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# Visibility and Erasure: Identity in Margaret Atwood's "This Is a Photograph of Me" (1966)

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## Abstract

Contemporary poetry frequently interrogates the relationship between representation and self-hood, questioning whether identity can be captured, communicated, or understood through conventional means. The present paper deals with the problem of understanding how Margaret Atwood explores the dialectic between visibility and erasure in the construction of identity in her poem "This Is a Photograph of Me," published in *The Circle Game* (1966). The purpose of this study is to analyze how Atwood employs the photograph as a metaphor for the limitations of representation, presenting a speaker who exists beneath the visible surface of the image, simultaneously present and effaced. The research paper employs the research method of close textual analysis informed by feminist literary criticism and poststructuralist theory to interpret the poem's treatment of female identity and the conditions of visibility. The research paper concludes that Atwood presents identity as existing in the tension between visibility and erasure rather than as stable presence, challenging both essentialist notions of self and nihilistic acceptance of complete effacement. The future perspective of research is to situate this poem within Atwood's broader exploration of female identity across her poetry and fiction.

**Keywords:** Visibility, Erasure, Identity, Atwood, This Is a Photograph of Me

## 1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood (b. 1939) stands as one of the most significant literary voices of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Her work spans poetry, fiction, criticism, and cultural commentary, consistently interrogating questions of identity, gender, power, and representation. From her early poetry collections through her internationally acclaimed novels, Atwood has explored how selves are constructed, constrained, and potentially liberated within social and linguistic systems.

"This Is a Photograph of Me," published in Atwood's Governor General's Award-winning collection *The Circle Game* (1966), exemplifies her early exploration of these themes. The poem presents a speaker describing a photograph in which she appears—or rather, in which

she is submerged beneath the surface of a lake, invisible to the casual viewer. This central image establishes a complex meditation on the relationship between presence and absence, visibility and erasure.

This study examines the poem as an exploration of the dialectic between visibility and erasure in the construction of identity. By analyzing Atwood's use of the photograph metaphor, the poem's distinctive two-part structure, and its feminist implications, the paper demonstrates how the poem challenges conventional assumptions about representation and selfhood.

The main aim of the research study is to critically analyze the themes of visibility and erasure in the construction of identity in Margaret Atwood's poem "This Is a Photograph of Me." The major objectives of this study are: to examine Atwood's use of photography as a metaphor for the problems of representation; to analyze the poem's two-part structure and its thematic implications; and to evaluate the feminist dimensions of the poem's treatment of female visibility and invisibility.

**The researcher intends to evaluate how Atwood's "This Is a Photograph of Me" constructs identity through the dialectic of visibility and erasure, presenting the female subject as simultaneously demanding recognition and acknowledging her effacement within representational systems, thereby challenging both essentialist notions of fixed identity and nihilistic acceptance of complete erasure.**

## 2. Review of Literature

Critical engagement with Atwood's poetry has been substantial, though sometimes overshadowed by attention to her fiction. Early criticism often emphasized the Canadian nationalist dimensions of her work, situating her poetry within debates about cultural identity in postcolonial contexts.

Feminist criticism has proven particularly generative for understanding Atwood's poetry. Davey (1984) examined how Atwood's early poems challenge patriarchal constructions of femininity, arguing that "This Is a Photograph of Me" represents a specifically female experience of invisibility within male-dominated systems of representation.

Poststructuralist readings have attended to the poem's interrogation of representation. Hutcheon (1988) analyzed Atwood's characteristic irony and self-reflexivity, demonstrating how poems like "This Is a Photograph of Me" foreground the constructedness of meaning and identity. The photograph, in this reading, becomes a figure for the instability of all representational systems.

Studies of Atwood's use of visual imagery have examined the photograph motif. Stein (1999) traced the recurrence of photographic imagery across Atwood's oeuvre, arguing that she consistently employs the photograph to explore tensions between surface and depth, presence and absence, truth and fabrication.

Ecocritical approaches have examined the poem's natural imagery. Relke (1999) ana-

lyzed the significance of the lake and landscape, arguing that Atwood's nature imagery often carries symbolic weight related to female identity and experience. The drowning in "This Is a Photograph of Me" can be read as figuring the submersion of female selfhood within patriarchal culture.

Recent scholarship has connected the poem to contemporary visual culture and theories of the gaze. Bouson (2010) situated Atwood's treatment of visibility within feminist discussions of how women are seen, objectified, and rendered invisible within patriarchal regimes of looking.

### 3. Methodology

This research employs close textual analysis as its primary methodology, attending carefully to the poem's language, imagery, structure, and rhetorical strategies. The analysis is informed by feminist literary criticism, which examines how gender shapes representation and experience, and by poststructuralist theory, which questions assumptions about stable meaning and identity.

The primary text utilized is "This Is a Photograph of Me" as published in *The Circle Game* (1966) and subsequently collected in *Selected Poems 1965–1975* (1976). Secondary sources include critical editions of Atwood's poetry, scholarly monographs on Canadian and feminist literature, and peer-reviewed articles addressing photography, gender, and representation.

The analysis proceeds by first examining the poem's opening section and its treatment of the photograph as representational object. Subsequent sections analyze the revelation of the speaker's drowning, the poem's structural division, and its implications for understanding identity. The conclusion evaluates the poem's significance for feminist poetics.

## 4. Analysis and Discussion

### 4.1 The Photograph as Representational Problem

The poem opens with a matter-of-fact declaration that immediately establishes the tension between assertion and uncertainty:

- 1 "It was taken some time ago.
- 2 At first it seems to be
- 3 a smeared print: blurred lines and grey flecks
- 4 blended with the paper;"

The opening line's past tense ("was taken") and vague temporality ("some time ago") introduce instability from the outset. The photograph, supposedly a record of a specific moment, is distanced and uncertain. The subsequent description emphasizes obscurity: "smeared," "blurred," "grey flecks." Rather than clarity, the photograph offers confusion.

The phrase “At first it seems to be” introduces the possibility of changed perception—what seems true initially may prove false upon closer examination. This prepares for the poem’s later revelation while establishing a hermeneutic of suspicion regarding visual representation.

The description continues with gradual emergence of recognizable forms:

5 “then, as you scan  
6 it, you see in the left-hand corner  
7 a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree  
8 (balsam or spruce) emerging  
9 and, to the right, halfway up  
10 what ought to be a gentle  
11 temporary slope of a hill,”

The landscape emerges piece by piece through the viewer’s active “scanning.” Objects are identified tentatively: “a thing that is like a branch,” “part of a tree,” “what ought to be... a slope.” This hesitant language emphasizes the interpretive work required to construct meaning from visual data. The viewer does not passively receive information but actively produces interpretation.

The parenthetical “(balsam or spruce)” further underscores uncertainty. Even when an object is identified as a tree, its specific identity remains undetermined. This attention to the limits of visual knowledge anticipates the more radical uncertainty to come.

#### 4.2 The Revelation of Drowning

The poem’s central turn occurs with a typographical break—a space on the page that separates the description of visible landscape from the revelation of invisible presence:

12 “(The photograph was taken  
13 the day after I drowned.”

The parenthesis creates a sense of aside or afterthought, as if this crucial information is supplementary rather than central. Yet the content is anything but supplementary: the speaker is dead, drowned, and the photograph was taken after this death. Everything that precedes this revelation must now be reread in light of this knowledge.

The statement “the day after I drowned” combines the documentary precision of photography (“the day after”) with the impossibility of posthumous speech. The speaker narrates from beyond death, describing a photograph taken after she ceased to exist as a living presence. This paradox establishes the poem’s central concern with presence and absence, visibility and erasure.

The speaker continues:

14 “I am in the lake, in the center  
15 of the picture, just under the surface.”

The speaker claims presence (“I am in the lake”) while acknowledging invisibility (“just under the surface”). She is “in the center of the picture”—the most prominent position—yet entirely unseen. This spatial configuration embodies the paradox of female identity that the poem explores: centrality coexists with invisibility.

### 4.3 The Conditions of Visibility

The poem’s final lines articulate the conditions under which the speaker might become visible:

16 “It is difficult to say where  
17 precisely, or to say  
18 how large or small I am:  
19 the effect of water  
20 on light is a distortion”

The speaker cannot specify her location precisely or determine her own dimensions. Water distorts light, making accurate perception impossible. This distortion operates as a figure for the conditions that prevent female identity from being clearly seen or accurately represented.

The phrase “how large or small I am” suggests not merely physical size but significance—how much the speaker matters, how much space she occupies in the world’s attention. The uncertainty about dimensions reflects uncertainty about value and importance.

The poem concludes:

21 “but if you look long enough,  
22 eventually  
23 you will be able to see me.)”

The final promise offers qualified hope. Visibility is possible, but only with sustained effort (“look long enough”), patience (“eventually”), and active engagement. The viewer must work to see what the photograph does not readily reveal. The closing parenthesis, matching the opening of this section, completes the aside while emphasizing its separateness from the “official” content of the photograph.

### 4.4 Structure and the Dialectic of Visibility and Erasure

The poem’s two-part structure embodies its thematic concerns. The first section presents what is visible: the landscape, the recognizable forms that emerge with scanning. The second section reveals what is invisible: the drowned speaker beneath the surface. This division enacts the dialectic of visibility and erasure that constitutes the poem’s central concern.

The typographical space between sections represents the surface of the water—the boundary between what can and cannot be seen. Crossing this space, the reader moves from the visible world to the invisible, from conventional representation to its unseen remainder.

The contrast between the two sections extends to their grammatical mode. The first section is descriptive and impersonal, presenting objects without a clear subject position. The second section is intensely personal, centered on “I” and addressing “you” directly. The emergence of the first-person subject coincides with the revelation of that subject’s death and invisibility.

#### **4.5 Feminist Dimensions: Female Visibility and Erasure**

Reading the poem through a feminist lens illuminates its treatment of specifically female experiences of visibility and invisibility. The drowned woman beneath the photograph’s surface can be understood as a figure for women’s position within patriarchal representation: present but unseen, central but overlooked, existing yet effaced.

The photograph, as a technology of representation, has historically been implicated in the construction and control of female images. Women have been objects of the camera’s gaze, positioned as spectacles for male viewing pleasure. Atwood’s poem reverses this dynamic: the female subject speaks from within the photograph, asserting presence despite visual absence.

The drowning itself carries symbolic weight. Water has long been associated with femininity, and drowning with female death and silencing—from Ophelia to the countless drowned women of Victorian literature and art. By giving voice to a drowned woman, Atwood recuperates a silenced figure, allowing her to speak from and against her erasure.

The demand “if you look long enough... you will be able to see me” articulates a feminist imperative: the requirement that viewers work to perceive what patriarchal representation obscures. Female presence is not automatically visible; it must be sought, attended to, recognized through sustained effort. The poem thus positions visibility as an ethical achievement rather than a passive reception.

#### **4.6 Identity Between Presence and Absence**

The poem ultimately presents identity as existing in the tension between visibility and erasure rather than as a stable, fully present entity. The speaker is neither simply present (she is drowned, invisible, beneath the surface) nor simply absent (she speaks, claims location, demands recognition).

This understanding of identity resonates with poststructuralist theories that challenge the notion of a unified, fully present subject. Identity, in this view, is constituted through difference and deferral rather than self-identical presence. The speaker of Atwood’s poem embodies this theoretical insight in poetic form.

Yet the poem does not simply accept erasure as inevitable. The final lines insist on the possibility of visibility, even if qualified and difficult. Identity may be unstable and partially effaced, but it is not entirely lost. The poem holds open the possibility of recognition, connection, and understanding despite the distortions that complicate representation.

## 5. Conclusion

This analysis has demonstrated that Margaret Atwood's "This Is a Photograph of Me" explores identity through the dialectic of visibility and erasure, presenting the female subject as simultaneously present and absent, demanding recognition while acknowledging the conditions that render her invisible.

The poem employs the photograph as a figure for the problems of representation. Rather than transparently recording reality, the photograph in Atwood's poem obscures, distorts, and conceals. The visible landscape that emerges through scanning proves to be only the surface; beneath lies the drowned speaker, invisible yet insistent.

The poem's feminist dimensions emerge through its treatment of female presence and absence. The drowned woman beneath the photograph's surface figures the position of women within patriarchal representation: present but overlooked, speaking but unheard. By giving voice to this effaced figure, Atwood challenges the conditions that produce female invisibility while insisting on the possibility of recognition.

Identity in the poem exists neither in full presence nor complete absence but in the tension between visibility and erasure. The speaker persists despite drowning, claims presence despite invisibility, and promises eventual recognition despite distortion. This understanding of identity challenges both essentialist assumptions about stable selfhood and nihilistic acceptance of complete erasure.

Future research might situate this poem within Atwood's broader exploration of female identity, examining how works such as *Surfacing*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and later poetry collections develop similar concerns with visibility, erasure, and the conditions of female subjectivity. Additionally, theoretical engagement with contemporary discussions of photography, digital representation, and visual culture might illuminate the continuing relevance of Atwood's early poetic meditation.

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