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The Detrimental Power of Unrequited Love in Medieval Literature

Love is an impactful factor. It dictates actions, relationships, and even personal wellbeing. Love is constantly being given, received, and radiated among couples, partnerships, and even general communities. But what happens when love isn't experienced in the way it's given or perceived? Tragedy, selfishness, and unrequited romance tend to be common themes throughout Old English literature. Love and relationships depicted in English literature of the Anglo-Saxon era and Middle Ages have proven to be capable of depressing, harming, and even killing the most unappreciated and lovelorn individuals.

As aforementioned: tragedy, selfishness, and unrequited love tend to be recurring themes in the Old English, Medieval Romance literature. Giovanni Boccaccio's *Federigo's Falcon* is a prime example of a selfish, one-sided love story. In this tale, Monna Giovanna, the story's antagonist, seduces Federigo, the story's hopelessly romantic protagonist, in efforts of acquiring his prized falcon to lift her ill son's spirits. Despite the emotional distress she causes and lack of interest on her part, Monna visits Federigo to selfishly carry through with her plan of obtaining Federigo's prized falcon. The narrator describes in detail the backstory of Federigo and Monna's complicated relationship; the lengths of which Federigo reaches and the lack of regard Monna has for him expound,

"In the manner of most young men of gentle breeding, Federigo lost his heart to a noble lady, whose name was Monna Giovanna...And with the object of winning her love, he rode at the ring, tilted, gave sumptuous banquets, and distributed a large number of gifts, spending money without any restraint whatsoever. But since she was no less chaste than she was fair, the lady took no notice, either of the things that were done in her honor, or of the person who did them."

The story goes on to tell of Federigo's failed efforts as well as his newfound state of poverty, brought about by rash spending. Monna turns a blind eye to Federigo's attempts, yet later takes it upon herself to go ask of him a rather substantial favor. In this work of literature, selfish unrequited love is blatantly exhibited. Federigo so

caught up in his lust and admiration over the snobbish Monna, fails to realize that he is not receiving any love or appreciation in return. He hurts himself financially, emotionally, and mentally trying to stretch himself thin. When it comes to Giovanni Boccaccio's *Federigo's Falcon*, the theme clearly focuses on self-awareness and being cautious of the company that is kept; not everyone has the purest of intentions.

Lisabetta learns a similar lesson of caution in Boccaccio's fifth story in the Decameron, *Lisabetta and the Pot of Basil*. In this catastrophic story, Lisabetta is betrayed by her brothers. Her lover is slain for not being up to par, as well as the fact that the two hid an affair for quite some time. The sudden disappearance of Lorenzo, Lisabetta's secret lover, troubles her for many nights and many days until he comes to her in a dream and explains in detail what happened to him. Lisabetta attempts to bring Lorenzo closer to her side by cutting off his head and burying it in a pot of basil; however, the pot is confiscated by her brothers and the poor girl enters a deep state of depression. Boccaccio tells of Lisabetta's saddened state and last few days, "...Ceased not to wail and weep, insomuch that she fell sick; nor in her sickness craved she aught but the pot of basil...The girl ceased not to weep and crave her pot, and, so weeping, died. Such was the end of her disastrous love..." (Boccaccio). In this case, love destroys a secret relationship as well as a young woman's personal well-being and life. Lorenzo is brutally murdered for loving Lisabetta in all of his inadequacy, while Lisabetta succumbs to despair and losing the love she once received.

Following the theme of aching, distressed women, *The Wife's Lament*, details a woman's state of despair as she is exiled by her fifth husband and his kinsmen. The narrator clearly expresses the wife's sorrow as she is forced out of her own home, a place where she felt such joy and elation. Though the wife was the one facing exile, she was not alone in her sorrow. The narrator points out, "May that young man be sad-minded always hard his heart's thought while he must wear a blithe bearing with care in the breast a crowd of sorrows...May on himself depend all his world's joy. Be he outlawed far in a strange folk-land -- that my beloved sits under a rocky cliff...a lord dreary in spirit...My lord endures much care of mind. He remembers too often a happier dwelling. Woe be to them that for a loved one must wait in longing." (46-53). Though the woman's life was now ruined, so was that of her husband's. This is an example of a toxic relationship in which both partners have a part in wronging one another. One is forced into solitude, while the other brings upon themselves a state of dejection.

However, intimacy, romance, and relationships - as seen in the Catechism, Bible, and modern works of literature - prove that the most pure, and unreciprocated love has the capacity to positively impact one's life. Many would argue this statement based on personal experiences or more modern literature (since times have changed). Religious print, articles, and even personal standpoints have all contributed to modern opinions on love and relationships; what they should be and what they should not.

The Catechism speaks frequently on faithfulness, companionship, and the "fidelity of conjugal love". Paragraph 1646 says: "By its very nature conjugal love requires the inviolable fidelity of the spouses. This is the consequence of the gift of themselves which they make to each other. Love seeks to be definitive; it cannot be an arrangement until further notice. The intimate union of marriage, as a mutual giving of two persons, and the good of the children, demand total fidelity from the spouses and require an unbreakable union between them." (1646). This paragraph is somewhat of a guideline for love. The text is like a checklist one should follow to ensure a true, healthy, reciprocated love. This paragraph of the Catechism basically states that love cannot be love until both people are involved and serious and intimate.

While the Catechism speaks mainly on what true, healthy love is, and what it requires, the Bible speaks on the good and bad; what true love is as well as what it isn't. This verse from the New Testament proclaims, "4 Love is patient, love is kind...5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 8 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away." (1 Cor. 13:4-8). 1 Corinthians 13, written by Paul the Apostle, focuses on the subject of love. The opening verses describe what love is, what it isn't, and what one does/doesn't do when truly in love. Paul is saying that if love ever fails, harms, or was not equal, it wasn't love. "Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth" means that never, when two people are in love, does one receive pleasure from hurting the other. These bible verse prove two things: the love mentioned in the stories above were either not true or toxic, but true love does exist, but is equal.

On the other hand there is Christina Parrish, student at St. Joseph's College and contributor to The Odyssey Online. She is a believer in true love, but states that it is okay to love others more than yourself; she

actually believes it is “ignorant and absolutely ridiculous” to think or say otherwise. She believes this type of love is the best kind - in some cases - for multiple reasons. Parrish explains her personal take on the concept,

“But it’s in my nature to care for other people, even when they don’t ask for it. When Tim is sick, he refuses medicine and pretends he’s fine when you offer him help, but then I can see the sadness in his eyes. So naturally, I’ll make him warm food...and/or give him cuddles and kisses. And this makes me ridiculously happy because not only can I forget about my issues and focus on his, but I’m also making him feel better than I feel 99 percent of the time and I love knowing that.”

In all, Parrish believes that overtly expressing admiration and care towards someone may make one feel better about themselves or they simply feel nice when showing someone more love than what is received by them.

In conclusion, though some will get the deeply desired chance to experience true love and relationships, the literature of the medieval romance era proves it’s not always an endless period of elation. There are highs and lows, pain and struggle, but if truly involved, one may get the chance to love one in the same way they are loved.

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