

AGAPE AND THANATOS: A PSYCHOLOGICAL READING OF SAUL BELLOW'S MORE DIE OF HEARTBREAK

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ABSTRACT

In Psychoanalysis, Agape love is a feeling of protectiveness, tenderness, and Self-denial, similarly Thanatos is the death instinct proposed by Sigmund Freud. The 1987 book *More Die of Heartbreak* by Saul Bellow, shares many of the same themes of pessimism about society and death. Even the title alludes to a sombre disposition toward life. Kenneth Trachtenberg, the protagonist Benn Crader's nephew and a renowned botanist with a focus on Arctic lichens, provides the narration for *More Die of Heartbreak*. In *More Die of Heartbreak*, Bellow focuses primarily on the nature of love and the unique challenges that the man-woman relationship presents. This article tries to trace the psychological instincts of love and death in Bellow's *More Die of Heartbreak*.

Keywords: Disposition, Pessimism, Instincts, Death, Love

The encounter with Caroline Bunge, a wealthy divorcee whom Crader encounters in Puerto Rico during one of his lecturing trips, is the subject of Trachtenberg's account of one of his uncle's romantic entanglements. She tries to persuade him to be married by showing interest in his studies, declaring that she is "ready for a permanent commitment," (61), offering to set up a lab for him and even joining him on trips. Despite Crader's concentration on his work, Trachtenberg notes that "[t]he happiness of a recluse wasn't enough for him" (62). "I was seeking for a Caroline like this, a decent woman - handsome, responsive, mature," declares Crader to him. His nephew adds, "Love is a harder subject than lichens" (79).

As their relationship develops, Crader is given comprehensive wedding preparations by Caroline, but when he discovers that love hasn't been factored into her calculations, he panics and leaves. It appears that Crader relishes the idea of becoming a desirable lover and prospective spouse, but a survival instinct, or perhaps an innate independence, prevents him at the last minute from joining plans that would effectively subject him to another person's desires and wealth. To avoid Caroline's arrival before the wedding, he makes last-minute reservations for tickets to Tokyo for both himself and Trachtenberg. Trachtenberg consents to the trip but says informally: "But there was something squalid about it – running away from a woman, and such a woman. True, she had picked him. But hadn't he agreed to be picked?" (60)

As in other instances, Crader keeps a respectful physical distance from the woman in question and refuses to confront her. On the one hand, Crader's conduct can be seen as reckless and self-centred, but on the

other, we might contend that Caroline's motivation is self-centred and that Crader deserves better. In either scenario, his mistake was failing to recognise the relationship's lack of genuine communication—the gap between his ideal and the reality.

Another tragic meeting involves Crader who, after being asked to assist Della Bedell change a lightbulb, allows himself to be persuaded. He feels embarrassed and not initially attracted to her, but he is powerless to reject her. She then left him voicemails asking, "When do I get my chance to live?" and "What am I supposed to do with my sexuality?" when he tries to avoid her in the future. (86). The episode touches on women's sexual liberation, saying that "taking the initiative was no longer an impropriety" (85) and poses the question of what consequences easily accessible sex without love might have.

In his analysis of the incident, Trachtenberg observes that people often view sexual activity as a panacea for all problems: "they do the act by which love would be transmitted if there were any" (86) contrasts the traditional view of sex as a sexual act and a means of reproduction with the attitude in contemporary society. Crader is immediately repentant when Della passes away from a cardiac arrest while he is away giving a lecture in Brazil, despite Trachtenberg's efforts to convince him to see the light bulb incident in perspective and even to find humour in the circumstances. Around this time, Crader replies, "I think more people die of heartbreak than radiation," in response to a journalist's inquiry about radiation levels.

Trachtenberg travels to Tokyo with his uncle as required, and while there, one evening, Crader and Trachtenberg are invited to a strip performance by the host professor's young students. The subsequent performance by several young girls, which leaves no room for interpretation, powerfully illustrates the phenomenon of organised voyeurism: "All these botanists, engineers, and creators of miraculous visual instruments, from electron microscopes to apparatus that transmitted images of Saturn's moons, cared for nothing but these slow openings. They were unable to look far enough the experience seems to point to a general vulnerability to sexual titillation on a primal level, independent of intelligence.

This scenario illustrates the opposite of the spiritual unity desired in romantic love and serves as a sobering reminder of the negative aspects of physical attraction and the degrading treatment of women involved in such a show. Crader's troubled response is noted by Trachtenberg: "And now he was in his fifties, and still tormented, a full-scale example of the ordeal by desire" (110) Trachtenberg speculates that his uncle was so shaken by the incident that "he determined to settle his life once and for all" (111) by getting remarried without even telling his nephew.

As it turns out, Crader is misguided in his belief that he will achieve fulfilment in his pursuit for a true accord and harmony between love and want through this marriage. The question is, then, why does everyone persist in looking for happiness through love? Trachtenberg asks early in the book. Why not be sensible and sign off early if love tears them apart so much and you can see the destruction everywhere? (11). "That question informs and haunts every page of *More Die of Heartbreak*," says Faye Kuzma."

In addition to thinking on the nature of love, Bellow also considers the urban issues that have appeared in prior books and the human tendency toward acquisitiveness. These are exemplified by Trachtenberg's lengthy reflections on Crader's second marriage to Matilda Layamon, a stunning PhD candidate in her thirties with a wealthy physician for a father, and his reasons for doing so. Emotional types, loving hearts like my uncle, exuberant high-energy characters, easily agitated, needy, and greedy - they can't see why one high gift should not be followed by another, by a succession of gifts. He concludes that despite spending the majority of his energies studying plants, which has earned him acclaim, his affectionate side craves fulfilment.

"The demand then was for a sharer, a charming woman, such a woman as Swedenborg describes – made by God to instruct a man, to lead him to the exchange of souls" (54). He explains that Swedenborg, a philosopher, and theologian who lived in the 18th century, believed that love and mind "complete each other in the human pair" and that the exchange of souls takes place when a woman's affection and a man's abstract tendencies come together (50). However, Crader says, "I absolutely love Matilda," to Trachtenberg. She's the best," he says (119), but his nephew questions her motives, and Crader soon learns that money is the most

important thing in her family. He is expected to play the part of “a botanist to be a host to celebrities - the husband who went with the mansion,” according to Trachtenberg (155).

It raises questions in Crader’s mind that Matilda plans to refurbish the opulent but outdated flat that her aunt left to her: “The living room may be the hangar for two, three private jets. These—which to me appeared to be museum halls—were part of her long-term strategy for married contentment. Matilda, I, and the Roanoke [the apartment complex] are the three participants in this match. (154). Crader meets Matilda’s father for lunch and finds out that he wants him to reopen a case against Harold Vilitzer, Crader’s uncle, who made a fortune from the sale of the land that will become the location of the massive skyscraper and prominent local landmark Ecliptic Circle Electronic Tower, owned by Japan. Harold Vilitzer is Crader’s uncle. He defrauded Crader’s family of the land’s true value by buying it from them through a phoney company.

Naturally, Matilda will benefit financially from any payment as Crader’s wife. Vilitzer passes away in the middle of the legal dispute before the issue can be resolved. According to Gary Davenport, “money, or the lack of it, has always been and continues to be thematically fundamental to urban fiction.” The Electronic Tower is indicative of both urban expansion and a materialistic society (698). According to Trachtenberg, Crader’s job decision is a response to the “great constraints of social growth imposed on the soul” that are present in metropolitan tyranny (279). Bellow’s earlier book *The Dean’s December*, which describes both the criminal underworld of Chicago and the corrupt political system in Bucharest as well as how each affects the existence of the individual, reflects his focus on social ills even more strongly.

The background of metropolitan America is evident throughout *More Die of Heartbreak* even though the issue is less overt: “All those abandoned industries awaiting electronic resurrection, the huge body of the Rustbelt, the stems of the tall chimneys currently bearing no blossoms of smoke” (146). In Bellow’s works, facing mortality and romantic relationships are recurring themes. In contrast to the later books, it is treated in the earlier books in a somewhat different manner; for example, Bellow explains Humboldt’s Gift as “a presumptuous book which attempts to make a comedy of death” (cited in Bragg 1975, 676).

Both *The Dean’s December*, where the plot is largely centred around the impending death of Corde’s mother-in-law Valeria, and *More Die of Heartbreak* raise the problem of the foreknowledge of death, especially when known to be imminent through either age or illness. *Ravelstein* is the late novel that most directly addresses this issue. According to Crader, “The big win is to cheat death. Keep it in check (327). When asked by Trachtenberg how he imagines dying, he responds, “Well, there have been pictures ever since the beginning, both inside and outside.... And for me, the worst-case scenario is that those images will cease to exist (19).

“The worst that can happen” implies that death is only one possible outcome, and that the possibility of an afterlife cannot be completely ruled out. In *Ravelstein*, Chick made a similar prediction. “No one can give up on the pictures – the pictures might, yes they might continue” (Bellow 2000, 222).

In *More Die of Heartbreak*, love is linked to death; Trachtenberg muses during the flight to Tokyo:

We might imagine that we had left the earth behind. We were still, however, within the mundane egg where all creatures, all beings, lived on death, infected by death in the very desire for love, the only force that held out a hope against being devoured altogether (89).

One may argue that love is a means of accepting death because it brings comfort from a solid bond and a feeling of purpose from supporting one another. This point is supported by Trachtenberg’s statement on Crader and Matilda’s marriage, “We have to die, some sooner than others, and as condemned men, it’s only natural to attempt for peace - two human beings tied together in love and kindness, and so forth” (120).

When it comes to Crader, his attempts to find love have failed, and his rejection of Matilda as his wife is a reflection of his earlier escape from Caroline. He travels to Tokyo in one case and to the Arctic in the other to create a symbolic physical separation between himself and the women. Due to the parallels, it is unclear if Crader is being courageous or deftly ending his partners’ expectations. With Caroline, a marriage is just imminent; in Matilda’s instance, Crader is contesting the continuation of an already-existing union. However,

the lesson in both situations might be that, despite marriage vows, a realistic response is the courageous one if love is, or has become, absent.

There will be no “heartbreak” for Matilda other than embarrassment and the failure of her and her family’s plans; Crader’s decision to end his relationship with Matilda can even be seen as a positive step in terms of his self-knowledge and the fact that Matilda’s mercenary considerations prompted the marriage. Therefore, *More Die of Heartbreak* follows the same formula as other novels by Saul Bellow in which the protagonist resolves his personal problems by admitting his flaws and finding hope for the future in a fresh perspective.

Works Cited

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