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Aesthetic Objectivism : *Instapoetry* 'Dark Love' through Lang Leav's Poetry (2013-2016)

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Abstract

The themes of Lang Leav's poems are mostly about love, loss and loneliness. Her poetry is very well received by many and is also said to promote a toxic view of love. This paper aims to examine the themes of love which we argue contain the elements of dark love. Dark love is divided into 'love as a sad notion' and 'love as a hopeless infatuation'. A textual analysis is done on selected poems using Frank Sibley's aesthetic theory of objectivism (1959). The analysis reveals that the poems promote 'dark love' that is grim, disappointing and pessimistic.

Keywords: Lang Leav, Dark Love, Aesthetic Theory of Objectivism, Poetry Meaning

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1.0 Introduction

Lang Leav is a Sydney-based poet, author and artist. She was born in a Thai refugee camp when her family fled the Khmer Rouge Regime. She debuted as a poet in 2013 by releasing her first poetry collection, *Love & Misadventures* (2013). Up until now, she has released seven books, including *Love & Misadventure* (2013), *Lullabies* (2014), *Memories* (2015), *The Universe of Us* (2016), *Sad Girls: A Novel* (2017), *Sea of Strangers* (2018), *Love Looks Pretty on You* (2019) and *September Love* (2020). Lang Leav is the winner of a Qantas Spirit of Youth Award, Churchill Fellowship and Goodreads Reader's Choice Award.

Despite being labelled as an Insta-poet for being phenomenally popular for her poetries on *Instagram*, Lang Leav admitted that she found her fame initially on *Tumblr* (Hoare, 2018). Fans from across the globe glorify her books and poetry. Through the help of social media, "Lang's message of love, loss and female empowerment continue to resonate with her multitude of readers" ("About Lang Leav", n.d., para. 3). Her poems often regarded as to be helpful for most of her young readers, especially in the cases where love is involved. Her words are associated with the blooming and loss of love, self-awareness and feminism. In an article written by Rose Hoare (2018), she quoted a fan confessing that she was able to escape an abusive relationship thanks to Lang Leav's poetry piece, *Letting Him Go* (2013). More readers share their love for Lang Leav's books on social media such as *Instagram*, *Twitter* and *Tumblr*.

1.1 Problem Statement

Nonetheless, despite being well-received by readers, Lang Leav's poetry is defined as nothing but problematic. The poems are said to diminish the meaning of the poetry itself. Lang Leav's poetry is argued to be very personal, making them appear generic (Jarales, 2016). Joshua Lee from *Rice Media* boldly states in his article that "her poetry is nothing but a recipe for disaster" (Lee, 2017, para. 15). Lee chooses *Soul Mates* (2018), one of Lang Leav's most loved works on social media platforms such as *Instagram*, *Tumblr* and *Pinterest* as

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an example to validate his judgement. Joshua Lee mentions that as much as this poem may sound melodious to her fans, the meaning can change when these words are taken apart and read thoroughly once more. He further believes that despite the beauty of the words, there lie hidden messages that may curb the readers from facing the truth and reality. His article *The Real Reason, Lang Leav's Poetry, is So Toxic* (2017) argues that the portrayal of love in Lang Leav's poetry is primarily illogical, as it promotes only the infatuation parts and none of the realistic attitudes toward facing the truth in love. Despite that, the study by Muhammad Adek, Nesa Riska Pangesti and Asmawati (2020) argues that Lang Leav's portrayal of love is categorized as mysterious, pessimistic and disappointing. Thus, the key questions that need to be addressed are how does the dark love depicted in the poem? What are the qualities of aesthetics and non-aesthetics that promote dark love? Hence, this article argues that Lang Leav's poetry promotes dark love that shows love as a sad notion and a hopeless infatuation. The aims of the article are :

- i) to identify the aesthetic and non-aesthetic qualities of the poems
- ii) to discuss the concepts in generating the meaning of dark love as sad, disappointing and pessimistic

The poetry will be separated into two sections: love as a sad notion and love as a hopeless infatuation. Each section will be discussed based on Frank Sibley's theory of the aesthetic concept of objectivism.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Dark Love

Instapoets like Lang Leav, Rupi Kaur, Atticus, Tyler Knott Gregson and R.M. Drake are some of the poets that often express the emotions of love through their poems. However, these are only a tiny number of instapoets that made it into social media and gained thousands of fans with a single click on the internet. Love is a strong feeling of affection towards someone who is romantically or sexually attracted. Love can be the feeling that a person's happiness is essential to us, and how we show this feeling is in our behaviour towards them ("Love", n.d.). Nevertheless, when love turns toxic, the sense of warmth and happiness in the emotion is no longer there. Dark generally means devoid or partially devoid of light, either not receiving, reflecting, transmitting, or radiating light. It can also be related to grim or depressing circumstances. This paper refers to the possible grim and depressing characteristics of the meaning of love in Lang Leav's poetry ("Dark", n.d.). Dark love may also allude to the type of love that happens when a person allows fear to control how they love someone else ("Dark love", n.d.). The fear can be their fear of losing the person they love, causing them to pursue the love desperately and depressingly, fitting the term dark love. Besides that, *Shadow of Iris* refers to dark love as surrendering entirely to love, being obsessed with another person and also a twisted kind of love that is destructive no matter how genuine the love may be ("Dark love poems", 2016).

2.1 Instagram and Instapoetry

Instagram was introduced in 2010, and it has become popular worldwide ever since. Instagram is defined as "...a free, online photo-sharing application and social network acquired by Facebook in 2012 (Brian Holak, 2017, para.1)". The application allows users to upload and edit their photos or short videos through a mobile application. Instagram was later used as a platform to write poetry in the form of texts on a plain or visual background. Hence, the terminology of instapoetry was coined along with these terminologies; Instapoet and Instapoem. Instapoet is a person who writes or publishes their work on Instagram, and sometimes they publish their poetry in books. Instapoem and Instapoetry are referred to as works published on Instagram as a single poem or a collection of poems. Interestingly, Jessica Myers in *The State Press* defines Instapoetry as "...Blunt line breaks, emotions expressed in a handful of words and a thought that fits within a few lines pasted over an aesthetic background" (2019, para. 6). Instapoetry is highly accessible to everyone especially the Z generation, the most active users of social media in this digital age.

The instapoetry forms are "...short, snappy poems and largely about love, feminism, and mental health..." (James Morgan Rue, 2019, p.2). Apart from that, Miller (2019) and Givoni (2017) in Smit Frederique (2020) further claim that instapoetry deals with the themes of otherness, selfhood, abuse, trauma, sexual violence and friendship. Due to the short and snappy attributes, Paolo Manalo in Clozette (2020) states, "... "You need verses or lines that will fit the frame of an Instagram post or story" (para 7). If the poetry is too long, it requires a longer time to read, and readers would probably ignore it. Furthermore, Instagram contains many visuals, and users will scroll through hundreds of images; hence, the lines and verses must be short and brief so they can be easily shared. Another interesting form of instapoetry is that it has an ambiguous persona; henceforth, it is easy for the readers to relate to the subject of the poetry, especially on the theme of love. It is a universal theme and could easily engage the readers; in fact, "...there tends to be more entries and pieces that are about unrequited, unfulfilled, or impossible love" (Manalo, 2019, para. 13).

2.2 The Aesthetic Objectivism

The question of beauty is essential in the philosophical inquiry of aesthetics. Frank Sibley, in *Open Edition Journal* (2014), proposes two distinct types of aesthetics; aesthetic concepts and non-aesthetic concepts. The aesthetic concept requires the capacity of taste or sensitivity of the observer so that the aesthetic concept can function well. He further argues that aesthetic concepts are not to be rule-governed. They must be supported with locution to reinforce the aesthetic qualities of a piece of work. Locution in this context refers to explaining and supporting the aesthetic terms with linguistic evidence, for example (from the perspective of a poem); *why a poem is moving or tightly organized?* The locution is that *"his verse has strength and variety because of the way he handles the metre"* (p.322). The aesthetic qualities also must not be settled by a mechanical method which means there are no general standards when criticizing a piece of work. He contests that there is no 'substitute for individual judgement' with its "spontaneity and speculation" and that "the final standard...(is) the judgement of personal taste" (p. 322). In addition, the qualities of aesthetics must not be separated from the non-

aesthetic qualities, and they depend on each other symbiotically. *Non-aesthetic qualities* are defined as physical descriptions of an object, such as colour, shape, form and structure.

According to Giulia Bonasio (2014), the central of Sibley's aesthetic concept of objectivism relies on a shared agreement among people judging the art pieces. Furthermore, aesthetic qualities are described as 'emergent', which means there are features that stand out from the rest of an object. Hence, there is a probability that a piece of art will be judged similarly by two or more different persons. Thus, 'taste' is the key concept that allows the viewers to identify with the aesthetic concepts. Emmanuel Kant also shares the notion of taste. Kant, in *the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2013), states that "...the judgment of taste as "based on" a feeling of pleasure, and as claiming that everyone ought to share the subject's feeling of pleasure, or, as he puts it, as claiming the "universal communicability" of the pleasure (para. 17). Sibley argues that taste is an integral part of life and judgement however he states that everybody does not use taste. He further argues that taste is not meant as "a matter of personal preference or liking" but the ability of a person to "notice or see or tell that things" have aesthetic qualities.

3.0 Research Methodology

This article employs a qualitative method that focuses on four case studies of Lang Leav's poems, *Dead Butterflies* (2013) and *Loving You* (2014). Key questions need to be addressed: How is the poem's dark love depicted? What are the qualities of aesthetics and non-aesthetics that promote dark love? Textual analysis is adopted to uncover the emergent meaning of dark love through the aesthetic concept of objectivism, as illustrated below :

- i) Illustrate the non-aesthetic features
- ii) Illustrate the aesthetic qualities that we want people to see
- iii) Makes linking remarks about the aesthetic and non-aesthetic features
- iv) Uses similes and metaphors
- v) Uses contrasts, comparisons and reminiscences

4.0 Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Love as a Sad Notion

To what extent can love poetry be "sad"? Instead of uplifting the readers' spirits, Leav's choice of style and diction makes them wallow in sadness? In the first lines of *Dead Butterflies* (2013), she has to endure a painful moment for unable to touch the man she loves. The comparison of pain due to a cut by the broken glass is nothing comparable to the emotional pain that she suffers while looking at her love interest through the transparent glass. Why is that so unbearable? Love is supposed to promote beautiful feelings but not in this case. She considers her love interest as the butterfly behind the glass at first, as she constantly watches him getting more unreachable as days go by. Like a person who observes a butterfly underneath glass in awe, she continues looking at her love interest. Only, in the end, she realizes that he is not the one who is behind the glass, but she. She is the pinned butterfly underneath the glass—the dead butterfly—unable to do anything than watch him living his life. When she admits that she is the pinned butterfly, not only yearning for the man as she continues to watch him live his life with the new girl. It also means that the heartbreak she experiences is truly immense to the point that she places her worth only as a dead butterfly pinned underneath a glass. A dead butterfly will never be able to recover its life and can never fly like it used to. She indirectly declares that her feeling toward love has died altogether when the man leaves, and all she can do now is to continue watching him through the non-existent 'glass' that she creates on her own. The dark themes of love revolve in *Dead Butterflies* (2013), starting from expressing her love to the man through her broken emotions. She lives her life constantly watching him even after he leaves and ends up admitting herself to be the dead butterfly—metaphoric death. It means a part of her is lost. The kind of love that she will never get in return.

4.2 Love as a Hopeless Infatuation

Love is a complex emotion where it comprises physical attraction, along with intellectual and emotional compatibility, whereas infatuation is solely dependent on physical attraction and leads to lust. Infatuation is a scenario where someone feels sexual desire toward another person, and it is often reckless and unreasonable ("Infatuation vs love", 2019). In *Loving You* (2014), a girl meets again with a lover from her past, and she wonders if he still remembers what she once told him. She had vowed to him that she would love him forever, yet instead of returning her vow, he turned it back on her by saying that she was the one who may stop loving him one day. It suggests an act of someone who fears losing the person that he loves, but when being considered in a different context, he is somewhat blaming her that if their relationship ever ends, it will be because she is the one who is no longer in love. It becomes a hopeless infatuation when she reveals that she could not stop loving him even as she sees him accompanied by another girl. Love turns to something grim and depressing in *Loving You*, yet she refuses to stop loving him despite the circumstances that they are no longer together, even after years have passed. Infatuation indeed dies after a while, but love will survive years, if not for eternity. For the persona in *Loving You* (2014), her love for the man can be seen as a hopeless infatuation because she is no longer in a relationship with him. She claims that she does not and will not be able to stop loving him. She becomes obsessed with love, which has turned her into a person who is so hopeless about love.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

Through selected poems, Lang Leav exposes many parts of darkness in her love, ranging from mourning over a broken relationship that is non-existent to obsessing over a hopeless case of love. One of her poems also conveys the act of sacrificing someone's worth for the sake of holding to a destructive relationship. The elements of dark love in Lang Leav's poems may not be seen directly on the surface, but it may indirectly lead to the readers believing in desperation, obsession and toxicity in the act of love. The strengths of Leav's poetry rely on her writing style and diction. Her writing style is sharp, and she uses similes, metaphors and making comparisons to illustrate the emotional turmoil of the persona. In no way it is possible to claim that all of Lang Leav's poems promote dark love through their words, but a number of them focus on the sad, disappointing and pessimistic elements of love. Two other poems by Lang Leav worth examining are *A Love Story* (2015) and *Procession* (2016).

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