

Research Article

Love, Darkness and Wisdom in Irving Layton's Love Poems.

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ABSTRACT

Irving Layton, an English poet of Canada cannot be considered a poet celebrating love. On the other hand, his love poems pave way for the realization of wisdom. Thus, Layton's poems on love are exhibitivite of the opposites accounting for tension which according to John Crowe Ransom is the factor that sustains the poetic impact in poetry. This tension is didactic in Layton's love poetry, for it gives an expose to his feminism too as he transposes himself into the consciousness of the feminine mind in its expectations of love from its man. Simultaneously, the poet is convinced that true love is just an accident. Layton presents the two sides of Love- one is love as religion and the other is the state of lovelornness. This renders a man devoid of soul. Layton advocates further that infidelity on the part of women and self-deception in men are the two unsurmountable impediments in the realization of true love.

Key Words: Tension, Platonic, polarisation, Lovelornness, Dying, Peacemeal.

Introduction

Layton's conviction that life moves on tension between the opposites is very conspicuous in his love poetry. A melancholic strain pervades his love poetry and it presents the nature of reality in man's life. His love poems abound in raw descriptions of physical love. This is one aspect of his love poetry and the other meaning is always Platonic. They reveal Layton's wisdom of life. Life is darkness. Concomitantly, it is a fleeting illumination. Owing to the impact of love, man is unable to see the truth of life. When love shines within, the truth of life which is always dark to man is not discernible. But when the illumination of love disappears, he could understand the true meaning and gain wisdom. The reality in man's life is that love is only a fleeting illumination.

Layton correlates life's darkness to Eve's choice of damnation despite God's advice. Adam was necessitated to participate in Eve's fall. So is the modern man who helplessly participates in woman's demeaning exercises. Eve is a *la belle dame sans merci*. Sexual instinct in man has two sides - disgrace and exaltation. It can bring about either of the two. Layton metaphorically presents sexual desire in man as "scarred slopes" which are inhabited by *la belle dame sans merci*. Out of his experience on the "scarred slopes," Layton speaks of "agony and exaltation" of

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sex. Sexual instinct can cause "glory" or "carnage of the love emotion" which is destructive in man. This is the message of Layton to those who consider his love poems presenting a single vision of love being fleshly. Hence with full justification it could be said that Layton's love poetry is not merely erotic. It is a lesson for man in love.

Love enfolds within itself both the ache of the body and the longing of the soul. This is the picture in the poem, *The Courage to Be*. Layton projects himself as a feminist writer in this poem, and it is antithetical to his usual stance of despising women. A woman expects "wonderment and surprise/ a rapture from distant skies" and when this is unfulfilled, when her man fails to rise up to her, "perversion" distances her from him. The "melancholy eyes" denote the ideal which is not gratified in her. Therefore, life turns hellish. While the "rapture" accrued is the male belonging, the woman develops a distaste. With "great courage" she turns and leaves her man. What is obvious is that it is not only physical excitation but also fulfilment of the soul's longing that accomplishes love's emotion. This is an accentuation of the Lawrentian concept of "polarization" in love.

This polarisation of the consciousness of man is the basis of man-woman relationship. In "Mountains," Layton emphatically declares that his "rage alone" makes him both potent and manly. He considers love as "unsatisfied lust" whereas in *Out of Pure Lust*, he once again projects himself as a feminist writer, and presents the view point of a woman-her serious expectations in love from her man. His poem *Seventeen Lines and Three Kisses* also establishes him as a feminist writer. The woman in this poem dreams "of the perfect existential lover/who will give her more trouble." She wants a lover who "walks confident as an animal." This is because she has suffered so much from love from men who are not the right kind of animal.

Love, which is made of expectations and counter expectations and which we call pangs can find its convenient and potent medium to convey itself only in poetry. The aching, yearnings and longings for a befitting companion lie dormant in the psyche despite the flux of time. True love, according to the poet is not certain on earth. It depends on accident or chance, and rarely manifests in person. Consummation of true love is a matter of sheer luck. This outpouring is the result of the poet's unsuccessful marriages, besides the craving for true love. Not even Gods can grant the gift of love. Hence he/laments in "Orpheus in Old Forest Hill": "Though I had held the Gods above the woman I/prized and burned for, /the promised guerdon, a woman's love, was not mine." This is an expression of disillusionment in love. The fire of love is very much there. But his lady love is gone. Therefore he stands bereft at the mouth of Hell. He seeks recourse in his lyre. Music is substituted for love's absence. This means that the music is solo and has no equation with divine order of love with its innocence. Music and poetry are ersatz gratifications as regards love. Love with its innocence is divine and evades the poet.

Lovelornness also makes a man bereft of soul. Love cannot exist when it does not find a suitable partner. Companionship out of compulsion results in lovelornness and a soulless state. A lying woman is a whore. The poem *Dead Souls* is an admonition to "peasants"-men. A man who has believed in the forcefulness and purifying nature of poetry is dismayed when he learns that the magic of poetry that can normally illuminate a woman's soul is powerless before a whore. This is because "for her the sun and moon were dead." That is, she has lost her thinking, enlightenment, wisdom and spiritual vision.

The poet believes that comparatively speaking "decaying body" is better than the "souls that are corrupt." That is why Layton says that there is "a whore" in every woman. The male in the poem

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who is "neither green dragon nor red" is devoid of *libido* and passion. Hence there cannot be any compatibility between the woman to whom the Sun and Moon are dead and the man who stands bereft of *libido* and passion. Both dead souls and life itself becomes despicable because of this. Degeneration in general is something that can never be set right. Its only end is death, both living and factual. Living death which is degeneration of the soul in man means "dying piecemeal" and he becomes a "shroud and hearse." This is the picture of living death in *For the Great Wrong*.

It is interesting to note that Layton attributes lovelornness, soulless state, and degeneration only to women. But at the same time, he takes cognizance of what essentially a woman requires in love. Layton castigates women as of disabled minds. It is interesting to note that nowhere in his poetry does he specifically mention the name of any woman he castigates. Therefore it is to be taken to mean that his accusations against women are general.

Marital life is something Layton holds in high esteem. Though he had married four times, all the marriages were failures. His argument is that disloyalty is what one should avoid in married life. The poem, *The Air is Sultry* pictures two kinds of disloyalty, one practised by the "darling" and the other by her man. The soul of the man is "solitary" and his thoughts are bitter and emotions stale due to his partner's infidelity. He deceives himself imagining that she is virtuous. But he knows that she is vicious. There is a hole in his heart like a "filthy hole in the wall." There is a knock at the door and the man knows that his life-partner brings sufferings. It is her return after an affair with another man. Her declaration that she loves her husband, and his reciprocation that he adores her are both insincere. Both forms of insincerity have different dimensions: the insincerity of the woman signifies infidelity, disappointment and failure at last, and that of the man is self-deception. None knows exactly as to what reason is there for this falsity and this requires serious introspection in both.

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