

摘要

本論文的主旨在於探討瑪格麗特·愛特伍的《燒厝之晨》透過第一人稱敘述者的方式，來凸顯哀悼與記憶的主題，來紀念作者的父親卡爾·愛特伍及其死亡，進而分析敘述者在她父親死後的過程中所產生的敘述手法，尤其是詩學的語言展現、個人記憶及歷史重新省察。本論文著重在愛特伍如何透過詩中敘述者的觀點來再現父親的影像、敘述者如何和死者交涉溝通而形成的關係以及敘述者如何重說歷史事件。換句話說，本論文強調愛特伍詩裡所側重的哀悼與記憶之間的倫理關係及其必然性。這些面向常被批評家所忽略，批評家大部分著重在愛特伍的小說作品，鮮少注意到愛特伍的詩有此複雜的面向。透過詩學的語言展現與文本分析，《燒厝之晨》提供了富有張力的表現，透露出「死者」已儼然成為愛特伍的寫作中一個十分重要的關懷。

本研究共計五章，第一章緒論說明研究動機、目的與方法。第二章分析愛特伍詩裡的「哀悼」主題來切入，引用法國哲學家德西達的論點，討論哀悼的概念及其哲學思想作為提供本論文的一個很重要理論基礎架構。第三章延續德西達的論點來解釋「記憶」如何與哀悼構成一個糾結的關係。第四章跳脫出父親的影像，選擇以個人記憶方式與家庭史來做分析，強調敘述者如何透過再現、重說故事的方式來和死者與歷史做一個重新的溝通交涉。第五章為結論，說明解釋本論文所選擇的文本與問題意識，追溯到早期愛特伍的寫作主題到晚期的轉變，強調「死亡」與「哀悼」為其重要的主題發展，因此，《燒厝之晨》是愛特伍寫作生涯過程極為重要的一本著作。

Abstract

In *Morning in the Burned House* (1995), Margaret Atwood (1939-) uses a first person speaker to foreground such themes as mourning and nostalgia in memory of her father Carl Atwood and of his untimely death. In my thesis, I take Atwood's *Morning in the Burned House* as an example of memorial address to analyze the speaker's mourning in the wake of her father's death, especially the way in which she works through her poetic language performances, individual memories, and historical re-vision. My concerns are how the speaker in the poems re-presents the father's image, how the speaker negotiates with the dead, and how the speaker re-tells the historical event in *Morning in the Burned House*. In other words, this thesis highlights the problematics of Atwood's poems on the ethical relations and ethical necessity between mourning and memory. These complexities are often neglected by critics as they tend to focus on Atwood's novels. Through the examination of Atwood's poetic language performance and textual analysis, *Morning in the Burned House* offers an intensification of ongoing concern, demonstrating that the dead has been central to Atwood's writing.

My thesis consists of five chapters with introduction and conclusion. Chapter One, "Introduction," highlights the problematics of *Morning in the Burned House*. Chapter Two, "Keep Mourning in Memory," analyzes Atwood's mournful poems in the wake of the speaker's father's death. Derrida's works of mourning and philosophical thought will provide a very important perspective to examine Atwood's poetry. Chapter Three, "Keep Memory in Mourning," explores Derrida's arguments about the entanglement of mourning and memory to reflect on the impossible necessity of mourning. Chapter Four, "Revisioning the Dead," delves into family's history and language through Atwood's "Half-hanged Mary." Chapter Five, "Conclusion," serves to conclude this thesis with an attempt to recap major themes of

Atwood's *Morning in the Burned House*.

List of Abbreviations

The following are the abbreviations for Margaret Atwood's and Jacques Derrida's works.

Margaret Atwood:

MBH *Morning in the Burned House*.

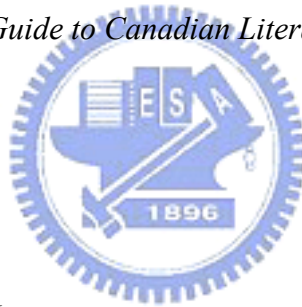
NWD *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*.

SW *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose, 1960-1982*.

SP II *Selected Poem II: Poems Selected and New 1976-1986*.

S *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*.

TS *Two Solicitudes*.



Jacques Derrida:

M *Memoires for Paul de Man*.

SM *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*.

PF *Politics of Friendship*.

WM *The Work of Mourning*.

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Chapter One: Introduction

All writers learn from the dead. As long as you continue to write, you continue to explore the work of writers who have preceded you; you also feel judged and held to account by them. But you don't learn only from writers—you can learn from ancestors in all their forms. Because the dead control the past, they control the stories, and also certain kinds of truth. (Atwood 2002: 178)

In *Morning in the Burned House* (1995), Margaret Atwood (1939-) uses a first person speaker to foreground such themes as mourning and nostalgia in memory of her father Carl Atwood and of his untimely death. In my thesis, I take Atwood's *Morning in the Burned House* as an example of memorial address to analyze the speaker's mourning in the wake of her father's death, especially the way in which she works through her poetic language performances, individual memories, and historical re-vision. My concerns are how the speaker in the poems re-presents the father's image, how the speaker negotiates with the dead, and how the speaker re-tells the historical event in *Morning in the Burned House*. In other words, this thesis highlights the problematics of Atwood's poems on the ethical relations and ethical necessity between mourning and memory. These complexities are often neglected by critics as they tend to focus on Atwood's novels. Through the examination of

Atwood's poetic language performance and textual analysis, *Morning in the Burned House* offers an intensification of ongoing concern, demonstrating that the dead has been central to Atwood's writing.

Morning in the Burned House, published almost a decade after Atwood's collected volume *Selected Poems II* (1987), marks a significant change in style and attitude. The title of the collection is personal; it also emphasizes an important place where the speaker had spent in her childhood which had been burned down. This collection of poetry reveals personal significance as it is filled with small incidents and intimate portraits. They address memory and fear, with reference to the past and present, reality and imagination. The poems are marked not only with those of the wry humor and witty irony as found in Atwood's earlier poems but they are arranged in a moving elegiac sequence on the death of the speaker's father.

The first section of *Morning in the Burned House* describes ordinary life with emotional emptiness, fear, frustration, grief, and comedy. When the sad child mourns, "*I am not the favorite child*," the poem concludes tartly, "My darling, when it comes / right down to it / and the light fails and the fog rolls in," that at the end of death, "none of us is; / or else we all are" (MBH 4-5). "February," with its comic tone, portrays the cat "settles on my chest, breathing his breath / of burped-up meat and musty sofas, / purring like a washboard." The cat bids the comic way of telling

“whether or not I’m dead. / If I’m not, he wants to be scratched; if I am / he’ll think of something” (MBH 11). In “Asparagus” the speaker’s friend complains that he is in love with two women. In the speaker’s voice we could sense a certain tinge of irony. She says, “if I should let my hair go grey / so my advice will be better. / I could wrinkle up my eyelids, look wise” (MBH 13). The speaker pretends herself as an innocent listener, but she is astonished at his stupidities.

Section Two consists of dramatic monologues uttered by famous and powerful women of myth, describing their stories with black humor and irony. For instance, “Daphne, Laura and So Forth” (MBH 26-27) depicts the destiny of women who are silenced by men. In “Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing,” the speaker Helen warns, “Try me. / This is a torch song. / Touch me and you’ll burn” (MBH 36).

Section Three is focused on the powerful and impressive long poem “Half-hanged Mary” (MBH 58-69), which is about a Massachusetts woman in 1680 who was left hanged all night and failed to die. The woman is Atwood’s favorite ancestor Mary Webster. The powerful phrases, “Before, I was not a witch. / But now I am one” (MBH 67) suggest an ironic meaning which represents and embodies history of loss. “Marsh Language” mourns the dying of language and the loss of humanity. The “hard” language has replaced the human connection, and we are losing our “mothertongue” and “the sibilants and gutturals, / . . . the syllable for ‘I’

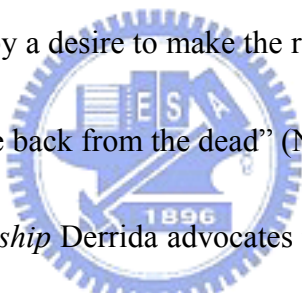
that did not mean separate” (MBH 54). Atwood conveys a horrific vision at the end of the poem that human language is threatened by cold computers or “the language of metal” (MBH 55).

The memorial poems of Section Four are written on the occasion of the father’s illness and death. The poems describe the speaker’s family history, childhood memories, “such minutiae” (MBH 92), and her mourning. In “Bored,” the speaker recalls that she was bored as a young girl doing such chores to help her father in the bush, and also realizes, “Now I wouldn’t be bored. / Now I would know too much” (MBH 91). In “Two Dreams, 2” (MBH 96-97), the speaker and her sister compare their dreams about the dying father because “such dreams are relentless” (MBH 97). Their father is not the way he looks: “in his winter parka, the hood up. / He never had one like that” (MBH 97).

Section Five occurs after the death. The bereaved speaker is left to struggle for survive. After the moving sequences of mourning, death evokes the speaker herself to understand, “*You own nothing. / You were a visitor, time after time*” (MBH 109). Concluding section five and this volume, “Morning in the Burned House” (MBH 126-7) ends with the paradoxes of memories and the mixes of time, half in the past and half in the present.

This thesis focuses on the speaker’s father’s death in *Morning in the Burned*

House and its connections to mourning and memory. In my reading, the first poem of the fourth section, “Man in a Glacier” (MBH 81-2) thematizes the connection between the father and the speaker. Drawing on French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s treatment of mourning, this thesis presents a reading suggesting that mourning helps console the speaker as a survivor in terms of family crisis. And, the last poem of the book, “Morning in the Burned House,” (MBH 126-7) provides in loss and mourning modes motifs that have been central to the whole book. As Atwood describes, this poetical volume is “motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality— by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead” (NWD 156).



In the *Politics of Friendship* Derrida advocates that one must always die before the other. This is the law of friendship and thus of mourning. While one must see the other die, one of them will live on. The surviving one will be left to bury and to mourn the dead. Only one of them will carry the death of the other and the mourning. As Derrida points out, “Survival – that is the other name of mourning whose possibility is never to be awaited” (PF13). The survivor does not live without mourning. In my view, mourning is the central motif of Atwood’s poems and I would like to explore ethical responsibility and politics of mourning in relation to the dead to examine the place of *Morning in the Burned House* in Atwood’s literary

career.

Morning in the Burned House displays a distinctive transformation in terms of Atwood's theme, tone and subject matters. As Kathryn Van Spanckeren states, "this distinguished volume, the first since the publication of *Selected Poems II* in 1987, breaks new ground in its use of autobiographical materials" (106). For Atwood, autobiographical writing plays an important part because it is a way of self-discovery, self-determination, and self-construction. Thus in an interview, Atwood talks about her specific writing experience as follows:

I wanted a literary home for all those vanished *things* from my own childhood—the marbles, the Eaton's catalogues, the Watchbird Watching You, the smells, sounds, colors. The textures. Part of fiction writing I think is a celebration of the physical world we know —and when you're writing about the past, it's a physical world that's vanished. So the impulse is partly elegiac. And partly it's an attempt to stop or bring back time. (Ingersoll 1990: 236-37)

Writing about "the past" and those "vanished things" can be regarded as Atwood's definite writing concern. Atwood makes her efforts to constitute her narrative identity in terms of such themes as an intimation of lost memory, of transience, of disappeared things, of the dead and thus of mortality, constructed a world in flux

among her works.¹ Loss or death is an important topic for Atwood in various stages of writing and generic forms.

Unfortunately, on 5 January 1993, a striking event happened: Carl Atwood suffered a severe heart attack and died (Cooke 310). It was a crucial literary transition in Atwood's writing career because *Morning in the Burned House* is a work to the memory of Atwood's father, of those vanished things, and dedicated to her family (Sullivan 328).

According to Linda Wagner-Martin, Atwood's remarkable literary career falls into three stages: in the beginning, Atwood established herself as "poet and novelist," it was her poetry that built up her reputation. From her earlier publications, Atwood's poems were "wryly lyric and blunt" in order to challenge readers' expectations. In the second stage Atwood became a "mother" with her daughter born during the mid-1970. Mother image dominated Atwood's second phase as a poet. As Atwood described her becoming "instantly warm and maternal" (SW 14), her poetry at the time dealt with "family dynamics" and the relationships between "mothers and daughters." The third change turned Atwood's position from being a "feminist voice" (71-72). Atwood challenged not only the inequities about gender and sex, but also addressed social injustice issues. Atwood mentioned that her

¹ One of Atwood's lectures at Cambridge University entitled "Negotiating with the Dead: Who makes the trip to the Underworld and why?" suggests that death and the writer's responsibility to the dead are main concerns for Atwood.

involvement with social issues and human rights does not separate from writing. She explains, “When you begin to write, you deal with your immediate surroundings; as you grow, your immediate surroundings become larger. There’s no contradiction . . . I began as a profoundly apolitical writer, but then I began to do what all novelists and some poets do: I began to describe the world around me” (SW 15). These changes were connected with each other. While Atwood found out that the social milieu and ills destroyed her literary prospect, she started to break out of literary conventions she found confining.

In addition to the shifts, it is necessary to bring our picture into Atwood’s writing process in poetry. It was poetry that established her reputation from the outset. In Karen Stein’s argument, Atwood’s poetry can be divided into two parts. The first of them was from 1961 to 1975 (especially *Double Persephone*, *The Circle Game*, *The Animal in That Country*, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, and *Procedures for Underground*), a period when Atwood’s world could be characterized by “a stark and Gothic landscape, a harsh Northern geography of stunted islands, bedrock ridges, flooded forest, drowned worlds, frozen terrain, arctic wastes, and lakes that conceal drowned people” (9). Moreover, Atwood’s characters and personae were more archetypes than particular individuals in the early poems. While with the publication of Atwood’s influential critical book, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian*

Literature (1972), she pointed out that in Canada many writers saw the cold northern landscape as a salient metaphor. This book considered in particular the notion of victim complex and the problem of victimization. She contended that survival is the Canadian symbol, because a lot of works, past and present must struggle to survive in a new land. Atwood thematically questioned the binary oppositions in her poems; she listed the objectionable: “surface and depth, city and nature, speech and silence, visibility and invisibility, the observer and the observed, rationality and irrationality, the real and the mythic, entrapment and freedom, life and death” (10). In this period, Atwood’s poetry continued to elaborate and explore the Gothic world of Atwood’s country.



Instead of Atwood’s earlier stereotypical persona and victimhood position, in the second part, the poems from 1976 to 1995, Atwood displayed in her later poems (including *Two-Headed Poems*, *True Stories*, *Interlunar*, *Morning in the Burned House*) a wider “tonal, emotional, and thematic range and versatility . . . The world of these poems is larger than that of earlier poems” (110). In the earlier poems, the persona often viewed herself as a victim. In contrast, the narrator was “a crone, a witness, an older and wiser woman who observes life’s events with sympathy, humor, anger, indignation, and compassion” (110). Characters in earlier works were often archetypal; however, we could find out particular roles such as husbands, daughters,

and fathers in the later pomes. To read Atwood's poetry, especially the latest volume *Morning in the Burned House*, we may discover that "[t]he mood frequently turns to elegy. Awareness of mortality suffuses these poems" (110). This book can be regarded as a new break in Atwood's poetic career, and also to be a significant transformation in her life as well.

To illustrate this transformation of Atwood's writing career, we may better take a look at Atwood's personal life history. Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born November 18, 1939, in Ottawa, Ontario. She was the second of three children. Her parents came from Nova Scotia. Her father, Carl Edmund Atwood was a professor of zoology, and her mother Margaret Dorothy Killam was a nutritionist. The Atwoods spent most of their time traveling because of Carl Atwood's forest-insect research station was in northern Quebec. Atwood was carried into the woods with a backpack when she was only six months old, as Atwood later recalled, "this landscape became my hometown" (NWD 7). Carl Atwood built a cabin around Quebec, where Atwood noted that cabin itself was "on a granite point a mile by water from a Quebec village so remote that the road went in only two years before I was born" (SW 107).² Atwood lived in the city during the wintertime, but she also spent long summer periods in the wilderness of Quebec and Ontario until she was twelve. As a result of

² In *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*, Nathalie Cooke writes, "the Atwood's cabin, by the way, was not finished until Margaret was twenty-seven. It still has neither nor running water" (22).

these extraordinary childhood experiences, Atwood developed a long-lasting interest in the wilderness and described this landscape in her writing.

Atwood's poetry and novel have won lot of awards. Her self-printed and published poetry collection, *Double Persephone*, for example, won the E. J. Pratt prize (1961). In 1966, *The Circle Game* won the Governor General's Award for poetry. The works were followed by several poetry collections and Atwood's first novel *The Edible Woman* (1969), establishing her as both poet and novelist during the 1970s. In 1972, the publication of *Surfacing* and *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* establish her to be an important cultural critic and writer. Several remarkable novels followed, among them, *The Lady Oracle* (1976), *Bodily Harm* (1982), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Robber Bride* (1993), *Alias Grace* (1996), brought Atwood international fame. She eventually won the Booker Prize in 2000 for *The Blind Assassin*. And more recently, her new novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003) was again shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2003.

As Atwood's marvelous oeuvre evolves, a number of critics have focused their attention mostly on Atwood's novel rather than on her poetry. In Taiwan, for instance, people tend to know Atwood through her novels instead of her poetry.³

³ There has a research project named "Emergent English Literatures/ New Literatures in English: Crossing the Boundary" in the Humanities and Social Sciences Division, under National Science Council from 1995 to 1998. The Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, National Chiao-tung University, takes charge of this project to construct and organize the significant Taiwanese scholars' perspectives to research literary works from various English spoken writers. In NSC project, Margaret Atwood is one of the writers to be focused on her work; however, her novels remain the most

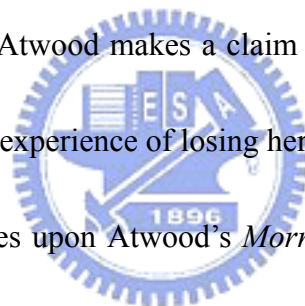
Atwood's poetry has been slighted. Her novels have raised unfairly a series of discussions and questions filled with Biblical, historical, social, political, literary, and mythical allusions, and also in other forms of symbolism, satire, intertextuality, and parody. As result, Atwood's works have widely been studied by scholars from all over the world. She acquires the status of international acclaim.

Hence, I plan to examine Atwood's most recent poetry collection, *Morning in the Burned House* as a text on mourning exploring the tensions between loss and epiphany, longing and belonging with a thematic reading to interpret Atwood's poetic narration and landscape. In other words, what concerns my thesis is not solely the theoretical practice but the interrelation between mourning and memory in Atwood's poems. It also emphasizes Atwood's personal change in her writing career because of her father's death. For the tragedy urges Atwood to look back on her family's history, cultural memory, and individual experience as personal testimony.

Quite a few critics and scholars have commented on the importance of this particular personal transition in Atwood's *Morning in the Burned House*. The work is regarded as a substantial departure in her poetry career. Critic such as Kathryn Van Spanckeren acclaims that Atwood's *Morning in the Burned House* traces a "self-oriented mode to a more human vision" and it is also a "memento mori, a skull

popular genre to be researched rather than poetry. The research paper is collected in *Remapping the Territory of Literary Studies: Perspectives on Foreign Literatures from Taiwan* (1999). In addition, Atwood's novels have increasingly become the topics of dissertations for graduate students in Taiwan.

on the desk, a look at death from a thousand angels” (106), and Charlene Diehl-Jones claims that this volume is “a new turn of mind” to shape Atwood’s well-structured prose poems (30); John Bemrose states Atwood “uses grief . . . to break away from that airless poetry into a new freedom” (85); George Woodcock describes Atwood’s poetry as “a great deal different from the earlier work; less acerbic perhaps, more resigned to aging and to loss in general,” (25) and Nathalie Cooke characterizes tersely Atwood’s poems as “intensely personal, strikingly so” (312). Indeed, Atwood’s *Morning in the Burned House* unfolds a “new” sentimentality with mourning and loss, in which Atwood makes a claim to her emotional authenticity in order to set free her traumatic experience of losing her father.



Several recent researches upon Atwood’s *Morning in the Burned House* could be divided into two different perspectives. The first group of critics focuses on such topics as female identity, feminist vision, mythical storytelling, aesthetic interpretation and trickster narratives, applying them to a diverse group of poems. In Karen Stein’s essay (1999), she emphasizes that Atwood’s poetry is full of “political undertones” and “storytelling” skills (111). Stein advocates the central figure of *Morning in the Burned House* to be the survivor, who has “seen a great deal and now observes life’s predicaments with sympathy and wry amusement” (122). Her essay provides a comprehensive theory in general view; she does not find clues. In “Margaret

Atwood's Poetry 1966-1995" (2000), Lothar Honnighausen treats Atwood's mourning poems as "autobiographical urge" and "aesthetic achievement" (116). As to Charlotte Beyer (2000), her article focuses on the analysis of "feminist revision of myth, language and spirituality" (276) with critical and theoretical interpretations to see Atwood's recent poetry collections *Interlunar* and *Morning in the Burned House*. Kathryn Van Spanckeren (2003), in "Humanizing the Fox: Atwood's Poetic Tricksters and *Morning in the Burned House*," offers the trickster, fox-like persona as the way to examine how "tricksterism" (103) develops in Atwood's poetry.

Some other critics assume that mortality and loss suffuse the whole collection. A modern elegiac reading is for Sara Jamieson (2001), which delves into the conventions of pastoral elegy to analyze Atwood's elegies. As Jamieson asserts, through Atwood's poems, Atwood works through a genre that "has traditionally precluded feminine subjectivity, as well as the challenge of writing consoling memorial poetry from within a secular, materialistic society in which death is seldom discussed in public" (39). Here, morning is most frequently interpreted as mourning by critics. For instance, Van Spanckeren points out "[w]e witness an elegiac new 'morning' within 'mourning'" (118). Jamieson entitles her essay "Mourning in the Burned House" to stress the importance of mourning in Atwood's poetry. Along the line, Janice Fiamengo (2000) concludes that "it is 'morning' signals some sort of

resolution: both ‘mourning’ and ‘morning’ come after the darkness of death and night, dispelling and lightening it” (159). Similarly, Fiamengo’s essay, “‘A Last Time For This Also’: Margaret Atwood’s Texts of Mourning,” calls attention to the identity performance of mourning. Fiamengo also concentrates on the way in which memory is suffused with Atwood’s mournful poems in emphasizing its connections with her previous poetical works by intertextual analyses.

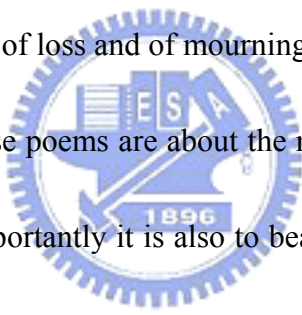
As Fiamengo’s essay was developed before Jacques Derrida’s *The Work of Mourning* (2001) was published, it did not deal with mourning further with its theoretical exploration and interpretation. Thus Fiamengo admits that “[a]lthough I have not explored Derrida’s arguments in full, his reflections on the impossible necessity of mourning lie behind many of my thoughts about *Morning in the Burned House*” (161). Fiamengo’s argument is inspired by Derrida’s *Memoires for Paul de Man* (1989). Therefore, this thesis is a further attempt to deal with Atwood’s poetry with Derrida’s *The Work of Mourning* and *Memoires for Paul de Man* to see how Atwood’s poetic persona’s mourning and memory can be better understood.

In a number of books, especially since *Memoires for Paul de Man*, Derrida has associated the question of affirmation with mourning and with a sort of fragile memory. In the context of Derrida’s writing, he elaborates Sigmund Freud’s famous essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) to focus on the loss of the loved one.

Notably Derrida writes about the death of his friend Louis Marin in “The Force of Mourning” in *The Work of Mourning*. In *The Gift of Death* (1995), Derrida discusses the story of Abraham and Isaac to examine the project of a philosophical ethics, and he also ponders abstraction loss in *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1994) to enrich his argument on Marx and his fate in western Europe in the 1990s, however, Derrida also speculates on the loss of a loved one Chris Hani, who is the South African Communist Party leader. For Derrida, mourning loss is interminable, “mourning in fact and by right interminable, without possible normality, without reliable limit, in its reality or in its concept” (SM 97). Reflecting on “work of mourning,” Derrida says, “All work in general works at mourning. In and of itself. Even when it has the power to give birth, even and especially when it plans to bring something to light and let it be seen” (WM 142-43).

Although Atwood’s early work had provided mourning, for example, in *Surfacing*, where a father dies and the protagonist as daughter searches for him. Atwood’s writing can be seen as an attempt to handle emotion such as sadness and loss, but eventually Atwood realizes that lamentation cannot be dealt with because the fact is that “[n]othing gets finished, / not dying, not mourning; / the dead repeat themselves” (MBH 100). Here, we could see that mourning is still an ongoing process connected with the dead. My analysis owes much to that of Derrida’s

concept of mourning, in his astonishing books *The Work of Mourning* and *Memoires for Paul de Man* to examine how do we let the dead speak and how else do we speak. Mourning is always in relation to memory. “The memory is no friend,” the speaker said to her father in the hospital, but “it can only tell you” what the speaker’s father had left and remembered (MBH 88). In other words, as Derrida says, “All we seem to have left is memory.” (M 33). Memory, in Atwood’s poems, is always kept in a way of linking to a sense of loss. Atwood repeats her poetic personas, events, settings, and images because these repetitions are the ways of seeking some kinds of consolation and compensation of loss and of mourning.



Atwood admits that these poems are about the memory of her father’s life with particular detail, and more importantly it is also to bear witness to a relationship with the deceased. Here, this kind of relationship with the dead can be considered in terms of an ethical relation between the father and the daughter. In Atwood’s case, to use Avishai Margalit’s argument, father-daughter relation is good for two reasons, positive and negative. The positive reason is that father-daughter relations are caring relations. The negative reason: the relations do not violate moral demands. Such good relations, we are discussing about the goodness of the relation (86).

This sort of goodness of relation is different from Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. They both have written angry poems or elegies for their fathers. Plath uses her angry

poems or elegies to “express anger creatively,” and “fury flows out into the figure of the letters” (McCullough and Hughes 1982: 273, 256). As to Sexton, her early poem named “A Curse Against Elegies” obviously demonstrates her relationship between the dead and the living. She writes:

I am tried of all the dead.

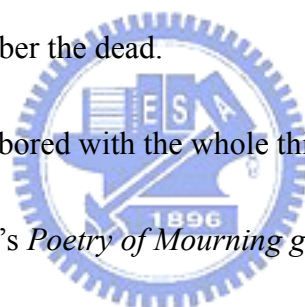
They refuse to listen,

so leave them alone.

[.]

I refuse to remember the dead.

And the dead are bored with the whole thing. (60)



According to Jahan Ramazani’s *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (1994), he concludes that “While the daughter in Plath’s ‘Daddy’ returns her father’s violence, Sexton’s poem paradoxically takes psychic retribution in its use of an impersonal tone—a tone that mirrors her father’s impersonality. . . . Like Plath, Sexton would also use the genre of the elegy to exorcise her father’s memory and block any legacy that may penetrate her defenses” (307-8). Therefore, I would like to distinguish that Atwood’s relation to her father is different from Plath’s and Sexton’s.

For Atwood, the speaker’s father’s death gives rise to her poems to address

poetic language and representation for her intimate reflection. To Atwood, the dead only can be recalled but cannot be presented. Consequently, Atwood recounts personal memories of the deceased through the speaker in *Morning in the Burned House*: finding a “box of slides” (MBH 81) that contain the pictures of the speaker’s father with her brother in the cellar, bringing “fresh flowers” (MBH 93) to her father in the hospital, doing “such minutiae” (MBH 92) with her father, and recounting history of witch-hunt with the speaker “Half-hanged Mary” (MBH 58). Each text, as Fiamengo writes, like individual memory, is “faithful both in attempting retrieval and in failing” (149).



In “Mnemosyne,” Derrida advocates that mourning involves remembering in order to forget. We represent and create various images of the loved person in our memories in order to embed the loved one’s memories to rest and continue with life in the face of loss; however, the beloved other always eschews our representation and thus mourning must be a failure. This failure is a kind of ethical necessity (M 35). Furthering this point, this shows the ways in which Atwood’s poetic representations and strategies reflect a fruitful and constructive exploration of Derrida’s ideas by way of textual analysis. I argue that mourning is not only just an ethical mode for Atwood but also actually for all human beings or humanity in general.

My thesis consists of five chapters with introduction and conclusion.

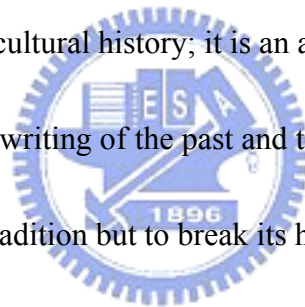
Following “Chapter One: Introduction,” “Chapter Two: Keep Mourning in Memory” analyzes Atwood’s mournful poems in the wake of the speaker’s father’s death. Derrida’s works of mourning and philosophical thought will provide a very important perspective to examine Atwood’s poetry. A dominant theme, mourning links the general background to the twelve poems collected in section four. Derrida’s ideas such as mourning and memory are very much relevant to our understanding of Atwood’s poetry, which seems to be about finding and articulating ways of being in the world which enable people to define themselves and each other in spiritual and ethical ways. Through the speaker’s storytelling, *Morning in the Burned House* reveals the ways in which how mourning and memory become intertwined.



“Chapter Three: Keep Memory in Mourning” explores Derrida’s arguments about the entanglement of mourning and memory to reflect on the impossible necessity of mourning. Memory is at issue in relation to mourning. In her *Morning in the Burned House* Atwood constantly repeats her images and poetic personas to articulate and construct those specific details, childhood episodes and everyday life. Through the speaker’s narration, these repetitions are ways to bear witness to Atwood’s relation to her departed father, and to compensate for her memory and loss. These repetitions intensify the poet’s explorations of loss as integral part of the mourning.

“Chapter Four: Revisioning the Dead” delves into family’s history and language through Atwood’s “Half-hanged Mary” (MBH 58-69). This chapter will appropriate the American poet Adrienne Rich’s argument, advocated in her seminal essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision” (1971). Rich wrote in a feminist context, but for Atwood the definition of re-vision offered a very special perspective to see history. To Rich,

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival . . . We need to know the writing of the past and to know it differently . . . not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. (167-168)



In this regard, Atwood’s long poem “Half-hanged Mary” can be seen as the crucial text in response to Rich. Atwood revisits her own ancestry and personal family history. This chapter attempts to argue that Atwood’s “Half-hanged Mary” explores history as a continuous engagement with loss, memory and its remains. In “Mourning Remains,” Eng and Kazanjian suggest that “This engagement generates sites for memory and history, for the rewriting of the past as well as the reimagining of the future” (4). Mourning, on one hand, means to relinquish the lost loved person (or object) in order to lay histories to rest, and on the other hand, to unfold a relation

to the past and the present, so that the dead and the living may gain new perspectives on lost person (object).

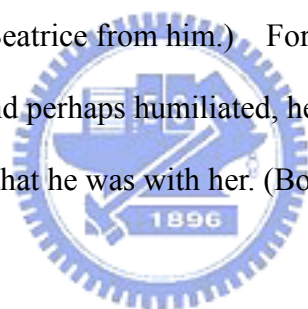
“Chapter Five: Conclusion” serves to conclude this thesis with an attempt to recap major themes of Atwood’s *Morning in the Burned House*. Examining the significance of this collection that establishes Atwood’s literary career. My conclusion will comment on my findings and also evaluate Atwood’s literary development in the future.



Chapter Two: Keep Mourning in Memory

To speak of mourning or of anything else. And that is why
 whoever thus works at the work of mourning learns the impossible
 -- and that mourning is interminable. Inconsolable.
 Irreconcilable. (Derrida 2001: 143)

We must keep one incontrovertible fact in mind, a single, humble
 fact: the scene was imagined by Dante. For us, it is very real; for
 him, it was less so. (The reality, for him, was that first life and then
 death had taken Beatrice from him.) Forever absent from
 Beatrice, alone and perhaps humiliated, he imagined the scene in
 order to imagine that he was with her. (Borges 1999: 304)



In “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), Sigmund Freud writes that “mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (243). Freud’s essay proffers the theoretical frame for Jacques Derrida to organize and develop his concept of mourning. Derrida takes up Freud’s argument on the “loss of a loved person” to elaborate his work of mourning with a provocative philosophical and theoretical thinking. His recent book *The Work of Mourning* (2001) is a collection in memory of those friendships in the wake of death. Among

the well-known figures are Roland Barthes, Paul de Man, Michel Foucault, Max Loreau, Jean-Marie Benoist, Louis Althusser, Edmond Jabes, Joseph Riddel, Michel Serviere, Louis Marin, Sarah Kofman, Gilles Deleuze, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Francois Lyotard.

One must always pass away before the other, while one must see the other die. The surviving one will be left to memorize, to mourn, and to bury the other. In *Politics of Friendship* (1997), Derrida writes:

Survival – that is the other name of mourning whose possibility is never to be awaited. For one does not survive without mourning . . . [T]he difference between the effective and the virtual, between mourning and its possibility, seems fragile and porous. The anguished apprehension of mourning insinuates itself a priori and anticipates itself; it haunts and plunges the friend, it weeps death before death, and this is the very respiration of friendship; the extreme of its possibility. Hence surviving is at once the essence, the origin and the possibility, the condition of possibility of friendship; it is the grieved act of loving. This time of surviving thus gives the time of friendship. (PF 13-14)

Accordingly, Derrida provides his philosophical and theoretical reflection to

explore how death structures a friendship, and draws attention to a series of questions and aporias of how to confront both mourning or its politics and ethical responsibility in his recent work. Moreover, Derrida also speculates how to remember someone, and what it means to mourn the dead. These writings not only shed light on Derrida's relation to his friends, but also on some of the prominent themes of Derrida's entire oeuvre: mourning, memory, friendship, time, and the "gift of death." In a sense, as Brault and Naas (2001) argue that Derrida's texts of mourning "not only speak of or about mourning but are themselves texts *of* or *in* mourning" (3).

In addition to *The Work of Mourning*, notably Derrida writes about the death of his friend Paul de Man in *Memoires for Paul de Man* (1989), and discusses the pain of losing a friend. In this book, Derrida's argument about mourning adheres to a paradoxical logic. Ironically, he also hints that remembering is to forget. We shape an image of the loved person to hold the one's memory to rest, and then keep on with life to confront the losses. The loved other, however, resists our efforts of "interiorization." Thus, mourning fails. This kind of failure is what constitutes Derrida's concerns in terms of ethical responsibility and faithful fidelity. We can thus understand that Derrida attempts to remember de Man with his "rhetoric of mourning" to ask why the aporia of mourning that indicate "success fails" and "failure succeeds" (M 34-35). In "By Force of Mourning," Derrida examines the

aporia of mourning further:

[F]or this is the law, the law of mourning, and the law of the law,

always in mourning, that it would have to fail in order to succeed.

In order to succeed, it would well have to *fail*, to fail *well*. It would

well have to fail, for this is what has to be so, in failing *well*. That is

what would have to be. And while it is always promised, it will

never be assured. (WM 144)

The aporia of mourning where we may be caught by the following of a friend's death is already there and at work, at the end of a living relationship, from the very beginning of the friendship. Hence, as we shall see that mourning also begins before death. Writing in the wake of Edmond Jabes's death, Derrida explains his experience of aporia: "There was already in this first reading a certain experience of apophatic silence, of absence, the desert, paths opened up off all the beaten tracks, deported memory—in short, mourning, every impossible mourning. Friendship had thus already come to be reflected in mourning, in the eyes of the poem, even before friendship—I mean before the friendship that later brought us together" (WM 122). He also writes in his essay on a knowledge of Sarah Kofman's death, "From the first moment, friends become," says Derrida, "as a result of their situation, virtual survivors, actually virtual or virtually actual, which amounts to just about the same

thing. Friend knows this, and friendship breathes this knowledge, breathes it right up to expiration, right up to the last breath” (WM 171).

In Derrida’s *The Work of Mourning*, these addresses are not only about or speak of mourning but also bear witness to a singularity of relationship with the deaths of friends and colleagues. However, Derrida’s concept of ethical relation is influenced and inspired from German philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’s (1906-1995) ethics and concept of responsibility. As the critic Simon Critchley (2002) argues, Levinas’s “one big thing” is expressed in his thesis that “ethics is first philosophy, where ethics is understood as a relation of infinite responsibility to the other person” (6). Levinas has exerted a profound influence on twentieth-century philosophy, providing inspiration for Derrida, Blanchot, Lyotard, and Irigaray. It is this ethical relation to the other person that is connected with every one of us. This philosophical thought of ethical relation makes thematic in Derrida’s work.

Derrida’s ideas are very much relevant to Atwood’s poetry. In drawing attention to these personal and mournful texts, we realize that, after all, we cannot mourn for those another has mourned or not in the same way at least. Therefore, we shall go back and reread what we have read, take up what has left us through reading those works of mourning. This chapter endeavors to analyze Atwood’s mournful poems in the wake of her father’s death. Derrida’s works of mourning and

philosophical thought provide a very important perspective to examine Atwood's poetry.

In *Morning in the Burned House*, memory is at issue in relation to mourning. Atwood begins the sequence by recalling memory and exploring mourning and loss involved in peculiar form of storytelling. She manifests to construct a proper memorial to her father. Consequently, she starts the first poem of section four, "Man in a Glacier," to thematize the connection between father and the speaker. This poem evokes the speaker's loss and desire of preservation of the father, the dead, the photograph or even the image. Atwood enables the speaker to prefigure mourning for the father, as the speaker / sister and her brother find a "box of slide" (MBH 81) in the cellar. Those slides are pictures of their father. The speaker shows her father's photograph,

and here's my father,

alive or else preserved, younger than all

of us now, dark-haired and skinny,

in baggy trousers, woolen legs tucked into

those lace-up boots of our ancestors,

by a lake, feeding a picnic fire (MBH 81)

Although the speaker's father's photographic image becomes "aging gelatin spread

thinly / with fading colours” (MBH 81-82), the speaker remains that her father’s image is “there. There still” (MBH 82). In this poem of mourning for her lost father, as we shall see that the speaker invests individual emotion to the memory of her father’s photographic image as absence. Clearly, the speaker bears witness to her relation to the loved person, her father in the photograph, and she tries to preserve it. Thus by laying particular stress on the image of the father, the photograph replaces the lost father for the speaker. In “By Force of Mourning,” Derrida discusses on Louis Marin’s final book on the power of image, he depicts:

[T]he image commonly used to characterize mourning is that of an interiorization (an idealizing incorporation, introjection, consumption of the other). . . . *We are speaking of images.*

What is only *in us* seems to be reducible to images, which might be memories or monuments, but which are reducible in any case to a memory that consists of *visible* scenes that are no longer anything but *images*, since the other of whom they are the images appears only as the one who has disappeared or passed away, as the one who, having passed away, leaves “in us” only image. (WM 158-159)

The speaker’s memory for her lost father, here, can be insinuated and constructed by

the “box of slides” and “fading colours” of photographs. In other words, memory itself is the representation of images. As Derrida mentions that they are all images “in us,” only images. When the speaker sees her father’s picture:

This was all we got,
 this echo, this freeze-framed
 simulacrum or slight imprint,
 in answer to our prayers for everlastingness (MBH 82)

The father’s images are also the left memory that the speaker could preserve. While the speaker sees her father’s photograph, in the same way, its image of the father also looks at the speaker. So the speaker is looked at by her father’s image from the picture which can be seen as such a force that constructs her living, her subjectivity, and her mourning. This is what Derrida states the force of image:

The image sees more than it is seen. The image looks at us . . .

Louis Marin is outside and he is looking at me, he himself, and I am
 an image for him. At this very moment. There where I can say
cogito, sum, I know that I am an image for the other and am looked
 at by the other, even and especially by the mortal other. I move
 right before my eyes, and the force of this image is irreversible.

Louis Marin is looking at me, and it is for this, for him, that I am here

this evening. He is my law, the law, and I appear before him,
 before his word and his gaze. In my relationship to myself, he is
 here in me before me, stronger or more forceful than I. (WM160)

One of Derrida's central motif about mourning is "in us." The dead must and can be only "for us." As Brault and Nsaa comment, "Fidelity consists in mourning and mourning—at least in a first moment-- consists in interiorizing the other and recognizing that if we are to give the dead anything it can now be only in us, the living" (9). In this regard, everything we receive from and give to the dead will remain among ourselves. In the poem, "Man in a Glacier," (MBH 81-82) Atwood begins her mourning text for her father Carl Atwood by way of preservation of his image to reduce her sense of loss. This poem unfolds the entangled relationship between memory preservation and loss, and thereby contain death by creating a lasting image of the loved person, that is, Atwood's deceased father. Hence, this poem reveals a state arising from a loss of the dying person about whom tremendous amount of effort has been invented both in writing poetry and in mourning the dead.

In the seventh poem of this sequence, "Flowers," Atwood describes that she brings flowers to her dying father in the hospital, replacing the place of the old bouquet with a fresh one. The speaker depicts that the "greenish water" (MBH 93) of flowers smells "like dirty teeth" (MBH 93), and cuts the stems with "surgical

scissors” (MBH 93) which borrowed from the “nursing station” (MBH 93). The speaker sits silently beside her father in the sickroom, and hears different kinds of voices flood them— ticking the “little bells” (MBH 93), trailing the “rubbery footsteps of strangers” (MBH 93), and whispering “all around of the air-conditioner” (MBH 93). Then, they do not talk with each other. The speaker’s father cannot hear, and also cannot see her “because he won’t open his eyes” (MBH 93).

In the meanwhile, the nurses coming with “large and capable” (MBH 94) hands move her father carefully in the deathbed. Their professional deeds generate the speaker’s anxiety and she looks upon the rest of family are “helpless amateurs” (MBH 94). She cannot offer any real help at all. So she can only “sit there, watching the flowers / in their pickle jar” (MBH 94). The image of jar, here, can be seen as a form of death, like death in the hospital as confinement. “He is asleep, or not” (MBH 94), says the speaker, “he looks erased” (MBH 95). Her father is incapable of opening his eyes, of responding, and even of hearing. Here, communication between the speaker and her father completely fails. As Derrida writes in the wake of de Man’s death, “Speaking is impossible, but so too would be silence or absence or a refusal to share one’s sadness” (M xvi). Language, in this poem, is a failure before the excess of sadness and grief.

The speaker thinks of her loss about her father, her lost things, and past times.

She recalls that last canoe trip with her father: “[t]here will be a last time for this also” (MBH 95). The next two lines are to think that perhaps she will die some day just like her father. Eventually, the speaker realizes that

Sooner or later I too

will have to give everything up,

even the sorrow that comes with these flowers,

even the anger,

even the memory of how I brought them

from a garden I will no longer have by then, (MBH 95)

In “Flowers,” Atwood associates personal experience with both the speaker and her memories of her father in order to express mourning and loss for her lost father. To the speaker, her father remains alive in her memory. She finds herself at a loss that she may be losing her father, but still wants to save him if possible. In the last line, the speaker says that “hoping I could still save him” (MBH 95), even though she knows she cannot. This shows that the speaker not only mourns for her father’s death, but also muses over the essence of death.

Awareness of death is also cruel and real to the speaker in “The Time.” The setting of this poem is also in the hospital in which the smell is mixed with “[t]he sweet, dire smell of hospitals, / stale piss and disinfectant, / and baby powder” (MBH

98). The family stays together waiting for the time of her father's death. The speaker's brother speaks to the speaker, "You'd better come down" (MBH 98). A monologue of the speaker says, "It's the time. I know death when I see it. / There's a clear look" (MBH 98). When the nurse asks, "Has anyone been away?" (MBH 98), the speaker said "Me" (MBH 98). The nurse says "Ah" (MBH 98). The Atwood family still have to wait until their father appears. The speaker describes her dying father "winced / like pulling off a bandage, / he frowned" (MBH 98). Finally, her mother said, "I need some time / with him. Not very long. Alone" (MBH 98).

The sequential introduction of family members, such as, "my brother," "I," "my sister," and "my mother," echoes the traditional and temporal procession of mourners. Here, as we shall see that the Atwoods do not speak too many words, only short sentences to reply or response. Word fails when it approaches death. In this poem, Atwood suggests that such experience of the joyless and bleak deadness reveals the time is crucial but we also need "some time" to bear, and to be "alone." This ordinary, short, and simple poem illuminates Atwood's employment of thematic storytelling in her poetry for representing mourning and loss.

In "Two Dreams," dreams of searching for the father in water (diving into a lake) and fire in the burned cabin seems to predict the death of the father in this poem. The second and also the last dream is that the speaker dreams her father is distant and

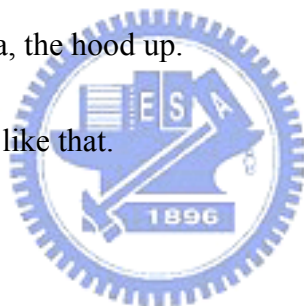
she cannot catch him. They are up on the hill, seeing “the small cabin that burned down, / each window zinned with frost” (MBH 96). The speaker just can watch him disappear into the wood. She says ruefully, “Such dreams are relentless” (MBH 97). Her father completely ignores the speaker’s presence in the dream. The speaker ends this poem by saying that she is at the loss because her father is not the one who she knows before in her dreams.

My father is standing there

with his back turned to us

in his winter parka, the hood up.

He never had one like that.



Now he’s walking away.

The bright leaves rustle, we can’t call,

he doesn’t look. (MBH 97)

This poem is also about dream. In “Two Dreams, 2,” the speaker and her sister compare their dreams concerning the dying father. They dream different kinds of father images, seeming to laugh at the speaker’s attempt to remember him, “like clumsy drunks / lurching sideways through the doors / we open to them in sleep” (MBH 100). Their father’s images appear in the dreams, says the speaker, which are

all

slurred guests, never entirely welcome,
 even those we have loved the most,
 especially those we have loved the most,
 returning from where we shoved them
 away too quickly (MBH 100)

These images of dreams still cannot represent for their true father. In other words, the images of father fail to represent the one who they desire truly and cannot substitute for the father. This as Derrida suggests: successful mourning of the deceased other actually fails because the other person becomes a part of us, and then the other person no longer seems to be the other. So, we bear and remember the other in us. On the other hand, failure to mourn the other's death is to succeed, because the image of the other's presence is prolonged (M 35). Hence, the latter can be suitable to interpret Atwood's condition of mourning and loss as failure succeeds. To some extent, Atwood displays that how dream image and death are known to us (the living or survivors) are able to work through our grief: "from under the ground, from under the water / they clutch at us, they clutch at us, / we won't let go" (MBH 100).

In the poem with laconic title "Oh" vividly depicts the irony of the narrative

voice about cultural ritual of death. This poem can be read as a memento mori poem.

As Jahan Ramazani argues, poetry has increasingly become “an important cultural space for mourning the dead” (1). It addresses the speaker’s dead father, with lots of survivors coming to pay respects to their dead ones:

It’s Christmas, and the green wreaths,
festive and prickly, with their bright red
holly berries, dot the graves,

the shocked mouths grief has made

and keeps on making:

round silent Ohs,

leafy and still alive

that hurt when you touch them.



Look, they are everywhere: Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh.

What else can be said? (MBH 101)

The poet heightens such unspeakable state for those survivors (of course, including the poet) who hardly say a word but just “oh”s with soundless, and oh after oh, nothing more. The poet ponders over the cemetery ritual or the essence of death

while death happens:

Strange how we decorate pain.

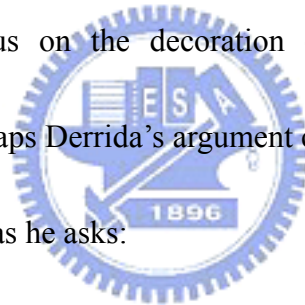
These ribbons, for instance,

and the small hard teardrops of blood.

Who are they for?

Do we think the dead care? (MBH 101)

“Who are they for?” asks the poet; they can be the mournful poems (or elegies), the wreaths, the tears, the pains, the emblems of death like the ribbons, or even our mourning. The poet’s focus on the decoration of death may imply itself as ornamental and trivial. Perhaps Derrida’s argument could evoke and deepen the way of thinking about this stanza, as he asks:



What, then, is *true mourning*? What can we make of it? Can we

make of it? Can we *make it*, as we say in French that we “make”

our mourning? I repeat: “can we?” And the question is double:

are we *capable* of doing it, do we have the *power* to do it? But

also, do we have the *right*? Is it right to do so? Is it also the *duty*

and movement of fidelity? (M 31)

“The bare trees crack overhead” (MBH 102) as those mourners bring their flowers which are “stiff with ice ” (MBH 102) placing them in front of the grave. Flowers

are one of the most important symbols in the funerals. In this respect, its image is often connected with death. According to social anthropologist Jack Goody's *The Culture of Flowers* (1993), "Flowers are particularly associated with rites to the dead" (375). In Michael Taussig's latest essay "The Language of Flowers" (2003), he also mentions, "[F]lowers and death go together in the Christian world, with a long history of use on graves and in funerals. Could it be that flowers frequent death because they are seen as bearers of life and that this "mix" is what enters so naturally into our everyday life-rituals as something superbly sardonic, savage, cruel, and uplifting" (110).



Indeed, flowers plays an important role, for instance, in "Flowers" and "Oh," where the settings of Atwood's poems are apparently located on sites of death: the cemetery, the hospital, and the nursing home. Atwood writes these poems in memory of her dying father, but "aporia of mourning" and condition of loss are actually what she cares about as we can see from her beautiful and humane poetic lines. In the final stanza, Atwood presents mortality as the seasonal interchange and its regeneration:

In the spring the flowers will melt,
 also the berries,
 and something will come to eat them.

We will go around

In these circles for a time,

winter summer winter,

and, after more time, not.

This is a good thought. (MBH 102)

Spring is a symbol that stands for rebirth in a new year. In *A Dictionary of Literary*

Symbols (1999), Michael Ferber writes “The word ‘spring’, as its other meanings

today imply, meant a rise or leap of something, hence a first onset; the phrase

‘springing time’ was used in the fourteenth century, and ‘spring of the year’ and

‘spring of the leaf’ were once common” (200). By using the symbol of hopeful

seasonal cycles, Atwood reminds us that death is part of our life like the four seasons.

The experience of grief often associates with the seasonal circle, in C. S. Lewis’s *A*

Grief Observed (1961), he depicts that “For in grief nothing ‘stay out.’ One keeps

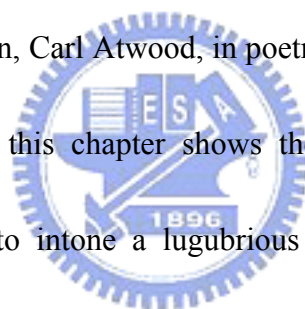
on emerging from a phase, but it always recurs. Round and round. Everything

repeats. Am I going in circles, or dare I hope I am on a spiral?” (46). As we have

seen that Atwood, at the end, hopes all survivors will get over their grief.

As a poet, Atwood conveys her sense of responsibility in taking this role upon herself in memory of her father’s death. This ethical responsibility is as though the

father-daughter relation, which such relation that one person will have to die after the other. The surviving one is left to mourn and to memorize the other one. This rule is what David Farrel Krell (2000) discusses about Derrida's thought and works of mourning, and he continues, "we will not see one another die any more than we will see ourselves die" (182). One of the two will carry the death of the other, and of course, thus the mourning. In Atwood's texts, her speaker articulates for her by raising some profound reflections about the necessity of such mourning and memory, and of negotiating with the dead and calculating the losses between them. Atwood addresses her lost loved person, Carl Atwood, in poetry in order to imagine that she is with her father. Therefore, this chapter shows the poems to keep mourning in memory, not only in order to intone a lugubrious threnody, but also to promise memory to one and one's others, dead and living.



Chapter Three: Keep Memory in Mourning

Everything remains “in me” or “in us,” “between us,” upon the death of the other. Everything is entrusted to *me*; everything is bequeathed or given *to us*, and first of all *to* what I call memory—to *the memory*, the place of this strange dative. All we seem to have left is memory, since nothing appears able to come to us any longer, nothing is coming or to come, from the other to the present. (Derrida 1989: 32-33)

Following Jacques Derrida’s provocative lead that it is only “in us” that the dead just may speak, this chapter argues that it is only by speaking of the dead that we could keep them alive. As Derrida asks, in “The Death of Roland Barthes,” “To keep alive, within oneself: is this the best sign of fidelity?” (WM 36). In other words, fidelity consists in mourning, and thus mourning consists in interiorizing the other. And if we can give any response or anything at all to the dead, then the dead can be only in us now. The image of memory interiorizes between us, the living and the dead, and also in us.

Atwood’s *Morning in the Burned House* is so rich a text on memory, reminiscence, and mourning. Memory is again related to mourning. Mourning entails forgetting to care about the lost loved person (or object). In other words,

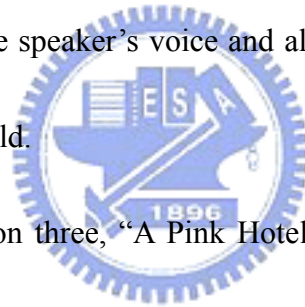
mourning helps us to “relinquish *real objects* by building *psychic memorials* to them—the memorials we call “memories”” (Forster 2003:139). Indeed, in this poetry collection, Atwood recounts her personal memories of her dying father: recalling the past and memories with her family, in particular, her father, recounting such trivial things in their everyday life, discovering her father was teaching her mother how to dance, and describing the fire and the house or cabin.

In her *Morning in the Burned House* Atwood constantly reiterates her images and poetic personas to articulate and construct those specific details and everyday life. These repetitions are ways to bear witness to Atwood’s relation to her departed father, the dead, and to compensate memory and loss. These repetitions also intensify the poet’s explorations of loss as an integral part of the mourning. This chapter explores Derrida’s arguments about mourning and memory intertwined in order to reflect on the impossible necessity of mourning.

Mourning is such a process of interiorization of the other’s memory. According to Derrida’s “By Force of Mourning,” “[w]e are speaking of images. What is only *in us* seems to be reducible to images, which might be memories or monuments, but which are reducible in any case to a memory that consists of *visible* scenes that are no longer anything but *images*, since the other of whom they are the images appears only as the one who has disappeared or passed away, as the one who,

having passed away, leaves ‘in us’ only image” (WM 159).

In Atwood’s poem, memory’s images seem to be constantly haunted by the speaker, and then such memories appear “in speaker” only images. Thus, Atwood utilizes technique of flashback to trace her childhood memories or events in the past from the present in her narrative through recollection recounted by dreams or characters (the speakers), or through reveries. In my examination of Atwood’s representations of memory, this chapter will focus on related main themes (mourning, memory, and loss) or locations (the forest, the beach, and the house) which she uses to characterize or personalize the speaker’s voice and also to bear witness in relation to her father, family, and the world.



The last poem of section three, “A Pink Hotel in California,” links Atwood’s childhood experience by way of flashback to recount her memory about the lakeside cabin where the speaker’s family stayed in 1943 up to 1994. The speaker recalls that “My father chops with his axe / and the leaves fall off the tree. / It’s nineteen forty-three” (MBH 76), and “[m]y mother rakes the ashes / out from under the oven” (MBH 76). The speaker continues,

This is comfort and safety,

the sound of chopping in the empty forest,

the smell of smoke.

It's nineteen forty-three.

[.....]

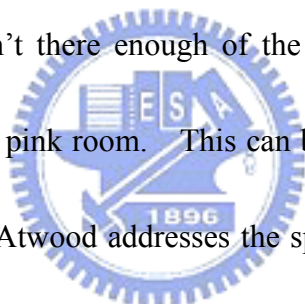
I rolled them in my mouth like marbles,

they tasted pure:

smoke, gun, boots, oven.

The fire. The scattered ashes. The winter forest. (MBH 76-77)

Also, it recalls World War II and the speaker as a child at that time was starting to learn those words about war: "smoke, gun, boots," and "fire, ashes." Now the speaker asks herself that "Isn't there enough of the past / without making more?" (MBH 77), when she sits in a pink room. This can be seen as a yearning for a time of the speaker's childhood. Atwood addresses the speaker as the first person "I" to be her persona who reiterates the past time they had spent.



It's nineteen forty-three.

It's nineteen ninety-four,

I can hear the sound of the chopping.

It's because of the ocean,

it's because of the war

which won't stay under the waves and leaves.

The carpet smells of ashes. (MBH 77)

The speaker stays in the pink hotel “where everything recurs,” and “nothing is elsewhere” (MBH 77). This poem is about the way in which the speaker makes sense of seemingly ineffable nostalgia and loss to her family and memory. Atwood makes an effort to describe her poetic embodiments of these childhood episodes and sense of her helplessness within the elapse of time in such the way of memory recurring.

In “Wave,” the speaker envisions that the cabin near the beach is a locus of her father’s death, because “a wave washed over him. / Suddenly, whole beaches / were simply gone. / 1947. Lake Superior . . . Nothing was left . . . We remained to him in fragments” (MBH 83).⁴ The speaker keeps on talking to appease her submerged and worried father:

It’s all right here, I said.

There are no bears.

There’s food. It isn’t snowing.

No. We need more wood, he said.

The winter’s on its way.

It will be bad. (MBH 83-84)

⁴ In “While I Was Growing Up” (1985), Atwood says, “I must have been 6 or 7. We were living then north of Lake Superior, in a tiny cabin my father had just finished building. He’s gone off on a trip, leaving food for three weeks, which was still stored in one of the tents: we hadn’t had time to move it into the cabin; we were going to do it the next morning. But we woke up to find that a bear had walked through the back of the tent, eaten everything he liked, and squashed or mingled everything he didn’t like” (93-94). So, the lake, the cabin, and the bear are indeed happened to Atwood when she is a little girl. And this setting also appears in Atwood’s other poems.

As the critic Jean Mallinson has argued, “[p]erennial concerns, like love and death, move a poet towards traditional images—or towards a deliberate resistance to those images” (26). Here, the speaker’s submerged father is so uneasy that he seems to know something will happen. The bad weather implies an ominous fate, of the death coming and of the foreboding. As we shall see that Atwood uses times of the day and four seasons to delineate the cycle of death and life. Janice Fiamengo concludes, commenting on Atwood’s use of elegiac images in her article on Atwood’s poetry that:

The “bad weather” (81) that claimed the man in the glacier is paralleled by the father’s premonition of a “bad” winter “on its way” (84) at the beginning of his final illness. Immortalized on color slides, the forever young father is framed by the blue sky of “a northern summer” (81). Contemplating the cultural meaning of wreaths—which are like ritual “Ohs” signaling our wordlessness before grief—Atwood reflects that we “go around / in these circles for a time, winter summer winter, / and, after more time, not” (102). (152)

“Bored” is an ordinary but special poem for Atwood because this is also about her childish boredom. The speaker remembers the vanished days she spent with her

father in banal details in the forest, “Holding the log / while he sawed it. Holding / the string while he measured” (MBH 91). Atwood’s repetition emphasizes that such trivial things and chores are so boring to a little girl that the speaker loses her patience: “hardly wait to get / the hell out of there to / anywhere else” (MBH 92). The speaker recounts,

Or sat in the back

of the car, or sat still in boats,

sat, sat, while at the prow, stern, wheel

he drove, steered, paddled. It

wasn’t even boredom, it was looking,

looking hard and up close at the small

details.

[.....]

Sometimes he would whistle, sometimes

I would. The boring rhythm of doing

things over and over, carrying

the wood, drying

the dishes. Such minutiae. (MBH 91-92)

In the last five lines of this poem, the speaker is appreciated that her father is no

longer there; therefore, a poignant sadness occurred to her. The poem continues,

Perhaps though

boredom is happier. It is for dogs or

groundhogs. Now I wouldn't be bored.

Now I would know too much.

Now I would know. (MBH 92)

Atwood suggests that life is filled with boredom and, of course, ended with death.

The final lines indicate that the speaker is well aware that things would be no different

because she has known and accepted her father's death. This as Janice Fiamengo

argues that "Knowing at all is knowing too much because it is knowledge of death.

Knowledge makes the moment retrospectively precious but also forecloses the

possibility of regaining the remembered experience because the happy boredom of a

world without time is forever lost" (158).

On the other hand, Atwood is brought up against the things that she does not

know about her father's life while she is a little girl. In "Dancing," the speaker

recalls, "There is always more than you know" (MBH 90) discovered to her surprise

that it was her father who taught her mother how to dance. The parents' "graceful

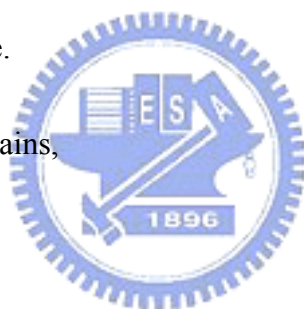
twirling, / curved arms and fancy footwork" (MBH 90) signify that the daughter is

like the sheet music that she "can't play" (MBH 90).

In “A Visit,” her father’s paralysis causes the speaker to revisit her childhood memory about her father. Her father is not the person as she imagines. He is not strong enough, but vulnerable because he is an ordinary human being. As the speaker mourns:

Gone are the days
 when you could walk on water.
 When you could walk.

The days are gone.
 Only one day remains,
 the one you’re in.



The memory is no friend.
 It can only tell you
 what you no longer have (MBH 88)

“Let’s not panic” (MBH 88), the speaker says, and she talks to her father about “axes” and “the toolbox” (MBH 89) in order to salvage his lost memory. However, he cannot remember anything but only recognizes “the bed” (MBH 89). So, Atwood reveals her helplessness and feeling of anxiety, “Can’t we do anything but feel sorry?”

(“Flowers” 94).

The poem “Up” also depicts the occasion of the speaker’s father laying on the deathbed that he “can’t get out of bed” (MBH 110), she continues, “Forget all that and let’s get up. / Try moving your arm. / Try moving your head” (MBH 111). Apparently, we can see that Atwood’s poems engage with the ways in which mourning and memory both inscribe and reiterate in many different forms in order to express Atwood’s acceptance and consolation about her father’s death through poetic persona.

In “A Fire Place,” the fourth poem from the end, Atwood indicates that new growth comes to replace the old in a burned house. The speaker revisits the place in the forest where her family’s house had burned. The charred place looks like a “gash” and “scar” (MBH 116) where poplar, fireweed, berries, and bears all grew on the ashes; “that bright random clearing / or burn, or meadow” is gone, and then a new forest is growing now. Only humans “can regret / the perishing of the burned place. / Only we could call it a wound” (MBH 117).

The title poem of this collection, “Morning in the Burned House,” takes place in the burned house. In this poem, the speaker is simultaneously represented both as an aging adult and as a child, with consciousness split in half between the present and the past. She is alone sitting in a house where no longer exists. The speaker

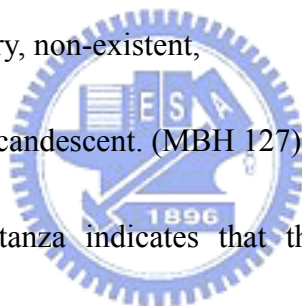
imagines the loved ones and also looks for her family, “Where have they gone to, brother and sister, / mother and father?” (MBH 126). Though everything “in this house has long been over / including the body I had then, / including the body I have now,” the speaker still sits “at the morning table, alone and happy,” her “bare child’s feet on the scorched floorboards” (MBH 127), wearing her

burning clothes, the thin green shorts

and grubby yellow T-shirt

holding my cindery, non-existent,

radiant flesh. Incandescent. (MBH 127)



Particularly, the last stanza indicates that the speaker has reconciled her mourning and memory with the burned house. The poem suggests the speaker saw her burning body, and thus memory in which she sees it now. Though her family’s “clothes are still on the hangers,” the reality of its minutiae is “every detail clear, / tin cup and rippled mirror” (MBH 126). This poem suggests that the speaker is not sure “if this is a trap or blessing” to possess her memory, but we can see that she is “alone and happy” (MBH 127).

Janice Fiamengo suggests that this title poem “articulates the complex gift of loss” and that it is “‘morning’ signals some sort of resolution: both ‘mourning’ and

‘morning’ come after the darkness of death and night, dispelling and lightening it” (159). Another critic Kathryn Van Spanckeren argues that this poem “links loss of consciousness with larger cultural losses—nuclear war, Hiroshima’s burned spots in which large vivid flowers grow . . . The book’s title assumes new meaning. We witness an elegiac new ‘morning’ within ‘mourning,’ the long-anticipated advent of spring, precisely in the locus of death, the ‘burned house’” (118). Lothar Honnighausen (2000) also comments that the title “‘Morning’—‘Burned House,’ encapsulates the poet’s equal acceptance of the past and present” and the last stanza particularly expresses Atwood’s “aesthetic achievement” (116). On the other hand, Susanne Becker (1999) interprets Atwood’s “Morning in the Burned House” to carry “gothic overtones in its title” and “evoke the uncanny, domestic situation of a virtual ghost speaking from the burnt breakfast table” (191).

In the burned house I am eating breakfast.

You understand: there is no house, there is no breakfast,

yet here I am. (MBH 126)

To some extent, this poem indicates that the speaker not only mourns her vanished past and childhood memory, but also mourns for herself because she is burning with the burned house into the whole, and “incandescent” (MBH 127).

Images of the burned house often reappear in Atwood’s poems, especially in

“Wave” (MBH 83), “Two Dreams” (MBH 96-97), and “Up” (MBH 110-111), and “A Fire Place” (MBH 116-117). While the burned house no longer exists, it has become a symbol of loss or of the end of history. As Judith Butler claims in her “After Loss, What Then?”:

Places are lost—destroyed, vacated, barred—but then there is some new place, and it is not the first, never can be the first. And so there is an impossibility housed at the site of this new place.

What is new, newness itself, is founded upon the loss of original place, and so it is a newness that has within it a sense of belatedness, of coming after, and of being thus fundamentally determined by a past that continues to inform it. And so this past is not actually past in the sense of “over,” since it continues as an animating absence in the presence, one that makes itself known precisely in and through the survival of anachronism itself. (426)

According to his “Mnemosyne,” Derrida writes in the wake of Paul de Man’s death:

Upon the death of the other we are given to memory, and thus to interiorization, since the other, outside us, is now nothing. And with the dark light of this nothing, we learn that the other resists the

closure of our interiorizing memory. With the nothing of this irrevocable absence, the other appears *as* other, and as other for us, upon his death or at least in the anticipated possibility of a death, since death constitutes and makes manifest the limits of a *me* or an *us* who are obliged to harbor something that is greater and other than them; something *outside of them within them*. (M 34)

Here, in *Morning in the Burned House*, the image of the speaker's father appears in her dreams in different forms. For example, in "Two Dreams," the speaker's father always eludes the speaker. Using Derrida's phrase, he investigates the paradox that mourning involves remembering in order to forget. We create and imagine an image of the loved person in order to lay the loved one's memory to rest. And then we have to try carrying on with our life in the face of loss. However, the loved one always evades our attempts to interiorize him or her. Hence, this is what Derrida avers that "failure succeeds" (M 35). This failure, as Derrida argues, is such a kind of respectful tribute or ethical necessity (M 35). In the poem the speaker dreams that she dives to find her father in the lake, but "he [the speaker's father] was too far down. / He still had his hat on" (MBH 96). Then, the second dream describes that the speaker looks at her father turning away. She says,

My father is standing there
 with his back turned to us
 in his winter parka, the hood up.
 He never had one like that.

Now he's walking away.
 The bright leaves rustle, we can't call,
 he doesn't look. (MBH 97)

The images of the speaker's father always turning away, "walking away," which explain Derrida's paradox of mourning in "failure succeeds." This failure is that the father's images evade to represent the true father "because they cannot substitute for the father, they are truer—in the sense of more faithful—representations, testifying to loss without achieving consoling substitution" (Fiamengo 2000: 158).

Through the speaker's narration, her father's images reveal both in retrieval and in failing. To the speaker, this failure of the father's image is such kind of respectful homage to remember or to in memory of her father. But the father's images often laugh at the speaker while she tries to interiorize her father's images in the dreams, "like clumsy drunks / lurching sideways through the doors / we open to them in sleep" (MBH 100). In "Two Dream, 2" (MBH 99-100), the dreams are frustrated by the

speaker. The dreams of her father's images the speaker creates fail to retrieve the father figure. In the dream, the speaker depicts that her father "is blind" and "we were trying to be cheerful," but she "wasn't happy to see him" (MBH 99). She describes the dreams:

we shoved them

away too quickly:

from under the ground, from under the water,

they clutch at us, they clutch at us,

we won't let go. (MBH 100)

As Janice Fiamengo writes, "the surprising *we* at the end of the line confirms the speaker's need to be reminded of her loss. The multiple images of the father emphasize their failure to represent the *one* truly, signing their status as textual traces, representations that do not refer" (158).

In short, this chapter tries to keep memory in mourning, which means both to keep memory and to lose it, to embrace it and to give up the dream of possessing it. Atwood's memorial poems are in order to memorize her father's death with emotional authenticity. Moreover, Atwood not only tries to negotiate with memory of the dead but also to create a different memory between her and her father. At the end of a series of poems in which mourning is interminable by the tone of speaker who is full

of sense of loss, and on the other hand, Atwood's memory is constantly recounted by the speaker's specific details, repetitions, and those minutiae, neither successfully forgotten nor successfully remembered, which all are fractured nature of loss and memory.



Chapter Four: Revisioning the Dead

All writers must go from *now* to *once upon a time*; all must go from here to there; all must descend to where the stories are kept; all must take care not to be captured and held immobile by the past. And all must commit acts of larceny, or else of reclamation, depending how you look at it. The dead may guard the treasure, but it's useless treasure unless it can be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more—which means to enter the realm of the audience, the realm of the readers, the realm of change. (Atwood 2002: 178-79)



Margaret Atwood's favorite ancestor was considered as a witch in 1680s before the notorious Salem witch trials of 1692-93, which almost two hundred people were accused of using witchcraft and nineteen were executed.⁵ Mary Reeve Webster, who was an ancestor of Atwood's grandmother Ora Louise Webster on her mother's side, lived in Hadley, Massachusetts. Mary and her husband William Webster were so poor that they needed public assistance. Under New England's Puritan laws, the poor people can petition the town for relief, and the town people also were required to offer some help. In her poverty, Mary Webster came under the care of Philip Smith,

⁵ See David Hall, ed. *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth Century New England: A Documentary History, 1638-92*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991.

who was to arrange her poor relief. Smith was a deacon of the church, member of the court, and selectman of Hadley. Obviously, Mary, “being dissatisfied at some of his just cares about her, expressed herself unto him in such a manner that he declared himself apprehensive of receiving mischief at her hands” (Mather 132). It was unwise to humiliate her benefactor.

Soon Mary was accused of being a witch. Rumors were rampant. She realized that those crimes from court records of the report were deadly accusations. The accusation read: “For that she not hauing the feare of God before hir eyes & being instigated by the diuill hath entred into Couenant & familiarity wth him in the shape of a warraneage [an Indian name for black cat] & had hir Imps sucking hir & teats or marks found in hir secret parts as in & by seuerall testimonyes may Appeare Contrary to the peace of our Soueraigne Lord.”⁶

Kept in prison waiting for a further trial, Mary finally was found not guilty in September 1683. The records did not explain why, but she was charged to pay some money for the cost of her trial and travel to and from Boston. This was not the end for Mary. Philip Smith died two years later in 1685. Mary was accused again of his murder by witchcraft as many ominous signs indicated that Smith’s death was from supernatural causes. For instance, pins were discovered under the bed, and the

⁶ *Records of the Court of Assistants of the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay, 1630-1692, Vol. I.* Boston: County of Suffolk, 1901, p.229.

scent of musk in the air. Mysterious and strange scratchings were heard.

“To relieve the suffering Smith, a number of the young men of Hadley went to Mary’s house. They dragged her out and hanged her by the neck until she was almost dead. Then they cut her down and rolled her in the snow, finally burying her in it. By some trick of luck and extraordinary will, she survived” (Sullivan 14). Mary died in Hadley in 1696.⁷

As Atwood talked about her ancestor Mary Webster’s story in a Radcliffe alumni address in 1980, she said,

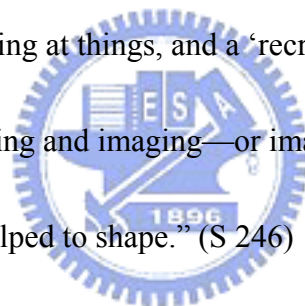
For ‘causing an old man [Smith] to become extremely valetudinarian’ . . . When they cut Mary Webster down the next day, she was, to everyone’s surprise, not dead. Because of the law of double jeopardy, under which you could not be executed twice for the same offence, Mary Webster went free. I expect that if everyone thought she had occult powers before the hanging, they were even more convinced of it afterwards. She is my favorite ancestor . . . and if there’s one thing I hope I’ve inherited from her, it’s her neck. (SW 331)

When Atwood wrote the poems collected in *Morning in the Burned House*, she

⁷ Mary Webster’s story can be found in the first chapter “Kitchen Stories” in Rosemary Sullivan’s book *The Red Shoes: Margaret Atwood Starting Out*. p12-4.

included a poem to her ancestor Mary Webster named “Half-hanged Mary” (MBH 58-69). Atwood revisits her own personal family history and ancestry.⁸ This poem provides the possibility of survival, which explores the suffering spiritual, bodily and psychological experiences of the speaker. In Atwood’s early critical book, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), she argues that the importance of revision and survival in a national and cultural context. As Atwood writes,

Even the things we look at demand our participation, and our
 commitment . . . what can result is a ‘jailbreak,’ an escape from our
 old habits of looking at things, and a ‘recreation,’ a new way of
 seeing, experiencing and imaging—or imagining—which we
 ourselves have helped to shape.” (S 246)



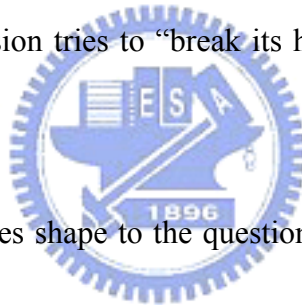
This is such a perspective of Atwood’s work that her argument shares with the American poet Adrienne Rich, who has been argued the necessity of women’s re-visionary writing. In Rich’s seminal essay titled “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision” (1971), she suggests:

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of
 entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women
 than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival. Until we

⁸ Mary Webster is such a woman who has been documented as one of Atwood’s ancestors. Barbara Rigney (1987) mentions that Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) is dedicated to her ancestor Mary Webster hanged for a witch in Connecticut. See Rigney’s book *Margaret Atwood*, p114.

can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we
 cannot know ourselves. . . We need to know the writing of the
 past and to know it differently than we have ever known it; not to
 pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. (167-168)

Rich wrote in a feminist context, whereas for Atwood the definition of re-vision needed to be widened to examine her poem “Half-hanged Mary.” In other words, the revision of “Half-hanged Mary” involves a critical position to reinterpret the traditional narratives (or grand narratives) from a new perspective, which presents a new voice of critique. Revision tries to “break its hold over us,” not to break with tradition.



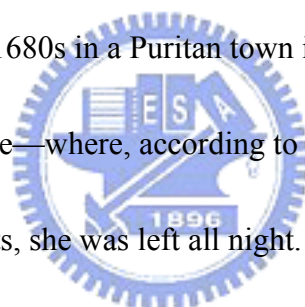
Rich’s classic essay gives shape to the question I pursue here: how the history (witch-hunting) and mourning (ones the dead Mary) are related to Atwood’s “Half-hanged Mary,” on the one hand, and Rich’s argument “writing as re-vision,” on the other. For Atwood emphasizes her ancestor Mary’s historical deed to critique the morbid religion and inexplicable witch-hunts incidents, which become part of Western history. The dead becomes the only sacrificial body in this crucial ritual. Atwood’s poem introduces a radical revision that allows readers a special insight into the brutal history of witch-hunts and its consequences. Placing her poem “Half-hanged Mary” in the context of witch-hunting gives Atwood to criticize Puritan condemnation,

violence and persecution.

Here, this topic associates with the American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne's famous novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), which can provide background for an intertextual reading and parallel linking. Also, as we can find out in Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) that echoes such thematic preoccupations and humanity concerns to critique the totalitarian religious regimes.

Before the poem starts, Atwood notes the historical fact:

“Half-hanged Mary” was Mary Webster, who was accused of witchcraft in the 1680s in a Puritan town in Massachusetts and hanged from a tree—where, according to one of the several surviving accounts, she was left all night. It is known that when she was cut down she was still alive, since she lived for another fourteen years. (MBH 58)



This poem consists of ten parts which explore the efforts of time and memory. Atwood writes in the first person, and imagines different periods of Mary's ordeal from the night (7 p. m.) to the daytime (8 a. m.). The poem reflects the speaker's (Mary Webster) mediations and miserable experiences during the night she is hanged in the tree by her townsfolk. It proceeds with each part following the temporal sequences. The title of the time, for example, '7 p.m.' or '8 a.m.' indicates the

speaker's ordeal experience through the twenty-four hours hanging by a rope.

In the first part of the poem, '7 p.m.,' the speaker recalls the day happened during sunset when she was milking the cow in the barn. She still does not smell the scent of ominous omen pervaded in her town. She recounts,

Rumour was loose in the air,
 hunting for some neck to land on.

[.....]

I didn't feel the aimed word hit

and go in like a soft bullet. (MBH 58)

Somehow she is hanging alone. The hanging speaker mocks herself as:

a blackened apple stuck back onto the tree.

Trussed hands, rag in my mouth,

a flag raised to salute the moon, (MBH 59)

Those townsfolk are coming to make a careful check of her to see if she is dead.

The speaker says that she can "see their fear" (MBH 60). The townsfolk accuse her

but those who are afraid to save her.

In the part, '10 p.m.,' consequently, the speaker has a quarrel with God. She questions the authoritative language system that has destroyed her faith and excluded

her wording, failing to build a relation between God and her. As she says,

Well God, now I'm up here

[.]

we can continue our quarrel,

the one about free will.

[.]

If Nature is Your alphabet,

what letter is this rope?

Does my twisting body spell out Grace?

I hurt, therefore, I am.

Faith, Charity, and Hope

are three dead angels (MBH 61-62)



In the part, '12 midnight,' describes that Death is waiting for the speaker's fresh body at midnight. Here, three metaphorical figures are pictured by the speaker: like "a crow," "a judge," and "a dark angel" (MBH 62-63). She is negotiating with Death without any fear and hesitation, and refusing Death's cajolery. As she depicts,

Trust me, he [Death] says, caressing

Me. *Why suffer?*

A temptation, to sink down

[.....]

To give up my own words for myself,

my own refusals.

To give up knowing.

To give up pain.

To let go. (MBH 63)

The impressive part of “Half-hanged Mary” is “3 a.m.” since this part’s rhythm and tempo intensify the speaker’s condition of breathless and struggle for survival. As she declares,



no crime I was born I have borne I

bear I will be born this is

a crime I will not


acknowledge leaves and wind

hold on to me

I will not give in (MBH 65)

In this poem, “3 a.m.,” the technique Atwood uses is to reflect the speaker’s tense situation which “wind seethes in the leaves” (MBH 64) and “birds yell inside / my

ears like stabbed hearts my hearts / stutters in my fluttering cloth” (MBH 65). This part is narrated without punctuation. The fast rhythm and tempo in gasps followed its narrative toward a choking image that carries the speaker’s unyieldingly struggle with destiny. This image seeks to produce the speaker’s pathos and strength. As Charlotte Beyer claims that this part “emphasises its fluid, surreal flow-of-conscious—the ramblings of a body in extreme pain and anguish; a state in which linguistic and subject barriers are dissolved, and the poetic persona experiences herself as an embodiment of defiance and of the word ‘No’” (289). This sequence shows:



body I dangle with strength
 going out of me the wind seethes
 in my body tattering
 the words I clench
 my fists hold No
 talisman or silver disc my lungs
 flail as if drowning (MBH 65)

When the huge sun rises in the morning, the speaker realizes that she is still alive. Recalling the horrific hanging experience in the wilderness, she mourns herself as a deadly living body. She grieves,

I would like to say my hair turned white

overnight, but it didn't.

Instead it was my heart:

bleached out like meat in water. (MBH 66)

When the townsfolk expect to harvest the speaker's dead body, they are surprised because she is still alive. This part proceeds with the dramatic development and climax. The speaker warns her townsfolk with an acerbic tone.

She says,

Tough luck, folks,

I know the law:

you can't execute me twice



for the same thing. How nice. (MBH 67)

The powerful phrases, “Before, I was not a witch. / But now I am one” (MBH 67) suggest an ironic meaning which represents and embodies history of loss. History renders the speaker a victim who has no choice except reticence to herself.

After her horrible experience, the speaker realizes that she can say anything she wants to say now. She attempts to break the social convention with a transgressive language,

Having been hanged for something

I never said,
 I can now say anything I can say.
 [.]
 The words boils out of me,
 coil after coil of sinuous possibility.
 The cosmos unravels from my mouth,
 all fullness, all vacancy. (MBH 69)

As Karen Stein has suggested that “The internal rhymes of boil and coil, out and mouth, the hissing sibilants, and the tightly packed accents underscore the crone’s power. She is both Scheherazade, arguing with God during the night, and the poet returned from the dead bearing an appropriated ambiguous message, encompassing both absence and presence” (123). As Charlotte Beyer concludes that “[t]his alternative poetic discourse here, and in the final section of the poem, and the changed subject position that it denotes in the poetic persona, hint at a radically revised vision of subjectivity and spiritual existence which transgresses patriarchal and discursive norms” (289).

In sum, this poem is based on the true story of the life in the 1680s of Mary Webster, who was hanged as a witch. Mary survived the hanging; when the townsfolk came to cut her down in the morning, she was still alive. Atwood offers a

chronology of Mary's hideous dangling. The writing technique Atwood uses is that Mary's chronology is juxtaposed with her story connecting the historical event with the moment of Atwood's revision and mourning Mary, merging the past with the present.

Throughout "Half-hang Mary," Atwood both addresses mourning for Mary, and also links this mourning to the loss of history, history itself as a past, which cannot be captured correctly, but as a poet / writer, Atwood tends to represent the dead in order to make sense of history, then making sense of ourselves. Additionally, Atwood is faced with having to speak in mourning and to let the dead speak. As in "Negotiating with the Dead," Atwood writes that "They [the dead] don't want to be voiceless; they don't want to be pushed aside, obliterated. They want us to know" (NWD 163).

To use Rich's words, Atwood narrates Mary's story with an "act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (167), and for Atwood "writing is re-naming" (174). Trying to look back and understand that time Atwood tries to display Mary's historical fact to be an imaginative transformation which is in a critical way. Further, Atwood represents the art of survival over the historical event, suggesting not only of the historical or modern deaths but also of coming into being of her own act of writing.

In other words, revision involves a critical reinterpretation from a new perspective. So, Atwood adopts the revisionary writing strategy to involve the past to retell the historical event through Mary Webster as a poetic persona who gains a completely new perspective to see history and its remains. In this regard, for Atwood, rewriting of the past is a continuous engagement with the dead and with the act of mourning.

Through mourning, Mary's story serves herself not only as a historical artifact, but also as a historical archive that is part of repository of social and cultural memory. Atwood seeks to remember Mary's death in her writing that she would be remembered by the living. Inscripting her ancestor Mary's name in Atwood's text, through documenting and reimagining Mary's experiences, she instructs Atwood to mourn her insufficiently death of the past. Ultimately, Atwood opens a new relationship with the past—bringing her ancestor Mary the specter into the present to the contemporary readers who may obtain new reflections of and perspectives on the lost loved person (object) or history.



Chapter Five: Conclusion

You own nothing.

You were a visitor, time after time

climbing the hill, planting the flag, proclaiming.

We never belonged to you.

You never found us.

It was always the other way round. (Atwood 1995: 109)

Death is universal and inescapable. If you've discovered the secret of immortality, please share it! A word taken out of its context loses its meaning. I think all writers speak of death. It's one of the great themes of literature, along with love, war, nature—and what else? Meals, perhaps. There are a lot of meals in my writing. Meals are more precise than deaths. It's too general a question, I think. How do we speak of non-life? We find ourselves without references. And if no one died, what would happen? (Atwood 1998: 120)

Through working at her speaker's mourning, I have taken Atwood's *Morning in the Burned House* as a literary text, to examine the way in which she works through poetic language performances, the rhetoric of mourning, individual memories, and historical revision. As critics have pointed out, Atwood "knows that words bring things into existence, she also knows the reader's contribution to that process. The

shaping narrative patterns of repetition and revision, of metaphor and imagery, of assonance and word play, appear just as frequently in Atwood's fiction as they do in her poetry" (Reynolds and Noakes 2002: 10). Drawing on Derrida's work of mourning and Rich's critical notion of revision, my thesis explores the problematics of Atwood's poems in terms of politics of mourning, ethics of memory, and revision of the dead. For critics often neglect these complexities in Atwood's poetry. I try to open up a new understanding of Atwood, and also to argue that this collection of poems could account for her literary transformation as an important step in her writing career.

Mourning, in the wake of her father's death, is ethical necessity for the speaker to look back from the dead and the past in *Morning in the Burned House*.

Father-daughter relations are good, Avishai Margalit maintains:

Morality is indeed a basis for disqualifying ethical relations.

Ethical relations are bad relations if they are immoral. Morality provides a threshold test for the assessment of ethical relations.

But the sufficiency condition for making an ethical relation a *good* ethical relation is caring. Caring is the ethical contribution to the goodness of the relation. (86)

As my thesis has analyzed, we could observe that the relation between Atwood's

poetic persona and her father is based on a good ethical relation. The speaker and the father care for and indeed love each other. Sara Jamieson suggests that Atwood's poems "almost entirely lack the bitterness and hostility which characterize the elegies of some of the century's most prominent daughter-poets . . . her attitude toward her father is generally loving and recuperative, but it is not without its moments of private conflict" (39).⁹

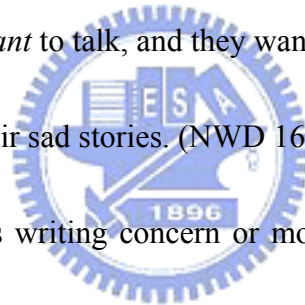
I have argued that Atwood writes to represent her family history and of personal experience in order to resolve her mourning, whether for her lost father, lost ancestor Mary Webster, lost places, and lost lives. This is her way of fixing the past by imaginatively revising its meanings in the present. Through nostalgic memory, Atwood provides her poetic persona with a vehicle for her physical and psychological transformation. For Atwood herself, narrative nostalgia and memory give opportunities to work through mourning, to revise and revisit the emotion of loss and grief.

Atwood's early poems hardly address the topic of the dead, and they are often focused on the Canadian landscapes, revising mythologies, and feminist critiques and discourses. However, in *Morning in the Burned House*, Atwood offers a different perspective: let the dead speak. As Atwood claims in her provocative essay

⁹ Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, and Sylvia Plath all have written angry poems or elegies for their fathers. Also see Ramazani's book *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*. P. 262-83, 299-322.

“Negotiating with the Dead”:

[F]orensic doctor-anthropologists such as the protagonist of Michael Ondaatje’s latest novel, *Anil’s Ghost*, are firmly of this tradition—such an old and persistent one because it’s so elemental, interbound as it is with the desire for justice and the longing for revenge. When the blind old man in the Ondaatje novel “reads” a skull with his fingers, it’s a recap of a very ancient scene. The premise is that dead bodies can talk if you know how to listen to them, and they *want* to talk, and they want us to sit down beside them and hear their sad stories. (NWD 163)



As we can see that Atwood’s writing concern or motif is focused on death and the dead, she also praises Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* as a typical novel to develop this kind of motif. *Anil’s Ghost* is for political reasons and Ondaatje tends to deal with historical consciousness and transnational problems. However, for ethical reasons, Atwood’s poetry illuminates her point of view by the speaker to respect the dead. Its topic is different from Atwood’s poetry; however, I argue that Atwood and Ondaatje’s theme and concern are the same.

Atwood proposes to bring something to let the dead speak and also let the dead be seen in *Morning in the Burned House*. These she lets the speaker and the dead

speak in order to announce the subject of mourning. The speakers (including the dead) who can be seen as the representations of the speaker's memory, for example, the photographs, the burned house, and dreams, the images might be memories as Derrida says that "a memory that consists of visible scenes that are no longer anything but images" (WM 159). Through memory and mourning, we can discover that Atwood's narration obviously pays attention to the topic of the dead: how she deals with death and mourning, and how she negotiates with the dead since at the death of the speaker's father.

During forty years of her writing career, Atwood believes that "all writers speak of death" (TS 120), and that "all writers learn from the dead" (NWD 178). With these beliefs, Atwood tries to explore various kinds of genres and challenges in her writing development. In *Morning in the Burned House* Atwood deliberates over the theme of mourning and lets the dead speak because "the dead have some very precious and desirable things under their control, down there in their perilous realm, and among these are some things you yourself may want or need" (NWD 167).

Therefore, I argue that *Morning in the Burned House* is a very important and distinctive poetry collection among Atwood's oeuvre because it bestows upon the writer the responsibility to witness and resurrect the dead in the act of mourning. Such concern is related to the philosophical thinking in terms of Derrida's concept of

mourning, such as ethical relation and memory.

Through Atwood's *Morning in the Burned House*, we can realize that this book provides serious and intimate perspectives on the process of revisioning history and mourning the dead. These dimensions are very important to observe Atwood's literary development as they have lasting impacts on her writing topic and style. In my opinion, the theme of mourning or death helps perpetuate Atwood's literary preoccupation with loss can be found in her later work. For example, Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000), winner of the prestigious Booker Prize, constructs an intricate layering of texts and ironies, and narrates the tragic death of the Chase family, including the storyteller Iris Chase Griffen's parents, husband, sister, and daughter. In her latest novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003) the narrator Snowman mourns the loss of his beloved Oryx and his best friend Crake as he slowly awaits death. As I have argued, two important motifs of these two novels are death and mourning. Unlike what was in her early work, Atwood's recent narratives seem to move beyond archetypical characters and the figures of mythologies. The key literary transition in Atwood's writing career stands for an important position as she will develop her motif of mourning and death to create her stories.

This subtle literary transformation gives Atwood's poetry a new perspective. As a key international writer, Atwood still keeps on exploring human questions and

tries to probe problems that have bestowed readers with more sensibility to experience the world—imagined and real.



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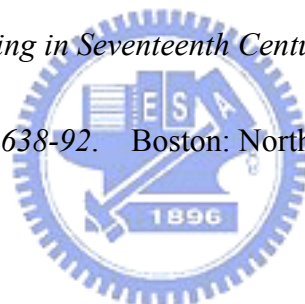
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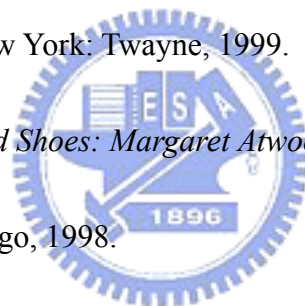
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