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**IRONY, PARODY, AND POWER IN THE REWORKING
OF THE TRADITIONAL LOVE LYRIC
IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *POWER POLITICS***

BA thesis

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how Margaret Atwood's *Power Politics* reworks and challenges the conventions of the traditional love lyric through irony, parody, and representations of gendered power dynamics. The literature review establishes the historical conventions of love lyric traditions and outlines previous critical approaches to *Power Politics*. The empirical section consists of literary analysis of selected poems, focusing on language, imagery, tone, and structure to demonstrate how Atwood dismantles romantic ideals and exposes intimacy as shaped by conflict, domination, and emotional instability. The analysis concludes that *Power Politics* remains formally connected to the love lyric tradition while simultaneously subverting its assumptions about love, unity, and emotional fulfilment.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, *Power Politics*, love lyric, irony, parody, power dynamics

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INTRODUCTION

The Canadian writer Margaret Atwood's *Power Politics* (2018), first published in 1971, is well known as an anti-romantic and anti-lyrical work, often regarded as containing shocking and even repellent poetry. Considering the “anti-romantic” and “anti-lyrical” stance the collection holds, it can be claimed that Atwood actively reworks what would be considered the conventions of the traditional love lyric. Although *love poetry* can broadly refer to all poetry concerned with love, the traditional love lyric has been associated with such conventions as idealisation, (emotional) unity, praise, and harmony. These characteristics have existed for thousands of years and remain relevant in modern times. Moreover, they were shaped and developed over the centuries by many important literary figures and schools. These conventions can be pinpointed by examining different pieces of literature and identifying the traditions that can be derived from them alongside with the authors who have established these traditions in the past or engage with them in the present. Among many scholars who have explored the conventions of traditional love lyric are Dubrow (1995) and Bryson and Movsesian (2017), whose studies this thesis relies on.

Not only does Atwood rework the traditional love lyric, but she also disparages the entire arc of the romantic relationship archetype and the clichés that accompany it. This is where gender and power issues emerge. While it is possible to approach the subversion of the traditional love verse and gendered power individually, it is also important to look at them together, as Nischik (2009: 7) says, “In an antiromantic, uncompromising, highly analytical stance, [Atwood] superimposes the critical code of gender politics over the idealistic code of romantic love.” This proposes the idea that Atwood systematically subverts the ideals of heterosexual relationships to criticise romantic clichés, through which she exposes the layer of gender power politics. In turn, this leaves room for feminist

readings of *Power Politics*, which scholars have done. For example, Gorjup (2006: 139) reads the collection as the oppression of women by men, adding also the aspect of female “entrapment” by social, cultural and linguistic structures. He continues, saying that love turns into a mask for domination, and love is something that creates and destroys. The victimhood of the women is complicated — she internalises it, creating the victim herself, and becomes the victimiser, so now it is the man who is “locked inside” different cultural representations (Gorjup 2006: 139). The roles do switch, but what Gorjup is implying is that, since the woman internalises the oppression and victimhood, she then mirrors and reenacts the same violence, but is overtaken by guilt instead of being empowered. This suggests that gendered power in *Power Politics* is not fixed but rather circulatory, destabilising clear distinctions between victim and aggressor.

What Ostriker (1984: 486) calls “a quintessential dissection of the modern love affair as power struggle” is a significant playground for Atwood to deploy her distinctive humour and irony, proposing that *Power Politics* can also be analysed by focusing on shifts in tone and on how meaning is destabilised in the poems. Dvořák (2021: 132) proposes a key idea here: irony is not invariably humorous, but Atwood likes to blend irony with humour, especially through counter-expectation. In *Power Politics*, this technique is particularly significant because expected expressions of love are interrupted and turned into violent images and shocking outcomes.

In the centre of the book is a romantic relationship between a man and a woman. Many critics agree that the “I” in the poems is a female addressing the male “you.” A parallel can be drawn between the one-sided dialogue in the poems and how the sides were referred to in traditional love lyrics — the Lover and the Beloved (Bryson and Movsesian 2017). The poetry collection contains 45 poems and is divided into three sections, each

section introduced by a four-line epigram at the bottom of the right-hand corner. Grace (1980: 55) gives insight into the sequence of the sections and how they function:

There is little sense of development or progression through the three parts; things remain as bad as they began. We simply look at events from different perspectives. Nevertheless, some syllogistic conclusion to the sense of predominantly static situation exists: given the violence of part one and the obtuseness and prevarication of part two, one forgets how to live; one dies. An undeniable aspect of the horror arises, in fact, from the seemingly irrefutable logic of the syllogism form. (Grace 1980: 55)

By Grace's syllogism idea, part one expresses violence, part two dullness and denial, and part three is the conclusion, that is, the inability to live, so death. Even though the progression feels static, it leads to an inevitable and logical endpoint. The impact of this structure lies in the "seemingly irrefutable logic" that turns the relationship into a system of power and destruction rather than a progressive or redeeming romantic narrative. Talking specifically about the poems, very few have titles, and we can see the sequence reveal itself in how and which poems are titled. For example, the first titled poem, "He reappears," comes right after the opening epigram, and the last poem in the collection, "He is last seen," insinuate this narrative frame of an unstable and maybe even cyclical relationship (Ostriker 1984: 487). Instead of development, there is repetition.

The opening quatrain is one of Atwood's most frequently discussed poems in the collection, as the lines "you fit into me / like a hook into an eye // a fish hook / an open eye" turn romantic discourse into a shocking and disturbing image. The layers of the poem can be interpreted in different ways. For example, Ostriker (1984: 487) describes it as "a shockingly perfect example of the female victimization," and notes how it turns from "romantic cliché to domesticity to horror." Ostriker suggests that, at first, it appears to be a love poem, but then it suddenly shifts from a romantic image to violence and the grotesque. The woman is the passive victim or the "eye", the man is the "hook" that harms and penetrates, so love becomes violence and domination. Onley (1974: 21) supports this approach, even though she delves more into the sexual innuendo of the lines, saying that because of the erotic sadomasochistic love, the female's sight is annihilated and her self is

lacerated. Somacarrera (2000: 135) seems to approach this from another angle — there is not just the victim and the aggressor, but both are a part of a destructive pair, causing harm to each other while also being dependent on each other.

While scholars have discussed *Power Politics* as an anti-romantic and parodic literary work, few have examined these approaches explicitly through the lens of traditional love poetry and how the motifs of violence and irony engage with such conventions. Therefore, this thesis aims to examine how *Power Politics* engages with and challenges the conventions of the traditional love lyric. I argue that Atwood uses irony and parody to methodically dismantle the conventions of the traditional love lyric, revealing the power dynamics of gender and the subversion of the assumptions ingrained in romantic discourse, specifically in heterosexual relationships. To support my claims, I have closely analysed five poems from *Power Politics*, with particular focus on language, imagery, tone, and structure. More attention is paid to how elements in traditional love verse are undermined, and how, in turn, these observations relate to questions of power and gender.

The thesis is divided into two sections: literature review and empirical study. In the literature review, I will establish the theoretical background by organising key literary studies to understand the conventions of romantic poetry and why exactly these traditions matter for analysing Atwood's poetry collection. I will also delve into feminist readings of *Power Politics* and, finally, into previous scholarship on Atwood's use of irony and parody to challenge traditional love lyric conventions. The second part of the thesis will draw on the theoretical work to show exactly how Atwood dismantles the romantic discourse through parody and irony. This section is divided into six subsections: the first five focus on the literary analysis of selected poems, and a final subsection that draws together the main patterns identified in the analyses.

1. THE LOVE LYRIC TRADITION AND THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF *POWER POLITICS*

Margaret Atwood's *Power Politics* has been widely recognised as a poetry collection concerned with gendered power dynamics and anti-romantic themes, challenging conventional representations of love and intimacy, as Zwicky (2018: ix–x) notes. Critics (e.g., Somacarrera 2000, 2006; Benton 1990) have frequently described the work as fragmented, confrontational, and deliberately unsettling, particularly in its refusal to present love as harmonious or emotionally reassuring. This literature review aims to discuss the traditional love lyric and its conventions, and to provide critical context for the thesis on *Power Politics* by presenting and organising key scholarly perspectives on the collection. It focuses on Atwood's use of irony and parody, as well as the feminist approaches that link romantic discourse to questions of power and gender. By defining these debates, the literature review establishes the theoretical and critical framework through which the thesis will analyse how *Power Politics* engages with and challenges romantic lyrical conventions.

1.1. The Traditional Love Lyric, its Conventions and their Relevance for Atwood's Poetry

We can trace the roots of love poetry back to biblical times, with the Bible containing what Linafelt (2002: 326) calls “the only example of erotic literature” in the Scripture, the Song of Songs. In this poem, two young, unwed lovers discuss each other's bodies, which are the central image in the verses, expressed through metaphors of nature and landscapes, as well as the desire and longing they feel for one another, in alternating voices (Linafelt 2002: 326). For example, the male speaker describes the female through lavish natural imagery: “Your branches are an orchard of pomegranates, of all the choicest

fruits. /.../ You are a spring in the garden, a well of living water¹ /.../” (The Song of Songs 4:13–15). The female figure then responds: “Awake, north wind; come, south wind—breathe upon my garden, carry its spices” (The Song of Songs 4:16). While Linafelt does refer to it as erotic, it is plausible to replace the word ‘erotic’ with ‘love’. Thus, from this observation, it is possible to draw out a significant convention of the love lyric tradition: the idealisation and praise of a lover, suggesting that it was present in love poetry even before the Common Era. Additionally, the Song of Songs, told in a shared voice, reflects the mutuality between the couple, as both lovers express their desire for each other equally.

As expected, this mutuality continued into the Middle Ages. Bryson and Movsesian (2017: 2) suggest as well that love poetry is characterised by mutuality between the romantic pair, who are not divided by any kind of hierarchy, as both are simultaneously Lover and Beloved, and this kind of love combines all body, emotion, and intellect. This form can also be described by the Occitan word *fin’amor*, which was used by troubadour² poets in the 11th and 12th centuries to describe passionate and mutual relationships — and because such love is already rebellious and in opposition to systems of authority including marriage, patriarchy, and social norms, it is therefore often presented as subversive (Bryson and Movsesian 2017: 2). The social control that love poetry is frequently positioned in opposition to suggests that it prioritises individual desire over institutional authority, as Bryson and Movsesian (2017: 9) put it, “Love rejects the claims of law, property, and custom.” As a result, love poetry commonly serves as a literary space where tensions between individual desire and social constraint are articulated.

¹ All biblical quotations follow the translation provided in Linafelt (2002), unless stated otherwise.

² The troubadours were medieval lyric poets by profession in Southern France, whose period falls between 1070 and 1300. Their main subject in poetry was love, and war was often an inducement to love as a reward to its devotees (Tabor 1929: 357).

Moving slightly further along the timeline, it is worth mentioning one of the most influential figures in love poetry, the Italian poet Francesco Petrarch (1304–1374), who also played an important role in establishing the Italian literary language. However, as Knecht (2011: 235) puts it, “/.../ [the] characteristics as represented in [Petrarch’s] poems — the arresting visual impression of the beloved, the prolonged meditation on her image, the suffering of unfulfilled desire, and so on — were already thoroughly conventional in his time.” This suggests that Petrarch did not invent any love lyric conventions, but he does consolidate them, including the idealisation, concentration on the beloved’s image, and also the suffering caused by unfulfilled desire. This is clarified by Wolosky (2001: 42), who explains that Petrarch’s writings were so influential that one of the primary types of sonnets is actually called the Petrarchan sonnet³, as he perfected it in the 14th century. In fact, a parallel can be drawn between the Italian poet and the troubadours, who were mentioned by Bryson and Movsesian, as Wolosky (2001: 55) explains, the troubadours’ courtly verse directly influenced Petrarch (as well as Dante and their circle). It was addressed to a woman in the court, and its main purpose was to express admiration and adoration for her (Wolosky 2001: 55–56). Dubrow (1995: 2) also points out that the Petrarchan love lyric idealises the beloved through elevated praise and conventional imagery, such as comparing her to a saint or a star. Moreover, she identifies repetition as “the fundamental praxis of Petrarchism,” with its effects ranging from diction to structure to plot, implying that the traditional love lyric can rely on repeated linguistic (rhetorical) and emotional patterns.

Relying on these examples, it is feasible to identify various recurring conventions of the traditional love lyric. After establishing these features, it is also necessary to discuss why they matter for the analysis of Atwood’s *Power Politics*. Firstly, Grace (1980: 54)

³ The Petrarchan sonnet (also called the Italian sonnet) is a poem consisting of 14 lines divided into two divisions: the first of eight lines (octave) and the second of six lines (sestet). Each of these divisions is then bound together by specific rhyming patterns (Wolosky 2001: 41).

argues that the collection exposes love as a form of personal power politics, in which relationships mirror the adversarial layout of war and national politics rather than emotional harmony. This idea can already be seen in the title of one of the poems, “They are hostile nations,” which possibly refers to the relationship dynamic as two nations in conflict. This understanding already challenges the traditional love lyric’s emphasis on unity, balance, and emotional fulfilment, making its conventions particularly significant for Atwood’s work. According to Zwicky (2018: ix), Atwood herself has described the collection as a “non-sonnet sequence,” directly highlighting the book’s relation to, and the departure from, traditional love lyric forms. Similarly, Somacarrera (2000: 147) argues that *Power Politics* remains formally connected to the tradition of love poetry through its use of the lyric ‘I’ addressing a ‘you’, a structure commonly associated with romantic praise and idealisation. However, Atwood deliberately reverses the function of this convention. Whereas traditional love lyrics use rhetorical devices such as parallelism to accumulate admiration for the beloved, *Power Politics* employs the same devices to foreground the ‘you’’s negative characteristics (Somacarrera 2000: 137).

Understanding the conventions is crucial because they encode a historically oppositional archetype of love — the one that Atwood can then subvert or expose. As Bryson and Movsesian (2017: 1–2) argue, traditional love lyric norms are not merely applied stylistic features, but they are also tied to resistance to authority, individual desire versus social control, and emotional freedom versus institutional power. They go on to argue that if we view the idea that conventional love lyrics equal individual desire, we can clearly establish that it opposes the patriarchy, indicating that love is a space of freedom (Bryson and Movsesian 2017: 1–2). Atwood then shows this space as corrupted by power. Finally, analysing love poetry conventions is essential because they shape how literature represents human relationships and mechanisms: love is not insignificant or decorative,

but it is linked to identity, freedom, and resistance (Bryson and Movsesian 2017: 500). This becomes evident in *Power Politics*, where romantic relationships are framed by power, conflict, and control, rather than emotional fulfilment or unity. As a result, identity seems to break down; in terms of freedom, there is none, and resistance is redirected away from social systems and toward the parties themselves.

1.2. Parody as Feminist Critique: Power Imbalance in Romantic Discourse

Margaret Atwood's work has often been approached through a feminist critical lens, with *Power Politics* being the collection that first established her public reputation as a strongly feminist and misandrist writer, largely because it challenged the romantic and social codes that still shaped attitudes toward love in the early 1970s (Hönnighausen 2000: 105). However, Tolan (2007: 2) and Somacarrera (2000: 135) both note that Atwood has rejected the claim that her work, including *Power Politics*, should be read as explicitly feminist. At the same time, Tolan (2007: 2) argues that Atwood's resistance to the label does not prevent her work from being productively analysed within a feminist framework, because "feminism is not a bounded, monolithic theory, it is insupportable to claim that a novel may react and interact with feminist themes and still operate outside of feminism." These arguments make feminist readings of *Power Politics* not only possible, but they also crucially elucidate how to understand the collection's adaptation of the language and assumptions of love. Tolan's (2007: 1–3) discussion of Atwood's relationship to feminist theory helps to clarify how such parody functions as critique rather than personal expression, as she and Hönnighausen (2000: 105) both argue that Atwood's writing should not be read as a direct statement of her personal beliefs or political position, but as a form of critical engagement that both uses and challenges the discourses circulating within its cultural moment.

To get more specific, Hönnighausen (2000: 106) emphasises that the apparent cruelty of poems such as “you fit into me” should be understood as black humour rather than hostility, particularly when read in the context of parody and cultural inversion. He describes Atwood’s use of irony and brutality in love poetry as one of the most original features of *Power Politics*, noting that the collection refuses the sentimental “slush” expected of earlier love lyrics (Hönnighausen 2000: 107). Also, as discussed earlier in relation to Bryson and Movsesian’s idea of romantic discourse being linked to identity, freedom, and resistance, and how, in *Power Politics*, these assumptions are destabilised. This shift can be further confirmed by Blakely (1983: 34), who claims that a man and a woman (in *Power Politics*) do not exist as fixed identities — they exist only in relation to each other — and that both are mutually constructed through interaction. Although roles may shift, as Gorjup (2006: 139) suggests, the foundation of opposition remains intact as it has always been, and this is why this concept is important from a feminist perspective — because power is not settled but repeatedly reproduced through the interaction itself, instead of showcasing the assumption that gendered identities and power positions in romantic relationships are fixed. So, through exaggerated violence, comic imagery, and ironic tone, Atwood exposes the limitations of romantic ideals and reveals how love poetry can mask power struggles within intimate relationships (Hönnighausen: 2000: 106–107). In this way, the collection’s anti-romantic stance becomes inseparable from its feminist critique of romantic discourse.

1.3. Atwood’s Use of Irony and Parody to Challenge the Traditional Love Lyric

According to critics, irony is one of Atwood’s central strategies in *Power Politics*. Benton (1990: 13–14) observes that Atwood’s humour and comic voice are intentional,

inviting the reader to listen and think about the themes and issues of modern-day relationships. The opening epigram, which transforms everyday objects into horrifying images of violence, is a good example of how, as Dvořák (2021: 131) states, Atwood often unsettles readers by creating a distance between what appears to be said and what is actually meant, preventing emotional comfort or reassurance. In the collection, this ironic tone disrupts the expectations of sincerity usually associated with love poetry (Benton 1990: 3–4, 13–14).

Although Somacarrera (2000: 137) does not consistently use the term “parody,” her analysis of *Power Politics* clearly demonstrates how Atwood subverts the conventions of courtly and romantic love poetry. This matches with Benton’s ideas of Atwood’s ironic method, as both critics emphasise how familiar forms are used to unsettle rather than reassure the reader. Somacarrera’s (2000: 135) analysis of syntactic and verbal parallelism demonstrates that Atwood’s poetry can be read through rhetorical devices such as isocolon, chiasmus, and anadiplosis — figures that traditionally convey admiration, but which Atwood uses intentionally to undermine certain discursive fallacies which have been ingrained in heterosexual relationships. According to Somacarrera (2000: 137), “In traditional love poetry, one of the most usual functions of parallelism is defining the beloved by enumerating the positive characteristics which adorn the ‘you’. In *Power Politics*, this convention is subverted by using parallelism to elicit a litany of negative characteristics /.../” So what Somacarrera means is that through this inversion, Atwood parodies romantic clichés by exposing their ideological function, revealing how patterns of admiration can become tools for domination and control within intimate relationships.

In conclusion, the scholarship discussed in this literature review demonstrates that *Power Politics* is closely connected to the tradition of the love lyric while simultaneously

challenging many of its formal conventions. Earlier traditions of love poetry, from the Song of Songs to Petrarchan lyric, commonly emphasise admiration, idealisation, mutuality, and emotional fulfilment. Critics such as Bryson and Movsesian (2017) further suggest that these conventions are connected to broader ideas about freedom, desire, identity, and resistance to social authority. Understanding these conventions is therefore essential for analysing how Atwood reworks them in *Power Politics*. The reviewed criticism also shows that Atwood's collection does not simply reject romantic discourse, but instead uses irony, parody, and inversion to expose its underlying assumptions. Critics such as Somacarrera (2000), Hönnighausen (2000), and Benton (1990) demonstrate how Atwood adapts familiar lyric structures and rhetorical devices while transforming their traditional functions. Rather than presenting love as harmonious or emotionally fulfilling, *Power Politics* frames intimacy through conflict, instability, domination, and emotional fragmentation. As a result, the collection becomes both formally connected to the love lyric tradition and critically opposed to it. This theoretical framework provides the basis for the following analysis, which examines how Atwood's poems subvert and reinterpret traditional love lyric conventions.

2. DISMANTLING OF ROMANTIC DISCOURSE IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *POWER POLITICS*

Having established the framework for traditional love lyric conventions and outlined the previous reception of Atwood's use of irony and parody in her work, this empirical section aims to show the parodic dismantling of the romantic discourse in the poems of *Power Politics* (hereafter *PP*). To achieve this, I have used a literary analysis approach, focusing on language, imagery, and poetic structure, and linking these features to the

conventions of love poetry discussed in the literature review. With this approach, I intend to reveal how irony and parody function within the established tradition of amorous verse.

The empirical study is divided into six subsections, with five of them dedicated to a specific poem, including “you fit into me” and “They are hostile nations.” The poems were selected for their representation of the themes of irony, parody, anti-romantic motifs, and questions of power dynamics in heterosexual relationships. The empirical part concludes with a subsection that draws together the main patterns identified in the analyses of individual poems and considers how they contribute to the collection’s broader critique of romantic discourse and power through irony and parody.

2.1. you fit into me

In the opening epigram of *Power Politics*, Atwood seems to transform intimacy into an image of violence and injury, thereby immediately undermining the idealised vision of love associated with traditional love poetry. The first line, “you fit into me” (*PP*: 1), appears to be the start of a typical love poem. It sounds familiar and comforting, and creates the expectation of closeness and unity between two people. Because of the enjambment of that line, the reader has a brief moment to read it as something romantic, maybe as a vision of two lovers completing each other. However, this expectation is quickly broken as the simile “like a hook into an eye” introduces an image of pain and violence that strongly contrasts with the romantic tone suggested at the beginning. Atwood then makes the image even more disturbing by clarifying it in the second couplet: “a fish hook / an open eye,” removing any possibility of a softer or metaphorical interpretation. Instead of love being shown as mutual or harmonious, intimacy is presented as something that causes injury. It is worth noting that if the first stanza is removed, we are left with an image of a fish hook and an open eye, which already conveys a horrifying picture and

suggests harm. Thus, it is possible to turn this reading around and say that, actually, the first two lines are the clarification. In this case, the poem is not just about romance turning violent, but the romantic language of the first line hiding the violence that was there from the beginning.

While the poem imposes a sexual undertone, the bigger picture can be painted of the victimisation in the poem and how it becomes a central theme throughout the book. The speaker, or the woman, is the victim, and the man is the one causing harm. The same view is shared by Ostriker (1984: 487), who says that the opening lines are a “shockingly perfect example of the female victimization.” However, the poem's cold and detached tone could suggest that the persona is aware of her victim status and acknowledges it with numb directness rather than emotional sentimentality. The overall image suggests an unequal relationship in which one person harms and the other is wounded. In this way, the poem turns a familiar romantic idea on its head and shows how love, rather than being gentle or fulfilling, can be harmful and rooted in power rather than equality.

2.2. My beautiful wooden leader

In “My beautiful wooden leader” (*PP*: 7), Atwood parodies the traditional poetic praise of the beloved by transforming admiration into artificial heroism, authoritarian performance, and emotional emptiness. The speaker calls the beloved “beautiful” and presents him as a leader, a figure who is admired and followed. In traditional love lyrics, this kind of praise usually elevates the beloved and presents them as heroic or ideal. However, Atwood quickly challenges this admiration. The leader is described as “wooden,” with medals that are also “made of wood,” suggesting that his authority and heroism are artificial rather than genuine. This repeated diction strips the beloved of vigour and authenticity, so his authority becomes a hollow, meaningless performance. The

line “fixing it / each time so you almost win” further weakens the praise, implying failure, repetition, and the need to control outcomes instead of true strength or success. What looks like admiration is therefore already ironic.

The poem continues to undermine romantic praise by portraying the beloved as someone who expects protection and special treatment. The line “you long to be bandaged / before you have been cut” suggests entitlement and self-importance, as if the beloved demands care even before suffering. When the speaker describes her love as “the love / of one statue for another,” love is no longer emotional or intimate but stiff, frozen, and lifeless. Statues cannot move or feel, which turns romantic devotion into something static and empty. Rather than celebrating love as dynamic or fulfilling, the poem presents it as immobilising. As the poem develops, the language of love shifts into the language of power and domination. The beloved is addressed as “General,” and the speaker’s body is described as something that is “enlisted” in his “heroic struggle.” This suggests that the relationship is not equal but hierarchical; love language becomes military command language, with one figure commanding and the other being used. Although Piercy (1973: 42) calls the poem the “game of mutual losers admiring each other’s styles,” the poem itself appears to construct a more hierarchical power dynamic, as just mentioned. The speaker repeatedly occupies a position of vulnerability and submission, whereas the beloved is associated with authority, command, and heroism, even though it is portrayed as artificial. In the next stanza, Atwood refers to the cover illustration of the collection. The image of the speaker being held upside down by the ankle, blinded and disoriented, reinforces this imbalance. Instead of protection or tenderness, intimacy becomes a position of vulnerability and loss of control. Overall, the poem could actually be read as mock-heroic, as it is presented in a language of military splendour and heroic admiration to a figure whose authority is repeatedly exposed as artificial. This idea can be clarified by

an argument of Edwards (1998: 32) that mock-heroic depends on a discrepancy between reality and elevated poetic language, and in Atwood's poem, this discrepancy appears in the contrast between the beloved's grand titles — like "leader" and "General" — and the repeated insistence on woodenness, failure, and theatricality.

The final stanzas further expose the false nature of the beloved's authority. The speaker describes "hordes of me now, alike / and paralysed," suggesting that her individuality has been erased in order to serve or admire him. The image of "scattering floral tributes / under your hooves" evokes ceremonial adoration, but the use of "hooves" dehumanises the beloved, making the scene feel brutal rather than celebratory. In the final image, the beloved is "magnificent on your wooden horse," a clear symbol of artificial heroism. The closing line — "the sun sets, and the people all / ride off in the other direction" — suggests abandonment and failure. Despite all the praise and devotion, the beloved is ultimately left behind, exposing the emptiness of the romantic and heroic ideal that the poem initially appeared to celebrate.

2.3. They are hostile nations

Zwicky (2018: xi) argues that power politics compels all parties to adopt antagonistic positions, therefore, drawing on this concept, it is possible to argue that, in "They are hostile nations" (*PP*: 37–38) Atwood rewrites romantic intimacy as a form of political antagonism, replacing the traditional love lyric's ideals of harmony and mutual understanding with images of warfare, surveillance, and survival. The poem is divided into three sections, and the title itself already suggests that the lovers are not emotionally united but separate and opposing. The poem begins by describing a world in crisis, with references to environmental destruction and extinction. In such a context, the speaker suggests that people should be kind, forgiving, and gentle toward one another. The

repetition of “we should” creates a moral or ethical expectation, suggesting what love should be, i.e., kind, forgiving, and mutual. However, this expectation is immediately undermined when the speaker admits that, rather than showing kindness, the lovers “touch as though attacking.” The adversative “Instead” serves as a key turning point, marking the collapse of the poem’s ethical expectation. Also, physical closeness, which is usually associated with intimacy in love poetry, is here described as aggressive and confrontational. Even gestures meant to be loving, such as “the gifts we bring,” are transformed into “implements” and “manoeuvres,” suggesting that affection can easily become a form of strategy or control rather than care.

The poem continues to describe the relationship using the diction of war and surveillance. The beloved is imagined as guarding the speaker like a “target” seen through binoculars, while the speaker holds an “aerial photograph” marking the beloved’s “vulnerable sections.” This imagery turns intimacy into a form of mutual monitoring, where knowledge of the other person functions as a weapon. Love is no longer based on trust or emotional closeness but on negotiation and conditional surrender. The poem continues into the last section; the line “Here there are no armies / here there is no money” strips away all public systems of power and control, but the conflict does not disappear. It is possible that this hints at the very idea of power existing within intimate relationships, not only in public or political spheres. In the final section, the poem suggests that survival, rather than happiness or fulfilment, is the true goal of the relationship. The line “surviving is the only war we can afford” presents love not as a romantic escape from conflict but as an exhausting effort to endure in a hostile world. In this way, the poem rejects traditional romantic ideals and portrays love as a fragile, uneasy truce shaped by power and necessity not harmony.

2.4. You take my hand and

In “You take my hand and” (*PP*: 3), Atwood presents romance as a performance, cliché, and addiction as the poem frames the relationship as a bad cinematic script that the speaker recognises is subpar, but cannot stop watching and/or participating in it. The poem begins with a gesture that is traditionally associated with intimacy and romance. The opening line, “You take my hand and,” creates the expectation of tenderness and emotional closeness, much like conventional love poetry. The enjambment after “and” leads the reader to expect something tender or romantic to follow; however, this expectation is immediately disrupted when the speaker describes the experience as being “suddenly in a bad movie.” Essentially, this is the same technique from “you fit into me,” where Atwood establishes this specific kind of expectation for the reader, only for then to disrupt it. Therefore, rather than presenting love as sincere or meaningful, the poem frames the relationship as artificial, repetitive, and clichéd. The metaphor of the bad movie suggests predictability and emotional emptiness, reinforced by the speaker’s resigned statement, “why am I fascinated,” which reads less like a question (as there is no question mark after it) and more like a statement of reluctant self-awareness.

Throughout the poem, romantic imagery is repeatedly undermined by irony. The lovers “waltz in slow motion,” a scene that initially appears graceful and romantic, but this movement takes place in an atmosphere “stale with aphorisms,” implying that their interactions are filled with worn-out phrases and borrowed emotions. Moments of intimacy feel staged instead of being genuine, and the suggestion that the beloved “climb[s] through the wrong windows” further destabilises the romantic scenario. Climbing through windows can suggest secret affairs, but it is also often associated with teen romance and boys climbing through girls’ windows. Atwood turns this cliché into an image of misdirected intimacy and emotional secrecy by simply adding the word “wrong.”

The beloved is emotionally lost and misguided. This could also hint at the beloved's ex-partners who have been "wrong" for him, as this ties into the next stanza where "other people are leaving" while the persona "always stay[s] till the end." The other people are being framed as his past relationships, so the speaker is aware that she might not be right for him either, but she cannot let go. Here, the poem also seems to shift from irony to emotional exhaustion. The next line, "I paid my money, I / want to see what happens," presents love as an investment that must be endured rather than enjoyed. By the end of the poem, the speaker describes herself as "finally an addict," suggesting that the relationship persists not because it is meaningful but because it is forming a habit. The lingering "smell of popcorn and worn plush" evokes the cheap comfort and residue of the cinematic experience, reinforcing the idea that love, like the bad movie, leaves behind only dull familiarity rather than emotional fulfilment. The whole poem could be read as an extended metaphor or a cinematic conceit: the relationship is a bad movie that the speaker is in, and at the same time, she is watching it. In this way, the poem subverts romantic ideals by presenting intimacy as performance, repetition, and dependency rather than authentic connection.

2.5. He is last seen

As the final poem in *Power Politics*, "He is last seen" (PP: 17) presents the emotional aftermath, loss, and frozen memory of the relationship and reinforces Atwood's dismantling of romantic idealisation. The title itself signals distance and finality, resembling the language of disappearance or loss rather than intimacy. The beloved approaches the speaker "carrying a new death / which is mine and no one else's," suggesting that the relationship has fundamentally altered the speaker's identity and resulted in the loss of her former self. This "new death" is an anti-romantic gift and links

to the “gift-bearer” later on. Instead of bringing emotional fulfilment, love is associated with personal transformation through damage. The beloved’s face is described as “silver and flat, scaled like a fish,” an image that is cold and dehumanising, stripping him of warmth or emotional accessibility. This fish imagery also recalls the fish hook in the collection’s opening epigram, creating a symbolic progression from injury to emotional lifelessness. The abstract idea of emotional death is reified into a curved object containing an ornamental scene, resembling a snow globe, which further emphasises the decorative and frozen nature of romantic memory. Inside the globe, a man and a woman run with their hands joined, and, again, on the surface, this seems romantic, but they are trapped inside the object. This could contrast sharply with traditional love lyric conventions, which portray love as emotionally meaningful and enduring. However, Atwood presents love as something that ultimately becomes static, distant, and destructive. The first lines in section two, “Nothing I can do will slow you / down, nothing / will make you arrive any sooner,” indicate inevitability and emphasise the speaker’s lack of agency, as she can do “nothing” to stop him or bring about faster movement from him. By the end of the poem, the beloved moves “towards firm ground and safety,” while the speaker seems to remain marked by the emotional consequences of the relationship, highlighting the unequal impact of love and reinforcing Atwood’s critique of romantic idealisation.

In this last poem of the collection, it is possible that Atwood retrospectively mentions motifs from the section-opening epigrams. Besides mentioning the fish imagery, the lines “you set one foot / in front of the other,” from this poem can be linked to the second couplet of “Imperialist, keep off” (*PP*: 15): “you walk backwards, / admiring your own footprints.” Similarly, the death imagery may be read alongside the earlier lines “Returning from the dead / used to be something I did well” (*PP*: 39). These references make the final poem not only function as an individual piece, but more in the frame of an

epilogue, a structural closing point for the whole sequence. Earlier motifs of injury, return, movement, and death reappear in altered form, suggesting that the collection does not end in a romantic conclusion but in a culmination of all that has been mentioned above.

2.6. Patterns of Subversion in *Power Politics*

The analyses of the selected poems demonstrate that Atwood's rewriting of the traditional love lyric is not limited to one single technique, but occurs through several recurring patterns. Across the poems, familiar conventions of love poetry, such as romantic union, praise of the beloved, physical intimacy, devotion, and stability are repeatedly introduced only to be subverted. In "you fit into me," the expectation of romantic closeness is transformed into bodily injury; in "My beautiful wooden leader," praise becomes artificial heroism and authoritarian performance; in "You take my hand and," a romantic gesture is turned into a bad cinematic script. These examples suggest that Atwood does not simply reject the love lyric from an external perspective but rewrites it from within, using familiar gestures, only to expose the violence, emptiness, or artificiality beneath them.

Irony and parody are techniques Atwood uses in this process. The poems often begin with language or imagery that appears recognisably romantic, but the tone quickly shifts towards violence, detachment, or absurdity. This ironic reversal is especially evident in the opening epigram, where the phrase "you fit into me" initially suggests intimacy, but is redefined through the violent image of "like a hook into an eye." Similarly, "My beautiful wooden leader" imitates the praise of the beloved, but the repeated diction of woodenness and the mock-heroic imagery expose this praise as hollow. In these poems, parody does not function simply as humour; instead, it becomes a critical method through which Atwood reveals the instability of romantic language itself.

A further pattern is the connection between love and power. The selected poems rarely present intimacy as mutual or harmonies, instead, love is associated with injury, hierarchy, surveillance, and performance. “They are hostile nations” makes this pattern especially clear by translating the relationship into the language of war and diplomacy — the lovers become opposing forces who monitor each other’s weaknesses rather than trusting each other. This confirms the logic suggested by the book's title, *Power Politics*: private relationships are not separate from structures of power but are shaped by them. Romantic love in Atwood’s poems becomes a site where domination, vulnerability, and resistance are negotiated.

These poems also suggest a broader movement within the collection. The opening epigram introduces love as injury, while the final poem presents love as emotional aftermath. The repeated fish imagery, moving from the “fish hook” in the first poem to the fish-like face of the beloved in the final poem, creates a symbolic frame for the sequence. The movement suggests that the collection does not progress toward romantic fulfilment or reconciliation. Instead, it accumulates images of damage, disillusionment, and emotional consequence. In this sense, *Power Politics* rewrites the traditional love lyric by replacing ideals of unity, praise, and permanence with fragmentation, irony, and unequal power.

Overall, the analyses demonstrate that Atwood’s anti-romanticism is not merely thematic, but formal and rhetorical. Her use of enjambment, abrupt shifts in tone, violent imagery, mock-heroic diction, cinematic conceit, and fragmented structure all contribute to the dismantling of romantic ideals. The love lyric is therefore not only rejected, but it is also exposed as a discourse capable of concealing harm. By rewriting these conventions,

Atwood reveals how romantic language can mask power imbalance, emotional dependence, and forms of domination within heterosexual relationships.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined how Margaret Atwood's *Power Politics* reworks and challenges the conventions of the traditional love lyric through irony, parody, and the exposure of gendered power dynamics. The main aim of the thesis was to show that Atwood does not merely reject romantic discourse from the outside, but engages with the love lyric tradition from within by employing its familiar conventions and transforming them into images of violence, artificiality, conflict, and emotional damage. The analysis has therefore focused on how conventions such as romantic unity, praise of the beloved, physician intimacy, devotion, and emotional fulfilment are introduced in recognisable forms, only to be undermined through sudden tone shifts, disturbing imagery, and ironic reversals.

The literature review establishes the conventions of traditional love lyrics. Throughout its centuries-long development, the centre of love poetry has been the expression of desire, especially through the lens of longing and separation, as seen both in the Song of Songs and later in Petrarchan lyric. At the same time, the beloved is frequently idealised and elevated, becoming the object of the poem's attention and repetition, which helps to intensify and sustain the expression of desire. Love is also frequently presented as something that exists outside or in opposition to social and institutional constraints, especially in the tradition of *fin'amor*. Altogether, these conventions form a foundation for understanding the patterns of traditional love lyrics. At the same time, the review showed that *Power Politics* is formally connected to this tradition, particularly through its use of the lyric "I" addressing a "you", sequence-like structure, and its engagement with the

conventions of praise and intimacy. However, critics such as Grace (1980), Somacarrera (2000, 2006), Hönninghausen (2000), and Benton (1990) also suggest that Atwood transforms these traditions into something darker and more unstable. The collection rejects the comfort usually associated with love poetry and instead presents love as a space in which power, domination, resistance, and vulnerability are continually revealed.

The literary analyses of the selected poems in the empirical section confirmed this argument by showing how Atwood repeatedly introduces familiar romantic gestures, only to disrupt them. In “you fit into me,” the opening phrase initially appears to suggest emotional and physical compatibility, but the poem immediately turns this expectation into an image of injury through the comparison to “a fish hook” and “an open eye.” This poem establishes one of the collection’s central strategies: romantic language is allowed to appear for a moment before being violently redefined. In this way, Atwood reveals that the language of unity may conceal harm, penetration, and victimisation. A similar process occurs in “My beautiful wooden leader,” where the traditional praise of the beloved is transformed into mock-heroic parody. The beloved is addressed with elevated terms such as “leader” and “General,” yet these titles are repeatedly undermined by images of woodenness, failure, theatricality, and artificial grandeur. Instead of presenting the beloved as genuinely admirable, the poem exposes the emptiness of the heroic and romantic ideal. The speaker’s body becomes “enlisted” in his struggle, suggesting that the relationship is structured by hierarchy rather than mutual affection. “They are hostile nations” further develops this critique by replacing the traditional language of romantic harmony with political and military imagery. The lovers do not appear as a unified pair, but as opposing forces who attack, negotiate, monitor, and assess each other’s weaknesses. Its war imagery suggests that intimacy is not separate from structures of power, but is itself shaped by them. Love becomes a fragile and exhausting form of survival rather than a source of

fulfilment. In “You take my hand and,” Atwood presents romance as performance and cliché. The opening gesture of hand-holding appears conventional and intimate, but the poem immediately situates the relationship in “a bad movie.” The speaker recognises the artificiality of the situation, yet remains fascinated by it, eventually describing herself as “an addict.” The attraction to the cliché becomes part of the problem: the speaker cannot fully escape the very narrative she criticises. Finally, “He is last seen” serves as a closing point for the sequence, presenting love as aftermath, disappearance, and emotional death. The “new death” the beloved carries suggests that the relationship has produced a lasting transformation in the speaker, not through growth or happiness, but through damage. The poem’s connection to earlier images in the collection creates a circular structure in which violence and emotional consequence frame the entire book. This reinforces Grace’s (1980) argument that the collection does not develop toward improvement, but remains trapped in a destructive logic.

Taken together, these poems demonstrate that irony and parody are central to Atwood’s dismantling of romantic discourse. Irony operates through the gap between expectation and outcome: the reader is led toward a familiar romantic meaning, only for that meaning to be reversed or exposed as false. Parody operates through Atwood’s use of recognisable love lyric conventions, such as praise, intimacy, devotion, and the “I”/“you” structure, which are then distorted and redirected. Atwood’s parody is therefore not simply a comic imitation. It becomes a critical method for testing and exposing the assumptions of the traditional love lyric.

The thesis has also shown that Atwood’s critique is inseparable from questions of gender and power. In *Power Politics*, love is not represented as a private refuge from social or political conflict. Instead, the private relationship becomes one of the places where power is most visible. The poems repeatedly show intimacy as shaped by

domination, submission, surveillance, dependency, and resistance. Gendered roles are present, but they are not always stable or simple: the roles of victim and aggressor can shift, and power circulates between the dynamic rather than permanently belonging to one side. This instability makes the collection more complex than a straightforward rejection of men or romantic love. Atwood's poems expose the structures through which romantic discourse can produce unequal relations and emotional harm.

In conclusion, *Power Politics* presents love not as harmony, fulfilment, or escape, but as a field of conflict in which language itself becomes unstable. Through irony and parody, Atwood dismantles the traditional love lyric and reveals the power relations hidden beneath romantic ideals. The collection's refusal of closure, comfort, and reconciliation is therefore central to its critique. By not offering a renewed vision of love, *Power Politics* leaves the reader with fragmentation, repetition, and damage. This unresolved ending is precisely what makes the collection powerful: it forces the reader to confront the violence and instability that may exist beneath the most familiar forms of romantic expressions.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Kaisa Kriisa

Irony, Parody, and Power in the Reworking of the Traditional Love Lyric in Margaret Atwood's *Power Politics*

Iroonia, paroodia ja võim traditsioonilise armastuslüürika ümberkirjutuses Margaret Atwoodi teoses „Jõupoliitika“

Bakalaureusetöö

2026

Lehekülgede arv: 33

Annotatsioon:

Käesolev bakalaureusetöö uurib, kuidas Margaret Atwoodi esimest korda 1971. aastal avaldatud luulekogu „Jõupoliitika“ kasutab irooniat ja paroodiat traditsioonilise armastuslüürika ümberkirjutamiseks ja lammutamiseks. Töö keskendub sellele, kuidas Atwood õõnestab konventsioone, nagu idealiseerimine, romantiline ühtsus, vastastikkus ja armastatu ülistamine, tuues nende alt esile vägivalla, võimusuhted, emotsionaalse killustatuse ja konfliktid.

Töö eesmärk on analüüsida, kuidas luulekogu suhestub traditsioonilise armastuslüürika tavadega ning kuidas Atwood kasutab irooniat ja paroodiat romantilise diskursuse destabiliseerimiseks. Samuti uurib töö, kuidas kogus kujutatakse heteroseksuaalseid suhteid võimu ja domineerimise kaudu.

Bakalaureusetöö teoreetiline osa käsitleb traditsioonilise armastuslüürika kujunemist ja selle peamisi konventsioone, toetudes näiteks Ülemlaulule, trubaduuriluulele ja Petrarca traditsioonile. Lisaks antakse ülevaade varasemast kriitikast Margaret Atwoodi loomingus, eriti „Jõupoliitika“ kohta, keskendudes iroonia, paroodia ja feministliku kriitika käsitlusele.

Empiirilises osas kasutatakse kirjandusliku analüüsi meetodit viie luuletuse analüüsimiseks: “you fit into me,” “My beautiful wooden leader,” “They are hostile nations,” “You take my hand and” ja “He is last seen.” Analüüs keskendub kujundikeelele, toonile, struktuurile ja poeetilistele võtetele, mille kaudu Atwood traditsioonilise armastuslüürika konventsioone ümber kujundab ja õõnestab. Viimane alajaotis võtab kokku analüüsides tuvastatud peamised mustrid ja käsitleb, kuidas need mustrid panustavad kogumiku laiemasse romantilise diskursuse ja võimu kriitikasse iroonia ja paroodia kaudu.

Töö tulemusena selgub, et Atwood ei hülga armastuslüürika traditsiooni täielikult, vaid kasutab selle tuntud vorme ja kujundeid nende destabiliseerimiseks. Romantiline lähedus muutub vägivallaks, armastatu ülistamine muutub tühjaks ja kunstlikuks ning intiimsus seostub kontrolli, sõltuvuse ja konfliktiga. Seega näitab „Jõupoliitika“, et romantiline keel ei ole neutraalne, vaid võib varjata võimusuhteid ja emotsionaalset lõhestumist.

Märksõnad: Margaret Atwood, Jõupoliitika, armastuslüürika, iroonia, paroodia, võimusuhted

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