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Redefining Love in Margaret Atwood’s VARIATION ON THE WORD SLEEP

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Margaret Atwood’s “Variation on the Word Sleep” resignifies a patriarchal definition of intimacy and love to an articulation of a gender-balanced definition of love. While the poem overtly presents the speaker as wishing to nurture and give to her partner, in actuality the speaker exhibits many needs simultaneously. The speaker is female and her partner is male as evidenced by the speaker’s longing to be penetrated—“where your body lies / beside me, and you enter” (24–25)—when considered with later allusions to a branch and a flower, traditional male and female symbols. Although the speaker does present the conventional female role of desiring to give to her partner, her actions convey contrary needs of giving and receiving, taking and being taken, leading and being led. These multitudinous yearnings expand upon the English language’s patriarchal binaries of intimacy as defined by male versus female, receiving versus giving, taking versus being taken, action versus passivity (Muzaffar 621) and ultimately affirm that it is the poem’s natural lack of logocentrism that creates a complex and beautifully interwoven profusion of meaning. The speaker’s partner enters her body, but she enters his sleep, his dreams, and would like to be “the air / that inhabits” him (27–28), resulting in a longing for a simultaneous drawing-in of both partners where each occupies the other. This mutual penetration resignifies existing notions of one-sided male-to-female penetration as a means of defining Atwood’s new apperception of intimacy as one that involves a two-way female and male system of dual penetration; this sense of broadened penetration and intimacy extends to the culmination of an expanded interpretation of love.

Jill Hufnagel’s article “Atwood’s Variation on the Word Sleep” focuses on the binaries Hufnagel construes in the poem: she perceives a “gendered warfare,” describing the “confined war in intimacy between a man and a woman” (188); Hufnagel infers that the speaker’s power and her partner’s power are categorically different, writing “He is empowered through entering her body; she is empowered through entering his mind” (190). Hufnagel apprehends only a duality of gender and power where really a vast multiplicity renders far more intricate—and progressive—meaning. While the speaker’s partner does enter her body and she does enter...
his mind, the very expression of this unusual concept of a woman penetrating a man demonstrates a mutual penetration, therefore a mutual intimacy that far transcends mere dualism. Hufnagel argues that the speaker and her lover are “inter-twined, created by air, by language” (190), but I argue that they are also entwined in mind, woven within the speaker’s partner’s dream when she enters his sleep and walks with him “through that lucent / wavering forest” (8–9). Dreams are not comprised of language but of image, of pure meaning and consciousness; thus, the speaker and her partner become interwound within the dream and the body, within air and language, creating a profusion of vacillating power transfers that culminate in intimacies. Atwood’s redefining of penetration as two-way female-to-male and male-to-female resignifies intimacy as inclusive of both gendered directions of penetration.

Atwood creates a framework within which different interpretations arise for different readers on the basis of their experiences; this results in the gradual construction of new and expanding meanings over the course of the piece’s thirty lines. For example, the poem starts “I would like to watch you sleeping” (1), which might be perceived by different readers as intimate or voyeuristic or foreboding, and so on, dependent on the reader’s associations with such an assertion. The speaker’s admission in the next line, “which may not happen” (2), lends instability to the prior statement of desire and prompts a question: why might she not watch him sleep? It is easy enough to do so, as the other, unconscious, has no way of stopping the speaker; as such, the speaker’s uncertainty further destabilizes and broadens the potential interpretations: is she too sleepy herself to watch him sleep? Too eager herself to dream? Does she find it likely to be, in practice, boring to watch him sleep? Later in the same stanza the speaker says, “I would like to sleep / with you” (4–5), which might be interpreted as tender or confessional or possessive, and so forth, again dependent on the signifieds that emerge for each reader. When placing the phrases together, many possible combinations of meaning ensue: tender and possessive, or voyeuristic and intimate, or foreboding and confessional, and so on, with a sense of uncertainty enduring throughout as a result of the second line’s concession that she may not, in fact, watch him sleep, though she wishes to.

The enjambments render further breadth of interpretation: separately, “I would like to sleep” (4) might indicate to various readers exhaustion or depression or simply that it is nighttime and appropriate to sleep, but the continuation of the sentence on the next line “with you” (5) adds the possible element of intimate connection to another (or possessiveness or audacity, and so on, again dependent on the interpretation). Further, while separately “I would like to watch you sleeping” (1) and “I would like to sleep / with you” (4–5) have a myriad of possible interpretations, when reading the phrases together as Atwood intends, the poem’s opening lines display even further complexity in ostensibly conflicting desires: one cannot simultaneously watch another sleep while also sleeping themselves, thus Atwood establishes superficially paradoxical desires. These paradoxes induce Atwood’s process of resignification to the effect of expanded meaning: her new
definition of intimacy involves both an inherent external watchful guardian element (“I would like to watch you sleeping”) and an internal vulnerability and protector (“I would like to sleep / with you”) that she continues to expand upon throughout the poem.

The poem continues employing superficial paradoxes in its resignifications: the speaker next states she wishes “to sleep / with” him, “to enter” (4–5) his sleep and then to join him in his dream and walk together through its beauty, the “wavering forest of bluegreen leaves” (9), but the beauty leads them “towards the cave where” he “must descend, / towards” his “worst fear” (11–12). The trope of the forest signifies the speaker’s interpretation of her partner’s beauty and the cave his fear that he must face: he walks through the beauty and peace of his internal self in order to access the fear embedded in his unconscious; he must directly engage his fear as a means of coalescing with his lover into the beauty in both his unconscious and conscious selves. The speaker longs to sleep because she wishes to enter his dream where they together experience his internal self; once inside, she can lead him to face his fear and then lead him back away from the fear after he has confronted it. She enters his dream “as its smooth dark wave / slides over” her head (6–7), Atwood employing the trope of waves, an almost orgasmic sensation, to merge the gratification and intimacy of sexual climax with the even greater intimacy of entering another’s mind, in which nothing is private and all is exposed.

Although the speaker has entered her partner’s very unconscious, she cannot protect him from his fear; instead, she gives him the tools for self-protection, “the silver / branch, the small white flower, the / one word that will protect” him (13–15). A question arises as to which word, when combined with the branch and the flower, will have the facility to protect him: “Silver?” “Small?” “White?” An unnamed word? It is ambiguous, affording opportunity for interpreting which word might be the protecting force and why that word has safeguarding quality. The speaker’s partner needs protection from “the grief at the center” (16), but Atwood’s continuous destabilizations connote an absence of locus, the poem devoid of a center from which it emanates. Atwood herself proves in the first stanzas and their many possible meanings that there is no center, neither to the poem itself nor in any possible manifestation of grief the poem expresses. Atwood builds her expanded definitions of intimacy and love by means of disrupting the traditional binaries of male as protector and female as nurturer—the speaker is both protector and nurturer, just as the speaker ultimately requires both from her partner.

The speaker’s longing to sleep with her partner is rendered further complexity at the end of the third stanza when she states she wishes to go where his “body lies / beside” her and he enters her body (24–25), establishing again paradoxical desires that cannot simultaneously coexist: one cannot concurrently sleep beside another and have sex, though both presuppose an elevated intimacy. His body enters hers “as easily as breathing in” (26), implying that their intimacy is longstanding, familiar. The text hinges on a variety of different manifestations of intimacy, literal and metonymical, each building upon the next. To watch one sleep, to seek sleep
oneself, to enter another’s dream with him, and to have sex may not be simultaneously possible, but each is an accepted definition of sleep; when compiled together, each variation, and the inculcated cultural narrative therein, provides insight into the complexities and multiplicities of sleep’s meaning from which Atwood draws and through which she builds the word sleep metonymically toward a heightened and expanded definition of intimacy.

In an essay analyzing Kate Chopin’s renegotiations in The Awakening, Cynthia Griffin Wolff explores language’s inherent limitations: “It is not merely about things that are never named, but most significantly about stories that cannot be told and things that can be neither thought nor spoken because they do not have a name” (377). Wolff suggests that Chopin employs bricolage as a means of countering the oppression intrinsic in these problems that cannot even be spoken because they are “without a name”; further, Wolff intimates that the first method of subverting such oppression is to shift discourse by means of reappropriating old language in new ways. Atwood’s discourse is stuck in the only language she has—a patriarchal one in which intimacy is primarily defined by biologically dictated male-to-female penetration; language does not yet exist that encompasses her expanded view. Her only choice, then, is to construct new meaning within existing language as a means of expressing her conceptions that transcend the language at her disposal. Although it is conventional in a patriarchal culture neither for a woman to protect a man (Muzaffar 622) nor for a woman to enter him, this is precisely what the speaker does: her position in relation to her male partner is reappropriated by Atwood’s portrayal of the shifting trope of penetration. Atwood expresses the new gender-balanced ideology she works to create within the renegotiation of existing language through a superficial portrayal of the patriarchy’s “proper female”—the speaker nurtures and cares for her partner, walks with him to his grief, and ensures his own safe sleep—but she contradicts this typic ideology with many of her protective actions in the poem. For example, she gives her male partner both the “silver branch” and “the small white flower” to protect him—the former is a sexual metonymic symbol for male genitalia, traditionally one of penetration and strength, the latter for female genitalia, conventionally symbolic of a receiving vessel; note that she gives him both, a conjoining of the female and male, as a means of protection from his solitary fear. Further, the speaker wishes to both sleep with her partner and watch her partner sleep, and in the third stanza she states his “body lies / beside” her and he “enter[s]” (24–25), wishing for him to penetrate her as she concurrently penetrates him. In all cases, they are conjoined—when she is awake, she conscientiously watches him; when she is asleep, she dreams with him, permeating his unconscious; when he is awake, he physically penetrates her. This subversion of patriarchal notions of male and female roles lends depth to Atwood’s amplified notion of intimacy.

The reappropriations continue in Atwood’s delineations between wakefulness and sleep. When one is awake, one is open to others and can be communicated with and entered; by contrast, when asleep, one is closed, fully internalized. In
Atwood’s reappropriation in which partners conscientiously enter one another’s dreams, both individuals are simultaneously open only to one another and closed to the rest of the world; in addition, the speaker and her partner are open to the other and are penetrated by the other. In the final stanza, the speaker professes that she “would like to be the air / that inhabits” him (27–28), saturating his very lungs in a life-sustaining capacity. In lieu of having existent vocabulary to convey her deeper concept of intimacy as mutual, she creates new meaning via layers of these penetration reappropriations. Atwood strives toward a dual penetration, a conjoined intimacy that must be mutual in order to achieve the resignified and expanded dimensionality.

Atwood’s process of resignification deepens with her masterful joining of apparently disparate rhetoric and grammar. After the speaker walks with her partner so that he can face the “grief at the center” (16) (already established as a false center), she follows him “up the long staircase” away from his grief (19), but then she says she would like to “become / the boat that would row” him back (20–21), leading him yet further away from his grief—she shifts from walking with him, to following, to leading. The grammar indicates a vertical rise on the stairs away from the depths of his grief, and then the speaker becomes a boat within which they horizontally navigate away from the place of his grief; the rhetoric demonstrates that they move together in all directions away from his grief, each alternatingly leading the other. The speaker then says she would like to become “a flame / in two cupped hands” (22–23); a juxtaposition arises between the water she rows him out of and the flame she becomes to help warm him after he faces his grief. She is both the boat and the flame, and, defying thermodynamics and atomic chemical reactions, the water her boat floats within does not cause her flame to go out, nor does her boat catch fire from her flame—the grammar indicates her concurrently impossible actions of protection while the rhetoric intimates her overriding desire for the role as his protector in its many manifestations. In addition, the rhetoric points to her own longing for his penetration and protection; after the speaker leads her partner away from the grief in his unconscious dream, he physically, consciously enters her. They both sleep and penetrate, both lead and are led, each in their own modus where they give to and receive from the other. Atwood’s grammar illustrates that the speaker gives herself to her partner by means of sleeping with him, bringing him away from his grief and to her open body and sustaining him as the air he draws in, but the rhetoric reveals her own human need and the reciprocity that she receives from sleeping with him, being with him in his beauty and his grief, and being physically and metaphysically joined with him. While the speaker does give of herself to her partner, she also takes for herself what she needs: an ultimate intimacy that Atwood suggests only manifests through mutual and conjoined experiences including sleeping, encounters with beauty and grief, a confrontation of fear, sexual intercourse, and air itself.

The building of meaning grows further when examining the poem’s seven grammatical uses of the phrase “I would like to”: if one were to take the phrase literally,
one would accept as true whatever comes after this phrase. In contradiction, the rhetoric exhibits the many seemingly conflicting aesthetics of the poem: the speaker “would like to” concurrently sleep and wake with her partner; sleep with him and be penetrated by him; enter his dream; walk together toward his unconscious private fear; be the boat and the flame; and become the very air he breathes. The rhetoric displays all of the wonderful complexities that create the poem’s rich and expanded definition of intimacy. The resignified mutual intimacy reveals the resignified, elevated definition of love that exudes from the heightened intimacy.

Atwood’s new intimacy adverts a deep connection—it signifies a love that transcends patriarchal boundaries and understandings. Imagine the depth of intimate emotional connection required of the speaker to desire to look after her partner while he sleeps, enter his grief-laden dreams (likely also a painful proposition for her), help bring him back from his grief to the warmth of her flame, be physically entered by him, and then be the air he breathes; these far expand the customary one-way penetration of a man entering a woman into a dual penetration that traverses beyond mere intimacy into an enhanced, heightened love that language bound within patriarchal ideology did not prior have the means to express. The speaker’s yearning alone to protect her partner transcends intimacy and signifies a deep love; she wishes to be his air, “that unnoticed / & that necessary” (29–30), a true penetration to the effect of a merging of the two as if they were one. Atwood ultimately resignifies the intimacy of patriarchy’s single penetration to a mutual penetration as a means of expressing a love for which she only now creates the language. While the poem’s speaker claims that it is grief at the center (in the symbolic center of the speaker’s partner and literally in the center lines of the poem), the piece actually displays a multiplicity that cannot be encapsulated in one mere center. While the speaker nurtures her partner, she also demonstrates her own needs: she seeks a culturally transcendent love resignified from singularly giving to her partner what he needs to a mutual giving and receiving, taking and being taken, sustaining life and being sustained, in which both female and male participate.

The poem’s title itself, “Variation on the Word Sleep,” indicates heterogeneity and depth: Atwood’s sleep is not composed of only a single signification, but of many and conjoined versions of sleep, all working together toward an intimate love that is achieved through a reciprocal coming together of both man and woman, woman and man. He inhabits her body while she inhabits the air he breathes and his very dreams, and thus they merge in their sleep and their waking. This idea of mutual conjoining deconstructs traditional patriarchal binaries, and the new ideas emergent from the deconstruction shift and at times appear to conflict superficially, but the broadening characterizations of penetration, sleep, protection, and intimacy expand Atwood’s definition of this mutual love. The speaker and her partner each synchronously dwell within the other, establishing a complex intimacy with multiple and overlapping needs and manifestations that culminates in a complex, vastly expanded, and more complete version of love than English speakers prior had the ability to perceive or express.
Works Cited


