

Andrew Marvell's "The Definition of Love"

Love has been the topic of literature for centuries. Although experienced by many, love is intangible, difficult to adequately capture in writing, and difficult to define. In his poem "The Definition of Love," Andrew Marvell uses a number of abstractions, capitalized for emphasis, in an attempt to define the ultimate abstraction: Love. Born out of Despair, the Love in this poem is characterized by an element of Impossibility and very little Hope, and is ultimately prohibited from its complete culmination by the highly personified abstraction of Fate. In addition to the poem's abstractions, there are geographic and mathematical references, and love is described in terms of mathematical probabilities and impossibilities. Thus, as "The Definition of Love" continues, the abstract is intermixed with the concrete. Through these oppositional descriptions, Marvell is able to capture the paradoxical nature of love. At the poem's end, both the abstract and the concrete, and the author and his love, cannot be reconciled or joined. Ultimately what emerges is the sense that all real love (that is, existing in reality and permitted by Fate) is flawed, and that the union of a perfect love is an impossibility to achieve.

Throughout "The Definition of Love," there is an element of impossibility surrounding the love in the poem, and impossibility plays a large role in Marvell's definition of love. Interestingly, despite the fact that the poem is called "The Definition of Love," a title that suggests the poem attempts to propose a definitive, all-encompassing description of love—another task that seems relatively impossible—the narrator of the poem introduces the love in the poem as "*my* love." As the poem continues, it becomes apparent that this case is perhaps indicative of love in general in some respects.

Regardless, the overarching characteristic of the love in this poem is its impossibility, an

idea that is introduced in the poem's opening. From the outset, Marvell describes the Impossibility of this Love in terms of abstractions. Marvell writes, "My love is of a birth as rare/ As 'tis, for object, strange and high;/ It was begotten by Despair/ Upon *Impossibility*" (Lines 1-4). Thus, in Marvell's love, Despair, the complete loss or absence of hope, gives rise to Love, despite that love being seemingly unfeasible. Additionally, Marvell goes on to explain that only "Magnanimous Despair alone could show me so divine a thing. Where Feeble *Hope* could *ne'er* have flown/ But vainly flapped its tinsel wing" (4-8). This moment further reiterates the Love's impossibility; it is almost completely void of Hope, a hope in this circumstance that is likened to a bird attempting to fly, but remaining land-ridden. Thus, according to Marvell, it appears that in this Love and perhaps in love generally, Love is doomed from the outset and any attempts to overcome this impossibility are futile. This love seems impossible upon its inception and its impossibility only grows as the poem progresses.

The primary reason that the Love in this poem is so plagued by impossibility is the domineering presence of Fate, who refuses to let the two loves unite. Marvell personifies Fate to a great extent throughout the poem and quite negatively, as s/he/it is described as "jealous" and "tyrannical," among other things (Lines 13, 16). Marvell writes, "For Fate with jealous eyes does see/ Two perfect loves, nor lets them close; Their union would her ruin be,/ and her tyrannic power depose" (Stanza 4, Lines 13-16). Marvell suggests that Fate has a vested interest in preventing this union of love, particular because it is between "two *perfect* loves" (14). It becomes clear why exactly the union of the Love in the poem is so impossible: indeed, it the perfect nature of the love in question. As the footnote to the text explains, "Two perfections, united, would not be

subject to change and thereby to fate” (2.). Thus, it appears the love, subject to fate as (or if) all things are, is entirely out of one’s own control. Furthermore, the perfect nature of the love, however beneficial perfection is, is also hindered by its perfection, as Fate prevents a perfect love from being completely actualized. Thus, Marvell not only seems to suggest that there is an impossibility associated with love, but that the closer to perfection a love is, the less likely it is to be actualized because of Fate’s jealousy. Indeed, perfect love cannot fully exist in reality. Thus, Marvell’s definition proposes that love is not (and cannot be) perfect, but rather, imperfect.

The idea of the impossibility of perfect love is further reiterated in Marvell’s use of mathematical concepts, a stark contrast to much of the poem’s abstract language. In particular, the metaphor of mathematical lines is especially revealing. Marvell writes, “As lines, so loves oblique may well/ Themselves in every angle greet,/ But ours, so truly parallel,/ Though infinite, can never meet” (25-28). Oblique lines, being at a slant, are neither parallel lines nor right angles. As a result, they are able to touch. Parallel lines, on the other hand, never touch. Despite being side by side and a consistent distance apart, if permitted to continue on forever, two parallel lines would never intersect. In this stanza, Marvell likens the perfect love he has with his object of affection to a relationship between parallel lines; although they are corresponding (“able to be matched, joined, or interlocked”) and even if their love is infinite, they are never united because of the perfect nature of their relationship (dictionary source). Conversely, the relationship between oblique lines is similar to that of a less perfect love. Far from being “truly parallel,” two lines (or lovers) that are oblique are able to eventually meet within every angle (or unite at some point in time). However, the two lovers represented by the oblique lines are not

perfect, but in this imperfection, they are united. Thus, Marvell differentiates between perfect and imperfect love and illustrates the predicament of perfect love through the use of a metaphor utilizing concrete mathematical concepts.

Ultimately, the poem's close suggests that this perfect love will not end in the union of lover and loved. Indeed, the poem closes concludes with a contrary idea. In the last stanza, Marvell writes, "Therefore the Love which us doth blind,/ But fate so enviously debars,/ Is the conjunction of the mind,/ And opposition of the stars" (29-32). In the end, it seems Fate, with her "decrees of steal," is the force that definitively determines the outcome of the love in question (17). Because Fate "enviously debars" the love, and fate is completely out of one's control, then it seems the conjunction Marvell refers to will not occur. Interestingly, Marvell describes "the love" as "the conjunction of the mind,/ and the opposition of the stars" (31-32). In these two lines, Marvell appears to be referring to the coming together of the mind, which is based on rational thought, with the stars, which have a heavenly, other world connotation. This could also be thought of as representing the conjunction of the concrete and the abstract. However, if so, the phrase is somewhat paradoxical, as the conjunction involves "opposition." If anything, it also seems rather impossible, as it also suggests the combining of two polarities. Similarly, just as the mind and the stars cannot be conjoined, the narrator and his would be lover cannot be united either, just as the set of parallel lines cannot intersect. This last stanza allows Marvell to further reiterates the idea that perfect love is an impossibility and its union cannot be completely attained.

In "The Definition of Love," Andrew Marvell sets forth a definition of love that is far from perfect. Indeed, throughout the poem, he demonstrates the impossibility of

uniting two perfect loves. In doing so, he suggests that a perfect love can never exist in its entirety and in reality because Fate will not let it conjoin. In other words, what Marvell proposes is that perfect love does not actually exist. Like a pair of parallel lines or two polarities, some things simply cannot be conjoined. Perfect love is one of these instances. Indeed, Love is paradoxical and inexplicable at times. Furthermore, it is difficult to define, whether in scientific terms or solely in abstractions. Ultimately, the definition of love Marvell sets forth is based almost entirely on what love is not: perfect.