our current lives; or, more frequently, we disregard those lessons, we imitate past events, relive our earlier experiences or the experiences of our predecessors, and repeat past mistakes. Second, past events appear in our present life through memories. Although we sometimes do recall those events the way they actually happened, still, on numerous occasions, our memory fails us, we forget some less meaningful events and become unreliable narrators of our own story, which then gives us an opportunity to create a different version of those events and tell a different story. Third, our present can also affect and alter our past. By employing our newly-acquired knowledge or wisdom we get to revise or reinterpret past events, which then appear in a new light.

Similar conclusions can be made in regard to history in general. Atwood's stories constantly remind us that historical events cannot be explained in "a single true account"; that history is not an exact science strictly based on "true" facts; and that in many instances the "real" or

"ultimate" truth cannot be established. This suggests that every historical event can be related in several ways, and that by intelligent and meticulous selection of facts and their calculated interpretation, every author can "manipulate" history — namely, produce the account which best suits their political or social views, or their intended message, which in Atwood's case mostly refers to the mistreatment of women or the abuse and exploitation of the environment.

Besides, Atwood reflects on the relation between history and literature or, to be more precise, about the way history is represented in works of fiction. Like other postmodern authors, she discovers that literary accounts of past events can be as truthful and useful as those found in historical books. In addition, she insists on the significance of "telling a story", both in the context of our personal life or history in general. First, since the majority of people are unable to witness past or historical events, the only way they can learn about them is by means of stories — fictional stories or historiography — which makes stories more relevant than the actual events. Similarly, stories provide us with an opportunity to present things or people the way we want them to be perceived by the public. Besides, through stories we can rebuild ourselves or other people and revise history. Finally, telling stories about certain events can be therapeutic because it enables us to deal with past events, put them behind, and move on with our present life.

Finally, in some of her stories, Atwood examines history as a science, either by making her characters historians and archeologists, or by focusing on true historical events, or by presenting different media used to study history. In all of these cases she combines reality with fiction, real historical figures with fictional characters, and true facts with speculations, in order to once again confirm her earlier revelations — namely, that history is only accessible through its artefacts; that our view of history depends on the selection and interpretation of facts; that there are different kinds of history books (popular vs. academic); and, more significantly, that it is still crucial to learn history because it determines us as human beings and enables us to live in the present moment.

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Дијана Тица

Прошлост и садашњост у збирци прича Маргарет Атвуд
Савјети за преживљавање у дивљини[6]

Резиме

Збирка Маргарет Атвуд *Савјети за преживљавање у дивљини* (1991) садржи десет прича које се, између осталог, баве и начином на који се прошлост и садашњост преплићу у људском животу. У већини ових прича средовјечне жене осврћу се на догађаје из њихове давне или ближе прошлости који су их обликовали као особе и утицали на њихове садашње животе. Ове јунакиње, са сигурне временске дистанце и са већим животним искуством, коначно су способне да схвате ове кључне догађаје, што им даје могућност да их ревидирају и поново испричају. Поред тога, неке од прича спомињу историјске догађаје или личности који се рефлектују у животима ликова, на основу чега се долази до закључка да људи стално понављају грешке својих предака.

Уводни дио овог рада анализира однос историје и књижевности као два жанра која обрађују исте или сличне теме из различитих перспектива и на различите начине. Прво се износе нове спознаје о историји као науци до којих су дошли припадници покрета *нови историзам* предвођени његовим оснивачем Стивеном Гринблатом. Овај сегмент се завршава освртом на *историографску метафикцију* као новији књижевни жанр који преиспитује историјске догађаје узимајући у обзир чињеницу да историју углавном пишу побједници, и то на начин на који то одговара њиховим циљевима. Стога овај књижевни жанр, који се може сматрати модерним обликом традиционалног историјског романа, омогућава некад потчињеним, маргинализованим и обесправљеним групама да изнесу своју верзију историјских догађаја. Други сегмент увода разматра питање да ли је тачније или истинитије знање које се може наћи у историјским уџбеницима од оног које се црпи из књижевних дјела, о чему су некада давно размишљали и Аристотел и сер Филип Сидни. Такође се говори и о утицају садашњих сазнања на тумачење историјских догађаја, односно о добрим и лошим странама *презентизма*.

Централни дио рада посвећен је начину на који су прошлост (историја) и садашњост повезани у причама Маргарет Атвуд. Разматрају се личне или глобалне промјене које доноси пролазак времена, кључни догађаји који заувијек мијењају живот јунакиња, непоузданост успомена те потреба за ревизијом прошлости и причањем нових (и)сторија, као и значај традиције у свакодневном животу. С обзиром на то да је у фокусу рада прича „Доба олова“, која се заснива на једном истинитом историјском догађају — изгубљеној поларној експедицији енглеског капетана Џона Френклина — у овом дијелу се говори и о начину на који учимо историју, о документима, фотографијама и ексхумираним тијелима као тихим „свједоцима“ прошлости, о значају модерне технологије и науке за боље разумијевање историјских догађаја, о односу популарне и академске историје, те о неугодној спознаји да ријетко учимо из историје.

Кључне ријечи: прошлост, садашњост, историја, традиција, успомене, историзам, историографија

Примљено: 19. 12. 2020. Прихваћено: 5. 5. 2021.

6 С обзиром на то да збирка није преведена на српски језик, наслов збирке као и наслов централне приче превела је ауторка рада.