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## Identical Hearts, Different Rhythms: The Various Viewpoints of Marlowe, Raleigh, and Dickinson

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## Identical Hearts, Different Rhythms: The Various Viewpoints of Marlowe, Raleigh, and Dickinson

Everyone views love in a different way—there are romantics who like to believe that they will one day find their happily ever after story, there are others who don't believe in love at all, and mostly, there are people who exist on a level somewhere in between the two extremists. “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love,” a love poem written by Christopher Marlowe initiates a discussion about whether lust can be classified as love. After it had been published, Marlowe's close friend, Sir Walter Raleigh, wrote a poem in response to Marlowe's work called “The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd.” Though it has not been confirmed, one may suspect that Emily Dickinson's “I Cannot Live With You” was also written as a response to the works of the two men, and if not, it still serves to enhance the reader's understanding of the subject by comparison. Readers can see that each poet expresses a different viewpoint on courtship and, though their pieces of literature do not provide an accurate interpretation of love, they illustrate the various forms that love can take.

Marlowe's poem exemplifies the first stages of love—the carefree and wild kind, commonly classified as “young love.” The piece starts with a shepherd trying to seduce his beloved who, after reading Raleigh's reply, may be presumed to be a nymph. Despite the fact that he has barely enough money to survive, much less to comfortably support another, the love struck man courts the nymph. He implores her to come to him, saying that he will give her all sorts of riches: “And I will make thee beds of roses/ And a thousand fragrant posies/ A cap of flower, and a kirtle/ Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle” (Marlowe 9-12). The shepherd promises the nymph all sorts of amusements in return for her love—however, it stands apparent that all that the shepherd has to offer are riches and delights obtained from the land. Having no money, nor any luxuries, his only chance of wooing the nymph comes through empty

promises—which is what he offers. He also promises that they will “[...] sit upon the rocks, / Seeing the shepherds feed their flocks” (Marlow 5-6) and that the two will frolic from dawn till dusk. In reality, the shepherd will work all day, tending to his flock, while the nymph would have to take care of the house and children like a common housemaid—there would be no time for play, there would not even be much time to rest.

Though Marlow’s poem shows a beginning stage of love, the poem does not depict the true nature of this love—rather, it shows a highly exaggerated version. The poet also does not portray a realistic scenario. First off, the poem talks about a love that lets the couple throw all duty and responsibility out the window, and allows them to act like children playing all day. There remains another main aspect that deters the poem from expressing true love: The shepherd woos through materials—he does not care whether she will like him for who he is, the man only focuses on luring the nymph in with trinkets. In reality, the shepherd is not experiencing love. No one would truly fall in love with someone whom they do not even know; therefore, the shepherd is experiencing lust, which may be the reason for his endless pursuit.

In real life, being in love does not mean that obligations can be thrown to the wind. If anything, love will cause more responsibilities to be added, especially if the couple is committed to a relationship. They will be expected to care for each other and also have equal responsibility in managing the household, meaning that they will both have to work hard to make their lives run smoothly. No such thing exists as “love at first sight” except in fairytales, as true feelings can only be formed through a close bond and connections of the mind and soul, not just the physical features. Though trinkets and other baubles may be able to lure someone into a trap, there is no way that that person will fall in love with her captor—trinkets may soothe the mind, but they will have no effect on the heart and the soul unless the person is naive or shallow.

In “The Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd,” Raleigh’s response to Marlow’s poem, the nymph directs her reply toward the shepherd. Though it has a slightly more realistic view of love, the poem still raises issues. In the poem, the nymph easily sees through the shepherd’s empty promises as she states: “Thy gowns, they shoes, thy bed of roses, / They cap, thy kirtle, and thy posies, / Soon break, soon wither, soon forgotten, / In folly ripe, in reason rotten” (Raleigh 13-16). She claims that if all the shepherd’s promises were true, and they could both remain young forever, then she would have been convinced to love him. Though she refuses the shepherd’s advances due to this fact, she also admits at the end of the poem that she would have been fine with being his wife and leading a harsh life, as long as he was truly in love with her and not just her appearance: “But could youth last and love still breed, / Had joys no date nor age no need, / Then these delights my mind might move” (Raleigh 21-23). Seeing through the shepherd’s false claims of love, the nymph perceives that he is only experiencing the feelings of lust because he offers her materialistic items and no mention of marriage.

Though the nymph has a slightly better understanding of love than the shepherd—who only knows the feelings of lust—she only understands the love that a man can have for a woman’s physical attributes, such as her body and her voice. She believes that even if she accepted the shepherd, and gave him all her love, that the shepherd would soon leave her. As soon as he laid eyes on another woman with features that he liked, the nymph would be forgotten as he started a new pursuit. Unlike the shepherd in Marlowe’s poem, the nymph does realize that loving is more than just material—she takes it upon herself to inform the shepherd of his folly. Being cynical, she’s a foil to his naiveté—the nymph seeks a better, more sustainable match. To discourage the shepherd’s advances, she sets impossible conditions for him to meet. In short, she declares that he must be immortal for her to love him. By giving him unmanageable

requirements, the nymph hopes that the shepherd will see that they would not work out even if the nymph had accepted him.

In reality, true love forms when the outside shell of a person is not taken into consideration and all of the person's flaws are accepted without complaint. When two people are in love, it does not matter to them how the other looks. The other could be the ugliest, most disfigured, person alive on the outside, yet the person will only see the beautiful spirit residing within them. True love does not define just a connection between two bodies or two people, it is the connection between two souls. Trinkets should not sway the heart—material stays disposable and breakable, yet true love will be able to persevere forever. Being just “happy” with their lives also does not guarantee that the nymph and the shepherd would fall in love—eventually something or another would go wrong and the bond between the two would not survive because they were not really in love; they were just living together. Even if the shepherd could somehow keep his youth—pretty soon, one of them would be unable to continue the relationship and would leave, ending the relationship for good.

Dickinson writes the third, and final, poem—out of the three poems, this differs the most. Even though Dickinson seems to scorn the idea of loving someone in the poem, in reality, out of the three poems she understands the true concept of love most thoroughly. In the poem, the woman gives the man she loves various reasons as to why they should not be together. She claims that she cannot live with him because the church will keep them apart as well as their different spheres in society. She also believes that two people cannot die together because no one can die with another—it is an independent act. Then, Dickinson continues to say that she will never be able to rise with the man, due to the fact that the love she has for the man will block the love she has for Jesus, and the love Jesus has for her, because she would choose him over Jesus.

She expresses these feelings by stating: “Nor could I rise-with You-/Because Your Face/Would put out Jesus’-” (Dickinson 21-23). In short, Dickinson concludes that no matter where the two end up—even if they were in the same place—if they were apart, both would still suffer. The ending to her poem serves as a paradox: “So We must meet apart—/ You there —I—Here—” (Dickinson 49-50). The woman comes to the conclusion that it is better to not love at all, which would spare both of the people from having to deal with all the problems that came with love.

Though the only poet out of the three to realize that love is more than just lust and physical form, Dickinson does not realize that there can be love, even if it is not perfect. The poem illustrates that it remains better not to love because of all the baggage that comes along with the feeling. The woman in the poem convinces herself that dealing with the problems together would not be worth the love that she and the man would be able to share. Instead, she tries to convince the man to let her go, as she is doing to him, so that they will both be able to live easier lives. Another problem that Dickinson introduces in the poem concerns the question of what will happen to the two lovers after they die. She shows that the woman feels afraid of what lies in wait on the other side, as she lists many “what-if” scenarios. Because of the many religious laws that the couple has broken by loving each other, she fears that there will no longer be a place for them in Heaven.

What Dickinson fails to understand is that true love remains something that is worth fighting for. Because of her extreme exclusion from society, Dickinson’s definition of love would never have had a chance to develop through experience. She did comprehend the hardships presented by love much better than both Marlowe and Raleigh, however, she did not see that the results would be worth conquering the hurdles. Dickinson also worried about what the future can hold. Truth to be told, no one can predict the future. Worrying too much over

things that cannot be controlled will result in nothing—instead, one should strive to live in the moment and be happy, yet still be prepared for the possible setbacks in the future. By convincing both the man and herself to let each other go, it is true that both of them will lead easier lives. However, that does not mean that their easy lives will be happy. Without happiness, there exists no reason to live.

Dickinson's poem proves the opposite of Marlowe's poem: in the latter, all responsibilities are forgotten, however in Dickinson's poem, too much responsibility is taken—even if there exists no way to be responsible for some problems. Raleigh's poem also connects with Dickinson's: in his piece, the nymph believes that she and the shepherd will not be happy together because they are not a suitable match. That thought remains the same in Dickinson's, however she focuses more on the fact that the happiness will not survive even if the match is right. She acknowledges that love will always be imperfect and that there will be cracks in the path. However, unlike the nymph—who does not recuperate the shepherd's feelings and tries to end his wooing by showing him that they would not be happy together—the woman in Dickinson's poem shies away from the hardships and convinces herself that love is not worth the risks, even though she does love the man.

Their views on love may also have been influenced by the voice that they were writing in. A man writing in a man's voice, Marlow would have written what he would have thought a woman would like to hear. Judging by his words, one can see that he thinks of woman as if they were easily won over and easily fooled into loving a person. Raleigh, being a man writing in a woman's perspective, would have had no way of knowing what a woman's thoughts on love were. Even if he had asked someone, having not experienced what she was feeling firsthand, he would not have been able to convey the exact feelings. Dickinson, who, like Marlow is writing in

the voice of her own gender, seems to draw more on her personal experiences. “Scholars have[...]speculated that she suffered from conditions such as agoraphobia, depression and/or anxiety.” (A&E Television Networks). Due to her depression, Dickinson may have seen love in a pessimistic light and written from that point of view.

Marlowe, Raleigh, and Dickinson composed three poems, each of which shows extremely different perspectives on love. Marlowe shows love exists as lust in disguise. His poem paints a fantasy that love is perfect, and that nothing can go wrong when someone falls in love. Raleigh tries to be a bit more realistic when he responds to Marlowe—though he proves able to distinguish between love and desire, he still makes the mistake of thinking that happiness will fix everything. Lastly, Dickinson paints the most realistic portrayal of love, yet she only focuses on the problems that will prevent love, and believes that there exists no way for love to survive when there are so many obstacles in its way. Though all three poems exclude a few elements of true love, the poets all take a definite stand on their thoughts regarding love. However, they missed the fact that not all love has to be true: true love exists when love perseveres through all the negativity that is sure to be present in any relationship, yet still manages to retain its magical spark.



Sources:

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