



The love between man and woman in the history of Literature

The oak and the flower

In these pages, we want to see a little more closely how love has been presented between man and woman in Western literature to remove, if possible, some brushstrokes on who are these two who love each other.

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They say that in the world there is only one plot. Everything that has ever been written in world literature is nothing more than a variant of it. The only story that man has written is summed up in this: "Who am I?" On the other hand, the slightest glimpse of the literary panorama shows that the subject that has been in vogue since man knows how to write is another: love. Well, both positions may not be correct. Or are they? Maybe these two plots are only one. Maybe one is the question and the other is the answer. Maybe all the books in the world are screaming a single message that we just have to know how to decipher. If this is so, then the history of literature can be summed up in these five words: "Who am I? One who loves. "

In these pages, we want to see a little more closely how the love between man and woman has been presented in Western literature to remove, if possible, some brushstrokes on who are these two who love each other. Let's start with the look of an expert. On March 8, 1941, JRR Tolkien wrote a letter to his son who was fighting in the trenches of the Great War. The theme of the letter – as it may seem unusual – is precisely ours. Says the following: «There is still in our Western culture a strong, chivalrous, romantic tradition [...]. It idealizes "love" – and because it's worth can be very good, since it includes much more than physical pleasure and imposes if not purity, at least fidelity and thus self-sacrifice, "service", courtesy, honor, and bravery. "According to Professor Tolkien, therefore, the model of love that has prevailed in Western traditions is 'romantic' love'; the love that has crystallized in the image of the gentleman and the lady. Although this is the most typical icon of romantic love, we do not mean that all literature can be reduced to a chivalrous story or that all the love of literature is that of the gentleman and the

lady. The love of these romances retains a lot of ambiguity of ideals and sometimes confuses the sacred with the lewd. It is, as Tolkien says, an idealized love. What inspires this type, however, is what we refer to that man's yearning to be a hero to win his lady and that benevolence of the woman who is left to collate because she knows that this nourishes greatness in the gentleman. This is the implicit locomotive of all history. It's no surprise. Love is the end to which man incessantly tends. And if the stories are indications of what man is, here we discover a fundamental truth.

The model of romantic love rests strongly on markedly sexual characteristics. No one can ever confuse the role of the gentleman and the lady. There is no room for ambiguity of sexes. The gentleman is male and the lady is female. The love between the two works and grows precisely when each assumes its unmistakable role in front of the other. A gentleman, however admirable he may be, does not arouse in gentleman fervor comparable to that which the lady inspires. It is only the lady who assumes her role can elevate the gentleman to unsuspected heights. The same could be said of one lady in front of another. Only the gentleman makes the lady become a beacon and a guiding star.

And this brings us to the second observation. Not only men and women are unmistakable male and female respectively, but there is in the literary tradition the notion that man and woman, finding each other, evoke each other's highest characteristics. The glorious final scene of *Crime and Punishment* describes this with almost biblical solemnity:

They wanted to talk, but they couldn't utter a single word. Tears shone in their eyes. The two were thin and pale, but in those sad faces shone the dawn of a new life, the dawn of resurrection. Love resurrected them. The heart of each one of them was a wellspring of life inexhaustible to the other. [...] Raskolnikov was regenerated. He knew it; he felt it in all its being. As for Sonia, she only lived for him.

Between the two is given the miracle of the elevation. Together they seem to be transported above the circumstances to vindicate the full sovereignty of their humanity. Indeed, the best of man and woman is made present when complementary love is given. But as expected, it is done in one way and in him different from how this is done in her. The observation-and the literature bears witness to this-seems to reveal that in the presence of a complementary love, the woman acts in immediate possession of her best qualities. She is a moment gives the best of herself and takes care of all her powers of generosity, virtue, delicacy, etc., that the encounter with man has made it immediately accessible. Thus describes Thomas Hardy the love of Bethsheba Everdene which is given all in one moment: «Her love was total like that of a child, and although warm as the summer was fresh as the spring». The woman is promptly capable of great sacrifices in favor of the one she loves. George Du Maurier in *Trilby* introduces the wife of a tuberculous stranger who is on the train: "[his] wife, tender and anxious

(seated at his side) seemed to think nothing in the world but in him; and his patient eyes were for him consolation stars, for he turned to look at them almost every minute and he seemed more and more happy to have done it. What better star-watching than that! '

These powers are often of benevolence, of wanting to improve man, of wanting to nourish him the germs of kindness that he possesses. In this sense, the woman has the special gift of seeing in truth the person of the other, beyond what the outward aspect of the present moment can reveal. This is described by C. S. Lewis: "For this is one of the miracles of love; it grants — to both but perhaps especially women — the power to recognize their enchantments and still not disenchant themselves. " and Tolkien with more poise: "[women] are able to take a ruffian with her eyes wide open and, even when it has failed the delirium to reform him, to continue loving him."

Man, on the other hand, does not get from the immediate woman the present possession of his endowments but, inspiration and motive to achieve his most excellent powers. She becomes for him a flag and banner. Even if he recognizes that he is not virtuous, the effort to achieve virtue becomes kind because it is nothing more than an opportunity to get to deserve the woman.

That's why Bradley Headstone in *Our Mutual Friend* Charles Dickens says in desperation of love: «You could take me to the fire, I could take to the water, I could lead to the gallows, I could lead to any kind of death, I could take to everything I have avoided most or, I could take it all ridiculous and disgrace. [...] But if I gave a favorable answer to the offer of myself in marriage, I could take any good-all well-with equal force. "In it, he finds the power to attain both glory and condemnation.

This effect of order and purpose that the presence of the woman gives to the man expresses it with candor the character of Sixo in *Beloved* of Toni Morrison: «It is a friend of my mind. She picks me up; the pieces that I am. She picks them up and returns them all well-ordered. It's very good - you know? - to have a woman friend of your mind '. It is no wonder, then, that much of Western cultural production, be it literary works, musical compositions, etc., revolve around the common refrain of the promises that a man makes to his beloved. The woman inspires, the man promises and the fable is served...

The world literature, romantic and other, is full of examples and counterexamples of this. Perhaps the most classic of all is Don Quixote of the stain that for the love of Dulcinea goes from being an old «strong complexion, dry meat, lean of face» to be «The Knight of the Sad Figure» that can face only lions and giants. The love of Don Quixote not only transforms him but also Dulcinea, who is a "maiden of veneer, made and right and of hair on breast» becomes «lady of the beauty, effort, and vigor of the weakened heart» in whom" nothing put nature that was not perfect and well finished. "

And let's go back to Sonia and Roskolnikov. In one of the most moving scenes of all the world literature, when he asks for the reading of the passage of the resurrection of Lazarus, Sonia, a prostitute, becomes a true angel of purity that shines in the scrawny and claustrophobic world of crime and punishment. Thanks to love in a tortuous and tortured beginning between those "two cursed beings", Roskolnikov is redeemed. Finding, at last, the reason to go on living and accept his punishment.

She becomes good. He discovers the motive to be good. Dostoevsky reflects this:

Sonia [...] felt so happy and had received this bliss in such an unexpected way that she experienced even some terror. [...] Raskolnikov [...] would have to acquire [that new life] at the price of long and heroic efforts...

We can conclude, then, that love is like spring in the human person. The woman is like a flower and the man like an oak. The flower barely glimpses the spring and soon blooms. In a matter of moments, it displays its petals and exhales its best perfumes. You saw everything in color and beauty. The oak on the other hand when spring comes throws out only its first sprouts; promises only of what with time and perseverance will become sturdy branches that will provide shelter and security to anyone who accepts them.

In a sublime moment of War and Peace, Prince Andrei compares himself precisely to an oak in the winter that says, "There is neither spring nor love nor bliss!" A short time later, in front of the same oak, he felt "the swelling heart of intense joy that awakened spring with his new life." What happened in the middle? Natasha, "the young lady enchanted by the beauty of the night... and that night, that moon." So love, "that does not allow that we do not love" makes man and woman. And this tells the tales of men, because, who is man but one who loves? Literature is a chronicler of living. But in the words of Molière: "living without love is not really living".