

## What's Love Got to Do With It?

“Most Americans cannot tell the difference between love and anxiety” (Bell 179). Love is an obsession in American culture. An American can hardly get out of bed before encountering some love-related media. The equal potential for romantic love is a myth that reinforces the belief in the American Dream: if you work hard enough you can achieve your dream of upward social mobility. The dream includes the house with the white picket fence and the marriage that ends with happily ever after. This belief in romantic love raises several pressing questions surrounding the nature of love like, “Is romantic love a privilege?,” “What is romantic love anyway?,” “Why do we believe in it?,” “Is it a reasonable barometer for successful relationships or marriages?,” and “Is romantic love given too many unrealistic expectations?” The answer to these questions are complicated but extraordinarily important to consider when examining our culture's worship of romantic love in all its insanities and revelries.

First, it is important to acknowledge that romantic love is a relatively new concept in the grand scheme of civilization. Gail Putney points out in the article “The Adjusted American” that “Romantic Love is an invention of the Middle Ages. The troubadours built the myth of love. They fashioned such ideas as love at first sight, the existence of an ideal lover for each person, and the power of true love to conquer all” (Putney 10). The romantic love that we worship is an invention made by Western culture centuries ago during a time where romantic love had no place in the institution of marriage. Most people, whether peasant or aristocrat, married for very pragmatic economic, social, and familial reasons (Putney 10). Therefore, Americans base marriage on a “culturally defined emotion which was considered incompatible with marriage by those who shaped it” (Putney 10). Though Americans see romantic love as a normal human

experience, in actuality, it is an invention that they continue to use for a function the inventors never intended.

So why do Americans cling so desperately to the notion of romantic love even though it is inherently flawed in its understanding and uses? Bell states that “By putting the love experience at the center of life, the mythology deftly draws attention away from opportunities that are very unequally distributed, such as work satisfaction, a pleasant environment, and security in one’s old age” (Bell 183). In this statement, Bell argues that the reason so many Americans buy into the notion of romantic love is because it upholds society's illusion of meritocracy. The promise of romantic love distracts us from the fact that Americans are born unequal. It makes one believe that though all other elements of one's life may be disadvantaged no one is disadvantaged in the quest for romantic love which realistically is not true. In many other cultures when people get married they consider developing feelings of love to be a rare occurrence and have no more expectation of being in love with their spouse than “Americans count on becoming millionaires.”(Bell 178)

The reality that romantic love is an unequal playing field is supported by Fromm when he says “What specifically makes a person attractive depends on the fashion of the time, physically as well as mentally” (From 3). Therefore, attraction in the name of romantic love is entirely left up to chance and arbitrarily depends on the fashion of desirability at a particular point in time. These constructs leave the majority of people out of that category of attractiveness completely at random.

Not only are there sociological issues concerning romantic love, but there are some real problems with its practical application. As Peck astutely describes it “The essence of the phenomenon of falling in love is a sudden collapse of a section of an individual's ego boundaries,

permitting one to merge his or her identity with that of another person page”( Peck 87). This phenomenon relieves humans of the immense burden of loneliness by tricking the mind into temporarily merging with the mind and ego of another. The issue with this experience, wonderful though it may be, is dreadfully temporary. In all romantic relationships this sense of self returns and once again we are faced with the differences and imperfections of our partner. This eventual recognition of the separateness of ego leads to the phenomena of falling out of love when a person no longer resembles the projections “of The Perfect One” put onto that person (Kasl 99). This concept is the transitory nature of love. That is why it is madness that we decide to make any lasting decisions based on this experience. Just because one has a thrilling time on a roller coaster, does not mean they should commit to riding it every day for the rest of their life.

Due to the unreliability of falling in love, it is not at all a sound basis for determining successful life-long partnerships. Bell states that it is best to look for a long-term committed romantic relationship in the same way one would look for a best friend. Bell reflects that she “had frequently entered romantic relationships with people I would have rejected out of hand as friends”( Bell 190). As simple as this method sounds, it is quite effective. John Gottman who is a researcher of love, relationships, and marriage found in his decades of research that one of the greatest determining factors to a successful relationship is the quality of friendship it has (Gottman 34). Once one dispels the myth of successful romantic love, one is liberated from its tormenting chains to find that friendship is the best way to find a successful romantic relationship.

Just like sex, love is a complicated topic to talk about. Where it differs from sex is in the fact that it is not easy to have or understand. One can devote a lifetime to understanding the theories of love but in the end still fall prey to its allure. The important realities to consider when

engaging in the act of love is that one's experience of it is drastically affected by the culture that created it. Falling in love is a temporary emotion that is not an adequate barometer for a successful long-term romantic relationship. Friendship is the best standard to hold potential partners to to have a successful long term relationship. Above all one must love themselves before they can know how to love others.

## Works Cited

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