

The power of
language:
comparative analysis
of plath's "words" and
atwood's "spel..."



In the two poems, “ Spelling” by Margaret Atwood and “ Words” by Sylvia Plath, words are described in terms of power: the power to create, to penetrate, to move, and to destroy. Both poets invoke images of words as connected to time and forces of nature, as active outside of the speaker, and, as having a presence which continues to live, grow, and affect its environment. Both poems also employ violent and shocking images of death, destruction, and decay. Whereas Atwood’s poem has a hopeful “ rising from the ashes” tone to it, Plath’s poem holds a more bleak and dark feeling in which the wound inflicted by the force of cutting words never fully heals but penetrates and lingers.

Atwood’s poem “ Spelling” links three timelines by using women of different ages and times and connects the feminine to the power of words and the violence of being silenced. The first timeline is set in the present moment between a mother and her daughter. The child is still very young and “ plays on the floor”. The image of childhood is further represented by the primary colors of “ red, blue & hard yellow”. This girl child is “ learning how to spell”. By connecting this very young female with the process of learning language and how to create words Atwood is pushing the time line of the poem into the future. Not only is the little girl learning to create words, she is “ learning how to make spells”. The image of “ spell making” invokes mental pictures of witches, magic, and mysterious powers. There is a transformation at the end of the first stanza. Atwood casts a poetic word spell and turns a verb into a noun with a twist; the infinitive verb “ to spell” changes into the present tense “ spelling” and again into the noun “ a spell”. Subtly shifting the verb tense creates layers of double meanings. This metamorphosis further

reinforces the images of change, witchcraft, creativity, and power, and connects them to women, words, and word-crafting. The second and third stanzas build the image of writing as a creative process and tie it to motherhood. The image of color and family in the present is contrasted against the isolation and darkness of women writers from the past. By contrasting the two images, attention is drawn to the importance of community, continuity, and the passing on of knowledge from mother to daughter. This constructed image of family is so unlike the women of the second stanza who “closed themselves in rooms”, “denied themselves daughters”, and “drew the curtains” to write in isolation and secrecy.

Next, Atwood connects the idea of writing with the use of, and implied addiction to, a powerful drug, such as heroin, when she says the purpose of this dark isolation was to “mainline words”. This word play also creates another connection between the female and the narrative, the heroine, and the image of a powerful force, the drug. The third stanza continues with the pairing of motherhood and idea of using words to create. Although Atwood writes “a child is not a poem” this statement itself plants the seed that a poem, like a child, is gestated, grown, and then, with great labor, birthed by the author. By saying that a piece of writing is not a child she in fact draws attention to the ways in which they are similar. After the poem has come into the world it continues to exist and to grow, to be heard, and to be interpreted in different ways, perhaps for millennia. The images of family, birth, creativity, and safety, is again contrasted against the imagery of violence and war in the fourth stanza with the shocking images of women being tortured and killed. She describes a woman in labor with her “thighs

“tied together by the enemy” not only to kill the mother and child but also to stop the creative process. Here Atwood is continuing her linking of women creating and birthing children with women as creators of powerful language, as well as language itself as a powerful force. The next lines, again going back in history, summon up the “burning witch”, naming her “Ancestress”, and connecting her to the long line of women who came before her, as well as those who came forth from her. The woman’s “mouth covered by leather to strangle her words” uses the silencing of words to demonstrate how powerful those words are. The image of the witch brings the poem full circle back to the present moment of the child “learning to spell” and again connects the female with the powerful imagery of the creator.

Atwood emphatically states at the end of the fourth stanza that “A word after a word after a word is power” again giving the reason that the witch was denied her voice was because to speak, and to spell, is to have power. The fifth stanza continues with the vivid description of the burning body and “the point where language falls away from the hot bones”. Here the body, the flesh of the woman, the burning witch, is the language itself. The woman, the witch, the child, and the power of the body to create and be created is language and is “truth”. Even after the woman has been destroyed, her words silenced, still “the word splits & doubles & speaks the truth”. The word is the beginning, it is the embryo, it is the creative cycle started anew. This is the image of the creative and the created, the spelling and the spell, the linking of the power of words and the power of women. Atwood says “the body itself becomes a mouth”. The body, the created, the physical, now speaks its truth. The last line of this stanza tells us that “this is a metaphor”

and here Atwood uses metafiction to draw the reader's attention back to the process of writing and the creation of words and poetic images. The final stanza asks the reader the question " how do you learn to spell". This question not only takes the reader back to the beginning of the poem, back to the image of the child " learning to make a spell", but also asks the parallel question of how do you learn to be powerful, how do you learn to use your power. She answers her question and says that by writing your " own name first, your first naming". This idea of naming ties closely with the power to self-identify; to say who you are. Atwood connects all women through history, all women to words, to knowing and claiming our identity, and to the power of creation, right back to the beginning.

Sylvia Plath's poem " Words" also deals with the power of the spoken word and the way in which it moves in the world. In this poem Plath uses layers of images, words with double meanings, and metaphors to express the force and the impact that words can have on others. The title of the poem " Words" not only raises the reader's awareness that the writer is writing about words in a conceptual way but it also immediately juxtaposes the title beside the first word of the first stanza, " Axes". This pairing of " Words" and " Axes" creates an image of words as weapons as well as tools. There is a force that is felt when the word " Axes" is spoken aloud; a distinct sharp cutting sound and an echoing repetition that sonorously captures and reinforce the imagery of echoes, and rings, that ripple throughout the poem. The second line completes what the first line has introduced. She writes " After whose stroke the wood rings" which creates an image of the axe as chopping at the tree but it also eroticizes, and softens, the action by using

the word “stroke”. There is also a double meaning created by “wood rings”. On the one hand it can mean the rings of wood inside the tree which mark its age or it can mean the verb to ring and that the tree is reverberating with the force of the axe’s stroke. The third line establishes that the wood is ringing with sound waves that move out and away from the trees creating “echoes”. Plath repeats the word “echoes” immediately at the start of the fourth line not only emphasizing the word itself but also creating an echo by repetition. The idea of “echoes traveling” conjures up impressions of sounds moving through space with force and energy. Plath uses the metaphor “like horses” to describe this energy and tie it in to the mental picture of logging, nature, and power. When all these images are placed one on top of the other in combination with the title “Words” there is a suggested connection between the concepts of destruction, force, energy, sound, rings, and waves, and that all of these things are released from the action of one person swinging the axe, or speaking the words.

The vision of trees being cut down continues but this time from the tree’s perspective, from the internal. “The sap” is what a tree naturally releases to heal wounds and this line reinforces the idea of the “axes” as weapons which are damaging and the tree as the victim. The second line says “Wells like tears”. When taken in the context of the axe and the tree one can read it that the sap is coming upward to fill the cut but it can also be read as “wells” of deep internal waters and that the person who has been wounded by the words is weeping “tears” from the pain. “Wells” meaning rising waters that are being forced up from an internal pressure and “wells” that are dug deep into the ground. The rest of the stanza continues with the water

metaphor, “ like the water striving to re-establish its mirror over the rock. There is a subtle creation of the ring imagery which ties the poem visually back to the first stanza, the tree’s rings, the sound ringing, and now the water rings which are created from the rock breaking the surface tension. Plath personifies the water by using the word “ striving”. The water tries to re-establish its peace, its calm external “ mirror” after the rock has penetrated and disturbed its surface. The mirror can be read as the idea of identity and the way in which the world sees us. The rock is connected to the axe, or the word, which is breaking the surface and is now contained inside the pool of water. She writes “ Over the rock/ That drops and turns”. This creates a mental picture of the rock which broke the surface now falling through the water. The next line “ A white skull” introduces the image of death and decay indicating not only a great passage of time but also the damage that words can do in terms of a destructive force. The rock “ turns” into a skull that is “ eaten by weedy greens”. The skull sits at the bottom of the pool of water, covered by the weeds, hidden from sight and yet still it remains. The final stanza re-addresses the power of words. They are now described as “ dry and riderless”. This dryness is in contrast to the water images of the previous stanzas and suggests that something has changed. Perhaps in the past the words had seemed driven and personal and now they are de-personalized yet “ indefatigable”. At the same time that the words are running free and unfettered, there is “ a life” at “ the bottom of the pool” who’s fate or “ fixed stars” is being controlled. This idea of fate governing a life being contrasted with the image of free horses, perhaps representing free will, gives the poem a feeling of isolation and confinement.

Atwood and Plath both write about the power of words but in very different ways. Atwood speaks of self-identity as she connects women over time and links the creative process of writing with the creative power of the woman's body. Her focus, although it uses shocking images, is quite intellectual in style whereas Plath writes from a more emotional and personal perspective about the power of words to wound and the way in which the words penetrate and stay in the deep unconscious mind.

Works Cited

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