



El objeto femenino en *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* (Translation: *The Female Object in Twenty Poems and a Song of Despair*)

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Summary of *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada*:

In his poetry collection, *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* (1924), Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda, approaches various moments and emotions tied to the romantic relationship between two lovers. The narrator details love's phases and the stages of a relationship, including separation, and their emotional consequences. This collection, one of his most notable works, is frequently praised for its highly descriptive language and sexual imagery. However, there are elements woven into Neruda's poetry that should be examined further considering the context of the patriarchal society in which it was written and the male-dominated perspective contained within the collection.

Abstract:

This study, originally conducted and written in Spanish, explores the ways Neruda's poems reflect a dynamic of heterosexual relations influenced by patriarchal society characterized by a de-personification and objectification of women, as well as the tendency of men to use women as a means to fulfill their own desires. Readers can observe Neruda's frequent metaphors that depict the female lover as an object or an image of nature, and through these figures and language choices, Neruda deconstructs the humanity of the woman and reconstructs her not as an individual with a distinct personality, but as a malleable thing that the male narrator wants to possess and dominate. The female figure becomes something upon which the narrator imposes his own idealized and misguided thoughts and desires. The heartbreak at the end of the collection does not in fact stem out of a loss of love, therefore, but rather the loss of the narrator's constructed image of his partner: the male gaze that deludes him into seeing his lover as anything but an authentic human individual.



Image on Left:
Pablo Neruda

Image on Right:
George Lakoff (Right) and Mark Johnson (Left)



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Understanding Metaphor as Indicative of Perspective:

As defined by linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff and Johnson 5). The remarkable thing about metaphor, however, is that in order to be understood, the culture or society from which a text comes must somehow see the signifier and signified as similar enough for the comparison to make any sense. With this in mind, all the metaphors that Neruda writes in his poetry, which is almost always done to connect the narrator's lover to nature or objects, are subconsciously validated by being widely understood by Neruda and his patriarchal society.

Women as Nature:

From the start, Neruda relies heavily on nature metaphors to describe the female body, such as in line 1 of "Poema 1": "Cuerpo de mujer, blancas colinas, muslos blancos" (Trans: "Body of woman, white hills, white thighs"). Traditionally, nature is conceived of as being feminine, such as Mother Earth or Mother Nature, and the same is true in literature. After linking the woman to nature, the male narrator, refers to himself in the second line as "un labriego salvaje" or a "wild farmer", that can traverse and cultivate the female form. For men, nature is often seen as something to be traversed, cultivated, mastered and possessed, concepts that when linked to women in literature through metaphor, speak volumes about how women's bodies are often perceived in the patriarchal society that creates and makes sense of these comparisons.

Women as Objects:

There are also moments where the reification of women goes further, and metaphors begin to establish links with objects and tools. In line 2 of "Poema 6," the narrator tells the woman, "Eras la boina gris y el corazón en calma" (Trans:"You were the gray beret and the calm heart") and later, in line 2 of "Poema 13," mentions the "atlas blanco de tu cuerpo" (Trans: "white atlas of your body"). The man conceptualizes his lover as an accessory and a map, while joining them to more disjointed images of the body. The narrator reflects an abstraction of women that is associated closer with things than with humanity. All of these images distance the woman from her status as an individual with thoughts, feelings and capacity for action, and instead portray her as an inert body, a natural scene or an object or tool to be explored, used and enjoyed by men.

Women as Abstractions:

According to Keith Ellis, "The description of the woman in every poem, even the first, is abstract and nebulous" (13). The woman is desolidified, disembodied, and separate; she never takes concrete form. Even her name is never given, but in line 6 of "Poema 14" is said to be written with "letras de humo" (trans: "letters of smoke"). A leitmotif of the work is that of the wind, which is often associated with women, and the transient, chaotic symbol of the wind pairs well with the disjointed and strangely abstract descriptions of the woman. Detached from a solid and complete identity, like smoke and wind, she is instead abstracted and reduced to a body of non-human comparisons. The narrator refuses to see the woman as a human being, a generalized, non-specific vision. In doing so, he now is free to impose on the woman his own desires, expectations, and idealized fantasy.

Conclusion:

Within Neruda's collection, the relationship between the male narrator and his lover is heavily influenced by the perspectives of a patriarchal society. First, with the metaphors that link the female body to nature and objects, the narrator dehumanizes and reduces the woman, as male-dominated societies often do with women, to a passive being to be admired for beauty and sexual pleasure. Then, with the metaphors of abstraction used to describe the woman, there is an imposition onto the female object of the male narrator's own narcissistic fantasies and desires that reflects the ways in which society often implicitly expects women to exist entirely to suit the needs of men. Some could argue that Neruda could have included these themes intentionally through his language choice, but the most likely possibility is that these particular connections made through metaphor were subconscious. In the case of the later, the language of Neruda's poetry can then be said to reflect the gender politics of his society, where men exercise control and power over the female body and where women are reduced to sexual objects designed to support and satisfy their male lover. Frighteningly, to some extent, this attitude still exists today, which is implicated by the fact that each of these metaphors are able to be digested by the public without hesitation or confusion.