Margaret Atwood Essay, Research Paper

Margaret Atwood is a widely recognized literary figure, especially known for her themes of feminism. Her novels, including Alias Grace and The Handmaid’s Tale are widely known for their feminist subject matter, and one finds the same powerful themes within her poetry. Judy Klemesrud, in her article for The New York Times, once made the wise acknowledgement that “People follow her on the streets and in stores, seeking autographs and wanting to discuss the characters in her novels- most of whom are intelligent, self-absorbed modern women searching for identity. These women also suffer greatly, and as a result, some Canadian critics have dubbed her ‘the high priestess of angst’”(March 28, 1982). Indeed, Margaret Atwood has a talent for the conscience feministic perspective, and the tone of much of her work seems to indicate her sense of political responsibility. Her poem “Spelling,” for example, is a testament to the power of words and it depicts the victimization of powerlessness of women without language. Atwood describes her daughter on the floor, learning how to spell for the first time, and then leads the reader through a history of persecuted, helpless women. For instance, Atwood depicts “the woman caught in the war/ & in labour, her thighs tied/ together by the enemy/ so she could not give birth”(803). Such disturbing portrayals of women have earned Atwood the reputation as a daring feminist. Yet it is important to recognize that her poetry is not just about feminist themes, it is also an exploration into the depths of human consciousness and loneliness. This consciousness, paired with her curiosities about the power of language, is seen in many of her poetic themes. Atwood focuses on different literary and artistic genres in her poetry, ranging from postcards to photographs to magazine depictions of love, in order to explore human connections. Although much of her work may seem fearlessly feministic, in the sense that it brings explores female condition without reserve or embarrassment, Atwood’s poetry probes into a genderless consciousness to explore feelings of human connectionedness and painful separations.

The first poem that will be examined in this paper is “Variations on the Word Sleep.” The narrator of the poem immediately addresses their conscience need to connect with the other person, and they also recognize the hopelessness of this goal: “I would like to watch you sleeping, / which may not happen”. The opening to the poem, as we see here, could be considered typical of Atwood’s writing in the sense that one person longs to bond with another, and recognizes the difficulty. It is this type of vulnerability that we have come to expect in Margaret Atwood’s writings, because as with many feminist writings, we are aware of the power struggle between men and women, and even between women. But this poem refrains from identifying sexes; it only discusses a deeply internal need of one person for another, who is on a journey through he dark maze of their consciousness. The first stanza evolves from a simple plea from the genderless speaker to watch their lover sleep, to a deeper, spiritual need. Atwood chooses to remain ambiguous in this respect, which helps a wider audience identify with the work.

The poem also has merit because within seven short, simplistic lines we glide from a gentle longing to a love complex and intense, with two minds merging together in a dream: “I would like to watch you, / sleeping. I would like to sleep/ with you, to enter/ your sleep as its smooth dark wave/ slides over my head.” The action of the poem continues to evolve as Atwood carries the reader through what appears to be a lover’s dream or fantasy. The narrator at first wishes only to watch their lover sleep, then they desire to enter the same sleep with them, then they envision themselves descending through the layers of consciousness. As the reader follows along with the admiring narrator and his or her companion, they become increasingly aware of the narrator’s need for transcendence. Atwood uses words that help guide us along the action, such as “watch,” “enter,” “over,” “descend,” “follow,” and “become.” All of these words are effective in making the reader feel as if they too are stumbling along side of the narrator, desperately trying to enter the depths of their lover.

Moreover, the narrator is so anxious and passionate, that they are willing to follow their lover towards their worst fear in order to protect them “from the grief at the center.” This is especially interesting in the aspect of feminism because Atwood’s female characters, especially in his novels, are usually exemplary of achievement and empowerment. If one is to assume the narrator in this poem is female, than Atwood is describing a woman chasing her man in a desperate attempt to become his center, and even to “be the air/ that inhabits you for a moment/ only. I would like to be that unnoticed/ that necessary.” The word “unnoticed” here could be seen in a couple different lights, as could the entire theme of the poem. On one hand, the narrator is reducing him or herself to being virtually invisible, by becoming the air of their lover. Given Atwood’s aptitude for dismantling the power structures between males and females in her novels, this type of clinging and desperation seems out of character with her writing. Yet on the other hand, she has abstained from identifying sexes, and the poetry itself is painfully honest and romantic in its portrayal of sacrifice. The narrator is recognizing that the object of their affection, whether they be male or female, has a consciousness worth exploring, and they are willing to carry this person way from darkness. The other reason that this poem should be valued is because of Atwood’s use of the elements. The imagery of the poem moves from water (“smooth dark wave”) to earth (forest, cave) to water again (“become the boat that would row you”) to fire (“a flame in two cupped hands”) then finally, air (“I would like to be the air that inhabits you”). The poem “Variations of the Word Sleep” is an excellent example of Atwood’s talent for revealing feelings of separations and also for showing the romance in giving up ones’ own identity for the sake of love. This theme is not typical to what the public would consider ruthlessly feminist, but Atwood’s writings redefine the realms of what women desire and deserve in love.

The next poem that this paper will discuss is the poem “Variations on the Word Love.” This poem is similar to “Variations on the Word Sleep” in the sense that the idea of love evolves from a simplistic, shallow relationship to realm of love that explores new meanings of human connection and consciousness. The first stanza even seems to be a mockery of the idea of love, because Atwood’s words ring of cynicism: “This is a word we use to plug/ holes with. It’s the right size for those warm/ blanks in speech, for those red heart/ shaped vacancies on the page that look nothing / like real hearts. Add lace/ and you can sell/ it.” (802). This poem, at least initially, seems to fit Atwood’s reputation as a staunch “feminist” better than the latter poem, in the sense of “feminism” as a movement which rejects love and men and all things traditional. Atwood’s first few lines reduce the word “love” to an object of convenience. Her words are highly discouraging, as “love” is merely something sold for commercial value (“add lace on it . . .”) and cutesy magazine advertisements “There are whole/ magazines with not much in them/ but the word love, you can/ rub it all over your body and you/ can cook with it too”(802). Again, here we see a bit more of the feminist theme we’ve come to expect from Margaret Atwood. She expertly mocks the type of women’s literature that provides its reader’s with mushy romance, heavy perfumes, and cooking recipes. Yet, as before, it is important to interpret Atwood’s intentions correctly. Assuming “Variations on the Word Sleep” was written in a sincere tone, we know that love, for Atwood, transcends the boundaries of commercialism and even conventional devotion. Atwood is not saying that love is an over-rated, half-imagined concept created by Hallmark or Cosmo that should be rejected by intelligent females. She is using her poetry to redefine the boundaries of love.

Her approach in this poem is from a post-modernist point of view, because she recognizes that words can be powerful, yet often inept at holding meaning. Her second stanza becomes more personal, showing the gap between what the shrunken word “love” and what it can be, in reality, between soul mates: “Then there’s the two/ of us. This word/ is far too short for us, it has only/ four letters, too sparse/ to fill those deep bare/ vacuums between the stars/ that press on us with their deafness”(802). So again, Atwood has effectively evolved the concept of love. And she has let her feminist colors glimmer in her portrayal of modern women’s magazines, while showing that connections between two people are intensive and indefinable. This poem is also intriguing because she manages to come to the same feelings of helplessness towards the end of the poem that we saw glimpses of in “Variations on the Word Sleep.” Atwood described the word love as being “single vowel in this metallic/ silence, a mouth that says/ O again and again in wonder/ and pain, a breath, a finger/ grip on a cliffside”(802). Here, Atwood captures the desperation of love while also finding new angles with which to celebrate it. Her last stanza gives the reader a feeling of transcendence without a single use of the word “love,” which strengthens her theme. As in the previous poem, her description of the emotions shared between two people has surpassed conventional interpretations of intimacy.

The third poem, “Postcard,” is yet another example of Atwood’s talent for redesigning the concept of love. Just as we have seen before, Atwood is interested in the ways in which both words and literary mediums convey the sense of human relationships. In this poem, she studies the words that might go on a conventional postcard, and also how reality differs from the usual declarations of love that come in the mail. The first line of the poem is representative of what one might expect on the back of a postcard: “I’m thinking of you. What else can I say?” but Atwood immediately dissects the allusion of an ideal vacation with a perfect love waiting across the sea. She describes the surroundings as being dirty and disappointing, and the reader gets the sense that her words may apply to the narrator’s relationship as well: “What we have are the usual/ fractured coke bottles and the smell/ of backed-up drains, too sweet, / like a mango on the verge/ of rot, which we have also”. One must be careful not to oversimplify Atwood’s images here, but it is interesting to interpret this putrid environment as a metaphor for the disintegrating relationship between the writer and the addressee. The “backed-up drains,” for instance, and the rotting sweetness are indicative of the poem’s dark, disparaging tone.

This poem delineates from the feelings of intense love in the other two poems, but it is important to notice that Atwood has avoided, yet again, boxing the two characters into sexual identities, thus, the reader is free to interpret the relationship in “Postcard” according to their own experience or imagination. What is also apparent in “Postcards” is that Atwood sidesteps the usual trappings of what we expect love to be. “Variations on the Word Sleep” depicts a psychological or dream-like journey which intensified the idea of connection and sacrifice, while “Variations of the Word Love’ pulls new meaning out of such connections by denying the reduction of language. “Postcard” is certainly less optimistic about love, but again we see Atwood attempting to transcend the ordinariness of romance. Just as magazines are often inept at capturing the essence of our connections, so are corny vacation postcards. Instead of using the back of the postcard for forced simplicity and reduced senses of time, Atwood writes “time comes in waves here, a sickness, one/ day after the other rolling on; / I move up, its called/ awake, then down into the uneasy / nights but never / forward”. Again, Atwood has a perceptive sense of movement in her poetry. As we have seen before, she used words such as “enter,” “over,” and “follow,” in the previous lines, and in “Postcards” Atwood rocks her readers into queasiness with the words “rolling on,” “up,” “down into,” and “never froward.” The narrator’s vacation has become an absurd foreign nightmare, and the “glossy image” on the front of the postcard serves as a metaphor for the dark realities of being disconnected from others.

In conclusion, Margaret Atwood’s poetry is not what one might expect from a feminist writer. While her novels such as The Handmaid’s Tale and Alias Grace explore the feminine perspective, her poetry can be characterized by its genderless conscious and its unconventional portrayal of love. Atwood’s poetic voice defies the trappings of feminism in the sense that it embraces romantic images. Atwood shows the reader, through such poems as “Variations on the Word Sleep” that love transcends ordinary human activity, and chases it even into the depths of our consciousness and deepest fears. This poem captures the beauty of love by avoiding gender trappings and by carrying the reader through the boundaries of language. This is also true of her poem “Variations on the Word Love,” where Atwood gives us what language is incapable of and reshapes the language of human connection. Of course, Atwood’s poetry should not be oversimplified. In the poem “Postcards” we see a revival of the “high priestess of angst” that is predominant in her novels. “Postcards” is undoubtedly bitter: “Love comes/ in waves like the ocean, a sickness which goes on/ & on, a hollow cave/ in the head, filling and pounding, a kicked ear.” But again, Atwood has found a descriptive language to redefine love and overstep gender issues. The poetic voice in this poem makes the pain of absence clear to the reader, and again, we feel the power and pain of human connections. Atwood peels off the layers of consciousness to reveal a multi-faceted perspective on a usually clich? subject. Love, through Atwood’s poetry, transcends our expectations of humanness and gender.

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