Mad Love Study Guide

Mad Love by André Breton

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Mad Love Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Plot Summary....3

Section 1....4

Section 2....6

Section 3....7

Section 4....9

Section 5....11

Section 6....13

Section 7....14

Characters....15

Objects/Places....18

Themes....20

Style....22

Quotes....24

Topics for Discussion....26

Plot Summary

Mad Love (L'Amour fou) is surrealist theorist André Breton's case study on love. Using the surrealist style of juxtaposition, Breton explores how love is manifested and expressed in his poetry, in found objects, with his relationships with women, mostly notably with artist Jacqueline Lamba, and in the final chapter, in regards to his relationship with and hopes for the future of his infant daughter.

Best known as the founder of surrealism and its primary theorist, André Breton was also a poet. Published in 1937, Mad Love is partly an ars poetica and partly an autobiographical exploration of Breton's relationship with the artist Jacqueline Lamba. Mad Love was published nine years after the publication of one of Breton's most famous works, Nadja a semi-autobiographical exploration of Breton's interactions and obsessions with a young, mentally-unbalanced woman. Like Nadja, Mad Love provides Breton an opportunity to explore surrealist theory and important surrealist themes, including the power of desire and the unconscious and their relation to delirium, poetry, and love.

Breton's arguments about love and poetry in Mad Love do not develop logically or move linearly. As a surrealist text, instead the connections that Breton makes between ideas, and between the different sections of the book, are dictated by what some would call "chance" or "circumstantial-magical" connections, but that Breton sees as tied to the unconscious. Contending that "chance is the form making manifest the exterior necessity which trades its path in the human unconscious," Breton explores how the circumstances that led to his discovery of love, of Lamba, of found objects in the flea market, of phrases and inspiration for his poetry are dictated by desire and by delirium.

Mad Love contains seven sections. Each explores the themes of love and desire through a slightly different lens. Mad Love begins by retracing some of the ideas about love and beauty explored by other avant-garde poets and playwrights, including Alfred Jarry, Comte de Lautréamont and Mallarmé, before turning to expressly surrealist theories and practices, most notably automatism and the found object. The book also includes a number of photographs by surrealist artists. All these references make Mad Love a survey, of sorts, of French literary history and of the theorists that influenced the surrealists. Although the book is largely a reflection on Breton's relationship with Lamba, Breton does not describe his first sighting of her until Section 4, approximately one third of the way into the text. It is not possible to separate the "madness" from the "love," in Mad Love. They are intertwined and as a followup to Nadja, the text in which Breton explores a relationship with a woman who was insane, the love that Breton describes in Mad Love still has that idea of delirium and frenzy. The texts describes both the highs and lows stirred up by this "mad love," from the excitement of first meeting Lamba to doubts about their future. The book ends with a section where Breton addresses his infant daughter (his only child and his child with Lamba) and wishes her a future where she too is "madly loved" (pg. 119.)

Section 1

Section 1 Summary and Analysis

Mad Love or L'Amour fou is surrealist theorist André Breton's case study on love. Following on his earlier work, Nadja that chronicled his interractions with a young woman who was eventually shown to be mentally-unbalanced, Mad Love continues Breton's exploration of madness and love, demonstrating how, for the purposes of surrealist theory and practice, the two are completely intertwined.

Mad Love opens with Breton invoking the theater and by beginning the first section of the book this way, Breton immediately juxtaposes ideas of theatre, audience, and performers. The reference to stage and the "unveiling" that occurs in theatre are important metaphors for the unveiling that Breton wants to tackle in Mad Love, particularly as he is the actor, the analyst, and the author.

The first section of Mad Love invokes the works of many avant-garde artists and theorists that Breton and the surrealist movement found inspirational antecedents, including the playwright Alfred Jarry and the poets Stephen Mallarmé, Edgar Allen Poe, Arthur Rimbaud, the Comte de Lautréamont. Breton quotes only the first three words of Lautréamont's famous quotation such as "Beautiful as the encounter of a sewing machine with an umbrella on a dissection table" but notes that this statement, often cited as foundational to surrealism, "constitutes the very manifesto of convulsive poetry" (pg. 9.) Breton links this poetic convulsion, a physical and emotional juxtaposition of ideas, to beauty and in turn to desire.

Using the Hegelian dialectic that relies on thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, Breton argues that this "convulsive beauty" must be seen in terms of the object in motion and in repose and between an object that is wished for and an object that is found. The convulsion then is found in the movement from "force to fragility" which Breton compares to great quartz crystals found in grottos in Europe and the simple crystals found in rock salt. These sorts of juxtapositions appear throughout Mad Love such as black and white, man and woman, ashes and snow. Surrealist theory argues that juxtapositions like these are important for the shock and surprise they elicit

In addition to demonstrating the importance of juxtapositions for surrealist thought, the first section of Mad Love points to the significance given to the random and to chance, as well as the surrealist interest in the occult. Breton muses on how it is "the beast with miraculous eyes" — a woman he can love — will appear, he turns to a surrealist game of chance. "...[I]n order to have a woman appear, I have seen myself opening a door, shutting it, opening it again — when I had noticed that it was not enough to slip a thin blade into a book chosen at random, after having postulated that such and sucha line on the left page or the right should have informed me more or less indirectly about her dispositions, confirming her immediate arrival or her non-arrival" (pg. 15.) Breton goes

on to describe a tarot card reading, a passage echoed in one of the images that accompanies this section, a photograph entitled "Myself and her" by Man Ray.

Breton ends this section by recounting his lunch in a little restaurant on April 20, 1934. He describes the restaurant employees, including the owner, the dishwasher, and the waitress. The latter of "quite pretty: poetic, rather" captures his attention, and he notes her polka dot blouse and a moonstone brooch she is wearing. Breton is distracted by a wordplay uttered by the dishwasher of "Here, l'Ondine!" which Breton notes as "Here one dines." Breton will also later return to "l'Ondine," the French word for water nymph.

Section 2

Section 2 Summary and Analysis

Although with only six pages the shortest section in the book, this section helps to clarify Breton's purpose in Mad Love.

Section 2 opens with two questions posted by Breton and Paul Eluard in the surrealist journal The Minotaur. They are, "What do you consider the essential encounter of your life?" and "To what extent did this encounter seem to you, and, does it seem to you now, to be fortuitous or foreordained?"

Breton remarks that while almost half the questionnaires sent out were returned with responses, and while the responses were largely insufficient, there was enough interesting material there that Breton feels as though there is more to say. He contends that while several of the testimonies seem to provide glimpses into understanding what people think about chance that many of the responses seemed to be disturbed by the very thought of chance intervening in logic.

Breton defines chance as "the form making manifest the exterior necessity which traces its path in the human unconscious," which is something he calls a bold interpretation and reconciliation of Freud and Engels. Wanting to discover how one encounter and one memory might stand out as being a "sign of the spontaneous, the indeterminate, the unforeseeable or even the unlikely," Breton notes that a public survey is probably not the best avenue to find an answer to this question (pg. 23.) Instead of turning to the public, Breton announces that one of the purposes of Mad Love will be to explore his own encounter with chance. In this self-reflection, he argues, he can point out the most significant and most trivial details and link them to the importance of desire.

Section 3

Section 3 Summary and Analysis

Section 3 begins by invoking "the new," one of the cornerstones of the avant-garde. Linking "the new" and the act of discovery to chance, Breton argues that surrealism always aspires to this.

Section 3 addresses the importance of the object, including both the art object and the found object. Breton relates a trip with sculptor Alberto Giacometti to a flea market in the spring of 1934. At the time, Giacometti was working on a sculpture of a female figure. Breton notes that he has observed the entire process of the sculpture's creation and observes its incompleteness, particularly in regards to the figure's face, signaled the object's "lack." When Giacometti and Breton go to the flea market together, however, they come across two objects that help Giacometti move his sculpture forward and that help Breton articulate his case in Mad Love for the relation between the object and desire.

The first object they discover is a metal half-mask. A photograph of the mask taken again by Man Ray shows what Breton explains. The mask has a strange series of horizontal strips across the eyes. Breton claims these allow for a perfect visibility but also describes the object as a like a blind face. This juxtaposition between perfect sight and blindness are echoed in Giacometti's initial misgivings about the objects but after he and Breton wander away, he returns to the booth to purchase it. Breton also purchases an object at the flea market, a large wooden spoon with a shoe on its handle.

Breton and Giacometti debate the meaning of these objects. As they discuss the mask, they see it less and less as what they thought was its original purpose as a German sabre mask and more as part of a continuum of important objects of Giacometti, a part of his personal research in order to finalize a sculpture. Breton notes that the discovery of the mask helps Giacometti over come some indecision as to how to proceed with the sculpture's head. The found object acts as a catalyst for Giacometti. But Breton notes that the object he bought has a similar influence as well, and although he hadn't gone to the flea market with the same search that Giacometti did, found that the two of them together worked as a singular influence to direct their path through the market.

For Breton, the shoe on the handle of the wooden spoon invokes the Cinderella tale and a fragmented phrase that he'd thought of some months earlier: a Cinderella ash-tray. Breton initially felt as though the discovery of the spoon meant the discovery of Cinderella's lost slipper, something he attached to a childhood memory. But as he brings the object home, he feels its meaning change and that the object and its meaning change profoundly.

Section 3 contains two postscripts, with one written in 1934 and the other written in 1936. Breton continues to have a dialogue through time with the changing meaning of

these found objects. In the first postscript, he recounts a conversation with Giacometti in which he realizes he has repressed some of the account, including the connection of the spoon with the phallus. Breton continues the sexual imagery by relating an early definition of automatism as "big spoons, enormous bitter-apples, and chandeliers of soap bubbles" (pg. 36.) Breton explains the latent sexual meaning in the spoon and in the Cinderella tale. This is an exploration absent in his initial draft of the essay. He also adds that the meaning of the slipper is that of "lost object" and that to Breton it symbolized an unknown woman and his desire for her. The search for the lost shoe and the search for love coincide. The second postscript also addresses love, but from a Freudian perspective. Breton contrasts the sexual instinct with the death instinct as he describes how, unbeknown to him two people had perused the same objects at the flea market, one of whom was a former lover of Breton's.

Section 4

Section 4 Summary and Analysis

Section 4 relates Breton's first encounter with Jacqueline Lamba, the love about whom much of Mad Love addresses. Despite her centrality, she remains unnamed throughout the book. Having ended the previous section thinking about the death instinct associated with a failed relationship, Breton begins Section 4 by stating his fears of falling into the unknown.

The description of the Lamba is one of the most important passages of the book where "This young woman who just entered appeared to be swathed in mist - clothed in fire? Everything seemed colorless and frozen next to this complexion imagined in perfect concord between rust and green: ancient Egypt, a tiny, unforgettable fern climbing the inside wall of an ancient well, the deepest, most somber, and most extensive of all those that I have ever leaned over, in the ruins of Villeneuve of all those that I have ever leaned over, in the ruins of Villeneuve-les-Avignon, a splendid fourteenth-century French town today abandoned to gypsies" (pg. 41.) The juxtaposition between the mist and the fire, between the frozen colorlessness and the rich fertile greens and reds, between the past and present all are meant to mark the shock and jarring impact upon Breton. As Breton notes, she was "scandalously beautiful" (pg. 41.) He believes she is writing something for him and he follows her. She does in fact produce a letter for him and they have their first rendezvous later that evening.

As Lamba and Breton move through the city, Breton notes that they pass the Tour Saint-Jacques, what Breton sees as a monument to things that are hidden. He cites one of his poems where the tower sways like a sunflower. As Breton and Lamba reach the Quai aux Fleurs, it becomes clear that the figure of "sunflower" is connected to Lamba.

Breton notes that love stirs up "lyrical behavior" and in turn he starts to examine memories, lyrics, and fragments of poetry. This causes him to reexamine an automatic poem he had composed in 1923 called "Sunflower." Dedicated to Pierre Reverdy, Breton is frustrated that he does not have his original manuscript of the poem, as it has gone through multiple changes, which are changes that are dissatisfactory to Breton. "Today I am unhesitatingly convinced of its profound failure" (pg. 57.. Breton argues that all the edits and changes have contributed to this, as the process of revision has altered what was the original inspiration for the poem. Nevertheless, unlike other failed poems that get destroyed, Breton observes that he has retained a copy of "Sunflower" for over a decade and he indicates that having done so has provided him with a depth of experience with which to approach the poem. What was originally written as as imaginary adventure, Breton relates to Lamba, and he provides what amounts to a reading of the poem alongside an interpretation of their relationship and his feelings for her, noting this makes "Sunflower" a prophetic poem of sorts. "I say that there isn't anything in this poem of 1923 that did not announce the most important thing to happen to me in 1934" (pg. 65.) This prophecy is echoed in the structure of Mad Love, for

Breton points out at the end of Section 4, as he sits in a restaurant with his friends Paul Eluard and René Char or the same restaurant from section 1 that the figure who "seems to swim" in the poem who is the naiaid or "l'Ondine" is Lamba herself.

Section 5

Section 5 Summary and Analysis

Section 5 is the longest section in Mad Love, containing a number of different themes and images. They are volcanoes, grasses, succulents, Alice in Wonderland, and Engels' The Origins of the Family, Baudelaire's poem "Voyage." This section exemplifies the surrealist automatic writing, as these connections seem incongruous but reflect the track Breton's mind takes as he writes.

Breton ascends in an elevator up the peak of the volcano at Teide on Tenerife, one of the Spanish Canary Islands, and describes the world he sees from that height including the sand, lava, water, and cacti. Breton compares passing through the rough landscape with passing through rough desire, and he finds the contrast as he moves from the forest of the island to the lava peaks to be a powerful reminder of volcanic and natural forces. As Breton describes the plant life on Tenerife, he repeats this connection to prehistory, noting the "Jurassic fauna" and the "autochthonous species." He is also fascinated by the sempervivum, the succulent evergreens and the datura, the deadly nightshade.

After detailed descriptions of Tenerife, the section suddenly switches to political and psychological analyses. First Breton examines love and monogamy in light of Marxist and Freudian thought, suggesting that both point to monogamy as being foundational for political and cultural progress. Breton draws on some of the arguments on behalf of the family and sexual monogamy in Engels' and Freud's writings, notably the argument in The Origins of the Family that once private property is abolished, "we can reasonably affirm,' declares Engels, 'that far from disappearing, monogamy will be realized for the first time'" (pg. 77.) Breton contends that through monogamy, through sexual love, will contribute "in large measure to the progress of culture" (pg. 77.) Then, it is perhaps Breton's stay in the Spanish Canary Islands that leads to his next thought. He mentions Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel's controversial surrealist film L'Age d'or, a film that Breton claims is the perfect example of this.

Breton describes some of the automatic writing and surrealist games played while in the Canary Islands, observing the repetition of some "childhood mirages," most notably the phrases "tree for bread" and "tree for butter." Breton posits that these repetitions and their emphasis on sustenance are part of the reconciliation between the pleasure principle and the reality principle when he says, "What is required most earnestly to keep up this sort of life loses all its value at the passage of the great dream trees, each of which declines for man an immeasurably quality in the very syllables of its name" (pg. 80-81.) Rediscovering the trees — "the bread tree, the butter tree...the salt tree, the pepper tree" (pg. 81) during the automatic writing and tapping into that pleasure principle, Breton then invokes trees in more sexually graphic detail: where "the long smoked fruits of the prodigious sausage tree are hanging" (pg. 81.)

Breton's descriptions of flora become more sexual and more personal. Describing the connection between lovers as linked and lacy grass and as ship-rigging in turn, Breton emphasizes reciprocity, physical sensation, and desire. According to Breton, "Desire, the only motive of the world, desire, the only rigor humans must be acquainted with, where could I better situated to adore it than on the inside of the cloud?" (pg. 88.)

Breton argues that desire and love should not be seen as something that dissipates over time, and in particular contends that the sexual relations do not negate desire. Challenging Christian notions of sin and "forbidden fruit," Breton praises temptation as divine. Breton links this to "sublime imagination" and contends that the Marquis de Sade's New Justine is the culmination of this. Echoing Breton's location in the volcanic Canary Islands, Sade's novel has Mt. Etna as a background.

Breton ends Section 5 with a passage addressing an unnamed "you." "I want to make only one being your flesh, the very flesh of the medusas, for one single being alone to be the medusa of the sea of desire" (pg. 96.) This passage is both exclamation and exaltation.

Section 6

Section 6 Summary and Analysis

While the previous version ends by extolling love and passion, Section 6 emphasizes discord. Section 6 opens by recounting the myth of Venus and her connection both to the protection of Aeneas (a symbolic founder of civilization) and the Golden Apple and by noting these stories' cruelty. Breton then observes that his birthday occurs at "the conjunction of Venus with Mars" and suggests that discord thus has a major influence on his love life. Breton suggests that his purpose, in part, for writing Mad Love is to address what happens when discord strikes a relationship, even when that discord seems to occur by chance.

Breton describes a trip to the coast of Brittany in July 1936. He uses the pronoun "we" to describe walking on the beach but does not explain specifically who is with him. Although presumably he is with Lamba, Breton does not detail his company most likely because he notes that even though he is not alone, he feels profound frustration and solitude. He wants to wander off and he wants to be alone. Breton associates part of his melancholy with an uninhabited house he sees and when he explains the episode to others, they suggest that that house was likely the house where a murder had occurred. Breton digresses with an analysis of Paul Cézanne's painting The House of the Hanged Man, but returns to the story of the house and the murder that occurred there. The killer claimed in court that he had been driven to exasperation in part due to his wife's long-standing refusal of his sexual advances. Breton admits to feeling very moved by sharing the same location as the murder. Although he wonders if perhaps the connection between all these things such as the coast, the house, the murder, and his desire for solitude do not constitute an "overdetermination" and a deliberate undoing.

Section 7

Section 7 Summary and Analysis

The final section of Mad Love is directed to "Dear Hazel of Squirrelnut," Breton's daughter by Lamba, Aube. Mad Love opens with the English word "boys" and can certainly be interpreted as a very male-oriented analysis of love. However, the book ends with his wishes for a girl. As Breton writes, Aube is still an infant and he addresses her as such, but also as the woman she is to become. "Whether you have just closed a school desk on a world crow-blue in high fantasy, or whether your sunny silouette, except for the bouquet of flowers on your blouse, is cast against the wall of a factory - I am far from sure about your future - let me believe that these words, "mad love," will one day correspond uniquely to your delirium" (pg. 112.)

Breton speaks of the mystery of her birth and returns to his earlier theme of "chance." Breton notes the profound impact this birth had on him, interrupting the poverty that was otherwise his life. Referring to Picasso's Blue Period as another thing that made this poverty somehow tolerable, Breton suggests the poverty is the reverse of the "coin of your existence: the night of the sunflower would have been less radiant without it" (pg. 113.) In other words, Aube's birth is a great part and even the pinnacle of his love with Lamba.

Echoing the metaphors he's used to describe her mother, Breton wishes Aube some day understand for herself what it means to be a flower. Speaking to Aube, Breton writes, "You have come from the slightest shimmer of what was rather late for me the goal of poetry, to which I have been devoted since my youth" (pg. 114.) The search for love, then, is complete by his daughter, and is more powerful than the heartbreak associated with the relationship with her mother. If there is to be a "forever" associated with love, which is something Breton claims that all girls want, that forever is located with Aube. Having a child, for Breton, is the realization of the future and of the idea of something that will continue after his death.

Mad Love ends with a Breton describing a peek-a-boo game with Aube as he reads about the breakout of the Civil War in Spain, a scene that contrasts the destruction and violence of war with the mundane of home and the love of father and daughter. Breton suggests that this sort of moment encapsulates the duality between the conscious and the unconscious as well, between the old order (family, country, and religion) and a new one. Breton suggests the reconciliation between these dualities is connected to the miracle of love. "You have gone from non-being to being by one of these agreements which are the only ones to which I cared to listen. You were thought of as possible, as certain, in the very moment when, in a love deeply sure of itself, a main and a woman wanted you to be" (pg. 119.)

His final sentence speaks a wish for Aube and for all humans is, "I want you to be madly loved." (pg. 119.)

Characters

André Breton

This is a French poet, surrealist theorist, and author of Mad Love. Generally considered to be the founder of Surrealism and its primary theorist. Published thirteen years after the "Surrealist Manifesto," Mad Love is part autobiography, part ars poetica. A first-person narrative, Breton explores both his relationship with artist Jacqueline Lamba, his thoughts and experiences about love and desire, and analyzes some of his own poetry, most notably "Sunflower," which is a poem he rereads in light of new insights that he has due to Lamba.

Jacqueline Lamba

This is French artist and Breton's second wife. She was also the mother of Breton's daughter Aube Breton. Breton's seeing and meeting Lamba for the first time is described in Mad Love, and the book is an exploration of how this relationship shaped Breton's thinking about love and about his poetry. Breton and Lamba separated in 1943, six years after Mad Love was published. Breton does not mention Lamba by name in the book, but refers to "l'Ondine." Breton first mentions "l'Ondine" in Section 1 when describing a pun the staff at a restaurant make: in French, "Ici, l'Ondine" and "Ici, on dine". "l'Ondine," or "l'undine" is the French word for water nymph, and one of Lamba's jobs is as a dancing mermaid in an underwater show. In Section 4, when Breton analyzes his poem "Sunflower" he pauses on the phrase "seems to swim." A photograph of a woman underwater accompanies the text.

Man Ray

American-born avant-garde artist, Man Ray's photography appear in Mad Love and are used to illustrate some of the thoughts Breton attempts to explain. "Myself and her," for example, a photograph containing playing cards and a mannequin's hand helps to illustrate Breton's argument in Section 1 about the occult.

Paul Eluard

This is a French poet and one of the founders of surrealism. Eluard appears in Section 2 as, along with Breton, one of the editors of the literary journal Minotaur. He also appears in Section 4 where he and Breton discuss Breton's new interpretations of the poem "Sunflower."

Alberto Giacometti

A Swiss artist, Giacometti was a well-known sculptor and painter. Giacometti accompanies Breton to a flea market in Section 3. In Section 3, Breton describes a sculpture Giacometti has been working on and Breton notes that the face of the sculpture in particular still needs completion. When the two visit the flea market, Giacometti finds a metal mask that Breton contends acts as an inspirational catalyst to finish the sculpture.

Comte de Lautréamont

This is a nineteenth century French writer. Pseudonym of Isidore Ducasse. His only published works, Les Chants de Maldoror and Poésies, are seen as hugely influential on the avant-garde, notably on surrealism. Breton cites Lautréamont and Maldorer throughout Mad Love. Lautréamont's famous saying "beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella," Breton writes, "constitutes the very manifesto of convulsive poetry" (pg. 9.)

Arthur Rimbaud

This is a nineteenth century French poet. His extended poem Une Saison en Enfer ("A Season in Hell") was very influential on surrealism. Breton mentions Rimbaud, along with Lautréamont, in Section 1, when he lists the ways in which poetry can alter consciousness.

Charles Baudelaire

This is a nineteenth century French poet. His book Les fleurs du mal was very influential on surrealism. One of Baudelaire's poems from Les fleurs du mal, "Voyage," appears in Section 5 of Mad Love. Breton cites the following lines from the poem: "None of the famous landscapes that we saw / equaled the mysterious allure / of those that chance arranges in the clouds / And our desire would let us have no peace!" (pg. 88-89.) Breton argues that the last line in the stanza disrupts the previous three "so oddly, charging them with meaning" (pg. 88.)

Sigmund Freud

The founder of psychoanalysis, Freud's theories of the unconscious mind were profoundly important to Breton and to surrealism. The surrealists devised numerous "games" in order to try to expose their unconscious minds, including notably in Breton's case automatic writing. Freud's influence is seen throughout Mad Love, and Breton discusses Freud in Sections 2, 3 and 5.

Pierre Reverdy

This is a French Surrealist poet. Hailed in the Surrealist Manifesto in 1924 as the greatest poet of all time, the poem "Sunflower" that Breton explores in Section 4 is dedicated to Reverdy.

Friedrich Engels

This is a German theorist who, alongside Karl Marx, was the founder of communism. Engels co-authored The Communist Manifesto with Engels. His influence On Breton's ideas in Mad Love stem primarily from his work The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State, which Breton examines in Section 5. In The Origin of the Family, Engels examines the history of the family through the lens of class relations. arguing this has shaped the rise of the modern family. This pairing is a monogamous one, but one based on property, not love, and one in which women are subjugated.

Luis Buñuel

This is a Spanish filmmaker, who along with Salvador Dali, made the two most important surrealist films. They are L'Age d'or and Un chien Andalou. Breton discusses L'Age d'or in Section 5 and describes it as "the only enterprise of exaltation of total love such as I envisage it" (pg. 78.)

Marquis de Sade

This is a French aristocrat and author from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Marquis de Sade is known for his erotic and blasphemous novels, many of which were written while he was imprisoned. The surrealists often described de Sade as a progenitor. de Sade's influence is seen in multiple places in Mad Love. Breton mentions Marquis de Sade's New Justine in Section 5, and L'Age d'or was based partly on one of his stories called the 120 Days of Sodom.

Aube Breton

This is André Breton and Jacqueline Lamba's daughter. Section 7 of Mad Love is written for and about her. Breton describes what it means to have had an infant daughter and the realizations he has about love by holding her. Breton speaks to her future and wishes that she some day be "madly loved" (pg. 119.) Like her mother Lamba, Aube is not mentioned by name in Mad Love, although the section does begin "Dear Hazel of Squirrelnut."

Objects/Places

Surrealism

Surrealism was an avant-garde movement, born in Europe in the 1920s. André Breton, author of Mad Love, was also the other of the Surrealist Manifesto, issued in 1924. Breton is often credited as the founder of surrealism. Surrealism is based on ideas of "automatism," the way by which the unconscious mind could be exposed and channeled into artistic expression. In addition to drawing on Freudian theories of the unconscious, surrealism drew on Marxist theories of class struggle.

Nadja

Nadja is Breton's major work that predated Mad Love. In Nadja, another semi-autobiographical book, Breton explores a relationship with a woman who later turns out to be mentally unstable.

The Found Object

There are two key found objects in Mad Love. They are the mask and the spoon found by Breton and Giacometti at the flea market in Section 3. Giacometti bought the mask, which is a metal half-mask with strange vertical strips across the eyes. Breton purchases a large wooden spoon with a boot on the handle. Breton links the spoon and its shoe to the Cinderella story. Having had a waking dream some time before about "the Cinderella ash-tray" Breton argues he was unconsciously motivated to the shoe, the proverbial "lost object" of Cinderella found in a spoon/shoe (pg. 33.) For surrealists, found objects are everyday items that can be transformed into art objects or reinterpreted as objects outside their intended utilitarian purpose.

Giacometti's sculpture

Section 3 contains a photograph of one of Giacometti's sculptures Breton describes. Breton notes the sculpture's incomplete face. The mask found at the flea market serves to catalyze Giacometti to complete the sculpture.

L'Age d'or

Luis Buñuel's 1930 surrealist film. Breton discusses L'Age d'or in Section 5 as "the only enterprise of exaltation of total love such as I envisage it" (pg. 78.) The film deals with a young man and woman passionately in love, but whom the Church and their families forbids their marriage. The final scene of the film was incredibly shocking and controversial for its sexual explicitness and critique of the Church.

Venus

Breton mentions Venus, the goddess of love several times in Mad Love. Oftentimes, she is referred to as an astrological influence over Breton's life. She is also mentioned in Section 6 in conjunction with the myth of the golden apple. A reference to the Judgment of Paris, who was given a golden apple and told to reward "to the fairest" and chose choice of Venus set of a chain of events leading to the Trojan War. Notably, the golden apple in this myth was a devise of Eris, the goddess of discord.

The House of the Hanged Man

Paul Cézanne's painting, discussed in Section 6. Breton calls his analysis of the painting "a parenthesis" and that he observes that Cézanne is "not above all a painter of apples" (pg. 104), he invokes the golden apple and discord myth yet again. Breton quickly surveys several of Cézanne's paintings but is most interested in The House of the Hanged Man, painted in 1885, as it invokes the "aura" that Breton experiences on his trip to the coast.

Paris

Sections 1 and 4 relate events that occur in Paris. This is where Breton meets Lamba, and in Section 4, Breton traces their courtship through various locations in the city. They include the restaurant, the Tour Saint-Jacques, the Café of the Birds, and the Quai aux Fleurs. The Tour Saint-Jacques is particularly notable. It appears in photo and the tower is linked to the "sunflower" theme Breton develops.

Canary Islands

Section 5 takes place in the Spanish Canary Islands. Specifically, Breton visits the volcano at the Teide in Tenerife. This provides a setting for much of the automatic writing that occurs in Section 5. The volcanic ash connects to Cinderella, for example.

Lorient

In Section 6, Breton travels to the Lorient, the Brittany coast in Northwestern France. Breton describes as dismal trip, and he feels frustration and solitude, even when he is not alone. When walking along the loch, he sees a house that gives him a feeling of doom and when he returns to his family they inform him it was the location of a murder of a young wife by her husband.

Themes

Sunflower

There are references to flowers throughout Mad Love but the most important flower is the sunflower. First mentioned in Section 4, the sunflower appears as both a plant and as poems. Quoting a snippet from a poem "In Paris the Tour Saint-Jacques swaying / Like a sunflower," the flower is linked to the tour that Breton and Lamba pass by (pg. 47.) The tower is a common phallic symbol but despite the sunflower's height, it does not seem to be coded as a male object in Mad Love. Rather the sunflower is seen as feminine. "Are you, at last, this woman?" Breton writes, "is it only today you were to come? While, as if in dream, with still other flowerbeds before us, you lean long over these flowers enveloped in shadow as if less to breathe in their perfume than to snatch their secret from them" (pg. 51.) Speaking presumably to Lamba, Breton notes this woman, this flower — this sunflower — is "so blond, so attractive in the morning dawn" (pg. 51.) The sunflower is the tallest flower and the blossom itself radiates like a sun. Both of these qualities would echo the centrality of Lamba in Breton's world in Mad Love. A photograph of the tower is followed by a photograph of a sunflower.

If Lamba is the sunflower as Breton suggests, then he must come to terms with an earlier reference to sunflowers in his writing: a poem written over a decade earlier. Originally written as an automatic poem, Breton says he has continually revised and rewritten the poem "Sunflower" and wishes he had not lost or destroyed the original. He claims to feel "some letdown in the actual trouvaille of words" and contends "I am unhesitatingly convinced of its profound failure" (pg. 56-57.) In Section 4, Breton analyzes his poem "Sunflower" in detail, focusing on lines in particular that resonate with his feelings for Lamba. For example, his respond to the line "The traveler walking on tiptoe" is that "It would be impossible not to recognize in her the now very silent passerby of May 29, 1934" (pg. 58) connecting the poem to a different time and place.

When Breton shares some of his thoughts about the "Sunflower" with his friends, they point to the connection between the "Tournesol" or French for sunflower and "Clé de sol" or French for the treble clef, two poems of Breton's that he had dedicated to Reverdy.

Cinderella

References to the Cinderella tale and the magical transformation it implies are repeated in Mad Love. Sometimes, the reference is fully explored, but sometimes it is only mentioned in passing, as in the Section 1 where Breton briefly writes of "the wonderful little diamond slipper" (pg. 6.) Breton first explores the Cinderella tale in some detail in Section 3, where he and Giacometti visit the flea market. Breton procures a large wooden spoon with a little shoe attached to the spoon's handle. As Breton explores the impulse that drew him to the object, he remembers a phrase that had come into his

mind some time before: "the Cinderella ash-tray" (pg. 33) and he ties the ash to glass, to sand, and to laval. But of course the Cinderella story is about sex and gender. Breton links the spoon to domesticity and to Cinderella's role as servant. Furthermore, as a found object in the flea market, the shoe is connected to Cinderella's missing slipper. Breton writes, "I cannot too strongly emphasize the fact that Cinderella's slipper is just what, in our folklore, takes on the meaning of the lost object, so that taking myself back to the moment when I conceived the wish for its artistic realization and its possession, I can easily understand that it symbolized for me a woman unique and unknown magnified and dramatized by my loneliness and by my imperious need to abolish certain memories" (pg. 37.)

Desire

For Breton, desire is one of the most important impulses towards and aspects of love. Breton refers to desire as a "common denominator," the motivating force that drives one to make life meaningful (pg. 24.) Breton quotes Freud saying "Of Eros and the struggle against Eros!" and this conflict around love and desire are echoed throughout Mad Love. Unlike Breton's earlier work Nadja which dealt directly with madness, the "mad" in this book is not the same sort of mental instability. Rather it is this deep consuming desire. Despite the different emotional states Breton explores in Mad Love, he admits "I enjoy passing through this rough form of desire" (pg. 71.)

As a surrealist, this desire can be seen in Freudian terms. Breton does speak of the pleasure principle and the reality principles, and the death and sexual instincts. Breton argues that there is something psychological if not biological driving us to this state. "Desire, the only motive of the world, desire the only rigor humans must be acquainted with, where could I be better situated to adore it than on the inside of the cloud?" (pg. 88.) Despite linking desire to the transitory cloud, Breton argues that desire is not something that necessarily fades once a couple are involved sexually. Despite this claim, the trajectory of Mad Love does suggest conflict in relationships and a frustration that can take ahold.

Style

Perspective

Part-autobiography and part-ars poetic and literary analysis, Mad Love is told from the first person perspective. The book relates the relationship that Andre Breton has with the artist Jacqueline Lamba, his second wife and the mother of his daughter Aube. As the book involves analysis of not just Breton's poetry but his imagination and his dreams and automatic writing, Mad Love gives a very intimate perspective into Breton. The book provides insight into the creative process that goes into his poetry as well as into the artwork of other surrealist artists, most notably the sculptor Giacometti.

The first person perspective of Mad Love coincide with Breton's theories of surrealism as being deeply personal and psychological. But Mad Love's exploration of cultural, artistic, and political theory also speak to surrealism's commitment beyond just the individual to an artistic movement that called for social transformation.

Tone

Mad Love is a difficult book, in no small part because much of it comes in the form of automatic writing. Automatic writing was an important tool of surrealist authors as they believed it could tap into the unconscious mind and reveal new and profound connections. But as Mad Love relies so heavily on these connections — connections of Breton's mind — the book does not have a traditional or logical argument to it. The novel also demands a fairly solid grasp of French literary history and surrealist and political history as Breton makes allusions to other authors' works with little or no explanation.

Depending on how heavily a section relies on automatic writing, the different sections of Mad Love take different tones. Chapter 2, for example, is a short chapter that relates quite simply the results from a survey in the surrealist magazine Minotaur. At the end of end of Section 5, Breton makes a major shift in tone and writes the most emphatically. The last paragraph of that section contains multiple exclamations and exaltations. Although Breton does not say this specifically, this section seems to speak directly to Lamba. The last section is geared to an audience as well as Aube, Breton's infant daughter. He speaks with the greatest clarity, arguably, in this final section of the book.

Following the surrealist style, Mad Love is full of juxtapositions. These serve to jolt and shock the reader.

Structure

Mad Love contains seven sections. Each one has a slightly different style, depending on the topic of the section and the mode by which Breton writes, something that is most

notable when Breton uses automatic writing. Sections 4 and 5 are the lengthiest. Section 4 chronicles how Breton and Lamba met and courted one another and Section 5 is a survey of the landscape of the Spanish Canary Islands done largely via automatic writing.

The book is held together by the repetition of Breton's claims to be uncovering the surrealist meaning of love. There are themes such as flowers, volcanoes, and chance that reoccur, helping to unite the text. The final section is written to Breton and Lamba's infant daughter and this last section helps tie the book together by summarizing all of Breton's hopes regarding the meaning and potential for love.

Mad Love contains a number of photographs. These images tie directly to the themes that Breton attempts to articulate. Surrealism places a great deal of importance on the image and so it is not surprising that these pictures are included.

Quotes

"Boys of harsh discipline, nameless actors, chained and brilliant, from the grand musical that will always occupy the mental theatre, with no hope for change, have always mysteriously evoked for me certain theoretical beings, whom I interpret as key-beaers, possessing clues to situations" (Section 1, pg. 5.)

"[T]he mind chooses to believe that the loved object is a unique being, whereas often social conditions of life can destroy such an illusion" (Section 1, pg. 7.)

"Convulsive beauty will be veiled-erotic, fixed-explosive, magic-circumstantial, or it will not be" (Section 1, pg. 19.)

"Somehow included between the Head reproduced in number 5 of the journal Minotaur, the last work he had finished and whose mold he had promised me, and this face, which had remained in a sketchy state" (pg. 30.) Breton notes that the discovery of the mask helps Giacometti over come some indecision as to how to proceed with the sculpture. He writes, "The finding of an object serves here exactly the same purpose as the dream, in the sense that it fixes the individual from paralyzing affective scruples, comforts him and makes him understand that the obstacle he might have thought unsurmountable is cleared" (Section 3, pg. 32.)

"This young woman who just entered appeared to be swathed in mist—clothed in fire? Everything seemed colorless and frozen next to this complexion imagined in perfect concord between rust and green: ancient Egypt, a tiny, unforgettable fern climbing the inside wall of an ancient well, the deepest, most somber, and most extensive of all those that I have ever leaned over, in the ruins of Villeneuve of all those that I have ever leaned over, in the ruins of Villeneuve-les-Avignon, a splendid fourteenth-century French town today abandoned to gypsies." (Section 4, pg. 41.)

"People dispair of love stupidly - I have despaired of it myself - they live in servitude to this idea that love is always behind them, never before them: bygone years, lies about forgetting after twenty years" (Section 4, pg. 42.)

"What am I capable of after all, and what shall I do so as not to be unworthy of such a fate? I walk ahead automatically, in a great clank of gates being closed. To love, to find once more the lost grace of the first moment when one is in love...All sorts of defenses take shape around me, bright laughter springing up from the years past to finish sobbing, under the great beating of gray wings of an uncertain spring night." (Section 4, pg. 44)

"The possibilities of finding the one being who could help him to play it, to give it its full sense, are lost in the chart of stars. Who is going with me, who is preceding me tonight once again? Tomorrow is still made up of determining factors to be accepted whether one wills or not, without taking any account of these charming curls, or of these no less charming ankles" (Section 4, pg. 45.)

"Man's and woman's sexual organs are attractd to each other like a magnet only through the introduction between them of a web of uncertainties ceaselessly renewed, a real unloosing of hummingbirds which would have gone to hell to have their feathers smoothed" (Section 5, pg. 81.)

"My love for you has only increased since the first day: under the imperial fig tree it trembles and laughs in the sparks of all its daily forges. Because you are unique, you can't help being for me always another, another you. Across the diversity of these inconceivable flowers over there, it is you over there changing whom I love in a red blouse, naked, in a gray blouse" (Section 5, pg. 81.)

"These exaggerations are, and we have to admit it, what most interest the poet" (Section 5, pg. 83.)

"I am this man with the sea urchin lashes who for the first time raises his eyes on the woman who must be everything for him, in a blue street" (Section 5, pg. 89.)

"From the very first day, I admired your hand. It hovered about everything intellectual I had tried to construct, as if to render it inane. What a mad thing this hand is, and how I pity those who have never had the chance to place it, like a star, on the loveliest page of a book. The poverty, suddenly, of any flower" (Section 7, pg. 116-117.)

Topics for Discussion

What is the connection between "madness" and "love," according to Breton?

Throughout Mad Love, Breton compares women with objects such as objects of art and objects of desire. Despite Breton's love for Lamba and for his daughter. Neither are mentioned by name. What do you think about the treatment of women in this book?

Surrealism was inspired by Sigmund Freud. Where do you see this influence in Mad Love?

Surrealism was inspired by Marxism. One of the famous moments in Surrealist history was the expulsions of several non-communists by Breton. There are several points in the book where Breton discusses Marxism. What role do you think Marxism plays in shaping Breton's analysis of love?

Mad Love is interspersed with images of photos and paintings. How do these images add to the argument Breton is making in Mad Love?

The surrealists were known for their automatic writing, which they claimed would help unlock the unconscious. How does Breton use automatic writing in Mad Love? Contrast the sections that are more "automatic" with those where Breton's argument is more "logical."

Breton is very descriptive of key locations in Mad Love such as the cafe, the Canary Islands, and the coast. What is the significance of place in Mad Love?

Like many avant-garde movements, surrealism relies in part in "shocking" the audience. Do you think Breton uses any techniques to shock or unsettle the readers of Mad Love?