

# Close Reading of “Siren Song” by Margaret Atwood (Seminar 2)



**Revise instructions for Close reading** (retrieved from <https://guides.lib.uoguelph.ca/c.php?g=130967&p=4938496>)

**I. Perform a close reading of the following poetry and complete the tasks.**

## **Siren Song**

MARGARET ATWOOD (born 1939)

This is the one song everyone  
would like to learn: the song  
that is irresistible:

the song that forces men  
to leap overboard in squadrons  
even though they see the beached skulls

the song nobody knows  
because anyone who has heard it  
is dead, and the others can't remember.

Shall I tell you the secret  
and if I do, will you get me  
out of this bird suit?

I don't enjoy it here  
squatting on this island  
looking picturesque and mythical

with these two feathery maniacs,  
I don't enjoy singing  
this trio, fatal and valuable.

I will tell the secret to you,  
to you, only to you.  
Come closer. This song

is a cry for help: Help me!  
Only you, only you can,  
you are unique

at last. Alas  
it is a boring song  
but it works every time.  
(1974)



**1.1 Find information about the author (life and creative works) and be ready to present it in class.**

**1.2 Listen to the poem reading and practice reading it aloud:**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rnh3qROt19E>

**1.3 Find the meaning of the words in the dictionary and explain their usage in the poem:**

- ✓ irresistible
- ✓ to leap overboard
- ✓ in squadrons
- ✓ beached skulls
- ✓ bird suit
- ✓ squatting
- ✓ picturesque
- ✓ feathery maniacs
- ✓ trio
- ✓ cry for help
- ✓ unique
- ✓ boring

#### 1.4 Explain the meaning of the poem, answer the questions:

1. Who is speaking in the poem?
2. What is the “song” everyone wants to learn?
3. Why is it dangerous to hear the song?
4. What does the speaker ask from the listener?
5. How does the speaker describe her situation on the island?
6. What “secret” does she reveal?
7. What happens at the end — does the song work again?

#### 1.5 Define the following:

##### Narrative Voice

1. Who is speaking?
  - Task: Identify the narrator (I / you / mixed address), and explain whether the voice is a survivor, participant, or retrospective storyteller.
  - Look for: pronouns, temporal markers, immediacy of sensation.
  - Starter: “The poem uses a \_\_\_\_\_ person narrator (e.g., ‘I’ / ‘you’) which suggests...”
2. Narrative perspective and focalization
  - Task: Is the perspective internal (limited to one mind) or external? How many minds do we access?
  - Look for: internal sensations (“I don’t enjoy it here”), absence of other consciousnesses.
  - Starter: “The focalization is mostly \_\_\_\_\_ because the narrator reveals \_\_\_\_\_.”
3. Narrative voice — reliability and purpose
  - Task: Discuss whether the Siren’s voice is reliable (is she manipulating or confessing?), and what the voice’s rhetorical purpose is (to seduce, to warn, to involve the reader).
  - Look for: contradictions (“I will tell you the secret... it is a cry for help”), tone shifts, emotional manipulation.
  - Starter: “Although the narrator claims to need help, the tone suggests she is actually...”
4. Access to characters
  - Task: Which characters’ inner lives do we access? Which remain external (the men, the other sirens)? Why does Atwood limit access?
  - Look for: verbs of perception, reported speech, lack of other viewpoints.
  - Starter: “We only access the Siren’s mind, while others are voiceless, which highlights...”

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##### Tone

5. Describe tone(s) across the poem

- Task: Map tone shifts (mythic → intimate → manipulative → ironic). Quote phrases showing change.
  - Look for: adjectives/adverbs (“fatal and valuable,” “boring”), sentence rhythm.
  - Starter: “The tone shifts from \_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ as shown by \_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_.”
6. Directness vs. ambiguity
- Task: Is the speaker straightforward or evasive? Where is ambiguity used intentionally? How does it affect the reader?
  - Look for: rhetorical questions (“Shall I tell you the secret?”), promises and withholdings.
  - Starter: “The poem is deliberately ambiguous when it says \_\_\_\_, suggesting \_\_\_\_.”
7. Emotion vs. detachment
- Task: Is the voice sincere and emotional or detached and ironic? Cite examples.
  - Look for: emotive vs neutral diction (“Help me!” vs “it is a boring song”).
  - Starter: “Emotional intensity appears in \_\_\_\_, but detachment in \_\_\_\_.”
8. Irony
- Task: Identify irony (difference between what is said and meant).
  - Look for: contradictions between plea for help and final manipulation.
  - Starter: “This line is ironic because although it claims \_\_\_\_, the context shows \_\_\_\_.”

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### Rhetorical & Literary Devices

9. Figurative language inventory
- Task: Identify metaphors or symbols. Choose one and explain its effect.
  - Look for: “bird suit,” “cry for help,” “the song that forces men.”
  - Starter: “The metaphor ‘\_\_\_\_’ suggests \_\_\_\_ because...”
10. Sound & syntax
- Task: Analyze sound, rhythm, and sentence length. How do they mirror seduction or entrapment?
  - Look for: repetition (“only you, only you”), enjambment, short declaratives.
  - Starter: “Repetition of \_\_\_\_ creates \_\_\_\_, reflecting \_\_\_\_.”
11. Repetition / motifs
- Task: Identify recurring words (song, you, help). What is their cumulative effect?
  - Starter: “The repetition of \_\_\_\_ underscores the theme of \_\_\_\_ by...”
12. Effect of rhetorical devices
- Task: Choose two devices and explain their function (to persuade, to deceive, to involve).
  - Starter: “By using \_\_\_\_, Atwood achieves \_\_\_\_ because...”
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## 2.6 Construct an Argument

**Goal:** Move from *what the language does* → to *why it’s done*.

1. Collect 3–5 language observations (e.g., repetition of “song,” shifting tone, ironic confession).
2. Ask WHY for each: Why repeat “song”? Why “only you”?
3. Draft thesis: Start descriptive, then make it argumentative.
  - *Descriptive*: “The narrator uses repetition and irony.”
  - *Argumentative*: “Atwood’s use of repetition and irony exposes how female voices are both desired and dismissed, turning mythic seduction into a commentary on power.”
4. Support with 2–3 close quotations (word-level analysis).
5. Connect to larger themes: gendered myth, art vs authenticity, seduction and power.

Model thesis options:

- *A (Voice & Power)*: “Through the Siren’s ironic self-awareness, Atwood turns the mythic seductress into a symbol of female entrapment in performance.”
- *B (Reader Implication)*: “By addressing the reader as ‘you,’ the poem implicates us in the act of seduction, making the reader both victim and audience.”
- *C (Myth Revision)*: “Atwood rewrites the classical myth to expose the tension between performance, manipulation, and the desire for freedom.”

## 2.7 Compare the myth about sirens and the poem:

	Character/ Detail	Characteristics in the myth	as portrayed in M.Atwood’s poem	
			feature	quotation
1	Sirens: - portrayal - lineage - behaviour - destiny/death			
2	Sailors: - behaviour - relations/encounter with the sirens - destiny			
3	Sirens’ dwelling place:			
4	Siren song and its influence on the sailors			