

# Words on Love: Love in Philosophy, Literature, and Art (An Introduction)

Dejan Kos, Andrea Leskovec, and Špela Virant

Love, as a fundamental human experience, has always been a part of literary discourse. Since the beginnings of written culture, all periods, styles, and genres have thematized love in its various incarnations. Literature seems to be a place predestined to negotiate love. The semantics of love could be determined as a set of culturally passed down standardizations for feeling, thinking, acting, and speaking, structuring the love life.

Embeddedness within a particular cultural tradition and within a specific socio-historical context appears to be crucial for the identification of an utterance, sense, or act as belonging to the coding of love. As a consequence, the motif of love displays a variety of implications and characteristics in different social and cultural contexts. There are at least two different levels: the social conceptualization of love and the literary thematizing of love.

However, the coding of love features specific developmental dynamics, and so it is never completely compatible with the contextual factors that seem to determine its nature. On the one hand, according to Roland Barthes, this is founded in an increasing individualization of the love discourse. On the other hand, this inconsistency is due to the continual vagueness of love as a feeling. It is this inconsistency or uncertainty that seems to be a constitutive marker of the (literary) discourse of love. Under these circumstances, the question arises whether the literary discourse of love features universal structures beyond its historical, social, and cultural dependence. Specifically, 1) society's concepts of love often make ahistorical claims, regardless of their metaphysical, anthropological, psychological, cognitive, and biological justification, and 2) the literary thematizations of love seem to have at least one thing in common; namely, the weakening of social norms (cf. Luhmann).

However, the theme of this set of thematic articles is not "love," but love as part of literary discourses. Thus, we do not ask what love is, but how it is negotiated in literary discourse in the broadest sense. Put another

way: historical and ahistorical perspectives appear to collide in literary discourses of love. On the one hand, these discourses address love in its dependence on the values, norms, and conventions of different epochs; on the other hand, they try to establish a universal language of love.

In modern times, it can be stated that the traditional semantics of love and its numerous underlying cultural, historical, and sociological factors are in decline. However, it is the extreme individualization (modernization and individualization theory; cf. Beck & Giddens) that seems to be decisive. Nevertheless, this decline does not mean the end of collective ideas of love; rather, it stimulates a radical duplication and volatilization of the ideas of love and the opportunities to speak about it. The lack of clear and binding semantics might possibly contribute to the normalizing notions of love. Is any attempt to speak about love solipsistic? Then again, under the influence of a (post)modern lack of meaning, love is stylized as a new myth, which stands for a crossing of borders between the individual and collective desire. In this context, the question is whether there are any alternative concepts that transcend the traditional and (post)modern idea of love. Bernhard Waldenfels deals with this question in his article, which serves as an introduction to the set of thematic articles.

The set consists of three groups of articles. The first concentrates on philosophical questions, and the second on literary representations of love in selected literary texts. The third group of articles deals with the topic of love at the junctions between literature and film, art, and music.

In his article "Responsive Love," Bernhard Waldenfels approaches the issue of love from the perspective of responsive phenomenology. In contrast to intentional, existential, or structural phenomenology, this goes back to a *pathic* dimension of experience. With key concepts like pathos, response, and diastasis, he draws a model of responsivity that is based on interactivity: people respond to what is happening to them in a way that should not be static or stereotypical, but always specific: they have to invent how they respond, but they do not invent what they respond to. In his article "Love as Morality: The Non-Will-to-Possess or the Utopia of Affectivity in Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse*," Alexandru Matei talks about the "figure" of love that Barthes calls *non vouloir saisir* (non-will-to-possess), which merges with the notion of neutral. This is the shift between a European affect (love as will-to-possess) and the neutral affect, or what Matei calls a "utopian affect": an affect that the author assumes to be impossible in the European cultural context.

In the article "Literary Definitions of Love," Špela Virant concentrates on various attempts to define love that can be found in fictional texts. She focuses on the perspective of observing love and the structure applied in

these texts. In her article “Between Mercy and Lechery: The Courtly Love Codex in Spanish Literature of the Fifteenth Century,” Maja Šabec focuses on the ambiguous role of mercy (*pietas*) being the element that determines the disentanglement of the love process. Courtly etiquette followed Christian teaching and demanded acts of mercy from a lady—however, on the condition that a man would not betray her trust. Maja Šabec concludes that the ambiguous metaphor of mercy in the dialogues opens up a broad area of interpretations, among which first place is taken by the salacious urges of both participants. In the article “Love and Longing: Absolute Desire from Romanticism to Modernism,” Peter V. Zima examines the topic of romantic love, understood as the longing for an absent object of love. He shows how this kind of desire appears in the works of selected authors.

The article “Looking for Love in *Werther*, *Jacopo Ortis*, and *Leandros*: A Comparative Analysis of Three Romantic Epistolary Novels from Germany, Italy, and Greece” compares three epistolary novels. The authors Stefan Lindinger in Maria Sgouridou investigate the various concepts of love in these works and the question of the influence of *Werther* and *Jacopo Ortis* on *Leandros*, an important work in the context of the “arrival” of both the Greek national state and Greek literature.

In her article “Familial Love Discourses in Contemporary German-Language Drama and Theater,” Ljubinka Petrović-Ziemer explores the topic of love in terms of social commitment and emotional investment within traditional and unconventional family arrangements. In contemporary drama she finds a growing interest in the phenomenon of violence and excess, and the tendency to dismantle the myth of infallible family love.

Željko Uvanović’s article “Men in Love with Artificial Women: E. T. A. Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman,’ Ira Levin’s *The Stepford Wives*, and their Film Adaptations” examines the phenomenon of Pygmalionism and agalmatophilia and the strategies used by different authors to create the horror circumstances of the production of surrogate women by men united in a conspiracy of hatred. Ana Lúcia Beck uses a comparative approach to the poetics of Louise Bourgeois and Jose Leonilson. In her article “Bleeding Words,” she shows that both artists use the topic of love as a metaphor for life and death. The last text in this set of thematic articles, with the title “‘Take to Your Heart These Songs:’ Love, Eros, and Artistic Production in the Nineteenth Century,” by Dominik Pensel, is a reconstruction of a romantic model of artistic production based on the power of love. He focuses on the works of Goethe, Beethoven, and E. T. A. Hoffmann.