

Lord Alfred Douglas' "Two Loves": Love, Shame, & Names

The term "queer" has had many definitions. From the nineteenth century to the modern day, the word has lived as a pejorative, an identity, and a mere adjective. Particularly in the contemporary age, queerness has become associated with homosexuality. Despite this connection, there was a time when the two terms did not coexist. Predating the concept of homosexuality, queerness once thrived as a category free of present-day connotations. This period saw a simultaneous adoption of aberrant indulgences and resistance to normative ideals, yet remained an era of queerness before homosexuality. Especially in writing, this push and pull would be represented in overt and discrete ways. In his widely quoted 1892 poem "Two Loves", Lord Alfred Douglas illustrates both a rejection of oppressive societal norms and an embrace of non-traditional forms of pleasure. As his poem progresses, readers witness a movement away from traditional "true love" and a motion toward "the love that dare not speak its name" (Douglas).

Spanning seventy-four lines unbroken by stanzas, Douglas' "Two Loves" appears visually daunting to the reader at first glance. As its content is examined, however, the audience is invited to picture sprawling hills, flower fields, and magnificent figures. The poem tells a story of an unnamed narrator examining the dream-like setting before him; a young man approaches to "show... [the narrator] shadows of the world / And images of life" (Douglas). As the youth and the narrator speak, two more characters are introduced: the titular "Two Loves". The first Love is described as "joyous ... / ...fair and blooming" and sings of love between girls and boys (Douglas). A golden figure, he stands in stark contrast to the second Love, or "the love that dare not speak its name" (Douglas). Douglas portrays this Love as "sad and sweet", adorned with "A purple robe" and a melancholy, reserved demeanor (Douglas). As the two Loves converse with

the narrator and youth, Douglas is able to depict a sort of commentary on the disparate nature of two kinds of affection.

Throughout “Two Loves”, Douglas illustrates a clear spurning of the idea of “true love”. When the protagonist first sees Love, he is enraptured by his appearance yet not taken with the figure. This Love is seen holding an “ivory lute / With strings of gold that were as maidens’ hair” (Douglas). Coupled with Douglas’ description of Love’s singing, it is clear that there is a gendered air about “true love”. Rather than singing simply of love itself, Douglas specifically writes Love to sing “of pretty maids” and pleasure between the two genders (Douglas). In this vein, Love seems conditional on the presence of what would modernly be referred to as heterosexuality. Readers can infer that this Love is who the narrator is intended to adore; he represents the “norm” in this poem. As Douglas finishes his description of the first Love, or “true love”, he juxtaposes this character with “the love that dare not speak its name”, using the word “but” to further elucidate their opposition to one another in the narrator’s eyes (Douglas). In this instance, Douglas underscores a movement away from the societally-ideal true Love, drawing his readers’ attention toward a second figure instead.

As Douglas turns to paint a picture of the second Love, his imagery takes a dramatic turn. Rather than bear the gilded features worn by his counterpart, this Love seems almost mournful. Douglas makes a note of his “many sighs / That moved [the narrator]” as well as his clenching and unclenching fist (Douglas). The narrator is apparently absorbed with this Love, emphasizing how his beauty and sad movements bring him to his knees as he “fell a-weeping” (Douglas). He simply must know what is plaguing this Love, begging to know his name (Douglas). In this portion of “Two Loves”, Douglas illustrates a palpable tension between his narrator and the mysterious second Love. The previous movement away from true Love transitions into a

powerful pull toward its melancholic brother. As a result of their contrast, readers can gather that this second Love is not as normative as the first. Its mere presence seems weighed with a sort of oppression, as this figure sighs while the other sings. There is a distinction between these two loves in their volume alone; “true” Love is allowed to sing proudly while “the love that dare not speak its name” is left with quiet exhales (Douglas). It is evident, then, that they may represent a larger trend in Douglas’ surrounding world. Some forms of love are permitted to express themselves freely, professing their presence from rooftops. Others are ushered into closets and corners of society where they dare not even make themselves known. As such, Douglas continues to develop his portrayal of the “Two Loves” as figures that intersect and inform each other.

The concluding lines of Douglas’ “Two Loves” are perhaps the most salient, or at least the most famously renowned as years have gone by. After the protagonist implores the sadder of the two figures to speak its name, he states that “My name is Love” (Douglas). Before he can continue to introduce himself, his counterpart interjects, correcting him:

... ‘He lieth, for his name is Shame,
 But I am Love, and I was wont to be
 Alone in this fair garden, till he came
 Unasked by night; I am true Love, I fill
 The hearts of boy and girl with mutual flame.’ (Douglas)

At this moment, “True Love” takes the reigns, deciding what his counterpart should be called and denouncing him as a liar in the same breath. Almost resigned, “Then sighing, said the other, ‘Have thy will, / I am the love that dare not speak its name’” (Douglas). In this final line, Douglas closes his poem with a statement that will have a ripple effect for years to come. This

second Love who “dare not speak its name” concludes his dialogue-- and, subsequently, the story of the poem-- by awarding himself a title that more obscures than clarifies his identity. Rather than fight with “True Love” or argue that he, too, can be called Love, the second Love amends his statement with a qualifier to pacify his counterpoint. It is apparent, then, that the “Two Loves” overlap. Their appearances are dependent on each other, as each figure lives in contrast to the other. Without “Love”, perhaps “Shame” would not seem as shameful; perhaps it could call itself “Love” and be revered rather than admonished for it. Without “Shame”, “Love” would not stand as proudly; its joyous, singing nature relies on the weakness of its counterpart. In this way, Douglas encapsulates the relationship between the “Two Loves”, both within the confines of his poem and in the outside world he resides in.

Douglas’ embrace of “the love that dare not speak its name” makes his resistance toward “true Love” even more powerful. These two movements-- a push and pull-- are codependent; they exist because of and despite each other. In “Two Loves”, Douglas sheds a subtle light on a pleasure deemed deviant in his time. His prose, specifically in the final line, can be interpreted as a nod toward queerness. Douglas provides a commentary on the standards of love during the nineteenth century, particularly concerning gendered prerequisites. His title alone raises questions: how can there be “Two Loves”? Is one more genuine than the other? Is one real, or fake? No matter the answer to these inquiries, Douglas succeeds in producing a work that sparks conversation and even controversy. Despite the stigma around queer themes and the potential for condemnation, Douglas took a risk to represent the parallels between societally “natural” and “unnatural” forms of love. He underscores the significance of their interactions with each other, intersecting and diverging, in a time before homosexuality as it is known today even existed.

With this poem, Douglas earns his spot in the history of queerness in writing and provides insight into an almost infamous, unnamed form of love.

Works Cited

Douglas, Lord Alfred. "Two Loves by Lord Alfred Douglas - Poems | Academy of American Poets." *Poets.org*, Academy of American Poets, <https://poets.org/poem/two-loves>.