

Pandemic Love and Loss in Armitage's "Lockdown"

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Abstract

Simon Armitage's poem "Lockdown" reveals human need and loneliness while examining themes of love and loss during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper draws parallels between these themes and the separation of Emmott Syddall and Rowland Torre during the Eyam plague. It also compares the poem with Kalidasa's Meghaduta, in which an exiled yaksha sends a cloud to express his love to his estranged wife. Both works reflect the common feelings of longing and separation. By linking Eastern and Western literary traditions, the article emphasizes the universal human experience of longing and the enduring power of love in the face of hardship. It also explores Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian duality in the poem, contrasting chaos and order in the times of crisis.

Keywords: *human need, COVID-19, Apollonianism, Dionysianism, crisis*

Introduction

In Armitage's "Lockdown," the speaker explores complex emotions of love and loss during the time of isolation and uncertainty. The poem's major theme is clear: the pandemic has disrupted our relationships and made it difficult to connect with loved ones. The speaker laments the loss of physical touch and intimacy, as well as the inability to share experiences and create new memories together. However, the poem also suggests that the pandemic can also bring us closer together, as it forces us to rely on each other for support and love. In the following paragraphs, I will explore the themes of pandemic love and loss in more detail that the poem offers a portrayal of the challenges and opportunities that the pandemic has presented for our relationships. I have conducted my analysis through textual analysis of Armitage's "Lockdown" as the primary text. As part of the textual analysis, firstly, a close reading of the poem's language, imagery, and structure can unveil subtle nuances and layers of meaning. This involves dissecting the poem line by line to uncover literary devices, such as metaphor, symbolism, and allusion, which contribute to the portrayal of love and loss. Additionally, I have employed comparative analysis to juxtapose different sections of the poem, such as the narratives of Emmott Syddall and Rowland Torre versus the tale of the exiled Yaksha, to discern commonalities and differences in their experiences of love and loss. Moreover, examining the historical and cultural contexts referenced

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in the poem, such as the plague in Eyam and Eastern folklore, can provide valuable insights into the universal human experiences depicted. Through these methodologies, the textual analysis of "Lockdown" can offer a comprehensive understanding of how the poet has portrayed love and loss amidst the backdrop of a global pandemic.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, a lockdown is a situation or time when access to or movement within a region is restricted for the sake of public health or safety. I am talking about the term's generic meaning here, not the "Lockdown" poetry. The poet also portrays the state of lockdown in the poem. Eyam is a small village in the Peak District National Park in Derbyshire, England. In 1665, the plague arrived in the village in a bundle of cloth sent from London to the local tailor, Alexander Hadfield and it spread quickly through Eyam, and by the end of 1665, over 100 people had died. The villagers took a number of measures to try to slow the spread of the disease, including quarantining themselves from the surrounding area. However, the plague continued to spread, and by the end of 1666, over 260 people had died, representing about a third of the village's population. The conditions in Eyam during the plague were horrific. The villagers buried their dead in plague pits, and the strength of death filled the air with fear. The plague also had a devastating impact on the village's economy and social structure. The plague ended in Eyam in 1666, and the villagers eventually rebuilt their lives. In the plague-stricken village of Eyam, England, in 1665, dreams of infected fleas and a tailor's hearth, reminds the devastation and loss that surround them, haunt the speaker of the poem. Haunted by dreams of plague-infested cloth, the speaker recalls the Boundary Stone, where coins were left to prevent the spread of disease. Remembering the star-crossed lovers, Emmott Syddall and Rowland Torre are separated by quarantine line. The speaker dreams of a Yaksha sending a message to his lost wife on a cloud that traverses the globe, passing over camel trails, cattle tracks, streams, meadows, forests, and peaks, on a slow but necessary journey. The poem speaks to love's power and resilience in the face of adversity.

I will answer the following questions in this paper: what are the similarities and differences in the experiences of love and loss portrayed in the narratives of Emmott Syddall and Rowland Torre, and the tale of the exiled Yaksha? How do Apollonian and Dionysian elements manifest in the depiction of love and loss in "Lockdown," and what insights do they offer into human responses to crises? How does Armitage bridge Eastern and Western perspectives on love and loss in "Lockdown," and what implications does this have for understanding cross-cultural experiences of the pandemic? By addressing these research questions through a thorough textual analysis of the poem, I can provide valuable insights into the complex interplay between love, loss, and the human experience of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The depths of pandemic

In “Lockdown,” the speaker explores the complex emotions of love and loss during a time of isolation and uncertainty. The thirty-four lined poem of single stanza begins with an image of the speaker's partner sleeping in their bed, while the speaker lies awake, listening to the news of the pandemic. The speaker fills with feelings of anxiety and fear, but the presence of his loved one comforts him. The poem then goes on to explore the different ways in which the pandemic has infected the speaker's relationship. The speaker laments the loss of physical touch and intimacy, as well as the inability to share experiences and create new memories together. However, the speaker also suggests that the pandemic can also bring us closer together, as it forces us to value each other for support and love. In the final lines of the poem, the speaker expresses his hope for the future. He believes that the pandemic will eventually pass, and that the relationship will emerge stronger than before. It is clear that “Lockdown” explores the complex emotions of love and loss during a time of isolation and uncertainty. The pandemic has disrupted our relationships and made it difficult to connect with loved ones in the usual ways. We may feel isolated and alone, even when people surround us. Despite the challenges, love can endure through isolation. The speaker knows that his relationship with his partner will emerge stronger from this difficult time. However, loss also haunts him. He dreams of the plague-stricken village of Eyam, England, and the star-crossed lovers Emmott Syddall and Rowland Torre, who were separated by quarantine. He also dreams of a Yaksha sending a message to his lost wife on a cloud, traveling across the globe to reunite them. Talking about this poem, Armitage himself says:

Hope you enjoy this reading – I think there's some enjoyment to be had towards the end of the poem, when the imagination is charged with bringing hope and comfort to the confined and separated. I read this with happy memories of appearing on the stage at the Coronet, and look forward to those days coming again. (The Coronet Theatre, 2020, 00:00:07-00:00:25)

The theme of love and loss is central to the poem. The speaker imagines a time when people will be free to travel and connect with each other again. They imagine a world where people are more understanding and compassionate, and where love and hope prevail. Armitage's poem is a reminder that even in the darkest of times, there is always hope.

Beside the eastern bank

In his “Lockdown,” Armitage has referred *Meghaduta*, a Sanskrit epic of Kalidasa too. The story of *Meghaduta* is split into two parts – Purvamegha (First cloud) and Uttaramegha (Following cloud). It is about Kubera, the treasurer of the Gods, who has a group of celestial helpers called Yakshas. Yaksha was so much in love with his wife

that he forgot his duties. As a punishment, he was sent away to live in the deep woods on Earth. He felt very sad without his wife, and she missed him too, thinking about him all the time. Some of the final lines of “Lockdown” are powerful affirmations of the power of love, loss and imagination:

But slept again
And dreamt this time
Of the exiled Yaksha sending word
To his lost wife on a passing cloud,
A cloud that followed an earthly map. (Bramcote College, 2020, p. 1)

The given excerpt describes a dream sequence where they fall asleep once more, only to find themselves dreaming again. This time, the dream involves imagining the exiled Yaksha, who had been banished to the earthly woods, trying to communicate with his beloved wife. The imagery portrays the Yaksha as sending his message on a passing cloud, as if the cloud itself carries his words. This cloud is depicted as following an "earthly map," implying that even in the realm of dreams; there is a sense of navigation or direction guided by the familiar terrain of the earth. This imagery encapsulates the power of imagination and the longing for connection, even in the face of physical separation and exile.

Hindu mythology sketches Yakshas as a class of supernatural beings or nature spirits that are often depicted as guardians of the natural world, including forests, mountains, and treasures hidden within the earth. They are sometimes considered benevolent, protective spirits, while in other stories they can be mischievous or even malevolent. Yakshas are often portrayed as attendants of Kubera, the god of wealth, and are associated with prosperity and abundance. Additionally, Yakshas are portrayed in various Hindu texts such as the Vedas, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata, where they play different roles depending on the context of the story:

Then one day, monsoons started to splash upon earth. The Yaksha saw a rain cloud pass by and requested it to carry a message to his wife, then languishing on Mount Kailash in the Himalayas. The Yaksha then commences to describe the route the cloud should be taking in the northward direction. The description is so enamouring and so pictorial, that one can actually experience the scenes are flashing in front of the eyes in a vision. The Yaksha makes the route seem as bewitching as possible, so that the cloud takes his message to his wife, in the city of Alaka (according to Hindu mythology, Alaka sometimes also referred to as Alakapuri, is a mythical city in the Himalayas) (Bharateeya, 2010, para. 3).

The feeling of love and loss at the same time is evident in the speaker's dream of the

exiled Yaksha. The Yaksha is deeply in love with his wife, but he is also separated from her by exile. He sends her a love message on a passing cloud, but he knows that the message may never reach her. In the context of love and loss, the poem speaks to the power of imagination to keep us connected to our loved ones, even when they are no longer with us. We can use our imagination to remember the good times that we shared, and to create new memories in our hearts. We can also use our imagination to imagine a future where we will be reunited with our loved ones.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on all aspects of our lives, including our relationships. In literature, the pandemic has been explored in a variety of ways, with authors examining the challenges of isolation, the resilience of love, and the power of grief. One of the most common themes in pandemic literature is the challenge of isolation. P. R. Baral in his article “Human Reconnection to nature: An Ecopsychological Appeal in Corona Time Poetry” writes:

In “Lockdown,” Simon Armitage contemplates on how humans cope amidst the alien situation and anxiety through a connection to nature. He feels the time in quarantine is a chance to escape the hectic lives and concentrate into the beauty of the natural world. The poem alludes to a scene in “Meghadūta, an epic by the Sanskrit poet Kālidāsa, in which “the exiled Yaksha” sends reassuring words to his wife in the Himalayas via a passing cloud. The cloud is ready to take the message because the Yaksha tells him that he is going to pass across many beautiful landscapes (Baral, 2020, p. 38).

In “Lockdown,” Armitage suggests that amidst the anxiety and alienation of the pandemic, there exists an opportunity for humans to reconnect with the natural world and find moments of tranquility. The poem draws on the ancient Indian epic “Meghadūta” by the Sanskrit poet Kālidāsa, referencing the tale of the exiled Yaksha who communicates with his wife through a passing cloud. This allusion highlights the enduring connection between humanity and nature, as the Yaksha's journey across diverse landscapes reflects the beauty and resilience found in the natural world. Through this connection to nature, Armitage discusses how humans can find comfort and reassurance even in the most challenging of circumstances.

To the western border

Armitage's “Lockdown” builds on these themes in a number of ways. The poem explores the challenge of isolation, the resilience of love, and the power of grief in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The poem also offers a unique perspective on the pandemic, drawing on its speaker's knowledge of the plague-stricken village of Eyam, England:

His poem references Eyam's boundary stone, which contained holes that the quarantined villagers would put their money in to pay for provisions from outside, and then fill with vinegar in the hope it would cleanse the coins. It also touches on the doomed romance between a girl who lived in Eyam and a boy outside the village who talked to her from a distance, until she stopped coming. (Flood, 2020, p. 5)

The poem does indeed reference the boundary stone of Eyam, a village in England that quarantined itself during the plague of 1665. The stone was used to exchange money and goods between the villagers and the outside world, and vinegar was used to cleanse the coins in the hope of preventing the spread of disease. The poem also alludes to the doomed romance between a girl from Eyam and a boy from outside the village. The two lovers would talk to each other from a distance, but they were never able to be together. The girl eventually died from the plague, and the boy was forced to watch from afar:

Both of these references are significant because they evoke the themes of love, loss, and separation that are central to the poem. The boundary stone is a reminder of the physical barriers that can separate us from the people we love. The doomed romance is a reminder of the emotional toll that these barriers can take on us (Pyman, 2021, para.1).

"Lockdown" explores the complex emotions of love and loss during a time of isolation and uncertainty. The poem is set against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disrupted our relationships and made it difficult to connect with loved ones. The speaker of the poem laments the loss of physical touch and intimacy, as well as the inability to share experiences and create new memories together. However, the speaker also suggests that the pandemic can also bring us closer together, as it forces us to rely on each other for support and love.

"Lockdown" also depicts love and loss through Apollonian and Dionysian lens, emphasizing their raw, uncontrollable power in the poem. Despite the Apollonian emphasis on order, reason, and control, the poem illustrates how love and loss can disrupt these structured notions, revealing their profound impact on human experience. The poem depicts love and loss through an Apollonian lens by presenting them in a structured and orderly manner, emphasizing rationality and clarity. However, it also suggests the raw and uncontrollable power of these experiences, challenging the Apollonian attempt to fully comprehend and control them. The poem explores these themes through vivid imagery and emotional intensity, portraying love and loss as primal forces that transcend rational understanding and societal constraints. One-way love and loss are portrayed through a Dionysian lens through the story of Emmott Syddall and Rowland Torre,

"star-crossed lovers on either side of the quarantine line." This narrative evokes the Dionysian concept of tragic love, where emotions override reason and societal boundaries. The lovers' wordless courtship spanning the river symbolizes an intense, primal connection that defies logic and conventional communication. Their story emphasizes the uncontrollable nature of love and the devastating impact of loss, highlighting the raw, emotional power of these experiences. Additionally, the dream sequence involving the exiled Yaksha sending word to his lost wife on a passing cloud further emphasizes love and loss through a Dionysian lens. The imagery of the Yaksha's longing and the ephemeral nature of the communication evoke a sense of longing, desire, and emotional intensity that transcends rationality. The Yaksha's journey across diverse landscapes, guided by primal instincts and emotions, underscores the uncontrollable nature of love and the profound sense of loss experienced by Yaksha and his wife.

Apollonian and Dionysian values

Armitage has used both Apollonian and Dionysian values in this poem. Apollonian values are derived from the Greek god Apollo, representing order, reason, harmony, and restraint. Apollo symbolizes intellect, clarity, and moderation. Apollonian values emphasize rationality, self-control, and adherence to rules and structures. In literature and art, Apollonian qualities are often associated with formality, symmetry, and clear narrative structures. Apollonian individuals strive for balance, logic, and disciplined behaviour in their pursuit of knowledge and self-improvement. Dionysian values stem from the Greek god Dionysus, embodying ecstasy, chaos, spontaneity, and emotional intensity. Dionysus represents the wild and primal aspects of human nature, encouraging liberation from societal constraints and embracing instincts, emotions, and irrationality. Dionysian values celebrate creativity, passion, and the pursuit of pleasure without inhibition. In literature and art, Dionysian qualities are often linked to symbolism, abstraction, and sensory experiences that evoke primal emotions and desires. Dionysian individuals seek transcendence, immersion, and ecstatic experiences that defy rational explanation.

According to Nietzsche, Apollonianism and Dionysianism in art reflect ancient Greek dualistic concepts examining the dichotomy (opposing tensions) between order and chaos, rational logic and frenzied madness, restraint, and unbridled passion. Both Apollonian and Dionysian values in this poem are evident. The poem opens with an Apollonian sense of order and reason as the speaker reflects on historical events, such as the plague in Eyam and the boundary stone. These references highlight a rational attempt to make sense of the situation, emphasizing structure and control. However, as the poem progresses, Dionysian elements emerge, disrupting the ordered narrative with vivid imagery and emotional intensity. The dream sequences, such as the tale of Emmott Syddall and Rowland Torre and the exiled Yaksha's communication with his lost

wife, evoke a sense of chaos and primal emotions. The imagery of the journey across diverse landscapes and the hypnotic quality of the air suggest a Dionysian exploration of sensory experiences and the subconscious mind. "Lockdown" blends Apollonian and Dionysian values, reflecting the complex interplay between reason and emotion, order and chaos, in human experience:

Apollonian and Dionysian values can be viewed as two art realms – dream and intoxication. The dream is more important for an artist because it is a dream that inspires him for literary creation. Nietzsche refers to Roman Philosopher Lucretius who said that the marvellous images of gods and goddesses first came into the minds of men. In medieval time, too, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *The Legend of Good Women* because two goddesses inspired him in a dream to write something about good women. Similarly, William Langland wrote *The Vision of Piers the Ploughman* being inspired by gods. Before that, in ancient Greek culture, the dream was supposed to be the base of all kinds of artworks. (Singh, 2018, p. 3)

Similarly, the Dionysian element in "Lockdown" manifests in the passionate, unruly nature of love and loss depicted, particularly in the story of Emmott and Rowland. Their connection stretches across the "plague line," defying boundaries and reason. Their courtship is "wordless," driven by an ecstatic, primal yearning that mirrors the intoxicating frenzy of Dionysian rites. The image of the river separating them symbolizes the carnal, untamed essence of their love, a torrent that cannot be contained by social restrictions. Emmott's eventual disappearance reinforces the tragic, cyclical nature of love and loss, a central theme in Dionysus' myth. Further echoes of Dionysianism appear in the exiled Yaksha's dream. The cloud he sends to his wife carries a lavish, sensory map of their life together. The imagery of "camel trails," "painted elephants," and "embroidered meadows" evokes an opulent, unrestrained world, akin to a Dionysian festival's excess. This dream-world stands in stark contrast to the "plague line" and death's grip, highlighting the yearning for ecstatic union lost. While tinged with sadness, the Yaksha's dream retains a Dionysian spirit, emphasizing the transformative power of love and the enduring longing for connection even in the face of loss.

Before to conclude, I can say that, Armitage's poem "Lockdown" serves as a poignant exploration of the theme of love and loss amidst the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the lens of Nietzsche's theory of Apollonianism and Dionysianism, the poem reveals the complexities of these contrasting forces, portraying love and loss as both stationary and dynamic elements in human experience. By interweaving narratives from both Eastern and Western traditions, such as the tales of Emmott Syddall

and Rowland Torre, and the exiled Yaksha, Armitage bridges cultural divides and sheds light on the universal human experiences of longing and separation exacerbated by the pandemic. Ultimately, "Lockdown" underscores the enduring power of love to transcend boundaries and bring solace amidst times of uncertainty and isolation. As we navigate the challenges of the pandemic, the poem serves as a poignant reminder of the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring nature of human connection. The poem also draws on the speaker's knowledge of the plague-stricken village of Eyam, England, in 1665. The villagers of Eyam quarantined themselves from the surrounding area in an attempt to slow the spread of the plague. This act of self-sacrifice resulted in the loss of many lives, but it also preserved the lives of many others. The speaker of Armitage's poem sees parallels between the villagers of Eyam and the people who are living through the COVID-19 pandemic. We are all making sacrifices to protect our loved ones and to slow down the spread of the virus.

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