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Harold Monro's "Parcel of Love": An Expression of Monro's Homosexuality

Harold Monro was both an excellent writer and a talented entrepreneur. Born March 14th, 1879 to Edward William Monro, and Arabel Sophia, Monro came from a long line of well-established men, many of which were doctors and surgeons. He would not follow the family medical tradition, and instead pursued a career as a writer and editor. He worked for a time as an editor for "The Poetry Review," and would later establish the Poetry Bookshop in Bloomsbury, where he went on to publish his own work and the work of many other up-and-coming authors. Monro's love life was complicated, and though he was rumored as being a homosexual, he would choose to only marry women. His first marriage with Dorothy Elizabeth Brown did not last long, and after the birth of their first-born son, the couple quickly separated. He would then marry Alida Klemantaski, a woman 17 years his junior, though their marriage seems to have been an intellectual rather than a physical one. Knowing this, I argue that Monro's "Parcel of Love," is in fact an expression of Monro's homosexuality, and that it highlights the inner turmoil going on inside him because he was never able to experience love the way he wanted to.

Harold Monro's "Parcel of love," was published in *The Little Review* in November 1919. The story takes the reader into the inner consciousness of a male character, who is married, but is in love with another person. Monro never reveals the character's name, the name of his wife, or the name of the person he is in love with. In fact, Monro reveals very little information about any of the other people in the story, and focuses solely on the inner conflict of the male character.

From the very beginning of the story, the reader can sense that something is not quite right inside the man. He cannot stop thinking about someone, and that someone dominates his mind like a “long hot pain, night and day, asleep or awake; on tired perpetual obsession, and no release.” It is a love he does not want, and a love he seeks to rid himself of throughout the story. When describing his relationship with his wife, the character admits his moments with her as his hardest. He goes through the motions with her, and manages to kiss and even make love to her “all quite naturally.” In the end, he decides that in order to rid himself of this love and free himself, he must parcel it up. Instead of giving the parcel to the person he truly loved, the story takes a drastic turn, and the man dives into a canal while clutching the parcel, and dies. In order to show that Monro is expressing his homosexual feelings in this story, I will be looking at Monro’s most used words for evidence.

“Love” is the most used word in this short story, and if looked at contextually, one can find some very notable things. Monro begins the story by writing, “That love he had not asked for, and did not want, had hurt him by now almost beyond endurance.” What is this love he is referring to? Is it the love with his wife, or could it be his love for another person? I believe that Monro is referring to the latter, because later on in that same paragraph he writes,

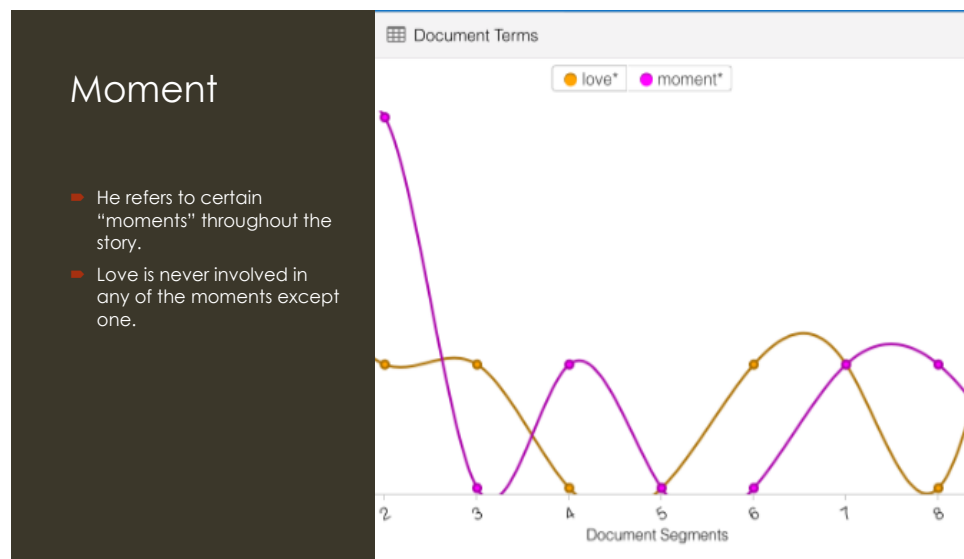
Love regained its complacent habitation of him. He ached as before; his brain glowed, rekindled and burst into flame; his heart resumed the hard-volcanic beat. He was utterly possessed. No movement of limb or thought, no change of surrounding, could free him for more than a moment or, two. Long hot pain, night and day, asleep or awake; one tired perpetual obsession, and no release.

The anguish and inner turmoil expressed by Monro’s character in this first paragraph is palpable and unavoidable. This love that he does not want burns within him like a fire, and possesses

every part of his being. The pain associated with this love leads me to believe that this is a love he cannot act on or pursue, which is probably because it is with someone else other than his wife.

The prohibited nature of this love also suggests to me that his character could be in love with a man. It is important to note that the story never gives any details regarding the sex of the significant other, which means that we cannot rule out the possibility that Monro's character could be a homosexual. This leads me back to the question "what is this love he is referring to?" This kind of love could in fact be a homosexual love, and knowing that Monro was a closeted homosexual, I believe he is expressing the feelings of his heart in these moments. To be more specific, I believe that the inner consciousness of the character is in fact the inner consciousness of Harold Monro. To be homosexual during this period (early 1900's) was still very much socially unacceptable, which could be an explanation why Monro only chose to marry women. However, that love for another man still burned in him, and it also tortured him.

The second most used word in the story is the word "moment," which Monro uses to refer to time and specific memories. What makes this



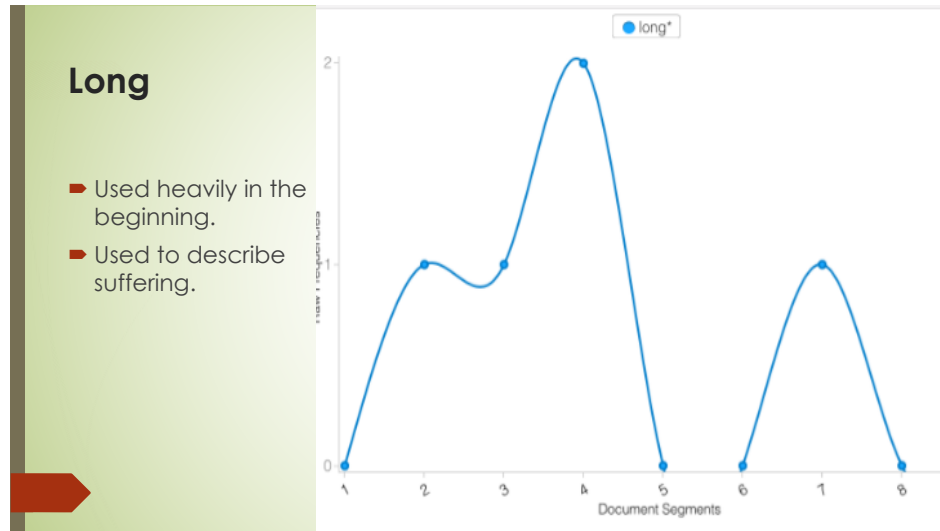
word interesting, is that if you cross reference the word "memory" with the word "love," the words are never used together except once. The one instance where the two words are used together reads,

His hardest **moments** were those of recalling looks and words. He scarcely ever **loved** that occupation now, yet could not stop. Normal life had become entirely automatic for months. He felt there could be nothing outwardly unusual about him: he still performed the customary routine correctly though without conscious attention. He kissed his wife without difficulty, called her "darling" at appropriate moments, signed her cheques, paid a compliment, went to church with her, even made occasional straightforward **love** to her--all quite naturally.

The occupation he is referring to is his marriage with his wife, and if anyone refers to their marriage as an occupation, it is safe to say their marriage is not doing so well. What this shows me is that Monro has never experienced love. He does these chores in his marriage not because he wants to, but because he feels obligated to do them.

This is arguably one of the most important quotes from the entire short story, because it can be seen as Monro's explanation for why he never pursued a relationship with another man. We know that Monro was married twice, and that his first marriage did not go very well, and that after his divorce he immediately pursued another woman who was nearly half his age. But why didn't he pursue a relationship with a man if he was in fact a homosexual? In the aforementioned quote, Monro writes, "He scarcely ever loved that occupation now, yet could not stop. Normal life had become entirely automatic for months." He then writes that by doing his husbandly duties, it made it seem like there was nothing "outwardly unusual about him." I believe that Monro is explaining to his audience, that being with women and marrying women was something he could not stop. He was accustomed to the routine of being married, and more importantly, it made him look normal.

Another word that stands out is the word “long.” It is used heavily in the beginning of the story to describe the suffering Monro’s character is going through. For example, Monro writes, “One or two words of the last meeting, (their tone, their hundred meanings), would ring like



chimes all through the **long** interval of waiting for the next.” In this passage, he is referring to the long waits between interactions with his significant other. His

use of the word “long” in the beginning of the story leads me to believe that his suffering has been going on for a long time now. What is even more interesting is that there is one instance where “long” used differently near the end of the story. Monro writes, “Those quiet other eyes stared into the sockets of his own; the **long** smooth beloved hands folded themselves round his brain.” This further demonstrates how powerful Monro’s, or his character’s, obsession is for this significant other is, and the literal hold he or she has on their brain.

Finally, the end of the story poses the question: is he dying with his love? Monro turns love into an object, something to parcel up. One would think he is going to deliver the parcel, but instead throws himself, along with the parcel, into a lonely cold canal. This ending not only encapsulates the suffering Monro went through in life, but it also predicts his loveless death. Monro undoubtedly feared he would die without experiencing true love, and his marriages surely suggest that he was suffering because of this.

Monro's short story is certainly ambiguous, and his lack of details leave a lot of questions unanswered. However, knowing details about Monro's life and sexuality makes it almost impossible to avoid the connection between he and his character. Monro's "Parcel of Love" served as his canvas for him to express his innermost feelings. Not being able to love the way you want would drive anyone crazy, and his piece spotlights the inner conflict that many homosexuals have experienced over the years.

Works Cited

Monro, Harold Edward. "Parcel of Love." *The Little Review* 6, 7 (1919): 16-8. Edited by Isaac Robertson. Modernist Short Story Project, 23 April 2018, <http://mssp.byu.edu/title/parcel-of-love/>. Accessed April 23, 2018.