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### The Many Faces of Love

What is love? For many people it is the most important thing in their lives. Without it they feel as though their lives are incomplete. But what is “it”? Thousands of men and women throughout recorded history have attempted to define romantic attraction and eventually concluded that it is a mystery. As a result, until recently, very little was known about this powerful emotion. That situation changed when psychologists began to study love. Now with the help of scientific research the question “What is love?” can finally be answered.

Before research was undertaken, much of the information available about love was provided through fictional works, in books, poems and plays. An early twentieth century author, Kate Chopin, is well known for her stories about relationships and love. In her short stories “The Storm,” “The Story of an Hour,” and “Desiree’s Baby,” Chopin writes about the love experienced by three different women. The kind of love depicted in each story is different; however, the meaning remains the same throughout each piece

It wasn’t until the late 1960s that love was accepted as a worthwhile subject for scientific research. After overcoming their initial reluctance, psychologists flocked to the study of love in droves. It is important to note that current research on love extends beyond social psychology to other areas and disciplines. The subject of love is being studied using concepts and methods

borrowed from such diverse fields as cognitive psychology, personality, infant-parent attachment, and psychometrics.

At best, love is an ambiguous term; meaning different things to different people. Due to this ambiguity, one of the first tasks undertaken by love researchers was the classification of different kinds of love. The triangular theory of love, developed in the 1980s by Yale psychology professor and author, Robert Sternberg, is one of many classification systems. The three components of Sternberg's theory are, passion, intimacy and decision/commitment, each forming one leg of the triangle:

Intimacy refers to close, connected and bonded feelings in loving relationships. The passion component refers to the drives that lead to romance, physical attraction, and sexual consummation. The decision/commitment component consists of two aspects, one short term and one long term. The short term one is the decision that one loves someone.

The long term one is the commitment to maintain that love. (Sternberg 120 -21)

Utilizing his concept of three components of love, Sternberg derives eight subsets, which forms the basis for his classification of love. For clarity, each subset and its components are listed here:

Liking (intimacy alone), Romantic Love (intimacy + passion), Infatuation (passion alone), Fatuous Love (passion + commitment), Companionate Love (intimacy + commitment), Consummate Love (intimacy + passion + commitment), Empty Love (decision/commitment alone), and Nonlove (absence of all components). (Sternberg 122)

This classification system will be used to identify the different kinds of love presented in Chopin's writing.

When one thinks of love, it is usually in the context of romantic love. It is the stuff dreams are made of. Growing up, little girls dream of meeting their Prince Charming, being

swept off their feet, and carried away to a castle where they will live happily ever after. Is it any wonder that romantic love is the primary ingredient of fairy tales? Exactly what is romantic love? According to Sternberg's triangular theory, it is a combination of passion and intimacy. An example of romantic love is found in Chopin's short story, "Desiree's Baby." Chopin presents both Desiree and Armand as emotionally needy. Armand's mother died when he was eight, and the story implies his father has recently died as well. Desiree was abandoned as a child and the only "family" she knows is the couple who adopted her. This circumstance sets up an emotional void that love can fill. The passion Armand feels toward Desiree and her response to him is driven completely by emotional need. The emotional need is not consciously experienced. Both Desiree and Armand believe they have simply fallen in love. Are the necessary ingredients for romantic love found in this story?

Armand and Desiree have known each other since childhood: "...he had known her since his father brought him home from Paris, a boy of eight, after his mother died there" (Chopin 864). This passage establishes the intimacy required for romantic love by revealing Armand and Desiree are not strangers, they share the same lifestyle and are at least familiar with each other. These commonalities allow the couple to develop a deep emotional attachment (intimacy). The second ingredient necessary for romantic love is passion. Chopin establishes the intense passion Armand feels when describing how he fell in love "as if struck by a pistol shot" (Chopin 864). The degree of Armand's passion is further revealed in this passage, "The passion that awoke in him that day... swept along like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or like anything that drives headlong over all obstacles" (Chopin 865). The characters in this story experience passion and intimacy, the ingredients necessary for romantic love. Further analysis of Chopin's writing reveals she is not one-dimensional. Her characters experience many types of love.

If romantic love is composed of passion and intimacy, what is the result of passion alone?

According to Sternberg, it is infatuation. "The Storm," another of Chopin's short stories, illustrates this concept. The story describes an encounter between a woman named Calixta and Alcee Laballiere an acquaintance and neighbor, who takes shelter from a thunderstorm at her house. Both are married and this is a chance meeting, not a planned rendezvous. Calixta, frightened by the storm's ferocity becomes distraught and emotional, "'Bonte!' she cried... 'the house'll go next! If only I knew w'ere Bibi was!'" (859). Alcee pulls her into his arms to comfort her, and becomes physically aroused, "The contact of her warm, palpitating body... aroused all the old-time infatuation and desire for her flesh" (859). Alcee kisses her and, responding to their mutual feelings, they allow passion to overtake them: "They did not heed the crashing torrents and the roar of the elements made her laugh as she lay in his arms" (860). In this moment, they are completely alone, cut off from the outside world by the fierce storm; they are free to act on their passion without fear of being discovered. After the storm passes, Alcee goes home and Calixta turns her attention to preparing supper. Commitment was not discussed nor plans made to see one another again. Alcee returned to his life and Calixta returned to hers. This exchange describes passion and nothing more. Once again, the characters in Chopin's story exhibit behaviors included in Sternberg's classification of love.

Any discussion of love would be incomplete if the concept of "love at first sight" were not considered. Sternberg believes "love at first sight" is nothing more than infatuation and includes it in his triangular theory as passion alone. However, passion may cloak the true reasons behind "love at first sight." In her book, The First Sex, Helen Fisher discusses this phenomenon from a different perspective. She believes love at first sight is an act of nature, related to female reproductive cycles. According to Fisher:

Most animals cannot delay; they have only a few hours, days, or weeks to breed. At the beginning of the breeding season, or cycle they are obliged to select an adequate partner and begin mating. Instant attraction probably evolved to enable them to begin this process swiftly. (236)

Whether the initial attraction is due to passion or reproductive instincts, the act of falling in love at first sight is not uncommon. In her second book, Why We Love, Helen Fisher reports “In a recent survey of one hundred American couples, eleven percent of these men and women said they had fallen in love the moment they set their eyes on their partner ...” (42). However, In Sternberg’s opinion, “Some infatuations never proceed beyond that stage, but others do. Two partners initially attracted to each other for sheerly physical reasons may come to realize they have much more in common than just the physical attraction...” (Sternberg 126). The expectation derived from research is that individuals may initially experience passion (or infatuation), and then develop the intimacy or commitment component that allows their feelings to evolve to different kind of love.

Companionate love is yet another kind of love included in Sternberg’s triangular theory. Sternberg’s classification states companionate love is the combination of intimacy and commitment. However, another definition is provided by Elaine Hatfield in Sternberg’s book The Psychology of Love. According to Hatfield, companionate love is, “the affection we feel for those with whom our lives are deeply entwined” (Hatfield 191). This type of love includes friendship, sibling love, or any intimate relationship that does not include passion. In this context, intimate means to be close to another. This is the type of love Chopin writes about in “The Story of an Hour,” a short story in which Chopin describes a wife’s reaction to the news of her husband’s death.

Reviewing the components of companionate love, it is immediately evident that the component of commitment exists. Marriage is the ultimate form of commitment, knowledge of the characters marital state satisfies the commitment component of companionate love. The intimacy element however, is not directly evident. In fact, after the initial shock, Mrs. Mallard seems relieved at the news of her husband's death. She is suddenly very aware of the implications of being a widow, for now she is free to live as she chooses, "There would be no one to live for her during those coming years: she would live for herself" (863). This passage seems to indicate a lack of love between Mr. and Mrs. Mallard. Perhaps their marriage was not a happy one. Would empty love, which is the decision/commitment component alone, better describe the Mallard's relationship? There is no interaction between the characters in this story to provide evidence of the intimacy component, however, it can be found. Chopin subtly refers to the intimacy they shared in this passage, "And yet she had loved him – sometimes." Also, the affection Mrs. Mallard felt for her husband is clearly established here, "She knew she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death..." (863). In spite of Mrs. Mallard's reaction to the news of his death, the love they shared can be classified as companionate love.

Due to the restrictions imposed on women by society during this time in history; companionate love was, for some, the best relationship society could offer. "The Story of an Hour," was published in 1894, a time when women's rights, as we know them, did not exist. If the marriage was not satisfying, or even abusive, divorce was not an option. Women were subordinate to men in every way. They were not allowed to make their own decisions, own property, or vote, and were expected to comply with their husbands' wishes without question. In this era, romantic love was hoped for, but companionate love was more often the reality.

Using Sternberg's triangular theory of love to analyze Chopin's writing, it is evident that different kinds of love are portrayed in each story. The meaning of love, however, remains the same throughout each piece. The issues Chopin addressed more than a century ago- love, marriage, extra-marital affairs, and self-fulfillment – are still being faced by individuals today. It is in this arena that love researchers hope to have an impact.

The goal of scientific research is to unlock the mystery of love, to help us understand our behaviors and provide tools to deal with ourselves and others. Much work has been done, however, much work remains. In the final analysis, no matter how successful the scientists may be in uncovering the biology of love, they will never destroy the mystery or ecstasy of this passion.

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**Comment:** MLA requirements have changed since this essay was written.

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