

The painting 'The Kiss' by Gustav Klimt depicts a man and a woman in a romantic embrace. The man, on the left, has dark hair and is wearing a simple, light-colored tunic. The woman, on the right, has her eyes closed and is wearing a highly ornate, multi-colored dress with intricate patterns. They are surrounded by a dense, golden background filled with various geometric shapes, circles, and floral motifs. The overall style is characteristic of the Vienna Secession movement.

Romantic Love and Marriage

Gustav Klimt, "The Kiss"

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose Worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom:
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.*

William Shakespeare

Above you find one of William Shakespeare's most famous sonnets. You may have heard it before; it is one of the most commonly seen poems in weddings and has been spoken by countless amorous youths. If you find yourself baffled as to what it means, however, you're not alone. Students seem to misunderstand Shakespeare more than any other writer. In this particular piece Shakespeare is attempting to define what may very well be indefinable: Love. It is a grand task. What does he have to say about it? According to him it does not "admit impediments," it is perfect and unchanging. It does not "bend" or "alter." Time does not affect it, and it will outlast everything, even death. It is an "ever-fixed mark." When it touches a person, it never leaves and strengthens (or haunts) him to the day he dies. He is so certain of this definition that he is comfortable staking his entire career on it.

But is this really what love is? Is it such a rigid ideal? Perhaps one of the most enigmatic parts of life, love seems to defy definition. Dictionaries take up full pages trying to hash out what it means. Philosophers have spent their entire careers, sometimes even lives in the attempt. There seems to be no single explanation for romantic love. Is what an elderly man feels for his wife at the end of his life different from what the young man feels for a woman he is about to propose to? Do the first few powerful relationships a teenager experience really contain love? Is there a difference between requited love and the love that remains even when its object doesn't return the affection?

Is love a biological process? Is it something that can be experimented with in a lab? The thinking may seem cold, but science is continually ascribing the different facets of love to hormonal shifts, brain patterns, or whatever physical entity they can. Some say we can't control who we're attracted to, the cocktail of hormones surging through our bodies dictates who we fall in love with. Perhaps our propensity for love is genetic. Some people fit easily into a monogamous role while others struggle to keep their eyes from wandering. Could this be something in our very DNA? Humans are one of the few animals who practice monogamy, what genes might we share with other animals who choose one partner for life?

As with any part of life that we all share, love is an interesting sociological phenomenon. While many claim vehemently that love transcends things like money and society, sociologists claim that, like everything else, love is affected by societal influences. The likelihood of you marrying someone far beneath your station is small, they say. You are choosing your mate from a small pool of people close to you in society.

Psychology also tries to explain love, but with a more personal approach. The way you think will determine who you love.

Love is also one of our favorite things to watch on television and in the movies. This is not new, it seems, classic art has been focusing on the topic since people began putting paint to cave walls or canvasses. One of the most common literary themes is love (if not the most common), the sheer volume of poems about love is so great that you could probably find it addressed in every single poet's repertoire. We like to sing about love, think about love, write about it and learn about it.

History is littered with stories of wars waged and countries forever changed simply for the love or possession of a woman. The catalyst in the birth of the Protestant religion was Henry VIII's split with Rome, widely believed to be over his desire to divorce his current wife and marry Anne Boleyn. Love has been the driving force in some of history's greatest accomplishments. Who knows where we might be today without the powerful sex drive of some of history's great men. It seems that ever since the brains of our early ancestors evolved to process complex thought, love has been foremost on our minds.

This chapter contains an attempt, though feeble; to further explore the complexities of love, affection, and its fulfillment in law and society: marriage. The subject permeates every discipline, and so we will address its affects in each one. Whether it is the chemistry of attraction in science, love's portrayal in great art and classic films, its place in the poetry of the greats, or its affect on history, love seems to be an ever present force.

Helen Fisher is a behavioral anthropologist and is the leading researcher on topics of romantic love. She's written several books on the chemistry of attraction including *The First Sex*, *Anatomy of Love*, and *The Sex Contract*. The following text is an excerpt from her book *Why We Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love*. The content of this particular excerpt deals primarily with why we- humans both male and female - are attracted to certain members of the opposite sex and not others. The examples listed in the text (e.g. the natural propensity of humans to gravitate towards genetically similar individuals, and the importance of physical symmetry) are just a few of the many interesting facts about human attraction discussed in Fisher's book.

Do Opposites Attract?

Nevertheless, "that first fine careless rapture," as Robert Browning called romantic love, is generally directed toward someone much like one's self. Most people around the world do feel that amorous chemistry for unfamiliar individuals of the *same* ethnic, social, religious, educational, and economic background, who have a similar amount of physical attractiveness, a comparable intelligence, and similar attitudes, expectations, values, interests, and social and communications skills.

In fact, in a new study of mate selection in America, evolutionary biologists Pete Buston and Stephen Emlen report that young men and women think of themselves as particular types of marriage partners and choose people with the same traits, ranging from financial and physical assets to intricacies of personality. If a woman is blessed with a trust

fund, for example, she seeks another from the upper class. Handsome men seek beautiful women. And those devoted to family and sexual fidelity select someone with these attributes. The mirror speaks. Men and women also gravitate to lovers who share their sense of humor, to those with similar social and political values, and to individuals with much the same beliefs about life in general.

Remarkably, scientists have established that many of these traits, including your occupational interests, what you do in your leisure hours, many of your social attitudes, even the strength of your faith in God, are influenced by your genes. So genetic types gravitate toward one another; we tend to be attracted to people like ourselves.

Anthropologists call this human propensity to be drawn to someone like yourself "positive assertive mating" or "fitness matching." The specific kind of person you actually choose, however, has been changing somewhat. The world is seeing more interracial marriages, for example. In the United States these weddings have increased some 800 percent since 1960. But even in this time of the global village, that fire in the mind is still most likely to ignite when you meet an unfamiliar man or woman who is quite similar to you ethnically, socially, and intellectually.

Like our attraction to unfamiliar people, this preference for partners like oneself is probably evolutionary baggage. Why? Because a fetus and its mother are foreigners to each other. If they share a similar chemical makeup, the mother will have an easier time carrying the infant in her womb. In fact, mates who are genetically similar experience fewer natural abortions and bear more and healthier babies.

It is not advantageous to be too alike, however. And humans seem to have evolved at least one mental mechanism to assure that we choose a partner who is slightly different—chemically at least. This discovery stems from what has become known as the “sweaty T-shirt” experiment. When women were asked to smell men’s sweaty T-shirts and report on which they thought were the most “sexy smelling,” they chose T-shirts of men with immune systems that were unlike but compatible with their own. Unconsciously these women were attracted to individuals who could potentially help them produce genetically more varied young.

So opposites attract—within the limits of one’s ethnic, social, and intellectual sphere.

Symmetry: The “Golden Mean”

Another biological taste we have inherited from the animal kingdom is our tendency to choose well-proportioned mates. Bodily symmetry can help to trigger romantic love, as the ancient Greeks theorized. Almost twenty-five hundred years ago Aristotle maintained that there were some universal standards of physical beauty. One, he believed, was balanced bodily proportions, including symmetry. This accorded with his high respect for what he called the golden mean, or moderation between extremes.

Modern science supports Aristotle’s notion. Symmetry is beautiful—to insects, birds, mammals, all of the primates, and people around the world. Female scorpion flies seek mates with uniform wings. Barn swallows like partners with well-proportioned tails. Monkeys are partial to consorts with symmetrical teeth. If you walk into a village in New

Hechler

Guinea and point to the most beautiful man or woman sitting around the campfire, the natives will agree with you. And when researchers used computers to blend many faces into a composite "average" face, both men and women liked the averaged face better than any of the individual ones. It was more balanced. Even two-month-old infants gaze longer at more symmetrical faces.

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," Keats wrote in his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. Keats's words have puzzled many. But as it turns out, the beauty of symmetry does tell a basic truth. Creatures with balanced, well-proportioned ears, eyes, teeth, and jaws, with symmetrical elbows, knees, and breasts, have been able to repel bacteria, viruses, and other minute predators that can cause bodily irregularities. By displaying symmetry, animals advertise their superior genetic ability to combat diseases.

So our human attraction to symmetrical suitors is a primitive animal mechanism designed to guide us to select genetically sturdy mating partners.

And nature has taken no chances; the brain naturally responds to a beautiful face. When scientists recorded the brain activity of heterosexual men ages twenty-one to thirty-five as they looked at women with beautiful faces, the ventral tegmental area (VTA) "lit up." A similar response occurred in our scanning study: those subjects who gazed at photos of better-looking partners showed more activity in the VTA. And the VTA is rich with dopamine—the neurotransmitter that provides the energy, elation, focused attention, and motivation to win a reward.

Not surprisingly, symmetrical men and women often have many suitors to choose from. As a result, exquisitely good-looking women tend to marry higher status men, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis being a crowning example of this matching process.

Highly symmetrical men also get reproductive perks. They begin to have sex some four years earlier than their lopsided peers; they have more sex partners and more adulterous affairs as well. Women also achieve more orgasms with symmetrical men, even when this relationship is not emotionally satisfying to them. And when a woman has an orgasm with a well-proportioned man, her orgasmic contractions suck up more of his sperm.

I suspect these sexual responses occur because as the woman looks at her symmetrical lover, the ventral tegmental area in her brain produces dopamine—which (in a series of interactions) triggers testosterone and enhances the sexual response.

Because symmetry enhances one's choices in the mating game, women go to extraordinary lengths to achieve it or at least a semblance of it. With powders they make the two sides of the face more similar. With mascara and eyeliner, they make their eyes appear more alike. With lipstick they enhance one lip to match the other. And with plastic surgery, exercise, belts, bras, and tight jeans and shirts, they mold their forms to create the symmetrical proportions men prefer.

Nature helps. Scientists have found that women's hands and ears are more symmetrical during monthly ovulation—a time when it is reproductively important to attract a man. Women's breasts become more symmetrical during ovulation too. Moreover,