

ENGL1102

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"The 'Fickle' One"?

On his birthday in July of 1954, Pablo Neruda confessed to the University of Chile that "it is worthwhile to have struggled and sung, it is worthwhile to have lived because I have loved" (Neruda 331). In nearly all of his works, Neruda attests to the simplicity, valor, and importance of love, whether for country, "common things," or another human being. Throughout South America, he was known as "un poeta del pueblo," a poet of the people, and his talent for composing such passionate verses propelled him to Nobel Laureate status. In a collection published in 1972, he exemplifies his mastery of language by entwining his own passionate love life with an admiration for nature, producing realistic, yet mystical expressions of devotion. In "The Fickle One," the author creates a paradox confirming that the persona's sincere affection transcends the physical attraction and lust by which he initially appears imprisoned. Furthermore, Neruda presents an opposition by dividing the poem into parallel halves, demanding that even the receptive reader peruse the poem more than once to discern the genuine meaning of the experience that the text conveys.

Neruda, with much attention to detail and manipulation of language, demonstrates the persona's inability to control his human, sexual nature, causing the reader to disapprove of him. By stating, "My eyes went away from me," he conjures a persona with eyes that are disconnected from the rest of his body, as though they are a separate entity, acting against the will of the brain, bones, and heart. Seemingly, he desires all the females that pass by him. He gazes longingly at each woman while absorbing all their physical details, corroborating the notion that the only qualities that draw him to random women are tangible attributes. The persona covets a "dark girl" and a "pale blonde," relaying not only an affinity for one type of female, but an equal attraction to all women, from one end of the spectrum to the other. Indeed, Neruda portrays the persona as a very capricious man (Neruda 2, 10).

The Chilean poet further perpetuates a negative view of the persona through the utilization of violent imagery. For example, the "dark girl . . . lashe[s]" at him demonically with her "tail of fire" (2, 6-7). In addition, instead of merely touching the "pale" girl's breast, the persona "discharg[es]" the heat of his passion, his "lightning bolts of blood," upon her like a round of bullets (10, 15-6). Both of these metaphors represent his sexual fantasies with women other than the one with whom he sustains a real relationship, solidifying the reader's initial bad impression. Neruda also employs these fierce descriptions when developing the paradox that contrasts the first and second women while simultaneously generating an opposition to the third woman. This functions as an initial sign of the persona's tenderness. For instance, in the first half of the work, "blood" has a negative connotation while in the latter section of the poem, "blood" is positive and tender, suggesting love and life (6, 16, 21). The persona acknowledges his soul mate as his reason for being and the force that sustains him spiritually and physically. Similarly, the author uses contrasting diction again to liken the fair girl to a "golden plant," fertile and valuable; however, his lover is "made of *all* the gold" in the world (11, 26 emphasis added). With the fair women he uses "gold" as an adjective, perhaps in reference to color, but unmistakably, with the second woman, he is commenting on her significance and worth. She is priceless, for a value cannot be attached to something as rare as the love he finds in her.

Though a variety of women captivate the persona, Neruda illuminates the spontaneous and temporal nature of the persona's emotions regarding the common women with the repeated lines, "After them all / I go" (8-9, 17-18). All the words in the stanza are simple, yet purposely contrived. The triteness of the individual words reflects the persona's perception of all the women with whom he is infatuated. He repeats the monotonous five words twice, attesting to his passivity and the generic way he considers these females in contrast to the actual woman he loves. Though he may find numerous women sexually appealing, they are all equivalent: trivial compared to the beauty of his soul mate. Correspondingly, the length of the stanzas indicates the intensity of the persona's feelings. For example, the stanzas regarding the mysterious, sexually enticing women are concise, for his emotions concerning these women are ephemeral. In comparison, the longer final stanza reflects the enduring quality and stability of his affection. Additionally, the number of lines in the poem supports the notion that the quantity of lines parallels the persona's emotions. Neruda devotes more than half of the lines to the third woman and divides the rest between the "dark girl" and the "pale blond" (2, 10).

Neruda fully divulges the sensitive side of the persona in the second half of the poem, which culminates with a simple profession of love to the last woman, who is "made for my arms, / made for my kisses, / made for my soul" (32-4). Perhaps the most powerful moment in the work, it reveals the persona's sincerity through emphasis on the verb "made," indicating a shift from lust to love. He makes it apparent that the emotional intimacy that the persona finds in his relationship with the third woman is absent when dealing with other females. Moreover, in those three simple lines, he charts their love from a platonic relationship to an intimate relationship, and, finally, to the realm of the spiritual. His lover, unlike the others, is not only a symbol of sexuality; rather, she represents trust and enduring companionship.

The latter half of the poem, ironic yet honest, necessitates a re-evaluation of the persona, as well as the whole work, by the reader. In lines one through eighteen, the persona is portrayed as nothing but a flirtatious womanizer who could never sustain a mature, lasting relationship; however, in the final stanza, the persona proves to be just the opposite. By admitting his faults to the reader, he also is building his credibility. Neruda affirms that the persona is human, for he experiences lustful temptations. While the reader may disagree with, and even dislike, the persona during the first half of the poem, his affection and truthful expression of love during the latter half of the poem transform him into an admirable, ideal man. Though many women tempt the persona every day, he remains faithful to his one true love. His desire for her is innate. Ultimately, after a second or third reading, the reader recognizes the persona's actual intentions and devotion, and the reader completes the poem commending the persona instead of despising him.

By circumventing the idea of true love through a focus on the first two women, Neruda accentuates the persona's eternal faithfulness to the third female. The persona, though he may be fickle in his thoughts and cravings, is steadfast in this fidelity. In fact, the persona's unflinching integrity lends irony to the title of the poem. His flaws are those of the common man, yet he proves the maturity of his affection by honestly admitting his shortcomings. His true love is the paramount interest in his life, and it is through the characterization of the persona in "The Fickle One" that Neruda demonstrates that the struggle that is love makes life worthwhile.

Works Cited

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