All’s Fair in Love and War

The phrase “all’s fair in love and war” denotes an unusual parallel between the pain of love and the pain of war. How can two subjects be so different and yet so similar? This idea often surfaces in Yusef Komunyakaa’s poetry, especially in his works describing romantic encounters and episodes from the Vietnam War. One selected poem depicts an emotional end to a couple’s relationship; the other poem depicts the emotional suffering a commander endures after losing a fellow soldier. These poems, though based on two entirely different situations, share many emotional connections and even veracities on human behavior. Both characters experience love, whether it be romantic love or companionship, and both characters experience loss. Their reactions to these events are so similar that the reader is left intrigued. Could it be that a soldier in combat has the same emotional reaction as a heartbroken lover? Komunyakaa leads his readers to see the connection between the two ideas through his exquisite word choice and poetical structure.

Walt Whitman’s profound ideas on the subject first inspired Komunyakaa to embrace the tie between love and war. In an interview hosted by Jacob Wilkenfeld, Komunyakaa says, “One leaf is different from all the other leaves, and that multitude is always crowding Whitman's brain. So beauty is severe. Sometimes beauty is as severe as tragedy, and there is a marriage between the two…” (Wilkenfeld). This marriage of beauty and tragedy surfaces in many of Komunyakaa’s war poems as well as his love poems. Whitman’s acceptance of the pair fueled
Komunyakaa’s interest in their correlation. Throughout his war poetry, readers commonly see a reflective sadness in the speaker’s tone. But even in sadness, he finds an angle of love towards the subject. In the poem “Please”, Komunyakaa’s speaker begs a fallen soldier to forgive him for accidentally ordering the innocent man’s death. Although the speaker mourns the loss of his fellow soldier, his tone remains compassionate and empathetic. Near the end of the poem, the speaker talks directly to his subject, saying “when I said go, / Henry, you went dancing on a red string / of bullets…” (Komunyakaa lines 31-33). Out of all the vocabulary created to describe agonizing death, Komunyakaa uses dancing. This peculiar word choice indicates to readers that the speaker’s feeling of camaraderie with the soldier is coupled with that of heartbreak.

Komunyakaa’s poem “Translating Footsteps” depicts the same idea, but a completely different setting. In this poem, the speaker ends the relationship with his partner and the reader watches him react to the loss. In the last few lines, the speaker says “my mouth kisses the blues harp” as he plays the harmonica. These romantic ideas in lieu of depressing truth exhibits Komunyakaa’s use of Whitman’s theory on the marriage of beauty and tragedy.

Another method Komunyakaa uses to tie these two opposing ideas together is similar poem structure. Komunyakaa places feelings of anger and resentment directly next to those of love and remorse, creating a sense of confusion and conflict within the poem. Michel Fabre describes this unsettled reaction as “stemming from the juxtaposition of unexpected subjects and images” (“On Yusef Komunyakaa”). The structure of the opening lines of Komunyakaa’s work “Translating Footsteps” confirm Fabre’s theory: “She says Go fuck yourself / when I say Good-bye and good luck / with potted plants / under a granite moon” (Komunyakaa 1-4). The violent opening line sends a signal to the reader that the female speaker holds anger and/or hate towards the male speaker. However, the male speaker responds quite calmly and lovingly: “Good-bye
and good luck”, twisting the mood of the poem into an entirely different aura. Komunyakaa’s reference to a “granite moon” then gives the reader a sensation of the speaker’s stone-like lack of emotion. These twisting emotions represent to the audience Komunyakaa’s coupling of love and war. A similar structure appears in the latter half of his poem “Please”. In the second stanza the speaker says, “If I could make my mouth / unsay those orders, / I’d holler: Don’t / move a muscle. Stay put, / keep your fucking head / down, soldier” (Komunyakaa 20-25). This passage has the reverse structure of the last, however, it retains the same emotional effect. The first line begins in a remorseful tone, the speaker craving to change the past and right his wrong. The mood quickly changes to anger when the speaker hollers at the dead soldier not to move. Readers are caught off guard by this sudden change of attitude, and then further confused by the intertwining of positive and negative feelings. Every alteration of temperament reinforces the idea of love and war being combined to one. The success of this theme relies mainly upon Komunyakaa’s pairing of anger with tenderness and the fluidity between the two thoughts.

One important, though sometimes overlooked, connection between love and war is the refutation of one’s emotions in order to recover from a traumatic situation. The first stage of grieving, denial, is prominent throughout Komunyakaa’s works with this theme. In both poems, the speakers confess to suppressing rather than confronting their feelings. The male speaker in “Translating Footsteps” says, “my heart hides like notes / locked in a cedar chest” (Komunyakaa 22-23). Instead of confessing his feelings of anger and compassion, he subdues his feelings hoping one day he will forget them. The reader may assume that the speaker feels as though he should disregard his emotions in order to move on. In the poem “Please”, the speaker tells the fallen soldier, “I’ve tried to swallow my tongue” (Komunyakaa 29). Similar to the lover in the previous poem, the commander stows away his feelings and attempts to block the loss from his
memory. However, Komunyakaa’s wording shows the reader that the commander has not succeeded in bottling his sentiments. Both love and war can create situations where those involved may have to quell their emotions in order to cope. The initial reaction to a traumatic situation is denial; both speakers experience the stage of denial after the detrimental loss of a loved one. The true test lies in overcoming the sense of denial and progressing through the stages of grief. The speaker in “Translating Footsteps” has not had time to advance through his denial; however, the speaker in “Please” denied his feelings for a longer period of time and therefore has had time to overcome his denial. At the end of the poem readers cannot tell if the commander has proceeded to the second stage of grieving, or if he remains prisoner to denial. In each situation, Komunyakaa presents his readers with a sense of truth in the authenticity of his characters’ behaviors. His exquisite word choice makes the stories easily relatable to a broad audience. Also, this denial supports the original theme of the emotional connection between love and war.

Although these poetic devices seem artistic and tasteful, one may question if they lead to effective writing. If Komunyakaa changes the emotions and mood of the story so abruptly, how does the reader follow along? The answer is simple; his poems are written in a way that parallels real-life occurrences. In an interview held by Elizabeth Cho, Komunyakaa explains, “Given the complexity of human social interactions, I see these realities as products of the whole social fabric of the society” (“Yusef Komunyakaa Speaks”). Every emotion, every turn of temper is purposefully written so that his poem may sympathize with the society it’s written to. Komunyakaa’s understanding of the world around him strengthens his ability to provide readers with a realistic story in his poems. Although poetically the tumultuous emotions call for further analyzing, each line serves to paint a vivid picture of the scene inside the reader’s head. Komunyakaa’s excellent word choice and careful structure polish his poems and make them easy
to understand emotionally. Though the theme of love and war may lead to some confusion, Komunyakaa avoids this problem in his works by successfully appealing to the natural feelings of the reader, leaving the both the reader and the writer satisfied.
Works Cited


