

RENNIE'S "MASSIVE DIS-INVOLVEMENT" IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *BODILY HARM*

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Bodily Harm is Margaret Atwood's profoundly moral and religious work which emphasizes the need for mercy, pity and love in our power-mad world. Its heroine Rennie's painful and terrifying experiences make her realize that her cherished marginality and dis-involvement has all along prevented her from living her life as a 'human being' in the truest sense of the term.

The narrative structure of *Bodily Harm* follows a pattern familiar in Atwood's fiction. As the action of the plot unfolds, memory and association trigger flashback sequences. Revelations from earlier years help the reader understand the central character's actions and responses in the present. Rennie is another of Atwood's powerless heroines. And once again, it is a woman, Rennie's grandmother, who embodies the archetypal paternalistic patterns of repression and domination that account for Rennie's ingrained passivity and subservience.

Born and raised in a small puritanical Ontario town named Griswold, she learns three important things as a child: "how to be quiet, what not to say, and how to look at things without touching them."¹ This Puritanical town sees everything that happens as the will of God and believes that people get what they deserve. Rennie wryly adds, in what sounds like a stage aside, that in Griswold, "everyone deserves the worst" (*BH*, p.12). The town makes an icon of the concept of decency and frowns upon things which give pleasure. By overemphasizing decent appearances and behavior, it forces its inhabitants to repress spontaneity.

Rennie wants to escape from Griswold at all costs and gets her chance to move away from Griswold on a university scholarship, which was one of the respectable ways out of Griswold for a young single woman. Being a product of Griswold, Rennie, like the town, is addicted to surfaces and fears unknown depths. She tells us that in Griswold "surfaces determined whether or not people took you seriously" (*BH*, p.20). Though Rennie sneers at the town for it, she has fully internalized this attitude as is evident from her job. Seeing herself as "arbiter of the new and chic,"² she churns out deliberately trendy and superficial articles on things like male and female boredom, the fat trade in Toronto, drain-chain jewelry, fast food outlets, the 'in' wardrobe for the picket line, the importance of denim overall, what feminists eat for breakfast and on how to pick men up in laundromats.

After leaving Griswold, Rennie says she wanted honesty to be her policy and thus she wrote truthfully on blockbusting as practiced by city developers, the lack of good day-care centres for single mothers and on other things which deeply aroused her indignation. After graduation however, she realized that she could write whatever she liked but that nobody was under any obligation to accept her articles and pat her for them.

Dissuaded by the response of the editors to her 'true stories', she began writing about the latest trends in fashion and even about trends that did not really exist. For instance, spotting drain-chain jewelry on her friend Jocasta, she wrote about it as "the latest Queen Street thing.....a New Wave sleaze put-on of real jewelry" (*BH*, p.18) and derived vicarious pleasure from seeing at least ten women with bath-plug chains around their necks two weeks after her piece was published. Forced into repressing her basic honesty, Rennie sees it as a "professional liability" (*BH*, p.64).

Based on her ability to anticipate future trends in fashion, one of the editors tells her that she has an uncanny insight into the future. Rennie rejects his compliment and tells him that if such was the case, she would not waste her time on “the colour of women’s lipstick, the length of their skirts, the height of their heels, what bits of plastic or gilt junk they choose to stick on themselves” and adds with a rare touch of honesty: “I see into the present, that’s all. Surfaces, there’s not a whole lot to it” (*BH*, p.20). Her words indicate her alienation from her job which she regards from a distance and with characteristic irony.

Her desire to stay alive on the edges and avoid total involvement at all costs, is largely due to her upbringing in the “sterile, hypocritical, sexless”³ Griswold: “Other people make statements,” she says; “I just write them down” (*BH*, p.8). Accordingly, as a young woman living in Toronto Rennie does not become seriously involved with or connected to anything and maintains a safe distance from all those around her. Thus she does not know even the name of her old Chinese next door neighbor and hardly seems to care for the woman who lives on the ground floor of her house.

Two significant events break-up Rennie’s smooth ‘surfaces’: a housebreak and an operative surgery. The book starts with Rennie’s return to her apartment from the market and she learns from two policemen that an intruder broke into her apartment and left a coiled rope on her bed. The fact that one of the titles Atwood considered for this novel was “Rope Quartet” signals the centrality of this incident. After the intruder has entered her bedroom, Rennie feels violated and worried about “faceless strangers” and wonders – what is at the end of rope? “A hand, then an armand finally a face” (*BH*, p.38). She thinks of this man as “an ambassador, from some place she didn’t want to know any more about” (*BH*, pp.37-38). Though this man does not succeed in harming Rennie physically, he succeeds in terrorizing her psychologically.

The operative surgery for her breast-cancer, a site of her sexual identity, initiates Rennie’s crises. Even before the crisis brought on by the amputation, Rennie has been used to seeing her body as separate from herself. She regards it as “a close friend” and says that nothing had prepared her for the outrage she felt against her body when the doctor informed her of her cancer for, “she’d given her body swimming twice a week, forbidden it junk food and cigarette smoke, allowed it a normal amount of sexual release. She’d trusted it. Why then had it turned against her?” Her surgeon, Daniel, tries to make her understand that “the mind isn’t separate from the body; emotions trigger chemical reactions and vice versa” (*BH*, p.85) but Rennie continues to see them as separate entities.

Though she is glad to be “still alive” (*BH*, p.11), she sounds terribly distraught when she tells Daniel after her surgery: “I don’t feel human any more ...I feel infested. I have bad dreams; I dream I’m full of white maggots eating away at me from the inside” (*BH*, p.87). Fearing the thought of pain and eventual death, she is frightened to look down at the scar for “she’s afraid she’ll see blood, leakage, her stuffing coming out” (*BH*, p.16).

Rennie’s mastectomy prompts her love Jake to leave. Before her operation, Rennie and Jake seem to be perfectly suited to each other. “As a ‘packager’ of ‘images’ for advertising, he shares her taste for the superficial and her distaste for ‘massive involvement’.”⁴ But once Jake gets to know about her cancer, the charmed circle disappears altogether. Jake’s fantasy of Rennie gets destroyed and she now seems like a faulty package to him. Seeing “the kiss of death on her,” (*BH*, p.224) he does not want to even touch her and after a while, walks out on her.

After Jake moves out, Rennie naturally feels a “vacuum” (*BH*, p.36). She even fantasizes that the man with rope was “sucked in, by the force of gravity” (*BH*, p.36). Rennie now finds herself infatuated with her surgeon, Daniel who seems to her like the hero of “nurse novels andsex-and-scalpel epics” (*BH*, p.29) She falls in love with him because his is the first face she sees when emerging from the anaesthetic after her operation, and also because he knows something about her she does not know herself, which is, “.....he knows what she’s like inside” (*BH*, p.83).

She wants Daniel to have an affair with her and “save [her] life” (*BH*, p.157) by touching her with his life-giving hands. Though we deeply sympathize with Rennie, it seems ridiculous and practically impossible for Daniel to have sex with every woman he operates.

After her mastectomy Rennie has now stopped relying on and trusting surfaces; “... [I] no longer trust surfaces” (*BH*, p.47) and does not enjoy being in love. Being visible is also one of the things she dreads. Aiming for neutrality and “invisibility” she clad herself in white or washed-out blue dresses and wears “only enough make-up so she won’t seem peculiar, a leftover hippie or a Plymouth Brethren or something like that” (*BH*, p.8).

She is having a “mid-life crisis” (*BH*, p.66) and tells Keith, her editor: “my life is the pits right now.....I need some time out” (*BH*, p.9). Thus when Keith suggests to her to write a travel piece on Caribbean islands, she jumps at the offer and although “ordinarily she would have done some homework” before going to a new place, this time “...she was in too much of a hurry. This time she’s flying blind” (*BH*, p.10). Hence Rennie’s need to escape, to think, to rearrange her life under the threat of cancer which may recur at any time, takes her to the Caribbean Islands of St. Antoine and Ste. Agathe to write “a travel piece” (*BH*, p.24) as she tells Dr. Minnow, a man she meets on the plane from Barbados. Once on the island, Rennie feels she has “escaped” (*BH*, p.58) and since nobody knows her here “...she’s invisible...she’s safe” (*BH*, p.36).

Here Rennie meets Paul; in fact is caught staring at him in the dining room of Sunset Inn. Later he rescues her from a deaf-and-dumb man who pursues her. It is from Paul that Rennie learns that the islands will have their first elections since the British pulled out, which Rennie dismisses as “student elections.” She asks Paul if there will be trouble, and he says: “Yes..... [But] you won’t get hurt. You’re a tourist, you are exempt” (*BH*, p.80).

Lora first crosses Rennie in Sunset Inn and she feels that her words of greeting, “Hi there” are the only ones she has learned to fake, the rest is natural. She is repulsed at the sight of Lora’s stub-tipped, grubby fingers which are bitten to the quick and feels “she wouldn’t want to touch this gnawed hand, or have it touch her. She doesn’t like the sight of ravage, damage, the edge between the inside and outside blurred like that” (*BH*, p.89). Lora tries to befriend Rennie who avoids her as far as possible. During the boat trip to the reef, Rennie consciously ignores Lora for she knows that: “Conversations lead to acquaintances and acquaintances are too easy to make on these trips. People mistake them for friendships.” (*BH*, p.92)

Very unlike her, Lora is open and honest and repeatedly warns Rennie against dangerous persons and situations on the island. Rennie is quick to realize Lora’s basic honesty and wryly thinks that back in the early seventies, the Women’s Movement would have given Lora “ten out of ten for openness” and also “[t]en out of ten for sharing” (*BH*, p.98).

Now Lora requests Rennie to do her a “big favour” (*BH*, p.98) by picking up a box of “heart medicine” for her boyfriend’s grandmother from the airport next morning. Since her boyfriend Prince is scheduled to go to Ste. Agathe to make an election speech, he cannot pick it up himself or Lora as she has to leave to be with Elva, Prince’s grandmother. Surprisingly Rennie agrees: “What can she say but yes?” (*BH*, p.101) And the next morning she forces herself to get up because “...Griswold is ingrained in her. If you can’t keep your word, don’t give it” (*BH*, p.127).

But when she collects the box from the airport she is surprised to collect a large box, weighing almost a ton. It now strikes her that she has no idea where she is supposed to deliver the box because she does not know where Lora or Elva lives. She now feels “she has been either duped or used, but she isn’t sure which or how” (*BH*, p.130). Nevertheless, she brings the box to Sunset Inn and slides it under her bed without investigating its contents. Here she acts surprising naive for a reporter.

Rennie tours the island in the company of Dr. Minnow, a man she met on the plane from Barbados. Rennie expects to be shown the local attractions, but Minnow has a different itinerary. He takes her to a squalid encampment where the victims of a previous year’s hurricane huddle, without

adequate food or shelter, even though the “sweet Canadians” have given the government ample funds with which “to rebuild their houses....Only it has not yet happened, you understand” (*BH*, p.135). And when he anxiously begins describing the local politics in detail, Rennie feels she is tuning out as “it is too much like small-town politics, the tiny feuds in Griswold, the grudges, the stupid rivalries” (*BH*, p.140). Minnow reveals to Rennie that he is the major opposition candidate in the upcoming election and his tour highlights the island’s poverty and the corruption of the present regime.

Dr. Minnow feels that by making Rennie witness the plight of the hurricane victims and by honestly telling her of the malpractices of the government, Rennie will, like him, be “[t]empted to change things” (*BH*, p.144) by writing about them. But failing to elicit the desired response from her, he confronts her with: “Look with your eyes open and you will see the truth of the matter. Since you are a reporter, it is your duty to report.” But “Rennie reacts badly to the word *duty*. Duty was big in Griswold.” (*BH*, p.145)

Politics is “not my thing” protests Rennie, “I do lifestyles.” Minnow takes the word literally and agrees that this, too, is what he is after: “It is our duty to be concerned with lifestyles,” he says, “What the people eat, what they wear, this is what I want you to write about” (*BH*, p.148) alluding to the grim poverty in the island. And adds that though Rennie is a travel writer, she is the only one they can turn to at the moment to help prevent bloodshed. He wants her to publish ‘the truth’ once she gets back to Canada and refuses to believe her when she tries to bow out of the situation by saying that the local politics of the islands would not be of interest to Canadians. According to him, “[t]here is no longer any place that is not of general interest” (*BH*, p.147). We should all be concerned with everything that happens in our world.

Rennie returns and buys a local newspaper to learn about the local politics: “...she owes at least this much to Dr. Minnow” (*BH*, p.149) and tries to make up all kinds of excuses not to write what Dr. Minnow wants her to. Although she finds the island full of social ills, political corruption, poverty and violence, she tries to ignore the evidence of this corruption. Her willful blindness to the political and social problem is implicated by Atwood.

When Paul comes to take her out for dinner she tells Paul that she does not know what to do with Lora’s box. He suggests that she carry the box over to Ste. Agathe by boat. But when she returns to her room after dinner with Paul she discovers that someone has been into her room: “sliding himself onto the bathroom like anonymous letter” (*BH*, p.174). Her cosmetic bag has been emptied into the sink, and though nothing is missing, Lora’s box has been opened. And as she looks into the box, she sees a machine gun. She realizes her stupidity and calms herself down: “Dumb, gullible, naïve, to believe people....Now she must try not to panic” (*BH*, p.175).

She is thus drawn into the convoluted post-colonial politics, implicating herself by unknowingly transporting a machine gun. But Rennie does not know this yet. Even after someone has broken into her room and seen the machine gun in the box underneath her bed, Rennie thinks that the situation only resembles “an exceptionally tacky movi.” (*BH*, p.175). And the next morning she buys a roll of packing tape and tapes the box shut: “....trying to make it seem....like the original job”; for if the box does not look open she can always plead “ignorance” (*BH*, p.191) and plans to deliver the box next day to Ste. Agathe. She thus seriously misjudges the grim reality around her.

Rennie takes the boat to Ste. Agathe to deliver the box, trying to act normal, “though she’d felt guilt shining around her like a halo.” She meets Lora on the boat and notices that she has not offered “to take charge of the box,” but she does not want Lora to find out that she knows what was in the box: “the less she admits to knowing the better” (*BH*, p.195). When Elva arrives to take her box, Rennie is not even surprised to see her there.

After delivering the box to Elva, Rennie meets Dr. Minnow who is happy to see her there, for he thinks she is there to cover the elections. Here Rennie sees a German woman who accidentally steps

on a sea urchin being cured of her excruciating pain by Elva's "magic hands." And this springs in her the desire ".....to be cured, miraculously, of everything, of anything at all" (*BH*, p.216).

Lora tells her that only hotel in Ste. Agathe is full because of elections tomorrow and so Paul offers her space in this house. There she embarks on a "no-hooks, no-strings vacation romance" (*BH*, p.249) with Paul. Unlike Jake, Paul shows extreme tenderness and is not repelled by the scar on Rennie's breast. In an almost mystical love scene which emphasizes the healing power of love, he "reaches out his hands and Rennie can't remember ever having been touched before" (*BH*, p.227). At his touch, Rennie feels she is entering her body again and is grateful to him for being "the one who gave her back her body" (*BH*, p.279). By helping Rennie overcome her alienation from her body and restoring her self-confidence, Paul compels Rennie to stop regarding 'love' cynically. Although Paul warns her not to expect too much from him, she feels: "she's a tourist; she can keep her option open. She can always go somewhere else" (*BH*, p.225)

Paul now asks her to leave the Caribbean islands for good, but Rennie does not want to go back; "what does she have to look forward?" (*BH*, p.266) Paul tells her of his past life and also that he believes that there are no good versus bad people but "only people with power and people without power. Sometimes they change places" (*BH*, p.270). Realizing that Rennie is both "nice" and "naïve", he acquaints her with the political situation on the islands and warns her against getting too involved with Dr. Minnow as he is not liked by the power-mad Prime Minister Ellis, as well as some others.

It is from Paul that she learns that nobody on the island is what he or she appears to be. Paul, Lora and all others have at least two sides to themselves and even the kind and boring Abbots double up as CIA agents. Paul himself is "the connection" (*BH*, p.277) and Rennie learns from him that he is a big time drug dealer and gunrunner for a party. Infact, the box she brought from the airport for Lora was actually delivered to Paul. She further learns that because St. Antoine is so far off the regular tourist path and because she had arrived on the eve of first election since the British gave up colonial rule, her presence here had aroused suspicion. Rather than becoming "invisible", Rennie was being watched under suspicion of being a CIA agent.

Meanwhile the election results are out, but Rennie believes "it's nothing to do with her" and is busy reading murder mysteries. The news of Dr. Minnow's assassination seems to her like "a put-on, an elaborate joke" (*BH*, p.280) and it is only at his funeral ceremony that she feels "guilty because useless." Now Rennie understands the urgency behind Dr. Minnow's pleading: "Now she knows why he wanted her to write about this place: So there would be less chance of this happening to him" (*BH*, p.282). Thus Rennie learns that Dr. Minnow was right when he told her that there is no lifestyle which does not deal with life.

While in Toronto, she got paid for her "coy brittleness"⁵ but on St. Antoine, "irony offers no protection."⁶ By trivializing language and providing the readers with, what Atwood calls "a Disneyland of the soul containing...[numerous] Escapelands,"⁷ Rennie is committing violence of a kind in her relationship with her readers. Frank, the weird artist whom Rennie meets while collecting material for her article on pornography as an art form, understands the function of art better than she does. According to him, "What art does is, it takes what society deals out and makes it visible." When Rennie tells him that she does not like his work, he is not at all offended for he believes that art is "for contemplation" (*BH*, p.233) and not for providing diversion and entertainment.

Unlike his work, Rennie's writing "holds thought at bay, instead of inviting it"⁸ and her deliberate silence on 'political' matters implies her complicity in evil. If writers were forced by totalitarian regimes to remain silent or if they voluntarily choose to ignore vital issues, "the only voices and words left [will be] those of the ones on power."⁹ While Dr. Minnow and Lora entreat her to make their troubles known to the public, the deaf and dumb beggar conveys the same message to her with his eyes. They feel that by reporting the truth of the matter, she can help "stop excesses"

(*BH*, p.147). By making Rennie conscious of her duty as a writer Dr. Minnow succeeds in shaking Rennie out of her somnambulism, at least partly, thereby becoming her spiritual guide.

In the aftermath of Minnow's assassination some of his followers attempt to overthrow the present government and the riots which follow his death look like a "festival" to Rennie. She is calm even while Paul desperately tries to get her back to St. Antoine and feels that the machine gun in his hand is probably "a toy" (*BH*, p.287) from which nothing but rubber bullets could come out, and firmly believes: "Surely they are not in any real danger" (*BH*, p.288). The irony lies in that contrary to what she feels, she is firmly embroiled in the shoddy politics of islands and soon becomes "the classic pigeon in such a crossfire."¹⁰ It is only when she becomes an "object of negotiation" (*BH*, p.290) between Paul and Marsdon that the truth dawns on her: ".....the maidens were only an excuse. The dragon was the real business" (*BH*, p.291)

Initially Rennie had thought of her trip to the Caribbean as a sidestep, an absence from "real life" (*BH*, p.9). She had always avoided "massive involvement" (*BH*, p.30) and has refused to touch or be touched by anything. Even her breast-cancer, with its obviously serious implications, becomes merely a possible subject for her lifestyles column and she thinks "she could do a piece on it, 'Cancer, The Coming Thing'" (*BH*, p.22). In the Caribbean Islands, however, "massive involvement" becomes unevadable and unavoidable. Paul manages to drop her in Sunset Inn but her flight has been cancelled, the airport shut down. Feeling "marooned" (*BH*, p.285) in her hotel room she is caught by two policemen and jailed.

The irony is that Rennie comes back to life when she is, in fact, most vulnerable: jailed in wretched conditions. Rennie's cellmate is Lora and the two are unlikely companions.

In contrast to Rennie's solidly middleclass upbringing, Lora is the child of poverty and abuse. Where Rennie is university-educated, Lora has had to become streetwise. The difference between the two is brought out by their different responses to their predicament. In jail, while Rennie is worried about her passport, Lora tells her that they are lucky to have at least a roof over their head: "There are lots worse things." (*BH*, p.301).

To avoid panic, they both start talking about their past lives. Rennie tells Lora about the man with the rope, but when Lora tells her about her worse experiences with "the pride of a survivor" (*BH*, p.306) Rennie feels dejected because Lora has better stories to tell. Hearing cries of torture all around her sets Rennie thinking about "her own lack of power.....what could be done to her" (*BH*, p.308). A while later Rennie naively feels that the prison authorities have mistakenly put salt into their teas instead of sugar but Lora corrects her by saying that their teas are salted as per orders and that they are doing it "because they can" (*BH*, p.316).

From the jail cell, Rennie allows her thoughts to wander wildly; she wants an end to stories. She thinks of "Daniel.....enclosed in a glass bubble," herself on the "outside looking in": "From here it's hard to believe that Daniel really exists." She dismisses him as a "mirage, a necessary illusion" she believes in only to preserve her own sanity. She thus overcomes her infatuation for Daniel. Her real focus of attention, her cancer scars now seem minor to her. She assures us that "nothing has happened to her yet, nobody has done anything to her, she is unharmed," then admits that "[S]he may be dying, true, but if so, she is doing it slowly, relatively speaking. Other people are doing it faster: At night there are screams" (*BH*, p.321).

Rennie's cancer, which precipitates her journey to the Caribbean, is not only a plot device. It is also a metaphor for a malignant world. The disease really to be feared, Rennie comes to realize, is the capacity to take pleasure from another's pain. When the police arrest her at her hotel, she recognizes on the hotel manager's face "a look of pure enjoyment. *Malignant*" (*BH*, p. 296). In prison she watches a guard with a bayonet menacing a group of bound prisoners. The guard "walks slowly around to the back of the line with it, strolling, hips rolling, taking his time, luxuriating. He's not

doing this just because he's been ordered to," thinks Rennie. "He's doing it because he enjoys it. *Malignant*" (BH, p.327).

Rennie's physical crisis is brought on by seeing this latter scene. "She has been turned inside out there's no longer a *here* and a *there*. Rennie understands for the first time that this is not necessarily a place she will get out of, ever. She is not exempt. Nobody is exempt from anything" (BH, p.328). She thus links herself to all those who suffer loss.

Rennie is slow to realize that some of the privileges they enjoy in jail—Lora's supply of cigarettes, a package of chewing gum—result from Lora's sexual favors to their guards during the daily latrine run. For Rennie, silently repeating the wisdom of Griswold, "it isn't decent." To the hardened Lora, it is simply a survival tactic. It's "not any different from having some guy stick his finger in your ear" (BH, p.323). Not that Lora is doing it for cigarettes or chewing gum. The guards have promised to arrange for her to see Prince, whom they claim is also incarcerated. As the days go by, Lora becomes increasingly impatient: the guards keep promising, but they never deliver. When Lora cries over her dilemma, Rennie finds herself "...embarrassed. She looks down at her hands, which ought to contain comfort. Compassion. She ought to go over to Lora and put her arms around her and pat her on the back, but she can't" (BH, pp.323-324).

Finally, a new guard blurts out that Prince was never imprisoned, having earlier been "caught in the crossfire" (BH, p.330). Lora realizes that he, too, has been assassinated and that she has been used. Her rage and grief explode, provoking the two guards, and Rennie watches, helpless, as Lora's body endures their relentless beating. At last, against her will, Rennie is doing what Minnow had asked: "Look with your eyes open" (BH, p.145). "She doesn't want to see, she has to see, why isn't someone covering her eyes?" (BH, p.331)

Rennie had never responded well to the living Lora, and twice does she tell that the two of them have "...have nothing in common" (BH, p.96, p.306). She is repulsed by Lora's hands and in prison Rennie decides "she infact dislikes her" (BH, p.301). But after witnessing Lora's beating, she overcomes her revulsion for Lora. Heaving her head and shoulder on to her lap, she moves the sticky hair away from her blood-covered face mouth which looks like "a piece of fruit that's been run over by a car" (BH, p.338). For a moment, she feels nauseated and cries to tell herself that she has "no connection with this, there's nothing she can do, it's the face of a stranger" (BH, p.338); but realizes that there is no such thing as a faceless stranger.

In the scene which follows Rennie mothers Lora and helps her back to life. Thus, though Rennie knows that it is safer for her to remain childless, she finds the symbolic mother within herself. No longer repulsed at the sight of Lora's hands, Rennie reaches out, finds the use of her hands, and holds her left hand with both of her own and attempts "to pull....through" (BH, p. 338).

She admits: "It's the hardest things she's ever done" (BH, p.338). But believes that "...if she can only cry hard enough, something will move and live again, something will get born" (BH, p.338). What gets born is a new Rennie. "By recognizing that Lora is a real and suffering person,...Rennie has stopped being a voyeur."¹¹

The book concludes with Rennie envisioning her release from prison with the help of a Canadian diplomat and with her awareness that she has been changed irrevocably. For the first time, "she's paying attention, that's all" (BH, p.341). "What she sees has not altered; only the way she sees it" (BH, p.339). On the flight back to Canada, which may be a fantasy, Rennie feels "the shape of a hand in hers, both of hers, there but not there, like the afterglow of a match that's gone out" (BH, p.339).

Ironically, the time on St. Antoine has made her what before she's been in name only: "A reporter. She will pick her time; then she will report" (BH, p.340). The Canadian official who passes on a request from the local government that she not write about what happened to her has no influence. Rennie has become what they accused her of: "a subversive. She was not once but she is

now" (*BH*, p.340). The feel of Lora's hand in hers –"it will always be there now" (*BH*, p. 339) is the pledge that Rennie will eventually bear witness to what she has seen.

But the narrator in the final paragraph states ambiguously that "she will never be rescued" and in the following sentence that "she has been already been rescued" (*BH*, p.341). The rescue alluded to here may well be restoration of her contact with the rest of humanity, here represented by Lora, a woman Rennie would have shunned in Toronto. She is restored to a full life, however long it may last. Thus she can never be rescued now from this knowledge of human barbarity and yet that knowledge, paradoxically, frees her from her aloof detachment toward others and releases in her for the first time genuine compassion for the hurts and suffering of her fellow human beings.

Certainly, if she is released from the prison, she will never be able to return to the shallow, solipsistic existence she has known in Canada; now she will always be involved with the fate of humankind at large. Perhaps too, if she returns, the stranger with the rope will be waiting for her in her apartment - a personification of death - but she will not be afraid, for in her enlarged understanding of life she accepts that he too must someday come.

Thus the intended escape to "somewhere warm and very far away" (*BH*, p.9) embroils her in Third World political upheavals and, as has been the characteristic of all of Atwood's fiction, Atwood also makes Rennie undergoes a major transformation. She has come a far way from original plan to abstain from any political topics and to do "a good Fun in the Sun" (*BH*, p.9). Whether or not Rennie escapes is difficult to say, because the ending of the novel is narrated in future tense. But there is no doubt that she has become a three-dimensional person. The novel begins with first person narration but quickly switches to third, suggesting objectivity and it is narrated in very short scenes, like a journalistic piece. Past-tense memories of Toronto life are interwoven with present-tense events on island to highlight phases of Rennie's moral growth.

As much as this novel is an act of witnessing the terror that exists beneath the surfaces that are Rennie's speciality as a journalist, it is also a cry for the ending of silence, especially women's silence about the cruelty to which anyone may be subjected in the middle of the seemingly placid life. What is important, suggests Atwood, is what we pay attention to while we live, what we will tolerate, the quality of our witnessing. Atwood's commitments to the centrality of fiction as a means of moral analysis are extremely forceful and she attempts to ".....see ourselves and the way in which we behave towards each other, through which we can see others and judge them and ourselves."

Once home, from ".....a space trip, a trip into the future; it's her that has been changed" (*BH*, p.339) Rennie becomes, as Audrey Thomas comments in a review of the novel, like the Ancient Mariner, "a sadder but wiser person".

By growing conscious of the growing aspect of her power as a writer, Rennie overcomes her crippling alienation from her job. Her story makes us realize that "negative innocence.....is the most appalling characteristic of evil when appears in the actual world" and Rennie is the first of Atwood's narrator to approach becoming a serious writer: Marian in *The Edible Woman* is a market researcher, the narrator of *Surfacing* a commercial illustrator, Joan a writer of escape fiction.

Works Cited:

¹Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, [Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1999], p. 52. All further references to this work (*BH*) appear in the text.

²Mary-Ellen Mort, Review of *Bodily Harm*, *Library Journal*, 107, No. 4(15 February 1982), p.471.

³Clark Blaise, "Tale of Two Colonies," *Canadian Literature*, 95 (Winter 1982), p.111.

⁴Michael Dixon, Review of *Bodily Harm*, Fiddlehead, 132 (April 1982), p.88.

⁵Clark Blaise, "Tale of Two Colonies," *Canadian Literature*, 95 (Winter 1982), p.110.

⁶*Ibid*, p.110.

⁷Margaret Atwood, "Amnesty International: An Address (1981)", *Second Words*, (Toronto: Anansi,1982), p.393.

⁸Diana Braydon, "Caribbean Revolution and Literary Convention,"*Canadian Literature*, 95 (Winter 1982), p.183.

⁹Margaret Atwood, "An End to Audience (1980)," *Second Words*, (Toronto: Anansi,1982), p.350.

¹⁰Clark Blaise, "Tale of Two Colonies," *Canadian Literature*, 95 (Winter 1982), p.110.

¹¹Ildiko De Papp Carrington, "Another Symbolic Descent," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 26 (Summer 1983), p.57.