

Literature and medicine

Exploring Margaret Atwood's short story "Death by Landscape"

Frederick Donald Fraser MD CCFP FCFP

Dealing with patients' worries and fears is an aspect of medical care that is time-consuming and sometimes a challenge. It is often called the art of medicine—the part of care that is intuitive and empathetic, is hard to measure, and requires a skill that is difficult to acquire except by experience.

Medical educators are turning to the study of the humanities and, in particular, literature as a means of enhancing physicians' and medical students' empathetic skills. Charon et al reviewed the goal of including the study of literature in medical education and described the numerous ways that medicine and literature are connected.¹

The intent of this paper is to offer a psychological interpretation of Margaret Atwood's short story "Death by Landscape"² and to suggest that there are similarities between patients' narratives as told to their physicians and literary narratives. The means of understanding these narratives are similar. Literature, then, can be a source of experience and means of testing one's skills in understanding human motivation.

Narratively speaking

When patients visit their physicians, particularly for stress-related problems, they have a narrative or story about their concerns. The narrative is often told in terms of symptoms rather than a clear expression of what patients are worried about. These symptoms usually mask deeper concerns, which can be difficult for patients to manage. Narratives often contain symbolic or metaphoric material that has meaning for patients. Chronic pain, for instance, can be a symbolic way of expressing past physical or sexual abuse.³ Trying to understand hidden meanings is the challenge physicians have to meet in order to help patients resolve their difficulties.

Just as patients find a compromise between expressing and hiding symptoms of painful conflicts, authors must find a balance between maintaining readers' interest by skillfully rendering their stories on the one hand and causing readers discomfort by graphic portrayal of subconscious activity on the other hand. This shaping of the material involves some of the same mechanisms patients use to maintain their psychological equilibrium.

Atwood's short story

Margaret Atwood's short story "Death by Landscape" is about 2 girls in their early teens who attend summer camp in northern Ontario over a period of 3 years. Lois, a middle-class Canadian, is portrayed as somewhat uninteresting. Lucy is from a wealthy Chicago family and possesses glamour and mystique. Lois is envious of her American friend. Affectionate letter writing during the winters sustains the friendship, which both girls feel is like a sisterhood. In the third year, Lucy's parents separate, leaving her unhappy and withdrawn.

On the third day of a canoe trip, the 2 friends climb to a summit overlooking a lake. Lucy talks about diving into the water, an idea that frightens Lois. Lucy says she has to pee, so Lois walks away to give her friend some privacy. Then Lois hears a brief shout and returns to the edge of the summit to find that Lucy is nowhere to be found. Lucy has disappeared, and her body is never recovered. The reader is left to decide whether she jumped or slipped and fell.

Cappie, the owner and director of the camp, is concerned about the tragedy ruining her camp's reputation. She requires a plausible explanation for what happened. Cappie uses Lois as a scapegoat, implying that she must have been angry at Lucy and pushed her over the cliff to her death. Lois is devastated by this accusation, begins to cry, and immediately realizes that her crying has confirmed, in Cappie's mind, that her conjecture is correct.

Lois grows up, marries, and has 2 children, but she drifts aimlessly through life barely engaged in its events. As she looks back on her life, she can no longer remember what her deceased husband looked like, nor does she recall the birth and nurturing of her boys. The narrator tells us that "She never felt she was paying full attention to her life. She was tired a lot, as if she was living not one life but two: her own and another shadowy life that hovered around her and would not let itself be realized—the life of what would have happened if Lucy had not stepped sideways and disappeared from time." Lois has collected Group of Seven paintings that hang on the walls of her home. The narrator tells us that Lucy is in these paintings: "Everyone has to be somewhere, and this is where Lucy is. She is in Lois's apartment in the

Trying to understand hidden meanings is the challenge physicians have to meet

holes that open inwards on the wall, not like windows but like doors. She is here. She is entirely alive."

Story's conclusion

The story's closing paragraph tells the reader that, throughout her adult life, Lois has essentially kept Lucy alive in her imagination. Why Lois has not been able to resolve her grief and let go of her memories of Lucy is not explicit. The narrator implies that Lois's grief results from the camp director's accusation that she pushed Lucy off the cliff because she was angry with her. But there is nothing in the story that suggests this is what happened. This incongruity between a life of suffering and Lois's manifest innocence is central to the story, but unexplained.

This incongruity leads the reader to ask why Lois would spend her adult life acting as though she has committed a crime during the trip into the wilderness. Perhaps the answer lies in deeper feelings that Lois had toward Lucy, feelings that are hinted at in the story but not made explicit. The author makes it clear that Lois was envious of Lucy and felt inferior in looks and economic station in life. She saw Lucy's life as more appealing than her own. Lois might have had a subconscious wish that Lucy would die so that she could, in effect, become Lucy and enjoy her more glamorous and appealing life.

Wishes of this powerful magnitude are usually not allowed to become conscious. When Lucy actually does disappear and Lois's subconscious wish comes true, the consequences of having to deal with this are overwhelming.

Instead of comforting Lois at the time of the tragedy, Cattie, the camp director, blamed her by implying that she pushed Lucy over the cliff. Lois's solution to this trauma is to spend her life denying that Lucy is dead. The narrator portrays this effectively by saying that Lucy is living in each of the pictures on Lois's wall. Lois pays a very high emotional price for having to keep her wish subconscious. One manifestation of this wish is the guilt that it generates. For Lois the guilt is crippling and ruins any chance of enjoying life. For the wish to remain subconscious, Lois must deny that Lucy is dead.

Reader's response


Each reader must decide how successful the author has been in shaping the narrative. My response to the story is that it is oddly devoid of feeling or emotion. This is partly a result of Atwood's style of writing, which seems to result in a general suppression of feeling. It is as if Atwood does not wish to open a wound and display the raw emotions underneath. I am left with a feeling of repression in much the same way that Lois is repressed.

Margaret Atwood spent the first 11 summers of her childhood living in the northern wilderness in primitive conditions. I wonder what childhood fantasies were acquired during these formative years and how they

influence her fiction. The title of this story, "Death by Landscape," suggests that the author is reminding us that the wilderness is a dangerous place where lives can be lost by accident or misadventure. It is not so much the landscape that kills, however, but the characters in the landscape. If this theme were made explicit by the author, it would cause readers anxiety. Shaping the material softens readers' discomfort and leaves them with a sense that the real material of this story is repressed and unavailable to conscious perception.

Bringing the story to practice

There are a number of ways this story could be used as a teaching aid. Superficially, the theme of guilt and unresolved grief are manifest and could lead to a discussion of these topics. Those interested in psychotherapy could use the story to examine subconscious themes. An interesting discussion could evolve from examining how various readers respond to the story, and how readers' backgrounds influence their perceptions of the story.

At the end of her paper on literature and medicine, Charon asks and answers a question: "How do we know that teaching literature to physicians and medical students works? Individual physicians describe these influences when they attest to the improvements that slowly accrue in their practice over a career of reading, writing, and listening to their patients." 

Dr Fraser is a family physician in Stoney Creek, Ont.

Acknowledgment

I thank Dr Ian Cameron, a Professor in the Department of Family Medicine at Dalhousie University in Halifax, NS, for suggesting Margaret Atwood's story, and for his helpful comments during the early discussion of this paper.

Competing interests

None declared

Correspondence to: Dr Frederick Donald Fraser, 15 Mountain Ave S, Stoney Creek, ON L8G 2V6; telephone 905 662-4911; e-mail frfraser@istar.ca

The opinions expressed in commentaries are those of the authors. Publication does not imply endorsement by the College of Family Physicians of Canada.

References

- Charon R, Banks JT, Connelly JE, Hawkins AH, Hunter KM, Jones AH, et al. Literature and medicine: contributions to clinical practice. *Ann Intern Med* 1995;122(8):599-606.
- Atwood M. Death by landscape. In: *Wilderness tips*. Toronto, Ont: Seal Books; 1991.
- Rubin JJ. Psychosomatic pain: new insights and management strategies. *South Med J* 2005;98(11):1099-110.