Love as failed imagination in ‘the passion’ and in sexton’s poetry

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The notion of love is something that evades language, yet has been a staple theme in literary works all over the world. Writers have struggled to express this abstract feeling in language and accord it with a definition so that it can finally be understood. However, in Jeanette Winterson’s The Passion and Anne Sexton’s poems, “ The Interrogation of the Man of Many Hearts” and “ That Day”, it is suggested that trying to capture love may very well be a futile act. The Passion follows the journey of Henri, a soldier in Napoleon Bonaparte’s army. Although he is initially passionately in love with Bonaparte, Henri is later disillusioned by the latter’s cruel acts and deserts the army. He meets and finds passion in Villanelle, a Venetian woman, but his love is ultimately left unfulfilled, as Villanelle does not return his feelings. Sexton’s poems, similarly, play with the idea of unfulfilled desire. In “ The Interrogation of the Man of Many Hearts and “ That Day”, the character of the beloved is conspicuously absent, leaving the lover in an attempt to sculpt the beloved into existence using language. Both Winterson’s novel and Sexton’s work portray the lover as attempting to recreate or remember their beloved from past memory. Love is shown to be something that fails, as the lover has nothing to go by but interpretations and images that do not have any inherent meaning – resulting in their failure to arrive at the essence of love, and the creation of a beloved who does not exist.

In The Passion, Winterson exposes conventional acts of love to be arbitrary ones with no particular meaning. By juxtaposing the relationships between Villanelle and Henri, as well as Villanelle and her female lover, the Queen of Spades, the arbitrary nature of conventional acts of love is highlighted. When Villanelle is kissing the Queen of Spades, she describes their connected

mouths to be “ the focus of love”, suggesting that the act of kissing is an act of love (Winterson 67). However, this idea is turned on its head later on in the book, when Henri and Villanelle are trying to avoid detection after Henri kills the cook (135). Whenever they pass by anyone, Villanelle would “[throw Henri] against the wall and [kiss him] passionately, blocking all sight of [his] body” in order to prevent people from seeing “ the blood on [his] clothes” (136). Here, the act of kissing takes on a whole new meaning. Instead of connecting two people who are in love with each other as an expression of their love, Villanelle uses it as a means of survival. Similarly, sex means completely different things to Villanelle and Henri, as evidenced by the way she says, “ He gave me pleasure, but when I watched his face I knew it was more than that for him.” (148) To her, making love with him is only a way for her to feel good, but for Henri, it is an act that conveys his love for her. The contrast between the different ways that conventional acts of love can be viewed undermines their credibility as a means of validating love; as they could potentially hold other meanings as well, the lover can no longer use these acts of love to prove the existence of love.

Sexton complicates this argument in “ That Day”, showing that not only is love impossible to capture in the moment, it is even more elusive after the moment has passed. In the poem, the speaker comments on “ the typewriter that sits before me / where yesterday only your body sat before me” (Sexton, “ That Day” 3-4). The typewriter, symbolising language, has taken over the beloved’s spot, implying that after the moment has passed, love can only be revisited through language. Indeed, the speaker proceeds to try

to recreate the beloved in the form of language, piecing him together through images of “[his] red veins and [his] blue veins” (15), his “ shut eyes”, “ mouth”, “ chest and its drummer” (35-37). However, even as she attempts to recreate her love, she ends off the poem with the line: “ and love is where yesterday is at” (47), suggesting the impossibility of actually going back to the time when she is “[drawing] I LOVE YOU on [his] chest and its drummer” (35-36). According to Jacques Derrida, everything we have access to in this world is a text, as we require language in order to conceptualise it (158). Hence, although objective reality exists, we are unable to access it; all we have is a representation of it brought about by language (158). In line with this train of thought, not only is the speaker unable to return to the actual moment of love, when she uses language to recreate it, she is actually travelling further away from the authentic moment, as all she has now is an arbitrary representation of it.

The Passion emphasises this point with Henri’s diary. When he first starts to keep a diary in order to preserve his memories, Domino, his friend, tells him that “ every moment [he steals] from the present is a moment [he has] lost forever. There’s only now” (Winterson 29). Indeed, when Henri tries to recount the first night he makes love with Villanelle, he “ lose[s] sense of [his] work, writing this story, trying to convey to [the reader] what really happened. Trying not to make up too much” (103). He implies that in every attempt to recreate a scenario, one cannot avoid the embellishment of facts; all he can do is try “ not to make up too much” (103). This highlights the subjective nature of language, and suggests that any attempt to think about

a moment of love can only fail, as the subjective medium of language prevents one from returning to the unadulterated moment. As Jean-Luc Marion says, “ We can give love only an interpretation, or rather a non-interpretation, that is purely subjective, indeed sentimental.” (71) By thinking about love through the medium of languages, one is already attempting to participate in the act of interpretation; love thus fails as no one person can reach a pure, unmediated state of love.

Sexton’s “ The Interrogation of the Man of Many Hearts” goes further to suggest that it is not just the act of love that exists as an arbitrary interpretation; the beloved only exists as the lover’s interpretation as well. In the poem, the speaker enagages in a conversation with another unknown speaker, trying to describe what kind of person the beloved is in many different ways:

She’s my real witch, my fork, my mare, my mother of tears, my skirtful of hell, the stamp of my sorrows, the stamp of my bruises and also the children she might bear and also a private place, a body of bones (Sexton, “ The Interrogation of the Man of Many Hearts” 24-28)

Interestingly, the beloved is given many identifiers, but all of them are given to her by the speaker. Although she is physically present as “ that one in [his] arms” (Sexton, “ The Interrogation of the Man of Many Hearts” 2), she does not have a voice throughout the whole poem; the speaker is the one who speaks for her. This indicates that whatever identity she is given in the poem is merely the speaker’s intepretation of who she is. Here, the beloved

literally only exists as the lover’s creation, an imagined existence conjured from the speaker’s mind. The speaker acknowledges this when he says:

I called her the woman in red. I called her the girl in pink. but she was ten colours and ten women. I could hardly name her. (85-89)

He admits that although he calls her many things, he can still “ hardly name her” (Sexton, “ The Interrogation of the Man of Many Hearts” 89), implying that all the identities he accords to her are simply his own interpretations of her, and inaccurate ones at that. The speaker’s repeated attempts to name the beloved convey a sense of anxiety at not being able to pinpoint her identity, and also a sense of futility in trying to do so. He considers that “ maybe I shouldn’t have put it in words” (92), suggesting that as long as he is using language, he will never be able to describe the beloved as she truly is. However, as Derrida mentioned, language is the only thing one has to make sense of the world (158). The speaker can never truly reach the beloved while using language, yet language is the only tool that he has. From this, it can be inferred that the lover, being imprisoned by language, will always only be able to access an interpretated version of the beloved that he conjures up himself. The real person behind the beloved is forever unattainable, thus leading love to fail.

This is further emphasised in “ That Day”, as the speaker literally attempts to piece together her beloved in a series of fragmented images. She recalls his “ tongue that came from [his] lips” (Sexton, “ That Day” 11), “ the doorway of [his] heart” (13), and his “ red veins and [his] blue veins” (15).

The poem focuses on various parts of the beloved’s anatomy, but never features a full image of him. This reflects the impossibility for the lover to create a complete, or true image of the beloved’s person. Just like in “ The Interrogation of the Man of Many Hearts”, the beloved here is an object of construction, a fictional character created by the lover.

Marion expands on the idea that the beloved is a fictional construct created by the lover. According to him, the lover sees “ not [the beloved] but the sum of lived experiences, for which she is only the accidental cause and of which [the lover’s] consciousness is the real measure” (77). It is not the beloved who matters, but the lived experiences that the lover associates with the beloved. In The Passion, Henri states that he was willing to die for Bonaparte because he loved him, and “ when [they] go to war [they] feel [they] are not a lukewarm people anymore” (Winterson 108). This can be linked to the beginning of the story, when Henri is still living with his mother. He describes himself and his fellowmen as “ a lukewarm people” who “ long to be touched” (7). He also tries to go to confession at church but dislikes the lack of “ fervour” there, thinking that one should “ do it from the heart or not at all” (7). Here, Henri displays a want for something more passionate and grand than what his current life is. He later suggests that romance is “ an explosion of dreams and desires that can find no outlet in everyday life” (13), implying that the reason he loves Bonaparte is because of his own lived experiences, which he associates with the latter. He does not want to lead a lukewarm existence, and thus pins his hopes and dreams onto Bonaparte, believing that going to war with him would save himself from continuing to

be part of “ a lukewarm people” (7). Indeed, later on, when his monarchist mother starts to look up to soon-to-be King Bonaparte, he notes: “ I understood her hopes. We all had something to pin on Bonaparte.” (32) He acknowledges that he is essentially projecting his desires onto Bonaparte, loving what he stands for – passion and grandeur – rather than Bonaparte himself as a man.

However, this also means that Henri’s love for Bonaparte is destined to fail, as the object of his love does not really exist. While Henri envisions Bonaparte as a great man who cares for his troops, waking “ before [them] and [sleeping] long after [them]”, as well as “ rallying [them] personally” (Winterson 19), the truth is not so. As Henri later realises, Bonaparte is a cruel man who does not mind sacrificing recruits; after killing 2, 000 of them in a senseless move, “ 2, 000 new recruits marched into Boulogne” the very next morning (25). He also thinks that losing 20, 000 of his soldiers are “ good odds” because he is “ used to losing that number in battle” (20). To Bonaparte, the soldiers are nothing more than easily replaceable cattle. This discrepancy between Henri’s envisioning of Bonaparte and what the latter is really like dooms Henri’s love to failure right from the start. It is a love that cannot be, as Henri’s beloved is not Bonaparte, but a self-made vision that he imagines to be Bonaparte.

While Henri’s creation of a non-existent beloved makes his love doomed to fail, “ The Interrogation of the Man of Many Hearts” argues that it is possible for the lover to recognise this condition. The speaker talks about how he has “ tied [the beloved] down with a knot” (Sexton, “ The Interrogation of the

Man of Many Hearts” 42). This knot is associated with things like “[his] mother’s apron”, and his “ daughter’s / pink corduroys” (48-51), things that are a part of his daily life and lived experiences. This suggests that the “ knot” stands for the images that he projects onto the beloved because of what he has experienced in life. However, the speaker comes to realise what he is doing, as he admits, “ I sang her out. I caught her down. / I stamped her out with a song” (55-56). He is aware that by conjuring up his own image of the beloved, he is wiping away the existence of her person. Hence, the poem implies a hope for the lover to break out of the tendency to ignore the beloved’s humanity as he projects his desires onto her, making it possible to create an authentic love that will not fail.

However, The Passion suggests that there is no way for one to prevent the failure of love, as Henri repeats his mistake with Villanelle, despite thinking that he knows better. At the end of the book, Henri states that he has learnt about the difference between “ inventing a lover and falling in love” during his encounters with Bonaparte and Villanelle, saying that “ the one is about you, the other about someone else” (Winterson 158). Just like the speaker in “ The Interrogation of the Man of Many Hearts”, he appears to be enlightened about his act of projecting his desires onto Bonaparte, and claims to be “ in love with [Villanelle]; not a fantasy or a myth or a creature of [his] own making” (157). Despite so, he is shown to simply be repeating his mistakes all over again. He “[falls] in love with her” when she tells him that snowflakes are “ all different” (87-88). The reason that he falls in love with Villanelle seems shallow and almost unbelievable, but the reader will

remember when Henri first mentions the snowflakes. Back when he goes to the church with Patrick at Boulogne, he thinks about the deaths that he has witnessed, and how Domino tells him to “ forget it” (42). Then, he suddenly shifts to wondering about the snowflakes: “ They say every snowflake is different. If that were true, how could the world go on? How could we ever get up off our knees? How could we ever recover from the wonder of it?” (42-43) The quick shift from thoughts about death to snowflakes suggest that they are Henri’s form of defense mechanism. Only by thinking about the beauty in the world, can he forget the horrors that he has seen in war.

This theory is reinforced by the second appearance of Henri’s thoughts about snowflakes. It comes right after he sees the Russian village people who are “ singing songs” as they sit “ by the frozen rivers”, driven out of their homes to die because the Russians are destroying their villages in order to stop the French Army from looting them (Winterson 81). Once again, Henri thinks about how these villagers are dying because of them: “ We had killed them all without firing a shot” (81). Immediately after, he thinks, “ Is every snowflake different? No one knows.” He turns to the snowflakes as a defense mechanism, bringing his mind to a place of safety, where he does not have to contemplate the many deaths that he has witnessed.

The idea that snowflakes symbolise the beauty and peace in a war-wrecked world for Henri, sheds new light onto his reasons for falling in love with Villanelle. She tells him to “ think of [snowflakes]”, he does so and immediately falls in love with her (Winterson 88). At this point of time, he does not even know her name; all he knows is that she is a “ vivandiere”,

one of the girls kept at the camp in order to satisfy the sexual needs of the officers (87). There is no reason for him to fall in love with her, which suggests that he only does so by associating his lived experiences with her, connecting her with the comfort and peace that the snowflakes bring him. Similarly, on the night when they first make love, Henri thinks of how Villanelle lets her hair “ fall all over [him]”, and how it makes him feel like he is “ lying in the long grass, safe” (103). By comparing her hair to the long grass, he associates her with his memories of “ the fields that ripen at harvest” back in his hometown (27), which causes him to feel safe.

As such, I argue that Henri’s love for Villanelle is not truly different from what he felt for Bonaparte, even if he believes it to be. He is still projecting his desires and wants onto her without even really getting to know her. What he loves is the safety and comfort that he thinks Villanelle stands for, and not her person – Henri once again creates a figure of the beloved that does not exist, dooming his love to failure. The Passion suggests that even when one is aware of the ideal form of love, the one that is “ about someone else” and not yourself (Winterson 158), the lover ultimately cannot refrain from projecting his desires onto the beloved. Thus, love will always fail in the end, as the non-existent beloved that the lover creates is not capable of returning his feelings.

Winterson and Sexton’s works largely focus on the relationship between the lover and the beloved, as well as love and language. Through the portrayal of conventional acts of love and language as arbitrary systems, the credibility of these sign systems as an indicator of love is challenged.

Without any form of medium to confirm the existence of love, it is then impossible for any lover to arrive at the pure essence of love, resulting in it being a futile act. Furthermore, love is revealed to be an extremely subjective act in both the poems and the novel. Not only do no two people view love the same way, it is portrayed as inevitable that the lover attempts to project his desires onto the beloved. The person that is the beloved is completely wiped out, and instead, replaced with the illusion that the lover creates for himself. This brings up the problem of alterity – can one truly love another person, or does one merely project bits of themselves to create a whole new non-person? While Sexton’s work expresses the potential for humankind to learn to relate to the other as they are one day, The Passion paints a much more pessimistic outlook. The novel suggests that the failure of love may be something that is inevitable and unstoppable, for as humans, even being aware of the ideal way to love, we ultimately fall short in practice.

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