

two poems from *Interlunar* (1984)

By Margaret Atwood (Canada)

Orpheus (1)

You walked in front of me,
pulling me back out
to the green light that had once
grown fangs and killed me.

5 I was obedient, but
numb, like an arm
gone to sleep; the return
to time was not my choice.

By then I was used to silence.
10 Though something stretched between us
like a whisper, like a rope:
my former name,
drawn tight.
You had your old leash
15 with you, love you might call it,
and your flesh voice.

Before your eyes you held steady
the image of what you wanted
me to become: living again.
20 It was this hope of yours that kept me following.

I was your hallucination, listening
and floral, and you were singing me:
already new skin was forming on me
within the luminous misty shroud
25 of my other body; already
there was dirt on my hands and I was thirsty.

I could see only the outline
of your head and shoulders,
black against the cave mouth,
30 and so could not see your face
at all, when you turned



Margaret Atwood
born 1939

and called to me because you had
already lost me. The last
I saw of you was a dark oval.
35 Though I knew how this failure
would hurt you, I had to
fold like a gray moth and let go.

You could not believe I was more than your echo.

Eurydice

He is here, come down to look for you.
It is the song that calls you back,
a song of joy and suffering
equally: a promise:
5 that things will be different up there
than they were last time.

You would rather have gone on feeling nothing,
emptiness and silence; the stagnant peace
of the deepest sea, which is easier
10 than the noise and flesh of the surface.

You are used to these blanched dim corridors,
you are used to the king
who passes you without speaking.

The other one is different
15 and you almost remember him.
He says he is singing to you
because he loves you,

not as you are now,
so chilled and minimal: moving and still
20 both, like a white curtain blowing
in the draft from a half-opened window
beside a chair on which nobody sits.

He wants you to be what he calls real.
He wants you to stop light.
25 He wants to feel himself thickening
like a tree-trunk or a haunch
and see blood on his eyelids
when he closes them, and the sun beating.

This love of his is not something
30 he can do if you aren't there,
but what you knew suddenly as you left your body
cooling and whitening on the lawn

was that you love him anywhere,
even in this land of no memory,
35 even in this domain of hunger.
You hold love in your hand, a red seed
you had forgotten you were holding.

He has come almost too far.
He cannot believe without seeing,
40 and it's dark here.
>Go back<, you whisper,

but he wants to be fed again
by you. O handful of gauze, little
bandage, handful of cold
45 air, it is not through him
you will get your freedom.

DIRECTIONS: After reading the two poems, complete the following activity.

Ambivalence is defined as the state of having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something. Although there is some degree of uncertainty implied in “Orpheus (1)” concerning the relationship between the speaker and the one she addresses, read in isolation the poem would seem to imply that the man (the metaphorical Orpheus) coercively wants to force a relationship that the speaker (the metaphorical Eurydice) would rather leave in the past.

“Eurydice” develops this idea with the same characters, but the one-dimensional reading of the first poem is complicated by a creeping note of ambivalence on the speaker’s part (though the conclusions drawn by the isolated reading remain broadly true). To put it another way, read by itself “Orpheus (1)” could plausibly suggest the woman no longer wants anything to do with her former lover; read side-by-side with “Eurydice,” however, it seems the woman is more conflicted in her attitude toward him.

Your task is to explore the speaker’s attitude toward the relationship or her former lover, finding a way to explore this seeming ambivalence. This should take the form of a paragraph devoted to each side of the conflict and a shorter concluding paragraph that sums up your position as to what the speaker’s attitude suggests.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR:

- The poems often describe the same thing from two different points of view (with different connotations for each). From the multiple choice, for example, you know the image of the speaker (from the man’s point of view) as “floral” (22) is echoed in the woman’s view of the

same idealization as the dirt forming on her hands and her becoming thirsty again (26). These two images imply very different things.

- There are implied comparisons to the way things are to the way things used to be.
- Though the speaker ultimately rejects her “Orpheus,” it is obvious that she is not indifferent to him.
- There are ambiguous images whose connotation could be read in multiple ways dependent on the context.

DUE DATE:

This assignment is due Tuesday (4/9). If you give the assignment to me early enough, I will mark it up with comments and corrections as if it were a timed writing. If you turn in the finished assignment early, there will be a small grade incentive (+3 points). If you miss the midnight deadline but turn in the assignment before eight hours have elapsed, there will be a small point deduction (-3 points). If you turn in the assignment between eight and twenty-four hours late there will be a larger point deduction (-10 points). If you turn in the assignment at any point after that, there will be a substantial point deduction (-20 points). If you turn in the assignment late, but do not want points deducted, you may earn back credit by, in addition to this assignment, writing an essay about the role of allusion in any two of Atwood’s three poems about werewolves (available for download from my website).



Margaret Atwood