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Humanities

The Many Faces of Love

Regardless of the age or place, one of the few things which people have bonded or fought wars over is love. Love often drives people to extremes and can lead to a life of sorrow or eternal happiness. One example of love's influence on people dates to ancient Egypt in a town of tomb-builders called Deir el-Medina, where feelings of love were often expressed through elaborate poems written by the population. Many of these secular poems share a pattern of comparing love to a sickness, healing tonic, or captor through the structure of an extended metaphor, illustrating that love has many faces.

In many of the secular poems, love is compared to a sickness through extended metaphors. The speakers draw comparisons between love and sickness when they feel profoundly wounded by their feelings of love. In "My Brother Torments My Heart," the speaker's "brother torments [her] heart with his voice," and consequently "sickness take[s] hold of [her]." Even though the speaker is not physically made sick by love, the thought that she cannot be with her lover torments her mind to the point where she feels sick. This feeling of sickness is not exclusive to women alone, as the speaker in "Sickness Invaded Me" express how "sickness invaded [him]" when it had been "seven days since [he] saw [his] sister." The men of the village of Deir el-Medina would often work long shifts constructing the tombs of pharaohs before returning to the village. This shows that being away from his lover for extended periods of time contributes to the speaker's sickness caused by his longing for love. Furthermore, the speaker's "heart rejects [the] remedies"

of the “physicians [who] [go] to [him],” denoting that his illness caused by love is so detrimental, that even the great doctors of ancient Egypt cannot cure his ailment. The sickness caused by the longing for love in these poems illustrates how people often feel weak without those they love.

In addition to the many references to sickness, love is often compared to a healing tonic and as something which bestows strength in many of these poems. Just as each door only has one key that opens it, the only cure for a man who has fallen sick because of love is his lover, “for (only) she understands [his] sickness” (“I Shall Lie Down”). The speaker of “Sickness Invaded Me” would agree with this statement, as he describes how just his lover’s “name would make [him] rise” and “revive his heart,” which indicates how powerful love is as a healing tonic. The speaker affirms this statement when he claims that “the sight of [his lover] makes [him] well” and “does more for [him] than all medicines” (“Sickness Invaded Me”). Ancient Egypt is renowned for its advanced medicines relative to the time, so for the sight of the lover to have more of an effect than those medicines attests to the effectiveness of love as a healing tonic. In addition to curing ailments, a healing tonic can give strength to a lover as well. For example, in “Her Love Gives Me Strength,” the speaker “enter[s] the water and brave[s] the waves” notwithstanding the fact that “a crocodile waits in the shallows” for love. Love gives people the strength and courage to accomplish feats they normally cannot, such as crossing a river knowing there is a crocodile in it. It can also give people unfathomable power, as even “[a] flood is land to [the] feet” of a man empowered by love (“Her Love Gives Me Strength”). Though love can cause sickness, it can cure it as well, and the strength given by love is second to none.

Love is also often compared to a captor through the use of extended metaphors. People often preach that love is eternal, but it is in truth love’s grasp on a person that is eternal. Once “love...captures the heart,” it will not let go for the rest of that person’s life (“I Passed by His

House”). Additionally, the power of love’s grasp is so immense that even if one knows that she is “possessed by the love of [her lover],” she cannot escape it (“My Brother Torments My Heart”). One instance of love’s powerful grasp is in the poem “My Heart Flutters Hastily,” where the speaker must tell her heart not to “act so stupidly” and “not [to] flutter,” as she struggles to regain control of her heart from love. Ancient Egyptians believed that the heart, not the brain, was the control center for the entire body, so for the speaker to express that her heart has been taken captive by love indicates that love has absolute control over her body. Remarkably, people do not always see being captured by love as something negative; they will embrace and accept their captivity. Yet, there are still many instances when one wishes that they were not a captive of love. One example of this is when the speaker of “How Well She Knows to Cast the Noose” describes how his lover “captures [him] with her eye” and “brands [him] with her seal ring.” Branding is a technique often associated with animals or possessions, and is a painful and cruel act. To reference his lover’s control over him with the term ‘branding’ alludes to the fact that regardless of how abusive the relationship is, the speaker is not able to escape the grasp of love. Though people can fall in love very easily, it is almost impossible to escape love’s absolute grasp once they are its captive.

The comparisons of love to a sickness, a healing tonic, and a captor through the use of extended metaphors illustrates that love has many faces. The feelings caused by love and the longing for a lover can make a person sick, and this sickness can only be cured with the thoughts and sight of that lover. Love enables individuals to achieve feats which they would not have been able to normally do, and the absolute control love has over a lover demonstrates love’s power. Through the various comparisons of love, the people of the village of Deir el-Medina reveal that

love cannot be simply described, as its many faces and aspects are too complex for even humans to completely understand.