

Mourned Into Invisibility: The Erasure of the Female Subject in Pablo Neruda's "Tonight I Can Write the Saddest Lines"

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Abstract. Neruda's "Tonight I Can Write the Saddest Lines" (Veinte Poemas de Amor y Una Cancion Desesperada, 1924) has been one of the best-known love poems of this past century. At the same time, it is also a poem where the woman whose death he mourns is deliberately produced as an absent subject. In this essay, I will argue that the speaker's act of mourning is not merely a reaction to the loss of the woman, but rather it is the mechanism whereby she is completely possessed: by making her the reason for his grief, he possesses her more completely than love would have allowed him to possess her, thus placing her forever within the realm of his memory and outside the limits of her own ability to exercise agency. To do so, I will draw upon Simone de Beauvoir's explanation of woman as constituting the Other, Laura Mulvey's formulation of the male gaze as applicable to literary criticism and feminist readings of Neruda by Ibsen (1993), Detwiler (1998), and Perriam (1998). I will conduct a formal close-reading of the Spanish original version of the poem and consider its pronominal structure, tense changes, the quise/quería difference, the use of adjectives like fijos and the authorizing power of the repetition of the line "Puedo escribir." Although the argument that the speaker's fractured emotions expose masculinity as vulnerable rather than reinforcing masculinity's power over women will be considered, I believe that his inability to express himself reflects nothing about his right to define her experience or identity. Finally, I will examine how readers may become complicit with the speaker through his use of deictic immediacy and compression of syntax as well as through his purposeful vagueness regarding the beloved, thereby recruiting them to identify with him prior to their having had sufficient space to create critical distance from his perspective. Ultimately, this paper will conclude that there is no incidental relationship between the emotional universalism of Neruda's poem and its structural effacement of the feminine subject: these two characteristics are, formally and stylistically, identical.

Introduction

Neruda's Poem XX (Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada, 1924) begins with an opening line that has gained some form of universal recognition: "Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche". Translated to English as "Tonight I Can Write the Saddest Lines", the lyric has had multiple forms of reproduction, memory and repetition over time and space. Therefore, the lyric has become one of the most recognizable representations of love poetry ever written. What makes this so evident? The lyrics have an undeniable emotional appeal and a clear generosity towards its subject. The subject (a woman who the poet has loved and lost) is clear. However, when reading this poem closely and focusing on the original Spanish version instead of the translated versions, we find a strange formal contradiction. On its surface, the poem appears to be about a woman. She never shows up. That omission was no accident.

In this thesis, I argue that "Tonight I Can Write the Saddest Lines" does not simply omit representation of its female subject. Rather, the poem produces her absence through a series of formal mechanisms (pronominal, syntactical, temporal, and visual) that are inextricably linked to the lyric's beauty. In particular, I want to make a more specific argument than the fact that the beloved is marginalized and used as a tool for expression. As I see it, the poem's grief is not just a reaction to the

loss of the woman; but rather it is the method through which she is fully captured. To put it bluntly, she is, within the full capacity of the poem's reasoning, made invisible because of her grief.

My primary sources include Simone De Beauvoirs (1949/2011) concept of woman as constitutive other as well as Laura Mulveys (1975) theory of the male gaze applied to literature. Additionally, these concepts will be related to a thread of feminist Neruda studies (Ibsen 1993, Detwiler 1998 & Perriam 1998) which identify structural gendering in Neruda's earlier amatory poetry but do not take this study further than identifying Poem XX formal gendered mechanisms. An opposing argument will also be considered: if the speaker in Poem XX is visibly unstable and emotionally fragmented, he may be demonstrating masculinity in vulnerability rather than masculinity in control. My thesis will show, however, that in this poem fragility and disappearance are not opposite; they are rather two sides of the same rhetorical coin.

Lastly, the paper considers the reader. Poem XX continues to be taught as exemplary love poetry; it continues to elicit strong identification across demographics and cultures. It therefore becomes important to understand how it creates that identification -- what exactly the reader is invited to feel and at whom's expense -- especially since the poem's influence continues to grow years after its publication.

Methodology

Review of Related Literature

Questions about gender and representation have always been part of the criticism surrounding Veinte poems. However, this criticism did not become prominent until relatively recently. Much of the scholarly discussion on the collection during the 20th century focused on Neruda's poetic revision of the traditional Hispanic love theme. It wasn't until the 1970s that Neruda scholars began discussing his gender themes.

In his book-length study, René de Costa (1979) located the young Neruda among those poets who transformed "the relationship between woman and nature" into a cosmological phenomenon and therefore equated woman with a type of universal power. This statement was meant as an accolade; it becomes apparent why it will be problematic for later feminist critics after one recognizes that a woman changed into a universal power is no longer a person by any standard definition. Although de Costa's characterization is sympathetic toward Neruda's work, it also reflects exactly what would later become the central issue in the collection according to feminist critics.

Neruda scholars produced a more critical body of research on his work beginning in the 1990s. One example of this type of research is provided by Kristine Ibsen (1993) in her article published in *Symposium*. In this article, Ibsen argues that the female figure in Neruda's earlier poetry does not exist as a character in her own right but instead serves as a tool used to understand or interpret the speaker's fears and anxiety. More critically, Louise Detwiler (1998) analyzed Neruda's use of language in order to locate what she terms *lirica aniquilación*, or lyric annihilation of the beloved. Detwiler claims that this process occurs when Neruda denies the female figure's ability to speak for herself and reduces all aspects of her individuality to simply provide material for the speaker's self-expression (Detwiler p. 91). While Detwiler's approach to analyzing Neruda's work is more negative in terms of evaluation, Christopher Perriam (1998) takes a more positive approach. Writing in *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, Perriam attempts to place Neruda's poetry in historical context and uses the modernist style that dominated poetry in Spain during the 1920s to explain the imbalance of power that exists between the two sexes in his poetry. Perriam acknowledges that the female figures in his poetry function primarily as a site upon which men project their desires and emotions (Perriam pp. 102-103). These three works are considered to be the foundation of feminist scholarship regarding Neruda's early poetry and while there may be disagreements concerning how to evaluate Neruda's work, these three articles have reached similar diagnoses.

Veinte poems also participate in a larger cultural tradition of depicting women as either angels or monsters as described by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979/2000) in *The Mad Woman in the Attic*. According to Gilbert and Gubar, male writers throughout history have depicted women in ways that reflect their psychological needs rather than their physical or social realities. This same pattern can be seen in other art forms such as painting, film, and music. John Berger (1972) previously documented this trend in visual art when he stated "men act -- women appear." Similarly, Laura Mulvey (1975) explained that the male gaze as presented in classic Hollywood films is a system of images where women are styled to meet the demands of the male viewing experience rather than to express themselves visually (Mulvey p. 11). Since then, many have shown that lyric poetry creates systems of gaze that are equally totalizing when a single, seeing "I" is able to organize all of the elements of a given image.

Reader-response feminist theory provides an additional context to demonstrate the relevance of Poem XX. Patrocinio Schweickhart (1986) developed the concept of "immasculation" to describe how female readers learn to occupy the imagined male reader's role, to share in his desire, to see through his eyes and ultimately to act in opposition to their own

interests. As demonstrated in the following sections, the poem itself enacts this imasculation. Elaine Showalter's (1979) distinctions between what she calls "feminist critique," or the way in which we can critically read men written into pleasure through male authored texts, and gynecriticism situates this paper squarely within the former category.

Theories related to mourning make up the second body of theories this paper uses. Modern elegies have been characterized as forms of melancholy by Jahan Ramazani (1994). In other words, they resist the need for closure. Ramazani argues that rather than allowing us to move past our grief, modern elegies allow us to remain connected to it. Similarly, Melissa Zeiger (1997) discusses the gendered political implications of mourning. She specifically explores ways in which male elegists often use the death of women to justify their feelings of grief and thus validate their existence. This idea is extended by Judith Butler (2004) when she writes about the significance of grievability in terms of who gets to experience loss. According to Butler, grieving serves to both acknowledge and create loss; thereby creating a new reality regarding whose life has value. All three of these ideas are relevant to Poem XX and therefore each are used here individually and selectively.

A key omission in the work previously done on this poem is a detailed formal analysis of Poem XX that utilizes all of the previous theoretical perspectives. While Perriam (1998), Detwiler (1998) do perform close readings of the entire collection there is no close reading of Poem XX. Therefore, one objective of this paper is to provide such a formal analysis based on the Spanish version of Poem XX.

Theoretical Framework

This paper will keep its theoretical commitments to a minimum. If you take too many theories and apply them to a reading of a single lyric line, then your argument may be illustrative, and thus, theoretically uninteresting. What I want instead is something like the opposite: some theoretical tools that help to sharpen our attention to what the text does. De Beavoir's (1949 / 2011) account of the Other represents my first such tool. She argues that it is not necessary for individual men to consciously lower or demean women. Rather, the philosophical and representational traditions of Western Culture have provided the paradigmatic framework for the representation of woman as the non-essential supplement to a masculine subject who takes his own universality for granted. "She is not regarded as a self-contained entity," de Beavoir claims, "she is determined 'not by herself,' but by reference to him." (de Beavoir, p. 26.) The crucial implications for literary analysis -- and de Beavoir herself explored this idea in her readings of male authors in *The Second Sex* -- is that this structural dynamic is reproduced through equally benevolent or affectionate representations as it is through overtly malevolent ones. Adoring a woman in a poem can erase her identity from her person as surely as contemptuous representations do, if both insist upon representing the woman solely on the perceiving subject's terms. Thus, a poem that adores its female subject into symbolic status completes, via aesthetic refinement, the same philosophical operation that de Beavoir described.

Mulvey's (1975) account of the Male Gaze provides my second set of theoretical tools. Some adaptation is required prior to applying Mulvey's theory to the study of literature as opposed to cinema. Mulvey's original argument was framed within a psychoanalytic tradition and focused upon the technical aspects of classical Hollywood film. That is, she examined how the camera's gaze, the gazes exchanged among the film characters, and the viewer's gaze all worked together to produce the female figure as spectacle. When we adapt Mulvey's argument to lyric poetry, the "camera" is simply replaced by the speaker's perceptive "I", and the viewer identifies with the speaker's voice via the use of first-person pronouns rather than with the physical placement of the camera. Nonetheless, the fundamental asymmetry remains intact: in either case there exists a viewing subject who actively observes a feminine object who is viewed. In addition, the representational system favors identification with the former while providing no independent perspective for the latter. It should also be noted that Bloom (2017) has previously demonstrated how Mulvey's arguments could be adapted to fit the study of lyric poetry. These two theoretical frames -- de Beavoir's ontological definition of woman as relational being-for-the-other and Mulvey's formal definition of how that ontology is represented through asymmetric seeing practices -- will function in this essay as supplementary rather than identical analytical lenses. They provide me with a way to develop an argument that demonstrates how closely aligned are both what the poem says about its female subjects (i.e., very little and only via him) and how the poem structurally creates reader resistance to recognizing these limitations.

Results and Discussion

Analysis

A. She has no voice

There are two ways to view the woman's silence in Poem XX: the structure of the poem itself, and the fact that there is no voice at all assigned to the woman. Over thirty-two lines, the woman never speaks directly. Nothing is ever expressed in

her own inner dialogue. There is no perspective that comes from her. Everything that represents her, occurs inside of a consciousness that reports on what happened between them.

That consciousness, in turn, is claimed to be filled with love for her, yet is the same consciousness that summarizes how that love was experienced by both parties.

This inequality is made explicit in the poem's most well-known example. "Yo la quise...y a veces ella también me quiso." As translated by Merwin, this line reads, "I loved her, and sometimes she loved me too" (Neruda, 1924/2004, p. 51). In this line, the speaker is grammatically the subject in both parts of the sentence. The woman is represented in both parts as a direct object (the pronoun "la") and as someone who had some level of romantic interest in him ("ella"). When describing how much he loved her, Neruda used the verb "querer," which implies warmth and habit. When speaking of his own feelings of love for her, he used the imperfect tense ("yo la quería"). When describing her feelings of love for him, he used the preterite tense ("ella me quiso"), which suggests a singular act of love. The difference between the two tenses is significant. The imperfect tense describes something as being ongoing; it is an active process. The preterite tense describes something as having occurred. Here, the speaker's love for her is described using the imperfect tense (and thus has texture); her love for him is described using the preterite tense (and thus can be judged).

In addition to judging her love, the use of the adverb "a veces" - "sometimes" - further increases the inequality between their experiences. While this could seem like a concession to reality, it is actually a reflection of how the speaker thinks she felt. He is evaluating how often she loved him, not expressing doubt about whether she did. Therefore, not only is she denied a voice to express herself; she is also denied the ability to dispute his assessment of how she felt. This is what Detwiler calls "imposición de silencio" - or imposition of silence. It is so complete that her internal world becomes just a part of the speaker's world; it is no longer a separate world to which she has access.

The pronominal economy of the poem supports what the verbs have shown. First person pronouns - yo, mi, me - dominate every stanza in the poem. Third person female pronouns - ella, la, su - always appear as objects in the poem. Although there is no second person address in the entire poem (no apostrophe to create the illusion of her presence), there is clearly a listener present; one whose presence creates an implied distance from her.

Therefore, when deciding whether to write "tu" (you) or "ella" (she) in a love poem, Neruda chose to represent her as a subject of report instead of as an addressee. Neruda did not think this decision required explanation. However, this decision reflects a long-standing tradition in Western poetry, particularly in the context of amorous poetry. As Gilbert and Gubar (1979/2000) note, this tradition runs deep; nevertheless, it does not excuse Neruda's decision.

Perriam (1998) cautions against imposing current ideas about feminism onto Neruda's poetry because Neruda wrote during a time when certain poetic forms were common in Hispanic Modernism. Perriam's warning has value. The purpose of feminist formal analysis is not to criticize Neruda for not knowing enough to articulate today's feminist terminology; it is to show us how the generic forms that poets follow can function ideologically when those forms are followed without resistance.

As Gilbert and Gubar (1979/2000) explain, a convention that assigns speech to one gender and silence to another perpetuates throughout numerous examples of patriarchal poetics. Poem XX follows this convention with great precision and does not disrupt it in any way.

B. She existed only through her relationship with him

The second aspect of the concept of subjectivity is autonomous existence, and it is denied the woman in the poem. No independent history is given her; no future that is hers alone; no other relationship than those that pass through the poet's memories of her. Every detail about her physical and emotional being is organized solely by his conscious awareness of her and thus made passive by that organization.

This is especially evident when we consider the line "como no haber amado sus grandes ojos fijos" - which Merwin translates as "how could one not have loved her great still eyes", although the translation is more accurately reflected as "her great fixed eyes". This adjective fijos is performing a lot of work. In Spanish, fijo carries associations of fixity, stasis, immobilization - a stare that doesn't wander, and therefore cannot return the regards that are offered to it. Mulvey (1975) explained how filmic feminine figures are depicted to meet the needs of men looking at them rather than to express their own visual agency (p. 11); Berger (1972) had previously pointed out that the Western tradition of representation reduces women to being objects of sight rather than visual agents themselves (pp. 46-47). Neruda's fijos encapsulates this principle in a single word. The beloved's eyes are large - monumental - but fixed - i.e., incapable of responding to the speaker's stare. These eyes exist to be looked at - not to look. That a sentence describing eyes can serve as proof of the beloved's lack of

ability to visually respond to the speaker as opposed to merely existing within the speaker's visual field indicates just how completely the poem has assimilated her into his point of view.

Similarly, all the images in the poem illustrate the same way of reducing her to his viewpoint. The stars shining brightly above, the wind blowing gently over the grass, the dew on the grass, and the vast expanse of sky - none of these images represent anything outside of him. Rather they are indicators of his mood and the woman is gradually incorporated into them so that she becomes much less of a person than a meteorological condition. Ibsen (1993) called this function of women in Neruda's poetry from an earlier period "exegetic," because she functions as a medium through whom he interprets himself and his surroundings. In Poem XX, however, this function is particularly obvious. It is her nonexistence that creates the clarity of the night in order for us to read the poem; it is her nonexistence that enables the speaker to create his own expression, and consequently provides for us an interpretation of the tender language used toward her in the poem.

The way that time is structured in the poem also illustrates her subjugation. The tenses utilized in Poem XX are deliberate and are used to prove who continues to occupy a living moment. The speaker moves among the preterite (*quise*, *vi*, *ame*), the imperfect (*queria*, *era*), and the present indicative (*puedo*, *es*, *tirita*), while reserving the present tense virtually exclusively for his continuous experience and perceptions of nature. She exists only in either completed or habitual pasts. He exists currently. At the end of the poem, "*ya no la quiero, es cierto, pero tal vez la quiero*," - "I no longer love her, that's true, but maybe I do" (p. 53) - there is no question in his mind, only his uncertainty. The uncertainty expressed in this statement belongs to him and him alone.

C. Mourning as property

The central thesis of the essay's argument is that the poem's mourning is a process of possession, not a reaction to the woman's loss. Therefore, we need to break down why this is so important, since it goes contrary to how the poem has generally been interpreted - namely, as a speaker attempting to come to terms with the difficulties of letting go of someone he loves.

Ramazani (1994) has demonstrated that the contemporary elegy tends toward a melodic or melancholy structure that declines to provide the comfort and closure offered in the classical structure of the elegy and keeps the mourner in a continuing relationship with the lost object, rather than allowing him to release himself from it. Within Poem XX, this anti-elegy type of dynamic has taken a very specific, gender-based dimension. The speaker does not mourn the woman's individuality - i.e., her separate story, her unique wants, her world as she knew it. There is no reference to those aspects within the poem. What is being mourned is the speaker's ability to feel the way she made him feel. That is a key distinction, and one that Zeiger (1997) has identified as typical of male elegies: "The lost woman," she says, "functions as 'a symbol that authorizes'" the poet's grief "rather than as an autonomous entity whose loss is defined in its own right." (Zeiger, 1997 p. 63).

To mourn a feeling is to stay inside your own private space; it is the difference between grieving for a person and grieving for a part of yourself. Butler's (2004) insight that mourning constructs as much as it recognizes loss is also especially pertinent here. The speaker's grief does not merely react to an already accomplished loss; it creates her value, retroactively, through the act of lamenting her disappearance. Yet that value is created solely based upon what she represented for him. She exists, according to the emotional logic of the poem, because he laments her; however, the lament itself is constructed upon what she meant for him, which signifies that the act intended to honor her - this extended and lovely and deliberately crafted eulogy -- serves instead to eliminate any alternative representation of who she was.

At the level of form, each repetition of the refrain within the poem represents this process. "*Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche*" occurs twice (Neruda, 1924/2004 p. 51, 53); therefore, each repetition of the refrain needs consideration. Each occurrence centers the speaker as a subject -- I can write; I am creating; I am giving permission -- versus the preterite history of what was lost. The present tense "*puedo*" is situated against a closed past where she lived and loved and was loved; the speaker lives in a continuous present of productive grief; whereas she resides in a completely closed past of completed relationships. Writing is not compensation for loss in this poem; writing is a continued exercise in possessing by another method. She could be held; she could be written about. Structurally, the difference between these two ways of having is less than the poem indicates its evident humility as an elegy.

The final lines indicate that exchange explicitly: "*Aunque este sea el último dolor que ella me causa, / y estos sean los últimos versos que yo le escribo*" - "Even if this be my last pain that she inflicts upon me / And these my last verses that I write for her." (p. 53). At the time of farewell, there is still a same structural order. She causes him pain; he writes poetry. The poem concludes with him still speaking; still writing; still in the present tense. Throughout the poem, she remains the occasion for his creation, rather than his address.

Counterargument: The speaker's vulnerability, fragmentation and the limits of the unstable speaker

There is a believable alternative interpretation of the poem that focuses on what may be termed the speaker's disintegration. That well-known contradiction -- "I don't want you anymore, I'm sure, but maybe I still want you" -- is as much a description of the woman as it is a confession of the speaker's own contradictory feelings. He can't control his emotions. His declared sovereignty over his emotional condition fails when he adds "maybe". This view of the repetition "can write", interpreted from this viewpoint, can be seen as a compensatory statement, rather than a declaration of confidence. All that is left for a speaker who can no longer do anything else is to declare "I can write these sad lines".

Several other scholars have been working toward interpreting the poem along similar lines. Perriam (1998) notes that the speaker of the volume is frequently "the captive of emotion as much as it is the sovereign of emotion" (p. 101). There certainly seems to be some truth to that characterization. For many readers, the contradictions in the poem seem to represent the most psychologically truthful aspect of the lyric - evidence that the speaker is suffering from grief, rather than merely acting out grief.

This opposing reading has considerable strength and represents a major part of what gives Poem XX its widespread popularity. One reason for its broad appeal is specifically its willingness to reveal male vulnerability: a young man who cannot let go of what he has lost; a young man who cannot even give stability to his own account of his feelings; a young man who seeks to use natural imagery and cosmic proportions because the human dimensions of the loss are beyond his ability to describe using language. Across multiple demographic positions, readers identify with the image of a grief which will not be resolved by the speaker.

However, if we allow this opposing reading to stand without restriction, then the fact that masculine vulnerability in this poem does not shift the structural power of the poem presents us with difficulties. The speaker's ambivalence relates only to his feelings toward himself; it does not relate to whether he defines her accurately or completely. He questions whether he still wants her; he does not question whether his account of what she wanted - "sometimes she loved me too" - is correct or complete. The speaker's instability is an expression of his interiority, a measurable depth which the poem grants him; her silence is merely nothingness; unfilled interiority; a void which the speaker's grief does not mourn as much as it fills. De Beauvoir (1949/2011) formulated this situation particularly clearly. The male subject is formed as complex, self-contradictory and richly internal; the female Other remains relational, instrumental, and defined by his perceptions of her. His weakness does not provide humanity to her, since it never needs to include her. The poem provides space within its emotional structure for the speaker's collapse; it has no place for her response.

It should be stated clearly: the counterargument explains why the poem appears to be emotionally sincere without diminishing our structural analysis. A poetically fragmented speaker can, simultaneously, present through his formally organized lyric an erasure of his subject's separate existence. These are not opposing states.

Ultimately, what the counterargument reveals is how the poem achieves both humility and possession at once - a combination which could possibly be more ideologically effective than assertive statements.

Reader Complicity and the Politics of Emotional Identification

Why does this poem remain a gesture of love for many people instead of being understood as a gesture of erasure? The question is structural and not rhetorical, and the answers to this question reside in the way the poem organizes the reader's identification with the speaker. Before readers have the opportunity to reflect on their relationship to the speaker, Poem XX invites them to share the speaker's experience through a number of formal mechanisms which are simultaneously among its aesthetic achievements.

One of the most important of these mechanisms is the poem's manipulation of temporal proximity. "Puedo escribir los versos mas tristes esta noche": the use of the present tense and the indexical "esta noche" -- this night, the one occurring right now -- creates a sense of immediacy that places the reader within the speaker's experience and prevents them from observing it from a distance. The deictic "esta" does specific work here. An abstract statement about grief would not carry with it a sense of witness, shared moment, etc. The deictic "esta" carries with it a "you", a witness who could be experiencing grief alongside the speaker. In essence, Poem XX asks the reader to assume the role of witness to this shared moment. While being drawn into a present tense experience based on someone's grief establishes the reader's position, that position will always be the speakers. The woman exists outside of this present, in the preterite, thus rendering her inaccessible even within the fictional world created by the poem.

Schweickart (1986) coined the term "immasculation" to describe the process by which readers (including women) are trained to occupy the male implied reader's perspective. In doing so, they adopt his desires, memories and structural

authority over figures he represents (p. 42). Poem XX accomplishes this task with unusual efficiency. The majority of Poem XX's syntax is comprised of brief declarations and its vocabulary is clear, not elaborate. The imagery contained in Poem XX is immediate and sensory (starlight, wind, dew), and therefore activates bodily memory prior to analytic response. Poem XX develops a rhythmic pattern based upon its own expressions of grief, and that rhythmic pattern is contagious due to the fact that there is no space provided for reflective interpretation that may establish a physical and/or emotional distance between the reader and speaker. At the point where readers arrive at "a veces ella tambien me quiso", identification is already formed. The woman's silence is perceived as an aspect of the texture of loss as opposed to an absence based on a formal choice.

There is another level of participation that warrants analysis. The object of affection in Poem XX is characterized by extreme lack of specificity. She possesses very large fixed eyes; she inhabits the evening hours and the wind; she belongs to another possibly. Other than those descriptions, she has no name, history, personality or social existence. Lack of specification regarding her character is not a result of insufficient creativity; lack of specification allows for Poem XX's universalism. Due to the extreme lack of specification regarding her, she serves as a blank slate onto which readers may project their losses. The apparent close relationships portrayed in Poem XX (the whispering nighttime thoughts, the expressed ambivalences, etc.) mask to a great degree the reality that the female subject depicted in Poem XX serves as a projection screen for whatever grief/desire that readers bring to the text. Millions of people have adopted this poem as an articulation of their personal experiences largely due to the fact that she lacks sufficient characteristics to be identified as anyone they have lost. Lack of specificity is not typical of love poetry generally; lack of specificity is a unique formal accomplishment of this poem that results from Poem XX systematically omitting specifics about her identity.

Sara Ahmed's (2004/2014) treatment of how emotions "stick" to bodies and are transmitted in ways that make certain subjects excessively legible and other subjects excessively invisible provides insight here. The speaker's grief is detailed and completely concrete -- specific stars, specific nights, specific eyes, specific hedges of emotion -- while the woman gradually disappears as an individual presence as the poem progresses. She exists sufficiently to authenticate the speaker's grief; she exists too little to replace her with another individual. Ultimately, what Poem XX presents is a picture of a man grieving for a woman who left him; and it does so in such a manner that readers can enter into that grief without confronting any obstacles presented by her perspective.

There are several important implications of this interpretation. None of them suggest that the poem should be censored or removed from student view. I am describing how the poem functions before I am evaluating if it should be read. Description of how a poem works does not imply a value judgment regarding whether it should be read.

Perhaps the most important implication relates to what the poem reveals about the way the love lyric is constructed as a genre. Neruda is certainly not exceptional in his approach to the object of desire. He is, in fact, entirely conventional. The love poem of the West has, throughout history, consistently built itself upon the silent role of female subjects (Reilly, 2015), from the lyrics of the troubadours to Petrarch's Rime sparse and beyond to the Romantics' meditations on lost or idealized women. De Costa (1979) placed Neruda admirably within this tradition. The contribution of feminist criticism has been to point out that this tradition represents much more than simply a thematic predilection or generic convention -- it represents a structural predisposition toward using women as symbolic material. Neruda not only inherits this structure but expands its geographical scope to include the entire natural world through his use of imagery in the cosmic natural-symbolic scale of *Veinte poema de amor*.

This historical context is relevant here; however, it has limitations. Perriam (1998) warns against reading a work in an anachronistic manner. This warning is reasonable as a methodology. Neruda was 19 years old, writing in a cultural environment shaped by modernismo's masculine conventions. There seems to me to be something unfair in expecting his early work to meet standards based on a critical vocabulary developed after him by over fifty years. However, even though we should take care not to judge Neruda's early work too harshly, historicization is not exonerating. As Showalter (1979) defined the task of feminist criticism, it is not focused on understanding authors' intent individually. Rather, feminist criticism focuses on identifying the patterns that create and naturalize gender -- regardless of whether an author is aware of them.

The pedagogical consequences are very serious indeed. Poem XX continues to be included in almost every introductory course and anthology of world poetry as representative of the affective potentialities of love poetry. If we do not address the formal politics of this poem as we teach it, then we may very well reproduce its silences in the classroom. We would provide students with a model for expressing love in poems that centers the male speaker's anguish and makes the woman's voice structurally inaccessible. To teach this poem otherwise does not condemn it; it enables students to read it more fully. Demonstrating that alternative readings exist and have both political force and widespread public support is demonstrated by the 2020 feminist marches in Santiago, Chile. During those demonstrations protesters rewrote the beginning lines of Poem XV ("Me gustas cuando callas," I like you when you are quiet) into their antithesis.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This essay does not just argue that "Tonight I Can Write the Saddest Lines" silences its female subject. Rather, the argument is much stronger. This poem's mourning of the woman is when she is most thoroughly possessed by the speaker. He creates her as always there for him to remember through his grief, and then removes her from being able to do anything else in her own right. She exists in his poem more than in his life - and a poem is a far more permanent form of possession.

Loved into Invisibility describes this process. The more familiar phrase of silenced describes how she will never again exist as a subject in this lyric, but it doesn't capture how both the speaker's affective investment and the woman's representation are part of the same operation.

His inner turmoil and disorganization don't reverse or even diminish the idea presented above. An unstable, emotionally disjointed speaker is not necessarily a democratic one. And while Neruda's Poem XX shows a level of male vulnerability, that male vulnerability does not make the woman a human being because it does not include her. Her lack of presence is a necessary component to create his depth of emotion. His contradictions are manifestations of his interiority; her silence is merely the requirement to write the poem.

Readers respond to Neruda's speaker in Poem XX, regardless of their generation, native language, or previous experiences of loss - they are drawn to the poem because the poem identifies the reader first, and reflects on the experience second. Moreover, the fact that the beloved is sufficiently vague allows readers to substitute their own losses onto the blank space created by the poem. Both of these are significant stylistic accomplishments; however, they are also significant ideological accomplishments - and those two cannot be easily separated. It is exactly why the poem is so universally felt that makes it worthy of critical analysis; Neruda's emotional economy works so efficiently precisely because of the woman's disappearance. Every time we read this poem anew, we continue to reproduce that disappearance for another century.

Recognizing this does not mean that we should stop reading this poem. Rather, it is a prerequisite to reading it accurately. The person Neruda's speaker is mourning was, before becoming an element of his lyric, a person with a view of her own. We see none of that view in Neruda's poem; we cannot see any such view based upon the poetic form he uses. However, criticism can at least assert that the view existed - that her silence in Neruda's poem is not equivalent to her non-existence in the world. Criticism can further assert that the aesthetic beauty of the sorrow does not preclude us from asking about what was traded off to achieve it.

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Appendices

No appendices are attached to this study.