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Margaret Atwood and the Implications of the Word Love

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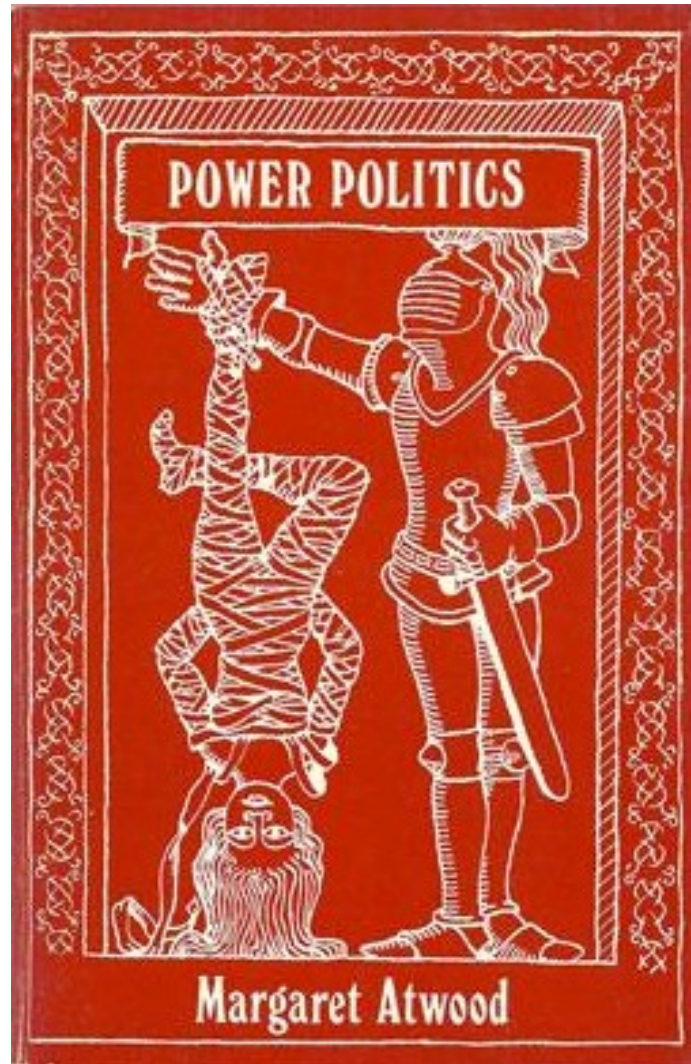


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Margaret Atwood and the Implications of the Word Love

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ENG 298
March 2, 2015

Abstract

This paper discusses ideal romantic love as it appears in Western literature and how women are portrayed in works containing idealistic romantic plots. It also explores how Canadian author Margaret Atwood rejects the traditional love plot in her novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as in her book of poetry *Power Politics* and the poem "A Woman's Issue." The first section of this paper gives a brief history of the ideal romantic love plot in Western literature, beginning with courtly love in Medieval literature, and its influences on later works such as *Madame Bovary* and *The Awakening*. The section also discusses the transition from the traditional love plot to that of the failed marriage plot in addition to such plots' portrayal of women as broken and unwhole beings. The first section concludes with a brief overview of how Margaret Atwood rejects the ideology of romantic love in her works. The second section explores *The Handmaid's Tale* as a rejection of the romantic love ideal and how the novel sheds light on various issues women face in addition to the imbalance of power between men and women. The third section expands upon the idea of an imbalance of power between men and women in romantic relationships by examining Atwood's book of poetry *Power Politics*, concluding with a possible theory as to why women appear to willingly give up power in such relationships.

**A Brief History of Ideal Romantic Love in Western Literature
&
Its Portrayal of Women**

Love.

It is a word that has been written about, sung about, photographed, and painted. There are entire grocery store aisles dedicated to love, seminars instructing people on how to attract it, and counseling sessions designed to help couples rediscover it.

But what, exactly, is love? And how does one know he or she is in it? There seems to be an ideal by which people judge their romantic relationships, a set of standards that must be met in order for their relationships to be happy, successful, and fulfilling. An article published in *American Philosophical Quarterly* defines ideal romantic love as the “desire to unite with another person in profound psychological and physical ways” in addition to “wanting to identify with another, to take another’s needs and interests to be [one’s] own and to wish that [they] will do the same” (Delaney, 340).

The ideal form of love is often portrayed in Western literature, which James R. Averill discusses in his study, “On Falling in Love in Conformance with the Romantic Ideal.” Averill insists, in order to conform to the ideal, love must be “a passion: One does not enter into love quietly and with deliberation; rather, one is ‘gripped,’ ‘seized,’ and ‘overcome’ by love” (235). This brings to mind the well-known phrase “love at first sight,” which is commonly used in Western literature, the most famous being Romeo’s instant attraction to Juliet in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*.

The ideal form of love in Western literature can be traced back to the late eleventh century, with the rise of “courtly love,” which was defined by the “image of the idealized Lady as an elevated, often unattainable object of desire.” Courtly love was followed by the French

“verse-romance of the trouveres,” which focused on the “courtly poet’s adoration, anguish, and lust; by stressing the *active* pursuit of passion.” Thus, medieval romance “became the first imaginative literature of length in Western culture to make love the motivating cause, or ‘desire,’ activating its narrative design.” (Boone, 34 & 35)

The idea of courtly love emphasized the importance of a complete “oneness,” which can be traced back to Plato’s *Symposium*, where Aristophanes tells a fable in which humans were once “unified beings” split in half by Zeus. The beings were forced to spend a lifetime searching for their other half, doomed to be “incomplete” without their soul mate. (Boone, 38) Despite the importance of oneness in courtly love, the Christian concept of marriage prevailed. Women were still expected to submit to men because “the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body” (Ephesians 5:22-23). Women, although elevated to the status of beings who were “worthy of profound love,” desire, and worship, were still considered to be under the control and influence of men (Boone, 34).

Courtly love continued to influence Western European love fiction in the nineteenth century. Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* tells the story of a young woman searching for the perfect love. Emma Bovary, the novel’s heroine, grew up reading “pulp romances and gothic tales” which provided her with the romantic ideals by which to compare the rest of her adult relationships (Boone, 47). Emma’s desire for a great true love, like what she has read about in literature, becomes her downfall. Emma is described as, “a sailor in distress, she kept casting desperate glances over the solitary waster of her life, seeking some white sail in the distant mists of the horizon...every morning when she awoke she hoped that today would be the day; she listened for every sound, gave sudden starts, was surprised when nothing happened; and then, sadder with each succeeding sunset, she longed for tomorrow (Flaubert, 35&36).” Her search for

an impossible ideal in the form of a “[man] strong and handsome, a valiant heart, passionate and sensitive at once, a poet’s spirit in an angel’s form, a lyre with strings of steel, sounding sweet-sad epithalamiums to the heavens” causes Emma great unhappiness; she continues to search for something greater than what she already has, but never finds it (Flaubert, 190).

Although Flaubert seems to acknowledge the impossibility of finding love in the idealistic form which is described in medieval literature, Madame Bovary is still portrayed as an unwhole being. She has dedicated her adult life to searching for her other half because, without him, she will remain incomplete, devoid of any joy or interest in life. Emma’s failure to find her soul mate results in her suicide, where she is finally able to find some semblance of peace. The idea of a woman as an unwhole being without a man is explored again nearly twenty years later in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*.

Edna Pontellier, the novel’s heroine, is married to Leonce Pontellier, a respectable man and kind husband. However, Edna is unsatisfied in the marriage, as her husband is oftentimes away on business trips or preoccupied with his work. While on vacation with her husband, Edna is introduced to Adele Ratignolle, who is more unreserved and open than she. This causes Edna to begin a transformation, or “awakening,” in which she begins to become more liberated from her husband and the social constraints which suffocate her. During the course of the vacation, Edna also meets Robert Lebrun, and the two begin a friendship, which soon blossoms into love. After realizing her love for Robert, Edna’s transformation becomes more intense. Upon returning home, Edna devotes herself to her art and starts becoming more independent, choosing her own interests over her husband’s and children’s.

Near the end of the novel, Edna plans to consummate her adulterous relationship with Robert, who returns to New Orleans in order to meet her. However, Robert eventually refuses to

enter a relationship with Edna, as he is unable to rebel against the societal rule prohibiting an affair with a married woman. At the end of the novel, Edna commits suicide after realizing that she would never truly be able to fulfill her dreams or desires. In a conversation with her doctor, Edna says, “The years that are gone seem like dreams—if one might go on sleeping and dreaming—but to wake up and find—oh! well! Perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life” (Chopin, 116 & 117).

Although Edna begins her transformation after befriending a woman, she does not truly experience a full emotional, mental, and sexual awakening until after she meets a man who appears to understand and “complete” her. Unfortunately, Robert’s desertion of Edna at the end of the novel shows that the romantic ideal of love doesn’t really exist and is nearly impossible to obtain in reality, due to social customs and constraints. Edna seems to realize that no man will ever be able to fulfill her every desire and dream, even though society states that a man *should* be able to provide those things for her. Unable to achieve the romantic ideal, Edna remains incomplete, and finds that the only way to escape from the restraints of society and her impending misery and boredom is through death.

In the years leading up to World War I, the courtly love plot in Western literature began to fade, giving way to plots revolving around the failure of romantic relationships. Novels such as *The Good Soldier* (1915) and *Tender is the Night* (1934) “focus on the breakdown of communication between spouses.” The dissolution of marriage is also used in such stories as a way of expressing the “quintessentially modernist theme of alienation, division, and unhappiness in a meaningless universe.” (Boone, 136) In these stories, women were more sexually liberated and were able to seek their own “happy endings” outside of marriage. This trend continued thirty years later in Jacqueline Susann’s 1966 novel, *Valley of the Dolls*. The novel follows the stories

of three liberated women who are able to have relationships with several different men and be in control of their own bodies.

However, freedom from the traditional marriage plot causes more tragedy for the main characters of *Valley of the Dolls*. Being sexually liberated means running the risk of being viewed as objects or toys by men as Jennifer, one of three main characters, discovers in her relationships with men. After falling in love and preparing to marry a senator, she is faced with the diagnosis of breast cancer and an inability to have children. Upon telling her fiancé that she will not be able to have children, he responds by telling her that he doesn't care, as long as nothing happens to her breasts, which he considers to be his children. Depressed by the fact that she can no longer have children and that another man only loves her for her body, Jennifer commits suicide.

Anne, the second protagonist in the novel, is also highly regarded for her beauty and instantly attracts the attention of Allen Cooper, a millionaire, who proposes marriage after only six weeks of dating. Anne refuses and later falls in love with Lyon Burke, a lawyer. While Anne and Lyon's love story ends with marriage, it is not a happy one. Lyon constantly has affairs and, in order to cope with her husband's infidelity, Anne resorts to taking sleeping pills, which she later becomes dependent on.

Neely, the third protagonist of *Valley of the Dolls*, struggles with her weight as she rises in fame as an actress in Hollywood musicals. She becomes addicted to pills in order to control her weight and, eventually, due to her behavior caused by the pills, Neely is prevented from working in entertainment. This causes two attempted suicides and, after two failed marriages, Neely is committed to a mental hospital. After she is released from the hospital, she begins an affair with Anne's husband, Lyon Burke.

Although *Valley of the Dolls* rejects the traditional love plot, it still portrays women as unwhole beings, broken by their failed relationships with men. Despite describing women as free from the societal constraints of marriage, Susann entraps her female characters by imposing an impossible ideal of beauty upon them. Additionally, they must live up to the expectations placed on them by men in order to attract, and keep, romantic partners. Attempting to become the “ideal woman” places an enormous amount of stress on each of the main characters, resulting in suicide for one of them, and misery, addiction, and madness for the other two.

The emergence of the failed marriage plot allowed for a change of pace after decades of the courtly love plot. However, the “abandonment of marriage” in such plots “does not automatically answer the question of how the sexually liberated female protagonist is to establish an autonomous identity” (Boone, 136). Although the focus of romantic novels changed, the involvement of female protagonists remained the same, as they rarely achieved a “subjectivity outside the structures of some form of the age-old love story” (Boone, 137). Readers merely knew women as objects of worship and desire, such as in the courtly love plot, or broken, unhappy, and unwhole, as in the failed marriage plot. Very rarely do such women in Western literature attempt to find their own identity and agency outside of romantic love.

In 1971, the Western definition and idea of love in literature changed dramatically with the publication of Canadian writer Margaret Atwood’s book of poetry, *Power Politics*. Atwood bravely approaches romantic love in a decidedly political and unromantic way. She writes about the problems of gender relations “from a new, indeed ‘protofeminist,’ perspective, analyzing gender-based structures of domination and repression from a female point of view and providing an elaborate reaction to such imbalance” (Nischik, 19&20). In response to the reception of *Power Politics*, Atwood stated:

“In general, response divided rather neatly along sex lines, women greeting the book with recognition, men with fear; ten years ago women would probably have ignored and men dismissed it. Women, both critics and ordinary readers, spoke of the book as though it were about them, about the way it was; for them it was realistic. Men tended to use adjectives like ‘cruel’ and ‘jagged’ and to see it either as a display of perversity on my part or as an attack, a conspiracy, a war or an inhumane vivisection of Love, nasty and unfair as cutting up a puppy”
(Nischik, 21 as cited in McCombs 1988a, 52).

In *Power Politics* and her later works of fiction, Atwood “openly challenges the ideology of romantic love” which views “romantic affiliation and/or marriage as a woman’s primary means to self-definition and self-fulfillment” (Bouson, 7, 8). By opposing the traditional love plots, she brings to readers’ attention the issues women face, as well as the imbalance of power between men and women.

Women's Issues Outside of the Romantic Love Plot

In "A Women's Issue" Atwood asks, "Who invented the word love?" She takes the reader through a timeline, detailing how women throughout history have been sexually mistreated in the name of love. In the first stanza, the woman portrayed wears a "spiked device | that locks around the waist and between | the legs." This evokes the image of the "chastity belt," which, according to myth, was "originally used during the Middle Ages by knights who wanted to defend their wives' honor while they were defending the honor of their country" (Reuben quoted by Classen, 4). The second stanza describes a similar device. The third and fourth stanzas become more violent, describing a "young girl | dragged into the bush by the midwives | and made to sing while they scrape the flesh | from between her legs, then tie her thighs | till she scabs over and is called healed." The poem suggests that the reason for such brutality is so "she can be married." The fourth stanza is suggestive of rape or prostitution, as the woman "lies flat on her back | while eighty men a night | move through her, ten an hour." The final stanzas pose the question "Is this | why wars are fought?" Atwood refers to female genitalia as having some sort of "uneasy power." Despite this power, it is something that is still owned by others and used in ways to conform to a society's vision of what "love" is. (True Stories, 40 & 41).

The horrific images described in "A Women's Issue" are not fictional, nor do they depict a cycle which ends with prostitution and rape. Even after the publication of "A Woman's Issue," a cycle of violence continued alongside oppression and mistreatment. Despite the successes of the feminist movement in the 1970's, there was still a "fragility of the newly acquired rights and equalities of women" (Neuman, 858). Newly gained rights were opposed in various parts of the world, including the United States, and such "gains were threatened or actively eroded" (Neuman, 858).

In 1984, when Margaret Atwood began to write *The Handmaid's Tale* (Neuman, 859), women in Iran were forced out of their universities and jobs, due to the Islamic Revolution. Women, who once held teaching positions at universities, were “arrested and flogged for improper dress” (Esfandiari, 8). Policies under the new regime encouraged women to “drop out of the workforce and [go] back into the house” or they were “deliberately directed into such traditional female areas as nursing and teaching” (Esfandiari, 41). Women in Afghanistan were prohibited from attending school and working under the rule of the Taliban. They were not allowed to leave their homes without a male escort and violations of Taliban laws could be punishable by death. (Smeal, 40) Under Ceausescu’s government in Romania, women were monitored monthly for pregnancy, birth control and abortions were outlawed, and women’s wages were linked to childbearing (Neuman, 859).

In the United States, under Ronald Reagan’s presidency, the Office of Domestic Violence was closed down while “murders related to sexual assault and domestic violence increased” (Neuman, 860). Abortion clinics were set on fire and their staff and patients were harassed. Medicaid “ceased to fund legal abortions” while “several states passed laws restricting not only legal abortion but even the provision of information about abortion” (Neuman, 860). Women like Phyllis Schlafly battled the equal rights amendment, encouraging the idea that domestic life is the “greatest achievement to which a woman might aspire” (Bellafante, 4). In an interview regarding women being drafted into the armed forces, Schlafly blatantly stated that “men can fight better than women, men are stronger than women in upper body strength, and women get pregnant,” further supporting her views that women were better off at home, raising children (Majors, 5). Accusations of brainwashing were rampant in New Jersey, where a religious sect of over a thousand members was moving into the suburb of Berkeley Heights. Members were

accused of subordinating women, restricting contact between members and non-members, and arranging marriages. It was rumored that wives of the sect coordinators were called “handmaidens” (Bajak).

The era of the chastity belt had ended, but, as Margaret Atwood’s “A Woman’s Issue” suggests, a cycle of control and oppression still continued. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, one of her most well-known novels, Margaret Atwood extends women’s issues into a nightmarish dystopian society. Despite being marketed as fiction, the events in the novel are rooted in fact. In an interview with John Goddard, Atwood stated, “There is nothing in the book that hasn’t already happened. All the things described in the book, people have already done to one another” (8).

In the novel, fertility rates are at an all-time low due to toxic waste in the environment and women who are still able to reproduce are called Handmaids. They are sent to households with the hope that they will be able to conceive a child with the male Commander of the house. Additionally, their rights are severely limited: they are not allowed to have jobs, or money. They are under constant supervision both inside and outside of their households. Men, on the other hand, still hold positions of power, as the character of the Commander does, both within the household, and the government. By means of justification, supporters of this ideology claim that women are safer and more respected when their primary role is child bearing and when they are beneath men in social status.

Departing from the oftentimes male-centric visions of a similar dystopian future Offred, the main character, is a woman who instead of analyzing the “public policies and institutions of state oppression,” gives readers a very personal account of her resistance against “patriarchal tyranny” and her “sexual service to the state” (Howells, 164 & 165). Offred, stripped of her

name and identity, is classified as a Handmaid. She is a prisoner in a man's house and her new identity is based solely on her biological role as a female: to reproduce.

In the past, Margaret Atwood has been criticized as being anti-love, especially after the publication of *Power Politics*. One reviewer wrote, "the whole book seethes with cool outrage. Yet this chronicle of two people violating each other in the name of human love sets up its own limitations" (Sullivan, 253). In another review, Michael Linton accuses Atwood of purposely profaning "one of culture's most deeply treasured expressions" (16). However, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood appears to be portraying love as something which is wanted, but irrelevant, as Offred thinks, "There's nobody here I can love, all the people I could love are dead or elsewhere. Who knows where they are or what their names are now?" (103) Essentially, love is taken out of the equation and women are valued and used only for their ability to reproduce.

Offred's sexual encounters with the Commander are devoid of love, warmth, and speech; they take on a grotesque quality in her descriptions of them:

"My red skirt is hitched up to my waist. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because that is not what he is doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose" (*The Handmaid's Tale*, 93 & 94).

The Ceremony is described as a "duty," something that is required to happen for the good of society. Offred states:

"It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with. It has nothing to do with sexual desire,

at least not for me...it seems odd that women once spent such time and energy reading about such things, thinking about them, worrying about them, writing about them. They are so obviously recreational” (The Handmaid’s Tale, 94 & 95).

Even though passion, love, and romance are removed from the lives of those living in Atwood’s dystopian society, it does not appear to improve the lives of women, especially those who are Handmaids.

Love is also depicted as something which can be dangerous and blinding, especially to Offred. After failing to be impregnated by the Commander, his wife instructs her to begin a sexual relationship with Nick, the Commander’s driver and assistant, in the hopes that she will finally become pregnant. Throughout the course of her sexual relationship with Nick, Offred begins to develop romantic feelings for him. She begins to lose her awareness of the world around her, choosing to ignore the conditions in which she lives, and continuing through her days as if in a daze. (270 & 271) Unfortunately, Offred’s happiness is short-lived. Near the end of the novel, she is arrested for violation of state secrets and is told by Nick to trust him, as he belongs to a resistance and will help Offred escape. *The Handmaid’s Tale* ends with Offred being led out of the Commander’s home and readers are left with the understanding that, even though she might be rescued, Offred’s fate is still in the hands of men, as it is up to Nick to either betray or rescue her.

Romantic Love as a Power Struggle & the Woman's Desire for Unity

The original cover art of *Power Politics* was the result of collaboration between Margaret Atwood and William Kimber (see Image 1). The cover depicts a knight holding a woman upside down by her foot. The knight is completely covered in armor and holds a sword, however, the subject matter of the poetry within *Power Politics* leans towards the depiction of the knight as a male figure. The woman on the cover is in a humiliating position, bound and helpless. She hangs by her right ankle, while her left leg is left loose and hangs behind her right leg. Her hands are bound, as is the rest of her body. The cover is reminiscent of the "Hanged Man," which is one of the twenty-two Major Arcana cards in Tarot. The Hanged Man card is numbered twelve and the image on the card is that of a young man hanging upside-down from his right foot. His right foot is tied to a "wooden gibbet" and his hands "appear to be tied behind his back" while "his left leg hangs loosely behind his right." His face "shows an expression of calm detachment, and in some [card] packs his head is surrounded by a halo" (Douglas, 85).

Much like the face of the young man in the Tarot card, the woman on the cover of *Power Politics* is calm and detached and does not appear to show any emotion. Her calm expression seems to convey that she is at peace with her situation, or that she has accepted the knight's dominance of her. In Tarot, the Hanged Man signifies "the interaction of unity with duality, which gives birth to a third dimension." (Douglas, 85) As the Major Arcana cards of the Tarot represent a "hero's journey," the Hanged Man represents a point in time in which the hero realizes he is "only part of a greater whole." He is not one person, instead he consists of "two halves which are antagonistic to one another, yet are at the same time complementary" (Douglas, 86). Atwood's cover appears to comment on the idea of love in this way, that "being in love" means being two parts to a whole. However, the illustration conveys that, in reality, love is not

something which is balanced. Instead, it is the woman who is powerless and at the mercy of the man.

The poems of *Power Politics* focus on the power struggle between men and women in romantic relationships, thus departing from the subject matter of earlier love poetry and fiction. In “Their attitudes differ,” the female narrator takes on the role of the biologist, dissecting and analyzing her relationship with “you,” who is assumed to be a man throughout the rest of the poems. As earlier male authors of love poems oftentimes dissected and analyzed women in their writing, the narrator of Atwood’s poem reverses the roles and appears to analyze and make judgements of her male partner. She states, “I approach this love | like a biologist | You flee from it | like an escaped political | prisoner, and no wonder” (10). In the final line of the poem, Atwood writes “Please die I said | so I can write about it” (10). This suggests that romantic relationships can’t be effectively dissected and analyzed until after they have ended, or “died.”

The imagery of power struggles and violence continues throughout “They travel by air,” where the narrator and her partner are described as “hurtling towards each other | at the speed of sound” and, when they collide, they fall and their pieces are “mixed as disaster.” They “hit the pavement” in a “blur of silver fragments.” (*Power Politics*, 11) In “You have made your escape,” the narrator describes the bruises on her thighs and the inside of her skull as being the only things that “remember you.” (*Power Politics*, 13) As the poems progress, the relationship between the narrator and her partner begins to deteriorate even more. It is described as an “accident” and the narrator seems to acknowledge the fact that she has no power to save herself, nor will her partner save her. In the final lines of “The accident has occurred,” the narrator asks, “Which of us will survive | which of us will survive the other” suggesting that romantic love is a battle to the death. (*Power Politics*, 35) Only one person can win and it is typically the man; as the narrator admits

in the final poem of *Power Politics*, “You walk towards me | carrying a new death | which is mine and no-one else’s” (56).

Despite the power men have over women in Western love stories and poetry, there is still a female yearning for love, for a complete union with another half. Atwood touches on this desire in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where Offred longs for human touch and wishes to be valued as a person, rather than a reproductive tool. She states, “I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me” (97). In the poem, “Variation on the Word *Sleep*,” the narrator wishes to actually inhabit her lover, to be as “unnoticed” and “necessary” as the “air that inhabits” his lungs (*True Stories*, 87).

Perhaps it is the desire of some women to “merge totally with a partner” and their “yearning for intimacy and fusion” that is so damaging to their own self-identity (Felski, 109). In her texts, Karin Struck “laments her own passivity and willingness to mold herself according to the desires of each lover,” showing the negative consequences of a lack of self-identity (Felski, 109). In *An Unknown Woman*, author Alice Koller describes how she must turn to other people as a means of self-validation. She states, “I have turned other people into mirrors for me. I look at other people in order to see myself” (Felski, 109).

Despite these disturbing revelations, books such as Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series and E.L. James’s *Fifty Shades of Grey* still grace *The New York Times Best Seller* list. Such books epitomize the romantic love ideal, portraying young women in all-consuming, passion-filled relationships, showing them as truly being a part of a whole, their self-identities defined by their relationships. Stories of sexual domination over women by men are prevalent on the Amazon Bestsellers List, right alongside titles meant to empower and encourage women in developing

their own self-identities. Such titles include Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* and Lena Dunham's *Not That Kind of Girl*.

In an interview with Karla Hammond, Margaret Atwood discusses people's interest in pop culture books, stating that "they connect with something real in people's lives...There's usually an area of reality in the lives of the readers. Even Harlequin Romances. Those books are about the dream that we all secretly have - that everything can work out, that everything can be happy, that there is a Mr. Wonderful who does exist" (Ingersoll).

If ideal romantic love portrayed in Western fiction reflects women's secret desires, how closely must these women follow the "guidelines" set out in these stories? If, for instance, a woman wanted to marry a powerful, rich, domineering, and not-to-mention attractive businessman, would she have to give up her own autonomy in order for her husband to accept and love her? In order to obtain the things she wants in life, would she have to relinquish all control to her husband, allowing him to purchase expensive cars for her and provide her with a job in her chosen field? More importantly, how long would it take before the woman grew tired of being a man's lesser half, before she went crazy from being under the constant control of her husband, before her dependence on him became like an addiction? Although Margaret Atwood does not necessarily answer these questions directly in her works, she provides readers with complex female narrators outside of the traditional love plot, shedding light on women's issues that are often overlooked or avoided. Through works such as *Power Politics* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood appears to push readers towards a greater awareness of the restrictions that the Western romance plot puts on its female characters. In doing this, she shifts readers' focus from an unattainable and unrealistic ideal to the harsh realities and injustices many women face.

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