

# The changing face of love in english literature assignment

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Love is a common theme in most literature, as either an underlying theme or as the stimulus for the story, as it is an emotion that has great power and is also universally understood. The writers we have studied have written about love in its many forms, from the cerebral to the visceral and they have used this complex emotion to propel their stories and their sonnets. As we progress forward in time we see a distinct change in the freedom writers had as they addressed this theme and a change in the way men perceived love. Chaucer explores love as a motivating theme in "The Knight's Tale" within his "Canterbury Tales".

Arcita and Palamon are the main characters within this tale and their actions are driven solely by their love for the fair Emily. This old English/Early Medieval view of love which Chaucer relates in "The Knight's Tale" is indicative of the role of women in society at the time and how men related to women in loving relationships. Arcita and Palamon's actions throughout the tale are based on a lustful obsession. The two see Emily through their window while they are imprisoned and fall in love with her, despite never having met her.

They value what men of their time would have valued in a woman, which was grace and beauty. They vow their love for her based solely on her appearance, as they would most likely not expect more than a superficial relationship upon marriage, as a woman's companionship was not as valued as her beauty. Toward the end of the tale, Palamon prays to Venus for the grace to win Emily's hand in marriage. Palamon asks Venus to make Emily his "sole possession", which mirrors the beliefs of Chaucer's day, that

women were not equals, but possessions, which could be won, owned and traded at a man's will.

The actions of Theseus illustrate this as well when he offers Emily's hand in marriage, without her consent, to Arcita or Palamon upon their completion of a duel the following year. This tale's driving force is a love theme. Arcita and Palamon are motivated by their obsession and jealousy as they attempt to win the favor of a woman that neither has ever met. I examined two medieval works to compare the theme of love within these works and the overwhelming consensus of the two works was that love is a danger and a distraction. I first examined " Sir Gawain and the Green Knight".

The lady who seduces Sir Gawain and gives him the green corset is only present to weaken and betray the knight. Sir Gawain expounds at the end of the tale that much like Adam, Samson and David, he too was misled by a woman. The poem " Lord Randall" held much the same view of love. The Lord is deceived by his lover and he is poisoned by her. These two works leave me with the impression that people at the time believed that love was a weakness of men and that they must resist the temptations of women as they are evil creatures that contrive to do harm.

I believe this view of love and, more importantly, of women was brought about by the religious dogma emerging at the time. Sir Gawain states that he "'tis the less blame" as he was misled by a woman, just as Adam was misled by Eve. This theory about the original sin was taking hold at the time and painting a very unfavorable picture of women. As we progress into the

Early Renaissance period, there is a dramatic shift in the perception of love and the manner in which writers use love as a theme in their works.

Sir Philip Sidney's "Astrophel and Stella" sonnets explore the less possessive and more compassionate side of love. In sonnet I, Astrophel struggles for the words to express his love and longing for Stella. In deep contrast to the earlier works, Sidney is using his work to appeal to the intellect of his love. He does not presume to have a right to this woman and he puts forth no desire to own her, instead he "looks in [his] heart and writes[s]". Sidney uses his words to win the affections of his love, instead of merely attempting to win her hand in marriage and he exposes men as vulnerable to the "pain" of love.

The Renaissance era was a time of radical change in thought and perhaps the greatest of all writers to expound upon the emotion of love, William Shakespeare, penned hundreds of pieces during this era. One of his most well known sonnets, #18, is a work that speaks of his adoration for a woman. His love and affection for this woman is the sole inspiration for this piece. He searches the catalog of nature's beauty in order to find some wonder with which to compare his love, but he cannot identify any which do not pale in comparison to her beauty.

Not only does Shakespeare vow his love for this woman, but he vows to love her always. Her "eternal summer" will never fade, even though she may age, he will recall her beauty and he will continue to love her. This concept of undying love despite a loss of physical beauty is a drastic change from the works represented in the medieval era. Shakespeare's vow of undying love

suggests a deeper connection between the lovers than a mere physical attraction. The fact that he promises to look beyond her aging body and continue to see her beauty is indicative of a deeper and more meaningful love.

Shakespeare reiterates this idea of intellectual love in sonnet # 130. He declares that while "Coral is far more red than her lips' red" and "music hath a far more pleasing sound" than her voice, he still views her as a "goddess". He acknowledges the fact that his love is not perfect, yet while she may be flawed; his love for her is more genuine than any purely physical attraction. The works of the neoclassical era are all but devoid of love as a theme in the writings. The works of this time seem to center themselves upon more academic subjects.

While Swift is very concerned with politics and social class, other authors are analyzing and satirizing the works of other authors, as Dryden does in "Mac Flecknoe" and as Pope accomplishes in "The Rape of the Lock" in which he satires the epic poem. The writers of this era have begun to write about writing and many of their works are nonfiction pieces. Unlike their predecessors, who created characters and contrived situations for their stories, the neoclassical writers are drawing upon real people and real life events to express a certain point of view.

These writers are using reason in their works far more than ever before and it may have been for this reason that they decided to abstain from the use of passionate and irrational emotions like love. Samuel Johnson in his "Preface to Shakespeare" looks at Shakespeare's use of love and passion within his

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works. He sees the use of love to “quicken or retard” the story as a cheap literary trick. Johnson believes that previous works have “misrepresented” the effects of love on people within the real world setting.

Beyond this fleeting mention of love in fiction, there is little to be seen of love as a theme in any of the works represented here. The poems by Gray, Collins and Pope are all poems of solitude. These writers are less concerned with the pleasures of life and love than earlier writers. They are of a new consciousness that desires time to reason and reflect. These new writers are analyzing their art and creating distinct styles and structures for the art of storytelling, as well as honing their critical skills.

The theme of love in literature changed a great deal over the several hundred years that we have explored this semester. The reason for the change is that the authors of these stories have been greatly influenced by the drastic changes that have occurred in social structure, religious beliefs and human relations since the time of the Anglo-Saxons prior to the 1500s. The authors of each era have gained a greater respect for the power and the pleasure of love throughout the years, as a result of the dramatic changes in lifestyles and belief systems from era to era.

As people were allowed more free time as the world progressed toward a more civilized society, people were allowed the opportunity to appreciate pleasurable experiences with their new found leisure time. As society evolved from a utilitarian lifestyle to a more structured society, men were allowed the opportunity to appreciate the beauty and intellect of women and from this new found leisure, came works about love and passion. The

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neoclassicists began to pull away from the use of love as an all-consuming passion to drive the story and began to investigate ways in which authors could create works that more closely reflected the real world.