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## Lack of Love

Devon Lawler

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# **LACK OF LOVE**

DEVON LAWLER

“It Takes Two Baby”:

What Ras Baraka and Lauryn Hill Teach Us about Writing and American Intimacy through  
“Hot Beverage in Winter”

“It’s a full moon, we in the bedroom, thoughts consumed  
By the passion, slow jam tunes and body action...”  
-Method Man, “Sweet Love”

“The Dream is the enemy of all art, courageous thinking, and honest writing”  
-Ta-Nehisi Coates

America is a country built on Protestantism and the belief that we sit one step below the Angels. In order for America to succeed as a self-governing nation, the country had to adopt set morals, morals that were based in the church and governed by hard work. History shapes America into a country of equality and democracy, but two hundred and fifty years of slavery, one hundred and fifty years where women could not vote and the creation of the reservation says otherwise. Along with the American basis of democratic equality, piety and hard work is engrained in our country’s foundation as well. Benjamin Franklin’s idea of the virtuous life is the best example to look to. His famous quote “early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise”, serves as the cornerstone of American capitalism and reinforces the attitude that with enough hard

work anyone can become rich. While everyone agrees that a good night sleep is sometimes the only thing we want in the world, this quote denies a wonderful quality about humans—our imperfection. When the founding fathers sat around a handmade table from a tree that Franklin chopped down the day before, they looked to eliminate what makes us human and strive for an impossible perfection.

Denying bad and embracing good is not unique to America. It is a natural human tendency to uphold the good while ignoring the bad and nationalistically speaking, every country has done it. When creating the foundations of a society, you dream of Utopia even if you know it is unachievable. You don't have to go back to Franklin or American religious thought to show that America tried to place itself above the rest (including its own black citizens) by denying natural human flaws, a state of mind that began to form American intimacy, an intimacy that combines elite Protestant thought with hard capitalistic work ethic and uses the black body as a model of impurity to uphold its standards to. As America progressed and tried to find its place among the Angles, the nation began to repress human's natural intimate nature, which bleed into mainstream expression.

Walt Whitman, America's poet whom we love to glorify, wrote exhilarating poetry. The first time I read "Song of Myself", I was forced to read it out loud. Lines such as "My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil" or "I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised/ and naked,/ I am mad for it to be in contact with me" praise the body and glorify the relationship between humans and nature; however beautiful (and real) these lines are, they move away from any genuine intimacy the moment it is touched. In section three Whitman writes,

"Urge and urge and urge.../always/ substance and increase, always sex.../As the hugging and loving bed-fellow sleeps at my side/ through the night, and withdraws at the peep of the day/ with stealthy tread."

Whitman acknowledges our sexual desire, yet moves away quickly, allowing the woman, as well as the intimacy to withdraw "with stealthy tread". Ras Baraka and Lauryn Hill's "Cold Beverage in Winter" continues Whitman's, "love thyself attitude", yet "unfearfully" (stronger word) acknowledges genuine human intimacy. Whitman writes, "Clear and sweet is my soul", Baraka reads "seeing our souls caress, dancing and dancing and dancing, trying to turn total chaos into complete thought." Whitman embraces the orderly and the power of collective individuality, while Baraka and Hill embrace a dark chaos that America sought to reject. Audre Lorde writes "[t]he white fathers told us, I think therefore I am; and the black mothers in each of us-the-poet-whispers in our dreams, I feel therefore I can be free." "Cold Beverage" frees the listener from rational thought and

invites us to embrace the chaotic made beautiful though the intimate.

The song begins with Hill singing, repeatedly “You are the sun after the rain. You are the comfort after the pain. I want to be with you.” A slow, melodic guitar riff comes in, one that actively falls from the ears, rather than sits to be heard. Baraka reads “in the core of my heart the fire of the sun beams, burning billions of degrees of compassion for the world in steady rhythms...beating and beating and beating I want to get in you—deep, deep, real, real, deep and watch you from your own eyes.” He depicts their love, his “teeth pressed against [her] collarbone, nibbling down, hot breath on [his] spine, finger prints on [his] chest.” The movement of the him/her creates a respected shared intimacy between two individuals. Often in song or poem, the speaker (when it is a man) focuses primarily on the women, neglecting his active participation and a true intimate connection is lost. Hills reminds us, “it takes to baby to make it alright.” It is through this unfiltered connective love that Baraka realizes he is in love with her, with her “soft pretty eyes [and] the way [her] hair touches [his] lips”, (note the her & his) which leads to the connection of these two individuals through which they both reach their “true greatness.” If Whitman sings praise to the individual and makes us a complicated being, Baraka and Hill praise the accomplishment of the embrace between two individuals. Baraka praises “your music, my poetry” through which we get “our voice”, our wholeness. This wholeness is what Baraka craves and what America has abandoned.

“Cold Beverage in Winter” falls into a unique category of art through the combination of song and speech, giving the listener a full experience by engaging multiple senses. That is why Whitman’s words were so powerful, they demanded to read out loud; however, as American poetry progressed, it lost its musicality and focused strictly on form and school of thought. The “isms” were made and the complete poet was lost. Thomas Sayers Ellis explains this through his metaphor of the door; the nuts and bolts of the door are the “craft” and the swing of the door is “the nuance, the poetry” and when both the craft and the swing are accomplished, the poem then has flow can touch on a much more visceral level. When talking about what poetry is, there are as many answers as there are poets and the joy of reading poetry comes from the wide range of written thought that the genre enables. Zachary Schomburg writes beautiful surreal vignettes, taking you to Sea of Japan or to the edge of a cliff where man and women sit, kissing in an avocado and cake costume, respectively. Schomburg’s work is grounded on the page and does not work linguistically the way Ellis argues poetry should; yet, it still works nonetheless. Read the masculine prose of Jim Harrison and allow Eavan Boland to teach you the struggle she faced as a woman growing up in Ireland wanting to become a poet. Through the combination of the vast collection of spoken and written

word we can begin to understand the range of human emotion and come to a true wholeness of ourselves. In our society we want to form paradise and in our writing we want beauty and command; however, when you place such an emphasis on the end product, you often lose the element you try so hard to create. Instead of expecting perfection in our lives and work, we should follow Baraka and Hill's advice and seek out the intimate in the hopes of finding our greatness.

We all want to write with beauty and command, yet when you place such emphasis on the words and rather than their meaning, you lose to very beauty you are trying to create. When you try and avoid a cliché, you are trying to say something new and in a new way, but it is very easy to move away from any meaning at all and instead you end up sounding sterile. In *Hot Beverage in Winter*, Baraka writes "Feeling every single emotion all at once. Remembering midnight since of soiled sheets that drive me into wild frenzies. Teeth pressed against your collarbone..." I argue that this is better poetry than anything you could find in Blake or anything other romantic poet because it is grounded in simple sensuality and its words translate in relatable feeling. Isn't that why we ultimately try and do when we write? We try and take a thought or action and put it into motion on the page or through our voice. Poetry created a self-inflicting wound that can never heal from and I hope that it never will. By trying to encompass human emotion, other ways we of course going to spring up.

Poetry tries to take on life and act in a way that is above literature. Unlike fiction and non-fiction, forms that ground themselves much more in a literary sense (ie the question is never "what is fiction?") poetry, tired to become greater than a literary medium, one that attempts to translate life into thought. Whether critics or the writers created this notion is beside the point. Poetry stretches (if not further) back to Sappho (who actually sang her poetry rather than read) in Archaic Greece, yet we still cannot come up with a consistent definition of poetry. Audre Lorde believes "poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so that it can be thought" This ambiguity of what poetry is stretched the genre and ultimately gave credibility to rap and r&b to be considered poetry. In "Brooklyn", Mos Def writes "Yo sometimes I sit back, reflect on the place that I live at/ Unlike any place I ever been at/ The home of big gats, deep dish hammer rim caps... Blue collars metro carding it/ Thugs mobbing it, form partnership / Increase armament, street pharmacist." Eavan Boland writes in her poem "Falling Asleep to the Sound of Rain", "I love small towns—they seemed to come from/ a kinder time: shop blinds lowered on weekdays/ afternoons, peaceful

evenings with beds turned down” (57 Domestic Violence). Here are two writers, one describing Brooklyn, the other writing about unnamed Irish town, yet the latter is regarded as poetry. That one is printed on a page and words are read rather than heard. If poetry wants to keep its stance as “something greater than the page” than it must be able to exist off the page.

The song, the poem, the words are ridiculously sexy. These thoughts can stand in a song, yet in a poem that might seem overly crude or dramatic, but they are so good. With Lauryn Hill’s voice accompany him throughout “you are the sun after the rain. You are the comfort after the pain” and a guitar repeating the smoothest rhythm while a piano tip toes. To me that is poetry. At times he is so deep inside that he can see the world from her eyes. You feel like you can only listen to it in headphones, like his words are something hidden, yet at times they are all that we want. The only “page poet” I have come across who writes like that is Kim Addonizio. In her work she does not move away from the dirty thoughts, because for her, for us, it all we think about it sometimes. And like Baraka, her poems are not perfect, but they don’t try to and for that reason they are so much better. In “What Do Women Want?” she writes, “I want a red dress./ I want it flimsy and cheap,/ I want it too tight, I want to wear it/ until someone tears it off me.” (Tell Me 74). Very simple words, but they address a very real feeling. Her words are honest and confront a human desire that a lot of romantic love poetry moved away from or discussed in a strange mix of love and religion. Louie CK made a joke that sex is the number one thing that we want all the time so he finds it strange that his audience is just fucking throughout his entire performance.

Wordsworth is beautiful, but it is a beauty that I cannot relate. Like America he tries to transcend human flaws and create a sterile beauty, while beauty lies in our mistakes. “The ode to duty”