

Modern Emotions: Love

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Surprise! Surprise! Love, too, in the sense we understand it now, is not a universal human emotion. Even today it is not universal: Some cultures are familiar with it and some are not. And, historically, only the last 500 years in human history have known it — the same 500 years that have known [happiness](#), [aspiration](#), and [ambition](#).

The first humans to fall in love also lived in the 16th century and were English. Today, of course, this most powerful feeling is familiar everywhere within the so-called "Western" civilization (which includes all societies based on monotheistic religion, i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and it has penetrated into other civilizations as well. But it has spread *from* England, accompanying other experiences (such as ambition or happiness) which were at first specifically English, and reached other societies in translation from the English language. Love as we understand it, therefore, also does not spring from human "nature": It is essentially a cultural phenomenon.

We all feel that our lives would be incomplete without love. Isn't this so? Many of us do not find it and suffer because of this. The search itself often becomes a source of suffering. But we all want love and are unwilling to give up. It seems unbelievable that there were times and there are still places, where people have never had this need and hardly would be able to understand why we make such a big deal about it. Yet, this is a historical fact: For most of human history, love scarcely touched more than a couple of eccentric individuals here and there.

We also know precisely what it is we are looking for—we recognize love immediately when we meet it, we know when it is "the real thing" and when what we encounter is not "it" but an emotion that only bears a superficial resemblance to it. If we are mistaken, if we take for "real love" something that only appears as one, for "true love" something that is false, we can go mad, have a nervous breakdown. Indeed, such "disappointments in love" are among common causes of depression and even suicide. We all know what it is, and yet, it is so difficult to define.

Among other reasons, this difficulty has to do with the word "love," which (unlike "happiness") is an old word that was commonly used before it acquired its modern meaning. In general, it referred to an ecstatic desire of any kind, which implied the experience of self-transcendence—this was, in fact, the original meaning of the word *eros* in Greek.

Because of this general meaning, "love" could be used to express both the purely spiritual sentiment of Christian love and even the divine love of God itself

(*agape, caritas, eros* of Christian theology) and the physical desire, libido, which the church considered essentially sinful—sexual lust.

When the 16th century English concept of love—which is our concept—was added to these older meanings, this resulted in some confusion. You may remember Shakespeare’s sonnet, one of many in which he defines true love, but where he says, admitting to the multiplicity of meanings the word “love” allows:

Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds,

Or bends with the remover to remove:

O no; it is an ever fixed mark,

That looks on tempests, and is never shaken;...

Love alters not with [Time’s] brief hours and weeks,

But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

The characteristic of true love that Shakespeare stresses in this sonnet is its unchanging nature: it is one-in-a-lifetime passion. Admit it: This is what we all want, however difficult it proves for most of us to find. Those who argue that our desires are genetically, and therefore, evolutionarily determined, should consider that; it is far more likely that we share our genetic endowment with the clearly polygamous apes than with species genetically remote from us, such as wolves, penguins, or swans, who mate for life. Yet, we long for a monogamous lifetime relationship.

There are, of course, other characteristics that distinguish love as we understand it today from other emotions (including those that could be called “love” in different times and cultures). And, again, Shakespeare was the first to point to them.

For example, “true love” is a passion, that is, an authentic and free expression of one’s innermost self; in fact, it is the ultimate modern passion, the supreme movement of the human spirit. None of the earlier concepts of love included this element. [See the discussion of passion in [Modern Emotions: Aspiration and Ambition](#)]. As a passion, it is irrepressible, uncontrollable, free from extraneous compulsion, and oblivious of social norms. The definition of love as the ultimate passion (i.e., the most authentic expression of the self), it must be pointed out, changed the view of human nature. This was done in *Romeo and Juliet*, the story of *ideal* love, in which Shakespeare provided us with the clearest description of what the love that we now want is.

In short, love makes it possible for every one of us to find one's proper place in the world and to define oneself. It leads one to the discovery of one's true identity (we often say that we find true understanding in the loved one, someone who really understands us): one's identity, one's true self is found in another person, in what he or she sees in one.

This other person, immediately recognized (thus true love is love at first sight), then is recognized as one's destiny, the One, and finding love at once also becomes self-realization, giving meaning to life as a whole. It is this that we all want—not simply affection, or companionship, or sex. In fact, the relationship between the essence of love-experience, which is self-affirmation, and sex, which is usually connected to it, is quite complicated. I'm going to discuss it in the next post.