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Romantic Love vs. Marriage: A Psychoanalytic Approach

by Keelin Lord

(English 1102)

Americans, as with any society, lead lives that are culturally constructed. These cultural norms are learned through the generations, but in the industrial west our culture is increasingly learned through media and visual arts. People of every culture take these learned norms as a grain of salt, accepting them as natural and inevitable while never questioning them. However, in challenging and analyzing these very cultural constructions, one soon realizes that some of these views are just mere conventions of their own culture. In realizing this, one sees that other views could be more realistic in function. An example of an American cultural norm that needs to be questioned is the idea of romantic love as a base for marriage. When looked into, this idea in our culture is revealed as a misleading social interpretation of reality. While Americans have no doubts about romantic love being a reality, various societies around the world see this idea as foreign, especially when involving marriage (Trachman 131-133). Romantic love as a base for marriage is unique to the industrial west, while other cultures marry for economic and social reasons and love may or may not grow after marriage.

Unlike these non-western societies, Americans learn much of their culture through cinema. Romantic love has been portrayed in visual arts of western culture for centuries, such as operas, plays, dramas, paintings and films. Although these arts directly influence culture, most view art as an illusion as well as an escape from reality. Yet Americans still believe that romantic love is tangible and serves as a solid base for marriage. While examining the psychology of romantic love and how it became a cultural adaptive base for marriage in America, this essay argues that romantic love needs to be questioned and learned rather than taken for granted, or this passion will continue to fail American marriage. Similarly, as Raymond Powell explains how Shakespeare's depiction of romantic love is seen as a "fragile instability, the way its narrow intensities can so easily be diverted into hysteria, derangement, and destructive monomania" (Powell 582). A famous example of the destructive nature that can accompany romantic love is Shakespeare's *Othello*. Throughout this paper *Othello* will be used to show how overwhelming passion, when not fully understood, can cause negative marital outcomes.

To begin, one needs to know the psychology of romantic love. Dr. Helen Fisher decided to conduct extensive research to find what produces love. Along with several colleagues, she used brain scanning technology called functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to record the brain activity of men and women who had fallen in love (Fisher 56). These men and women were extensively questioned and surveyed before they were accepted to partake in the research. After answering various questions including when they fell in love, how often they thought about their beloved and what their mate looked like, they took part in the fMRI scanning. During the scanning of their brains the volunteer first looked at a picture of their beloved for thirty seconds. Then they viewed a distraction test consisting of counting backwards in increments of seven from a large number, which took their minds off their loved one. After those forty seconds, they looked at a neutral photograph of a neighbor or nature for thirty seconds as their brain was scanned again (Fisher 63). Finally, a second distraction test was viewed and the cycle was repeated six times for each of the twenty men and women volunteers. The results found that when the person looked at the photo of their beloved there was heightened activity in the caudate nucleus of the brain. This C-shaped region near the center of the brain is the mind's engine for arousal, sensations of pleasure and the

motivation to gain rewards. The more passionate the subject was in their answers to the previous survey, the more active their caudate was (Fisher 69). Another result was found in the same area of the reward system of the brain, in the ventral tegmental area (VTA). This activity proved that romantic love is associated with high levels of dopamine because the VTA is center for dopamine-making cells. These nerve cells distributed dopamine to various regions of the brain, including the caudate nucleus. This results in focused attention, elevated energy, higher motivation to acquire rewards and feelings of ecstasy which are all feelings that people link to romantic love (Fisher 71). Fisher is continuing research to prove that low levels of serotonin produce the obsession of one's beloved, which is also central to romantic love. However, Fisher's studies also show that romance is bound to fade as attachment takes hold. Increasing levels of the hormone oxytocin, which produces feeling and behaviors of attachment often lowers dopamine, resulting in decreased romantic passion (Fisher 91-92). Therefore, when romance is a base for marriage and attachment, the romance fades shortly after vows and the craving for a new romantic relationship evolves. In realizing this, one would begin to question why Americans now look for romance to provide them with a happy marriage.

Traditionally Americans were much like other societies today, in that they viewed marriage as an economic and social support system, rather than a union of individual wants and desires. Although romantic love exists in all cultures, it is seen as too fragile and irrational to serve as a base for marriage in most societies, which will be discussed later. In America, however it has become a cultural norm to marry for love, but America presently has one of the highest divorce rates in the world (Kottak 226). Considering America is known to be the first truly secular country and we value individual happiness above everything else, we became perfect breeding grounds for romantic love. The Industrial Revolution and the birth of capitalism led Americans to be the first on earth with a high level of freedom, progress, achievement, wealth and physical comfort. This elevated standard of living allowed us to view marriage as a pursuit of our own happiness, rather than an economic necessity of an extended family support system (Branden 35-36). In other words, this radical change in life style in nineteenth century America allowed us to be "culturally free to marry for love" (Branden 45). As this idea grew in a time of heightened freedom, Americans viewed this base for marriage as a base for a better life without questioning its stability. The traditional needs for marriage faded quickly and many Americans today have no thoughts of how the old reasons for marriage actually resulted in long term relationships.

Using *Othello* as a famous example, this idea of marriage for individual desires is proven disastrous by Shakespeare. Othello and Desdemona marry quickly out of passion with no regards to the people around them. Breaking away from the traditional arranged marriage, Desdemona marries on her own accounts and then tells her father after the fact. She shows further individual intentions when she states to her father, "I do perceive here a divided duty....I am hitherto your daughter: but here's my husband..." (1.3.180). In these lines, Desdemona proclaims that her duty to her husband is more important than to her father. In doing so, her father Brabantio severs all ties with his only child, and the family support that was once there is now gone forever. This disownment by her father allowed Desdemona to be so easily harmed by Othello, because the extended support was no longer present as a crutch in her time of need. This individual desire for marriage also made Othello vulnerable in times of weakness. He became easily influenced by those under his command, because he had no trustworthy kin to confide in. This is part of the reason why an assured man becomes so quickly swayed by Iago, whom Othello must confide in considering he has no family to look to. This lack of outside support contributed to the downfall of their romantic marriage. Shakespeare's intention, among many others, was to show that the break from traditional marriage leads to weakness in times of need.

These traditional reasons for marriage need to be looked at to fully understand why romantic love fails as a base for marriage. Before the Industrial Revolution, "love in marriage was seen as a

bonus, not as a necessity” (Coontz 19). Rather, marriage was obtained for practical and spiritual reasons and then one may or may not have grown love out of that marriage. In seventeenth century America, marriages were arranged by parents to ensure the in-laws were going to share mutual support. In other words, marriage was more so the union of two economically interdependent families rather than union between two individual people. This idea began historically with early hunter and gatherer societies where marriage brought various kin groups together to pool resources for survival. Women-gathered foods served as the steady base for the families’ diet, while the males’ occasional hunt was shared among the kin groups. Once surplus foods began to emerge certain kin groups began to break away and gain prestige. This over time allowed the development of a small elite group with commoners below. Marriage then served as a way to gain alliances among the differing classes. Individuals had little say in who they were to marry, instead the parents, neighbors and states decided which unions would be most productive.

As surplus continued to rise, extended families became less important for support, and marriage started to turn to individual needs. However, early on love was still not as important as economic stability and spiritual union. Women and men united for mutual support as the “male breadwinner family” emerged (Coontz 155-157). This idea grew out of the fact that women’s work outside of the home was no longer deemed useful because machines were seen as more productive. In this sense, men became viewed as the economic support, while women rounded the union off with their domestic support. However, that soon changed as women began entering the workforce. This began to allow women to better support themselves, which led to the decreased need for economic union and the increased view of individual fulfillment. Nonetheless, this new view was highly criticized and worrisome in the late eighteenth century. People feared that the pursuit of personal happiness could undermine self-discipline and “unions based on love...were inherently unstable” (Coontz 175). Although this idea was widely feared, the arts picked up on romance, resulting in unstable love becoming a stable base for marriage in the cultural views of America.

These arts include, but are not limited to, poems, songs, novels, operas, plays, cinema, sculptures and paintings, all of which have portrayed romantic love as a wonderful and exotic emotion throughout Western cultures for centuries (Jankowiak 23). This relatively new perspective of art, as well as Hollywood movies, opposes the rational outcome that romance brings long-term relationships to a demise. Rather, this art influences our culture by proposing that romance is the ideal reason for marriage. According to William Jankowiak, “culture plays a crucial role in...directing behavior... who you find attractive, when you begin to court... and how you pursue a potential partner” (Jankowiak 27). This is why romantic love’s stability is rarely questioned by Americans, because our own culture taught us that passion and marriage are interrelated. This cultural construction of romance leading to marriage is often seen in films, so Raelene Wilding conducted a study to reveal correlations between what viewers see in romance movies and how their lives are affected. In this study, four films including *Father of the Bride* and *The Wedding Singer* were textually analyzed to determine the relationship between romantic love and weddings in each narrative theme. These conclusions were then compared to the real life relations between romantic love and marriage, according to 16 couples who were marrying for the first time. The conclusions were astonishing. Each of the couples emphasized that they suddenly fell in love as a natural and required starting point for their relationship. Considering the movies, this idea that romance just happens along with the theme that this passion is the only legitimate reason for marriage, one sees the correlation in the viewers lives. However, Hollywood films are proved unrealistic when it comes to the final wedding. In the films romantic love clearly serves a higher purpose than the actual wedding. This is shown by the characters drawn out identification that they are actually romantically in love, followed by the quick ending that they married and lived happily ever after. In contrast, the interviewees described the quick realization that they had fallen in love, followed by the less spontaneous, carefully reasoned and drawn out decision to get married. As Americans watch these

repetitious popular culture films they have come to accept romantic love as desirable. Although Hollywood has succeeded in making romantic love in movies correspond with romantic love in life, they have not incorporated the swift jump from love, to proposal, to wedding day, to happily ever after (Wilding 2-10). Therefore, romantic love as a base for marriage is realistically unstable due to economic and social decisions, but is still attempted by our society because our culture tells us to. This is one out of many reasons why other societies stand against “Americanization,” because their ideas of marriage strongly contrast and even seem more practical than romance.

According to these different societies and cultures, romance is still present, but never as a base for marriage. To better understand why romance does not correlate as a reason for marriage, other cultures opposing views of marriage need to be looked at. According to Jankowiak, passionate or romantic love constitutes a near-universal. These feelings, like most emotions, are based in brain physiology (Jankowiak 24). Although romance is a human emotion, most cultures view it in the same way late eighteenth century Americans did. These cultures consider it too risky to marry someone based on romantic feelings, because romantic feelings are seen to be too likely to vanish (Trachman 133). This idea of short-lived feelings compromising long-term relationships is not the only reason for disapproval. Conrad Kottak explains how “nonindustrial societies, although there can be romantic love... marriage is a group concern” (Kottak 222). This is because the two families of in-laws assume obligations and support to one another after the marriage of their children. This is seen in all of the societies studied in Holly Peters-Golden’s *Culture Sketches*. However, for our purposes, only a few need to be looked at to understand why their marriage system is more practical than our own. Three societies will be reviewed, which includes the Aztecs of Central Mexico, the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea and the Samoans of the Samoan islands south of Hawaii. Among the Aztecs, the primary aim of marriage serves the nobility in strengthening powerful political ties. These marriages are arranged by youths’ parents and their homes are established according to agricultural and subsistence needs (Peters-Golden 26). The Kaluli marriage system is decided by the elders often without the groom’s knowledge. The purpose of their marriage is to establish a lifelong relationship of exchange between kin groups. In their society, the new wife moves in with the husband’s kin, so the wives family is given a bridewealth to compensate for the loss of their daughter (Peters-Golden 124). The Samoans view the wedding as a primary source of exchange and transfer of property. The new couple then decides which family they would like to live with, forming a large extended family for economic advantage. The entire household then works cooperatively as different ages and sexes have particular responsibilities (Peters-Golden 212). As one can see, these three societies use marriage as an economic means of survival and therefore are forced to make long-term relationships work. Therefore, romance is the least desirable base for marriage; rather one is fortunate if love evolves after the wedding. Considering these societies’ educations are less developed than our own, it is quite fascinating that they are aware of the downfalls of romance while we fail to acknowledge them. This leads to the answer why romance eventually fades and is therefore least practical for a long-term commitment.

Considering love has a psychological base, so does the changing and fading of romantic passion. In a study by London scientists, Bartels and Zeki, their experiment concluded the same information as Helen Fisher’s study discussed previously. They found that romantic passion involves the caudate nucleus and high levels of dopamine. However, unlike Fisher, these scientists also studied subjects who were in love for an average of 2.3 years rather than just 7 months for Fishers subjects. When these men and women viewed pictures of their beloved, activity was shown in the anterior cingulate cortex and the insular cortex, while the 7 month lovers showed none. The anterior cingulate cortex is the region where emotions, memory and attention interact. The insular cortex registers external touch and temperature of the body and processes emotions. This established that as relationships lengthen, the brain regions associated with emotions, memories and attention respond in new ways (Fisher 73). These brain activities of long-term relationships differ from the

initial “reward system” activity shown in early romance. Therefore, feelings of love and attachment are still in the relationship, but the exciting and romantic ecstasy has disappeared due to the decline in dopamine. This waning of intense passion is often viewed by Americans to be a loss of love and therefore warrants the end of a relationship and a desire for new romance.

To illustrate why Americans feel the need to end a stabilized, less exotic partnership for a revived passionate one, the psychologists’ account that romantic love is an addiction that needs to be addressed. The reason psychologists view this euphoric passion as an addiction is because of the effects shown on one’s body and mind. Romance causes such things as emotional and physical dependence, obsession, craving, personality change and loss of self control. In a study done by scientists, Bartels and Zeki, brain scans of subjects in love were compared to subjects who had injected cocaine and narcotics containing opium. The results determined that the same reward system, or caudate region of the brain, became active in both sets of individuals as well as heightened levels of dopamine (Fisher 182). Furthermore, those who are love stricken show the same symptoms as drug addicts, such as tolerance while the need to see their beloved increases, withdrawal when the relationship ends, and relapse as memories are triggered long after the romance is over (Fisher 183). Considering the proof that romance is an addiction, one can understand the reason why infidelity is now the most frequently cited cause for divorce (De Munck 135). In Todd Shackelford’s study to determine how often different levels of infidelity leads to divorce, results were significant. The study concluded that a spouse’s brief affair lead to divorce 55% of the time, while a serious affair lead to divorce 67% of the time (De Munck 141). Addictive romance is the cause of these affairs, because after one marries and the passion fades, one looks for a quick fix of romance outside their marriage. Although some argue that an act of infidelity can result in an unharmed marriage, this thought is undeniably false. Instead, the marriage continues because the betrayed spouse weighs the costs of divorce and finds that they would suffer more if the marriage ended. This means that the marriage is unharmed in the sense that economically it is still working, but psychologically the relationship is deeply traumatized (De Munck 135-136). Overall, the addictive aspects of romance cause the dissolution of a relationship even if infidelity is not proven.

The reason infidelity does not have to be proven, and yet it is quickly believed, is because of the overwhelming emotions related to romance discussed above. This is also seen in the famous example *Othello*. In this tragedy, Othello reveals the effects of his passion for Desdemona. He states, “My blood begins my safer guides to rule, / And passion, having my best judgment collied, / Assays to lead the way” (2.3.180-182). These lines show that Othello knew his judgments were being clouded by his love for Desdemona, yet he still could not control them. As these emotions guide Othello’s decisions, Iago sees the perfect opportunity to turn those uncontrollable feelings into doubt and rage. Iago quickly succeeds in doing so, even though Othello believes that a jealous man is an evil man. He succumbs to his loss of self control as Iago informs him that his wife is having an affair. Othello explains that he would rather live in a dungeon than share Desdemona with others (3.3.273). As his mind wanders with visions of the affair his love turns to hate, and he dreams of ways to end her life. After days of unrest, his emotions boil over and he kills Desdemona with no proof of her infidelity. He quickly learns the truth that his wife was faithful to her unlawful death and he realizes that he was, “one that lov’d not wisely but too well; / Of one not easily jealous, but...Perplex’d in the extreme” (5.2.344). Shakespeare made clear the fact that Othello knew his judgments were mislead and yet continued to carry them out. He did this to show that romantic passions, even when understood to be interfering with ones judgment, prevail in the end with no regards to a stable outcome. However, romantic love can stabilize and continue if Americans learn the art of loving, instead of taking our cultural fantasy for granted.

In contrast to everything previously stated about romantic love fading and destabilizing over time, psychologist Erich Fromm provides hope in his book, *The Art of Loving*. In his book Fromm discusses love as being an art which requires knowledge and effort just as any other art, instead of the

widespread belief that art is just something to fall into by chance. He makes the point that “hardly anyone thinks that there is anything that needs to be learned about love” (Fromm 1). Americans neglect to realize that love needs to be worked on in order to perpetuate. One of the reasons for this assumption is that most people worry about being loved, rather than realizing that the problem is how to love another (Fromm 1). In this case, Americans spend their time trying to become acceptable on the relationship market, rather than learning how to love oneself and each other. Another reason people think that there is nothing to be learned about love is because of the initial exhilaration of falling in love and how it just happens. However, the problem begins when the romance ceases to exist as falling in love moves on to being, or staying in love (Fromm 4). This change causes confusion and leads to failure. Considering this regular failure, we need to realize that love is an art that needs to be studied. In order to become a master at love, one needs to proceed as they would with any other art. Thus one needs to master love’s theory, then allow practice until it is one’s ultimate concern and nothing else is more important (Fromm 5). The latter of these three necessities is the most significant problem in our society. Almost everything else in Americans’ lives is more important than love, such as our individual success, prestige, money and power, which is what we exert all our energy on to achieve. This leaves little energy for us to learn how to love, seeing as love only “profits the soul” rather than the bank account (Fromm 5-6). However hectic our lives are, in order to attain stable love we need to learn that “love is an activity, not a passive affect...that...is primarily giving, not receiving” (Fromm 21). This means that love requires us to have constant care, respect, knowledge and concern for our beloved. Continued love takes will, discipline, concentration, patience and complete commitment. As one can now see, love is not easy and work is required just as every other aspect of life, but having fun with one’s partner is just as important to make love last. Marriage needs humor, exciting careers and stimulating lifestyles, which coincidentally brings higher dopamine levels and maintains romantic passion. Dopamine levels are also heightened and stimulate the reward center of the brain when time is spent apart, which delays the obtainment of the reward and causes excitement (Fisher 206). However, for some Americans, society does not allow these pleasures and therefore love is even harder to achieve than for those who have easier access to life’s pleasures.

In conclusion, Americans need to realize that although our country allows us more freedom for individual happiness, those freedoms do not necessarily serve a practical function. We are culturally free to marry for love, yet our highly demanding social structure weakens our opportunity to focus on and obtain that romance. While we no longer need extended family support systems, we still need to realize that only focusing on our individual selves can breed lack of self discipline, resulting in such things as romantic affairs. Our strongly individualistic country needs to regain the value of having utmost concern for those we love. Only then will we gain individual satisfaction. This includes the ability and our own willingness to see our beloved as they are, imperfections and merit, rather than continuing a Hollywood romance based on fantasy. This flaw in our country’s values supports Harriet Hawkins idea that society is to blame for the failure of romance (Hawkins 115). While she speaks of Shakespeare’s lovers being situated in a conflict opposed by war and feudal impulses, Fromm speaks of lovers being situated in an economy too demanding for love’s commitment. This social control, along with the ability of romance to cloud one’s judgment, explains why Othello took not only Desdemona’s life, but his own as well. They were in a situation with no extended support system and Othello’s obligation was to commit himself as a general, while Desdemona was put second. Considering his duty to the state was expected to come first, Othello had reason to put his trust in his men. This took precedence over his duty to Desdemona and her words. Othello’s service to the state caused strain and failure in his marriage. In short, our social system needs to change, while we need to grasp the knowledge and essentials for the success of romantic love, or marriage will continue to suffer.

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