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ENGL 305, Section 002

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Analysis of “Another Elegy”

Margaret Atwood Processes Death and Letting Go

In “Another Elegy,” Margaret Atwood attempts both to comprehend and accept death. By incorporating the elemental forces of fire and water, Atwood begins to find death holy and sacred. However, she soon realizes and then finally accepts that unlike nature ⎯ which consists of matter and energy ⎯ death is formless and static. In writing this elegy, Atwood processes grief in a logical, formal manner through questions and self-criticism, and she concludes that death does lack in form. What Atwood achieves in this elegy is not merely an acceptance of loss, but also the realization that in order to come to terms with death, one must let go of the physical and emotional attachments. The key to the poem is the way it conveys the process of letting go.

In order to face the death, Atwood must first define it. She does this through a painstakingly logical process. With the exception of one fragment, the stanza is written in complete sentences. Atwood begins the poem with the different shapes that water incorporates: “Strawberries, pears, fingers, the eyes / Of snails” (1-2). Here, she establishes water as a prominent form of existence ⎯ one with shape and magnitude. Water takes on different forms, therefore, giving life to otherwise dead matter. In contrast, Atwood defines death as the process of drying:

. . . . . Even leaves are liquid

arrested. To die

is to dry, lose juice,

the sweet pulp sucked out. To enter

the time of rind and stone. (3-7)

The image is one of vitality and freshness, even taste, becoming hard and cold. Within this definition is a further implication, as making a single line out of *arrested* and *To die* links death to judgment and imprisonment. Atwood suggests thus represents death as something imposed on us. Death is also notably a *time* and not a place nor opportunity for personification. Here Atwood is leading toward an abstract definition of death rooted in physical processes and described through concrete verbs. The process of dying is to *lose*, *dry*, and *enter.* Unlike life, which is described in terms of *liquid* and *juice*, death is presented as dryness and the lack of sweetness. Death clearly lacks form, for it is empty of *pulp*. The lack of *juice* and *pulp* signify that death is emptiness, devoid of physical vitality. Atwood has not yet let go of the dead, but she has taken the first step of establishing a logical process, where she moves farther away from the deceased in each proceeding stanza.

In the second stanza, Atwood addresses the deceased for the first time by employing the second person. It is clear that she still remains attached to him/her:

Your clothes hang shrivelling

in the closet. Your whole body once

filled with your breath.

When I say *body*, what

is that a word for?

Why should the word *you*

remain attached to that suffering?

Wave upon wave, as we say. (8-15)

Through these lines, she moves from a general definition of death to a personal one ⎯ the *body* or the physical remainder. The word *shrivelling* indicates a lack of form; hence, death is shapeless. Ironically, in questioning the connection between the words she uses and the deceased, Atwood links *body* and *breath* to the second person *you*, which reflects that she has still not let go of the deceased. But she realizes that by doing so she is not only allowing the deceased to suffer, but is also putting herself in pain. Even her use of the word *body* becomes problematic because the deceased’s body had been the source or at least location of suffering, suffering that came “Wave upon wave,” as she says in line 15, which suggests that all the pain of loss and death keeps recurring. She answers the question she asks in lines 13 and 14 by realizing that as long as she is holding on, the suffering will not end because the memories return, over and over, and each time grief returns.

Each stanza takes a step away from the deceased and toward the abstract. In the third stanza, the *you* still remains connected to the burning hair because Atwood is still holding on to the personal. However, in the same stanza she later separates herself by removing the personal and by adding *the* to *body*. The tone shifts here from self-criticism and uncertainty to an admiration of death, or rather its aftermath. Not only does Atwood glorify death, but also gives it a holy and spiritual aspect:

I think of your hair burning

first, a scant minute

of halo; later, an afterglow

of bone, red slash of sunset.

The body a cinder or luminescent

saint… (16-21)

Atwood is envisioning the burning as a purification of the soul, a *scant minute of halo,* which again gives it a sacred quality. Here, she uses fire as a metaphor to convince herself that death is natural, pure, and flawless. Although she later realizes that death is not so, she glorifies what has remained of the personal *you* ⎯ the *hair*. Although *red slash* in line 19 has a dark connation, like blood, it is aesthetic when it appears next to *sunset*. The aesthetics provide a sense of comfort for Atwood as she slowly removes herself from the remains- the *bone* and *the body.* In this stanza, Atwood is complacent about death because she begins to *tart* it up to make sense out of it. The stanza is filled with light, life, and the imagery of *Turner*’s landscape, providing Atwood with a temporary sense of acceptance. The phrase *luminescent saint* furthermore indicates Atwood’s attachment, but also her admiration of the deceased.

The lines throughout the poem are calculated and measured. Atwood has thought out a logical approach; she has put order into the process of grief. Unlike writing in a stream of consciousness, Atwood assumes an orderly process of letting go. The semicolon and the comma in “of halo; later, an afterglow” emphasize the slow process of purification (18). This precision again shows Atwood’s logical approach in understanding and coming to terms with death.

Atwood continues to question death in the fourth stanza, revealing her continuous struggle of acceptance and of letting go. She moves from the *body* and the personal to an even more abstract definition of death. In this way, she enables herself to move a step closer to the reality of death and away from the attachments that hold her back. She asks herself why she wants to decorate death and responses by defining it as a *boat without eyes.* Once again, water is a major theme in this stanza. A boat is used for traveling across the ocean; it has no eyes because the ocean is vast and there is no clear destination. The boat is hidden because as it moves farther away from shore, discerning its shape becomes difficult. Death is an unknown mystery; no one knows what happens to him or her in the moment after. Therefore, it is a boat caught inside a fog, away from the coast where one cannot turn back. The fog here emphasizes the formlessness of death and indicates that despite its apparent form, it has no concrete shape. The last line, “Away from the shore” (31), signifies Atwood’s understanding that by letting go, one is parting from all attachments.

Water is purifying and sacred, but it can also serve as an escape place where one can let go of physical and emotional attachments. In the last stanza, Atwood attempts to use it that way but confesses her inadequacy to the task before her. She addresses the deceased’s ashes as “My dear, my voyager” (32), using the possessive *My* for the first time. The ashes and the responsibility for them are hers now, and she considers what she must do with them: “I’d scatter you / If I could, this way, on the river” (33-34). *If I could* reflects her own sense of inadequacy to the task. The problem lies in the object of the verb: she could (and probably does) *scatter* the ashes, but those ashes are not in any important sense the *you* she mourns. First, that *you* is beyond her reach; second, the memories of and attachment to the dead are not something of which she can or willingly would rid herself. She concludes with an observation that explains her reluctance: “A wave is neither form / nor energy. Both. Neither” (35-36). In other words, water is formless and acted upon rather than acting, so the ashes will be equally so once they are scattered. Unlike the first stanza, where Atwood describes water assuming different forms, here she recognizes it as merely amorphous. The ashes will not be a *voyager* because they have no agency and will take no form once they are tossed to the waves. Or rather, any form they might take is beyond human conception, let alone control, as *Both* and *Neither* in rapid succession, and with each allowed to stand alone as a sentence, hold out some possibility of something after death while conveying the pointlessness of speculating upon it.

Through a logical approach, Atwood comes to an understanding and even an acceptance of death. Her grief is clearly not gone, but she has accepted that she might as well let go of the ashes because they will never again take the form of the deceased or be animated by any energy; the dead can never be revived. Atwood ameliorates her own suffering by seeing death in physically concrete but metaphysically abstract terms. In so doing, she detaches herself from the remains of the body, the clothes in the closet, and the burning hair. Once she has separated herself from these relics, death becomes comprehensible and thus less painful. Yet this logical and formal process eventually reaches its limits, and Atwood’s final note on death is the ambiguity which one must accept and submit to.

1,498 words without quotations

1,654 words with quotations

Work Cited

Atwood, Margaret. “Another Elegy.” Ed. Richard A. Nanian. George Mason University. 10 Oct. 2011. Web.

Final comments