
The Collapse of Idealistic Love

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The Modern Age was pervaded by a strand of thought that it was necessary to break away from established norms and conventions in favour of new modes of self-expression. Perhaps, of no age more than this, is it apt to assert that the state of the society is perfectly reflected in the literature of the time. The cultural breakdown and the quest for a better future produced a mirror image in the varied experiments with both the forms and themes of literature. Love was not exempt from this transition and its depiction in literature underwent massive changes. The depiction of love in literature has always been a vital means of understanding the society of the time --- true love was unquestionable and won out in the end. Even when the end of the lovers was tragic, it was not their love itself that was the culprit, but rather its opposing forces in the story --- cases in point being the societal discord that culminated in the tragedy of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the political pressure that caused the collapse of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the cultural gap that contributed to the deaths of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. It was readily accepted that love made life worth living through all difficulties. And yet, as Virginia Woolf famously declared in 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', "...in or about December, 1910, human character changed", and this change automatically imposed itself on love, changed the way in which love was depicted in literature and the other arts.

The experiments in literature manifested itself clearly in the depiction of love. The cultural breakdown was reflected in the moral breakdown of the time, and the disillusionment of the age was

reflected in the disillusionment with idealistic love in literature. Love was not thought of as an escape any longer --- it did not stand segregated above other emotions, but was subjected to the same fall and disintegration as everything else. Though it still remained thematically integral to Modern art, it was not the hero anymore, but, the common man.

The Victorian Age, on the surface level, was an idealistic age where the great ideals of conventional love were brought to the fore in literature. But there was a darkness lurking beneath the surface that reared its ugly head in the Modern Age. One of the factors that had an immense impact on the collective psychology of the Victorians was Darwin's theory of evolution, published in his *Origin of Species* in 1859. This played a major role in shattering their religious belief system and it shook their faith to the core. The Victorian artists' view of what was significant in human affairs was public and agreed; the loss of the confident sense of a common world, of a public view of what was important to people, directly affected themes in fiction. The superficial morality and the facade of happiness of the Victorian era was gradually stripped away through a series of cultural shocks, the greatest of these being the First World War. Though the true dawning of disillusionment was seen in the Modern Age, its signs can be traced back to an earlier time.

For instance, Matthew Arnold clearly held up his disillusionment with religion in 'Dover Beach'. He holds up the reality of the Victorian Age where pain was suppressed with a mask of joy. And he turns to love for any possible consolation --- it is tentative, but nonetheless, it is there. But in the Modern Age, love was not an escape from worldly troubles, rather it was a part of such problems like all else in life --- herein was seen a disillusionment with love. An instance is seen in T.S. Eliot's 'The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock', which is an examination of the tortured psyche of the prototypical

Modern man --- overeducated, eloquent, neurotic and emotionally stilted. Here there is no consolation in reaching out for love, but rather, that poses as yet another problem. Conventional love is abandoned here in favour of expressing the concerns and mental isolation of a middle-aged man, trying and failing to find solace in love. Prufrock's vision is incommunicable, and whatever he says to the lady will be perhaps answered by," "That is not what I meant at all; /That is not it, at all." Just like him, she too is imprisoned in her own sphere and the two spheres can never join to become one --- they live in their own worlds that are impenetrable by love. This is antithetical to the idea of the lovers in Donne's 'The Good Morrow', where each lover possesses their own world, but also form one whole world together as a couple. This degenerative conception of love reflects in the degenerating relationship in Eliot's 'Portrait of a Lady'. Here the relationship is between a young man and an older lady, although the nature of the relationship is not explicitly defined. The narrator occupies himself with superficial matters, he avoids serious questions and seems satisfied with his prosaic lifestyle; we only find out what the lady says to him, but not what he says back. There is an emotional detachment and a sort of air of indifference about him. It is as though the "buried life" of the older woman generates in her more youthful energy than the young man, who is already living a dead life. It is a far cry from conventional love lyrics when she tells him," "Ah, my friend, you do not know, you do not know/ What life is, you who hold it in your hands '...' You let it flow from you, you let it flow,/And youth is cruel and has no remorse/And smiles at situations which it cannot see." The more idealistic " 'I am always sure that you understand/My feelings..." is described by its listener as "out-of-tune". The poem ends unconventionally; neither in happiness, nor in the tragedy of death, although death is hinted at; but in the apparently permanent separation of the two when he leaves her to go abroad. But

in spite of all his indifference, he does feel “a slight sensation of being ill at ease” and feels as though he had mounted the stairs to her door on his hands and knees before he informs her about leaving. In ‘Burnt Norton’, Eliot said “Love is most nearly itself/When here and now cease to matter”; and in both the poems formerly mentioned, we find that love plays second fiddle to the “here and now” and is controlled by it.

A work of the early Modern Age, ‘Heart of Darkness’ by Joseph Conrad also shows a very unconventional depiction of love on multiple levels. It has a striking similarity in narrative structure and depiction of a dark, mysterious atmosphere with Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*; but perhaps even more striking is its deviation in the depiction of love from the Victorian work. The love of Catherine and Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights* has become an archetype --- it expresses the passionate longing to be whole, to give oneself unreservedly to another and gain a whole self or sense of identity back, to be all-in-all for each other. This concept may find a resonance in Conrad’s idea of the double self or doppelganger that Marlow and Kurtz seem to find in one other. In the earlier work, the focus is on finding a soulmate and the completion of oneself through love; in the Modern Age, the focus shifts on to the alter-ego or double self; conventional love is clouded over by other emotions and other factors, its importance in human affairs takes a downward turn. Catherine and Heathcliff’s love is based on the shared perception that they are the same --- Catherine declares, famously, “I am Heathcliff” and Heathcliff laments after her death, “I cannot live without my soul!” The relationship between Kurtz and his Intended stands on an entirely different plane from this. Kurtz dies not thinking of her, but rather of “The horror! The horror!” --- a fact that his double self, Marlow, distorts and lies about while speaking to his grieving widow. And neither can this be called a case of unrequited love --- we find

that his Intended is actually devoted to an image of Kurtz instead of the man himself; she is full of praise for his “words” and “example”, but not for who he is as a person. Perhaps this is because she hardly knows him as a person --- no one really knows anyone in this society and no one really understands Kurtz --- perhaps except Marlow, who forms an indescribable, intricate psychological bond with him. In *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine and Heathcliff have an affinity for each other which draws them together; in ‘Heart of Darkness’, this sort of relationship is aptly applied to Kurtz and Marlow rather than Kurtz and his Intended. From here comes in a suggestion of homosexuality or at least, a homosocial bond. Victorian literature revolved around a heteronormative society, but gradually elements of homosexuality were woven into literature from the early Modern Age. Even greater suggestions of homosexuality are found in some works of D. H. Lawrence, one of the most important authors to break the conventions of and change our perceptions about love. He is one of the few artists of the Modern Age who primarily worked upon the theme of love. There are unavoidable sexual undertones in the relationship between Ursula and her tutor Miss Winifred Inger in *The Rainbow*; and between Rupert Birkin and Gerald Crich in its sequel, *Women in Love*. The bond between Rupert and Gerald is as compelling and important as their relationships with the women and the intense psychological and physical attraction between them adds a different dimension to our understanding of their heterosexual relationships. At the end of the novel, Rupert places his relationship with the deceased Gerald on an equal footing with his relationship with Ursula --- he needs them both in different ways. In Lawrence, we find great deviations from accepted and appropriated literary traditions, and one work of great merit is his *Sons and Lovers*. Lawrence uses Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex to explore the relationship between Paul Morel and his mother, which travels beyond the bounds of a conventional mother-son relationship. At the

end of the novel, he seems to have subverted his Oedipal fate by killing her instead of his father and we see some hope within the ruins of his life.

Thus, in Modern literature, we find long established conventions being subject to critical examination and change – with norms being broken and new perspectives being examined and entertained. We see a transition and marked change in the way ‘love’ was interpreted, gone were the traditional conventions of courtship, where talk, conversation and ‘things being said’ were vital, replaced by the more complex subtleties of psychology and the underlying connotations of ‘what is not said’.

Gone with the Wind written by Margaret Mitchell starts off in a conventional manner, but as one maps out the progress of this classic tale, one can see that it does not conform to traditional rules, and is much more than a quest for love. The novel can be approached from an anti-romantic perspective, or as an ironic use of the conventions to undercut our expectations of the genre. There is certainly a focus on romantic relationships, and marriage and all the social conventions surrounding it are important themes, but the plot should not be confused with the vehicles of the plot. The two male leads in this story are Rhett Butler and Ashley Wilkes. Rhett acts as a foil and plays the North to Ashley’s South – the contrast between the two men serving to deepen our understanding of the clashing cultural attitudes and tensions that were present in the South. Ashley stands for the romantic and doomed values of the Southern world, while Rhett represents the hardened, practical Northern world that rises up victorious after the war. The real import of the narrative is not Scarlett O’Hara’s love life, but a more ambitious portrayal of war and its aftermath as they affect a specific group of people. The flirtations and marriages certainly help move the plot along, but the give-away is that they are not ends in themselves, but always a means to an end.

The flirtations, the marriages, the ‘love’, all of it, are simply a vehicle to progress the overall scheme of things. We do not see a charade of courtship being played out; instead, we see actions driven by fortitude and desperation. Love here, is used as a means to depict this willpower and desperation, to the extent that one is forced to question its very definition. Scarlet’s marriages (Frank Kennedy and Rhett) are borne out of a need to survive, her real love/affection lies with neither for Frank, nor Rhett, but for Tara – and for Ashley. Her marriages are simply used as a device to further the plot, and to create situations that may depict the divide between the old southern and the new northern influx. Love and marriage are, for the most part simply used to depict the more pertinent issues of the civil war ravaged southern states.

Virginia Woolf was an author imbued with the spirit of Modernism, who explored the destructive side of love. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa leaves Peter as she feared that his all-pervading love would have left her devoid of something vital to the Modern society --- an individual sphere. She feared the destructive force of love that would destroy the “privacy of the soul”, and thus, this privacy presides over love, and “To love makes one solitary”. This idea is also used in *To the Lighthouse*, where the characters are disturbed by realisations that no form of love is exempt from destructiveness. Woolf was afflicted by a mental disorder which ultimately drove her to fill her overcoat pockets with stones and walk into the River Ouse to drown herself in 1941. With this, a whole pattern of literary culture is broken, and it can be said that Modernism died with her death.

Daphne du Maurier is one who has been classed as a romantic novelist. Her novels are anything but conventional romances – described as being “moody and resonant”. Her works, which contain overtones of the paranormal, the dark and the gloomy, are notable for their lack of a “happy ending”.

Rebecca is an intriguing work, with a strong undercurrent of the Goth theme. It is a love story – that of the unnamed protagonist and Maxim de Winter. Yet, it is shrouded in an air of mystery and gloom which leads to utter hopelessness and despair, before giving way to a few fleeting moments of happiness which is as soon dashed out as it arrives. It is symbolic that we do not know the name of the protagonist, as the struggle in *Rebecca* is not a struggle to find love, but to establish one’s own identity – a concept echoed in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. The only way for Mrs. De Winter to find her love, is by establishing her own identity – by becoming the mistress of Manderley, and ousting the ghostly omniscient presence of Rebecca which haunts the estate. For a love novel, *Rebecca* spends very little time dwelling on ‘love’, and the irony of Maxim and the protagonist being brought closer through the revelation of murder cannot be lost on the audience. Mrs. Danvers, is the vessel through which the spirit of Rebecca lingers. It is she who drives the protagonist to the point of utter desperation and misery, almost resulting in her committing suicide. Thus we can see, the novel is less about completion of one’s self through the discovery of a soul mate, but more about self-identification in the presence of what may be dubbed as a moral opposite. Through the gloom, tribulations, anxiety, desperation and death, the De Winter’s do seem to get a chance at love, life and happiness, but this too is taken away as the couple return home, only to find Manderley in flames. The book, which is a memory narrative, with statements such as “Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again”, and “We can never go back again, that much is certain”, leaves an ominous taste in the mouths of readers and represents a certain lack of fulfillment. The protagonist is haunted not only by the ghost of Manderley, but also by Rebecca – whom she sees instead of her own reflection in her dream. All of this begs the question as to if Maxim and she will ever find love and solace.

Yet, they are not without hope. They are still together and may yet have a chance at love.

During the Victorian times, a constant over-stimulation of the senses immunised people to shock; and many believed this numbness could be counteracted only with an even greater shock. Thus, the shock that the secret affair in Browning's 'Porphyria's Lover' fails to bring, is brought about by the act of murder when the speaker strangles the lady to death with her own hair. In an ironic resonance, when the society was recovering from the cultural shock of the First World War, and began to gain hope for a better future, it met with the even greater cultural shock of the Second World War, wherein all hope was lost. But instead of a sense of panic, there was rather a strange, ugly calmness --- the despair of the post-World War I period was replaced by a numbness or indifference to everything. Modernism had been about breaking conventions in favour of something new, and hence arose a new outlook on love, for better or for worse, and new ways to present it. But in post-Modernism, the quest for something new, the quest for anything at all, was abandoned. In a society characterised by hopelessness and indifference, it was only logical that love be depicted in the same vein. It was like an acceptance that when life itself is treated as a painful pathway to death, even love cannot save you, cannot help you, cannot move you.

This hopelessness was reflected in a post-Modern work by Du Maurier where we see a deviation from the concept of love in *Rebecca*. Richard "Dick" Young, the protagonist of Du Maurier's novel *The House on the Strand* reluctantly decides to act as a test subject for a hallucinogenic drug created by his friend, and finds that it enables him to enter into the landscape around him as it existed during the early 14th Century. He feels compelled to follow Roger, steward to Sir Henry Champernowne and secret lover to his wife, Lady Isolda Carminowe. He comes to share this love. Du Maurier

manipulates the parallels between Dick's real and imaginary worlds so as to enlist sympathy for Dick's rejection of the real world. Dick's disenchantment, emptiness and boredom with daily life are symbolic of the tediousness of society. It is made clear that Dick does not truly love his wife — which makes plausible his increasing desire to escape into the past. He is aware that his life in the fourteenth century is all a fantasy and that he is killing himself pursuing it, but he would rather live vicariously in the glorious past, even if it is a dream, than die of boredom in what is called reality. As the book closes, Dick attempts to pick up the phone but suddenly finds he is unable to grip it. The ending is ambiguous; the reader is left to wonder if Dick is dead, paralysed or simply collapsing? Daphne du Maurier said of it: "What about the hero of *The House on the Strand*? What did it mean when he dropped the telephone at the end of the book? I don't really know, but I rather think he was going to be paralysed for life. Don't you?"

This dark attitude is resonant of the cynicism of the time, displaying a lack of belief in love and society.

The Stranger written by Albert Camus is an existential novel which brought out Camus' beliefs and philosophy strongly. Through this work, he explores his absurdist ideas in life and its relations – his words resonating the cynicism and nihilism present in the general population due to the cultural shock of the two world wars. "Amor vincit omnia, et nos cedamus amori" ('Love conquers all; let us all yield to love!') – a line from Virgil's eclogues shows how, since the earliest of times, the concept that 'love makes the world go round' was one which was accepted and believed in. But under the morbid atmosphere of the world wars, even love proved to be too weak a force. In *The Stranger*, Camus brings out the irrationality of the ideas of society, its futility and meaninglessness and the importance of the physical world – of things that are, rather than ideal abstractions.

The first two sentences of the book are - "MOTHER died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure. The telegram from the Home says: YOUR MOTHER PASSED AWAY. FUNERAL TOMORROW. DEEP SYMPATHY. That doesn't mean anything; it could have been yesterday." Spoken by the protagonist – Meursault, the lines introduce the readers to his emotional indifference and bluntness, his two principal characteristics. His emotional detachment is evident from his casual attitude. Meursault's statement "That doesn't mean anything" is significant as it connotes the triviality of the entire issue for him. Something as significant as the death of his mother does not faze him. This lack of feeling (of love) eclipsed the general sentiments of the population of the time, and is further highlighted when he asks his boss for leave, both, through his boss' annoyance and his statement – "I had an idea he looked annoyed, and I said, without thinking: "Sorry, sir, but it's not my fault, you know.""

Possibly, the most important exchange in the respect of love occurs between Marie and Meursault when she comes to meet him one evening:-

"Marie came that evening and asked me if I'd marry her. I said I didn't mind; if she was keen on it, we'd get married.

Then she asked me again if I loved her. I replied, much as before, that her question meant nothing or next to nothing—but I supposed I didn't.

"If that's how you feel," she said, "why marry me?"

I explained that it had no importance really, but, if it would give her pleasure, we could get married right away. I pointed out that, anyhow, the suggestion came from her; as for me, I'd merely said, "Yes."

Then she remarked that marriage was a serious matter.

To which I answered: "No."

She kept silent after that, staring at me in a curious way. Then she asked:

"Suppose another girl had asked you to marry her—I mean, a girl you liked in the same way as you like me—would you have said 'Yes' to her, too?"

"Naturally."

Then she said she wondered if she really loved me or not. I, of course, couldn't enlighten her as to that. And, after another silence, she murmured something about my being "a queer fellow." "And I daresay that's why I love you," she added. "But maybe that's why one day I'll come to hate you."

To which I had nothing to say, so I said nothing.

She thought for a bit, then started smiling and, taking my arm, repeated that she was in earnest; she really wanted to marry me.

"All right," I answered. "We'll get married whenever you like.""

This conversation shows the difference in the conceptions of Marie and Meursault and brings to the fore Camus' absurdist theory, where even 'love' is futile. Meursault is willing to marry for the sake of marriage. On being told that marriage is a serious issue he simply replies with a stoic – "No". Meursault is more concerned with the physical aspects of society and love. There are numerous instances when he compliments Marie on her appearance, but not once does he express any sort of emotion towards the relationship they possess. His descriptions of the physical world are ornate and vivid, with the heat of the sun causing him more pain than the death of his mother. Even in prison, he muses about the loss of his physical relationship with Marie, while she bemoans the loss of his company.

Camus' philosophy shows the estrangement of man from society, Meursault is not just a stranger to the society, but also to himself and

to any sort of emotion – including love, even when it stares him in the face.

In the post-Modern era, we find a complete degeneration in the concept of idealistic love --- from seeing its different interpretations in the Modern Age, it has now dwindled down to near-indifference. And yet, the importance of love in life cannot go unacknowledged. The fact that it can challenge, liberate, damage and inspire all of us makes love, perhaps, the most enthralling aspect of writing in literature old and new. This period during which love was stomped down by numbness, was the time that needed love the most. This is evidenced by perhaps the most well-known lines of poetry about love written in the last century --- Larkin’s “What will survive of us is love” from ‘An Arundel Tomb’ and Auden’s “we must love one another or die” from ‘September 1, 1939’. Interestingly, both these lines were later publicly scorned by their respective creators. This is perhaps indicative of the lack of understanding that marred the idea of love during this period. The condition of life was such that it only permitted a distortion of the idea of love. And this led up to the natural consequence of the whole society asking what Samuel Beckett put into words in his play *Words and Music* : “Do we mean love, when we say love?”

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