

**Margaret Atwood**

**Invites Us to Think about Women's Vulnerability  
through the Novel**

**Bodily Harm**

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## Introduction

This subject appealed me because the writer of this book, a Canadian woman, is also a feminist. My other interest was to get a glimpse of Canadian literature because Canada is a country I feel attached to. It is my first use of a declared feminine point of view to analyse a text.

Margaret Atwood had a dream childhood, being raised in different Canadian Natural Parks. She never had to suffer from sexism in her surroundings. It can seem strange, in this situation, to become a feminist. She actually writes simply as a woman, not as a feminist fighting (with) men. She said in an interview: "I am a writer who is female and therefore I write a lot from the point of view of a woman. In other words, I don't see myself as a woman who is writing to promote certain things" (cited in Bonnie Lyons, page 221).

Analyzing some of the feminist issues in the novel *Bodily Harm* proves to be rather complicated work, because you have to define first what feminism really is. The trouble begins right here because there is not only one sort of feminism. Like each person has her or his own personality, every group of women - even every single woman - has a different opinion of what a perfect world would be. But though those many different ideas, most feminists aspire to bring women in a place of equality with men. Some even go further, claiming that we should get rid of men. I am personally not an adept of this solution, and probably Margaret Atwood neither is. I will not regard this book from this point of view. If basically it is a battle of women against (or with) men to gain rights, it widened into a battle of every disadvantaged people. Any minority would like to obtain the same rights as those who have the power. I will also consider this point of view in analyzing *Bodily Harm*.

Before coming to this analysis, we have to understand who is Rennie, the main character of *Bodily Harm*. Rennie was born in a village and raised by her mother and other women from her family, without her father. She left Griswold to study in Toronto and became a journalist. Through this job, she meets Jocasta who seems to be her only friend, and Jake, her soon-to-be boyfriend. She leads a rather normal life, having a partner, a job and a social life, until she is

diagnosed with a breast tumor. This cancer leads her to break up with Jake. As she finds herself alone, a mysterious stranger spies on her, enters her house while she is out but leaves a rope on her bed. Rennie will try to find help. She has an affair with her doctor and finally asks to be sent to the Caribbean to write a travel piece. Instead of resting and recovering, she has an affair with a man involved in politics and illegal traffic. Through him, she is caught in a revolution and ends up in jail. In the end, her future reminds hazardous.

Considering all the troubles she successively falls in, Rennie almost seems to be a caricature. However, once you consider it carefully, she can be any unlucky person. The amount of problems happening to her may appear out of measure, but they are not unrealistic nowadays. She is particularly weak, due to what happened to her in the few months following the identification of her breast tumor. It then is not surprising that she is led to such bad events without being able to resist. In my opinion, the events in this novel are not there to show adventure, but mostly to trap Rennie and to show the reader how she deals with trouble and reacts. Her different states of mind and reactions are the focus of the novel: her trip to the Caribbean embodies mental trips, which are unfortunately a nightmare after another one.

In a very short time, Rennie's physical, loving and social life falls apart. Furthermore, she realizes that she has not really chosen her job and loses some ideals of hers. She is still alive, but she remains practically alone and empty. She tries to escape this feeling of emptiness, which is a hole she is falling in, but since she is lost, she takes a wrong way, falling always lower. Rennie may be the embodiment of the woman we all fear to become one day, harmed and helpless, unable to save herself, only hoping to be saved. John Berger writes in his introduction to *Bodily Harm*: "A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman's presence...defines what can and cannot be done to her". Rennie is this woman, the archetype of the weak woman in a world of power-hungry men. Since the story is centered on this woman, it is natural to think of the way the reader (or the author) can identify herself or himself with Rennie. Margaret Atwood said in an interview that her books are not autobiographical. Though the images and characters have passed through her head and the identification is easy for the reader (Joyce Carol Oates, p. 72).

The first contact the reader has with this novel is its title. *Bodily Harm* immediately appeals because it leads to so many questions. What happened? Who was harmed? Was it an attack? Was it a fatal injury? After reading the book, there is no real answer. The main character undergoes a surgery during which a small part of flesh is removed from her breast. In our

society surgery is supposed to be a healing process. That is the theory. In practice, humans are no machines. They are made of a body and a soul, both rightly attached. You cannot touch a living body without touching the mind attached to it. Then, it is normal, in the case of such a surgery to feel hurt. The emotional response is more dramatic than the real surgical act.

Imagine a person being hit with a knife and another one (or the same person) having his navel pierced. Both wounds can be basically the same, but the feelings will be quite opposed. In Rennie's case, it is easy to understand how harmed she feels. Apart from her other problems in life, she has to go through the surgery with the fear of finding out her tumor is malignant. Eventually, it is. The part of flesh touched is not anyone: it comes from her breast. Since the breast is, in our society, an important symbol of femininity, she feels attacked in her body and her soul. She is harmed in many ways.

The first part of the following analysis will discuss the feminine identity, because Rennie has trouble finding and keeping it. Then we will examine the difficulty to define the limits of a woman's body, since Rennie has to face this problem. Finally we will point out the male stereotypes presented in this book, because of the important impact they have on the main character's life.

## I. Struggle to Define the Feminine Identity

First, Rennie goes through a crisis about her femininity. She undergoes a breast surgery, and even if it does not show when she is dressed up, she carries a scar that any man will see or feel when she is intimate with him. This point could be seen as a caprice, but a woman in this situation not only has to fight the fear that cancer might come back, the fact that she is harmed in her body and femininity, but she also has to face the misunderstanding of the people telling her that she is only being capricious.

The importance of the breasts needs to be pointed out. Breasts have been a symbol of fertility for ages, and then, in our society, of femininity. Feminism is only a few decades old, while the image of woman has been there for millenniums, and we keep believing that the main purpose of female beings is to give birth. For this reason a woman harmed in this part of her body will question her femininity. Feeling diminished in her very nature, she needs to be reassured, to be shown that she is still a woman. Rennie indeed does not feel like a woman anymore, and it is hard for her to make love with her boyfriend, who also seems to see her differently since he learns about her breasts tumor. He neglects her body, because this body seems strange, distant and different. Rennie has the feeling that he denies her body. In doing so, he denies her femininity.

This is exactly what feminists want to get rid of. The fact that a woman needs a man to be herself and to define herself is part of a patriarchal order feminists worked to eradicate. Because being dependent means being chained, unable to leave without an upper power and therefore recognizing this power, Margaret Atwood chooses as main character Rennie, who is the opposite example of a feminist ideal. It can be a warning to what could happen if women would let men rule their lives, but it is also a provocation thrown to the feminists. Margaret Atwood points out women's way of thinking. Indeed women accept the power of men. Effectively, middle-class women at the time *Bodily Harm* was written (early 80's), who did not need to work, depended on men. The female characters featured in this novel, though they do not exactly fit in this group, cannot imagine living without men. This need obliges them to accept the power of men over them. The problem not only comes from the men, but also from the women who are unable to take care of themselves and to stand in front of men. Women want to

be the equal of men and at the same time to be treated specially and helped by them. They are willing to place themselves in dependence but still want to keep their freedom. In order to free themselves from this condition, women must first accept that men will not take care of them anymore. Furthermore, they must acquire the strength to exist and stand by themselves. For this purpose, they can join other women to build their confidence and power together. Some feminists dream of a “world of sisters”. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who had cancer, wrote that she founded comfort and support in groups of women like feminists or lesbians (see p. 154).

Actually, any human being needs to be reassured when harmed, and while some women are trying to find help in the opposite sex, feminists claim that women can be at least as comforting, maybe more. It is true that they (usually) do not have sexual power over their fellow women, but this kind of power is often seen as aggressive. Much better than men, they can understand the fear and hurt of their “sisters” for the reason they are women themselves. Rennie does not have such a support group. The only friend she has is Jocasta who is in some way a model for Rennie because she can escape the events entrapping her. She is in charge of her destiny and knows what she wants. Actually, Rennie envies her for the success and freedom she has but cannot imagine succeeding as she does. Jocasta is not able to help Rennie very much, maybe because of these differences. Neither Jake, though he is her lover, is able to offer any help when she needs to be cheered.

Rennie not only questions her femininity but also her whole identity. Even since she was a young girl, she has wanted to leave Griswold, to detach herself from her roots. She eventually leaves Griswold, but it never leaves her mind. She keeps remembering it and being influenced by it. The name of this village, though it can be by hazard, can be interpreted in a way that would explain Rennie’s need to leave it. “Wold” is an area of small hills, nothing special, but it sounds very close to “world”. This likeness could mean that this place is like a world, what implicates that it defines the people living in it and does not allow them to go out easily. Furthermore “Gris” can remain of “grisly” and a “grisly world” is something pretty much anyone would like to escape and forget. But “gris” can be seen in a different way, especially from a French speaking person (“gris” means grey), a colour usually related to melancholy, boredom or sadness. A grey place appears like one covered with clouds, perhaps the reason why Rennie wants to go away from it.

At the time of the events related in the book, her whole life is collapsing and she is practically left alone wondering what her life is about. The answer she finds does not help

her, because it is the realization of the emptiness of her existence. She has failed in many ways, looking at the aims she had in her youth. She has been unable to forget Griswold; she did not keep some promises like never being boring or never faking. Her love life loses its meaning during this identity crisis. She realizes that most of her friends are not real ones, that her job is not what she expected it to be and that she is not as good at it as she wanted to be. And - top of the list - an illness destroying her from the inside is invading her own flesh. She decides to go in search of a new identity, because she lost the former one, and feels now like nude.

Rennie does not consciously decide to begin a new life but it is obvious that this is exactly what she wants. She chooses the Caribbean because it is sunny and she believes it will cheer her up. But the main reason seems to be that she wants a change. Some signs show that she is rejecting the idea of any coming back: she does not wash the dishes before leaving and, most importantly, ignores an appointment with her doctor and flies away before it, without even canceling it. This reveals that she neglects what she considers as a past and forgotten existence. Her real life is starting in St. Antoine, the promised Eden. But the beautiful island happens to fade very quickly, and Rennie aims to sleep, in order to forget what she is doing there. Furthermore, she seems not to be very pleased, away from home, especially missing its security (see p. 39). When she arrives, she first thinks she succeeded in making herself invisible, free to decide whatever she wants, nobody being in a position to do so. She sees herself safe in this way (see p. 39). But, to her expense, she realizes that she is not, that even if she cannot have any connection with local people, she is watched from the beginning, and the one composing her identity is not herself. As with Jake, (see p. 104), she appears as a blank paper and somebody else has got the pen.

Even though her past life remains thousands of miles away, her problems are not solved: the memory of the rope man is still following her. This event can symbolize the power of the past: when she sees the rope, Rennie is reminded of Griswold and thinks about the meaning it could have for the people there. Effectively the rope, that is seen as a cold suggestion to hang herself, is also a symbol that she is tied. Her present and past lives are with her wherever she is, and the distress with which she struggles does not leave her. The elements that could reassure her or hold her up are now far and she becomes weaker than ever. This situation makes her unable to start a new life. Anyway, is she strong enough to do it on her own? All the time, she wants to be saved, she cannot imagine salvation coming from herself. In this new place, where nobody is likely to hold her hand and bring her up, the exact contrary happens. She wants to go past the first line of her travel piece. Instead of finding new aims and references, she loses the

few ones she still has, what leaves her with nothing to protect her from any coming danger. She is so much in need to grab something to hold to, feeling so lost, that she runs into the first opportunity offered, without taking time to think about who she can trust and who she cannot. She never finds the strength to say no, like when she accepts to take care of the box of “medicine” even if it looks strange to her (see p. 95-96). Like migrating birds traveling over dark seas, irremediably attracted to a light shining in the dark are flying into a lighthouse, Rennie does not realize that her involvement could put her into an unsafe situation. Paul told her (see p. 78) that the upcoming trouble did not concern her, since she is a tourist. Though, she ends up in the middle of it because of him! She feels protected, also does not worry nor wants to think about the future. She is afraid of what her future could be or that there could not be any future for her, and that she could face death anytime. She leaves her former home and life, that she sees as a dark situation, to escape to a place she imagines full of hope and bright. Unfortunately, she keeps running through black clouds, even under the burning sun of the Caribbean.

It would be clear that people that are using Rennie, and then putting her into trouble she is stuck in, are men; if Lora was not that involved. But in which way is she? While Paul, Minnow and the other men seem to have mostly chosen to get into politics, traffic or anything, Lora, even if she looks terrific at first sight, seems to have come there very much like Rennie, regarding to her past. She was barely running away from home; she was weak, like Rennie, and younger, that means less experienced. She seems to have tried anything to build a new life and she had the bad luck to fall in St. Antoine. She stays there, surely because she is too much involved to get out, but she obviously does not feel at her place. If she participates in putting Rennie in trouble, it is only because she is already there and has no other choice. Maybe she is also longing for another woman to accompany her in her struggles. Those two women are being used and the trouble really comes from the men taking over their lives.

In the point of view of some feminists, those identity crises come from the fact that women are trying to change the place they have been given in society, i.e. taking care of the house and children. Of course, in this case, it is not as focused, since Rennie has no children and a job of her own. Margaret Atwood is showing here that single and professionally independent women are not totally free of the patriarchal order; they actually internalize it, because it is what most of them have been taught, sometimes unconsciously. Rennie has been raised in a puritan neighborhood, where women must be decent and one of their main aims is to get married. The fact remains that she wants to escape a life where she feels threatened to build another one.

The personal choice seems to be here a very important point, that women are trying to obtain, because they need to decide for themselves and not let men rule their lives.

Many women, called subjectivists (see Belenky, Mary Field & al. p. 82), are trying to walk away from their past and start a new life based on their autonomy. Those women are leaving their former surroundings (family, job, etc.), often in order to live for themselves, to escape their former identity of someone's mother, wife or daughter. For many of them, it will bring their ego up, and make them think positively of themselves, even if they have difficulty knowing who they are and see it as pretty foggy. They usually describe themselves with images instead of words. Rennie resembles them in the way that she cannot even think about who she is. Those metaphors appear to me very representative of the important subjective part of women's mind, opposed to the objective thinking men find far more useless and serious. In the case of those women, they are letting their feminine part express itself without the fences in which men want them to stay, and it seems to encourage them, because even if they do not know where they are in the present, they see the future as positive and promising: "Right now I'm so busy being born, discovering who I am, that I don't know who I am. And I don't know where I'm going. And everything is going to be fine". (see Belenky, Mary Field & al., p.82). But in order to successfully find her true self, a woman must be strong enough to search it and go through the emptiness she might face some time. Rennie obviously is not. Doing so she does not choose to go away from her life, but is actually left behind by it: her health is replaced by an illness, without her doing anything for it to happen, and it opens the door for numerous problems to come, also making her love life collapse. The basic elements of her life disappear, and she remains alone and lost. This, added to her weakness and the need she experiences to have a man taking care of her, does not allow her to develop her personality, and on the contrary puts her in jeopardy.

## II. Female Body Integrity in Question

Rennie faces another fear. She is frightened by the idea that the limits between the inside and outside of her body could disappear. This appears in a number of her thoughts. Most of all, she is afraid of the idea to be “cut open” and that the inside of her body would come out. That physical fear of being opened reflects her refusal or inability to psychologically open up to her partner Jake. This fear also comes out when she sees Lora’s bitten fingers and is highly repelled by it. The physicality of it seems unbearable for her. Her fear seems to symbolize her fear of her cancer, imagining the cells dividing and invading her whole body, trespassing the limits of the place they first occupied, invading her whole body without being stopped by any fence. But this fear seems to have been bothering her well before her illness, and cancer only increases it. Maybe she needs the world to be in order and all objects including aspects of her life to be within limits in order to feel secure and not lost. If the structure of her life is perturbed, she loses her marks and finally feels in an unknown and potentially dangerous world. As in St. Antoine, where everyone is not what they seem and cannot be defined, she loses all control over her life. What really frightens her is the idea of a body (especially hers) whose limits between the inside and the outside are disappearing. This seems to point out that deep inside she is afraid of her flesh, afraid to be harmed. Of course, the surgery is the exact realization of this fear. When Rennie undergoes it, a part of her flesh is removed, and this act breaks the limits of her body. It is very usual for women to feel harmed when a part of their breasts is taken away; even if not apparent, a scar remains. This is often not recognized and is not believed to be an important issue. Nevertheless, it is highly important for women concerned since a surgery alone is already a wound. It is harm done to their bodies in order to cure them, as if they had to pay - suffer - to heal.

This leads Rennie to question even the reality of her body and the fact that it belongs to her. Because it does not exist in Jake’s eyes anymore, and since she is used to living very much through him, her body vanishes in her mind, too. This impossibility to have a physical relationship leads them to break up. The separation does not help Rennie to improve. Finding herself with literally no body, she still has to physically live in it. Consequently, she begins to see

her body as apart from her, a piece of flesh she has to carry all the time, a piece of flesh only rising a lot of problems.

There is another way in which she sees herself from the outside: the man who leaves the rope on her bed actually enters her own home. He crosses the limits of the outside world and enters Rennie's one, threatening her life. This mysterious man can symbolize the fact that she now feels in pieces, not a whole self. However, he also represents a part of her she would be glad to get rid of. When she learns that he used to watch her, she feels invaded but seems to resolve herself to it; she actually begins to look at herself from his point of view, thinking of herself as "she" (see p. 40).

Rennie feels that the limits of her body are crossed by strangers who invade it. Any woman in that situation would feel attacked and very vulnerable. Women need integrity and control over their bodies, or they will never be able to feel really safe in this world. Rennie is frightened to imagine someone cutting her own flesh, and impressed that someone can know what is inside her, what she ignores. Furthermore, this knowledge gives Daniel an edge over her. Women must not get rid of their fear, but of its causes. They have to make men admit that physical relationships between the sexes must be equal and that the needs and desire of women are as important as men's.

There is another limit that Rennie crosses against her will: the limit between her own nice world and the wild outside world. When she arrives in St. Antoine, she enters dangerous surroundings. She has left a sweet place - Canada - where her problems are not life threatening; they only prevent her from fully enjoying life. Furthermore, she used to be in a lucky minority where happiness is an issue people feel they have a right to discuss. The biggest part of the world is not like Toronto. Here, out of the luxurious hotels, local people are living in a universe full of violence and danger. Because of poverty and unsteady political structures, too many people are suffering, struggling only to survive, and there is nobody to care about their individual lives. Rennie should normally not enter this logic, but she gets mixed with local people. It shows here that this transgression of limits can make her weak, vulnerable and exposed in an unknown situation. Rennie is also shocked to discover how thin the limit between life and death is in St. Antoine. Because she is used to a society who protects weak people, she feels even more helpless in a place where everyone must fight to survive. The only other possibility is to give up and die. This dilemma reminds of the one she has to face with cancer: she can either be cured, meaning being cut in her flesh, or stay untouched, meaning dying (see p.23). She is able to go through the surgery because in this case she is helped and taken care of, but she is totally

beaten in the battle she is thrown in at St. Antoine, because there is no one to save her, and she finally has to give up everything once in jail.

Of course, there are doors in the fences separating the self and the other that can usually be opened without risks, allowing social contact. Margaret Atwood said in an interview (see Bonnie Lyons, p. 229) that hands were important to her, that she saw them as one of the connecting points between a person and her surroundings. Margaret Atwood also sees hands as an extension of the brain. Knowing that, it seems clear that when Rennie's grandmother is looking for her hands, which she thinks she lost, she is actually looking in some way for her former brain (see p. 57). There is a moment when Rennie herself is searching for her hands (see p. 274) and it could mean that unconsciously, she realizes that she lost her mind and is trying to find it again.

This shows how the feminine identity and the definition of limits of women's bodies are mixed together, and how both elements interact. Rennie's body integrity as well as her feminine identity are threatened by men. I discuss it in the presentation of men stereotypes.

### III. Male Figures

Rennie is always trying to find help, comfort and support by men. Though, it seems that unconsciously, she rightly sees men as potentially dangerous. In fact, most of the ones she is confronted to are. The mysterious man who leaves the rope on her bed is clearly a threatening figure. He is the exact stereotype of the man who is imposing his presence in a woman's life, sometimes violently, without caring about what women think. Even Jake, Rennie's lover, is sometimes violent with her and she gets scared of him. Rennie's feelings about him remain unclear. She seems to long for the time they shared as a couple. Though she never really expresses it, she sees him as an object to fear. Jake represents the man who begins to take hold of and control her life to the point where she only lives through him and feels alone and empty when he leaves. He wants to rearrange her life and, more strictly, to open her up. All the people trying to open her up are men. It is understandable that women, especially weak ones like Rennie, fear men and their power over them and their bodies. In this case, Rennie's feelings are ambiguous, because she needs that power to heal.

Since she needs it so much to define her identity and accept her body again, she turns to men to help her. First she aches for Daniel to rescue her. He is the doctor who performs the surgery on her. She falls in love with him, which is a normal reaction. He is the stereotype of an idealized man. According to Freud, this recalls the projection of a father in the eyes of a little girl, both powerful and protective. Rennie imagines all his power and even his soul in his hands, because she was operated through his hands. They are the first objects she sees when she wakes up after the surgery (see p. 32). She feels that those hands save her and take her back to life. Even though he is the one who physically hurts her, Daniel is still a reassuring person, maybe because only he has the power to cut her and save her life in doing it. Rennie is persuaded that he has the odds of her life in his hands, but she is deceived and realizes that he is not at all powerful. She eventually sleeps with him, but this does not allow her to enter her body again. Daniel is clearly a fantasy, a man to whom she transfers her life, a usual phenomenon between a patient and her or his doctor. Indeed, Rennie principally feels appealed to his hands. The rest of his person seems too common and actually bothers her. When she discovers his failures, she realizes that he does not correspond to the man of her fantasy. He

has not the power she needs to heal. Sleeping with Daniel is not helpful for Rennie because he is not a male, all powerful character. He is an idealized figure of a savior. When she sees his simple humanity, she has to accept that his hands are not magic, no matter that he touches her, she feels betrayed because he is not the creature of her dreams and does not seem to feel a real desire.

Then she finally finds Paul. He also is a fantasy: the unknown guy met during some holidays... But this time, even if his activities are unclear, he fits the image Rennie has in mind. He holds power and sexually desires her, what finally makes her able to accept her mutilated body, to recognize it as her own and again be one with it. Touching her, Paul makes her body exist and gives it back to her. She needs a man to do that, to be a whole woman again. Though, Paul uses his power not only to save her, but also to take advantage of her, in circumstances that allow him to do so: Rennie feels so lost in St. Antoine that she is ready to follow and obey anyone and pretty much everyone on the island except her realizes that. Though the laws in our society now allow women to be in charge of themselves, Rennie finds herself in a situation where she depends on men. Because of that, she gets involved in something she has nothing to do with, and is not able to save herself.

Every man she meets actually uses her in some way: Dr. Minnow to have her write a piece on the local situation, defending his opinion, while Paul goes far beyond social needs and, with the help of Lora, makes her help them in their arms traffic. He maybe has the most effect on Rennie' s life because he is the one who really takes her over and finally uses her. He is an American arrived in a post-colonial island, enjoying the lack of limits on it. He loves taking risks and, like a kid, he likes playing war and going past legal limits. However, this world is an adult one, and his games turn into tragedy. He is a symbol of a male power, but he does not know how to use it in order to avoid any danger.

Dr. Minnow also tries to use Rennie, but in a much more concerned way. Even before she arrives, right on the plane, Dr. Minnow seems concerned by the fact that she is on her own, without a man and speak about "the sweet Canadian" (see p. 29), as if they were little kids, naive enough to think that the whole world is as honest and nice as their microcosm. In this issue, women and Canadians are given the same place; Rennie is twice too weak, first as a woman and secondly as a Canadian. Dr. Minnow is an ambiguous character. His name is the one of a fish, and I found out that it is a pretty small one, that people often catch. I am not a specialist, but this animal seems to be one not too aggressive and with relatively few ways to

save himself; in brief, a rather nice creature. And Dr. Minnow is about the same, not as violent as other men, and like a fish being caught, he finishes his life shot by his adversaries. It is difficult to know if he sincerely cares for Rennie because he does not really warn her about getting involved in the island. Nevertheless, he seems to care about the living conditions of the inhabitants of St. Antoine, not only about the power he could gain. He wants to change things and make life better, but he may be only a dreamer. He sees Rennie only as the woman she is in this surrounding: a sweet and naive person stuck in something too rough for her. He is the stereotype of the man who wants to protect women like weak and helpless people, but infantilizes them a little in doing so. By telling her the story of the ham given for the victims of the hurricane and used at a banquet, he not only underlines her own candor, but also warns her that she should not expect any understanding and help from anyone but herself. But she does not really listen to it, and does not take seriously the warning given to her against Paul, for example. He is the only man who is not threatening Rennie's integrity.

Margaret Atwood's novel echoes the fear of the power of men over women, what is one of the main common battlefield of feminists. It is unacceptable that a category of human beings has to fear another one because the former is weaker and unable to defend itself. The worst is that the fear is founded. Men are really harming women in many different ways. Feminism has a hard task in its aim to change the behaviors and beliefs people have been taught for millenniums. I would like also to point the fact that, in my opinion, many women fear to be "cut open", and experience this by losing their virginity. Doing it, they become open in a physical way by men; they bleed. It is then logical that women, consciously or not, take fright at men in some way.

## Conclusion

In *Bodily Harm*, Margaret Atwood offers a world in which men are to be blamed for all Rennie's problems. They are effectively showed messing things with politics and doing the revolution, and it is obvious that all the violent people, beating the prisoners for example, are men. They have the power but are not able to manage it for the good of people. Indeed, it is here a situation of not only male molesting female but also they represent people seeking power above all, oppressing any opponent in order to obtain it. So here is pointed the battle of every disadvantaged group to gain the right to exist and live in equality with the people governing them. Through this book, Margaret Atwood presents different questions and invites the reader to think about them. She succeeds in this task, because she does not only show the reader the obvious problems of our world, but also their hidden faces, and the way their different aspects are mixed.

As seen in part I, the feminine identity is hard to define, since the place of women in the society is changing nowadays. The limits of the female body (see part II) are also a complicated issue, since women do not always have control over them. Margaret Atwood shows in *Bodily Harm* how Rennie's struggle to find her identity, both as a woman and as a person, and to define the limits of her body are mixed. Those problems put her in jeopardy. This is tightly linked with her relationship with men, since, at the same time, they create and solve her problems. She feels - actually is - physically and psychologically attacked by men. Those use the circumstances to take advantage of Rennie, as she is in a state in which she turns to men to find help. The situation presented in *Bodily Harm* is an extreme one; indeed it makes this novel appealing, because part of the events may have happened to the reader.

Margaret Atwood not only shows the paradoxes of the world, she also builds each personality in order to create a complex web. She invites the reader to follow the heroine through this nest, from a woman's point of view, not of someone trying to promote or defends ideas. Though Margaret Atwood is a feminist, she is able to criticize this movement. She shows the reader that the trouble comes not only from men. Women are not poor helpless victims, but

also have failures and make mistakes. However, this book is about women. Canadians are the women among the different nations, so Rennie being a woman and a Canadian, she is twice a woman. Actually, the author also writes in regards of all the people who have weaknesses or suffer misunderstanding. That makes this book appealing for everyone, because almost anyone can identify with the characters. In this book, she is also bringing to light the fact that a life can totally change and be modeled, like plasticine. Here it is done in a very negative way, and Margaret Atwood invites us to think about how we can do better.

She invites the reader to get involved in that process because she deliberately leaves unclear the future of many of the characters, especially Rennie. We are given the right to chose what will happen, leave her or finally save her.

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Illustration on the first page: Cover painting of *Bodily Harm* by Fletcher Sibthorpe

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- Σ It contains articles that are original interviews of Margaret Atwood in which she speaks about her writing and some topics related to it. It includes interviews by Mary Ellis Gibson, Bonnie Lyons and Joyce Carol Oates.
- Σ Some aspects and details of *Bodily Harm* are pointed out in these interviews. They are helpful for the analysis of the novel.

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- Σ This work offers the analysis of some aspects and symbols in Margaret Atwood's novels.
- Σ It relates topics dealing with: *The Edible Woman*, *Lady Oracle*, *Life before Man*, *Bodily Harm*, *Cat's Eye* & *The Robber Bride*.
- Σ It is interesting but hard to read & requires some knowledge about psychoanalysis and other forms of psychology.

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- Σ It tells about the difficulties that women suffering from cancer are dealing with. Many frustrations are related to sexism.

- Σ It has many links with *Bodily Harm* and helps understanding Rennie's problems.

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- Σ This article is about a woman with breast cancer. It points out her ways to fight the disease and the groups of people who helped her doing it.
- Σ It is interesting because it highlights how women with breast cancer are socially abandoned and risk to remain alone if they don't react, like it seems to happen in *Bodily Harm*.

Belenky, Mary Field & al. "Subjective Knowledge: The Quest for Self". in *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice & Mind*. New York, Basic Books, 1986: 76-86.

- Σ It tells about women subjectivists, leaving everything in their lives in order to find their selves. Most of the time, they try to walk away from their pasts and values they had been given.
- Σ It has links with *Bodily Harm* in the fact that Rennie is trying to end her former life and run away from her problems.