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*Rescuing Feminine Voices from the
Rubbish: The Implications of
“Meneseteung” and “This is a Photograph
of Me”*

Brenna Raeder ‘20



Introduction

Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro are two of Canada’s most prominent and prolific writers, and both have leaned into frank and nuanced investigations of gendered experiences in their work. Additionally, both authors have made forays into the Gothic, exploring the macabre and mysterious. Placing works by Atwood and Munro in conversation with one another can produce compelling frameworks. In Margaret Atwood’s 1966 poem “This is a Photograph of Me,” a drowned speaker describes a photograph of the landscape and lake in which they drowned to an unidentified “you” audience. The speaker begins by describing the photograph as a physical object, “a smeared / print: blurred lines and grey flecks / blended with the paper” (Atwood 3-5). The speaker then guides the “you” through the image depicted by the photo, including “part of a tree,” “a small frame house,” “a lake, / and beyond that, some low hills” (Atwood 13-14). Here, the speaker’s voice shifts to a parenthetical for the remainder of the poem, where the speaker reveals “the photograph was taken/the day after [they] drowned” and that they are somewhere in the lake, “just under the surface” and difficult to see (Atwood 18).

The unnamed narrator in Alice Munro's 1990 short story "Meneseteung" functions as an archivist or historical investigator, and the story is the narrator's rediscovery and reimagination of Almeda Joynt Roth, a Victorian-era poet living on the frontier in Ontario. Based on Almeda's own published writing, a photograph of her, and excerpts from her local paper the *Vidette*, the narrator constructs a story of Almeda's grief for the loss of her family, her rejection of potential suitor Jarvis Poulter, and her evolution into "a familiar eccentric" before her death (Munro 350). After sharing the *Vidette* obituaries of Almeda and Jarvis, the narrator describes discovering Almeda's gravestone in the cemetery alongside her family and reflects on the power of people like themselves, people "driven to find things out" even if "they may get it wrong, after all" (Munro 351).

I will argue that Munro's use of water as a symbol for female creativity--both vital and dangerous--provides a feminist framework to read Atwood's speaker as a feminine voice silenced by a society resistant to women's self-expression, and that the very act of reimagining both Atwood's speaker and Almeda is a feminist practice.

Voices Reimagined

The narrator's gender is not explicit in either text, meaning that they cannot be read absolutely as female voices. However, this ambiguity does not make such a reading unreasonable, and particular facets of these voices imply femininity. Atwood's speaker exhibits an outward uncertainty and hesitation while describing the photograph to the audience, evident in the description that spirals in on the speaker's location "in the center/of the picture" (Atwood 17-18). Despite revealing in the title, "this is a photograph of me," the speaker spends significant time describing the "photograph" in detail before so much as

mentioning the “me”; beyond simply providing a brief description of the image, the speaker dawdles, drawing out mentions of “a thing that is like a branch” and “what ought to be a gentle / slope” (Atwood 8, 11-12). The speaker’s hesitance suggests a desire to avoid seeming attention-seeking that is further implied by the fact that all description of the speaker within the poem appears in a parenthetical remark -- essentially, an afterthought. Especially when considered alongside the voice of Almeda in “Meneseteung,” this speaker’s reluctance implies a lack of confidence stereotypically associated with female voices.

At the beginning of “Meneseteung,” Munro’s narrator shares the notably apologetic preface to Almeda’s published volume of poetry, *Offerings*. Kim Jernigan has argued that the narrator includes this preface because, after analyzing the photograph of Almeda in *Offerings*, “the narrator realizes that Almeda’s carefully composed surface might as easily reflect what’s outside (‘the fashion’ [Munro 336]) as what’s inside.” By including the preface, Jernigan contends, “the narrator also attends to Almeda’s voice” (59), apparently as a remedy for surface-level understanding. After matter-of-factly describing her family and their deaths (in some ways, dancing around and spiraling in on herself much like Atwood’s speaker), Almeda shares how she has “delighted in verse” all her life and that poetry has “sometimes allayed [her] griefs” (Munro 337). However, she immediately adds the qualifier that her griefs “have been no more... than any sojourner on earth must encounter” (Munro 337), minimizing her own experience. For the remainder of the preface, Almeda acknowledges her “floundering efforts” to compose poetry, her “clumsy” fingers, and that this book, only “the product of [her] leisure hours,” is full of “rude posies” (Munro

337). Even as she publishes her life's creative work, Almeda feels compelled to undermine its validity. In all likelihood, this impulse arises from the attitude her community has towards her work; the *Vidette* calls her "our poetess" (Munro 336), and the narrator finds "a mixture of respect and contempt, both for her calling and for her sex" in this appellation (Munro 336). In such an environment, maintaining the respect of her community would require Almeda to follow in the tradition of many writers of marginalized identities by apologizing for her craft, even as (or especially because) it is deemed to be of publishable quality. Thus, Almeda's preface does not necessarily complicate the "carefully composed surface" visible in her photograph as Jernigan argues (59); the surface may also simply reflect "the fashion" of patriarchal attitudes towards women's artistry (Munro 336). In addition to revealing contemporary attitudes towards female creativity, the connection between Almeda's gender and her urge to qualify her self-expression gives further support to reading the speaker in Atwood's poem as female. Furthermore, both Munro and Atwood undertake feminist work by revealing the limitations placed on female voices in a patriarchal society.

Peter Barry has argued that the photo described in the poem "cannot be any real photograph" (162). According to Barry, the fact of the speaker discussing the photo from beyond the grave means that it "not only doesn't exist, but couldn't" (165). However, such a photo very well could exist, even if its true contents would be impossible to know. Despite a perception of photographs as "objective," they represent a viewpoint that is strictly limited in time and space. This leaves room to imagine the voices of photographic subjects, whether immediately obvious or "under the surface" (Atwood 18). By creating a

speaker that could not possibly reveal their fate due to their drowning, Atwood hints at a key feminist practice: in order to understand the evolution of oppression dynamics over time, voices that were overlooked and silenced in the creation of historical records must be imagined. Barry himself suggests that “the voice may be imagined as speaking the unspoken, perhaps of domestic abuse, suffering, and violence” (164), alluding perhaps to a feminization of the speaker and granting feminist connotations to the emergence of this voice from an apparently innocuous source. Although the speaker does not explain their fate explicitly, even the fact of imagining a more complex story “just under the surface” of the historical record has these feminist implications (Atwood 18).

Voices Drowned Out

Katrine Raymond has read “the river of [Almeda’s] mind” (Munro 349) as “a metaphor for internalized (or ‘misdirected’) flow of Almeda’s... relationships with the outside world” (Munro 349). Raymond claims that because Almeda cannot relate to anyone in her community, “the flow of her dialogue... collapses into an internal ‘river of her mind’” (111). Beyond only an inability to relate, Raymond’s reference to “dialogue” implies that Almeda also cannot genuinely express herself, even on a day-to-day basis, to anyone in her life, much as she could not publicly find pride in her published work in her preface to *Offerings*. The narrator further develops association between water and Almeda’s self-expression at the climax of the story, as Almeda finds inspiration for “one very great poem that will contain everything” on the same night that the grape juice she was using to make jelly “has overflowed and is running over her kitchen floor” and that her menstrual flow begins

(Munro 348-349). Furthermore, the “one very great poem” will not only be named “The Meneseteung” after a river, but “it is the river, the Meneseteung, that is the poem” (Munro 348-349). The narrator’s claim that the river and Almeda’s greatest work would be one and the same supports Raymond’s reading; in this moment, all the creativity that Almeda has funneled away from her community and into the river of her mind overflows like the grape juice and can run out of her in the form of the Meneseteung. Jernigan adds to this interpretation, contending that the word “Meneseteung” itself “suggests a pairing of the words ‘menses’ and ‘tongue’ and hence a story about a woman’s struggle to find her voice, to discover what she wants to say along with the courage to say it” (56). While this interpretation does promise a release of Almeda’s suppressed creativity, it also reminds us that this is a story about struggle (borrowing a term from Jernigan), foreshadowing Almeda’s fate.

After imagining Almeda’s moment of inspiration, the narrator provides her obituary in the *Vidette*. The paper laments “that in later years the mind of this fine person had become somewhat clouded” and Almeda’s eventual status as “a familiar eccentric” (Munro 349-350), indicating that Almeda abandoned the community’s notions of propriety, likely allowing self-expression for the first time in her life. Notably, Almeda died after “she caught cold... having become thoroughly wet from a ramble in the Pearl Street bog” (Munro 350); apparently, “some urchins chased her into the water” (Munro 350), persecuting her as an eccentric. With the narrator’s established link between water and Almeda’s self-expression, we see that it was ultimately her willingness to be creative and unusual in her community that led to her death. Furthermore, the *Vidette* notes that Almeda’s cold ultimately killed her when it

“developed into pneumonia” (Munro 350). Essentially, her body drowned itself from the inside. In a text where bodily functions like menstruation are so closely associated with the status of the mind, Almeda’s pneumonia can be read as a physical manifestation of the “river of her mind” (Munro 349), a final moment where her suppressed self-expression overtakes her as her community will not allow it to be released.

Using this understanding of drowning as the destruction wrought by suppressed self-expression, Atwood’s speaker can be seen suffering a fate similar to Almeda’s. Returning to Barry’s reading that there is a “curious hint at some traumatic repressed narrative in the lines ‘halfway up / what ought to be a gentle / slope’” (164), we can understand the speaker’s trauma as the violence of losing one’s voice in society, much as the repression Almeda experiences in her community inflicts physical harm on her. Barry’s suggestion that the slope “maybe ought to be gentle, but it isn’t” offers the interpretation that the speaker’s death resulted from some unforeseen fall down the slope into the lake (164). The violence apparent in the landscape in this reading, in addition to the absence of any human community to frown upon the speaker’s creativity in the photograph, leads to the conclusion that the landscape itself stands in for patriarchal structures like the ones affecting Almeda. By claiming that the slope “ought to be... gentle” (Atwood 11-12), the speaker further indicates that the precariousness of the slope is, in some regard, immoral. Perhaps the speaker should have been guided gently into the possibility of self-expression rather than thrown down a precipitous slope into their own repressed creativity. Recalling that the lake is a relatively static body of water with no visible outlet further emphasizes that the speaker has no effective means to

channel their self-expression, and therefore drowns in it. Finally, that the speaker is speaking from the dead highlights how necessary creative expression of the self is, particularly for female voices; one reading of the speaker is that they are a kind of haunting presence, trapped with the photograph due to the unfinished business of expressing their trauma. In a metaphorical sense, Atwood reminds us of the haunting presence of past patriarchal structures and how their silencing effects reverberate today.

Conclusion

Considering Atwood's and Munro's texts in tandem provides insight into their feminist implications for historical women and women's self-expression. By taking on the endeavor of reconstructing Almeda, Munro's narrator engages in a feminist practice, "rescuing one thing [Almeda] from the rubbish" of her patriarchal community's records of her (Munro 122). Furthermore, by foregrounding Almeda's own words (her preface and poetry), the narrator enables her self-expression to the greatest extent possible. Where there are gaps in the historical record of Almeda, the narrator endeavors to fill them in with a story that gives Almeda a depth and purpose that the *Vidette* refused to acknowledge in a woman artist. Similarly, Atwood's speaker communicates from beyond the grave, offering a clear (if hesitantly worded) path for us to reimagine a history that appears objective, as well as a stark reminder that "under the surface" of an idealized image there is often suffering (Atwood 18). Additionally, by employing a speaker who should not typically be capable of speaking, Atwood emphasizes the power, even necessity, of self-expression. While these are important feminist implications, perhaps the most significant effect of the works (particularly when considered in conversation with

one another) is their invitation for imagination, uncertainty, and just plain getting it wrong in developing a tradition of feminist voices.

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