

This Is a Photograph of Me



SUMMARY

The speaker begins to describe an old photograph from many years ago. The speaker notes that, upon first glance, the image appears blurry, all of its fuzzy shapes mingling on the photo paper.

The speaker then guides the reader through the photograph, first pointing out a fragment of an evergreen tree that creeps into the frame from one of its left corners. To its right is an incline, which the speaker says should be gradual. Halfway up the incline is a little house whose weight is supported by a wooden frame.

The speaker describes the background of the image, drawing the audience's attention to a lake, behind which sit short hills.

The speaker claims, in a parenthetical statement, to have drowned on the day before the photograph was taken.

The speaker points the audience back towards the lake at the center of the photo, where the speaker lies lifeless right beneath its surface.

The speaker explains that it is hard to make out the corpse's form—its exact size and position—because light reflects off of the water, warping the body's appearance.

However, the speaker maintains that if the audience contemplates the photo for a while, they will be able to recognize the speaker.

cloudiness, using descriptors like “smeared,” “blurred,” and “blended.” The speaker goes on to point out one corner of the photograph, from which a tree emerges. In doing so, the speaker subtly hints that one's understanding of history materializes based on how that history is presented.

Indeed, the speaker says, “At first it seems to be / a smeared / print,” indicating that history is at least as much based on interpretation of records as it is grounded in raw data. The speaker continues to guide the reader through the image, delineating a slight incline and a humble house in the foreground, beyond which lie a lake and hills. The speaker uses soft language to describe the scene, such as “gentle slope,” “small frame house,” and “low hills.” As a result, the scene appears quaint and calm.

This tranquility disappears, however, as it is revealed that the image was taken on the day after the speaker died. The speaker urges the reader to look more closely and identify the corpse submerged within the lake, showing that the speaker's experience has been obscured.

The speaker's body is not readily apparent—so obscured, in fact, that even the speaker is unable “to say where / precisely” it is. The speaker's body will “eventually” emerge only after an extended period of intent observation, indicating that the ugly, complicated realities of the past are harder to discern than glossy, oversimplified narratives.

The speaker also calls the reflection of light off of the lake “a distortion,” suggesting that the photograph misrepresents the scene that it captures. This “distortion” makes the speaker unsure of “how large or how small I am,” signaling that the suffering of “small” or disenfranchised people is easy to write off as insignificant to history.

Moreover, parentheses surround the revelation that the speaker is pictured, indicating that this information could easily be left out. As such, they imply that the speaker's experience of events is seen as secondary or insignificant. Indeed, the speaker has no input into the photo's composition, twice saying passively that it “was taken.” Therefore, without this easily-excisable commentary, the speaker's perspective is entirely absent.

By uncovering multiple truths contained in the photograph, the speaker reveals that historical narratives are often simplified and exclusionary, shaped by whoever is recording them. As a result, the experiences of marginalized people are often erased from prevailing histories. Still, the speaker's form is at the “center” of the photograph, “just under the surface,” suggesting that such obscured stories are central to understanding the past and *can* be accessed.

The poem itself is an example of this—it opens Atwood's *The*



THEMES



HISTORY AND ERASURE

The speaker of the poem describes a photograph, first presenting the whole, blurry image and then calling the reader's attention to various details within its quaint landscape. However, about halfway through the poem, it is revealed that the speaker's lifeless body is also pictured, barely perceivable. As the photo's narrative becomes increasingly dark and complex, the speaker exposes the limitations of recording history. It requires simplification, the poem implies, centering certain experiences as others fade and effectively resulting in the erasure of those with less power.

After presenting the reader with a vague image, the speaker points out specific features and a picturesque scene begins to take shape. This initial scan of the photograph reflects the ease with which documents can be used to fabricate an uncomplicated version of past events.

When first introducing the picture, the speaker emphasizes its

Circle Game, which amplifies and immortalizes female perspectives long subsumed under male-dominated histories. Thus, “This Is a Photograph of Me” vocalizes the experiences of those who feel shut out of their own histories and indicates that the poems to come will illuminate such truths.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-26



THE SUBJECTIVITY OF TRUTH

Throughout the poem, the speaker provides commentary on the photograph and calls attention to particular details, shifting the reader’s understanding of what the photograph represents. By providing multiple readings of the photograph and calling the reliability of even the speaker’s own interpretation into question, the speaker reveals that one’s understanding of the “truth” is always subjective.

As the speaker describes the image, the reader’s understanding of what it depicts continuously changes, revealing that even “objective” documents like photographs can be interpreted in many ways. Initially, the image is hazy and difficult to make out—little more than “blurred lines and grey flecks / blended with the paper.” This description of the photograph as a “smeared print” is highly abstract and emphasizes the lack of clarity with which it presents its subject.

The speaker then guides the reader through a more detailed analysis of the photograph, using directional language (“in the left-hand corner,” “in the background”) to point out specific forms. The speaker identifies “part of a tree” and “a small frame house” that sits on a slope, as well as “a lake” and “some low hills.” As such, a scenic natural landscape takes shape.

The speaker’s use of simple, understated language projects a quaint and benign image. However, the atmosphere shifts suddenly when the reader learns that “the photograph was taken / the day after [the speaker] drowned.” The speaker draws attention back to the lake, which is now regarded as the resting place of the speaker’s corpse. As such, the reader is presented with three distinct interpretations of the photograph.

Though the speaker provides a detailed, nuanced analysis of the photograph, many aspects about it remain unknown, demonstrating that the “truth” it captures is never completely fixed and knowable. The speaker is unable to distinguish if the tree in the corner of the photograph is “balsam or spruce” and says that the picture contains “what ought to be a gentle slope,” never confirming if the slope is, in fact, gradual.

The precise size and location of the body in the lake are also impossible to determine, even by the speaker. The corpse is obscured due to “a distortion” caused by light reflecting off of

the water. The warped image further undermines the photograph’s reliability and contradicts the idea that photographs are “objective,” as they can create optical illusions. Moreover, the account of the photograph as a record of the speaker’s drowning is contained within parentheses, indicating uncertainty about the necessity and significance of the information they contain.

Therefore, rather than providing clarity about what the photograph represents, the speaker’s narration offers several different interpretations and calls the validity of each into question. As such, the speaker illustrates that one’s concept of the “truth” itself is based on perception—something unfixed and easily manipulated.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-26



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*It was taken ...
... print:*

The speaker opens the poem by noting that its subject is fairly old. The reader understands that the speaker is discussing a photograph, given the poem’s title and the verb “taken.” Still, by not explicitly naming the photograph or specifying just how old it is, the speaker introduces vagueness—a quality that will pervade the poem. Indeed, the speaker proceeds to describe the photograph as “smeared,” or smudged and blurry.

The passive verb form “taken” also indicates that some unnamed third party took the photograph, rather than the speaker. To put it another way, this phrasing presents the speaker as a commentator rather than an active force behind the photo’s production. This term will reappear later (see stanza 4) to clarify that the speaker is the *object* of actions carried out by a more dominant force. However, line 1 also establishes the speaker’s authority, as it is made up of one succinct, straightforward sentence, punctuated with an [end-stop](#). As such, the speaker comes across as confident, while the poem’s plain, reserved language projects credibility.

The speaker then points out the image’s apparent blurriness. These lines contain [assonant](#) long /e/ sounds, which emphasizes a few important characteristics of the photo:

At first it seems to be
a smeared

Assonance calls attention to the image’s smudgy appearance, while the verb “seems” signals that there is more to the image than initially meets the eye. Moreover, the words that contain

assonant vowels receive additional stress due to the poem's [meter](#):

At first it seems to be
a smeared

Plus, [consonant](#) /m/ and [sibilant](#) /s/ sounds create a sonic bond between “seems” and “smeared,” reinforcing their relationship, i.e. the photograph *seems* smeared. In fact, sibilance appears throughout this passage, as do consonant /t/ sounds. The contrast between the gentle hiss of words like “seems” and the harsh, percussive nature of words like “at,” “it,” and “to” foreshadows the dark reality lurking beneath the image’s fuzzy surface.

The [enjambments](#) that occur after lines 2 and 3 (“At first it seemed to be / a smeared / print ...”) create suspense as the audience waits to learn what the photograph pictures. Furthermore, the [caesura](#) that bisects line 4 (“print: blurred ...”) spotlights “print,” which indicates that the speaker is referencing a physical object. This word choice also plays up the image’s *production*—the human hand that developed the photograph and might be responsible for its smudginess. Finally, the colon that brings this passage to a close suggests that the remarks to come will explain or expand on this account of the picture.

LINES 4-5

*blurred lines and ...
... with the paper;*

The remainder of [stanza](#) 1 provides more details about the image’s hazy initial appearance—vague forms speckle and streak across the page. The caesura (in the form of a colon) before “blurred” and the line break before “blended” call attention to these descriptors, which are also linked by common sounds. [Assonance](#) and [consonance](#) pervade this passage as a whole. Here is a look at /l/, /ur/, /ay/, and /eh/ sounds in particular:

... blurred lines and grey flecks
blended with the paper;

The chains of echoing sounds bleed from one phrase into the next, flowing together much like the shapes that they describe. [Enjambment](#) also causes line 4 to run into line 5, contributing to the effect. The high concentration of stressed syllables, particularly around the line break, draws the clause out:

... blurred lines and grey flecks
blended with the paper;

The stress-heavy [meter](#) calls attention to the speaker’s out-of-focus characterization of the photograph and causes this image

to linger at the stanza’s conclusion. The [end-stop](#) that terminates line 5 highlights “paper,” which—like “print” in the previous line—foregrounds the photograph’s physicality and production. The end-stop also brings the stanza to a close, neatly containing the preliminary reading of the photograph.

LINES 6-9

*then, as you ...
... or spruce) emerging*

In the poem’s second [stanza](#), the speaker describes the photograph in more detail—specifically noting that there is a tree, what species the speaker is not sure, in the “left-hand corner.” The speaker notably addresses the audience/reader directly here, introducing [apostrophe](#). By engaging with the audience, the speaker builds trust and intimacy between them. More specifically, the speaker says, “as you scan / it, you see,” personally guiding the audience through the photograph and ensuring that they follow along. As such, apostrophe increases the speaker’s credibility—particularly as the photograph’s interpreter—which will become essential when it is revealed that the speaker is actually dead.

Within this stanza, each line breaks in the middle of a clause. The resulting [enjambment](#) creates anticipation, urging the reader to move on to the next line, as in lines 6-7:

then, as you scan
it, you see in the left-hand corner

Consequently, the reader’s gaze rapidly turns from the end of one line to the beginning of the next. The repeated scanning motion that enjambment brings about mimics the speaker’s suggested method for examining the photograph—carefully considering it from corner to corner. Furthermore, the combination of enjambment and [caesura](#) creates a jerky rhythm that starts and stops in the middle of lines. The speaker describes multiple, distinct narratives that arise from the photograph, and the choppiness of the speaker’s cadence can be seen as a reflection of the fragmentation that the poem describes.

Moreover, a caesura draws attention to the word “then,” which receives [metrical](#) stress and opens the stanza. Here is a closer look at the meter in lines 6-8:

then, as you scan
it, you see in the left-hand corner
a thing that is like a branch: ...

Stresses land on “left-hand corner,” focusing the reader’s attention on the first form that the speaker identifies. To this end, “scan,” “branch,” and “hand” contain repeating /an/ sounds—a combination of both [assonance](#) and [consonance](#). They receive metrical stress as well, slowing the reader down

to absorb the first distinguishable image that the speaker identifies. However, the speaker describes it as “a **thing** that is **like** a branch,” maintaining a healthy degree of ambiguity.

Much like the colon that appears in line 4, the caesura in line 8 signals that the following lines will provide more details about the hazy form. It also draws attention to “part,” which receives metrical stress, emphasizing the fragmentation of the forms that appear in the photo. Similarly, parentheses distinguish “(balsam or spruce)” — two varieties of evergreen tree that the speaker is unable to differentiate between — playing up the ongoing unintelligibility of the picture.

The parentheses also focus attention on “emerging,” which appears before a line break, attracting further notice. This term rhymes with “thing,” clarifying the form that the speaker identifies. Likewise, “tree,” which closes out the previous line, rhymes with “see.” As the photograph’s image begins to take shape, manifesting itself in pieces, lines creep across the page like tree branches, stretching out indefinitely due to enjambment.

LINES 10-12

*and, to the ...
... small frame house.*

In this passage, the speaker positions the tree described in the first half of [stanza 2](#) within a wider natural landscape. In line 10, [caesura](#) and [enjambment](#) call attention to this directional language:

and, to the right, halfway up

The speaker carefully orients the audience, urging them to follow along. In this way, the speaker methodically shapes the audience’s *perception* of the photograph by selectively identifying the forms it captures. Further, understated descriptors, such as “gentle” and “small,” convey a peaceful setting.

However, the speaker says that the slope “ought to be ... gentle,” raising doubt about the *actual* mildness of its incline. Surrounded by unstressed syllables, the term “ought” receives [metrical](#) stress, which puts rhythmic force behind it. [Consonant](#) /t/ sounds reappear within this statement, their harsh, percussive quality undermining the serene atmosphere. However, /t/ sounds fade, giving way to consonant /l/ and [sibilant](#) /s/ sounds, which are much gentler:

what ought to be a gentle
slope, a small frame house.

The softness of the repeating sounds in line 12 continues through line 14, restoring the peaceful mood. As the audience will experience later, the tranquil language and sonic mood of these lines will increase the impact of a dramatic shift in

imagery. As stanza 2 comes to a close, the meter features a higher concentration of stresses:

what **ought** to be a **gentle**
slope, a **small frame house**.

The syllables that receive metrical stress are drawn-out, slowing the reader down and calling attention to the house. The descriptor “small” suggests restriction, while “frame” refers to a structure that is supported by a wooden frame, suggesting rigidity. Thus, this image of domestic confinement can be seen as a nod to the feminist themes that run through *The Circle Game*, the collection this poem opens. Following this line of thinking, the slope might represent the suppression of women’s liberties, while the poem itself can be interpreted as an illustration of women’s erasure within male-dominated histories.

In addition to the metrical emphasis that this image receives, its position directly before an [end-stop](#), [line break](#), and stanza break attract the audience’s notice. As such, the “small frame house” lingers in the reader’s mind at the conclusion of stanza 2.

Furthermore, line 12 contains the stanza’s only end-stop. Many clauses — all part of the same sentence — weave throughout the stanza’s lines, punctuated internally with commas, parentheses, and colons. These caesurae set distinct images side-by-side, while enjambment laces them together, coalescing into a natural landscape by the end of the stanza. In this way, the stanza’s syntax mirrors the fragmented manner in which the picture comes together.

LINES 13-14

*In the background ...
... some low hills.*

The poem’s third [stanza](#) describes hills and a lake that sit in the background of the photograph, adding depth to the landscape. These lines also mark the first mention of water, which will become an important symbol. Here, water appears in the form of a lake — placid and unremarkable. Its benign initial presentation will exaggerate the cruelty that it comes to represent.

This [couplet](#) has a simple sentence structure, which gives the reader a reprieve from the complicated syntax that has pervaded the first two stanzas. Furthermore, both of these lines are [end-stopped](#), increasing the statements’ authority as the speaker provides straightforward, concrete descriptions of the photograph. The [caesura](#) in the middle of its second line (“and beyond that, some ...”) adds yet more clarity, focusing the audience’s attention on the images that the speaker lays out.

The gentle, mild language here follows that of the previous stanza, creating continuity. In particular, [consonant](#) /l/ sounds permeate these lines, while repeating sounds within

“background” and “beyond” yield a subtle musicality. Plus, the hills come across as quaint and unassuming due to the descriptor “low.” This stanza contains very few stressed syllables:

In the **background** there is a **lake**,
and **beyond** that, some **low hills**.

In other contexts, the high concentration of short syllables might result in a fast, percussive rhythm. However, in addition to those marked with a caesura and end-stops, there is a natural pause after “background.” As a result, the speaker’s cadence is conversational and understated, rather than dramatically accelerated or drawn-out.

LINES 15-16

*(The photograph was ...
... after I drowned.*

This [couplet](#) represents a stark turning point within the poem, as the audience learns that the speaker is dead. What’s more, the speaker’s corpse has been pictured in the photograph all along. In this moment, water becomes a [symbol](#) of erasure, as it has obscured the speaker’s body. This shocking revelation casts an ominous shadow over earlier readings of the image, especially its characterization as a peaceful landscape, which appears directly before this couplet.

Anticipation mounts as the stanza progresses, intensified by the [enjambment](#) at the end of line 15 (“... taken / the day ...”). The suspense culminates in the stanza’s final word, “drowned,” alerting the reader that the speaker is dead. In addition to building anticipation, the word’s position at the very end of the couplet increases its impact due to the [end-stop](#) and stanza break that follow. This gives the reader a clear pause in which to consider this shocking new information that the speaker is dead. The end-stop also notably punctuates a succinct statement that uses straightforward language and syntax, projecting confidence on the speaker’s part. As a result, the disclosure that the speaker is dead does not compromise the speaker’s credibility.

The dramatic shift in the poem’s tenor is reinforced by the parentheses that distinguish its first and second halves. Parentheses indicate that the information they contain is supplemental. As such, they signal that the speaker’s experience of the moment that the photograph captures is de-prioritized—seen as nonessential to the photograph itself. Indeed, it comes to light only after prolonged consideration of the photograph.

At the end of line 15, enjambment highlights “taken,” which also appears in the poem’s very first line. The term takes on new meaning as the reader learns that, outside of the poem, the speaker has no control over the photograph’s composition and the narrative it seems to present. As such, the passive verb

form (“was taken” as opposed to something like “I took”) stresses the suppression of the speaker’s perspective and agency.

This stanza is the only one in which the speaker actually uses the word “photograph,” which resonates with the title and draws the reader’s attention. Plus, relative to stanza 3, it sees an increase in stresses, which land on keywords:

(The **photograph** was **taken**
the **day** after I **drowned**.)

The [meter](#) also emphasizes the [consonance](#) and [assonance](#) of “taken,” “day,” “drowned,” “photograph,” and “after.” Such effects slow the reader down, adding intensity to the couplet.

LINES 17-18

*I am in ...
... under the surface.*

This third and final couplet explains where the speaker’s body is located within the picture. The speaker provides three separate descriptions of its position, which are connected by [caesurae](#). The lack of conjunctions, or [asyndeton](#), between them creates a pile-up of this repetitive information. As a result, the speaker comes across as insistent, pressing the audience to identify the corpse. The [repetition](#) of “in the” contributes to this effect, as if the speaker is determined to write the body’s presence back “in[to] the” photograph’s narrative. Furthermore, this stanza contains repeating /ur/ sounds:

I am in the lake, in the center
of the picture, just under the surface.

There is also a repeating /uh/ sound within “just under.” Thus, [assonance](#) and [consonance](#) further emphasize the speaker’s whereabouts. Plus, “center,” “picture,” and “under” all follow a [stressed-unstressed metrical](#) pattern, accentuating their sonic similarity.

Several structural elements of this stanza allow the text to reflect its meaning. First, because the speaker’s form is detectable only after prolonged consideration of the photograph, the grim reality that the photo captures physically sits beneath its earlier interpretations, “just under the surface.”

Second, the word “center” subtly suggests that the speaker’s perspective of the lake is crucial, or “central,” to understanding the moment that the photograph captures. Moreover, the stanza’s straightforward syntax and couplet format encourage a comparison with stanza 3, where the lake first appears:

In the background there is a lake,
and beyond that, some low hills.

“Is a lake” resonates with “in the lake,” both of which are

followed by a comma. As such, they reinforce the [juxtaposition](#) set up in stanza 4 between these two starkly different images of the lake. What *appears* to be a placid body of water *actually* conceals a drowned corpse, which the speaker points to emphatically in this stanza. By setting it against a rosy, innocuous earlier portrayal of the lake, juxtaposition exaggerates the horror of this latter image.

LINES 19-23

*It is difficult ...
... is a distortion*

The poem's penultimate [stanza](#) clarifies that, while the speaker points to the lake as the general location of the corpse, it is impossible to determine the body's exact size or where it is more "precisely," or specifically/exactly. Fittingly, the straightforward sentence style featured in the three couplets that precede this stanza dissipates. The return to long, convoluted sentence structures can be seen as a reflection of the body's ambiguous form.

Within the stanza, this complicated sentence is broken up by [enjambment](#) as well as one [end-stop](#) ("... I am:" in line 21) and one [caesura](#) (after "precisely," in line 20). The [line breaks](#) that occur in the middle of clauses create anticipation, causing the reader's gaze to shift from the end of one line to the beginning of the next. Consequently, the reader's line of sight follows a repeated scanning motion, an effect that also appears at the poem's outset. Thus, enjambment causes the audience to survey the text in the same manner that the speaker encourages them to examine the photograph and recognize the speaker's body.

Interestingly, the one caesura that appears in this stanza is grammatically unnecessary. However, it distinguishes the word "precisely," playing up the difficulty of pinpointing the speaker. It also calls attention to "or," which is repeated in the next line. Its [repetition](#) is emphasized by the fact that the two "ors" are physically stacked one on top of the other:

precisely, or to say
how large or small I am:

The word is also picked up in the sole stressed syllable within [distortion](#), calling attention to this word, which concludes the stanza. The line break that follows is also the only enjambed stanza break, creating anticipation and driving the reader towards the poem's finish:

on light is a distortion
but ...

Similarly, the phrase "to say" is repeated, the second appearance landing before an enjambed line break and directly beneath the first "to say," accentuating the phrase:

It is difficult to say where
precisely, or to say
how ...

Its repetition is again grammatically unnecessary, but it provides clarity. Additionally, it plays up the speaker's lack of a voice, which can be seen as a lack of power over the narrative that the photograph presents. In other words, the speaker has "no say"—although the photograph is a record of the speaker's death, it suppresses the speaker's perspective of the moment it captures. Moreover, the speaker's inability "to say / how large or small I am" can be interpreted as the speaker grappling with the significance of that perspective, or the speaker's place in history more broadly.

Furthermore, [assonant](#) short /i/ and [consonant](#) /t/ sounds appear in line 19:

It is difficult to say where

The shortness of the /i/ sounds gives them a percussive quality, which is also present in the hard /t/ sounds. As a result, the stanza's opening has a harsh, jarring sonic atmosphere, reflecting the strain of identifying the speaker's body. Plus, the /r/ sounds that reappear in stanza 4 pervade this passage, creating a growling effect that sustains the hostile mood ("where," "precisely," "or," "large," etc.)

Finally, water, which [symbolizes](#) erasure in the poem, makes its final appearance in line 22. The speaker says that its "effect ... on light is a distortion." Presumably, the speaker means that light reflects off of the water, warping the body's representation in the photograph. The colon that proceeds this statement also suggests that the distortion obscures the body, making it difficult to make out. However, the speaker posits *water* as the active force, while *light* is distorted. Light is a longstanding symbol of truth, purity, and clarity. Therefore, the unconventional phrasing implies that historical erasure clouds essential truths, misrepresenting the past.

LINES 24-26

*but if you ...
... to see me.)*

In the final [stanza](#), the speaker insists that the corpse is perceptible, "if you look long enough." The phrases "you look" and "you see" reinforce the [apostrophe](#) introduced in stanza 2, calling on the reader to contemplate the image at length. These lines also give way to smooth [consonant](#) /l/ sounds and [assonant](#) long /ee/ sounds:

but if you look long enough,
eventually
you will be able to see me.)

The softness of the /l/ sounds soften the mood as the poem as the speaker offers a method to work around the photograph's ambiguity. The [end-stop](#) that terminates line 24 creates a pause, encouraging the audience to indeed "look long" at what the speaker is describing. The meter here also elongates the line:

but if you look long enough,

The three stresses that land on "look long enough" elongate this phrase, reflecting its meaning—that is, the audience must spend an extended period of time considering the photograph to detect the speaker's body.

The following line, which reads "eventually," is the poem's sole one-word line, attracting attention. It is also [enjambéd](#), lingering out in space, while its separation from the rest of the sentence draws the final lines out. Here is a look at the meter in the next and final line:

you will be able to see me.)

In this reading, the stress on "will" emphasizes that speaker's insistence that the speaker's corpse will come into focus, that it won't remain obscured forever. The first phrase can also be read as "you will" or even "you will," each of which result in a slightly different tone. What is clear in all of these readings, however, is the speaker's belief that the full image, corpse and all, will come into focus if granted enough time and scrutiny. Taken within the broader thematic ideas of the poem, perhaps this is a call for people to more carefully and closely consider the historical narratives with which they are presented, because only they can anyone discern the truth of the past.

The two stresses that land on the final words prolong the poem's conclusion even further. Plus, they draw additional attention to the "see me," driving home the speaker's point that the body is, in fact, perceptible.

The rhymes between "eventually," "be," and "see me" have a similar effect, while also serving as the poem's only [end rhymes](#). Their harmony provides a sense of completion at the poem's conclusion, which is emphasized by the doubly-punctuated end-stop. As such, the speaker leaves the audience with a call to action, urging readers to identify the body within the photograph and write the speaker back into its narrative.



SYMBOLS



THE HOUSE

The speaker points out "a small frame house" in line 12, a seemingly quaint image. However, given the feminist themes in *The Circle Game* (the collection this poem

opens) and Atwood's work more broadly, this house can also be interpreted as a symbol of domestic confinement.

The traditional, expected role of women within society has long been relegated to the domestic sphere, and that was certainly the case in the 1960s, when this poem was published. The speaker's specification that the house is "small" implies restriction, while "frame" denotes a structure supported by a wooden frame, suggesting rigidity. Furthermore, the house is positioned "halfway up / what ought to be a gentle / slope." The inclusion of "ought" could indicate that the audience should be able to identify the slope within the image, but it also suggests that the slope is *not* gentle, but steep. Thus, it can be read as a signifying an unexpectedly difficult "uphill" battle. Overall, then, the house can be interpreted as a symbol of the arduous, restrictive nature of women's expected role within society.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "a small frame house"



WATER

Throughout the poem, water is an obscuring force—something that conceals or hides the full reality of the situation. Water first appears in the form of a lake within a picturesque natural landscape. However, the audience soon learns that it conceals the speaker's lifeless body, which is submerged "just under the surface." The speaker goes on to comment that it is essentially impossible to determine the body's exact size and location—even though it is the speaker's own body.

The body's imperceptibility is attributed to "a distortion" caused by "the effect of water on light." Presumably, the speaker means that light reflects off of the water, warping the body's likeness within the photo. However, the speaker frames water as the distorting force, tampering with light, which is traditionally associated with truth and clarity. In short, water makes the speaker imperceptible to the photograph's viewers. Thus, in the context of the poem's themes, water symbolizes erasure and the distortion of truth.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "a lake"
- **Line 16:** "I drowned"
- **Line 17:** "the lake"
- **Line 18:** "the surface"
- **Line 22:** "water"



LIGHT

Light makes one brief appearance in line 23, where the speaker explains why the body is so difficult to

make out, stating “the effect of water / on light is a distortion.” Among other things, light has long been associated with truth, purity, insight, and clarity. Such an interpretation is consistent with its usage within the poem, as water obscures a critical truth about the image.

It is interesting to note that light plays a critical role within photography, which translates to “drawing with light.” Photographs essentially record the amount of light that various sources reflect or emit over the course of a timed exposure. Thus, the photograph within the poem might be seen as a record that captures the truth of a particular moment in history, as well as the distortion of that truth.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 23:** “light”



POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

In line 6, the speaker begins to indirectly address the reader, who is unable to respond—an example of [apostrophe](#). Openly acknowledging and engaging the audience creates a rapport between the speaker and the reader, building trust.

Furthermore, each “you” statement appears in the context of the audience’s inspection of the photograph—“you scan,” “you see,” “you look,” and “you will be able to see.” As such, the addresses to the audience encourage them to follow along with the speaker’s narration and identify the forms that the speaker points out. As a result, the speaker is able to shape the reader’s experience of the photograph.

Plus, the speaker seems instructive, like an attendant that orients the audience so that they might better understand the image in front of them—almost like an audio guide at a museum, especially given the indifferent tone of the speaker’s language. Thus, apostrophe builds credibility and intimacy, allowing the speaker to shape the readers’ perception of the photograph, as they become reliant on the speaker to explain what it pictures.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-26

ASSONANCE

While this poem isn’t particularly musical, [assonance](#) makes several brief appearances, highlighting keywords and shaping the mood. For example, here’s a look at lines 2-4:

At first it seems to be
a smeared
print ...

The repeating long /ee/ sound occurs on stressed syllables, drawing them out further to create an impactful first impression of the print. [Consonant](#) /m/ and [sibilant](#) /s/ sounds call additional attention to “seems” and “smeared,” firmly establishing that the picture *appears* blurry at first glance. Assonance continues, again aided by consonance, mostly amongst /l/ and /r/ sounds:

... blurred lines and grey flecks
blended with the paper;

The echoing sounds bleed from one word into the next, so that they seem to run together, much like the hazy shapes mingling across the paper. Assonance has a slightly different effect in lines 15-16:

(The photograph was taken
the day after I drowned.

Here, repeating vowel sounds (coupled with consonant /f/ sounds) seem to elongate syllables that receive [metrical](#) stress. As a result, assonance slows the reader down, putting rhythmic force behind the shocking revelation that the speaker is dead and lingering on the gruesome image of a drowned corpse. A similar effect occurs in line 18:

of the picture, just under the surface.

The repeating /uh/ sound, picked up in two instances of “the,” underscores the phrase “just under.” As such, assonance emphasizes that the speaker is shallowly obscured—detectable if one goes slightly beyond a superficial examination of the photograph. Finally, the following line, which marks a new stanza, contains yet another assonance-consonance duo:

It is difficult to say where

The repeating short /i/ sounds are short and therefore percussive, creating a jerky cadence. Moreover, their tone is unpleasant to the ear, which, combined with hard /t/ sounds, creates an unwelcoming sonic atmosphere. The repeating sounds also draw attention to the difficulty of identifying the speaker’s body, due to the photograph’s “distortion” of its form. Consequently, the audience feels the strain of this task.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “seems,” “be”
- **Line 3:** “smeared”
- **Line 4:** “grey,” “flecks”
- **Line 5:** “blended”
- **Line 6:** “scan”
- **Line 7:** “hand”

- **Line 8:** “branch”
- **Line 15:** “photograph,” “taken”
- **Line 16:** “day,” “after”
- **Line 17:** “lake,” “center”
- **Line 18:** “the,” “picture,” “just,” “under,” “the,” “surface”
- **Line 25:** “eventually”
- **Line 26:** “be,” “see me”

CAESURA

A number of [caesurae](#) appear in the poem, largely resulting from long, complicated sentences that break in the middle of clauses throughout. The combination of caesurae and [enjambment](#) results in an erratic cadence, which matches the audience’s ever-changing impression of the photograph as more details about it come to light. Here is a look at both the caesurae and enjambment in lines 8-12:

a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree
 (balsam or spruce) emerging
 and, to the right, halfway up
 what ought to be a gentle
 slope, a small frame house.

Caesurae distinguish the individual things that the speaker identifies—the branch, the tree, the slope, the house—and place them side-by-side. As a result, they create fragmented images that combine in the reader’s mind into a larger visualization of the photograph. This fragmentation reflects the nature of history, wherein many disparate narratives arise from any single record of a moment in time.

Additionally, while parentheses indicate that the information they contain is nonessential, they ironically draw attention to the phrase “balsam or spruce” in line 9. The speaker’s inability to distinguish which kind of evergreen is pictured reveals the photograph’s inability to capture fine details. Thus, the caesura spotlights the limitations of this historical record—the narratives that it puts forward are incomplete accounts of the moment it pictures.

Furthermore, caesurae reinforce the two instances of [repetition](#), first in stanza 5:

I am in the lake, in the center
 of the picture, just under the surface.

Here, repetition emphasizes the speaker’s position within the photograph. The use of [asyndeton](#) creates a pile-up of three descriptions of where the body can be located. As such, the caesurae help orient the audience, encouraging them to identify the speaker’s form. A similar effect occurs in lines 19-20:

It is difficult to say where
 precisely, or to say

In this case, caesura works with the enjambled line breaks to highlight the challenge of locating the speaker. In particular, caesura distinguishes the term “precisely,” which communicates the image’s failure to portray the fine details of the scene it represents. Further, it plays up the repetition of “to say,” stressing the speaker’s lack of voice within prevailing interpretations of the photograph.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** “print: blurred”
- **Line 6:** “then, as”
- **Line 7:** “it, you”
- **Line 8:** “branch: part”
- **Line 9:** “spruce) emerging”
- **Line 10:** “and, to,” “right, halfway”
- **Line 12:** “slope, a”
- **Line 14:** “that, some”
- **Line 17:** “lake, in”
- **Line 18:** “picture, just”
- **Line 20:** “precisely, or”

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) briefly crops up in several places throughout the poem, often in combination with [assonance](#). This device appears in the poem’s first lines, drawing the reader in:

It was taken some time ago.
 At first it seems to be

While [sibilant](#) /s/ sounds are soft and gentle, the tapping, percussive /t/ sounds introduce tension, foreshadowing the disparity between pleasant and disturbing readings of the photograph. Consonant /t/ sounds reappear in the next stanza, particularly in lines 10-11:

and, to the right, halfway up
 what ought to be a gentle

While the speaker claims that the slope “ought to be ... gentle,” the harshness of the consonant sounds suggests that its incline is sharp—another subtle signal that the charming image is not what it seems. Still, the /t/ sounds give way to softer /l/ and /s/ sounds in the lines that follow:

slope, a small frame house.
 In the background there is a lake,
 and beyond that, some low hills.

Therefore, the speaker restores the mild, peaceable

atmosphere, which makes the revelation that follows all the more shocking. Consonant /t/ sounds appear alongside /r/ sounds in the poem's sixth stanza, which describes the difficulty of locating the speaker's body:

the effect of water
on light is a distortion

The repeating /r/ sounds result in a rasping, growling effect, which works with hard /t/ sounds to highlight the negativity latent in the statement—namely that the photograph is so misrepresentative that recognizing the corpse is difficult even for the speaker, to whom it belongs. However, the discordance fades and /l/ sounds become more prominent in the poem's final lines:

but if you look long enough,
eventually
you will be able to see me.)

As a result, the atmosphere softens as the speaker offers a method for correcting the photograph's shortcomings. Elsewhere in the poem, consonance works with assonance to draw the audience's attention to important images and ideas. Here is a look at lines 3-5:

a smeared
print: blurred lines and grey flecks
blended with the paper;

Here, echoing sounds are picked up in nearby words, causing them to blend into one another, much like the hazy forms that they describe. Consonance continues in the next few lines:

then, as you scan
it, you see in the left-hand corner
a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree

Repeating /an/ sounds, reinforced by additional /n/ sounds, create sonic interest that slows the reader down, highlighting the first image that emerges within the photograph. Similarly, /er/ sounds in line 17-18 emphasize the speaker's position within the photograph:

I am in the lake, in the center
of the picture, just under the surface.

Again, growling /r/ sounds suggest that the image's concealment of the speaker is harmful. They also focus the reader's attention on the area where the speaker's corpse lies, aided by assonant /uh/ sounds. As such, the speaker encourages the audience to identify the body and in turn acknowledge the speaker's experience of the scene that the

photograph captures.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "It," "taken," "time"
- **Line 2:** "At," "first," "it," "seems," "to"
- **Line 3:** "smeared"
- **Line 4:** "print," "blurred," "lines," "flecks"
- **Line 5:** "blended"
- **Line 6:** "scan"
- **Line 7:** "see," "hand," "corner"
- **Line 8:** "branch," "part"
- **Line 9:** "balsam," "spruce"
- **Line 11:** "what ought to," "gentle"
- **Line 12:** "slope," "small," "house"
- **Line 13:** "lake"
- **Line 14:** "low," "hills"
- **Line 15:** "photograph"
- **Line 16:** "day," "after," "drowned"
- **Line 17:** "center"
- **Line 18:** "just," "surface"
- **Line 19:** "where"
- **Line 20:** "precisely," "or"
- **Line 21:** "large," "or"
- **Line 22:** "effect," "water"
- **Line 23:** "light," "distortion"
- **Line 24:** "look," "long"
- **Line 25:** "eventually"
- **Line 26:** "will," "able"

END-STOPPED LINE

Many lines within the poem are [end-stopped](#), reinforcing the poem's structure and creating direct, straightforward statements. Both of these effects provide a reprieve from the long, complex sentences that pervade the poem. The first end-stop occurs in line 1:

It was taken some time ago.

This succinct statement of fact, neatly contained within the poem's first line, immediately establishes the speaker's authority. End-stops have a similar result in the poem's three [couplets](#) (two-line stanzas), which mark a shift from pleasant, rural scenery to much darker images. After a very lengthy and complicated sentence, the end-stopped lines ground the reader by punctuating simple, direct announcements, which therefore come across as unwaveringly confident. Here is a look at lines 13-16:

In the background there is a lake,
and beyond that, some low hills.
(The photograph was taken
the day after I drowned.

The candid nature of the statements, strengthened by end punctuation (apart from the third line quoted above), reestablishes the speaker's authority as the audience learns that the speaker is dead—a revelation that might otherwise threaten the speaker's credibility.

The end-stops also reinforce the poem's stanza structure, as they appear right before stanza breaks. In fact, each stanza, aside from stanza 6 ("It is difficult ... distortion"), terminates in an end-stop. The speaker's transitions from one reading of the photograph to the next correspond with stanza breaks (see: stanzas 1 to 2, and then stanzas 3 to 4). Therefore, the end-stops enhance the poem's organization, making it easier to navigate.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ago."
- **Line 5:** "paper;"
- **Line 12:** "house."
- **Line 13:** "lake,"
- **Line 14:** "hills."
- **Line 16:** "drowned."
- **Line 18:** "surface."
- **Line 21:** "am."
- **Line 24:** "enough,"
- **Line 26:** "me.)"

ENJAMBMENT

Most of this poem's lines are [enjambement](#), [breaking](#) in the middle of clauses and sentences. Overall, this builds anticipation and encourages the audience to read on. For instance, here is a look at lines 2-3, which contain the first occurrence of this device:

At first it seems to be
a smeared

The enjambment at the end of line 3 continues to build suspense as the audience waits to discover what the photograph depicts. Elsewhere, enjambment allows the text's form to reflect its meaning, as in lines 6-9:

then, as you scan
it, you see in the left-hand corner
a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree
(balsam or spruce) emerging

Here, enjambment causes the reader's gaze to quickly shift from the end of one line to the beginning of the next, resulting in a repeating *scanning* motion. In this way, the audience surveys the poem in the same manner that the speaker urges them to consider the photograph—thoroughly examining it from corner to corner. Furthermore, these lines creep into the middle of the page from its margins, stretching out in space

indefinitely, much like the "emerging" branches they describe.

Later, "eventually" lingers at the end of line 25, drawing out the poem's final words to reflect the extended period of time it takes to uncover the document's essential truths. The keywords that terminate enjambed lines receive additional emphasis—"center" in line 17 is one example, along with "taken" (line 15) and "distortion" (line 23), the latter of which also occurs directly before a stanza break.

Finally, enjambment works with [caesurae](#) as well as line and stanza breaks to create a choppy rhythm that stops and starts in the middle of lines. The erratic, fragmented sentence structures mimic the distinct images that materialize, which the speaker sets side-by-side to create a larger picture. The choppy cadence can also be seen as a reflection of the fragmented nature of history. As the speaker reveals, there are always many parallel narratives surrounding an individual event.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "be / a"
- **Lines 3-4:** "smeared / print"
- **Lines 4-5:** "flecks / blended"
- **Lines 6-7:** "scan / it"
- **Lines 7-8:** "corner / a"
- **Lines 8-9:** "tree / (balsam"
- **Lines 9-10:** "emerging / and"
- **Lines 10-11:** "up / what"
- **Lines 11-12:** "gentle / slope"
- **Lines 15-16:** "taken / the"
- **Lines 17-18:** "center / of"
- **Lines 19-20:** "where / precisely"
- **Lines 20-21:** "say / how"
- **Lines 22-23:** "water / on"
- **Lines 25-26:** "eventually / you"

JUXTAPOSITION

The speaker guides the reader through the photograph, first constructing a charming, peaceful landscape. However, that landscape is later set against an image of the speaker's lifeless body. There is a sharp [juxtaposition](#), then, between what the photograph seems to depict and what it truly represents from the speaker's perspective.

The first distinct form that the speaker points out is "a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree," speculating about which kind of evergreen it might be and projecting a laid-back, unhurried disposition. The speaker then directs the audience's attention to "a small frame house" sitting upon a "gentle slope." Such mild, understated language paints a serene picture. The speaker continues, "In the background there is a lake, / and beyond that, some low hills." These familiar images converge in the reader's mind, creating an ordinary—even mundane—rural landscape.

However, the speaker then reveals that “the photograph was taken / the day after [the speaker] drowned.” The corpse is “in the lake” described earlier as part of the countryside vista. As such, this account casts a sinister shadow over the earlier reading of the photograph. At the same time, the stark juxtaposition increases the impact of the revelation of the speaker’s death, due to the unexpected pivot away from rosy imagery.

Several structural and stylistic elements of the poem encourage a comparison between the two descriptions of the photograph. Parentheses enclose the latter description (of the speaker’s body), which is also separated by an [end-stop](#) and stanza break:

and beyond that, some low hills.
(The photograph was taken
the day ...

Plus, the text’s shape on the page is roughly symmetrical from top to bottom, with the revelation that the speaker is dead dividing the poem itself in half.

Ultimately, juxtaposition exaggerates the differences between what the photograph appears to depict and the trauma it really captures. In this way, it contributes to the speaker’s message that taking prevailing historical narratives at face value is insufficient. Rather, one must closely scrutinize records and recognize that they are always exclusionary to gain a more complete understanding of the past.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-18:** “a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree / (balsam or spruce) emerging / and, to the right, halfway up / what ought to be a gentle / slope, a small frame house. / In the background there is a lake, / and beyond that, some low hills. / (The photograph was taken / the day after I drowned. / I am in the lake, in the center / of the picture, just under the surface.”

REPETITION

This poem uses [repetition](#) sparingly, mostly to emphasize important images and ideas. This device first appears in [stanza 5](#):

I am in the lake, in the center
of the picture, just under the surface.

Repetition calls attention to the speaker’s location within the photograph, ensuring that the audience understands where they can find the body. It also gives the speaker an insistent tone, aided by [caesura](#) and [asyndeton](#), which accelerate the pace and leave only one word between the repeated phrase (“lake”). As a result, the speaker seems adamant that the

audience identify the body, while still maintaining a detached, unemotional attitude. The insistence that this phrase projects can also be interpreted as a pressing desire to be written back “in[to] the” image, as the speaker maintains that the body really is pictured.

The repetition also highlights the word “center,” which attracts notice due to its place directly before the [enjambment](#) at the end of line 17. In addition to orienting the reader spatially, “center” implies that the speaker’s experience is paramount (or “central”) to truly understanding the moment that the photograph captures.

Repetition turns up again in the following stanza, where “to say” appears twice, alongside two instances of “or,” stacked on top of each other:

It is difficult to say where
precisely, or to say
how large or small I am:

The second “to say” is not grammatically necessary, as the sentence could read “It is difficult to say where precisely or how large or small I am.” However, its repetition adds clarity and emphasizes that the speaker struggles “to say” certain details about the body, suggesting a lack of voice. As such, the repetition implicitly contributes to the audience’s understanding that the speaker has little power over the narrative that the photograph puts forth.

Further, the repetition of “or” is picked up in “distortion,” where it receives [metrical](#) stress and appears just before a stanza break. This term is unique because it *explicitly* signals that the photograph misrepresents the speaker. In sum, repetition foregrounds the speaker’s portrayal within the photo, including the shortcomings of that portrayal.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** “in the,” “in the”
- **Line 19:** “to say”
- **Line 20:** “or,” “to say”
- **Line 21:** “or”



VOCABULARY

Print (Line 4) - A photograph that has been printed on paper. More broadly, this term describes the act of transferring something onto a surface, leaving behind an impression. The speaker’s word choice thus emphasizes the *process* through which the photograph comes into being.

Scan (Line 6) - Briefly look something over for the purpose of identifying key information. This term has many different meanings depending on its context—for example, one “scans” a

poem to consider its meter, uses a “scanner” to digitize an image, or orders a medical “scan” to assess a patient’s wellness.

Balsam or spruce (Line 9) - Two varieties of evergreen trees, which bear green needles that retain their color year-round, making them a popular choice for Christmas trees and other ornamentation. Evergreens look very similar and the speaker is unable to distinguish them.

Slope (Line 12) - A surface that gradually increases or decreases in height, such as a ramp. In this case, the speaker refers to an incline, as the poem reads “halfway up.”

Distortion (Line 23) - The act of bending something out of its original shape, or the state of being misshapen. “Distortion” is also used to describe misinformation—the act of relaying information in a deceptive or misleading manner, or a change that undermines something’s accuracy or truthfulness (whether intentional or unintentional).



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem does not follow a traditional, established form, and is instead broken into six [stanzas](#) of varying length—some as short as two lines, others as long as seven. The stanza breaks demarcate individual vignettes within the photograph, providing organization as the speaker moves between them, guiding the audience through its image.

In the first stanza, the speaker introduces the photograph as a blurry, ambiguous print. In the second stanza, a picturesque landscape begins to take shape, though its precise subject matter remains vague (“balsam or spruce,” “a **thing** that is **like** a branch,” “what **ought** to be a gentle slope”). At five and seven lines respectively, these first two stanzas are relatively long in comparison with the rest of the poem. They are also syntactically complex and their imagery is hazy.

Conversely, the next three stanzas are succinct [couplets](#) that each consist of a single, comparatively straightforward sentence. These couplets offer brief moments of clarity as the speaker plainly states information about the photograph, including the fact that it pictures the speaker’s lifeless body. The simplified structure helps ground the reader before additional ambiguities are introduced in the following stanza, which contains five lines and marks a return to more complex language. The final stanza is a [tercet](#) (meaning it has three lines) that encourages the audience to consider the photograph at length.

Parentheses enclose the second half to the poem, which explains that the speaker is in fact in the photograph, as a drowned body. Parentheses indicate that the information they contain is supplemental and non-essential. As such, they suggest that the speaker’s experience and perspective are de-

prioritized (if not entirely absent) within the photograph’s composition and standard presentation.

Plus, the revelation that the speaker is dead occurs halfway through the poem, so it is physically “under the surface” of the photograph’s surface meanings. Due to the relatively symmetrical form of the text, those earlier interpretations appear as a distorted reflection of what the photo truly represents.

In general, the poem’s lines are very short, containing between 2 and 11 syllables. Further, most lines are [enjambéd](#), creating a choppy rhythm. The fragmented lines reflect the speaker’s commentary on the nature of history—the photograph represents multiple, disparate truths, none of which are complete on their own. Additionally, as the reader’s gaze traces the short lines, it rapidly shifts from the end of one to the beginning of the next, creating a scanning effect. Here is a look at lines 6-7:

then, as you scan
it, you see in the left-hand corner

As such, the poem’s structure causes the audience to move through the poem in the same manner that it encourages them to consider the photograph—carefully examining it from corner to corner.

METER

This is a [free verse](#) poem, so it does not have a consistent, underlying pattern of **stressed** and **unstressed** syllables. On the contrary, its [meter](#) is unpredictable, constantly changing to steer the poem’s rhythm and emphasize key ideas. For example, the first stanza contains a high concentration of stressed syllables:

It was **taken some time ago**.
At **first** it **seems to be**
a **smeared**
print: blurred lines and grey flecks
blended with the paper;

The abundance of stresses slows the rhythm, lingering at length on important phrases like “smeared / print: blurred lines and grey flecks.” The meter thus immediately establishes and characterizes the poem’s subject matter—an old, blurry print. At the same time, by drawing out the first lines, the stresses ease the audience into the poem’s choppy, erratic structure. In the second stanza, three stresses in a row land on the phrase “left-hand corner,” calling the reader’s attention to the location of the first concrete image within the picture:

then, as you scan
it, you **see** in the **left-hand corner**

The several unstressed syllables that appear directly before this phrase exaggerate the rhythmic emphasis that it receives. Three stresses also land on “small frame house,” highlighting another distinct detail within the photo and leaving the reader with a strong image at the stanza’s conclusion. Though not as dramatically, the rhythm slows again in lines 15-16:

(The photograph was taken
the day after I drowned.

Here, stresses call attention to [assonance](#) and [consonance](#) amongst “photograph” and “after” as well as “taken” and “day.” As such, the meter creates sonic interest and a drawn-out cadence, slowing the reader down as an important revelation is made. Elsewhere, the meter reflects the poem’s meaning, as in line 24:

but if you look long enough,

In this case, stresses elongate the line, mirroring the speaker’s suggestion that the audience consider the photograph at length to understand what it truly represents.

RHYME SCHEME

This poem uses [rhyme](#) very sparingly, and the rhymes that do appear are [partial](#) and [internal](#)—making them difficult to detect. For example, the poem’s first rhyming pairs occur in lines 7-9:

it, you see in the left-hand corner
a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree
(balsam or spruce) emerging

Here, very subtle rhyme links the forms that begin to take shape with verbs that describe their materialization, calling attention to the first concrete image that the speaker offers. (The “ing” sound of “emerging” is unstressed, however, so the resonance is quite subtle.) Within these first few lines of stanza 2, there are also partial rhymes between “scan,” “left-hand,” and “branch,” creating additional sonic interest that slows the reader down and increases the image’s impact.

Shortly thereafter, the phrase “the day after I drowned” alerts the reader that the speaker’s corpse is pictured in the photograph’s “background,” tainting the seemingly tranquil setting. Rhyme exaggerates the [juxtaposition](#) of the two scenes, in turn highlighting the disparity between what the photograph seems to represent and what it really captures.

The partial rhyme of “lake” and “taken” in the first lines of stanzas 3-5 creates continuity among the [couplets](#), while also bringing the speaker’s passivity and the location of the speaker’s body to the fore. Similarly, there are partial rhymes within stanza 5 that also underscore the speaker’s position within the photo:

I am in the lake, in the center
of the picture, just under the surface.

As the speaker is difficult to discern, the presence of rhyme helps orient the audience and encourages them to identify the body. Finally, the poem’s only [end rhyme](#) appears within its final two lines:

eventually
you will be able to see me.)

Internal rhymes reinforce the end rhyme, which gives authority to the speaker’s claim that the body is discernible and implicitly urges the reader to do so. Moreover, the end rhymes provide a sense of completion at the poem’s conclusion.



SPEAKER

Very little information is revealed about the speaker over the course of the poem. The only biographical details provided identify the speaker as someone who drowned “some time ago.” The speaker’s language is plain and straightforward—not particularly emotional or forceful. The fact that the speaker narrates from beyond the grave accounts for the detached tone. Meanwhile, the directness of the speaker’s commentary gives it credibility, so that the audience has confidence in the speaker’s account even after learning that the speaker is dead.

The speaker essentially functions as a guide, steering the audience through the photograph. Because the speaker spends about half of the poem pointing out the corpse’s position within the image, it is safe to say that the speaker wants onlookers to understand what this photograph really captures “under the surface.” However, the speaker establishes that the corpse is difficult to make out and as a result, the photograph initially presents a very different scene. Further, the description of the body is contained within parentheses, functioning only as an addendum. Thus, even while trying to write this reality and personal perspective back into the photograph’s narrative, the speaker emphasizes its exclusion in the first place.



SETTING

Because the poem’s speaker has passed away, it is difficult to imagine where the audience might gain access to the speaker’s consciousness, or vice versa. As such, it is impossible to determine where exactly the presentation and narration of the photograph take place. Thus, the poem’s setting is indiscernible much in the same way that the speaker’s precise location within the photograph is hard to pinpoint.

Interestingly, the reader learns that the speaker’s lifeless body is pictured about halfway through the poem, after a blurry

construal of the photograph gives way to a serene landscape. Thus, as the *photograph's* setting comes into focus, gaining depth and clarity, the *poem's* setting becomes increasingly ambiguous. This unreconcilable tension between clarity and ambiguity is consistent with the speaker's message that one's understanding of history is always incomplete.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"This Is a Photograph of Me" opens Atwood's first major collection of poetry, *The Circle Game*, which was published in 1964 and received the prestigious Governor General's Award. The [title poem](#) describes children playing Ring Around the Rosie and other games, contrasting images of childhood frivolity with those of adulthood isolation and monotony. In doing so, the speaker reveals that, although such games appear cheerful and innocent, they condition young people to mindlessly conform to social expectations and remain emotionally detached from others.

Indeed, *The Circle Game* takes seemingly benign objects and behaviors as its subjects and explores the dark truths that they reveal about society. "This Is a Photograph of Me" follows this approach by presenting a photograph that appears to depict a tranquil landscape and later disclosing that the speaker's lifeless body is also pictured.

Like [Beat Generation](#) writers, Atwood cites romantic poet and visual artist William Blake ("[London](#)") as a key influence and adopts his works' rebellious bent and socio-political concerns. *The Circle Game* was published as the counterculture of the 1960s and '70s began to take shape. The corresponding series of liberation movements and emerging subcultures opened up new space for women writers, whose contributions were generally wrapped up in specific movements—sharing an emphasis on female perspectives rather than a common style. For example, Atwood's contemporaries include Ann Sexton ("[Her Kind](#)") and Sylvia Plath ("[The Applicant](#)")—major figures in [confessionalism](#)—as well as Adrienne Rich ("[Diving into the Wreck](#)") and Audre Lorde ("[A Litany for Survival](#)"), who contributed to the Gay Liberation Movement, among other causes.

One of Canada's best-known and most prolific writers, Atwood has also published essays, novels, graphic novels, stories, reviews, criticism, children's books, a play, and scripts for televisions and radio, in addition to some two dozen collections of poetry. In her 1972 survey *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Atwood identifies survival, particularly of the victimized, as the preeminent concern of Canadian literature. "This Is a Photograph of Me" directly engages with this tradition, scrutinizing the limitations of recording history—unable to capture every coexisting narrative, it is

inherently exclusionary, threatening the survival of marginalized voices.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Atwood was born in Canada's capital of Ottawa, Ontario, in November 1939, just two months after the beginning of World War II. The conflict would continue through 1945, depleting much of the workforce as (mostly) men fought overseas. As a result, the number of Canadian women who held jobs doubled during the war. Further, women entered male-dominated sectors like manufacturing, construction, logging, and farming.

However, the birthrate ballooned in the 20 years following the war's end (1945-1965) and women began to get married younger. Having endured the Great Depression of the 1930s and WWII of the 40s, Canadians now faced the Red Scare. Seeking stability and security, people turned to traditional family structures, in which a man is the breadwinning head of the household, while his wife's responsibilities are strictly domestic. Furthermore, men's wages increased during this time, making it possible for more and more families to live off of one income. Women who entered the workforce faced harassment and discrimination, in addition to social stigmas that cast working mothers as neglectful of their familial duties.

Still, during the '60s, women entered the workforce at increasing rates, in large part due to the introduction of "the pill"—oral contraceptives that freed women from unwanted childbearing responsibilities. Additionally, growing movements for social and political justice radicalized many women. In the year before Atwood published *The Circle Game*, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* helped catalyze a new Women's Movement (known today as Second-wave Feminism). This nonfiction volume gets its name from a term that Friedan coined to describe the societal expectation that women find fulfillment through (heterosexual) marriage, childbearing, housework, and sexual submission—an idea she proves false.

The Feminine Mystique, which advocates female resistance and liberation, was the best-selling book of 1964, the year that *The Circle Game* was published. "This Is a Photograph of Me" questions mainstream history's tendency to subsume the voices of marginalized groups under male-dominated narratives, and can thus be seen as an early example of the intersection of literature and Second-wave Feminism.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Margaret Atwood Reads "This Is a Photograph of Me"](#) — Listen to the author read the poem aloud. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TP-3bAM5uTk>)
- [Margaret Atwood's Biography](#) — An overview of Atwood's life and work from the Poetry Foundation.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/margaret-atwood>)

- **The Subtle Horror of "This Is a Photograph of Me"** — A brief commentary on the poem's ominous implications. <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2017/04/favorite-poems-margaret-atwood-this-is-a-photograph-of-me/522705/>
- **Women's Movements in Canada: 1960–1985** — A summary of women's movements in Canada during the second half of the 20th century, including a discussion of literature. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/womens-movements-in-canada-196085>
- **Margaret Atwood's Website** — The author's website, which contains a brief biography, full bibliography, and

links to other relevant materials.
<http://margaretatwood.ca/>



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Soa, Jackson. "This Is a Photograph of Me." LitCharts LLC, January 7, 2020. Retrieved April 22, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/margaret-atwood/this-is-a-photograph-of-me>.