

This Is a Photograph of Me

It was taken some time ago.
At first it seems to be
a smeared
print: blurred lines and grey flecks
blended with the paper;

then, as you scan
it, you see in the left-hand corner
a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree
(balsam or spruce) emerging
and, to the right, halfway up
what ought to be a gentle
slope, a small frame house.

In the background there is a lake,
and beyond that, some low hills.

(The photograph was taken
the day after I drowned.

I am in the lake, in the center
of the picture, just under the surface.

It is difficult to say where
precisely, or to say
how large or small I am:
the effect of water
on light is a distortion

but if you look long enough,
eventually
you will be able to see me.)

Margaret Atwood

Poetry Analysis: This is a Photograph of Me by Margaret Atwood

Leana Lemon

As a reader, the first thing you will notice about this poem is the contrasting tone, which switches half way through from somewhat pleasant and docile to ominous and morbid. However, I argue that once the reader has a thorough understanding of the social context that this poem is representative of, the tone will not seem as divergent.

Reader Response: First Read

The speaker begins the first half of the poem by describing a picture of a lake, a house, hills and trees. Nothing seems to be out of the ordinary other than the fact that the picture seems to be old, the image slightly defaced and blurry. The language used is simple and easy to follow along with the line breaks. After the fourteenth line the speaker stops this description of the photo and tells the reader that they are dead, after drowning in that very same lake, and this is where the poem begins to take on an ominous, yet strangely unthreatening tone. Something also interesting to note regarding the format is that the latter half of the poem, after the speaker admits they are dead, is entirely in brackets. So after believing the poem to be about a speaker describing their childhood home, or a special place, the poet places the image of death and sadness into the readers mind. The title itself is straightforward in syntax and diction, however it actually sets the tone for the entire poem, although this is not revealed (or understood) by the reader until the second half.

Reader Response: Historical and Social Context

Margaret Atwood paints a stark and morbid image in the readers mind, however, her intended message is actually a feminist response to patriarchy and society's treatment of females (especially female writers/poets) at the time. In the classroom context, I would begin by having students watch this [commercial](#) (late 1930s early 40's) which depicts societies opinion of the place women should hold in the world, the housemaker and mother role. I would have students critically analyze this then re-read the poem, considering that this may be a critique of patriarchy.

Margaret wants the reader to see the powerlessness that women have in her society. In patriarchy, males create and shape women's stories using their authority. This is depicted with the passive voice in the title and first line, as if the speaker (presumably a female) has no control over the picture. When people make histories for others there becomes the question and problem with accuracy and precision. Not only is the speaker saying that she has no voice, she is also demonstrating the lack of power she holds in her society. This is demonstrated through many allusions, one in particular being the tree branches and house depicted in the picture. The house stands for the males of society, steady and rooted firmly in the right side of the image. The females are represented by rootless tree branches on the left side, a side typically known to be "weaker". The lake itself is supposed to stand for society, which is fitting that the speakers figurative "drowning" is actually her being forgotten and marginalised in her society. The fact that the photograph itself is blurry and unclear stands for the notion that women's future itself is unclear. Finally, the concept that the second half of the poem is in brackets is also interesting because it is as if the speaker feels the societal pressure to hide (bracket) her true self.

My Lady's Grave

Emily Jane Brontë

THE linnet in the rocky dells,
The moor-lark in the air,
The bee among the heather bells
That hide my lady fair:

The wild deer browse above her breast;
The wild birds raise their brood;
And they, her smiles of love caress'd,
Have left her solitude!

I ween that when the grave's dark wall
Did first her form retain,
They thought their hearts could ne'er recall
The light of joy again.

They thought the tide of grief would flow
Uncheck'd through future years;
But where is all their anguish now,
And where are all their tears?

Well, let them fight for honour's breath,
Or pleasure's shade pursue--
The dweller in the land of death
Is changed and careless too.

And if their eyes should watch and weep
Till sorrow's source were dry,
She would not, in her tranquil sleep,
Return a single sigh!

Blow, west wind, by the lonely mound:
And murmur, summer streams!
There is no need of other sound
To soothe my lady's dreams.

Little Red Cap

At childhood's end, the houses petered out
Into playing fields, the factory, allotments
Kept, like mistresses, by kneeling married men
The silent railway line, the hermit's caravan
Till you came at last to the edge of the woods
It was there that I first clapped eyes on the wolf

He stood in a clearing, reading his verse out loud
In his wolfy drawl, a paperback in his hairy paw
Red wine staining his bearded jaw. What big ears
He had! What big eyes he had! What teeth!
In the interval, I made quite sure he spotted me
Sweet sixteen, never been, babe, waif, and bought me a drink

My first. You might ask why. Here's why. Poetry
The wolf, I knew, would lead me deep into the woods
Away from home, to a dark tangled thorny place
Lit by the eyes of owls. I crawled in his wake
My stockings ripped to shreds, scraps of red from my blazer
Snagged on twig and branch, murder clues. I lost both shoes

But got there, wolf's lair, better beware. Lesson one that night
Breath of the wolf in my ear, was the love poem
I clung till dawn to his thrashing fur, for
What little girl doesn't dearly love a wolf?1
Then I slid from between his heavy matted paws
And went in search of a living bird – white dove –

Which flew, straight, from my hands to his open mouth
One bite, dead. How nice, breakfast in bed, he said
Licking his chops. As soon as he slept, I crept to the back
Of the lair, where a whole wall was crimson, gold, aglow with books
Words, words were truly alive on the tongue, in the head
Warm, beating, frantic, winged; music and blood

But then I was young – and it took ten years
In the woods to tell that a mushroom
Stoppers the mouth of a buried corpse, that birds
Are the uttered thought of trees, that a greying wolf
Howls the same old song at the moon, year in, year out

Season after season, same rhyme, same reason. I took an axe

To a willow to see how it wept. I took an axe to a salmon
To see how it leapt. I took an axe to the wolf
As he slept, one chop, scrotum to throat, and saw
The glistening, virgin white of my grandmother's bones
I filled his old belly with stones. I stitched him up
Out of the forest I come with my flowers, singing, all alone.

Carol Ann Duffy