

Love in a hopeless place... lemonade?

Travelling in trains is the best way to eavesdrop on people telling each other the most personal things – whether you want to or not. It happens too often to me that I hear two people talking about their loving relationships. Sometimes the stories are lovely, most of the times it involves complaining, but once a month I hear that conversation which makes me want to scream at a woman talking about her love: “Girl, go get yourself another man! (or get a woman)”.

Maybe some people do intervene at that point, feeling that they should tell the woman that she, for example, is in an abusive unhealthy relationship. But besides the question whether others should intervene, there’s a different, underlying, question. Every time I caught myself judging other people’s relationships, I wonder if I have any right to do so. Not just because I’m not aware of their situation, but because I am not sure whether or when love would be objectively good or bad.

If you have not lived in another universe the past six years, you probably know Rihanna’s song ‘We found love’ (featuring Calvin Harris). In the song she sings about how she and her boyfriend have found love in a hopeless place. In interpreting the song you could refer to Rihanna’s former relationship with Chris Brown. After Chris pleaded guilty to felony assault and accepted a plea deal in 2009 after an altercation with Rihanna turned physical, Rihanna resumed dating him in 2013 (before splitting up again several months later). Rihanna’s choice to get back with Chris was, like their relationship, widely condemned as stupid, naïve, and I think the most positive judgments would indeed have been: “Girl, go get yourself another man.”

But as Rihanna had already told us in 2011, she had found love in a hopeless place. Maybe the love alone was enough to make the hopeless place worth it, as Calvin’s happy synths popping your ears might suggest. However, the lyrics analyzing blogs (some gold on there, seriously) tell us something different: “the song is very ambiguous, which suggests even Rihanna is not quite sure whether her love is a good thing or not”. The question remains: can loving an abusive person still be a good thing? Or is it always a bad thing?

Let’s fast forward to 2016. Jay-Z has been cheating on Beyoncé and the whole world knows about it. Queen Bey releases her album Lemonade which is hailed by critics as ‘Beyoncé’s strongest album’ and as pushing ‘pop music into smarter, deeper places’. The album is about her husband’s infidelity, following Beyoncé’s stages of emotion. In Hold Up and Don’t Hurt Yourself, she’s angry and throws her wedding ring at the camera while snarling a final warning. But Lemonade is not a critically acclaimed divorce announcement. The album is about forgiveness, featuring loving videos with Jay-Z and their daughter. She turned the lemons into lemonade. And then we, the people, respected Beyoncé as a strong, independent, loving, fierce woman.

There’s much to say about how the album is about race and specifically the experience of black women. There’s also much to say about Beyoncé’s marketing strategy: the album was exclusively released on Tidal – the streaming platform created and mostly owned by husband Jay-Z. But let’s stick to simple gossip and judgy people right now.

Both Chris Brown and Jay-Z did something immoral and disrespectful to their partners in their loving relationships. Rihanna is trying to make the best out of it, falling back on the pure love they have for each other, even in a hopeless place. Beyoncé gets real angry, destroying cars with a baseball bat, after which she also recalls the best moments in their relationship and works on forgiving her cheating husband. In both cases the women decide to get back with their disrespectful partners, but the watching world judges them in an entirely different way.

The forgiveness in Rihanna's case is judged as naive and a form of bad love, in Beyoncé's case forgiveness is judged as being strong and a form of good love. Is it because Beyoncé explicitly portrays herself as a feminist? Or does it matter what the immoral act of the boyfriend in question was? I have no answer yet. Again I am left with the question whether or when love would be objectively good or bad.

To me it seems that loving a person is always a good thing. Isn't love the acceptance of a person as they are, and seeing the best in people? How can that be a bad thing? Maybe, then, the answer lies in making a distinction between love as valuing the person and love as committing to that person in a relationship. Rihanna is seeing the good in Chris, for his sake, which is a good thing, but more troubling when you think that the probable costs (her being beaten up again) are too demanding to get into the loving relationship again (a lot of assumptions going on here). Beyoncé is trying to see the good in Jay-Z for her own sake, portraying her own emotions and how forgiveness makes her stronger. Maybe 'the people' accept her getting back into the relationship because they think the probability of her getting hurt again is lower because she came out stronger at the end. The lemons *dissolved* into lemonade, while Rihanna, though loving him good, was still in a hopeless relationship.

If you have any thoughts about whether love can be a good or a bad thing or why Rihanna's and Beyoncé's case are judged differently, please join me in this tabloid philosophy in the comments.

I want to thank all participants of the summer school 'The right to be loved' for discussing the philosophy of love during the last ten days. I especially owe thanks to Michaël van Remoortere and Pilar Lopez-Cantero for taking philosophy to a next level combining it with pop culture gossip, and opening my eyes to the goodness of Rihanna. As part of the organizing committee I must say, I am very proud. (I suppose that a blog from your side on Taylor Swift's narrative is now just waiting to be written).

This blog was previously published on lottespreeeuwenberg.wordpress.com