“The end of the world”: desire and desolation in Margaret Atwood’s “The grave of the famous poet”

Jennifer Murray
"The end of the world": desire and desolation in Margaret Atwood's "The grave of the famous poet"

Jennifer Murray

1 Desire is by nature other-directed, it looks for an object which will reflect desire back to it, it wants the return of desire. Both Freudian and Lacanian theory have conceptualised the structure of desire in this respect. Freud's writing speaks of the libido which takes as its object either itself (ego-libido) or something other than itself (object-libido) (Metapsychology 94–95). Lacan's more poetic formulation, "desire is the desire of the Other," (264) brings out the doubly directed investment of the self in desire. Lacan goes as far as to say that:

   for both partners in the relation, both the subject and the Other, it is not enough to be subjects of need, or objects of love, but... they must stand for the cause of desire. This truth [...] constitutes the condition of the happiness of the subject (287).

2 Love relationships are the most intense sites of desire-investment, an emotional situation where, in 'loving', the self gives up "a part of his [sic] narcissism, and it can only be replaced by his [sic] being loved" (Freud Metapsychology 93). Margaret Atwood's short story "The Grave of the Famous Poet" ("The Grave") from the collection Dancing Girls, locates its psychological tension in the moment which preceeds the breakdown of a love relationship. The exploration of the subject's process of detachment from its love-object, (the disinvestment of object libido) might be seen as one of the main aspects with which "The Grave" engages and our purpose here will be to examine the key textual moments in the life and death of desire as it informs and takes form in the story. Bound up in this investigation are three central concerns: the construction of gender identity and how it structures the breakdown of the relationship, the projection of the protagonist's psychic itinerary onto the outside world, and the way in which she negotiates the process of emotional disinvestment.
"Ivory hearted, browning at the edges"

The fiction is centred around a quest: a couple is on a journey to visit a grave, the grave of a famous poet. Anonymity characterises all the actors of this quest - we do not know the names of the man and woman who are joined in this venture, nor do we know the identity of the specific poet whose grave they set out to visit. The information that it is a couple is communicated through the personal pronoun "we" in the first line, and through an opposition between an "I" and a "he" which is set up a few lines further on:

'This has to be it,' I say. I have the map.
'Better ask the driver,' he says, not believing me'.
Have I ever been wrong? I say, but I ask the driver anyway. I'm right again and we get off" (emphasis added).³

This first textual inscription of the relative positions-subject "I", object 'he'- also involves elements of the gender structures the story is concerned with. The "I" is female (as becomes apparent later in the story) and it is therefore from a female perspective that the story is narrated. In this extract "I" holds "the map", the means by which location may be determined. The knowledge which she affirms—she knows 'where' they are—however, is questioned by "he", on no grounds which are available to the reader other than an implicit mistrust of the female subject's position in relation to knowledge. The text disavows this mistrust—"I'm right again"—yet not before signaling the woman's submission to her partner's injunction (she does ask the driver) as well as the repetitive structure of this unfounded mistrust through the signifier "again".

Atwood here deploys a pattern of hierarchical gender values which valorises the male and to which the female subject submits herself. Yet the privileged narrating position of the female gives the reader access to a distancing discourse on these values. This pattern becomes a defining structure in the text, as in the following passage when the couple are exploring the poet's village: "'Come on!' he shouts down. I'm hesitant but I follow" (82). The imperative tense used here in the male discourse, the choice of the signifier "shout" with its aggressive connotations (where a more neutral verb such as 'call' might have been used), and the relative positions of the characters, with the man above and the woman "down" below, are all elements in the construction of a dominating male position. The woman's awareness of this is implicit in her hesitation, but this awareness is not fully formed and she acts in accordance with the traditional female role and "follows" the man. Yet she also refuses this positioning in the following sentence: "At the top he reaches his hand to me, but... afraid of losing my balance, I avoid it and scramble the last few feet, holding on to roots" (82). The narrator refuses the man's hand, equating it with destabilisation, rather than stability and prefers to act on the basis of her own resources.

The absence of names for the characters, but also of place names or of temporal indicators confers the aspect of universality to the couple's situation in an attempt to portray their specific problems in the larger context of gender relationships. This universality-effect is reinforced in the text through the extension/confusion of the couple's identity to include that of the poet and his female companion: "We ignore the church—he once said it was unremarkable—and head for the graveyard" (81). In this extract, the pronoun 'he' seems to designate the poet whereas it has referred exclusively to the narrator's male companion up until this point. The shift from one object 'he' to another is indicated, however through the use of the long hyphens, setting this
information apart from the rest, and through the phrasing "he once said", which carries connotations of the past, the time when the poet was alive.

7 Described only briefly, the life of the poet and his companion is seen as one of daily violence: "they used to have fights apparently. She never comes back and I can see why. He wouldn't leave her alone" (86). Here, the narrator postulates a form of persistent aggression on the part of the poet towards his partner, even after his death. The poet's female companion is understood to be alive in the present of the diegesis, so that a parallel between the narrator's couple, the poet's couple and by extension, other couples in general is set up. This paradigm is one in which, as we have seen, gender relationships are constructed within the framework of power, and where women are attributed a traditionally passive role, one which can only be defined in relation to positions taken up by the male.

8 The physical journey of the 'couple' through a village (visiting the poet's grave, exploring the village castle and the poet's house), provides the setting for the development of the respective male and female positions. The positions which "he" is seen as occupying are those of explorer and conqueror. As the couple enters the ruins of the castle, for example, we read: "He's ahead, eager to explore" (82). In the same position, the woman experiences a sense of transgression: "I bend over a rose, ivory hearted, browning at the edges; I feel like a usurper" (82). The difference in these positions indicates radically divergent approaches to the Other, one of invasion, the other of respect of boundaries. We might also point out that in this passage, the descriptive phrase "ivory hearted, browning at the edges" is ambiguous: does it qualify the rose or the speaking subject? The elliptical form of the grammatical structure prevents us from any positive conclusion. The woman becomes identified both with the delicacy of the rose, but also with its deteriorating state, whereas the signifying phrase "ivory-hearted" suggests the hardening up of the emotional centre. These are the first elements in a process of destruction that the narrator describes herself as undergoing.

"Squelching through the mud"

9 The process of emotional destruction which the narrator recounts is not made immediately accessible to her. The reader, however, has access to it through her description of the world outside the self. It is a world of physical desolation, with no clear markings, and which presents increasingly difficult obstacles to the narrator. We may reasonably argue that the physical desolation of the outside world is a form of projection of the narrator's inner emotional bleakness in the context of her relationship. By 'projection', we are referring to Freud's definition whereby "the subject sends out into the external world an image of something that exists in him in an unconscious way" (quoted in Laplanche 354). This psychical operation is not gratuitous, but intervenes in situations where the subject is unable to accept into consciousness certain of his or her feelings: "It always appears as a defence, as the attribution to another (person or thing) of qualities, feelings or wishes that the subject repudiates or refuses to recognise in himself" (Laplanche 352). In effect, we are suggesting that the bleakness of the external world in "The Grave" may most usefully be understood as an aspect of the first-person female narrator's psychical negotiation of the imminent end of her love-relationship.

10 The markers of the unwelcoming world are clear from the beginning of the story; the street the couple is in is "constricted", the houses are "grey" and "lawnless", the curtains
are "closed", and they are alone, for there are "no other people" (79). The unwieldiness of the environment, its mute hostility is experienced by the narrating voice which tells us that the stores are "uninformative", there are "no signs", and even when they do see "a building labelled HOTEL" (79), it is a misleading marker, for it turns out not to be a hotel after all. The choice of the word "labelled" is defamiliarising in this context: the word 'label' is generally used for commercial products, those found in a supermarket for example and which may literally have a label stuck onto them. It is a provisional marker of identity, and may be subject to revision. The effect of the phrase "a building labelled HOTEL", therefore is to accentuate the lack of correspondence between objects and their names, between signifieds and their signifiers, calling into question the status of language and the constructions of reality it offers. If a hotel is not a hotel, then love is perhaps not love, and the status of the couple's unity also becomes problematic.

Throughout the quest the couple undertakes, this impression is confirmed and reinforced. This quest, like all others, must begin with desire. Here, the motivating force is the man's desire - "it was his idea" (80) - and the goal of the quest is the grave of the famous poet. The attaining of the stated goal occurs very early in the story and is seen as being achieved without difficulty: "We find the right grave easily enough" (81). Yet the moment of arrival is constructed as being empty of significance: "We've brought nothing and have no ceremonies to perform; we muse for an acceptable length of time" (81). The early attainment of this goal and the construction of its insignificance destabilises the reader and forces her to re-evaluate her expectations of the story: the man's quest, which is presumably to do with appropriating the illusion of immortality, is at this point over. The moment of arrival has turned out to be misleading, it is not the real object of the narrative drive and the reader's focus must now shift to the second, undeclared concern, which is the female narrator's quest for meaning in her relationship to her partner. The story's title has been emptied of its manifest content and it begins to take on its metaphorical charge.

As the couple moves from the grave along towards the castle and then to the poet's house, the text presents a route which becomes progressively more difficult to negotiate. The narrator tells us: "At first we have no trouble; there's a wide uneven pathway", but they leave this road on the man's initiative and take "a scrabbly trail, a children's entrance up sheer mud" (82). In the castle grounds, the signs of decrepitude are again present through such phrases as "a skeleton of a garden" (82), or "Everything is crumbling, stairways, ramparts, battlements; so much has fallen it's hard for us to get our bearings" (83). The question of location and direction which, on the level of the manifest content is geographical, is clearly emotional in terms of the narrating voice's position and reappears here through the word "bearings". The final stretch of the journey becomes almost nightmarish: the tide is "out", they are "stranded", "clambering over slippery masses of purplish-brown rock or squelching through the mud, thick as clotted cream" (85). This landscape of desolation is the textual metaphor of the unvoiced decay of the couple's relationship.

When they "eventually" get to the front of the poet's house, there is, nearby "a neat inhabited cottage". The narrator wonders:

Did they see us coming, are they wondering who we are? The road above is paved, it has a railing and a sign with the poet's name on it, wired to the fence.
'I'd like to steal that,' he says. (86)
The presence of other people suggested in the word "inhabited", causes the narrator to resituate her couple within social context, to see themselves seen through the identity-determining sight of the hypothetical Other. For Grosz, "[the] subject is necessarily alienated, for it is defined on Lacan's model as seeable, shown, being seen, without being able to see either its observer or itself" (79). This alienation becomes apparent in the short story as the narrator presents us with the spectacle of her partner's self-consolidating need to appropriate the identity of others, here, that of the immortal poet. This attitude is foreign to the narrator to the extent that she can no longer recognise herself in him, can no longer recognise the 'him' her desire has been directed at and soliciting. The inherent misrecognition which characterises the narrator's attempt to see herself in her partner is voiced immediately afterwards through an overheard conversation: "No one here ever got to know him really" (86). This phrase puts a label of finality onto the heroine's unsuccessful attempt to see herself within the relationship. She has not been in it, she has been everywhere and in all ways outside of it, one of the "unhealthy-coloured rushes by the bank" being bent by "the wind" (85).

Beyond unhealthy, the narrator seems to be on the verge of physical collapse by the end of the journey: "I'm not sure I can make it to the house, whatever reserves my body has been drawing on are almost gone. My hearing is blurred and it's hard to breathe" (87). Atwood makes this moment of physical deterioration coincide with the narrator's voicing of emotional dissatisfaction and the realisation that the relationship is doomed: "He bends over to kiss me. I don't want him to, I'm not calm now, I'm irritated, my skin prickles. . . . I want it to be over, this long abrasive competition for the role of victim" (87). It is at this point, through the voicing of an instance of emotional and physical aversion to her partner, that the level of consciousness of the narrator seems to increase. It is from this point on in the narrative that a self-conscious discourse, capable of analysing the situation she is in, is attributed to her.

The narrator's awareness of the destructiveness of the relationship she is in becomes most dramatically present to the reader in the following passage. The narrator wakes up in the middle of the night, separated from her partner by the darkness and by the fact that he is sleeping. She examines herself in the mirror, the Lacanian metaphorical site of the construction of the self:

"In the mirror I'm oddly swollen, as though I've been drowned, my eyes are purple-circled, my hair stands out from my head like a second-hand doll's, there's a diagonal scar-like mark across my cheek where I've been sleeping on my face. This is what it does to you" (88).

The self-perception of the woman which includes markers of intense physical deterioration such as "swollen", "drowned" and "scar" constructs her as being close to death. The cause is only implicitly stated through the pronoun 'it' in the last phrase. This 'it', unnamed, like the protagonist, is nonetheless identifiable: 'it' is the emotionally destructive effect on a woman of a relationship constructed within the dominance of patriarchal values.

"The end of the world"

One may choose certain roads, certain directions, certain actions, but the self is not the master of its own complex reactions to these choices. We must first remark that in "The Grave", the choice of ending the relationship which is constructed for the narrator is not
a positive choice, in the sense that it is not born of happy perspectives but of unhappy consequences. Moreover, the heroine's relationship to her companion is a part of her subjective world and the process of disinvesting herself from that aspect of her life is not something which can be done by will alone, she cannot "shake hands and leave" as she wishes she could do; she will have to "work it through, boring and foreordained though it is" (87). The process of working it through is a psychological one in which the libido is inextricably bound up.

In love relationships, as we mentioned briefly in the introduction, people invest energy in the object of their love. To put things extremely schematically, if their love is returned, their energy supply is maintained, if not, it becomes depleted, creating a feeling of unworthiness in the unloved person. While the common-sense clarity of Freud's statement that "in love relationships not being loved lowers the self-regarding feelings, while being in love raises them" (Metapsychology 93) shrieks out at us, it is more likely an effect of the lucidity of the theory and its expression than any sort of inherent obviousness in the concepts themselves. Nevertheless, the "purple-circled" eyes of the narrator give us some indication of the degree to which her own self-regard, or her 'self' regarded in the mirror, has been depleted of its energy and left hollowed out.

What occurs next in the text seems somewhat strange in view of the reader's objective view of the situation. The narrator passes rapidly through a series of emotions and hypothetical actions that are as extreme as they are contradictory:

I want to make love, I want all there is because there's not much left. I start to think what he will do after I'm over and I can't stand that, maybe I should kill him... I look around the room for a blunt instrument. (88)

Here, the narrating "I" wants both (and almost simultaneously) the most intense expression of the life instinct, making love, and the most intense expression of the aggressive instinct which is murder. Where does this textual construction derive its psychological credibility from?

The first element, the desire to hang on to what is "left" by making love, would seem to be a response conditioned by the anxiety of what is to come, which Freud describes as nothing less than "the end of the world" for the subject: "The end of the world is the projection of this internal catastrophe; his subjective world has come to an end since his withdrawal of love from it" (Case Histories 208). In the process of anticipating this "internal catastrophe", the narrator uses the expression "after I'm over". This formulation is unusual; it is not the person, but the relationship between two people which is "over". The substitution of the first person pronoun effects a shift in perspective: the "I" is anticipating the experience of her own effacement, her own death in the subjective world of her partner. If the relationship is really to end, he must destroy or eliminate that part of himself which is constituted by her; he must kill her. Freud inscribes this process in the normal functioning of the instincts: "If a love-relation with a given object is broken off, hate not infrequently emerges in its place, so that we get the impression of a transformation of love into hate" (Case Histories 137). It therefore appears as an imaginary gesture of self-defence that the narrator should contemplate the death of her partner. Fortunately for the sleeping putative victim, the repressive effect of civilisation operates on the narrator and she resists her impulse: "Instead I brush my teeth, wondering if he'll ever know how close he came to being murdered" (88). The relationship is over, but its rituals go on: "we pack; or rather I pack, he lies on the bed" (89). The couple make love but the description of the moment employs the imagery
of aggression,—"he's biting down on my mouth, this time he'll get blood if it kills him"—death,—"I feel it's just flesh... an animated corpse"—and grieving—"the bedsprings mourn beneath us" (90). A routine argument, "its only importance the fact that it was the last" (90) puts a full stop to their desire, attempts, or pretences at preserving anything at all. They are determined to regain their separateness.

Each of the characters must at this point regulate the psychological effects of the loss of the love-object. For the man seen from the perspective of the female narrator, it is a process which is fairly easily completed and which she describes rather ironically through the romantic language of the 'great hero': "his cape billows,... a sword springs to attention in his hand. He throws his head back, courage, he'll meet them alone. Flash of lightning. Onward" (91). For the woman, it's a more difficult process, one in which the emotional 'catastrophe' of disinvestment has left her shaken in her sense of being: "I'm not sure whether I've survived", and which is accompanied by the 'end of the world' impression discussed earlier. The narrating voice tells us: "It's the pause during the end of the world" (91) and gives us her version of the impending apocalypse. Again, the landscape becomes a primary site of the character's projected emotions as she predicts that

at any moment, the bay will vaporize, the hills across will lift into the air, the space between will scroll itself up and vanish; in the graveyard the graves will open to show the dry puffball skulls, his wooden cross will flare like a match, his house collapse into itself, cardboard and lumber, no more language. (91)

This vision is characterised not only by the total destruction of the material world, but also of the traditions through which meaning is constructed for that world. Here the "he" of the relationship and the poet who served as icon for him are again confused and the tomb of the dream of immortality is opened up and revealed to be a sham, a mere "puffball". The illusions which uphold daily life and love are laid bare as constructions of language, which, outside of 'relationship', must also crumble; like the flame which "goes out", language,—meaning, signification—"scrolls" itself up and disappears. It is paradoxical that in the textual moment of the death of language, Atwood's text becomes most present and alive to the reader. Yet of course, the author in writing and the reader in reading are not dead, but are sharing in a representative process which engages with emotional problems.

Atwood generally avoids definitive endings for her texts; the situation of the protagonist is most often suspended at the point of heightened awareness, but without real options or perspectives in view. "The Grave" is situated within this pattern. The narrator is sitting on a wall, waiting for the bus, just after her apocalyptic vision. She detaches her imaginary gaze from it:

I turn aside and look down at my hands. They are covered with greyish dust: I've been digging among the shells, gathering them together. I arrange them in a border, a square, each white shell overlapping the next. Inside I plant the flints, upright in tidy rows, like teeth, like flowers. (92)

This final paragraph offers a densely conflicting set of possibilities structured through both inter- and intra-texts. In looking at her hands, the narrator draws the reader's attention away from the apocalyptic vision to the possibility of creation. The dominant consciousness, the controlling "I" of the text has hands which are "covered with greyish dust". Dust is of course suffused with the biblical intertext of creation: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Gen. II, viii), but also that of death, "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return"
The woman has "been digging", and here again the life/death possibilities are simultaneously affirmed; is she digging a garden or digging a grave?

In the next line, the character introduces the notion of order through the words "arrange" and "border", as well as "square". Within the story, there have been previous references to borders, but they are borders which have not succeeded in creating order. The passage where the couple visit the poet's tomb and the narrator comments that "the sweet alyssum intended for a border hasn't quite worked" (81) combines the imagery of both garden and tomb. Similarly, while visiting the castle, the couple are "in the skeleton of a garden, the beds marked by brick borders now grass-infested, a few rose bushes still attempting to keep order" (emphasis added 82), the signifiers here moving back and forth between the semantic fields of order and degeneration. The narrator's attempt to create her own borders and to "arrange" things in her own way may be an indication that even after the "end of the world" of a specific relationship, something else must be constructed.

What is the female character constructing though? Within her border, she "plant[s] the flints, upright in tiny rows". The first image which comes to mind here is the comparison with the tombstones in a graveyard, which obviously picks up on the story's initial quest object. Yet if there is something dead, needing to be buried, it is the object of the narrator's quest, the love relationship which has ended. Although she earlier resolved (after her murderous impulse) "never to plant flowers for him" (88), she does need to mourn the part of herself which 'died' along with their desire. She includes this possibility in the comparison she offers at the end, saying that what she has planted are "like teeth, like flowers". The flowers pay tribute, the flowers grow, symbolise life and therefore hope. It is on this note that Atwood ends the story, but she first introduces an element of danger, the teeth.

In Greek mythology, Jason is constrained to plant serpent's teeth and from them spring up the "Sown men": "All day he ploughed, and at nightfall sowed the teeth, from which armed men immediately sprouted" (The Greek Myths: II, 238). The danger these mythological men represent for the narrator is the prospect of facing an 'army' of patriarchal potential suitors. Yet, it is impossible to either control desire or to remove oneself from it. Since her libidinal energy no longer has an external love-object, she "will at once begin looking about for a substitute for the lost attachment; and until that substitute has been found the liberated libido will be kept in suspension within [her] mind, and will there give rise to tensions and colour [her] mood" (Case Histories, 211). The deliberate and cultivated ambiguity of the final paragraph suggests that the attempt to reconstruct options can only be done within the contexts which society makes available. In the western societies which Atwood refers to, the patriarchal aggressivity suggested by the teeth cannot be overlooked any more than one could envisage the future without the optimism symbolised by the flowers.

The ways in which men and women do relate to each other in late twentieth-century society is perhaps (if not unquestionably) the central concern of Atwood's writing. The perspective on this question is dominantly female, and the conclusions reached are very often bleak. But as Atwood says: "The world exists; the writer testifies" (Second Words 349). What "The Grave" offers in this context is a perspective which is located at a particular moment in the life of a couple, that moment when it becomes clear that there is no way forward for them within the psychological structures available to them. There is no diabolizing of the male character, only an intense portrayal of the way in which the...
patriarchal values of western society—shaping and dominating a relationship of desire—are experienced by the female protagonist, how they contribute to the destruction of her self-image, and how she must finally refuse them.

BIBLIOGRAPHIE


NOTES

1. Freud, quoted in Laplanche. "'We call by that name, [libido], the energy... of those instincts which have to do with all that may be comprised under the word 'love' " (238).
3. See also the projection of the narrator's mirror-image onto the outer world: "Above us the gulls wheel and ride, crying like drowning puppies or disconsolate angels. They have black rims around their eyes" (emphasis added, 91).
4. This does not exclude further feelings of aggression on the narrator's part such as when they are eating breakfast: "[He] puts his hand over mine, the one not holding the fork" (89). This negative inscription into the text of the other hand, the one which is holding the fork suggests to the reader what other impulses the narrator is repressing.
RÉSUMÉS

"The Grave of the Famous Poet", une nouvelle de Margaret Atwood, publiée en 1977 dans la collection Dancing Girls, est une évocation narrative d'un drame psychologique : la perte de soi à travers la perte de l'autre. Accompagnant la détérioration d'une relation amoureuse, la nouvelle aborde la question du rôle du désir dans la construction identitaire de l'individu. Si la réciprocité du désir est la condition du bonheur dans l'amour, son absence entraîne un processus destructeur. Cette nouvelle explore les implications psychologiques du désinvestissement de soi dans une relation placée d'emblée sous le signe de la mort, à travers la quête du tombeau du poète célèbre. La mort de la relation amoureuse trouve son écho partout dans le langage qui construit la relation entre la narratrice et sa perception du hors-de-soi. Adoptant une approche psychanalytique, cet article a pour objectif d'élucider les paramètres psychologiques de cette exploration, à travers une lecture serrée du texte.

AUTEURS

JENNIFER MURRAY

Université de Besançon. Agrégée d'anglais, Jennifer Murray est l'auteur de plusieurs articles sur des romans nord-américains post-modernes et s'intéresse aux théories post-structuralistes.