

## **IMPOSSIBLE LOVE: or Why the Heart Must Go Wrong**

By Jan Bauer

### Wrong Kinds of Love

Certain kinds of love affairs are both impossible to live and impossible to forget. They may last a month, or they may go on for years. It doesn't really matter, because they mark our lives far beyond the actual time spent in living them.

A description of these love affairs would not correspond to the relationships that psychology and the experts hold up as proof of maturity and healthy self-esteem. Indeed, they go against every official version of good and "possible" love. They happen at the wrong time, in the wrong place, and with the wrong person. They lead less to intimacy on earth than to intimations of immortality somewhere between heaven and hell. No wonder they go by the name of "impossible love" impossible to live, impossible to give up, impossible to understand—more about confusion than complicity. They exalt and they humiliate, they promise and they disappoint, but they do not bring peace of mind. In addition to all this, they usually end badly. We may become saints or sinners, but we will not become "winners" in these particular love affairs.

Frequently, we sense this from the beginning, and we go into these relationships knowing we shouldn't. We can already count the reasons, proving it will never work. And yet we go. And once in, we stay in them long after we should, even when the impossibility is "proven" beyond a

reasonable doubt. But these are not reasonable events, and they are definitely not the "right" kinds of love we would probably have if we had been reasonable in the first place and listened to the advice of concerned friends and therapists. From a healthy minded point of view, these relationships remain both impossible and wrong.

Their impossibility may come from obvious outer taboos or hidden inner inhibitions, material difficulties or psychological differences. Whatever the cause of the obstacles that intrude between the lovers and their love, transgressing them becomes irresistible and heightens the feeling of intensity, but it doesn't make the love any more possible. It just adds to the sense of "wrongness." Wrong to love, wrong to fail to overcome the obstacles to loving.

In former times, this kind of love was called tragic, romantic, or doomed, a great passion or even a "*folie a deux*." Today, it is more often termed a neurosis, an addiction, or a projection. The star-crossed lovers of yesteryear have become the dysfunctional, codependent patients of today. In the twelfth century, Abelard and Heloise were punished and ostracized for loving wrongly. Today, they would be labeled and treated. Each epoch provides its opportunities for impossible love and creates sanctions to deal with it. Today, as in the past, in spite of psychology, people go on loving wrongly and impossibly. They may read self-help books by day, but they read love poems by night, and they feel as caught by their own contradictions as they do by the passion itself.

Why would any normal person, especially any normal person with some psychological and practical understanding, consent to such an

experience? Why would anyone risk loss of control, of face, of well-being, perhaps even of family and reputation for an impossible love? Clearly, a normal person in a normal state of mind would not. Faced with the advent of passion, he or she would consider the risks and run the other way, tie him or herself to the mast, if necessary, in order not to succumb to the siren's call. And many people do run away or bravely and successfully resist before it is too late. Others, even "luckier;" never even hear the song and may manage to live a whole life long without the experience of such disruptive love. It isn't for everyone, nor is it the only way for normal people to be catapulted into abnormal states. Impossible love is just one of the routes into great pain, and through it perhaps great depth and new meaning.

Death, illness, divorce, failure, reversal of fortune and hopes are a few of the other blows that life may reserve to jolt us into an awareness beyond that of everyday consciousness. Sometimes the jolt comes from outside, sometimes it comes from within. In one form or another, life provides the raw materials. Unfortunately, it doesn't give the directions or the answers. Maybe that will take a lifetime, but let us at least start by asking the questions. Not the "Why me?" or the "Who can I blame?" or the "What did I do wrong?" questions, but the "Why now?" and the "What for?" questions. What does this event mean in my life, and how can I live it so that at my death I can say I have lived, and not that I was lived?

To ask this question takes a particular kind of courage, not necessarily of the active, heroic kind. It means holding the balance between the temptation to give up and the temptation to strike out. It means having

the courage to face the "dragon" (or the symptom, or the problem, or the "bad" guy in our dreams and lives) and find out what it wants, instead of killing it and walking away untouched. It means, if we are engaged in the dragon energy of an impossible love, facing its fire and inquiring what it is bringing into our lives.

It isn't natural to do this. Even Parsifal, the hero of the Grail Quest, who went through death defying adventures in order to find the sacred chalice, forgot to ask what the quest was all about the first time he came to the place of the grail. Because he forgot, because he just wanted to grab and run, the grail disappeared, and so he had to leave and be further tried before he could return, chastened and less greedy, to claim the prize. Like him, most of us forget many times around. We want the prizes of answers and solutions, not meaning. We may be willing to read books and pay therapists but we want results. It is so much harder to let events take their course in our lives, to meet them, and to let their meaning unfold, without over controlling or passively submitting. When something hurts, we want to find a cause, and our "culture of impatience" leads us to look for someone or something to blame: men, women, mothers, fathers, patients, therapists, ourselves, our bodies, our lovers, our lovers' lovers.

... We all have the potential to become psychological fundamentalists when we resist coming to terms with life's ambiguities, including especially the contradictions in our own psyches. Blaming as a way of dealing with the paradox of impossible love doesn't help, either. The love may be all wrong, but there is no right answer—no diagnosis or theory to cure it. You can blame yourself and your vulnerability or

foolishness. You can blame the other's ruthlessness, seduction, and unconsciousness. Still, the love is there, inappropriate, wrong, impossible perhaps, but undeniable.

Impossible love is not just undeniable in the psyche of a particular smitten individual, however. It is also undeniable in our culture, as a myth and a cultural "*imago*." Whether we actually live an impossible love or not, we are all deeply influenced by the myth of the star-crossed lovers, the central image of Romantic Love. We just don't realize that behind the modern sentimentalized versions of romantic love lies the darker story, a story of impossibility, tragedy, and death, not happy endings as in Hollywood. When we think of Romeo and Juliet, Abelard and Heloise, Tristan and Iseult, we think of their beauty and commitment, but we forget about their fate. We repress or blithely ignore their unhappy endings when we fall into fantasies of living a legendary love affair, and we are astonished by the darkness when we actually live one....

... We chafe in our relationships or their absence, decrying the lack of romance and/or passion. We yearn to partake in something that is more stirring, more momentous, more transcendent than the relationship we are living or have lived. We long for intensity and for transformation, but we are naive about that word "transformation." In our innocence, we often think it can just "happen" if we live right and go to the right workshops. Therapy will fix us, the workshop will change everything, or, better still, a passionate love affair will give us back our taste for life and transform our whole being. Unfortunately, this is magic thinking. It may happen that way on television, but not in real life. Transformation in

real life takes place both gradually and imperceptibly or violently and rapidly, but it rarely takes place at the speed or in the way we had planned.

In cultures where transformation from one state to another is provoked by initiatory rites, the process is invariably and deliberately painful. Skin is lacerated, bodies are mutilated, the mind is stricken, as if to guarantee that there will be no going back to the way it was before. In our culture, where we have few official initiatory rites, our psyches seem to have found other ways to "lacerate" us into initiation and, perhaps, transformation.

An impossible and passionate love may be one of these ways. In that case, it is more than a romantic fantasy, and it may also be more than just a passing madness, a self-destructive impulse, or a stubborn addiction. Whatever our ignorance or apprehension about its actual reality, it does continue to fascinate us as a cultural ideal and archetype. There must, therefore, be more to understand about it than its dark destruction, or even its sweet beauty. Indeed, as we shall see, in the "impossibility" of certain passions may lie the possibility of initiation into unknown depths of ourselves, of life, and even death.

This sense of "unknown depths" is what pulls us into the enchantment of a great and impossible love story, whether it be told in an old legend or shown in a modern movie. Our minds follow the story, the plot, the development and adventures of the characters, but our psyches respond to the archetypes. They respond to what is eternal and meaningful and universal behind the particular names and places, and

in the responding they remind us that we do not just participate in the practical, linear here and now, but in the timeless space of myth and feeling and destiny.

If this were not true, we would simply leave the theater or put down the book and forget about it, like a meal enjoyed or a newspaper read. We would not be interested in love tales from another century about people we will never meet. But we are interested, and we don't forget these stories, any more than we forget the ones we live ourselves. How else to make sense of what we live? If impossible love is an initiation, it is not just a private one. It is a collective event, as well, that puts us in touch with aspects of human experience much vaster than our own lives.

.... How is it possible to survive and make some sense out of a love affair that erupts between two people, but cannot be lived out? How can we understand the disruptive message of impossible love in the cultural psyche of the world at large? There are no absolute or "right" answers in the pages that follow but rather patterns of experience and conclusions to be drawn from them. Most of all, however, starting with an old and true tale of impossible love upon which many of our modern fantasies are based, there is company, lovers past and present to meet and learn from, as we ask the question "What for?"