

Redefining the Meaning of Intimacy: A Lexical Stylistic Analysis of Margaret Atwood’s

Poem “Variation on the Word Sleep”

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Abstract



Margaret Atwood in the literary world is known for the portrayal of a feminist perspective, which is both transgressive and unconventional. Unlike the writers of the previous literary ages who showed love, intimacy and relationship as part of human life, Atwood, in her writings, has presented a new vision of the feminist role and power in society that is beyond the mainstream concepts of love and human bond. This paper, therefore, attempts to unfold and redefine the meaning of love, human relationships, and intimacy in Atwood’s iconic love poem “Variation on the Word Sleep”. The poem has been analyzed adopting a stylistic approach to present a comprehensive analysis focusing on lexical choices and their contribution to Atwood’s subversion of traditional representations of love and intimacy. The study explores Atwood’s use of open class words, lexical density and deviation to highlight the profound reimagining of the empowering themes of love and intimacy as a shared journey into the subconscious, rather than a romantic ideal.

Keywords: Intimacy, Variation, Feminism, Lexical Analysis

Introduction

The word style is generated from the Latin word *stilus*, which means “an ancient writing instrument” (Verdonk, 2013). Traditionally, style can be defined as the ways in which writers use language, diction, form of sentences and their arrangement, and poetic devices to present their thoughts and ideas to the readers. Pretorius and Swart define style as “a way in which a writer utilizes the linguistic means at his disposal to produce a definite effect on the reader” (Pretorius & Swart, 1982).

Stylistics is a branch of applied linguistics which examines the style of any text of any genre scientifically and systematically. It extensively studies various styles in writing or speech by applying the linguistic methods and rules to literary texts. Stylistics predominantly emphasizes exploring the complete range of expressive tools present within a specific language (Shawa, 2015). It is a comprehensive analysis of language forms to understand the meaning and interpretation of a text.

Margaret Atwood (1939)

Margaret Atwood was born in 1939 in the Canadian capital, Ottawa. Atwood was brought up in three different provinces of Canada: Northern Ontario, Quebec, and Toronto. Atwood continued living in Toronto and completed her undergraduate degree from Victoria College at the University of Toronto. Later on, she received her Master's degree from Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Margaret Atwood currently lives in Toronto with writer Graeme Gibson. She is a Canadian poet, novelist, and critic. Margaret Atwood is a well-known and well-respected feminist. Internationally, she is one of only three novelists shortlisted for the Booker Prize more than four times and has won the award for *The Blind Assassin*. Being a feminist, Atwood often regards the main characters in her writings as common females who are the suppressed and weaker members of a society. Atwood’s deeply moving, engaging, and thought-provoking written works are known to have given a notch to feminist thought. Several of her novels can be classified as science fiction.

Margaret Atwood’s Poetry

Margaret Atwood’s poetry is considered a unique blend of stylistic features. Her poetry is renowned not because of expert stylistic techniques, but because of the powerful content about transformed human experiences (Foster, 1977). The psyche of the minorities is reflected in her poetry. In both her

poetry and prose, Atwood uses the literary form to challenge traditions (Ljungberg, 2001). Most of her poems center on grief and loss, which she expresses using robust language (Xolmatovna, 2024).

Variation on the Word Sleep

Margaret Atwood's dream-like poem "Variation on the Word Sleep" offers a poetic, undulating series of images that resemble a dreamy state. Atwood addresses the mystical and nonphysical aspects of human experience through metaphors, symbols, and vivid imagery. Her dream captures the transcendent love rather than just describing the dream state.

"Variation on the Word Sleep", first published in 1980, is one of the eight poems that Atwood has contributed to the magazine, *The Atlantic*, since 1969. The poem is a profound expression of love as the persona of the poem is a lover. Though the word *love* is not mentioned in the poem, the highlights of the poem are matters of intimacy, human relationships, female strength and dominance, and feminism. She describes intimacy and physical attraction between human beings by her precise use of language to develop two worlds, one that she controls and the other one in which she hopelessly longs for her lover's attention. This paper focuses on the stylistic analysis of the poem's lexical features to evaluate their contribution to its thematic depth.

Literature Review

Stylistics is defined in multiple ways by scholars and language experts. According to Leech and Short (1981), the "main objective of stylistics is to discover the meanings and appreciate the linguistic characteristics of the text." Short (1996) considers stylistics "a linguistic approach to the study of literary texts." Likewise, Widdowson (1975) states, "Stylistics is the study of literary discourse that has a linguistic orientation." He further elaborates, "Stylistics is an area of mediation between two disciplines... that Stylistics can provide a way of mediating between two subjects: English Language and literature." Thus, it can be stated that stylistics is the study of a writer's style and serves as a bridge discipline that connects linguistics and literature.

Crystal (1970) describes style as a writer's distinctive use of language; their "linguistic habits". Style is the basic element that gives uniqueness to every writer (Shawa, 2015). It is the pattern of linguistic features that distinguishes one work from another. The style of the text even affects and influences its interpretation. It includes how the writer thinks about a subject, and how they present it for a particular audience and purpose (Khan et al., 2014). As every author has a distinctive writing style aimed at expressing their meaning more artistically, having familiarity with an author's style would help in understanding their work in more depth and detail.

Harrison (2024) explores Atwood's unique style and language in her prose pieces. Similarly, Sanchez-Grant (2008) has analyzed Atwood's prose works. In her work on Atwood's novels *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*, employing contemporary theories, she explores the demystification of body image. The author examines Atwood's mind/body dualism through which Atwood reacts to the complex and disruptive consequences of body image. In addition, contemporary theory reveals how Atwood deals with the notion of women's place and the female body's "space". She examines the representation of the female appetite, having regard to its relationship with authority and power.

Hufnagel (1996) regards Atwood's use of duality, not uncommon in Atwood's writings. Hufnagel contends that this duality reflected in Atwood's work creates space for grand concepts and ideology to be embedded in the linguistic construction of a literary work. She specifically examines Atwood's mastery in exploring two contradictory desires in her work. Even more so, Hufnagel's work discusses Atwood's ability to maneuver reality and dream through linguistic construction.

Foster (1977) remarks that Atwood's spaces are rooms, houses and, surprisingly, sometimes, the human body. How these spaces were created, inhabited, defended and sometimes abandoned is recorded in the journals and letters of the pioneers and early visitors themselves, which thus provide an illuminating background to the poetry. Atwood's poetry shows that extinction and obsolescence are illusions, and life is always renewing itself. The self feels conflicted about the spaces it lives in, both needing and fearing, desiring and rejecting them.

Power remains a major theme in many of Atwood's works. Laflen (2007) explicates Atwood's use of language to depict the power of visual culture. Her renowned literary piece *The Handmaid's Tale* represents a Gilead extremely powerful and totalitarian in nature. It curbs all expression through surveillance and monitoring. It is due to Offred's voice only that the horrors of Gilead are expressed.

Similarly, Bowles (2015) explores various issues women face, in addition to the power imbalance between men and women. In “A Woman’s Issue”, Atwood asks, “Who invented the word love?” She takes the reader through a timeline, detailing how women throughout history have been sexually mistreated in the name of love.

Bowles (2015), while analyzing the implication of the word ‘love’ in Margaret Atwood, writings, highlights Atwood’s usual rejection of the traditional love plot in her novels and poems. She challenges the idealized notions of romantic love and foregrounds the power imbalances and issues women face in such relationships. In her works, including *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Power Politics*, Atwood portrays love as a political and often oppressive force rather than a source of fulfilment and self-definition for women. She emphasizes the struggles and mistreatment women endure in the name of love, advocating for a greater awareness of the restrictions and injustices imposed by traditional romantic ideals (Bowles, 2015).

According to Nischik (2009), Atwood openly approaches romantic love unromantically. She writes about the problems of gender relations “from a new, indeed ‘protofeminist,’ perspective, analyzing gender-based structures of domination and repression from a female point of view and providing an elaborate reaction to such imbalance.”

Heckman-McKenna (2016), attempting to redefine love in Atwood’s “Variation on the Word Sleep”, argues that the poem encompasses great meaning and depth as it contends for a reciprocal form of intimacy. This intimacy is distinct from the notion of intimacy embedded in patriarchal societies. Heckman-McKenna maintains that the author builds up on several narratives of the poem, the most prominent one being the gender balanced approach of intimacy reflected in the poem.

While research on Margaret Atwood’s works encompasses the study of both stylistic features and thematic elements of her prose writing and other poems, this paper focuses on analyzing the lexical features in Margaret Atwood’s “Variation on the Word Sleep”.

Research Question

How does Margaret Atwood employ lexical features in the poem “Variation on the Word Sleep” to subvert traditional representations of love and intimacy?

Theoretical Framework

Stylistics is the study and interpretation of a text from a linguistic perspective, and it is a discipline that links literary criticism and linguistics. The stylistics approach is employed by literary analysts to move beyond the words and their meanings in a literary or non-literary text to describe the intent and purpose of the writer (Isti’anah, 2017).

This paper considers the lexical level of language for an in-depth stylistic analysis. The lexical level, which is the most basic one, examines how individual words, phrases, and idioms align and pattern within different linguistic contexts, specifically from semantic and stylistic perspectives. It analyses words and phrases and their inherent expressiveness, including emotive, referential and figurative meanings.

According to Nowotny (2000), criticism of a poem’s diction should only consider those lexical items or the interplay between those items that contribute to developing a particular context within the poem.

Castlione (2020) considers “concrete nouns, descriptive adjectives, and verbs of material processes” to contribute the highest to create imagery. Imagery is the name given to the elements in a poem that spark off the senses. Alternative images emerge from the symbolic resources of a language (Langacker, 2010). Both image and symbol reflect the poet’s desire to achieve unity in seemingly unrelated things and experiences, or express meanings that ordinary language cannot convey (Britannica, 2024).

For an in-depth lexical analysis, the choice of vocabulary that impacts meaning, tone and reader interpretation must be considered. Lexical categorization into open and closed class words (Leech & Short, 1981); foregrounding and lexical deviation (Leech, 2014); lexical density (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013); stylistic function of lexical fields, cohesion and collocation to reveal themes and style (Halliday & Hasan, 2014); the categorization of lexical items in lexical sets involving the analysis of “loose synonymy” and lexical patterns (Verdonk, 2013) are integral to a comprehensive lexical analysis.

Methodology

This paper analyzes Atwood’s poem from a lexical perspective. It is aimed at redefining the notion of intimacy and exploring various underlying themes such as intimacy, feminism, womanhood and identity in Atwood’s work “Variation on the Word Sleep”, examining the poem with a stylistic lens. The primary data for this paper is Atwood’s poem “Variation on the Word Sleep”.

At a lexical level, the poem has been studied by comparing the generic linguistic connotations with the connotations of language construction in the poem. The study analyses the stylistic features of word choice and lexical deviation contributing to symbolism, imagery, allusions, metaphors and irony.

Analysis and Discussion

This section presents a detailed lexical analysis of Atwood’s poem “Variation of the Word Sleep”, focusing on word choices, lexical density and deviation contributing to the non-traditional representation of love and intimacy.

Lexical Analysis

Open Class Words and Lexical Density

Following is the division of open-class words in the poem:

Table 1

Division of Open Class Words

	Nouns	Main Verbs	Adjectives	Adverbs
1.	sleeping	watch	smooth	carefully
2.	wave	sleep	dark	easily
3.	head	enter	lucent	only
4.	forest	slides	wavering	
5.	leaves	walk	bluegreen	
6.	Sun	descend	watery	
7.	moons	give	worst	
8.	cave	protect	silver	
9.	fear	follow	small	
10.	branch	become	white	
11.	flower	row	long	
12.	word	lies	cupped	
13.	grief	inhabit	unnoticed	
14.	center	be	necessary	
15.	dream			
16.	stairway			
17.	boat			
18.	flame			
19.	hands			
20.	body			
21.	Air			
22.	moment			

The division of content words (a total of fifty-three) in the above table shows that most words used in the poem are nouns. The number of verbs and adjectives is a little more than half of the nouns. Most of the nouns, seventeen in number, are concrete. There are only five abstract nouns (fear, word, grief, center, and dream). The nouns can be further divided into two categories related to nature and humans.

Table 2

Division of Nouns into Two Categories

Nouns related to Nature	Nouns related to humans
wave, forest, leaves, sun, moon, cave, branch, flower, flame, air	sleep, head, stairway, boat, hands, body

The juxtaposition of words belonging to the lexical fields of nature and the human experience delineates the interconnection between nature and man. The abstract nouns can be related to both nature and humans. The abstract ones serve to bridge the gap between nature and humans in a way that the clear boundaries formed by the concrete world fade away. This semantic linkage between words (e.g., *sleep, dream, body, and breathing*) builds a lexical cohesion that signifies the connection developed through unconsciousness and love.

The high lexical density of content words, such as nouns, enhances the imagery and sensory perception. The poet uses visual imagery to characterize the nature of dreams as calm. The poem has a vivid description, particularly in the second and third stanzas, of how the poet would like to be the shield of her lover's dream. She would like to take her lover through the beautiful, charming forest in his dream. The poet further says she'd like to be the light of her lover's path in the darkest caves. The rich visual and tactile imagery creates a dreamy ambience reflecting the poet's inner experience.

Atwood's reiteration of content words and loose synonymy, constituting different lexical fields, are instances of "double ties" (Halliday & Hasan, 2014). Atwood repeats *word, sleep, watch, sleeping, enter*, the phrases *I would like* and *grief at the center*, the pronouns *I* and *you*, and the referential words *the* and *that*, constituting both lexical and grammatical cohesion.

Atwood employs material process verbs in her poem. Besides *become, lies* and *be*, all verbs belong to the material process category as defined by Halliday (1994, as cited in Canning, 2023). This density of verbs forms a lexical set that refers to the process of doing. Using these words, Atwood highlights the actions she or the male protagonist takes. However, the contrast is that these material process words, which Halliday defines as verbs referring to physical action taking place in the real world, actually materialize to an action in the world of dreams.

These verbs of physical movement and action (*enter, walk, descend, slide, and row*) signify a journey into the protagonist's inner world. Atwood travels through the dreams, fears and overwhelming emotions. The connection between the two characters is highlighted by the verbs signifying protection and connection. The use of *give, protect* and *follow* shows the speaker's desire to assist the beloved not only by giving what is necessary for guidance, but also by extending protection and maintaining closeness. The choice of these verbs delineates a nurturing role of the female speaker opposed to the stereotypical submissive role of women. The verbs *watch, sleep, and inhabit* constitute a lexical set of verbs, producing lexical cohesion, chosen to reflect the speaker's desire for intimacy, requiring an emotional and spiritual cohesion challenging the traditional objectified representation of females in love poetry. The reiteration of *watch, sleeping* and *sleep* reinforces Atwood's desperate wish to be a part of the beloved's most private spaces: sleep, dream and breath to provide the beloved the much needed intimate connection. Considering the lexical pattern of these verbs, it can be seen that Atwood gradually progresses from verbs of action to protection and then intimacy. The rising intensity of these words parallels Atwood's profound desire and the feminist ideal of love.

The theme of empowerment, feminism and identity, that is, knowing one's own self, accepting and expressing it, is at the heart of Atwood's lexical choices in her poem. Not often do we know who we are, but some incidents, ordeals of life remind us of our true personality, and when we learn who we really are, we know what we want for ourselves and the people around us. The speaker, through her choice of words, identifies herself as the one who has the power to nurture, yet has certain well-defined needs and wishes she realizes may not be fulfilled.

The choice of verbs and nouns elucidates the speaker's identity transforming from a beholder to a bedfellow, a dream walker, a bestower, a protector, a follower, a navigator (a *boat*) and a lifesaver (*air*). The speaker seems to have a certain intellectual capacity to permeate the beloved's mind and, through her ethereal presence, perform a catharsis of the beloved's soul, pacifying it. Being the "air that inhabits" the beloved, the speaker provides that essential but ephemeral breath that goes "unnoticed" but is "necessary" for the afflicted.

The verbs in the poem reflect the power the speaker desires to have in the beloved's dream, akin to the divine power of knowing the creature's mind or the magical power of reading the thoughts. The power of healing the speaker wishes to have is also similar to the divine healing or the power possessed by a fantastical figure of a fairy-godmother, who, being a magical benefactor, protects the protagonist temporarily.

The themes of intimacy and connection are interwoven in all the desires the poet has expressed by using verbs. The gentle imagery employed by the poet to portray the spiritual journey creates a feeling of tenderness and understanding, which can be called the foundation stone of true love and companionship. Delving into the speaker's sleep and comprehending the beloved's subconsciousness are variations of the usual concept of love. In wanting to become one and walk with the beloved, the speaker effectively communicates her "gender balanced" notion of love and intimacy (Heckman-McKenna, 2016). Faithful lovers are those who are ready to give their all to know every hidden and buried side of their lover's life.

Lexical Deviation and Foregrounded Lexical Items

The poem's title announces lexical deviation as it suggests that the poem is not merely about the usual word *sleep* and the concept associated with it, but it is also a reinterpretation based on different emotional and symbolic contexts. Similar to the whole poem, the number of nouns dominates in the title. The title could just have been "Variation on Sleep" but Atwood chooses to use the "word" with it, emphasizing the significance of the words she uses to construct this variation. In a real-world context, sleep is a phenomenon when one becomes disassociated with the social world. However, the title of the poem implies that the poem is a reimagining of the phenomenon where sleep becomes a realm promoting intimacy and connection. Sleep is necessary for the human body as it contributes to improved physical and mental well-being. However, the poem elevates sleep by assigning it the characteristic of spiritual enhancement through a continuous journey. Contrastingly, sleep becomes a metaphor for personal struggle and a surreal experience symbolizing a journey of transformation.

In the poem, Atwood's choice of adjectives forms a foregrounded grouping of contrasting features. The deviant choice of collocations (*smooth dark wave, lucent wavering forest, bluegreen leaves, watery sun, and three moons*) is important to consider both the text-internal and extra-textual meanings. This surprising juxtaposition of adjectives assists both the reader and the speaker in entering the dreamy world. Nouns and adjectives are combined into unexpected word pairs to yield a metaphorical representation and a rich symbolic imagery.

Symbolism refers to a writer's use of an object or reference to add deeper meaning to a story. The poet uses the symbols of *sleep, wave, forest, silver branch, white flower, stairway, boat, flame* and *air*. Sleep symbolizes the unconscious mind and the state of vulnerability; however, if sound, it stands for peacefulness. The beloved's sleep is not comforting, as in the dreams the beloved "must descend" towards "the worst fear". The "smooth dark wave" of sleep slides over the speaker, taking her along with it to the unconscious mind of the beloved. Wave, a symbol of flow and fluidity, indicates how, in the manner of surfing the wave, the speaker can flow into the beloved's sleep.

In this poem, Atwood's deviant lexical choices shift the usual meanings of words to create metaphors to convey the poet's profound notions. Metaphors are a literary device, expressions used to compare people, things, or places. The metaphorical representation of sleep having a "wave" deviates from the usual meaning of *sleep* and is portrayed as a powerful entity that could sweep over the speaker and envelope her, carrying her into a dreamy world.

The themes of dream and fantasy also prevail in the poem, suggested by the poet's choice of lexical items to portray a wave-like journey into the beloved's dreams and the fantastical imagery used to develop a dream-like quality. The "lucent wavering forest", "watery sun", and "three moons" in the beloved's dream suggest the existence of light even in the presence of the dark wave that carries the travelers in the "cave" of fear. The luminosity surrounding the travelers is of a blurred and wavy nature, emerging from the reflection of the sun or non-luminous moons. Descending into the cave of fear is similar to plunging into the underworld, where negativities manifest themselves.

The elements of fear and grief dominate the beloved's sleep. Fear and grief are two of the negative emotions that humans experience. The poet offers protection from both of these emotions. The poem, having the theme of courage against all fear, is a source of motivation for the beloved to confront their fear by moving down the "cave". Receiving 'the silver branch' and 'the small white flower' will alleviate both fear and grief. The poem stresses the importance of acknowledging these emotions by making it mandatory to enter the dark cave of fear. The poet supports the beloved to enter this cave and emerge from it successfully. Hence, it is not a solitary journey into the realm of the speaker's subconscious mind but a journey in tandem in which the speaker and their beloved face the "worst" fear together. This deep emotional bond blesses the speaker and the beloved with the courage to not yield in the face of any internal and external conflicts that develop the most upsetting feelings at the "center".

The speaker offers protection and comfort to the beloved by bestowing "the silver branch, the small white flower, the one word" meant to provide complete safety. The silver branch and the white flower are universal symbols of protection. The symbols "silver branch" and "white flower" represent innocence, purity, and rejuvenation. These could also have sexual connotations; however, in the context of grief and Atwood's intention to purge the beloved's heart from a deep sorrow, the "silver branch" and "white flower" seem to take on more nuanced meanings, connoting comfort, hope, and healing. As such, "silver branch" and "white flower" are examples of allusion. An allusion in

a poem refers to a person, place, historical event, or ancient source such as the Bible, mythology, ancient poets, etc. It refers to something outside of the poem itself to evoke a mental picture, create an image, and set the poem in a larger context or setting. The silver branch that the poet wants to give her lover is an allusion to the silver branch in Celtic mythology. The silver branch bearing golden apples is an object required to enter the Otherworld. It produces such magical music that soothes all sorrows. Similarly, the silver branch in the poem will remove all the worries from her lover's life. The white flower she intends to give her beloved may allude to the flower jasmine, which is a symbol of selfless care in various cultures. By presenting this flower to her beloved, Atwood wants to highlight the selfless love and care she possesses for her lover.

These tangible items, along with a verbal "one word", offer a thorough form of protection, one that safeguards the physical as well as the psychological being. "The one word", though not known, is like a magical spell that has the power to transform the beloved and dispel their fear or grief that lies at the "center" of their "dreams". The poet repeats the phrase "the grief at the center". The grief is so profound that it may not lie only at the center of the beloved's dreams but at the core of their entire existence, physical and spiritual. To protect one from such a deep grief also requires a strong fortification, which the poet is ready to offer in the form of verbal and non-verbal communication. Atwood mentions "word" the second time, as the first time "word" is found in the title. Here, the "word" seems to be a reference to "the Word Sleep" mentioned in the title. The repetition of this word contributes to lexical cohesion, reinforcing the themes of intimacy, feminism and protection. The beloved's distressed sleep undergoes transformation from the "grief at the center". Now that unknown word, which may be "sleep" itself, acts like a lullaby for the beloved, to calm and soothe him. The poet's companionship is a remedy for the beloved, extending its therapeutic ambiance to bring ease to the depressed soul.

The aura of mystery and adventure, as created using lexical choices and deviation, continues on the stairway and in the boat that rows back the beloved's soul to its body. After the beloved is relieved from the grief, Atwood intends to "follow" the beloved "up the long stairway again". The choice of words in this line is in direct contrast to the previous "where you must descend, / towards your worst fear". The adverbial *again* suggests that the act of following is being performed another time; previously it occurred when the beloved descended into the cave, and now it occurs again as the beloved, after being healed, climbs a stairway. The speaker chooses to follow as the beloved seems to be well aware of his destination, previously the cave, and now some mysterious place at the end of the long stairway that serves as the zenith of emancipation. Though the stairway is "long", the speaker's constant presence at the back provides complete backing to the beloved.

Here, the adverbial *again* may not just modify the word follow but the whole clause "I would like to follow / you up the long stairway", implying that the speaker and the beloved climbed up his stairway before as well, perhaps during the same journey or at a moment external to the poem. Climbing stairs symbolizes spiritual uplift, as multifarious religious and mythological traditions represent climbing stairs as climbing the path to heaven through spiritual ascension. The staircase connects the earth to the realm of the gods. Hence, this journey symbolizes a heavenly trip towards gaining divine knowledge.

Reaching the top, the beloved is fully recuperated as if after a pilgrimage. Now, the speaker, through the lexical contrast of "row you back", changes the roles from a follower to the one who would lead the beloved and direct him back to the location from where they started. This dreamy journey of emancipation has to culminate in the real world.

Using the metaphor of transforming into a "boat", Atwood reinforces the themes of protection and guidance, although in a different direction, yet very profoundly. Here also, Atwood offers physical and emotional protection to the beloved, and it is so intense that the beloved wouldn't have to row the boat; the boat would row itself "carefully". This deviation from the literal concept of the boat being propelled by someone using oars, engine, or sails renders a sense of authority to the speaker who knows where the beloved has to be taken.

Atwood equates the speaker's care in bringing back the beloved to holding a flame in two cupped hands. It is not just any flame but a flame surrounded by ultimate protection. It is the level of specificity, the second dimension of imagery (Langacker, 2010), that makes the flame and other lexical items an image. The poet expresses her desire to row the beloved back so carefully as if holding a flame in two cupped hands. These lines equate the beloved with a "flame" and the speaker

with “two-cupped hands”. The metaphorical representation of the beloved as a flame and the speaker as two cupped hands symbolizes the female protagonist’s passionate love for her lover. The beloved, after facing the worst fear and undertaking a laborious journey, finally achieves that luminance which characterizes a flame. This flame lives because of the steady cupped hands that ensure the air around it remains calm, which is essential to keep the flame lit. The poet’s protection and gentleness will not let “the flame” get extinguished. The imagery of cupped hands holding a flame emphasizes the complete protection, one that can cease any gush of air from smothering the flame.

After receiving the symbols of protection, the beloved’s soul or the mind can easily enter its own body and continue sleeping peacefully. The verb *enter* and the simile *as easily as breathing in* signify the contrast between the actions of descending and climbing up. To “enter” is to come or go into a particular place. The beloved makes this final movement like a subtle instance of inhaling.

The poet concludes the journey by referring to “the air that inhabits” the beloved, but only for a “moment”. This transience is in contrast with the lasting protection indicated by the use of “will” in “the one word that will protect you”, which implies that the beloved will be safeguarded as a result of the speaker’s offerings. But this air in which the beloved lives is momentary. Although this air, just like any air, is “unnoticeable” and “necessary”, it also has deviant features of staying there only for a moment. The only air the speaker can allow the beloved to dwell in is a calm but nourishing one, which uplifts the beloved without being noticeable. This momentary air seems to possess the same recuperative power previously possessed by “the silver branch”, “the white flower”, “the boat”, and “the two cupped hands”. Lasting for a moment only, the speaker, like air, invigorates the beloved so intensely that a moment alone suffices. These disparate notions of transience and permanence are reflected in the poem through contrasting ideas of a short-lived journey having a lasting impact of emancipation from grief and fear.

The lexical deviation and the juxtaposition of opposing lexical items have ironic undertones. As a literary device, irony is a contrast between fiction and reality. It emerges from an “intrinsic linguistic phenomenon” (Neshkovska, 2015). Grief and fear, as opposed to protection and care, and other unusual combinations, have ironic implications. The speaker’s desire to be “unnoticed” yet “necessary” also appears to be a lexical paradox, having an ironic effect. There is an irony in the poem’s title as well. The word “sleep” in the title usually means rest and peace. Sleep is the time when one releases one’s tiredness from a complex day and relaxes one’s body. But in this poem, the word *sleep* is connected with labor, instead: the labor of walking in the forest, descending towards the caves, and ascending to the stairs. This variation of the word *sleep* comes from all the lexical deviations found in the poem.

Atwood’s work “Variation on the Word Sleep” is not only a literary piece exhibiting the longing to love and to be loved, or the notion of passionate intimacy, but Atwood’s work has greater meaning and depth. Atwood creates these greater meanings by employing feminist mythological revision, duality, rhetoric, repetition and other stylistic devices. Close reading and study of the lexical layer in Atwood’s piece suggests that the poem not only pulls the “intimacy” out from the patriarchal realm but also reinvents its meaning.

The use of diction by the poet is quite interesting as it helps not only with the gradual build-up of the poem but also conveys interesting connotations. Such as, the gradual actions of the speaker (*watch, sleep, walk, give, follow, row, be*) throughout the poem invoke a sense of empowerment in the reader, the reader experiences speaker’s journey from being a passive watcher to someone who would like to be as essential as “air” is to the beloved. This gradual bold shift in the voice of the speaker suggests that the poetess is drawing up a self-reliant sketch, but at the same time is also offering the counterpart to become one with her in this journey towards self-reliance.

Change in voice of the speaker from expressing personal desire to emphatic intimacy and from being protective to being a guide also suggests that the counterpart, in the poem, is silent or inanimate, which is usually how the male counterpart appears in Atwood’s work because one of the recurring ideals in her work is self-reliance (Little, 1990). Atwood, in her literary pieces, puts forward a formulation of self-hood and identity as she does in the poem under discussion.

Even more so, this treatment of the counterpart in an inanimate and passive fashion is yet a realistic depiction of the patriarchs in a patriarchal society or an intimate relation.

Using imagery, the poetess conveys to the reader that intimacy is not measured by the proximity of bodies. For her, intimacy is on an intellectual and emotional level, something which patriarchal societies fail to offer.

Consequently, the lyrical urgency expressed through the skewed grammar in the piece hints at both the speaker's urgency to revolt from this realm and the author's breakaway from the inherently patriarchal linguistic structures.

From the introductory line, Atwood establishes the binary of desire and reality.

"I would like to watch you sleeping, which may not happen". (Stanza 1)

This duality in Atwood's work is not uncommon. The repeated use of the word *sleep* in the first stanza gives way to the speaker's dream (subconscious realm). Repetition reaffirms the binary of desire and reality in the poem as it suggests that perhaps the speaker is trying to lull the counterpart to sleep, whereas, in the second stanza, the speaker has entered the dream.

"Towards the cave where you must descend" (Stanza 2)

The speaker in this line refers to the *cave* where her beloved must descend. If this "cave" is re-imagined in the concept of Plato's "allegory of caves", the speaker here is trying to hint at the existing belief system (i.e., patriarchal, power imbalance between genders) of the beloved. Regardless of knowing that the beloved must descend to this belief system, the speaker offers the light of knowledge, *"I would like to give you the silver branch"*, a symbolic object of knowledge and protection which soothes the existence.

"Long stairway again" (Stanza 3)

The stairway symbolizes the terrain of hardships or a tedious path. This pathway could also be one of enlightenment. A tedious stairway to enlightenment, on which the speaker would like to accompany the beloved *again*.

"The boat that would row you back". (Stanza 3)

She wants to become the boat that sails her lover through the dangerous shores of the sea. The illuminating presence that shares the lived reality and expands it to unknowable heights.

The imagery of the poem describes a distinct world, a world which has "a wavering forest", "a watery sun" and "three moons". In an interview with the poetess, she comments, "life begins with geology, Canada is one of the wateriest countries in the world, the land is green and a lot of it is blue" (Atwood, Fitz Gerald, & Crabbe, 1979). Line 2-3 of the second stanza in the poem mentions *"wavering forest of blue green leaves with its watery sun"*, describing a similar Canada which the poet in her interview has. By doing the stylistics analysis of the poem, it can be suggested that the poem has profound political insight on a gender-balanced society and its benefits.

Atwood's poetry not only presents an alternate, empowering perspective of life but also touches upon the current limitations of intimacy and societal power dynamics at play in intimacy. The poem ends on a contrast, *"necessary and unnoticed"*, which again gives a sense of reassurance to the reader. This contrast between desire, lust, and obsession represents the urge, the activity needed for binaries to fall apart.

Conclusion

Atwood's poem redefines the notion of intimacy through its deconstruction of linguistic arrangement. The poem takes the notion of intimacy away from a patriarchal society and reconstructs it within the dream. This reconstruction is majorly towards the kind of intimacy Atwood envisions. The intimacy is liberating and empowering. Intimacy in which both the beloved and lover become one intellectually, more than physically. The kind of intimacy which liberates the lived experiences of the male and female counterparts in a patriarchal society. Most of all, Atwood imagines this change to be brought about politically, within the whole system, within the whole country.

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