Something Darker Than Love:
Language Considerations in the Poems of Pablo Neruda

Introduction

Pablo Neruda was a Chilean poet best known for his love poetry and political activism. His most famous collection of poetry, *Twenty Love Poems and A Song of Despair* is the most popular collection of Spanish language poetry, and the twentieth century’s most successful collection of poetry published in any language (Moran 56). Neruda’s attractiveness extends from scholars and poetry aficionados to casual readers, and he is often ranked among the best-loved poets ever.

Despite his broad appeal, Neruda’s work has received criticism from many because of its perceived sexism and sexual objectification. Scholars such as Dominic Moran and Margaret Persin defend Neruda’s work against this type of criticism, citing Neruda’s background and progressive political stance. In this sense, perhaps the lovely poetry of Neruda can be viewed differently, as something to enjoy, something to understand, something outside of its inherent chauvinism. Nonetheless, when these poems are viewed from a feminist perspective, outside of the particulars that make up the argument opposing alleged sexism, the language is at best patriarchal and at worst misogynistic.

Commenting on Neruda’s language and its implications presents some concerns that should be noted. First, as Western readers, we are typically consuming his poetry in translation. Without reading the work in its original form, it is impossible to know with certainty what the original intention and wording might have been. Even the most dedicated and careful translators are still using their own knowledge and perspective to reimagine the work. Additionally, we
must acknowledge cultural differences. Neruda’s work was written in a different culture and historical time; in addition to the potential issues in translation, we cannot rightfully interpret original meaning or cultural implications while considering contemporary Western effects. Yet in discussing those Western effects, we can consider that poetry’s language is its power. This is important today because of the pervasiveness of Pablo Neruda. Themes such as purity, possession, power, and the feminine ideal permeate Neruda’s work, creating potentially damaging effects given our cultural dynamics.

The Activist Poetic: An Overview of Neruda’s History

Pablo Neruda’s work is situated historically within the Latin American Modernista literary movement, a movement inspired by Symbolism and Surrealism (Stavans, Poetry xxxiv). Neruda adopted and sought to alter the ode, intending to create poetry that was “down-to-earth” and in contrast to elevated ancient style. The Poetry of Pablo Neruda editor Ilan Stavans describes Neruda as “fractured,” a man with contrasting public and private personas, a man who has been accused of engaging in “selective” activism (Poetry xxxiv-xxxv). Neruda’s politics are a large part of any discussion of his history and his work, showing another idea of his fractured persona—the political activist and the Latin lover.

Stavans explains, “Neruda's ideological odyssey took him from apathy to Communism, turning him into the spokesman for the enslaved” (“Pablo Neruda”). His life was marked by wars: the Great War, the Spanish Civil War, World War II. In “‘Cuerpo de mujer’: Neruda’s Sex Education,” Dominic Moran details Neruda’s various progressive political endeavors, particularly Neruda’s work with Claridad, a radical, libertarian-minded anarchist magazine. Of Claridad, Moran says, “the underlying ethos…was that of uncompromisingly utopian anarchism,
predicated on the notion that the freedom of the sovereign individual was the indispensable basis for all authentic human progress” (58). Regardless of the fractured nature of his personas, Neruda was and is a “torchbearer,” seen as an advocate for important political causes and the face of justice. Even now, Stavans notes, “Students everywhere embrace Neruda because he sought fairness and didn't shy away from resistance” (“Pablo Neruda”). His work is celebrated outside academia as well; Pablo Neruda continues to be a popular love poet with Western readers particularly.

Neruda, Paul Julian Smith says, “is the poet of politics and of nature” (143). His heightened sense of materiality and societal justice serve his poetry. He is also unmistakable in his poetry as a person, rather than simply a speaker. Smith explains views of Neruda’s voice: “[his] voice says ‘I’, this ‘I’ is also ‘you’, and when he celebrates himself…the poet is celebrating all men. Neruda is not merely a poet in these poems, but a ‘person,’ at once individual and universal” (143). Perhaps this universalized voice helps to explain his enduring appeal as a love poet to so many.

**Defending Neruda**

The universality however, does not eliminate criticisms of sexism. In defense of Neruda, Moran says, “Reading his work out of context risks grossly misconstruing the underlying intention…which may strike the reader as horrifyingly unreconstructed” (61). Neruda, Moran says, was “well acquainted with…some of the most progressive and challenging thought concerning sex and gender available to him at the time” (61). To illustrate this, Moran cites Neruda’s work with *Claridad*, and the “similar metaphors” found within political articles featured in the magazine (58). Cultural, religious, and socio-political concerns spurred responses
in the arts. “Given that sexual repression and its attendant hypocrisies loomed large in a society as Catholic and conservative as Chile’s in the 1920s, writing about sex, often in the most shockingly explicit ways, was considered a necessary and potentially fruitful way of breaking down harmful social barriers and taboos” (Moran 58). He asserts that many of the pieces were “expressly designed as an affront to bourgeois sexual morality” (Moran 66). Moran’s arguments position Neruda’s work as deliberately sexual in response to sexual and political oppression.

Margaret Persin also defends Neruda in “Writing and Women’s Work in the Later Poetry of Pablo Neruda.” She claims his view of women evolved over the course of his work, negating the “conventional patriarchal representation of women” in his poetry (230). Like Moran, Persin claims that cultural and historical context is required to understand Neruda’s intentions. His politics, she says, complicate our understanding of his work, particularly without considering his body of work in its entirety (Persin 230). She admits his view of “woman as [a] sexual object to be admired and possessed” but claims this view “was tempered by the poet’s stance in his more mature verse” (Persin 242). Her focus is on Neruda’s later work, which she says shows a matured worldview and sympathies to the plight of woman.

**Language Considerations**

When considering the language in Neruda’s poetry, the ideas of historical context postulated by Persin align with the Bakhtinian concept of “heteroglossia,” meaning that the language is shaped by external factors such as social, political, and ideological contexts (Eigler 191). Friederike Eigler discusses the application of Bakhtinian theory in feminist criticism and says, “Bakhtin is attractive to feminist criticism because he takes into account the various determining social and historical factors of language” (191). In “Relational Aesthetics and
Feminist Poetics,” Shira Wolosky explains that in feminist criticism, Bakhtinian theory is often used to dualize dialogics, uncovering the power hierarchy that exists in society as shown through literature (Wolosky 576). However, Wolosky points out that Bakhtin himself excluded poetry from his studies of language, claiming that poetry is “extra-historical language, a language far removed from the petty rounds of everyday life” (qtd in Wolosky 577). Wolosky refutes this notion, explaining, “On the one hand, in poetry words are excised from context, thrown onto the blankness of the page. On the other, these words bring into the text all the links, connections, usages, etymologies that connect them to general circulation” (577). Despite Bakhtin’s exclusion of poetry, his description of language provides powerful insight into our response to it:

[A]t any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form. (Bakhtin 291).

This description offers a double application in an analysis of Neruda. On the one hand, Bakhtinian perspective allows for a discussion of the cultural and political concerns that marked Neruda’s time and work. On the other, we must consider that we are reading English translations of his work. In this way, our reflections of heteroglossia are contextualized in the versions we read, thus prompting a discussion of the history and effects of that language, as opposed to the original. This is what I take into account in my analysis of a selection of Neruda’s poetry.

Analysis

Recurring themes of purity, sex, power, and possession are much clearer to see than the “love” Neruda is known for. The first poem that appears in Twenty Love Songs and a Song of
Despair, known simply as “I”, begins with imagery: “Body of woman, white hills, white thighs, / you look like the world in your posture of surrender” (Neruda 9). The imagery offered here by Neruda is, obviously, a description of the body of a woman. This poem contains several themes—purity (“white”), possession (“my woman”), and power (“surrender,” “I forged you like a weapon”)—common to Neruda’s poetry. The repeated use of “white” seems to imply purity, or at least the expectation of purity. The whiteness of the body is echoed in another description in the third stanza: “Body of skin, of moss, of avid, steady milk” (Neruda 9). The inferred possession stems from the deliberate use of “my” in the final stanza. The “Body of woman” in the first stanza is replaced by “Body of my woman” (emphasis mine), which, particularly because of the repeated use of “me,” “my,” and “I” throughout, implies ownership. This brings to mind Smith’s view of Neruda as universal man: in this way, the reader also takes possession of the woman, along with Neruda. The third theme, power, shows up in the weapon metaphors as well as in the emphasis placed on the speaker’s needs: “My thirst, my boundless yearning, my indecisive path!” (Neruda 9).

“We Together,” from Residence on Earth includes these same themes, shown by the same language. Here weapons, white, and “my” appear again. The title implies that the poem is about a couple, yet the language reads as though it is a celebration of the manliness of the speaker. “We Together” begins with an assertion of the object’s purity, “How pure you are by sunlight or by fallen night” (Neruda 36). After a short description of the woman, the speaker begins a long stanza:

Now what splendid weapons my hands,
how worthy their blade of bone and their lily nails,
and my exiled mouth bites the flesh and the grape,  
my manly arms, my tattooed chest (Neruda 36)

The speaker returns to describing the woman, again showing possession, “…my advocate, my  
amorous one” (Neruda 36, emphasis mine). “We Together” seems an interesting choice of title.  
The poem in its entirety pays homage to the “I,” the man, while recognizing the “girl” as  
essentially a piece of the speaker. Her place is as a sexual object, maintaining purity and  
submission to the dominant speaker.

The language in “Nuptial Substance” is a strong example of power and possession.  
Neruda begins again with the description of “a girl of paper and moon, / horizontal, trembling  
and breathing and white” (70). Again, the “girl” is pure, denoted by the reference to white, by the  
implied white in “paper and moon.” In the third stanza, the speaker talks of overpowering her:

I shall place her like a sword or a mirror,  
and I shall open until death her fearful legs,  
and I shall bite her ears and her veins,  
and I shall make her retreat, her eyes closed  
in a thick river of green semen. (Neruda 71)

In this poem, power is accompanied by sex. Each stanza holds an allusion to the act of sex in  
addition to the obvious sexual references. The fifth stanza appears to be a metaphor to an  
orgasm; however, the first line clarifies that the woman’s orgasm is thanks to the speaker: “I  
shall make her flee, escaping through fingernails and sighs / toward never, toward nothing”  
(Neruda 71).

In the poem “In You the Earth,” Neruda again focuses on the woman’s form:

Little
rose,
roselet,
at times,
tiny and naked,
it seems
as though you would fit
in one of my hands (321)

Here Neruda repeats the idea of the woman being small, tiny even. A few lines down he says,
“my arm scarcely manages to encircle the thin / new-moon line of your waist” (Neruda 321). The speaker’s explanation of the woman’s body is compared to the speaker’s size, the woman fitting into his hand, his arm encircling the waist. Size, as an indicator of power, cannot be ignored here. Though the speaker may be describing the body of the woman he loves, he reiterates her size in comparison to his.

In this passage, size acts as both indicator of power within the male/female binary, as well as an indicator of femininity. Beginning with the comparison to a rose (followed by a “smaller” rose—a roselet), the speaker is forcing feminine nature onto the woman. Simone de Beauvoir explains a common interpretation of woman, that “it is natural for the female human being to make herself a feminine woman” (408). Man, she says, “wishes her to be carnal, her beauty like that of fruits and pebbles” (158). Though the ideal feminine woman varies, “certain demands remain constant…since woman is destined to be possessed, her body must present the inert and passive qualities of an object” (Beauvoir 157). Therefore, in “In You the Earth,” the woman is made into an object (rose) and her small stature makes it easier for man to possess her, for she can fit into the palm of his hand.
Smith’s assessment of Neruda echoes this notion. He discusses the language of Neruda’s poems and the contradiction of commodity/subject. He says, “The principal contradiction… is that of gender: Neruda’s naturalization of male as universal subject of language and vision and his consequent deprived representation of female as passive object of this vital male force” (144). Woman is treated as a commodity, he explains. As such, she is “also Nature itself, passive matter designed to receive the dominant male form” (Smith 148). Woman as commodity and as Nature seems especially prevalent in “In You the Earth.”

In this example, the language and the historical view of women work together to create a sexist impression. Perhaps we cannot say that this illustrates misogyny, for the speaker does seem to think he loves the woman (or, at the very least, her body). Yet it does sexually objectify the woman in question, it reinforces long-held beliefs about woman as an object to be possessed, and it could very well make a female reader look at her own body with contempt when considering the female ideal. Wolosky discusses heteroglossia and meaning, explaining, “What creates meaning is the relationships between words which include…contexts and histories that situate and mark each word and that are then imported through the word into the text” (578). Though a consideration of the historical “ideal woman” may better elucidate Neruda’s possible intent in describing the woman as small, this is potentially harmful today. Additionally, this solidifies the notion of patriarchy—specifically that it is still relevant today. Men still hold expectations of women that women consequently attempt to conform to.

Through the objectification of woman, Neruda repetitively creates and fortifies a power structure. This power can be seen throughout all the poems discussed previously. Though defenders of Neruda might cite his political activism and progressive ideologies (mainly in his affiliation with politics that support women’s rights), the fact remains that this power illustrates
patriarchy. This power reinforces patriarchy, and it reinforces the idea of woman as a sexual object, the Other—that is, woman as not man. Gardiner asserts that oppressions formed under patriarchy are often “physiological oppressions which attack women by virtues of their body” (Gardiner 394). The physiological oppressions in these poems appear both through metaphor and through woman-as-commodity.

These poems, then, are examples of patriarchy, sexual objectification, and/or sexism. Does this mean they are also misogynistic? Moran claims, “Over the past twenty-five years or so there has been a glut of articles accusing Neruda of everything from stereotypical Latin American machismo to outright misogyny and worse” (56). In “Nuptial Substance,” it is difficult not to see anger or dominance within the lines. The passage cited previously shows the speaker overpowering the woman; the stanza immediately following continues this subject, saying, “I shall enter her with inches of weeping epidermis / and pressures of crime and soaked hair” (Neruda 71). “Enter her” and “crime” are provocative words in this sense. His idea of sex seems angry, not tender. Words such as “trembling,” “retreat,” “fearful,” and more seem to encompass an overall theme of fear, specifically, the woman fearing the speaker. In this way, the fear discussed by the speaker carries with it a sense of arousal. Perhaps the speaker is aroused by the woman’s fear. Inspiring fear in his lover and anticipating angry sex could certainly symbolize misogyny.

Alternately, the poem “Walking Around,” which is not inherently sexual in nature, portrays a speaker who is “tired of being a man” (Neruda 59). Though he is tired of “manly” things, such as “the smell of barbershops,” he says it would be “delightful” to “slay a nun with a blow to the ear. / It would be lovely / to go through the streets with a sexy knife” (Neruda 59). Collectively, the list that the speaker provides outlines societal rules. “Barbershop” and
“tailorshops” might represent a man’s need to look good, and “establishments” and “merchandise” are representations of public life. Factoring in his wish to “slay a nun,” perhaps this poem illuminates an underlying wish to break the rules and hurt women. Even if “slay” means something other than the obvious denotation, the implication is that the speaker holds ill will toward the woman, the nun. Choosing “nun” is a deliberate choice, one that evokes gender in a way another word would not. In this way, “Walking Around” has a decidedly misogynistic undercurrent. Considering the nun in context of Catholicism creates another interesting dynamic. Nuns are part of a highly patriarchal institution. Nuns are not supposed to be seen as sexual objects or women to be possessed. Therefore, what might Neruda be saying in his desire to “slay a nun”?

Though scholars create compelling arguments refuting Neruda’s alleged sexism and misogyny, several concerns should be noted in a reading of Neruda’s work. First, numerous passages enforce patriarchy. These passages not only imply patriarchy in the time of Neruda’s creation of the work, but modern day patriarchy as well. Second, the sexual objectification common to his “love” poems speaks more about power through sex than passionate, tender love. Finally, as patriarchy is still a relevant issue, the enforcement (and reinforcement) of male dominance that is evident in these texts should be recognized.

While Neruda’s political and humanitarian work might be used to situate author intention and to dispute sexism and misogyny in his poetry, a reader will likely take away textual evidence over informed research about the author’s history. A Western reader engaging with Neruda’s poetry for pleasure likely will not consider the problem of translation or cultural appropriation, nor will the reader seek out historical and cultural concerns prior to reading it. Arguing for the information necessary to read and understand Neruda assumes that every reader will do so, that
each reader will know and understand Neruda’s history and context. However, Neruda’s poetic “tastes” in women create a potentially damaging take-away for a reader. An awareness of what his language can do in Western culture seems more pressing than defending him based on his personal history.
Works Cited


---“We Together.” Trans. Donald D. Walsh. Stavans 36-37.


