

Pain and Love Are Inseparable

“You’ve never felt pain until you’ve felt love.” This is the sad truth for many who have been abused as children, in abusive relationships, or even in a nasty breakup. Jericho Brown is no stranger to any of these experiences. His book of poems, called *The Tradition*, is a statement on African American history, injustice, and police brutality, but it also touches on the immense amount of personal violence he has experienced. He speaks of rape, domestic violence, and the HIV epidemic among the gay community, all instances associated with some form of love. In *The Tradition*, Jericho Brown establishes the relationship between pain and love as a major theme using juxtaposition alongside repetition, simile, and metaphor.

The second poem of the collection, “As a Human Being,” displays Brown’s use of juxtaposition as he explores the relationship between pain and love in a family setting. At the beginning of the poem, Brown tells the audience whose experiences he will be juxtaposing by physically placing himself and his mother “on opposite ends of the sofa.” This physical separation early on shows that although they are in the same situation, Brown and his mother will have different outcomes. Brown goes on to use a simile to describe the relationship that his mother has with his father. She loves him only because she has to love and care for him “as a bride tends to her vows.” This simile shows that she will never be free of her duty to his father. While his mother will never escape, Brown’s actions of fighting back against his father have now set him “free.” He begins to describe how this happened when he repeats the line “no matter how sore the injury” twice in a row to move from his mother’s pain to his pain. Brown’s love for his mother led him to fight back, but instead of saving his mother, he is “free now that nobody’s got to love [him].” This implies that Brown’s mother had to choose, and like a loyal bride she chose his father over him. Brown’s father hurt his mother. Brown loved his mother, so

he hurt his father. His mother chose her love for his father over her love for Brown, though, and set him free from her love, hurting him in the process. Brown's use of juxtaposition between his mother and himself in this poem shows the complexity of love and pain in his family.

Brown goes on to explore the proximity between pain and love in his family's dynamic in the first of five poems titled "Duplex." In this poem, he uses the juxtaposition of two similes to compare and contrast the effect that both his mother and his father had on him as a child. When speaking of his father he states, "...my tall father/Hit hard as a hailstorm. He'd leave marks." Then, he refers to his mother with the following lines: "Light rain hits easy but leaves its own mark / Like the sound of a mother weeping again." The juxtaposition of these two similes draws a clear comparison to the fact that both his parents hurt him, but they hurt him in different ways. The comparison to a hailstorm indicates that the pain his father inflicted on him was in the form of physical abuse. His comparison of his mother to light rain, on the other hand, shows that her pain didn't leave scars on the outside but instead on the inside. It caused him emotional pain to see and hear her in pain. The two original sources of love in Brown's life both caused him immense pain, just in two different ways. Brown skillfully compares and contrasts his relationship with his mother and father with the use of this simile.

In the third "Duplex" poem, Brown moves from the pain and love in his family's dynamic to that which he has felt in his adult relationships by using juxtaposition with repetition and metaphor. Throughout the poem, Brown refers to the HIV epidemic in the gay community, but he is also speaking to his loneliness and failed relationships. This is shown in the lines:

Here is one symptom of my sickness:
Men who love me are men who miss me.

Men who leave me are men who miss me
In the dream where I am an island.

Here he uses juxtaposition to compare the real disease HIV to his figurative disease of being left by those he loves. This excerpt from the poem shows how Brown uses repetition to illustrate the proximity of love and pain in his past relationships. He is relating the fact that every man he loves seems to leave him. The last line in the quote is a metaphor that sums up his feeling of being abandoned. He compares himself to an island, alone and floating at sea. Brown uses juxtaposition to portray love as a messenger or a prelude of pain by making the statement that making love leads to diseases and falling in love leads to being left alone.

In these poems, Brown uses juxtaposition along with other literary devices to establish a theme of love and pain. He masterfully weaves these complex narratives that describe love and pain not just as close in relationship but sadly complementary to each other. His juxtaposition of his mother and himself in a situation of abuse, the harm his father and mother inflicted on him, and the disease and loneliness that resulted in his loving another demonstrate how diverse the effects of love can be and how often they leave a person scarred for life in more ways than one.