

The "Stirring Conversation": American Literature and *The Bleeding Heart*

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When Marilyn French's *The Bleeding Heart* was first reviewed, the major criticism levelled against it was that there was too much talking about issues. "Overly polemical," says Julia Klein of *The New Republic*.¹ "...It is hard to believe it is her incessant rhetoric that instructs either her lover or her reader," says Rosellen Brown in *The New York Times Book Review*.² Yet R.Z. Sheppard notes, at the conclusion of her review, "paradoxically much of the dialogue works...attentive male readers will discover why so many women are now saying 'Yes, yes' when there's 'No, no' in their eyes."³ And this is precisely the point of the endless conversations.

Conversations between men and women are rare and usually stilted in American Literature. When they exist, the point of the conversation is not to communicate information but to win a kind of power game. Hemingway's Lady Brett does not finish her sentences and thus forces others to interpret her intentions. Daisy Buchanan whispers so that men will have to lean toward her to hear her. Women win, not by convincing, but by using the situation of conversation to wield power.

But the game of power has lost its fascination to the man and woman in *The Bleeding Heart*.

They have both learned that simply to win the battle of the sexes is to lose something more vital. Dolores Durer has "won" her freedom by leaving her weak, terrorizing husband, Anthony, and manipulating him into granting her a divorce. But she has lost because his subsequent suicide remains with her, and the children, marked by her ex-husband, are a constant memory and source of guilt. Victor Morrissey has won a passive wife. His infidelities drive her to smash her car into a wall and lose her legs. The plastic surgeons redo her maimed face, and his mistress points out:

Oh, how nice. You have what you always wanted! A woman with a child's face and a child's dependency. You don't have to worry about her running around because she's numb, and you don't have to worry about her running away because she has no legs! She's utterly housebound, utterly subject, and utterly passive. Just what you wanted! How nice to get what you want. Just what you deserve!⁴

Although he belongs to a society in which victory is success, the highest value, he has of course not won: the passive-aggressive situation of guilt his wife inflicts upon him for causing her acci-

dent controls him even though he is now free to be a bachelor in form and a married man in name.

Dolores is caught in her suffering and Victor in his victory. This use of symbolic names, criticized by reviewers as a “heavy handed reminder”⁵ is quite deliberate: the characters are caught in the stereotypes of their self-images. And they need each other to begin to break out of these stereotypes. Gradually, over the year granted to them in the book, Victor and Dolores reveal themselves, through intensive discussions, in the full horror of the stereotypes they have fulfilled. Both learn about themselves and the other as they allow themselves to react and mirror past tragedies. Having lost the game of power, they both come to realize that the stereotypes of their names—the woman as long suffering, the man as ruler—have to be changed before a more fruitful conception of human relationships can be conceived.

These roles cannot merely be rejected: Dolores tells her daughter Elspeth she has quit as a mother, but when Elspeth kills herself almost immediately after this scene, perhaps partly as a result of her mother’s rejection (not of Elspeth, but of motherhood), Dolores discovers she still has the role of mother in her, even though her daughter is dead. And it is this role of mother that is the most deeply engrained and the most painful of all. These roles cannot be denied or rejected, but they may be able to be transformed.

Throughout the endless conversations there is a constant attempt on both sides to see and enable to see the stereotyped roles for what they are, and perhaps, to transcend them through mutual understanding. For the couple does not reject each other for having committed such atrocities on people who are not unlike themselves. Dolores understands Edith, Victor’s wife, and identifies with her. Victor can help to explain Anthony, Dolores’ ex-husband, in a way she has not conceived because she could not have understood

the pressures of being a husband, a man, a father. So both are victims in the other’s story of suffering. Had they married twenty years ago, they would have done similar things to each other as they had done to their spouses. When they come to understand the extent to which both of them are locked into their social stereotypes, these crimes are almost forgivable.

Victor wants to leave his wife and go with Dolores at the end. But, she feels, only by “breaking her legs,” by curbing her personality, can he succeed. Still locked in his masculine personality, he does not ask her, but tells her:

I’ve decided...I’m going to leave Edith...I know you insist on keeping a place of your own. I won’t try to move in with you. I can’t anyway, I have to be in New York. But it’s only a forty-five minute plane ride between cities, and we can spend weekends together.... (p.364)

She rejects this offer because he has simply not gone far enough. He maintains the position of the conquering male, even while his decision is a dependent one—dependent on Dolores. Although Dolores has learned to incorporate both masculine and feminine understanding, Victor has remained primarily masculine. “What I want, Victor,” she tells him, “is to change the world, what do you think? To make it a place...where maybe even men will join the women because they will see that woman’s way of thinking is more decent, more humane, and in the long run, Victor, more likely to preserve the human race.” (p.309) The author agrees. In an interview, Marilyn French states:

I don’t want to be like men. Women still are full of the old, traditional female virtues. They cook you a pot of soup. They do the serving. They try to make you feel better. They create the felicities of life. These things are important, *essential*, and I don’t want women to give them up. I want men

to learn them. I want to feminize the world.⁶

And yet, although Dolores rejects Victor, and refuses to commit herself to any relationship that is not entirely free on both sides, the connection between the two does not end. The book concludes with the feeling of joy Dolores feels in Victor's presence, and the hope, faint but real, that this year of true conversation has had enormous benefits, and that some solution may be found.

All of us, round plump children, long skinny children, brown and yellow and pale and pink and red and chocolate, all born with the cancer inside, tearing around from clinic to clinic, seeking diagnosis, cure. (p.374)

A review of *The Bleeding Heart* in *Ms.* complains that women today want some kind of guideline for modern heterosexual relationships, "... how (and how much, and when, and why) to relate to the sort of man one might describe as *Duke Charming*."⁷ While a plea to learn how to live life from literature is absurd, it is clear that—for literature, at least—a cure, or a progressive diagnosis, is here in *The Bleeding Heart*. Certainly the attempt to break out of the standard forms of human relationships in literature is a step in the right direction.

NOTES

1. (April 5, 1980).
2. (March 16, 1980), p. 9.
3. "Anguish Artist," *Time* (March 17, 1980), p. 92.
4. Marilyn French, *The Bleeding Heart* (New York: Summit Books, 1980), p. 243. All succeeding quotations from this work refer to this text.
5. *Time* (March 17, 1980), p. 92.
6. *New York Times Book Review* (March 16, 1980), p. 9.
7. Lindsey Van Gelder, "Romance Reconsidered," *Ms.* (May, 1980), p. 28.