Why We Love

The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love



Helen Fisher, Ph.D.

An Owl Book

HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY • NEW YORK

For Lorna, Ray, Audrey,
and the rest of my family



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(Hark close and still what I now whisper to you,
I love you, O you entirely possess me,
O that you and I escape from the rest, and go utterly off,
free and lawless,
Two hawks in the air, two fishes swimming in the sea
not more lawless than we;)
That furious storm through me careering.
I passionately trembling;
The oath of the inseparableness of two together,
of the wŏman that loves me, and whom I love
more than my life, that oath swearing,
O I willingly stake all for you,

Walt Whitman
"From Pent-up Aching Rivers"

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I

"What Wild Ecstasy": *Being in Love*

The world, for me, and all the world can hold
Is circled by your arms; for me there lies,
Within the lights and shadows of your eyes,
The only beauty that is never old.

James Weldon Johnson
"Beauty That Is Never Old"

"Fires run through my body—the pain of loving you. Pain runs through my body with the fires of my love for you. Sickness wanders my body with my love for you. Pain like a boil about to burst with my love for you. Consumed by fire with my love for you. I remember what you said to me. I am thinking of your love for me. I am torn by your love for me. Pain and more pain. Where are you going with my love? I'm told you will go from here. I am told you will leave me here. My body is numb with grief. Remember what I've said, my love. Goodbye, my love, goodbye."[1] So spoke an anonymous Kwakiutl Indian of southern Alaska in this wrenching poem, transcribed from the native tongue in 1896.

How many men and women have loved each other in all the seasons that preceded you and me? How many of their dreams have been fulfilled; how many of their passions wasted? Often as I walk or

sit and contemplate, I wonder at all the heartrending love affairs this planet has absorbed. Fortunately, men and women around the world have left us a great deal of evidence of their romantic lives.

From Uruk, in ancient Sumer, come poems on cuneiform tablets that hail the passion of Inanna, Queen of Sumeria, for Dumuzi, a shepherd boy. "My beloved, the delight of my eyes," Inanna cried to him over four thousand years ago.[2]

Vedic and other Indian texts, the earliest dating between 1000 and 700 B.C., tell of Shiva, the mythic Lord of the Universe, who was infatuated with Sati, a young Indian girl. The god mused that "he saw Sati and himself on a mountain pinnacle / enlaced in love."[3]

For some, happiness would never come. Such was Qays, the son of a tribal chieftain in ancient Arabia. An Arabic legend, dating to the seventh century A.D., has it that Qays was a beautiful, brilliant boy—until he met Layla, meaning "night" for her jet black hair.[4] So intoxicated was Qays that one day he sprang from his school chair to race through the streets shouting out her name. Henceforth he was known as Majnun, or madman. Soon Majnun began to drift with the desert sand, living in caves with the animals, singing verses to his beloved, while Layla, cloistered in her father's tent, slipped out at night to toss love notes to the wind. Sympathetic passersby would bring these appeals to the wild-haired, almost-naked poet boy. Their mutual passion would eventually lead to war between their tribes—and death to the lovers. Only this legend remains.

Meilan also lived by dying. In the twelfth century A.D. Chinese fable "The Jade Goddess," Meilan was the pampered fifteen-year-old daughter of a high official in Kaifeng—until she fell in love with Chang Po, a vivacious lad with long tapered fingers and a gift for carving jade. "Since the heaven and earth were created, you were made for me and I was made for you and I will not let you go," Chang Po declared to Meilan one morning in her family's garden.[5] These lovers were of different classes in China's rigid, hierarchical

social order, however. Desperate, they eloped—then were soon discovered. He escaped. She was buried alive in her father's garden. But the tale of Meilan still haunts the souls of many Chinese.

Romeo and Juliet, Paris and Helen, Orpheus and Eurydice, Abelard and Eloise, Troilus and Cressida, Tristan and Iseult: thousands of romantic poems, songs, and stories come across the centuries from ancestral Europe, as well as the Middle East, Japan, China, India, and every other society that has left written records.

Even where people have no written documents, they have left evidence of this passion. In fact, in a survey of 166 varied cultures, anthropologists found evidence of romantic love in 147, almost 90 percent of them.[6] In the remaining 19 societies, scientists had simply failed to examine this aspect of people's lives. But from Siberia to the Australian Outback to the Amazon, people sing love songs, compose love poems, and recount myths and legends of romantic love. Many perform love magic—carrying amulets and charms or serving condiments or concoctions to stimulate romantic ardor. Many elope. And many suffer deeply from unrequited love. Some kill their lovers. Some kill themselves. Many sink into a sorrow so profound that they can hardly eat or sleep.

From reading the poems, songs, and stories of people around the world, I came to believe that the capacity for romantic love is woven firmly into the fabric of the human brain. Romantic love is a universal human experience.

What is this volatile, often uncontrollable feeling that hijacks the mind, bringing bliss one moment, despair the next?[7]

The Love Survey

"O tell me the truth about love," exclaimed poet W. H. Auden. To understand what this profound human experience actually entails, I canvassed the psychological literature on romantic love, culling

those traits, symptoms, or conditions that were mentioned repeatedly. Not surprising, this potent feeling is a complex of many specific traits.[8]

Then, to satisfy myself that these characteristics of romantic passion are universal, I used them as the basis for a questionnaire I designed on romantic love. And with the assistance of Michelle Cristiani, then a graduate student at Rutgers University, as well as Dr. Mariko Hasagawa and Dr. Toshikazu Hasagawa at the University of Tokyo, I distributed this survey among men and women at and around Rutgers University in New Jersey and the University of Tokyo.

The poll began: "This questionnaire is about 'being in love,' the feelings of being infatuated, being passionate, or being strongly romantically attracted to someone.

"If you are not currently 'in love' with someone, but felt very passionately about someone in the past, please answer the questions *with that person in mind.*" Participants were then asked several demographic questions, covering age, financial background, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and marital status. I also asked questions about their love affairs. Among them: "How long have you been in love?" "About what percent of an average day does this person come into your thoughts?" And "Do you sometimes feel as if your feelings are out of your control?"

Then came the body of the questionnaire (see the Appendix). It contained fifty-four statements, such as: "I have more energy when I am with _____." "My heart races when I hear _____'s voice on the phone." And "When I'm in class/at work my mind wanders to _____." I designed all these questions to reflect the characteristics most commonly associated with romantic love. Subjects were required to indicate to what extent they agreed with each query on a seven-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." A total of 437 Americans and 402 Japanese filled out the questionnaire. Then

statisticians MacGregor Suzuki and Tony Oliva assembled all these data and did a statistical analysis.

The results were astonishing. Age, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, ethnic group: none of these human variables made much difference in the responses.

For example, people of different age groups answered with no significant statistical differences on 82 percent of the statements. People over age forty-five reported being just as passionate about their loved one as those under age twenty-five. Heterosexuals and homosexuals gave similar responses on 86 percent of the questions. On 87 percent of the queries, American men and women responded virtually alike: there were few gender differences. American "whites" and "others" responded similarly on 82 percent of the questions: race played almost no role in romantic zeal. Catholics and Protestants showed no significant variance on 89 percent of the statements: church affiliation was not a factor. And where these groups did show "statistically significant" differences in their responses, one group was usually just a little more passionate than the other.

The greatest differences were between the Americans and the Japanese. On most of the forty-three questions where they showed statistically significant variations, one nationality simply expressed somewhat greater romantic passion. And the twelve questions showing dramatic differences all appeared to have rather obvious cultural explanations. For example, only 24 percent of Americans agreed with the statement, "When I am talking to _____, I am often afraid that I will say the wrong thing," whereas a whopping 65 percent of Japanese agreed with this declaration. I suspect this particular variation occurred because young Japanese often have fewer and more formal relations with the opposite sex than Americans do. So, all things considered, within these two very different societies, men and women were much alike in their feelings of romantic passion.

Romantic love. Obsessive love. Passionate love. Infatuation. Call it what you will, men and women of every era and every culture have been "bewitched, bothered, and bewildered" by this irresistible power. Being in love *is* universal to humanity; it is part of human nature.[9]

Moreover, this magic visits each of us in much the same way.

"Special Meaning"

One of the first things that happens when you fall in love is that you experience a dramatic shift in consciousness: your "love object" takes on what psychologists call "special meaning." Your beloved becomes novel, unique, and all-important. As one smitten man phrased it, "My whole world had been transformed. It had a new center, and that center was Marilyn."[10] Shakespeare's Romeo expressed this feeling more succinctly, saying of his adored one, "Juliet is the sun."

Before the relationship grows into romantic love, you may feel attracted to several different individuals, addressing your attention to one, then another. But eventually you begin to concentrate your passion on just one. Emily Dickinson called this private world "the realm of you."

This phenomenon is related to the human inability to feel romantic passion for more than one person at a time. In my survey, 79 percent of men and 87 percent of women said they would not go out on a romantic date with someone else when their beloved was unavailable (Appendix, #19).

Focussed Attention

The love-possessed person focusses almost all of his or her attention on the beloved, often to the detriment of everything and everyone around them, including work, family, and friends. Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher, called this "an abnormal state of attention

which occurs in a normal man." This focussed attention is a central aspect of romantic love.

Infatuated men and women also concentrate on all of the events, songs, letters, and other little things they have come to associate with the beloved. The time he stopped in the park to show her a spring bud; the evening she tossed lemons to him as he made the drinks: to the love-possessed, these casual instants breathe. Seventy-three percent of the men and 85 percent of the women in my survey remembered trivial things that their beloved said and did (Appendix, #46). And 83 percent of men and 90 percent of women replayed these precious episodes in their mind's eye as they mused about their dearest (Appendix, #52).

Billions of other lovers have probably felt a surge of tenderness when thinking of moments spent with a sweetheart. A touching Asian example of this comes from a ninth-century Chinese poem, "The Bamboo Mat," by Yuan Chen. Chen agonized, "I cannot bear to put away / the bamboo sleeping mat: / that night I brought you home, / I watched you roll it out."[11] For Chen, an everyday object had acquired iconic power.

The twelfth-century tale *Lancelot,* by Chrétien de Troyes, illustrates this same aspect of romantic passion. In this epic, Lancelot finds Queen Guinevere's comb lying in the road after she and her entourage have passed. Several of her golden hairs are tangled in its teeth. As de Troyes wrote, "He began to adore the hairs; a hundred thousand times he touched them to his eyes, his mouth, his forehead, and his cheeks."[12]

Aggrandizing the Beloved

The infatuated person also begins to magnify, even aggrandize tiny aspects of the adored one. If pressed, almost all lovers can list the things they do not like about their amor. But they cast these perceptions

aside or persuade themselves that these defects are unique and charming. "So lovers manage in their passion's cause / To love their ladies even for their flaws," mused Molière. Quite so. Some even adore their beloved for their faults.

And lovers dote on the positive qualities of their sweethearts, flagrantly disregarding reality.[13] It's life through rose-colored glasses, what psychologists call the "pink-lens effect." Virginia Woolf described this myopic view vividly, saying, "But love . . . it's only an illusion. A story one makes up in one's mind about another person. And one knows all the time it isn't true. Of course one knows; why one's always taking care not to destroy the illusion."

Our sample of Americans and Japanese certainly illustrates this pink-lens effect. Some 65 percent of men and 55 percent of women in the survey agreed with the statement: "_____ has some faults but they don't really bother me"(Appendix, #3). And 64 percent of men and 61 percent of women agreed with the statement, "I love everything about _____"(Appendix, #10).

How we delude ourselves when we love. Chaucer was right: "Love is blynd."

"Intrusive Thinking"

One of the primary symptoms of romantic love is obsessive meditation about the beloved. It is known to psychologists as "intrusive thinking." You simply can't get your beloved out of your head.

Examples of intrusive thinking abound in world literature. The fourth-century Chinese poet, Tzu Yeh, wrote, "How can I not think of you—."[14] An anonymous eighth-century Japanese poet moaned, "My longing has no time when it ceases." Giraut de Borneil, a troubadour of twelfth-century France, sang out, "Through too much loving . . . So terribly do my thoughts torment me."[15] And a Maori native of New Zealand expressed his suffering with these

words: "I lie awake the livelong night, / For love to prey on me in secret."

Perhaps the most striking example of intrusive thinking, however, comes from Wolfram von Eschenbach's medieval masterpiece, *Parzifal.* In this story, Parzifal was cantering along on his steed when he saw three drops of blood in the winter snow, shed by a wild duck that had been wounded by a falcon. It reminded him of the crimson and alabaster complexion of his wife, Condwiramurs. Transfixed, Parzifal sat in contemplation, frozen in his stirrups. "And thus he mused, lost in thought, until his senses / deserted him. Mighty love held him in thrall."[16]

Unfortunately, Parzifal was holding his lance erect—a chivalric signal of challenge. Soon two knights who were camped in a nearby meadow with King Arthur took notice and galloped out to joust with him. Not until one of Parzifal's followers draped a yellow scarf over the drops of blood did he shake off his love trance, lower his weapon, and stave off a deadly battle.

Mighty is love. Not surprisingly, 79 percent of the men and 78 percent of the women in my survey reported that when they were in class or at work their mind returned continually to their beloved (Appendix, #24). And 47 percent of men and 50 percent of women agreed that "no matter where it starts, my mind always seems to end up thinking about_____" (Appendix, #36). Other surveys report similar findings. Informants report they think about their "love object" over 85 percent of their waking hours.[17]

How apt of Milton in *Paradise Lost* to have Eve say to Adam, "With thee conversing, I forget all time."

Emotional Fire

Of the 839 American and Japanese people in my survey of romantic love, 80 percent of men and 79 percent of women agreed with the

statement, "When I feel certain that _____ is passionate about me, I feel lighter than air" (Appendix, #32).

No single aspect of "being in love" is so familiar to the stricken lover as the torrent of intense emotions that pour through the mind. Some become painfully shy or awkward when in the presence of the beloved. Some turn pale. Some flush. Some tremble. Some stammer. Some sweat. Some get weak knees, feel dizzy, or have "butterflies in the stomach." Others report quickened breathing. And many report feelings of fire in the heart.

Catullus, the Roman poet, was certainly swept away. Writing to his beloved, he said, "You make me crazy. / Seeing you, My Lesbia, takes my breath away. / My tongue freezes, my body / is filled with flames."[18] Ono No Komachi, a ninth-century female Japanese poet, wrote, "I lie awake, hot / the growing fires of passion / bursting, blazing in my heart."[19] The woman in the Song of Songs, the Hebrew love lyrics composed between 900 and 300 B.C., bemoaned, "I am faint with love."[20] And American poet Walt Whitman described this emotional whirlwind perfectly, saying, "That furious storm through me careering—I passionately trembling."[21]

Lovers ride a kite of exhilaration so swift that many find it difficult to eat or sleep.

Intense Energy

Loss of appetite and sleeplessness are directly related to another of love's overwhelming sensations: tremendous energy. As a young man on the South Pacific island of Mangaia told an anthropologist, when he thought of his beloved, he "felt like jumping in the sky!"[22] Sixty-four percent of the men and 68 percent of the women in our survey also reported that their hearts raced when they heard their beloved's voice on the phone (Appendix, #9). And 77 percent of men and

76 percent of women reported that they had a surge of energy when they were with their beloved (Appendix, #17).

Bards, minstrels, poets, playwrights, novelists: men and women have sung for centuries of this energizing chemistry, as well as the awkward stammering and nervousness, the pounding heart and breathlessness that can accompany romantic love. But of all who have discussed this psychic and physical pandemonium, none has been as graphic as Andreas Capellanus, or Andreas the Chaplain, a learned Frenchman of the 1180s who traveled in high courtly circles and wrote *On the Art of Honorable Loving*, a literary classic of the times.

It was during his century that the tradition of courtly love emerged in France. This conventionalized code prescribed the conduct of the lover toward the beloved. The lover was frequently a troubadour—a highly educated poet, musician, and singer, often of knightly rank. His beloved was, in many cases, a woman wed to the lord of a distinguished European household. These troubadours composed, then sang highly romantic verse to worship and flatter the lady of the house.

Yet these "romances" were expected to be chaste—and rigidly observant of complex codes of chivalrous conduct. So in his book, Capellanus codified the rules of courtly love. Unknowingly, he also listed many of the primary traits of romantic love, among them the lover's inner turbulence. As he aptly expressed it, "On suddenly catching sight of his beloved, the heart of the lover begins to palpitate." "Every lover regularly turns pale in the presence of his beloved."[23] And "A man tormented by the thought of love eats and sleeps very little."[24]

This sophisticated churchman also spoke of the "intrusive thinking" that lovers experience, declaring, "Everything a lover does ends in the thought of his beloved." And "A true lover is continually and without interruption obsessed by the image of his beloved." He also clearly recognized that the lover focusses all of his or her attention on

a single person when they love, saying, "No one can love two people at the same time."[25]

Fundamental aspects of romantic love have not changed nearly a thousand years later.

Mood Swings: From Ecstasy to Despair

"He drifts on blue water / under the clear moon, / picking white lilies on South Lake. / Every lotus blossom / speaks of love / until his heart will break."[26] For the eighth-century Chinese poet Li Po, romance was painful.

Feelings of love soar and dive. If the beloved showers the lover with attention, if he or she calls regularly, writes affectionate e-mails, or joins the lover for an afternoon or evening of food and frolic, then glows the world. But if the adored one seems indifferent, shows up late or not at all, fails to respond to e-mails, phone calls, or letters, or sends some other negative signal, the lover begins to feel despair. Listless, depressed, such wooers mope until they can account for the loved one's actions, relieve their trampled hearts, and renew the chase.

Romantic passion can produce a variety of dizzying mood changes ranging from exhilaration when one's love is returned to anxiety, despair, or even rage when one's romantic ardor is ignored or rejected. As the Swiss writer Henri Frederic Amiel put it, "The more a man loves, the more he suffers." The Tamil peoples of South India even have a name for this malaise. They call this state of romantic suffering "mayakkam," meaning intoxication, dizziness, and delusion.

It came as no surprise to me that 72 percent of the men and 77 percent of the women in my survey did not agree with the statement, "_____'s behavior has no effect on my emotional well-being" (Appendix, #41). And 68 percent of men and 56 percent of women

supported the statement, "My emotional state depends on how _____ feels about me"(Appendix, #37).

Yearning for Emotional Union

"Come to me in my dreams, and then / By day I shall be well again. / For so the night will more than pay / the hopeless longing of the day."[27] Lovers crave emotional union with a beloved, as poet Matthew Arnold knew.[28] Without this connection to a sweetheart, they feel acutely incomplete or hollow, as if an essential part of them is missing.

This overwhelming need for emotional union so characteristic of the lover is memorably expressed in *The Symposium,* Plato's account of a dinner party held in Athens in 416 B.C. On this festive evening some of the greatest minds of classical Greece convened to dine in the home of Agathon. As they reclined on their couches, one guest proposed that they amuse themselves with a topic of sportive discussion: each would take his turn describing and praising the God of Love.

All agreed. The flute-girl was dismissed. Then one by one, they took their turns eulogizing the God of Love. Some regarded this supernatural figure as the most "ancient," the most "honored," or the most "undiscriminating" of all the gods. Others maintained that the God of Love was "young," "sensitive," "powerful," or "good." Not Socrates. He began his homage by recounting his dialogue with Diotima, a wise woman from Mantinea. Speaking of the God of Love, she told Socrates, "He always lives in a state of need."[29]

"A state of need." Perhaps no single phrase in all of literature so clearly captures the essence of passionate romantic love: Need. In my survey, 86 percent of men and 84 percent of women agreed with the statement, "I deeply hope _____ is as attracted to me as I am to him/her" (Appendix, #30).

This craving to merge with the beloved pervades world literature.

The sixth-century A.D. Roman poet Paulus Silentiarius wrote, "And there lay the lovers, lip-locked / delirious, infinitely thirsting, / each wanting to go completely inside the other."[30] Yvor Winters, the twentieth-century American poet, wrote, "May our heirs seal us in a single urn, / A single spirit never to return."[31] And Milton expressed this perfectly in *Paradise Lost* when Adam says to Eve, "We are one, / One flesh; to lose thee were to lose myself."

Philosopher Robert Solomon believes this intense desire is the primary reason the lover says, "I love you." This is not statement of fact but a request for confirmation. The lover yearns to hear those potent words, "I love you, too."[32] So deep is this need for emotional union with the beloved that psychologists believe the lover's sense of self becomes blurred. As Freud said, "At its height, the state of being in love threatens to obliterate the boundaries between ego and object."

Novelist Joyce Carol Oates vividly caught this feeling of blissful fusion, writing, "If they turn suddenly toward us we draw back / the skin shudders wetly, finely / will we be torn into two people?"

Looking for Clues

When lovers don't know whether their love is cherished and returned, however, they become hypersensitive to the cues that the adored one sends. As Robert Graves wrote, "Listening for a knock, waiting for a sign." In my survey, 79 percent of men and 83 percent of women reported that when they were strongly attracted to someone, they dissected their beloved's actions, looking for clues about his or her feelings toward them (Appendix, #21). And 62 percent of men and 51 percent of women said that they sometimes searched for alternative meanings to their beloved's words and gestures (Appendix, #28).

Changing Priorities

Many infatuated people also change their clothing styles, their mannerisms, their habits, sometimes even their values to win the beloved. A new interest in golf, tango lessons, antique collecting, a new hair style, Mozart instead of Country Western music, even moving to a new city or starting a new career: love-struck men and women adopt all manner of novel interests, beliefs, and lifestyles in order to please their dearest ones.

The twelfth-century champion of courtly love, Andreas Capellanus, summed up this impulse, penning the words, "Love can deny nothing to love."[33] While a love-besotted American man put it bluntly, "Anything that she liked, I liked."[34] He was one of many. Seventy-nine percent of American men and 70 percent of American women in our survey agreed with the statement, "I like to keep my schedule open so that if _____ is free, we can see each other" (Appendix, #47).

Lovers rearrange their lives to accommodate a beloved.

Emotional Dependence

Lovers also become dependent on the relationship, very dependent. As Shakespeare's Antony declared to Cleopatra, "My heart was to thy rudder tied by the strings." An ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic poem described the same dependency, saying, "My heart would be a slave / should she enfold me."[35] The twelfth-century troubadour Arnaut Daniel wrote, "I am hers from head to foot."[36] But Keats was the most impassioned, writing, "Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath, / And so live ever—or else swoon to death."

Because lovers are so dependent on a beloved, they suffer terrible "separation anxiety" when they are out of touch. An anonymous

Japanese poem, written in the tenth century, aches with this despair. "Early morning glows / in the faint shimmer / of first light. Choked with sadness, / I help you into your clothes."[37]

Lovers are puppets dangling from the heartstrings of another.

Empathy

As a result, lovers often feel tremendous empathy for the beloved. In my survey, 64 percent of men and 76 percent of women agreed with the statement, "I feel happy when _____ is happy and sad when he/she is sad"(Appendix, #11).

Poet e. e. cummings wrote charmingly of this, saying, "she laughed his joy she cried his grief." Many lovers are even willing to sacrifice themselves for their sweetheart. Perhaps Adam's sacrifice for Eve is the most dramatic offering of any in Western literature. As Milton described it, upon discovering that Eve has eaten the forbidden apple, Adam chooses to eat the apple himself—which he knows will lead to his expulsion with her from the Garden of Eden and death. Adam says, "for with thee / Certain my resolution is to die."[38]

Adversity Heightens Passion

Adversity often feeds the flame. I call this curious phenomenon "frustration-attraction" but it is better known as the "Romeo and Juliet effect." Social or physical barriers kindle romantic passion.[39] They enable one to discard the facts and focus on the terrific qualities of the other. Even arguments or temporary breakups can be stimulating.

One of the funniest literary examples of how adversity heightens romance is Chekhov's one-act play, *The Bear*.[40]

In this drama, an ill-tempered landowner, Grigory Stepanovich Smirnov, appears at the home of a young widow to collect money owed him by her dead husband. The woman refuses to pay a single kopek.

She is in mourning, she explains, and curtly shouts at him, "I am in no mood to concern myself with monetary matters." This sends Smirnov into a tirade against all women—calling them hypocrites, phonies, gossips, scandalmongers, haters, slanderers, liars, petty, fussy, ruthless, and illogical. "Brrrr!" he sputters, "I'm shaking with fury." His rage triggers her anger and they begin to shout insults at each other. Soon he calls for a duel. Itching to put a hole in his head, the widow retrieves her dead husband's pistols and they take their positions.

But as their rancor builds, so does mutual respect—and attraction. Suddenly Smirnov exclaims, "Now this is what a woman is! This I understand! A real woman! This is not a whiner, this is not a wimp, this is a fireball, a rocket, this is gunpowder! A shame to have to kill her, though!" A moment later he declares undying love and asks her to be his wife. As her servants rush into the drawing room to defend their mistress with axes, rakes, and pitchforks, they stumble on the lovers—swept up in a mad embrace.

This odd relationship between adversity and romantic ardor is seen in all the star-crossed lovers of the world's great legends. Fueled by difficulties of one kind or another, they just love all the harder.

The most familiar Western story of this kind, of course, is Shakespeare's tragic tale *Romeo and Juliet*. These young lovers of sixteenth-century Verona are caught in a bitter feud between two powerful families, the Montagues and the Capulets. Romeo is a Montague, Juliet a Capulet. Yet Romeo falls in love with Juliet the moment he sees her at a family party, exclaiming, "O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright! / Did my heart love till now? forswear it, sight! / For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night."[41] Juliet, too, succumbs to Cupid's arrow. As Romeo departs the banquet, she asks her nurse, "Go ask his name. If he be married, / My grave is like to be my wedding bed."[42] The play unfolds with a series of obstacles and confusions that only intensify their passion.

Sixty-five percent of the men and 73 percent of the women in my

survey agreed with the statement, "I never give up loving _____, even when things are going poorly" (Appendix, #26). And 75 percent of men and 77 percent of women agreed with the statement, "When the relationship with _____ has a setback, I just try harder to get things going right" (Appendix, #6).

One of my unexpected survey results is almost certainly attributable to the role of adversity in love. Homosexual respondents, both gay men and lesbians, reported more emotional turmoil than did heterosexuals. These individuals were more bedeviled by insomnia, loss of appetite, and the yearning for emotional union with a beloved. I think this psychic distress occurs, at least in part, because of the social barriers that many homosexual lovers must surmount.

Those who answered my questionnaire while thinking about a former lover also seemed more emotionally fragile. They, too, had a harder time eating and sleeping. They were more shy and awkward around their former sweetheart. They suffered more "intrusive thinking" and more mood swings. And they more often reported having a racing heart when thinking about their old flame. I suspect that many of these respondents had been rejected by their beloved—and this adversity heightened their romantic zeal.

Like rowboats on a troubled sea, both men and women ride the swells of anguish and exhilaration that are romantic love. And barriers intensify these emotions. If your beloved is married to someone else, if he or she lives across an ocean, if you speak different languages, come from different ethnic groups, or just come from different parts of town, this obstacle can heighten romantic passion. Dickens said of this, "Love often attains its most luxuriant growth in separation and under circumstances of the utmost difficulty." Alas, 'tis true.

Hope

"Say that I might live in hope," King Pyrrhus pleads with Andromache in Racine's drama of love and death. Why do lovers continue to hope, even when the dice of life come up relentlessly against them? Most still hope the relationship will spring back to life—even years after it has ended bitterly. Hope is another predominant trait of romantic love.

A charming sixteenth-century poem by Michael Drayton expresses this optimism. It begins, "Since there's no help, come, let us kiss and part! / Nay, I have done, you get no more of me; / And I am glad, yea, glad with all my heart, / That thus so cleanly I myself can free. / Shake hands for ever, cancel all our vows; / And when we meet at any time again, / Be it not seen in either of our brows, / That we one jot of former love retain." With these words Drayton declares, with apparent confidence, that the affair is finally and easily finished. Yet at the very end of the poem, he suddenly changes his tune. Overcome by hope, he argues that "Love" can be still be saved: "Now, if thou wouldst, when all have given him over, / From death to life thou might'st him yet recover."[43]

I think this tendency to hope became implanted in the human brain eons ago so our ancient forebears would doggedly pursue potential mates until the last flicker of possibility had expired.

A Sexual Connection

"I would rather die a hundred times than be without your sweet love-making. I love you. I love you desperately. I love you as I love my own soul."[44] So declared Psyche to her husband, Eros, in *The Golden Ass,* the second-century novel by Apuleius. "Burning with desire," the tale continues, "she leaned over and kissed him impulsively, impetuously,

with kiss after kiss after kiss, fearful he would waken before she had finished."[45]

Poetry from around the world attests to the lover's intense craving for sexual union with the beloved, another basic characteristic of romantic love.

In the Song of Solomon, the woman calls out, "O north wind, awake. / South wind, rise up. / Blow on my garden / and let my spices flow. / Let my love enter his garden / and eat his sweet fruit."[46] Inanna, queen of ancient Sumeria, was enraptured by Dumuzi's sexuality, saying, "O Dumuzi! Your fullness is my delight!"[47] But the sweetest to my ear is the anonymous old English poem that wails, "Western wind, when wilt thou blow? / The small rain down can rain,— / Christ, if my love were in my arms / And I in my bed again!"

Freud, as well as many scholars and laymen, maintained that sexual desire is a central component of romantic love.[48] Hardly a new idea. Those who study the Kama Sutra, the love manual of fifth-century India, know that the word "love" comes from the Sanskrit, "Lubh," meaning "to desire."

It certainly makes sense that feelings of romantic love are intertwined with sexual craving. After all, if romantic passion evolved among our forebears in order to motivate them to focus their mating energy on a "special" individual *at least until insemination had been completed* (as I will maintain in subsequent chapters), then romantic passion must be linked with sexual desire.

The results of my survey support this proposition. A substantial 73 percent of the men and 65 percent of the women daydreamed about having sex with their beloved (Appendix, #34).

Sexual Exclusivity

Lovers also crave sexual exclusivity. They do not wish to have their "sacred" relationship sullied by outsiders. When someone hops in

bed with "just a friend," they often don't much care if this bed partner is also coupling with another. But once a man or woman falls in love and begins to yearn for emotional union with a sweetheart, they profoundly want this mate to remain sexually faithful—to them.

Many of the world's love stories reflect this sexual possessiveness, as well as the lover's desire to maintain his or her sexual fidelity. For example, while estranged from Iseult the Fair, Tristan wed another woman with a similar name, Iseult of the Fair Hands—largely because this woman bore much of his beloved's appellation. But Tristan could not bring himself to consummate the marriage. When, in the Arabian legend, Layla was betrothed to someone other than her beloved Majnun, she, too, avoided the wedding bed. And some 80 percent of the men and 88 percent of the women in my survey agreed with the statement, "Being sexually faithful is important when you are in love" (Appendix, #42).

Of all the properties of romantic love, this longing for sexual exclusivity is the most interesting to me. It probably evolved for two essential reasons: to protect ancestral men from being cuckolded and raising another's child; and to protect ancestral women from losing to a rival a potential husband and father to her children. This craving for sexual exclusivity enabled our forebears to protect their precious DNA as they expended almost all their time and energy courting someone they adored.

But along with a drive to ensure sexual fidelity during courtship came a less appealing trait of romantic love, Shakespeare's "green ey'd monster," jealousy.

Jealousy: The "Nurse of Love"

In his book on the rules of courtly love, Capellanus wrote, "He who does not feel jealousy is not capable of loving." He called jealousy the "nurse of love" because he believed it nourished romantic fire.[49]

This insightful cleric, as usual, had it right. In every society where anthropologists have studied romantic passion, they report that both sexes get jealous, very jealous.[50] As the I Ching, the Chinese book of wisdom written over three thousand years ago, warned, "A close bond is possible only between two persons; a group of three engenders jealousy."[51]

Emotional Union Trumps Sexual Union

But even the desire for sexual intercourse and the craving for sexual fidelity are less important to the lover than the longing for emotional union with the beloved. The love-stricken man or woman wants the beloved to call and say, "I adore you," to bring flowers or some other token gift, to invite them to a ball game or the theater, to laugh and hug and shower them with attention. The lover aches to have his or her love returned. This yearning for emotional togetherness far surpasses the desire for mere sexual release.

Seventy-five percent of the men and 83 percent of the women in my survey agreed with the statement, "Knowing that _____ is 'in love' with me is more important to me than having sex with him/her" (Appendix, #50).

Involuntary, Uncontrollable Love

"Behold a deity stronger than I, who, coming, will rule me from that time forward. Love quite governed my soul."[52] Dante wrote these words in the thirteenth century to describe the moment he first saw Beatrice. He knew the dominating force of romantic love. Indeed, at the core of this obsession is its power: romantic love is often unplanned, involuntary, and seemingly uncontrollable.

How many lovers have felt this magnetic pull?

Billions, probably.

"The Jade Goddess," the twelfth-century Chinese romance, says of Chang Po and Meilan, "The more they tried to stop the love that had been awakened, the more they felt themselves in its power."[53] And in twelfth-century France, Chrétien de Troyes wrote of Guinevere in *Lancelot,* "In spite of herself she was forced to love."[54]

But insights into the irresistible nature of romantic attraction have not been confined to the literary imagination. An American business executive in his fifties wrote of an office colleague, "I am advancing toward the thesis that this attraction for Emily is a kind of biological, instinct-like action. That it is not under voluntary or logical control. It directs me. I try desperately to argue with it, to limit its influence, to channel it, to deny it, to enjoy it, and, yes, damn it, to make her respond! Even though I know that Emily and I have absolutely no chance of making a life together, the thought of her is an obsession."[55]

Even the sober-sided American Founding Father, George Washington, knew the pull of romantic love. In 1795 he wrote a letter to his step-granddaughter advising her to beware lest love become "an involuntary passion."[56]

Contemporary men and women also feel the helplessness that accompanies this experience. Sixty percent of the men and 70 percent of the women in my survey agreed with the statement, "Falling in love was not really a choice; it just struck me" (Appendix, #49).

A Transient State

But as love arrives unbidden, it can also steal away. As Violetta, in Verdi's tragic opera *La Traviata,* sings, "Let's live for pleasure alone, since love, like flowers, swiftly fades."

Plato knew this aspect of the God of Love, saying, "By nature he is neither immortal nor mortal. Sometimes on a single day he shoots

into life . . . then dies, and then . . . comes back to life again."[57] Love is fickle, volatile, inconstant; it can expire, then rekindle, then fade away again.

How long does love's magic last?

No one knows. A team of neuroscientists recently concluded that romantic love normally lasts between twelve and eighteen months.[58] As you will see in chapter three, our study of the brain suggests love can last at least seventeen months. But I would bet that love's duration varies dramatically, depending on the cast of characters involved. Most people have felt a passing infatuation that lasted only days or weeks. And as you know, when there is a barrier to the relationship, this flame can burn for many years. Adversity stimulates romantic ardor.[59]

But this fire in the heart does tend to diminish as partners settle into the daily joys of togetherness, often replaced by another elegant circuit in the brain: attachment—the feelings of serenity and union with one's beloved.

Love's Many Forms

Of course, romantic love can take a variety of forms. You can wake up alone in the middle of the night with feelings of abandonment and despair. Then you get a call or e-mail from your lover in the morning and your hopes begin to soar. Then you meet your sweetheart for dinner and talk and laugh and your ecstasy turns to sensations of security and peace. After supper you climb into bed to read together and soon you are overcome by lust. Then in the morning your beloved dashes off, forgetting to say good-bye, even breaks a forthcoming date or calls you by another's name—and you plunge into despondency again.

"What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels / What wild ecstasy?" John Keats clearly knew that romantic

love is a tumult of wildly different motivations and emotions that mix to form myriad states of mind. Compassion, ecstasy, desire, fear, suspicion, jealousy, doubt, awkwardness, embarrassment: at any moment this kaleidoscope of feelings can shift, then shift again.

"Passions are liken'd best to floods and streams," wrote Sir Walter Raleigh.[60] We swim these tides. But psychologists generally distinguish between two basic types of romantic love: reciprocated love—associated with fulfillment and ecstasy; and unrequited love—associated with emptiness, anxiety, and sorrow.[61] Almost all of us know both the agony and elation of romantic love.

We are not alone. In his book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals,* Charles Darwin hypothesized that human beings share many of their feelings with "lower" animals.[62] Indeed, many furred and feathered beings who share this planet seem to feel some version of romantic passion.