

A philosophy of love in the twilight of romance



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"Love is a curious thing," my friend Miguel said, adding a fourth lump of sugar to his cappuccino. "People think it's eternal, but in reality there's nothing that is more prone to change."

We were sitting at a sidewalk cafe by the square in the small village of Tomelloso, Spain. At the table next to ours, a group of college students were drinking soda and talking boisterously. A policeman stood in front of the square and directed the traffic around a construction site, and a group of old men were playing *boccie* with tin balls under the shady willows of the square.

"What do you mean?" I said. "I'd say love is just about the only thing in the world that doesn't change."

"Ah, but that's a common misconception. Just think of it, here we are in La Mancha, home of Don Quixote a few hundred years ago. Now, do you think anyone would go through all those calamities for a virgin like Dulcinea today?"

"But Don Quixote was crazy. He wasn't a real knight, and Dulcinea certainly wasn't a real virgin," I said.

"It doesn't change my point," Miguel said. (I was wondering if he was absent-minded or if he really meant to put a fifth lump of sugar into his coffee.) "Don Quixote represents his era quite well. He's a parody of the old novels of chivalry, in which the knights would go to any length to protect the honor of the virgins in the castle towers. That was the dawn of romance, and

we're living in its twilight hour."

"But surely, you don't think of love as a passing fancy of humankind?" I protested. "Socrates philosophized about it, Shakespeare wrote about it and Madonna sings about it. Obviously, there's a lasting quality about it."

"But do you really think Socrates' and Madonna's love are one and the same? Socrates philosophized about the primacy of the ideal forms, and Madonna sings about *Erotica*. I grant you, they both deal with what we may call love, but they're very different forms of love. Love, defined as an attraction between people, may be a constant factor in human interaction, but it always expresses itself in new ways, depending on the fashion of the time. Socrates was a pre-romantic, and Madonna is in the forefront of the post-romantic era.

"And look at those college students sitting over there. Do you really think they live by the same Catholic standards as their grandfathers over at the square?" he asked.

"Well, I'd say we're still pretty romantic. We still send each other cards on Valentine's Day, and we still like roses and love letters and candle-lit dinners," I said.

"Those are merely relics from the romantic era. And they exist primarily for commercial purposes. Believe me, Valentine's Day would've been forgotten a long time ago if Hallmark didn't spend so much money reminding us of it."

(I watched with disbelief as he added a sixth lump of sugar. I was certain that the cup would overflow if he added another.)

"But let's get down to reality," he said. "Nowadays, it's no longer uncommon to change lovers quite often. And marriages don't last. Look at Juan,

our waiter, he's been married three times, and in every marriage he's had numerous mistresses. And he isn't even 40 yet. I think people have begun to give up on the idea of eternal love."

"Well, I haven't given up on it!" I said, finishing up my cup of tea. "I still believe it's possible for a man and a woman to love each other forever."

"That's because you're so hopelessly romantic, my friend. And old-fashioned, I might add. If it were up to you, people would still fight duels at sunrise and sing ballads under balconies. The fact is, romance is dead. It was a phase of love that began in the Middle Ages and lasted for about five centuries," he said.

"So what's the alternative to romance?" I asked.

"I don't know. Right now, it seems to be sex. Our culture is obsessed with it. Probably

because our culture is profit-oriented, and sex has become a best-selling commodity. Look at advertisements, look at the movies. It's about dark, mysterious-looking men without shirts selling jeans. It's about a sex-obsessed blonde stabbing men with an ice pick at their sexual climax. And those who say they're unaffected by our changing view of love are lying. It's reflected in divorce rates, in teenage pregnancies, in AIDS..."

"I see. Love is out, sex is in," I said.

"No, you still haven't grasped my point." (He stirred his cappuccino with a spoon.) "Love prevails, but the age of romance is over. We live in the age of realism."

And then he drank his cappuccino.

Back in America, I went to see *Sleepless in Seattle* with some friends of mine. When I came

out of the movie theater, I was exhilarated. Now, *that* was a real romance; there could be no question about it. Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan would love each other and live happily ever after.

"What a wonderful movie!" I told my friends as we walked to the car. "I didn't think they believed in romance any longer in Hollywood."

"It was awful," one friend said. "Dreadful," another friend said.

"So unrealistic!" the first one said.

"Who believes in that kind of love today?" the second one said.

And then I knew it. I belong to a dying species. My friend Miguel was right. We live in the twilight of the romantic era.

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