

# Political poetry by margaret atwood

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" Backdrop addresses cowboy" by Margaret Atwood Creating a masterful poetic movement through the American mythos, Atwood skewers " manifest destiny" by embodying the voice of the Other, the discarded " I am. " Writing political poetry that artfully confronts dominant ideology – thus exposing the motivation and effects of misrepresentation – is a difficult challenge. The process can easily be derailed by temptations to write strident, overly didactic verse that elevates sentiment above nuance and craft.

While passion is certainly important, it is the poem itself that transforms political intent into a dynamic act of oppositional literature. To be effective as a statement, it must first be effective as a poem. In " Backdrop addresses cowboy," Margaret Atwood delivers a scathing indictment of imperialist power that, through its elegant craft and conceptual framework, is also a breathtakingly vibrant poem. The core message, a potent denunciation of reckless power from the perspective of those who suffer its consequences, is simultaneously unequivocal and oblique.

Though Atwood's indictment is readily apparent, close reading reveals a brilliant poetic foundation comprised of nuanced language, double-meanings, and a metaphorical structure that satirically lambasts American exceptionalism by skewering the individualist 'cowboy' myth with imagery from its own construction. In short, Atwood's poem succeeds as a political statement because she allows the demands of exceptional poetry to drive its articulation. From the outset, Atwood chooses language that economically expands the meaning of each phrase.

For example, " Starpgle," the poem's first word, focuses a personification of ' cowboy mentality' into a subtle critique of nationalist manipulation. In <https://assignbuster.com/political-poetry-by-margaret-atwood/>

In addition, other connotations come to mind, like "starry-eyed," or the gaudiness of "pages." Even elements internal to the American anthem apply: bombs bursting, a nation under siege, victory against all odds. Though speculative, a reading like this is supported by the poem's representation of a cowboy who violently protects his own interests in an imagined landscape filled with heroes and villains.

Regarded as a heroic figure by the myth of manifest destiny, he is conversely seen as a reckless tyrant by those who suffer the effects of his violence. The first stanza reveals a comic figure - "Stargled cowboy" sauntering through his child-like fantasy while pulling a prop from the Hollywood simulacrum that supports his myth. Atwood complicates this image in the second stanza when she introduces violence to her "almost-/silly" characterization of the mythical "West." Using a line break to accentuate the transition, she plays the impact of a stand-alone line against the expanded meaning of its grammatical context. Isolated, line six ("you are innocent as a bathtub") relates directly to the opening stanza's child-like caricature, forming an aphoristic trope that is both interesting and oddly mundane. Accentuated by the break, the line's reading adds dramatic nuance when its sentence unfolds into a broader meaning: "you are innocent as a bathtub / filled with bullets." Contrasting the ironic character of opposed readings (innocent and not-at-all-innocent) within the space of shared words, Atwood foreshadows an overall conceptual structure in which "backdrop" refers both to the simulacrum of Hollywood sets and to the genuine environment of a beleaguered world. Despite its obvious quantitative reference, "bathtub / filled with bullets" also infers a Hollywood cliché - the

bullet-riddled bathtub – that reinforces a theme inherent to the myth: if you're not ready to fight, they'll get you when you're vulnerable.

An inference like this reflects back on the subtle statement of the earlier use of "stargled": a nation that imagines itself as besieged can use that camouflage as justification for militarism and imperialist expansion. Again, supported by the poem, these significations demonstrate a complicated structure that works internal logic to frame an effective (and damning) political statement. **Oppositions and Conceptual Structure** This is a poem about power and disenfranchisement.

It employs oppositions as a conceptual device to turn manifest destiny on its head. Exploding the cowboy myth by use of its own imagery and overarching theme of heroes and villains, Atwood draws complex parallels to American exceptionalism, a black and white ideology that drains color from alternative perspectives. By use of satire, she effectively removes the shroud that justifies questionable actions as being both inevitable and heroic. As stated in the title, the voice of this poem is that of "backdrop" (i. . the environment of scenes portrayed by the myth and recontextualized by the poem) addressing "cowboy." The expanding focus on "cowboy" and his violent milieu reaches a pivot in the fifth stanza when the Hollywood backdrop is fully exposed, and the speaker finally reveals herself. Using the word "ought" (implying mandatory obligation), she questions her expected role on the set (passive, "hands clasped / in admiration") while asserting, "I am elsewhere. Spoken as "backdrop," and expanded in the final stanzas, this statement implies a conceptual flip wherein "backdrop" becomes subject, inhabiting an environment desecrated by the reckless actions of a transient "

cowboy". Simulacra In the essay " Simulacra and Simulation," philosopher Jean Baudrillard states, " The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth--it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true. " While Baudrillard perhaps overstates his case, the point is clear: actions instigated and justified by myth play an undeniable role in shaping both material and social reality.

Applying this concept to Atwood's poem, manifest destiny can be seen acting as ' truth' in its own regard - concealing no truth, because instead it has replaced truth with artifice. Accordingly, " cowboy" becomes backdrop to the postmodern world from which Atwood addresses the genuine existence of other, more substantial truths conveniently denied by myth. The Alternative Power of Effective Verse As representation itself, replete with borrowed imagery and the detritus of experienced consequence, this poem enacts a self-reflexive reversal of the social forces it speaks against.

With a vocabulary full of bullets, Atwood crafts a poem that stands the test of both 'truth' and time - yet does so peacefully, through an act of oppositional literature. Whether her poem is construed as feminist, environmentalist, post-colonial, or just-plain-political (from a Canadian perspective), its verity is affirmed by continued relevance. Written in the mid-seventies, it speaks just as powerfully in our current era. In terms of effective poetics, how good is that?