Is/Not

Love is not a profession

genteel or otherwise

sex is not dentistry

the slick filling of aches and cavities

you are not my doctor

you are not my cure,

nobody has that

power, you are merely a fellow/traveler

Give up this medical concern,

buttoned, attentive,

permit yourself anger

and permit me mine

which needs neither

your approval nor your surprise

which does not need to be made legal

which is not against a disease

but against you,

which does not need to be understood

or washed or cauterized,

which needs instead

to be said and said.

Permit me the present tense.

Margaret Atwood

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Introduction to Poetry

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Explication of Margaret Atwood’s “Is/Not”

At surface level, Margaret Atwood's poem "Is/Not" seems to be a feministic rant about how a man cannot control her ("you are not my doctor / you are not my cure" (5-6)). However, although Atwood has typically had feminism themes within her writing, it becomes clear with a closer look that Atwood is simply attempting to create a dichotomy between the warm and sometimes messy nature of love and the aloof and distant nature of the medical world. Atwood was raised by scientists/doctors (more specifically, a nutritionist and an entomologist), and continues to be an environmental activist, which may shed light on as to why she chose a scientific explanation of what love is not. She succeeds in creating this atypical love poem primarily through her use of negations and medical jargon throughout.

Atwood begins with the idea that “Love is not a profession / genteel or otherwise,” thus immediately establishing that love, unlike a profession, cannot be studied or practiced in order to perfect, and it is not as neat or as proper as a professional would be. She insists that the intended audience (perhaps her husband) cannot fix her or her problems or her feelings so he need not try, as she states, “you are not my doctor / you are not my cure / nobody has that power” (5-8). This repetition of negations (“not,” “nobody”) is seen throughout the poem, thus establishing the contrast between the two worlds.

Her use of medical jargon such as “cauterized” (19) and “disease” (16), as well as words with a formal connotation such as “buttoned” (10) and “legal” (15), produces a cold and detached tone to the poem. These are all clearly not typical words used describe love. She insists that unlike many other things in life that follow a strict structure and set of rules, feelings and love do not. Feelings are not something to be fixed, diagnosed or needing of “approval” (14). She asks that her partner reject these formal practices when it comes to love, anger, and all that falls in between on the feelings spectrum, and instead let her be human; “permit yourself anger / and permit me mine” (11-12). She is not a patient in need of a diagnosis.

The couplet structure and repetition of negations mimics that of a doctor’s checklist. She runs down the list of all thing love is not (“love is not a profession (1)”; “sex is not dentistry (3)”; “[my anger] needs neither/ your approval nor your surprise (13-14)”), and finally comes to the conclusion (or diagnosis) that feelings are simply feelings, and they should not be treated as though they are a medical concern. She states, "Permit me the present tense (22)", or simply to allow her to have her emotions and her feelings without attempting to fix them.

By using a series of negations and medical jargon, Atwood creates a dichotomy between love and the cold rules, organization, and procedures of the medical field. The starkness in her words alone reveal how atypical this love poem is—veering from the typical images of flowers, sunsets, and happiness associated with love. In an ironic way, Atwood reinforces why those images have classically been used to describe love and feelings rather than medical vernacular, as feelings simply do not fit into the structure of everything else the professional world as we know it.