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Hit by Cupid's Arrow: Hidden Violence in Love Metaphors
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Love is a universal feeling that everyone experiences to a certain degree. Many people view romantic love as something that will inevitably happen to them at some point in their life, and the experience is almost always talked about or represented in a positive way. Considering that love is a popular topic of conversation as well as representation, a thorough linguistic examination is warranted. The following is an analysis of love metaphors. The irony of the violence that these metaphors imply, as well as the positive modern narratives of love, will be explored to illustrate how these metaphors shape cultural and social attitudes around love, sex, and relationships.

In their discussion of conceptual metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) use the example *fell in love*. From the phrase, they were able to discern the conceptual metaphors LOSS OF CONTROL IS DOWN and LOVE IS A CONTAINER. Loss of control in any other context would be negative; loss of control implies a certain level of helplessness and uncertainty; love is therefore a risky situation. Additionally, falling in the literal sense involves fast downward motion, and "down" in American culture is interpreted negatively in many contexts. The word "falling" might prompt the perceptual simulation and vision of an injury or vertigo. Physically falling often catches people by surprise and makes the heart beat faster, which love does as well. The loss of control that love makes people feel is a compliment because it hints at just how intense the attraction is; it incites motion as well as emotion. The LOVE IS A CONTAINER conceptual metaphor changes in the common saying "*Love makes* you do crazy things." Love is no longer a CONTAINER but an ENTITY that overtakes people, and the usage of the word crazy implies that people *lose control* over their actions. In other words, love possesses people, an action commonly reserved for demons in horror films. The craziness is a result of the increased levels of dopamine and norepinephrine in the body following attraction. The dopamine makes people feel euphoric and energetic, while norepinephrine (the fight or flight response) might make us stop eating or sleeping (Wu, 2017). Yet these symptoms are accepted as part of *being in love*. The feeling of craziness is typically associated with mentally ill people in horror films as well. That mental illness and love result in the same state of being is in itself significant. It implies that the altered state that mentally distressed people experience is not socially acceptable. Love becomes the socially acceptable context in which people can act crazy, especially when romantic love is so central to our society.

Deborah Cox uses this metaphor in her song *Nobody's Supposed To Be Here*, in which she sings about how she has gotten hurt in many relationships:

Love can make you do some crazy things
So I placed my heart under lock and key.
To take some time, and take care of me

She became so scared of the craziness that her love made her experience that she felt she could place her heart under lock and key to imprison it. She does not blame the person that hurt her, she blames her heart. Her heart is an entity that is culpable for her rash actions. Imprisoning it also implies that her heart is separate from her, instead of an organ within her body. When she sings that she wants to take care of herself, her heart is not included in that plan, thus it cannot be *rehabilitated or taught* to do better.

Even before people are *in love*, they might talk about the people that they are interested in pursuing as a *crush*; people are *crushing on* others. Frank Sinatra wrote a song titled *I've Got A Crush On You*, combining both the crush metaphor and the falling metaphor:

I've got a crush on you, sweetie pie
All the day and nighttime, hear me sigh
I never had the least notion
That I could fall with so much emotion

The first definition of crush in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is "deform, pulverize, or force inwards by compressing forcefully." Again, love is a physical experience that is not a positive one, or one that literally occurs when people become interested in one another. Perhaps it has more to do with the possibility of being rejected, but even in that case it is quite an exaggerated and dramatic word to use to describe someone who makes that person feel romantic attraction.

In the unfortunate event that the attraction is not requited, the experience that follows is referred to as the compound metaphor of *heartbreak*. The heart metaphorically transforms from an organ that pumps blood through the circulatory system to a delicate object that can easily be broken or shattered. The perceptual simulations of this might be the sight and sound of smashing glass or porcelain. Brokenness then implies that the heart needs to be fixed, but generally, cleaning up broken glass or fixing something that is broken is an unpleasant and difficult experience. Cleaning up glass especially involves a certain level of care, as it could potentially cut skin, and putting something that is broken together again is typically an impossible task.

In Whitney Houston's *Heartbreak Hotel,* heartbreak is turned into the location in which she had her heart broken. This song is an example of a breakup

song in which not only are hearts broken, but an entire relationship is. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term break up means “disintegrate or disperse." While disperse is a less violent definition, in the context of an end to a relationship the term tends to refer more to the latter definition. These two simple words can also be considered a story metaphor, because the words suggest a story of two people who once were so close, maybe physically attached, until they *broke up* and came forcefully apart. The word break could also suggest surprise on behalf of the person getting broken up with, as things tend to break suddenly and the act of breaking often cannot be anticipated.

In examining these metaphors, it has become obvious that the way people talk about love is extremely physical in nature. Continuing with this pattern, love as an ENTITY makes the body hot, or what Lakoff & Johnson (1980) classify as the conceptual metaphor PASSION IS HEAT. For example, when someone is attractive, a word people use is *hot*: “They are so *hot*.” The word hot might objectify the person and activate the sensation of burning, which is physically painful and if engulfed with fire, could lead to death. However, people still *burn with desire or burn with passion*. In many cases, the burning metaphor is used to indicate the intensity of emotions, as physical burning is immediate and intense. Since the most common perceptual simulation that comes with the word burning is fire, the burning could also imply that one is *engulfed* in those feelings of attraction—the person feels like they are constantly surrounded, consumed, by their affection. In Peggy Lee’s 1958 song *Fever*, she sings about the subject of the song as someone that *gives her* fever:

> When you put your arms around me
> I get a fever that’s so hard to bear
> You give me fever (you give me fever) when you kiss me
> Fever when you hold me tight

Another contradiction presents itself here. A fever is a symptom of physical illness that increases body temperature. Peggy Lee is unable to function normally when her lover puts their hands around her, kisses her and holds her tight, yet she doesn’t feel sick. In fact, her lover is doing things that are considered affectionate and that feel good. The rise in body heat is attributed to increasing arousal due to the romantic and sexual context. The loss of control is also implied in these lyrics, because she cannot control her internal body temperature or the love that her partner makes her feel.

Even though Peggy Lee does not feel sick with her experience of love, people generally can become *lovesick*. Along with fever, sickness comes with other physical symptoms such as vomiting, sneezing, shaking, tiredness, and weakness. Similarly, when one is lovesick, the implication is that they do not act

normally when the person they love is not around, but none of those physical symptoms occur when experiencing lovesickness. Being lovesick is not a pleasant experience but it is also viewed with fondness by those that are not lovesick. A rising body temperature and lovesickness can be attributed to the release of cortisol, which contracts the muscles in the stomach (Tigar, 2016). A similar metaphor is *lovestruck*, where love can change from an ENTITY to an OBJECT that can strike people, as is the case with the Vamps' song *Lovestruck*:

> Scratch your couch and sleep on the stairway
> If not tonight, maybe tomorrow
> 'Cause I'm hung up, I'm shook up
> I'm lovestruck

Lovestruck might cause a visual or physical perceptual simulation of a lightning strike which, like burning, causes unimaginable pain and can result in death. Another sensation could be getting struck over the head with an object that can make the head hurt, bleed, and cause people to become unconscious. Yet this also activates the body's adrenaline and can dull the visibly painful parts of the experience. In the Vamps' case, they are also hung up and shook up over this person, also objectifying themselves. It becomes implied that the shaking is violent, and the perceptual simulations that come with the phrase "hung up" continue the violence, until reaching the final, most violent metaphor of lovestruck. During the courtship process, one of the people within the pair might make their attraction known by *hitting on* that person. Like the lovestruck metaphor, it implies that the *object* of that person's affections is being forcefully hit with something; this metaphor in particular is a bit more complex than the others that have been previously described, as it is not made explicitly clear what the interested person is hitting the other with. Their attraction could be considered the object or weapon they are hitting with, or it could refer to the force of the attraction itself, which is strong enough to come at another person forcefully. In this case, love becomes a weapon that can inflict its effects quickly onto others. One of the most recognizable cultural examples of love being a weapon is Cupid and his arrow, which strikes two people to make them fall in love. The arrow, when separated from the mythical being, is a tool used in war and hunting. In this scenario, Cupid's arrow should not make people fall in love, but kill or injure both of the people he punctures.

The courtship process gives way to another set of violence metaphors, such as LOVE IS WAR. Often, people will approach the state of being in a relationship as a reward or an objective they have to achieve: their heart becomes a *prize to be won*, and the process of courtship becomes a game. If the process itself takes longer than anticipated, the heart could even grow to be something that

is *conquered*, as if it were a territory the interested person had to traverse and battle through. This lust is driven by heightened levels of testosterone in both men and women (Wu, 2017). These metaphor stories are commonly utilized in situations of rape where consent was not given and persist if a relationship begins and then elevates to a physically violent level. Eisikovits and Buchbinder (1997) found that abusive men use the war metaphor frequently. The argument itself is mapped onto a battlefield, making the partners into opponents. In making their partner their opponent, they were able to make them equally involved in the violence. The war metaphor was used to justify their violent actions because to them, if they framed relationship problems as wars, the only options were to either be victorious or accept defeat (p. 489).

The study of violence in societal expressions of love goes even further back in history. Zillmann, Cantor, and Bryant (1975) conducted research on erotic material and its effect on human behavior, or what they call arousal transfer. Arousal transfer theory posits that the arousal experienced from watching erotic material causes people to be in a heightened emotional state. However, their further research on this topic has shown that the heightened emotional state is not reached immediately after watching the content, but about five minutes later, when the source of the arousal can no longer be easily identified, thus showing that these instances can build up over time and become repressed. This study of heightened emotional states while watching erotic scenes might explain why people enjoy rough sex or can grow violent towards their partner. It explains why so many of the metaphors in this paper are violent but hold an undercurrent of excitement that translates into attraction and pleasure. Violence can become the vessel to reach those states of bliss and as a result becomes normalized in everyday speech.

These metaphors may have evolutionary and social roots. Both men and women's objectives when approaching mating are slightly different. The male's objective is to reproduce as many times as possible to keep populating the world, whereas the female's goal is to find a long-term mate that can provide care for the offspring; gathering food and resources, offering protection and caring for the child. However, the female's role also calls for a diversification of mates, so that her offspring can have a variety of genetic strengths. On a chemical level, oxytocin enhances the male's bonding process, resulting in the ecstatic pleasure of sex. Both male and female are genetically disposed to a pleasure response. This dynamic then establishes the social dynamic of intense emotions during courtship, infidelity, jealousy and so forth. This intensity may be the cause of violent metaphors in our common everyday language.

Among other evolutionary needs is the need to hunt; LOVE IS HUNTING metaphors have been in use to refer to the pursuit of love since medieval times. Andrew Marvell wrote a poem titled *To His Coy Mistress* in 1681 encouraging a

woman to yield to his romantic advances before she became too old and lost her youth:

> Now let us sport us while we may,
> And now, like amorous birds of prey,
> Rather at once our time devour
> Than languish in his slow-chapped power. (ll. 37-40).

These lines incite interest not only because they exhibit the violent pattern, but because Marvell assumes that his love interest is also keen on him; they are both hunters going after each other. The environment in which hunting happens turns into a metaphor for the courtship itself. Yet, while they are both hunters, they are transformed from human beings into "amorous birds of prey" in the next stanza. Time spent courting would be time wasted according to Marvell, so he uses an organic metaphor, either personifying the courting period or turning it into an animal that can devour them with its mouth. Time is a predator in this metaphorical context, but Marvell maps it onto the experience of already being in a relationship or engagement. The excitement during courtship is similar to the thrill of a hunt. J.M. Coetzee uses hunting as an extended metaphor in his allegorical novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* when referring to sex, in this case, with a sex worker: "But with [The Star] it is as if there is no interior only a surface of which I hunt back and forth seeking entry" (49). The hunting metaphor often refers to the man as the hunter, and the woman is dehumanized as the prey, though the roles can be switched. The act of penetration becomes weaponized when sex in general should be pleasurable for the people involved. The metaphor also carries the social expectations of men to be emotionally removed from the sexual experience.

When people do not experience love, love becomes a source of nourishment that people can be *starved* of. In Carol Lee's book, *To Die For,* in which she talks about her struggles with an eating disorder, she recalls: "I was a very lonely child and it's funny but the first word that comes to my head is "starved" I felt starved of affection, starved of love…" This example is not explicitly talking about romantic love but it does convey a certain violence. Starvation not only feels terrible (experiencing stomach pain and physical weakness, headache, and other physical symptoms), but it activates the perceptual simulation of emaciated bodies. Lee's metaphor allows readers to see a body with bones protruding and hollow, purple eye sockets, maybe even thinning hair. Love becomes something that is necessary for survival, akin to the nutrients that people get from food. Most importantly, with this metaphor, Lee is implying that the lack of love in her childhood did not only have psychological consequences but

physical ones, which manifest literally in her life when she was diagnosed with anorexia.

Loved ones can even be burdens. Another common phrase people use when referencing their long-term partners is *the old ball and chain*. The ball and chain was a type of shackle used in seventeenth century England to restrain prisoners. The shackle would attach to the foot, forcing the prisoner to drag a very heavy iron ball around every time they moved; the ball and chain was also used to shackle prisoners to a table during work detail. In the modern sense, one person in the relationship feels imprisoned by the other (typically a wife). The relationship becomes limited for one of its participants, to the point where they feel that they have no freedom because the partner follows them around. The relationship or marriage itself becomes a work detail they feel that they cannot escape from; seeing the relationship itself as work, when combined with a prison context, establishes the relationship as something that the imprisoned person would rather not be involved with at all. This metaphor does not describe a positive relationship, but the phrase is used casually, even humorously to refer to a significant other. Additionally, the phrase can simply refer to an unpleasant relationship where one of the people feel abandoned but are attached to their partner only by the fact that they are in a relationship, as is the case with The Brian Setzer Orchestra's *Ball and Chain*:

> Oh I got to break this ball and chain
> And to you our love is just a little game
> Now there's a fine line between
> Pleasure and pain
> You love me like a ball and chain

The ball and chain metaphor has been used in another context, in which the ball and chain is not referred to as a tool used for imprisonment but a tool to demolish buildings. The relationship is a structure that was built up over its duration. The relationship's end was either so violent it destroyed what those involved had built or the relationship's end was so violent that the person who was broken up with was destroyed. Destruction ensures that the structure (or person, in the metaphorical sense) no longer exists due to extreme force. The ball and chain metaphor implies that someone got irreparably hurt, in the same way that the heartbreak metaphor does.

In these lyrics, more metaphors are present. The singer feels that to their partner, their love is a game. A game is an activity that children typically engage in, thus trivializing the relationship; the relationship is no longer important to this person. In the next two lines, the singer sets up a spatial metaphor that suggests a boundary that the partner is crossing: pain and pleasure. This implies that while

the relationship has been painful, there have been times when it was pleasurable. Thus, this is the singer's conflict. They are hoping that the relationship turns around, but more often than not they think that they should *cut off the ball and chain* and end the relationship.

Through the examination of violent love metaphors in a variety of art forms, it has become clear that they extend throughout the stages of relationship development. They persist even before two people meet, when they experience purely physical attraction, through the courtship process, and finally to the relationship itself. The studies presented in this paper have shown that violent love metaphors have negative impacts on real life relationships and can be used to justify violence against partners. Outside of language, the possible biological and social factors that could influence the creation of these metaphors have been discussed. Overall, the evidence suggests that the hormone releases, primarily dopamine, in different relationship stages color our language as well as our experiences of love.

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