

Love in Literature: Transcending Milieu...

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The theme of love has been integral to English literature since its genesis. Over the centuries romantic love has been portrayed by literature in its many facets: shared love, impossible love, lost love, sexual love, spiritual love and, perhaps most often, unrequited love. Love's impact on literature is profound. Many literary works from around the world have been based on or about love. Sometimes love in books is portrayed in a way that is too idealistic compared to the real world, or it is a realistic perception of love and has only been made to seem idealistic due to people's lack of faith in love. In Romeo and Juliet for instance, love is portrayed as something worth fighting for, even unto death.

There are many interesting interpretations and inferences of the term 'love'. According to the dictionary it is, "Strong affection that drives us towards the object of our desires; inclination of the soul and heart; affection; passion; exclusive inclination; theological grace." Wikipedia states that, "Love is the emotion of strong affection and personal attachment." In the philosophical context, "love is a virtue representing all of human kindness, compassion, and affection." In the religious context, "love is not just a virtue, but the basis for all being ("God is love"), and the foundation for all divine law (Golden Rule)." In the New Testament, it is "... So faith, hope and love endure. These are the great three, and the greatest of them is love...."(Corinthians 13:13) In the Qur'an, it is described as, "...And of His Signs is that He created mates for you from yourselves that you might find peace of mind in them, and He put between you love and compassion." (Chapter 30, verse 21) In the Kabbalah it is "... The pure impulse of dynamic creation is formless; and being formless, the creation it gives rise to can assume any and every form." According to etymology, the Greeks had three expressions to designate love: Eros, Philos and Agape. Eros is the healthy love between two persons that justifies life and perpetuates the human race. Philos is the sentiment that we dedicate to our friends. Finally, Agape,

which contains both Eros and Philo, far beyond “likes” someone. Agape is total love, the love that devours those who feel it.

Scientific study: In the year 2000, researchers Andreas Bartels and Semir Zeki, of University College in London, located the areas of the brain activated by romantic love by studying a group of students who claimed to be madly in love. In the first place, they concluded that the zones affected by the sentiment are far smaller than they had imagined, and are the same as those activated by stimuli of euphoria, such as in using cocaine. The results of the study led the authors to conclude that love is similar to the manifestation of physical dependence provoked by drugs.

Using the same system of scanning the brain, scientist Helen Fisher, of Rutgers University, concludes that three characteristics of love (sex, romanticism and mutual dependence) stimulate different areas of the cortex, and further opines that we can be in love with one person, want to make love to another, and live with a third.

The argument that the idea of love in modern literature differs conceptually from that of earlier periods is demonstrably false. Readers of literature from any era will find that although man acknowledges love in many ways, the fundamental idea remains constant. Therefore, whether one reads the tender longing of Shakespeare, the unattainable desire of Jane Austen or the whimsical prose of Dickenson, the message of love in its myriad form remains the same. The concept of love particular to the piece of writing is equally a study of psychology, sociology and anthropology as it is a literary endeavor. This paper is an effort to explain how the readers of literature do not learn anything intrinsically different about love across eras, but rather as humans, translate the timeless message of the many facets of love.

Tristan and Iseult, Lancelot and Guinevere, Aeneas and Dido, Troilus and Criseyde, Dante and Beatrice, Petrarch and Laura... Intense love of man and woman is a central subject in European literature. There is no clear distinction made between people who had historical existence and those who have only ever existed in imaginary fictions. Modern European

literature featuring love as the central subject began with crafted lyrics and fictional narratives about power and oppression, identity and difference, but later we find writers who claim to be writing about their personal experiences.

In the middle ages and the renaissance, the male lover is usually the central figure; in many cases the woman does not even realize how much she is loved. In many works, the initial focus is on the conflicts in the male psyche. The ideal of love looked for, if not always found, is a situation where the woman and the man experience identically strong feelings for one another. Once the male has expressed his feelings, the central conflict within the woman centers on how she should respond, given her position in society.

The earliest existence of the male and female species is replete with the omnipresent fatal attraction that goes around by the name of love. It is no wonder that writers from time immemorial have featured love in their stories. Throughout time, courtly love and romance has been a topic found in literature. Sometimes love is forbidden between two people. Such love stories are intriguing and provocative and they divide people with opinions of what is right or wrong. Love attaches family, couples and friends forever. Many reasons are attributed to why love is forbidden. These reasons can include: social class, feuding families, a love triangle, and homosexuality. The theme of forbidden love is often found in novels from the 19th Century and still appears in novels today.

Some of the common themes found of forbidden love in literature are:

The lovers come from two different religions.

The lovers come from two opposing ethnic groups.

One of the people in a relationship has an affair with another person.

There is a huge age difference between the two lovers.

Two cousins fall in love or in other cases a brother and sister.

The world tends to get in the way of the lovers' romance, either the lovers' parents or society. The two people in love usually fall in love at an early age. The lovers' time together is usually brief and ends tragically.

Often one if not both lovers, ends up getting hurt in some way. The lovers don't care if their love is forbidden by others. They will be together no matter what the consequences. To substantiate this, we discuss some of the immortal love stories.

Eternal love: Romeo and Juliet: This is probably the most famous pair of lovers cited. This couple has become a synonym for love itself. Romeo and Juliet is a tragedy by William Shakespeare. This is a tragic tale of two teenagers from two feuding families who fall in love at first sight and then marry, become true lovers and then risk it all for their love. Their "untimely deaths" ultimately unite their feuding households.

Tragic love: Antony and Cleopatra: based on a true story is one of the most memorable, intriguing and moving love of all times. The story of these two historical characters had later been dramatized by William Shakespeare and is still staged all over the world. They fell in love at first sight and their relationship put the country of Egypt in a powerful position. But their love affair outraged the Romans who were wary of the growing powers of the Egyptians. Despite all the threats, Anthony and Cleopatra got married. It is said that while fighting a battle against Romans, Antony got false news of Cleopatra's death. Shattered, he fell on his sword. When Cleopatra learned about Antony's death, she was shocked. And she took her own life.

Unattainable love: Lyla and Majnun: written by Nizami of Ganje and inspired by an Arab legend, this love story has been told and retold for centuries. Layla and Qays fall in love while at school. Their love is observed and they are soon prevented from seeing one another. In misery, Qays banishes himself to the desert to live among and be consoled by animals. He neglects to eat and becomes emaciated. Due to his eccentric behavior, he becomes known as Majnun (madman). There he befriends an elderly Bedouin who promises to win him Layla's hand through warfare. Layla's tribe is defeated, but her father continues to refuse her marriage to Majnun because of his mad behavior, and she is married to another. After the death of Layla's husband, the old Bedouin facilitates a meeting between Layla and Majnun, but they are never fully reconciled

in life. Upon death, they are buried side by side. The story is often interpreted as an allegory of the soul's yearning to be united with the divine.

Jealous Love: Everyone thinks of “**Othello**”, a great work of William Shakespeare, as a play about jealousy. But the green-eyed monster blocks the view. The jealousy could not exist without the love that drives it. Othello and Desdemona's love is at least as brave as Romeo and Juliet's. It is a lonely enterprise that defies racist scorn. Othello is a lover with the gift of the gab and the noblest of chat-up lines. And Desdemona is so devoted that, even in the face of the terrible change in her husband's amorous nature she loves him to the last.

Lost love: The tragic love story of Tristan and Isolde is from the medieval times during the reign of King Arthur. According to this Celtic Folk lore, Isolde was the daughter of the King of Ireland. She was betrothed to King Mark of Cornwall. King Mark sent his nephew, Tristan, to Ireland to escort Isolde back to Cornwall. During the voyage, Isolde and Tristan fell in love. Isolde did marry Mark of Cornwall, but could not help but love Tristan. The love affair continued after the marriage. When King Mark finally learned of the affair, he forgave Isolde, but Tristan was banned from Cornwall. Tristan went to Brittany. There he met Iseult of Brittany. He was attracted to her because of the similarity of her name to his true love. He married her, but did not consummate the marriage because of his love for the “true” Isolde. After falling ill, he sent for Isolde in the hope that she would be able to cure him. If she agreed to come, the returning ship's sails would be white, or the sails would be black if she did not agree. Iseult, seeing the white sails, lied to Tristan and told him that the sails were black. He died of grief before Isolde could reach him. Isolde also died.

Time-less love: Wuthering Heights: In one of the oldest heart-wrenching classics where Heathcliff rejected in love, plans revenge on the two families he believes has ruined him. Emily Brontë's novel takes us back to 1802 at the Wuthering Heights estate. In this timeless love story, our leading man Heathcliff grows to become best friends with his

adopted sister, Catherine, his life-long crush. But an offhand comment, overheard at the Heights, changes the course of both of their lives

Happy love: Recounted in Homer's *Iliad*, the story of Helen of Troy and the Trojan War is one of the most intriguing Greek heroic legends, combining fact and fiction. Helen of Troy is considered one the most beautiful women in literature of all the ages. She was married to Menelaus, King of Sparta. Paris, son of King Priam of Troy, fell in love with Helen and abducted her, taking her back to Troy. The Greeks assembled a great army, led by Menelaus's brother, Agamemnon, to retrieve Helen. Troy was destroyed. Helen returned safely to Sparta, where she lived happily with Menelaus for the rest of her life.

Desperate love: Orpheus and Eurydice story is an ancient Greek tale. Orpheus fell deeply in love with and married Eurydice, a beautiful nymph. They were very much in love and very happy together. Aristaeus, a Greek god of land and agriculture, became quite fond of Eurydice, and actively pursued her. While fleeing from Aristaeus, Eurydice ran into a nest of snakes which bit her fatally on her legs. Distraught, Orpheus played such sad songs and sang so mournfully that all the nymphs and gods wept. On their advice, Orpheus traveled to the underworld and by his music softened the hearts of Hades and Persephone (he was the only person ever to do so), who agreed to allow Eurydice to return with him to earth on one condition: he should walk in front of her and not look back until they both had reached the upper world. In his anxiety he forgot that both needed to be in the upper world, and he turned to look at her, and she vanished for the second time, but now forever.

Longing love: Odysseus and Penelope: This Greek pair after being torn apart, waited twenty long years to be reunited. War takes Odysseus away shortly after his marriage to Penelope. Although she has little hope of his return, she resists the 108 suitors who are anxious to replace her husband. Odysseus is equally devoted, refusing a beautiful sorceress's offer of everlasting love and eternal youth, so that he might return home to his wife and son.

Passionate love: Gone with the wind: can be identified as one of the immortal pieces of literary works in this world. Margaret Mitchell has chronicled the love and hate relationship between Scarlett O’Hara and Rhett Butler. Surprisingly, Scarlett O’Hara and Rhett Butler never seem to be quite in synch. Throughout the epic story, this tempestuous twosome experience passion but not permanence, and their stormy marriage reflects the surrounding Civil War battles. The flirtatious, promiscuous, and perpetually pursued Scarlett can’t make up her mind between her many suitors. When she finally decides to settle on being happy with Rhett, her fickle nature has already driven him away. Hope springs eternal in our devious heroine, however, and the novel ends with Scarlett proclaiming, “Tomorrow is another day.”

We have an amazing variety of mythical love stories that abound in Sanskrit literature, which is undoubtedly one of the richest treasure hoards of exciting love tales. Classical love legends from Hindu mythology and folklore of India are both passionate and sensuous in content, and never fail to appeal to the romantic in us. These fables fuel our imagination, engage our emotions, sense and sensibility, and above all, entertain us. The tale-within-a-tale-within-a-tale format of the great epics of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, lodges a lot of love legends. Then there are the charming stories of Hindu gods and goddesses in love and the well-known works like Kalidasa’s *Meghadutam* and *Abhijnanashakuntalam* and Surdasa’s lyrical rendition of the legends of Radha, Krishna and the gopis of Vraj. Many eternal Indian love stories like Shakuntala-Dushyant tale, Legend of Savitri and Satyavan and many versions of Radha-Krishna romances are an integral part of Indian culture.

Many critics have tried to explain this fascinating concept of love from the modern literary perspective. The **Four Loves** is a book by C. S. Lewis which explores the nature of love from a Christian perspective through thought experiments. The content of the examination is prefaced by Lewis’ admission that he initially mistook St. John’s words “God is Love” as a simple beginning point to address the topic. But further meditation revealed two different kinds of love: “need-love” (such as the love of a

child for its mother) as distinguished from “gift-love” (epitomized by God’s love for humanity). Lewis happened upon the insight that the nature of even these basic categories of love are more complicated than they seem at first. As a result of this, he formulates the foundation of his topic by exploring the nature of pleasure, and then divides love into four categories (“the highest does not stand without the lowest”), based in part on the four Greek words for love: affection, friendship, Eros, and charity. Lewis states that just as Lucifer—a former archangel—perverted himself by pride and fell into depravity, so too can love—commonly held to be the arch-emotion—become corrupt by presuming itself to be what it is not.

E.M. Forster’s “Aspects of the Novel” addresses the constant theme of love in every book. Love in our characters respectively mirrors our Passion and Love of writing. Love in literature, innately, is not there for the reader, but for the writer. If the writer wants to pass the feeling of love, that is perfectly fine, since that is what Romance novels allude to. But Love is necessary for all literature, for if there is no Love, there is no Passion and no literature. The subject of love will continue to play an important role in literature. New ideas and small amendments to older traditions will make love an interesting theme in the years to come. However, we can already easily acknowledge the importance of love in the history of our literature.

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