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Marriage

What are the best poems ever written about marriage?

The question came to me while working on an appreciation essay for Jefferson Educational Society co-founding board member Charles Brock, who died last November and for whom we had a celebration Wednesday night. Unlike his hero, John Milton, who found marriage so unsatisfactory that he penned the first petitions in English advocating for divorce based on incompatibility, Charles twice found marital gold. First, in his long marriage to his late first wife, Carolyn Dexter Brock, and then in his marriage to his widow Mary Lincoln.

What was the gold that Charles Brock found? Well, John Milton, who never found it in his marriage to Mary Powell (great poet that he was), described it in his essays advocating for divorce based on incompatibility. Milton believed that marriage should be based on the compatibility of the partners' mutual love and sympathy for one another. In the 17th century, *sympathy* meant something closer to "empathy" – the ability to see the world as the other sees it and seeing it as they do then accepting it as a part of oneself. In short, the two become one without ever losing their own individual identity and integrity, which is an exceptionally fine balancing act that few master.

What have the poets had to say "about the two becoming one without ever losing their own individual identity and integrity?" Anne Bradstreet, the first published American poet, her work seeing print in 1650, said (I took the liberty to substitute *spouse* for *husband* in the title, because the sentiment works in either direction; it's really gender neutral):

from My Dear and Loving *"Spouse"*

If ever two were one, then surely we …

I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold,
Or all the riches that the East doth hold.
My love is such that rivers cannot quench, .
Nor ought but love from thee give recompense.
Thy love is such I can no way repay;
The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.
Then while we live, in love let's so persever,
That when we live no more, we may live ever. [1]

John Donne, the brilliant rake turned Anglican divine, who found happiness in his marriage to Anne More, had this to say about marriage:"

The Good-Morrow

I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I
Did, till we loved? Were we not weaned till then?
But sucked on country pleasures, childishly?
Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers' den?
'Twas so; but this, all pleasures fancies be.
If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.

And now good-morrow to our waking souls,
Which watch not one another out of fear;

For love, all love of other sights controls,
And makes one little room an everywhere.
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown,
Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one.

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;
Where can we find two better hemispheres,
Without sharp north, without declining west?
Whatever dies, was not mixed equally;
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die. [2]

The national poet of Chile, Pablo Neruda was both a great poet and deeply embedded in the politics of Chile. A supporter of Salvador Allende, Neruda went into exile after the anti-Communist coup d'etat of Auguste Pinochet. He died of prostate cancer, although it is suspected that supporters of Pinochet assassinated him. His fame, however, results from his poetry. Many critics consider him one of the greatest poets of the 20th century. More to our interests, this is what he said about the Miltonian notion of the two becoming one:

from XVII (I do not love you...)

... I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where.
I love you straightforwardly, without complexities or pride;
so I love you because I know no other way ... [3]

Milton referred to "sympathy" for or with the other, which in the 17th century meant something more akin to what we mean by "empathy." Simply defined, empathy means the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. As Jamaican poet Dennis Scott reveals in "Marrysong," that requires work. Investing the work to understand another is the essence of a marriage.

Marrysong

He never learned her, quite. Year after year
that territory, without seasons, shifted
under his eye. An hour he could be lost
in the walled anger of her quarried hurt
or turning, see cool water laughing where
the day before there were stones in her voice.
He charted. She made wilderness again.
Roads disappeared. The map was never true.

Wind brought him rain sometimes, tasting of sea –
and suddenly she would change the shape of shores
faultlessly calm. All, all was each day new:
the shadows of her love shortened or grew
like trees seen from an unexpected hill,
new country at each jaunty, helpless journey.
So he accepted that geography, constantly strange.
Wondered. Stayed home increasingly to find
his way among the landscapes of her mind. [4]

We met Carol Duffy, former Poet Laureate of Great Britain, the first woman so honored in over 400 years, in an earlier ***Book Note*** about lovers and Valentine's Day in which Duffy gave her beloved an onion instead of a rose. The peeling of the onion's layers a metaphor for revealing their deepening empathy, their deepening love. Here Duffy gives Shakespeare's wife, Anne Hathaway her due, as she says, "I hold him the casket of my widow's head/as he held me upon that next best bed." In his will Shakespeare left Anne his second-best bed, which the unknowing have for centuries thought an insult to her. In Elizabethan times, the second-best bed was the one the married couple slept in. The "best bed" would have been a stiff, seldom used bed reserved for guests.

'Item I gyve unto my wife my second best bed...'
(from Shakespeare's will)

The bed we loved in was a spinning world
of forests, castles, torchlight, cliff-tops, seas
where he would dive for pearls. My lover's words
were shooting stars which fell to earth as kisses
on these lips; my body now a softer rhyme
to his, now echo, assonance; his touch
a verb dancing in the centre of a noun.
Some nights I dreamed he'd written me, the bed
a page beneath his writer's hands. Romance
and drama played by touch, by scent, by taste.
In the other bed, the best, our guests dozed on,
dribbling their prose. My living laughing love –
I hold him in the casket of my widow's head
as he held me upon that next best bed. [5]

There aren't that many poems explicitly about marriage. Of course, if you make it "love and marriage" the number explodes, including venerable chestnuts like Shakespeare's Sonnet #116 "Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments" and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnet #43 "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." If one includes poems by 20th and 21st century

feminist poets shredding the old, patriarchal conception of marriage, then the number gets another bump. And there are more than a few about marriages gone wrong, including an entire sub-genre about divorce.

But, still, surprisingly few about marriages gone right.

Here are a few more before we'll end with, who else, Mary Oliver.

More famous as a novelist, her ***Wuthering Heights,*** with the Earnshaws and the Lintons struggling for local social primacy and Heathcliff the prototype of the modern "angry young man," a classic of English literature, prototype of multiple movies, and bugbear of many a high school sophomore – do they still read it in high school? I think not; nonetheless, Emily Bronte also turned her hand to poetry. In "Love and Friendship" she probes the constant oscillation back and forth in a marriage between friendship and love.

Love and Friendship

Love is like the wild rose-briar,
Friendship like the holly-tree—
The holly is dark when the rose-briar blooms
But which will bloom most constantly?

The wild rose-briar is sweet in spring,
Its summer blossoms scent the air;
Yet wait till winter comes again
And who will call the wild-briar fair?

Then scorn the silly rose-wreath now
And deck thee with the holly's sheen,
That when December blights thy brow
He still may leave thy garland green. [6]

Not all relationships ping-pong between love and friendship. Some simply *are* – a fusion in which two become one like in this poem by Walt Whitman.

A Glimpse

A glimpse through an interstice caught,
Of a crowd of workmen and drivers in a bar-room around
the stove late of a winter night, and I unremark'd seated
in a corner,
Of a youth who loves me and whom I love, silently
approaching and seating himself near, that he may hold

me by the hand,
A long while amid the noises of coming and going, of
drinking and oath and smutty jest,
There we two, content, happy in being together, speaking
little, perhaps not a word. [7]

As in so many things, however, Mary Oliver said it best. In her ***Our World***, an extended elegy to her partner of over 40 years, the photographer Molly Malone Cook, Oliver describes with particular finesse what a deep, empathetic (the word almost sounds shallow in this context) relationship looks like when two become one. In an extended quotation in Emilia von dem Hagen's musing on the book, Oliver relates how Cook taught her to really "see":

> It has frequently been remarked, about my own writings, that I emphasize the notion of attention. This began simply enough: to see that the way the flicker flies is greatly different from the way the swallow plays in the golden air of summer. It was my pleasure to notice such things, it was a good first step. But later, watching M. when she was taking photographs, and watching her in the darkroom, and no less watching the intensity and openness with which she dealt with friends, and strangers too, taught me what real attention is about. Attention without feeling, I began to learn, is only a report. An openness – an empathy – was necessary if the attention was to matter. Such openness and empathy M. had in abundance, and gave away freely. All the years I knew her she had this gift, which is also sometimes a burden, with our life friends, with me, and with the faces and even the objects that found their way into her pictures. I was in my late twenties and early thirties, and well filled with a sense of my own thoughts, my own presence. I was eager to address the world of words – to address the world with words. Then M. instilled in me this deeper level of looking and working, of seeing through the heavenly visibles to the heavenly invisibles. [8]

But even in the deepest relationships, do we really ever know everything about the other? Or is it a continuously unfolding exercise in mutual revelation? After 40 years, Oliver was still discovering new folds in the unfolding of her knowing Molly. Oliver said it better in "The Whistler."

<u>The Whistler</u>

All of a sudden she began to whistle. By all of a sudden

I mean that for more than thirty years she had not
whistled. It was thrilling. At first I wondered, who was
in the house, what stranger? I was upstairs reading, and
she was downstairs. As from the throat of a wild and
cheerful bird, not caught but visiting, the sounds war-
bled and slid and doubled back and larked and soared.

Finally I said, Is that you? Is that you whistling? Yes, she
said. I used to whistle, a long time ago. Now I see I can
still whistle. And cadence after cadence she strolled
through the house, whistling.

I know her so well, I think. I thought. Elbow and ankle-
Mood and desire. Anguish and frolic. Anger too.
And the devotions. And for all that, do we even begin
to know each other? Who is this I've been living with
for thirty years?

This clear, dark, lovely whistler? [9]

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Photo Credit

"Molly Malone Cook and Mary Oliver" at **Mary Oliver** available at Mary Oliver - Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award Winning Poet » Many Miles: Mary Oliver Reads Mary Oliver (beacon.org) accessed May 19, 2024.

End Notes

1. Bradstreet, Anne. *"To My Dear and Loving Husband",* at **The Poetry Foundation** available at To My Dear and Loving Husband by Anne Bradstreet | Poetry Foundation accessed May 19, 2024.
2. Donne, John. *"The Good-Morrow"*, in **The Complete Poetry of John Donne**, Ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967), p. 89.

3. Neruda, Palbo. *"XVII (I do not love you…)"* at **Hello P'try** available at XVII (I do not love you…) by Pablo Neruda - Hello Poetry accessed May 19, 2024.
4. Scott, Dennis. *"Marrysong"* at **Kinna Reads** available at 21 Days/21 Poems: Marrysong by Dennis Scott – Kinna Reads accessed May 19, 2024.
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6. Bronte, Emily. *"Love and Friendship"* at the **Poetry Foundation** available at Love and Friendship by Emily Brontë | Poetry Foundation accessed May 19, 2024.
7. Whitman, Walt. *"A Glimpse",* in **Whitman: Prose and Poetry**. (New York: The Library of America, 1982), p.283.
8. Oliver, Mary, from ***Our World*** quoted in Emilia von dem Hagen *"Mary Oliver's world with Molly Malone Cook"* in **Music and Musings** available at Mary Oliver's world with Molly Malone Cook (musicandmusings.wixsite.com) accessed May 19, 2024.
9. Ibid.

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