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A Dubious Confession

Frank O'Hara's *Having A Coke With You* stands out amongst confessional poetry because of its dimensionality and its referential way of analogizing the poet's love. The poem reads as a celebration of the speaker's lover and includes many small details about the lover that are noted through careful observation. O'Hara writes in first person, so the reader is privy to the speaker's direct thoughts and emotions. The poem explores the internal desires of the poet as well as the magnitude of their love affair. The poem has an interesting way of playing with the psyche of both the speaker and the reader by using the first-person narrative voice as a tool. This narration both plays a positive role in understanding the speaker's emotion, but also limits the reader to knowing only what the speaker is saying at any given moment. This becomes a complicated relationship when analyzing the themes of the poem and can be attributed to the complexity found in confessional poetry.

Stylistically, the poem is written to mirror how it feels to experience big love. The way that O'Hara writes feels similar to a line in Shakespeare's *Othello*. In Shakespeare the love interest is implored to, "heave the gorge," (II.i.254) Though an entirely different context, she vomits up her love for Othello. It feels that O'Hara does this through the speaker in the poem. The language is informal and not punctuated traditionally, only written in some fragments, and primarily run on sentences. The language and absence of punctuation iterates the feeling of rambling and being swept away into the poem and into the poet's lover as if he cannot stop. This

is useful in the poem as the reader finds a pace and rhythm that is unabridged and fluent, consistent with the love he is describing. O'Hara also employs similes and metaphors when speaking about the lover. His use of enjambment in the second stanza pivots the poem from external descriptions about the lover and into his own gaze. The "I look," that stands alone in line 13 turns the poem inward inviting the reader to see through his eyes, another confessional trope, that is not the speaker talking about a thing outside of themselves but rather something that is coming from within themselves.

First, perhaps the most obvious theme is revealed at the very start of the poem with the induction of the reader. The title flows into the first line, "Having A Coke With You / is even more fun than going to San Sebastian, Irün, Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne," (1). Sharing a coke is something relatively small, but to the poet it is preferable to anything. Immediately the poet reveals the value they find in mundane shared experiences with the lover, the assigned, "you" in the poem. This theme continues to build upon itself as the poem continues and small details about the lover are noted. Big love is found in the small things like sharing a coke (1), or a secret smile (6), or simply looking and admiring the lover (14).

It is interesting to consider the juxtaposition of mundanity with grandiosity for the purpose of scaling the speaker's love. O'Hara does this successfully in the poem by mentioning small things: the coke, the yoghurt, the lover's orange shirt and juxtaposing them with bigger, worldly things such as religion and art and nature. Similes such as, "in your orange shirt you look like a better happier St. Sebastian", (3) compare the lover to a martyr of Christianity, something big and important to the world. It is the speaker's own interpersonal connection being projected onto a grandiose scale and in this, there is grandiosity found in the object of love. The lover is being treated as an object, not a subject, as subject feels too personal a term when the

poem is finished. The closing lines of the work are useful in understanding this, that although the comparisons feel personal, it is truly the caliber of his art he is able to create that he is speaking of. It becomes impersonal and the lover is a token to have, and a tool of sorts used to create, possibly not undermining the love shared between the speaker and the lover but projects a transactional feel to the relationship.

O'Hara's way of writing about the lover creates a feeling of singularity to this love and their relationship. The speaker believes that no other artist has been able, and ever will be able to cultivate a work so in love because they have not known them. He also creates a feeling of aloneness. In lines 9-10 O'Hara writes, "in the warm New York 4 o'clock light we are drifting back and forth / between each other like a tree breathing through its spectacles." Spectacles could refer to the spectacle of the forest, perhaps representing all of the people in New York, something bigger than they are, and they play the role of the tree, a singular tree in the broader context of their environment, alone together but not isolated. In a very "meta" way this poem and its singularity taps into the universal feeling of being in love with another person. No two loves are the same, but to the reader who is or has been in love, singularity is something that perhaps they have felt and understood to be their own, only to see the same feeling replicated and told through the poem. Its singularity works in two ways, to challenge and to be resonated with.

This affronted pretentiousness regarding the singular love lends itself to insensitiveness. The speaker is insensitive to the lesser feelings of the world because of their love. O'Hara articulates this in the poem with, "it is hard to believe when I'm with you that there can be anything as still / as solemn as unpleasantly definitive as a statuary," (7-8). He cannot believe that there are things so solemn when his love exists. The accrued insensitiveness goes on to raise questions of desensitization of the speaker. Consider the speaker comparing his lover to the

bigger things of the world, the comparisons between an orange shirt and a Christian martyr, (3) having a coke together and travelling the world, (1) the lover's movements, and Futurism (17). It is plausible to wonder if the speaker has lost a sense of judgment, blinded by the proclaimed singularity of his lover and consequently big and small things of the world no longer matter. The speaker appears to have lost a sense of rational judgement.

Having A Coke With You remarks on the relationship between love and art and this relationship emerges as the most significant theme found throughout. The relationship between love and art is brought to the poem the last two lines after a line break and a shift in the form of the poem; it casts a shadow over the rest of the work and potentially shifts the readers entire understanding of the lines that precede it. O'Hara writes, "it seems they were all cheated of some marvelous experience / which is not going to go wasted on me which is why I'm telling you about it." (24-25) The speaker refers to other artists of the time and their attempts that have tried and failed at creating work that understands for itself the feeling only found in a lover, or in his eyes, his lover. The poem resolves to be not addressed to the lover as it had seemed all along, he is just making the art that others who didn't know his lover were unable to create. Moreover, with, "which is not going to go wasted on me," the speaker alludes to himself creating the art for himself and the world. Upon one way of interpreting the poem these lines appear cast a disingenuous light over the rest of the poem, as the speaker is artistically and creatively reaping the benefits of the lover's existence and nothing more. Inversely, one could also read it is the speaker seeing his lover for their greatness and valuing it so as to not let it go to waste, though probably less likely.

This effects the speaker's interpreted sincerity and expression of love and creates a new lens through which to read the poem. The poet's choice to introduce this theme so late in the

poem infers that it could have been predicted to devalue the rest of the speaker's sentiments and give them an air of insincerity. Though the poem is teeming with expressions of love and adoration that influence the other themes found within, they are directly contrasted by these two lines. The placement of these lines, if read as a strategic admission, work directly with the confessional style. The speaker lets the reader in on this idea late in the poem and understands that the admission will skew the preceding lines. It is a play on the psyche and a perhaps shameful admission as the speaker turns to address the reader.

Were this poem not written in a confessional style it would not achieve the feeling it was aiming for, for the lover or the artist being familiar with great love. O'Hara uses small details about the lover to reflect an intense emotional experience that the speaker carries with them into their body of work. The elements that make the poem confessional enhance the experience as a reader by allowing a direct tie between speaker and audience. It also adds a layer of complexity and unreliability when discussing a subject of interpretation and experience, like love, and leaves the poem to be interpreted and resonated with ambiguously. *Having A Coke With You* works on an individual and universal level in both love and art guided by its stylistic dimensionality and visceral confessionalism.

Works Cited

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