

This is a photograph of me

Margaret Atwood

It was taken some time ago
At first it seems to be
a smeared
print: blurred lines and grey flecks
blended with the paper;

Then, as you scan
it, you see in the left-hand
corner
a thing that is like a branch:
part of a tree
(balsam or spruce) emerging
and, to the right, halfway up
what ought to be a gentle
slope, a small frame house.

In the background there is a lake,
and beyond that, some low hills.

(The photograph was taken
the day after I drowned.

I am in the lake, in the centre
of the picture, just under the surface.

It is difficult to say where
precisely, or to say how large or small I am:
the effect of water
on light is a distortion

but if you look long enough,
eventually
you will be able to see me.)

What images appear in your mind after reading and hearing the poem? What exact line(s) do they come from?

How does the poem make you feel? What did it remind you of in your own life?

Choose one word or one line that struck you as exceptionally well written. Why this one? Look at how the poem was written, note the parenthesis. What could Atwood be doing by dramatically shifting the tone and point of view of the poem in this way?

What were you thinking at the beginning of the poem? What were you thinking at the end of the poem? What does Atwood tell about the place and plot. What does she not tell us? Why not?

Atwood's fascination with Illusion

- Through style
 - The title – suggests a portrait of a human rather than a landscape. She catches her reader off guard by having them assume what the poem is about and then delivering another
 - The setting – a calm serene landscape that suggests peace but, as we find out, has a hidden story
 - The Form – verse in parenthesis suggests it is only supplemental information, this forces the narrator's voice into the background of the story as well as in the images. If the mention of the death is only supplemental, why is it mentioned? Why is it not in the forefront?

Atwood's fascination with Illusion

- Through images
 - Landscape – the calm "typical" subdued landscape contrasted with a ghostly narrator and mysterious death
 - The lake – an image symbolizing an alternate world hiding beneath the surface
 - The water and light - alternate realities can be hidden or distorted, although patience and a watchful eye can bring forth new meaning.
 - The photograph - a sometimes inaccurate and misleading representation of reality.

Atwood's fascination with Illusion

- Through theme
 - Art may not be as simple as it appears
 - Life may not be as simple as it appears
 - It takes time and effort to see beyond (or beneath) the surface of most things
 - There is often much left unsaid in any image, art or even event.