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## The Bitterness of Breaking Up: An In-Depth Reading of Margaret Atwood's Power Politics

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Thien-Di Do     *The Bitterness of Breaking Up: An In-Depth Reading of  
Margaret Atwood's Power Politics*

Breaking up is hard to do--whether it is a puppy-love romance or a serious commitment, the searing pain and emotion still arise. The mere thought of losing that special someone, that perfect soul mate, causes the heart to break and the tears to fall. All the memories of holding hands, walking on the beach, talking on the phone, watching the sunset, make their way into the thoughts, and the question "Was that really the right thing to do?" quietly crawls into the back of the mind. Breaking up is hard to do. No one enjoys it. No one wants to do it. But there are times when breaking up must be done, when it is more than just outgrowing one another, when the happiness in the relationship evaporates. Sometimes the pain turns into anger--sometimes anger at the self, sometimes anger at the lost partner. Whatever the case may be, the ended relationship teaches both parties lessons about their strengths as individuals. From this, they are able to grow and able to realize that, despite the pain and heartache, a positive outcome may result from breaking up. This theme is especially evident in the poetry of Canadian writer Margaret Atwood. In her collection of poems entitled Power Politics, she explores the harshness of separation. The book, which must be read in its entirety, is divided into three sub-themes: (1) the violence of sexuality, (2) the pain of separation, and (3) the readiness to move on.

Said to have been an autobiographical account of her own dissolved relationship with her first husband James Polk, Power Politics was written by Atwood in 1971 (Rosenberg 63). Like the fascicles of Emily Dickinson, Atwood's poems are strategically placed within the book. No poem can be understood without the others. Together, the poems tell a story about the ambivalence of the speaker's feelings about her partner, "for she wishes attachment even as she detaches herself" (Eilmann 798). The book is about the power struggle that exists between men and women. The poems cannot be understood without one another because the man and woman continually misunderstand one another when they are together. As the title indicates, men and women play the game of power politics. Atwood says that, in a relationship, one person is always struggling to have domination over another, always (whether consciously or unconsciously) holding the other person back from his or her goals and dreams. Critic Sherrill Grace argues, "Through these poems Atwood shows how power struggles color everything we do, turning even our most sacred activities into deadly maneuvers that, finally, destroy both sides" (63). Though Atwood is more sympathetic to the feminine side, she does portray the destruction of both parties in a relationship.

Power Politics begins with a "terse four-line bombshell that establishes the tone of the following poems" (Grace 55). The overall tone of this poem is somewhat unfeeling. The speaker is seemingly desensitized to the pain that once existed in her life. However, the words and the imagery are carefully chosen to provide the reader with a powerful picture of what the speaker is trying to say. The diction, which is mostly mono- to disyllabic, is relatively simple and clear. This adds to the coldness of the speaker's tone--her stoic and apathetic manner.

you fit into me  
like a hook into an eye

a fish hook  
an open eye (Atwood 1)

This first section primarily deals with the violent sexuality between the ex-partners and their roles both publicly and privately. In a sense, he is still a part of her, he still "fits" her, but rather painfully and cruelly. Immediately, the man is seen as a monster with "three heads" and "six eyes [that] glowed / red" (Atwood 2). He is the evil that exists in her life, yet the single thing that she cannot let go of. In an untitled poem, she says,

You take my hand and  
I'm suddenly in a bad movie,  
it goes on and on and  
why am I fascinated? (Atwood 3)

The speaker knows that the man is not good for her, but she is fixated, entranced by some unknown part of him. He leads her into an uncomfortable situation until she cannot let go, or more precisely, she feels that something better will occur. For she says, "I paid my money, I want to see what happens" (Atwood 3). But because of her naiveté, she falls into the clutches of his sexual desires and she is trapped:

In chance bathtubs I have to  
peel you off me  
in the form of smoke and melted  
celluloid

Have to face it I'm  
finally an addict (Atwood 3)

Furthermore, within this first section, she addresses him as a "General" in another untitled poem. He is her "wooden leader" who fixes it so that he always wins the battle (Atwood 7). He, as a wooden character, has no feelings for her whatsoever. It is his ego, his needs, that he cares for first and foremost. She, loving and obeying him as a soldier should, follows him wholeheartedly in what he orders her to do:

My love for you is the love  
of one statue for another: tensed  
  
and static. General, you enlist  
my body in your heroic  
struggle to become real:  
though you promise bronze rescues  
  
you hold me by the left ankle (Atwood 7)

By not thinking, by allowing him to be her guide, she succumbs to the sex that he so desires. She loves him wholly, yet he breaks his promises and leads her to do the activities that he wants.

As this section progresses, however, she grows and learns what he is actually doing to her physically and mentally. The poem "They travel by air" begins,

A different room, this month  
a worse one, where your  
body with head  
attached and my head with  
body attached coincide briefly

I want questions and you want  
only answers (Atwood 11 )

Here she begins to understand why he wants her. The sex now becomes worse every time they "coincide" because she now desires intimacy, passion, and interaction, but he merely wants an end result. In the poem immediately following, she further emphasizes that the sex becomes dirty and enclosed like "an aquarium / filled with exhausted water and warm/ seaweed" (Atwood 12). Then in the next, she is walking through a town where he used to live, and she says that no fond memories can come to her, for "nothing / remembers you but the bruises / on my thighs and the inside of my skull" (Atwood 13). In the final poem of the section, the speaker realizes that they will never be able to share anything intimate, that they will never be able to truly know one another. They are only partners in bed, and she says finally, "we will never know / each other any better/ than we do now" (Atwood 14).

The next section deals with the pain that both partners cause one another. Whereas the tone of the first section is somewhat angry, the second becomes a little less harsh but still bitter about the torment that she must endure:

Imperialist, keep off  
the trees I said.

No use: you walk backwards,  
admiring you own footprints. (Atwood 15)

In this section, though she is still angry and hurt, she also comes to terms with her role in the break up.

The poem "Small Tactics," which is numbered by stanzas, progresses from the mutual pain that both cause to the pain that each individual causes, and finally, to the realization that the speaker no longer wants any part of the pain. In the first stanza, she wants to return to the days when the games they played with each other were out of love and not cruelty, to the days when there was happiness and not pain:

These days my fingers bleed  
even before I bite them

Can't play it safe, can't play  
at all anymore

Let's go back please  
to the games, they were  
more fun and less painful (Atwood 17)

In the second part of the poem, she admits that he has his "gentle moments," and she is able to feel his nervousness when they are together. Therefore the persona says, "I don't / want to hurt / you any more / now than I have to" (Atwood 17). But this sympathy for the man is short-lived. In stanzas three, four, and five, she remembers the emotional and physical pain that he causes her. It is the pain of waiting for him to come home and wondering if he will come at all, and then when he does, the pain

To be picked up and thrown  
(you won't stop) against

the ground, picked up  
and thrown again and again (Atwood 18)

Finally, he leaves again, and once more, she is left waiting for him to return. In stanza six, she begins to feel sorry for herself, but in stanza seven she will no longer let him have the best of her. Feeling distraught, the speaker says, "I take pills, I drink water, I kneel" (Atwood 19). She wants to destroy herself with pills but then realizes that she wants to be cleansed from the pain and prays for it to be so. She wants to stop the hurt that continues within her; she wants to be unfeeling, as she believes he is:

Let me stop caring  
about anything but skinless  
wheels and smoothly-  
running money

Get me out of this trap, this  
body, let me be  
like you, closed and useful (Atwood 19)

Finally, in the last stanza, she stands up to him and says, "You will have nothing / but me and in a worse way than before" (Atwood 20).

As this section progresses, the speaker understands that she must have inner strength now that he is gone. Once believing that he could save her and be the answer to most of her "religious problems" (Atwood 21), she now grimly says, "I remember what I have to do / in order to stay alive" (Atwood 23). She realizes more and more the pain that they are causing one another. Finally, in the last poem of this section, "They are hostile nations," she pits the two people against each other as raging animals in war, ready and willing to attack. The end result, however, is that the mutilation that they cause each other also forces them to keep one another alive:

It is cold and getting colder

We need each others'  
breathing, warmth, surviving  
is the only war  
we can afford (Atwood 38)

Ultimately, in this section she begins to realize that the pain she feels is not hers alone.

In the third and final section, she comes to the understanding that she must move on. The four-line introductory poem says,

Returning from the dead  
used to be something I did well

I began asking why  
I began forgetting how (Atwood 39)

In this section she knows she can no longer save him nor he save her. She sees, also, that much of the pain that they endure is because of the man's inability to love and know himself, and hence, his inability to share himself with her. In an untitled poem, the two are standing face-to-face in a room, and all that she can see of him is his fakeness. He offers her a promise, but she refutes it, needing more that he can't give:

I need more than  
air, blood, it would open  
everything

which you won't let me see. (Atwood 44)

She seeks an answer to their problems, believing that everything could be all right if he could share himself. In a way, she wants to be his savior. In another poem, she says,

you move  
wounded, you are hurt, you hurt,  
you want to get out, you want  
to tear yourself out, I am

the outside, I am snow  
and space, pathways, you gather  
yourself, your muscles

clutch, you move  
into me as though I  
am (wrenching  
your way through, this is  
urgent, it is yours like) the  
last chance for freedom (Atwood 46)

The speaker wants the man to lose himself in her, hoping to ease his pain in their love-making. She believes that she can be his only hope for salvation, his only path in finding himself.

Finally, however, after all of her efforts to save the man, to save their relationship, she knows that they can no longer be together. There is nothing left to salvage if he cannot even give himself partly to her when she has given him all. He doesn't recognize her existence and acknowledges no identity of her own. Perhaps, this is due to her actions within the relationship, as she states, "It was my fault but you helped / you enjoyed it" (Atwood 55). Now that she finally understands the pain that they brought to each other, that she can no longer hold on to what is not there, she will move on without him. She knows, however, that he may return. In the last stanza of the final poem "He is last seen," she puts their relationship, and her place within it, in perspective:

Nothing I can do will slow you  
down, nothing  
will make you arrive any sooner

You are serious, a gift-bearer,  
you set one foot  
in front of the other

through the weeks and months, across  
the rocks, up from the pits and starless  
deep nights of the sea

towards firm ground and safety. (Atwood 56)

She knows that there is nothing that can be done to hasten or slow down his return to her. The speaker has grown stronger and more sure of herself. She wants to give him the time that he needs to grow stronger, to ensure that if he returns to her, she will be the "firm ground and safety" that he will find, the tranquillity that he desires.

We have all felt before the movement and fluctuation of emotions within Power Politics--the pain of separation, the blaming of the self, the anger at the lost partner, and finally, the need to move on. Atwood says some very moving and personal things about breaking up. For the female reader, Atwood's poetry makes perfect sense. Every woman has felt the violation of man's stripping her of her identity and leaving her to yearn for his return. She makes up excuses for his behavior and blames herself for the things that she didn't do to salvage the relationship. He goes away, attempting to "find himself" and leaving her at home, pondering his return. Atwood says that this recurrent harm done to women must stop. The woman must move on, she must realize and come to terms with the faults of the man, and most importantly, she must take the time to find herself and become strong. She must let go of everything or everyone that stops her from knowing and loving herself. Ultimately, the woman must know that she can exist without man, but that if he returns, she will be strong and confident in her identity. She will have the voice that allows her to fight the game of Power Politics.

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