

# Finding Love: The Sonnet and the Importance of Form

By Caroline Mac Mahon



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Steve Cortright, Advisor & Claude Malary, Advisor

Saint Mary's College of California

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I do not imagine myself to be a talented poet. Yet, I have chosen to present my opinions on the philosophy of love through poetry. Why have I elected to do this? Why challenge myself in such a seemingly pointless way? The decision to propose my theory in poetry and merely comment in prose is far from pointless.

Regardless of its content, the form any text takes is remarkably important. The purpose of every text is ultimately to communicate to its audience and spark a conversation, whether it be internal or external, in its readers. The meaning of a text is only attained through this kind of challenging conversation. The construction of a text colors the tone of that conversation and shapes its conclusions. Impeccable verse or an everyday anecdote, the meaning of any text answers to its formal presentation.

I have chosen to employ the sonnet to interpret love, as it is the truest form in which to engage this conversation. Since its advent, the sonnet has lent itself to the development of personal thought. The sonnet's defining characteristics-- its subjectivity, its asymmetry, and its parameters--perfectly encourage philosophical meditation on love. To understand exactly how the sonnet is the ideal form for the examination of love, let us begin with its poetic tradition.

The sonnet was invented by Giacomo da Lentini, an Italian poet in the 13th century, but it evolved out of a longer poetic tradition of 14-line lyrical poetry. Yet, unlike much medieval poetry, the sonnet veers away from repetition. The rhyme structure of the sonnet only sanctions repetition with variation. By contrast, a majority of medieval lyrical poetry was characterized by the musicality of repetition, which at times manifested itself in couplets that were repeated like the chorus of a song. The reprisal of a specific couplet stresses a single notion, encouraging

static meditation. Abundant repetition in a poem can reflect its passive nature, while the nature of the sonnet is argumentative and dynamic. The asymmetric structure of the sonnet emphasizes change or development of thought. A sonnet is composed of an octave followed by a sestet; between these two uneven divisions is the sudden turn of thought. The octave usually presents a problem or moment of passionate instability that demands to be worked through. The volta, usually at line nine (the beginning of the sestet), initiates the shift or breakthrough in thought.

Sometimes the sonnet is divided into two stanzas at the volta, but there is significant academic dispute on whether this is a defining characteristic of a sonnet or not. Author and poet T. W. H. Crosland argues that the octave and the sestet should be distinguishable and separate from each other. For Crosland, they should be strong enough to stand alone as distinct poems which are only connected thematically. On the other side of this debate, professor and historian Paul Oppenheimer, agrees that the volta is the defining characteristic of the sonnet, but argues that the poem is made up of only one stanza. Nevertheless, the general consensus among scholars is that the volta is vital for any 14 line poem to be defined as a sonnet. Yet, the precise location of the volta alternates depending on the style of the sonnet. In the Shakespearean style, the volta does not appear until the final rhyming couplet at line 12. Placing the volta “late” dramatizes the reveal of the conclusion and accentuates the internal struggle of the previous lines.

Regardless of where the volta is placed, it is a feature that highlights the argumentative nature of the sonnet. The content must also take advantage of the sonnet-form by tackling perplexing topics. Oppenheimer writes that the sonnet deals “with deep contradictions, with passions and ideas that refute each other, and that yet exist simultaneously, and with all the frustration and growing self awareness that accompany this familiar type of suffering” (*The Birth*

*of the Modern Mind*). Love is a madness riddled with contradictions. The anguish of love is magnified by our own awareness that desire is out of our control. Love, as I define it, is an impulse towards a good. Both the perceived and true good can inspire this madness. Those in love can disassociate from their condition, frustrated by the impulse of their heart, but in love nonetheless. The configuration of the sonnet conducts meditation cognizant of its own dilemma. The volta, or turn in Italian, is a turn of thought that permits the poet to entertain another perspective. The lover is drawn to the sonnet, perhaps unknowingly, because it facilitates reflection altogether suited to the state of the lover.

The structure of the sonnet assists in cultivating a dialogue with the self. The invention of this verse form happened at a time when introspection just began to be popularized. Emphasizing the examination of burdensome ideas, the sonnet encourages what Oppenheimer calls dialectical self confrontation. The sonnet provides a platform to converse with the self and perhaps find a conclusion. This makes the sonnet the ideal form for the self to uncover the mysteries of love. Love is not shared: indeed, existence is lonely and we can never truly be partners in pleasure or pain. Therefore we must come to conclusions about the nature of these complex topics individually. Although this task may seem daunting, the attempt to clarify emotion logically (that is, in considered speech) is crucial. To understand love and ultimately understand our humanity we must examine the emotions love had bred in us. Love touches every human life. When we strive to comprehend this universal condition we can better understand ourselves and each other. The sonnets I have composed aim to do just that.

Since the experiences of each individual can never be wholly shared, attempting to relate that experience accurately can be challenging. Language is a tool we can use to bridge our

isolated existence by connecting with others. The form of Poetry limits the use of language, imposing rules and enforcing structure. The sonnet is one of the most intricate forms of poetry. Typically, the sonnet dictates the rhyme scheme, the meter, and the length of the poem. Almost every aspect of this form of poetry is controlled. Why limit a tool of communication so severely? The limits on language make every word significant and intentional. Each sonnet I have composed represents only a snapshot of the varieties of love. Each type of love is complex and can manifest itself in many ways. Limiting our examination of them by adopting the sonnet is engaging because we understand the whole of love through its parts. Developing the difficulties of love through the sonnet can leave its interpretation open to a myriad of experiences. Using the sonnet as the form to discuss love facilitates understanding. The sonnet brings us closer to the truth about love, but what is that truth? What is love?

Love is a mysterious notion. It is not tangible except through actions. It is a paradoxical condition that is simultaneously universal and particular. It can be in one case completely selfish and in another altogether selfless. In one instance, it is the cause of momentous pleasure; at another, the source of devastating pain. It is fitting that in classical mythology love is personified as an ancient god who is as old as the earth and created without lineage, simply born out of chaos. As one of the oldest gods, he is capable of bestowing the greatest blessings on humanity<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, in the Platonic dialogue *Phaedrus*, love is portrayed as a divine gift of madness. Socrates describes this madness as a “divine release from customary habits” (*Phaedrus*, 265b). The divine release of love described by the *Phaedrus* highlights the power of love over the lover.

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<sup>1</sup>In Plato’s symposium, a young Phaedrus cites many ancient texts such as *Theogony* to support the description of ἔρως personified as “one of the most ancient gods. As such, he gives to us the greatest goods” (178c). This truth is hardly disinterested: Phaedrus employs this personification to further his argument and in turn justify his own lifestyle.

Love fills the lover with so much passion for the beloved that everything is secondary, except (perhaps) the beloved's welfare. To the lover, the beloved holds a good which is not only imagined but manifested in the beloved himself. The recognition of this personal good is infused with the divine wisdom of a greater good.

In the *Symposium*, Plato expounds the idea of attaining to the greater good from experience with the personal good. In the recounted dialogue between Diotima and Socrates, love is determined to be the desire to possess the beautiful and the good forever, body and soul: "Every desire for good things or for happiness is the 'supreme and treacherous love' in everyone . . . In a word, then, love is wanting to possess the good forever" (*Symposium*, 205d). In attempting to possess the good and the beautiful, the lover is also chasing immortality. Whether it be in body or soul, Plato recognises that love begets the urge for immortality. When we consider this definition in the context of the Platonic theory of forms, it is easy to see that love is the desire to fulfill our humanity in a union with the perfect forms of the Good and the Beautiful.<sup>2</sup> Diotima's ladder of love distinguishes different levels of love: the lowest rung is desire for what is physical; the highest rung transcends human desire in its unity with "essential beauty entire, pure and unalloyed" (*Symposium*, 211e). The Platonic theory reveals love as an overwhelming desire inspired by heaven for the Good. Appropriately, this theory does not limit love to a single type. Some love is only interested in the physical and immediate good, while others are interested in the uninhibited and universal good. Experience teaches us that the word

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<sup>2</sup> Beauty and Goodness (capitalized to remain consistent with the platonic distinction i.e. between lesser "good" and the form of "Good") are in harmony with the divine so this definition is consistent with Plato's divinely inspired madness. The desire for the good of man is truly a divine inspiration to plant the seed of love for the good in hopes that it will blossom into a love for the form of Good.

love includes many varieties. To help distinguish these varieties, let us examine another philosophical definition of love by Saint Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*.

An important philosophical and theological scholar, Aquinas approaches the topic of love through the lens of its relationship with God. He asks the question whether or not love exists in God. In doing so, Aquinas must first define love. He understands love to be “the first movement of the will and of every appetitive faculty” (*Summa Ia*, Q. 20). Love is the seed of desire that is the root of every action. Even a sinister desire is rooted in a love for the perceived good<sup>3</sup>. Clearly Aquinas was influenced by classical philosophy as he seems to agree with the Platonic assertion that love is the desire for union with the good. However, after he has proven that love does exist in God, he develops the classical understanding of love further:

An act of love always tends towards two things; to the good that one wills, and to the person for whom one wills it: since to love a person is to wish that person good. Hence, inasmuch as we love ourselves, we wish ourselves good; and, so far as possible, union with that good. So love is called the unitive force (*Ia Q. 20*).

This statement advances our understanding of love in that Aquinas proposes two variables which can alter the love we experience: our understanding of the good and the object we will the good upon. The nature of love will ultimately drive us to try to unify ourselves with that perceived good. This idea is crucial to my theory on the philosophy of love. I propose that the two variations, the good we desire and the object of that good (or its dative), will ultimately define

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<sup>3</sup> The actions of the will and appetite can also tend towards evil. For example, sending a bag of live rattlesnakes to one’s most hated enemy would be a fulfillment of an evil desire, the death of the enemy. This evil desire is only a secondary and indirect object, a desire for the good, or love, is the primary object of the will and appetite. Hatred manifests itself only in opposition to the good: in the case of the two enemies, they desire evil for each other because the very existence of their enemy is in opposition to the good they desire for themselves. “For nobody desires anything nor rejoices in anything, except as a good that is loved: nor is anything an object of hate except as opposed to the object of love” (*Ia Q. 20*).

the type of love we are experiencing. I have chosen to classify love into seven types: erotic, parental, friendly, divine, self, unqualified, and toxic.

In the construction of this project I dedicated a sonnet to the exploration of each kind of love. In each type, the variables of the desired good and its dative are different. As we have discussed, the sonnet permits lovers, regardless of the type, to understand their desire. Each subset of love, as I have defined them, experiences its own instabilities that need to be worked through. I have elected to accompany my sonnets with an explanation of the desired good and its dative along with an application of the formal analysis of the sonnet. Obviously, the use of analytical prose to ponder the nature of love is less than ideal. Yet, my work requires an explanation, not of the sonnets themselves, but of the idea behind each love and how the sonnet does it justice.



Erotic Love

J'attends. L'angoisse m'étreint, toujours prête à plaindre  
Mes yeux remplis de l'embrasement de mon cœur  
L'amour consume mes pensées intérieure  
Conquise par le désir, ils ne cessent de geindre

J'imagine la caresse de tes mains tendre  
Quand je te quitte, c'est toujours à contrecœur  
si tu me refuses, ce serait un crève-cœur  
s'il te plaît, chéri, je me languis de nous joindre

Dans la passion, j'émet les deux mots "je t'aime"  
Mais c'est perdu après l'instant d'extase intime  
Je suis guérie de cette folie. Je me détends  
Nous n'étions jamais de sincères partenaires  
Même pour le plaisir, tu n'étais pas nécessaire  
Mais amoureuse de l'amour, encore j'attends.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Translation:

I wait. Anxiety grips me, always ready to complain  
My eyes are full of the blazing of my heart  
Love consumes my inward thoughts  
Conquered by desire, they never stop whining

I imagine the the touch of your tender hands  
Whenever I leave, it's always reluctantly  
If you refuse me, it would be heartbreaking  
Please, my dear, I yearn for us to unite

In passion I utter the two words, "I love you"  
But it's lost after the moment of intimate ecstasy  
I am cured of this madness. I can relax  
We were never sincerely partners  
Even in pleasure, you are not necessary  
Yet in love with love. I still wait.

Eros is known by many names: erotic love, sexual love, courtly love. This love is characterized by its intensity; it burns hot, but fast. This madness sends its afflicted into dramatic fits of impatient longing and fiery passion. Yet the moment it is consummated, it dissipates, as reflected in the volta. The erotic lover desires the good of pleasure, to satisfy a lustful impulse. Typically the dative of the good demands it upon himself. It is possible for the erotic lover, in an equally egocentric fashion, to desire the pleasure they can give to be bestowed upon the object of their love, the beloved. However, giving pleasure to another is usually a roundabout way to receive pleasure. The beloved wants, needs the lover only to achieve bliss. Eros is a selfish love. In the eyes of the lover the beloved is simply an object to be coveted. As both Plato and Aquinas agree, love seeks a union with the good. For erotic love, union is understood to be something more like union-as-possession. The volta of this sonnet reflects the fleeting nature of this love. If the problem presented in the octave is the anguish of sexual appetite, then the turn or change in thought comes from carnal satisfaction. The passion of the speaker is gone but perhaps the drive for union with the good is not. The desire for the good of pleasure is never truly satisfied. People can come and go, but the wishful desire to be fulfilled by sexual pleasure is insatiable. The subjective language of the speaker does not encompass the experience of every erotic passion. Yet from the individual case we can understand what erotic love means without explaining it completely.

Divine Love

In the beginning was the radiant light  
 Untouched by darkness, the sacred blaze  
 Pregnant with the power to ignite  
 Brilliant life that nature obeys  
 Man, forged in divine light, strays  
 Freedom to obtain independence  
 Man grew distant, unable to gaze  
 Upon that divine candescence  
 In an act of supereminence  
 God became man and died in love  
 Love full of cosmic resplendence  
 Love in three; father, son and dove  
 To bathe in its perfect and true light  
 The will of God and man must unite

Divine love is complicated for mankind to comprehend because our humanity restricts our capacity. Still, this natural obstacle has not stopped many theologians from advancing our understanding of God. God is love and God is goodness; therefore, the good that God wills is himself. The recipients of this goodness is all of His creation. Yet paradoxically, it seems like God loves some of His creations more than others, as goodness is not imparted to everyone equally. How can this be when divine love is perfect? Moreover, how can this be when God loves all His creations without bias? Just as a smaller vessel cannot contain as much as a larger vessel, some of God's creations have a greater capacity to receive God's goodness. Divine love is unique and pure. Unlike most lovers, God does not need his creations. Therefore, the love He has is completely selfless. The construction of this sonnet emphasizes the selfless act of the crucifixion depicted in lines 9 and 10 at the volta. Prior to this divine sacrifice, the fall of mankind estranged humanity from God, as presented in the octave. In the last two lines we can

discern that the union God desires with His creations is a union-as-communion, that the will of God and the beloved become one.

### Parental Love

I can still see you smiling up at me  
Holding your hand, I held the whole world  
Your sweet laugh echoes through my memory  
Then our time together unfurled  
Your innocent and forgiving eyes  
Grew indifferent to what I've taught  
You're more than me now, time flies  
I must accept, knowing what I've lost  
Time has guided you to the dull truth  
I am no god, no titan, no hero  
Part of me must die, forgotten in youth  
But I know we still have room to grow  
You are my life's masterpiece  
Indeed, for you, my love cannot cease.

Parental love is akin to divine love in that the child is the creation of the parent. In infancy the child is completely dependent on the parent. Like divine love, the good that parents desire for the beloved is, in fact, the parents themselves. The dative of the good is the child. The survival of the child is reliant on the care that only the parent can give. At times, this dependency can make the child seem like an extension of the parent. However, unlike divine love, parental love sees union with the good as a union of harmony. The good the parent wills for the child is also the ultimate good for the child. Eventually, the child must grow up and in doing so become self-sufficient. The child must separate from the parent and embrace individuality. The role of the parent must change: the good can no longer hinge on the actions or will of the parent. As the

relationship develops, the parental desire to be the good and the knowledge that they can no longer fulfill that role clash. This sonnet laments the subjective growing pains of a changing parental love. As the sonnet is composed in the Shakespearean style, the volta resides in the final couplet. This couplet reveals a sliver of hope. Parental love is unshaken by the evolving relationship. It is proud of the good it's given, but willing to evolve as the child grows. The development of parental love in this way encourages unselfish desire.

### Friendship Love

Some rely on similarity  
 Needing companionship to survive  
 I acquired allies who will thrive  
 Comfort comes in this necessity  
 Some have another capacity  
 Laugh idly in prattle we contrive  
 Only to entertain and to revive  
 Always lacking any complexity  
 But we have built something pure  
 To me you are above all others  
 With you I am free to act alone  
 Tribulation tests what can endure  
 You've seen the true me, beyond rumor  
 Together we can glean what we've grown  
 .

The love in friendship is outlined by Aristotle to have itself three varieties; friendship of utility, friendship of pleasure and friendship of virtue. Friendly love is characterized by balance. This balance makes friendship a love which is dependable, forgiving, and generous. This is a slow burning love, when compared to some of the other varieties. For every Aristotelian note of friendship, balance is necessary. The good that is desired in a friendship is always of equal

measure for both the lover and the beloved. For example, in the friendship of pleasure the lover can desire the good of entertaining companionship that is unique to the beloved, but the beloved must also desire and receive the good of companionship from the lover. The lover will offer the good that they can give in exchange for the good they desire. The dative must be both the lover and the beloved. Both friends must mutually benefit. Yet, the friendship of utility and the friendship of pleasure are both deficient. In a virtuous friendship, both friends must be equals and their morality must align. These friends are in a union of a common goal; to attain the virtuous good. Virtuous friendship, unlike the other kinds, loves the friend for who they are and not what they can give. This sonnet focuses on a virtuous friendship, emphasizing its distinct nature and importance in the volta at line 9. The speaker celebrates the beauty of a virtuous friendship especially in comparison with the defective ones.

### Self Love

I must stop staring at this reflection  
 My own face is a stranger to me  
 Does a mirror reveal reality?  
 I'm tired of this stale affection  
 But tired of my peevish rejection  
 I can never leave you to be free  
 Ashamed of what only I can see  
 Caught up in my chaotic introspection  
 Yet, who could possibly know you better?  
 unfinished, I will grow to change  
 Still, to my prior self I am a debtor  
 Accepting both the splendid and the strange  
 Satisfied to be the pacesetter  
 Thus from my heart, I need not estrange

Self love is perhaps the most immediate love, yet it is the most evasive to understand. The self is both the object of love and the lover. There is no escaping yourself and so the relationship cannot survive on mystery. Perhaps one knows oneself too well<sup>5</sup>. One can feel both desire and disgust simultaneously towards oneself. The good you desire for yourself is changeable. Self love can, in one instance be erotic and in another friendly. Who you are in this instant is a creation of your past self. Who you will become in the future is reliant on the decisions you make now. There is a kind of parental relationship in self love as well because you are dependent upon yourself to fulfill your own needs. Undoubtedly self love is confusing, constantly changing, it is riddled with contradictions. The form of the sonnet enables the discussion of this capricious love. In the octave, the speaker presents the challenge that is loving oneself. Including the conflict of simultaneous opposing desires. The volta shifts the perspective of the self to recognize the unique nature of this kind of love. The subjective perspective of this universal experience highlights the importance of engaging in a healthy dialogue with oneself and finding conclusions from within.

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<sup>5</sup> In *Symposium* the lover hides his faults from the beloved because there is never as strong a sense of shame and embarrassment as when the beloved witnesses some mistake of the lover. In the relationship with the self there is no way to hide the mistakes you've made from yourself. Self love must then overcome the shame that results from knowing, seeing and hating all the flaws of the self.

Unqualified Love

Merely parts of a noble whole  
 We have been gifted with a madness  
 captivating and shepherding the soul  
 To kindle in my heart a love deathless  
 To see unqualified beauty  
 Individuals unite as one  
 Just as I gaze upon the vast sea  
 My soul contemplates the perfection  
 An unchanging, endless and true love  
 To my humanity I cannot cling  
 Captivated by freedom above  
 My soul shall unite in virtue  
 With the everlasting good I pursue.

Unqualified love is characterized by the perfection and purity of its nature. This love comes from recognizing that the whole of humanity and nature itself is greater than individuals and the self. Everything is united by the desire for the good of goodness itself. Like divine love, this love does not seek to gain anything. There is no object of love except beauty and goodness itself. Unblemished by humanity, unqualified love is also unchangeable. This love differs from what I have defined as divine love because humans can experience it. In truth, this love is a result of the communion with goodness itself; it is the human participation in the divine love. In his novel, *War and Peace*, Tolstoy captured this love admirably:

Yes love...but not the love that loves for something, to gain something, or because of something, but that love that I felt for the first time, when dying, I saw my enemy and yet I loved him. I knew that feeling of love which is the essence of the soul, for which no object is needed. And I know that blissful feeling now too. To love one's neighbors; to love one's enemies. To love everything. To love god in all His manifestations.



This sonnet attempts to capture the rise of the soul to participate in unqualified beauty: the volta represents the transcendence of gazing upon unalloyed beauty and experiencing unqualified love. The sonnet imagines what it would be like to participate in this love from a subjective perspective.

### Toxic Love

As if looking down a mountain of air,  
A panic pulses through my fingertips,  
I see your eyes stupidly unaware  
All these screams that perish on my lips  
How could you control me, did I let you?  
We know only lies that make us numb  
Truth reveals our pride, stubbornness too  
I hate what you have become  
Still, once you were my fantasy  
On the brink of breaking love strains  
We satisfy a need for ecstasy  
Fleeting pleasure followed by pain  
I'll never forgive letting you go,  
Still I gave up hope long ago

Most of these types of love (except unqualified love and divine love) can easily be twisted into a toxic love. Proximate to unrequited love, toxic love is characterized by an unbalance or misperception. Essentially, it is a misappropriation of devotion toward something that cannot exist or never existed. The good that is desired is usually disconnected from reality.

The lover can be in self-conflict, desiring something they think they want or that they expect they should want. However in doing so, the toxic lover represses the truth.

The toxic lover could also be in conflict with the beloved, desiring something a partner, or this partner, cannot give. A paradigm for this type of love is Flaubert's character Madame Bovary. She collected so many ungrounded expectations for what romantic love should be that she began to drown in her own fantastic expectations. Her rampant desire and unfailing devotion to her fantasy was her demise.

Toxic love is greatly influenced by stubbornness and pride. This tainted love is nothing more than selfish. Ultimately it leaves the lover unsatisfied and resentful. The misperception of the good forces the lover, and sometimes the beloved, to live a lie. This love traps the lover in a torment of their own creation.

Perhaps one could argue that toxic love is in fact not really a love at all. Since it rests merely on an apparent good, which is an illusion, while human love wills the good as it is, a good for either the lover or the beloved. In toxic love neither the lover or the beloved will benefit. However, love is the need to be in union with the good regardless of whether that good is merely perceived or not. The good one desires can be unobtainable or impossible. Still the love that is felt is every bit as real, albeit much more damaging, as a love that drives the lover towards a legitimate good.

In the sonnet on toxic love the speaker battles feelings of anxiety and betrayal. Yet, at the volta the tone shifts to sentimental remorse. The turn of thought allows the speaker to contemplate how hard devotion to this love was to abandon. Holding on to the fantasy held some satisfaction. Letting go of the fantasy triggered grief.

Love, as we have said, is complicated. Most attempts to reveal its complexities fall short. Perhaps this is why many lovers have turned to poetry. By nature, poetry celebrates elusive ideas with precise language and controlled structure. In my humble exploration of love, I elected to use the sonnet as it encourages complex development of thought through contemplative dialogue. The limitations outlined by the organization of the sonnet breed a creative and engaging poem. These poetic musings on love are greatly influenced by the form they took. Clearly the choice of form in any text is an important one.

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