

Corso, Conformity, and Christmas Teeth

Alongside Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, and Joseph McCarthy, 1950s America presented a new type of American-- the type of American who wouldn't eat his vegetables, refused to come home before dark, and adamantly protested a nine PM bedtime. It was a new era, from which emerged a generation of youth who actively eluded normality. This generation is commonly referred to as the "Beat Generation," and no one better captured the thoughts and conventions (or lack thereof) of these "Beatsters" (Charters xxi) than the poets of the era, such as Jack Kerouac, Amiri Baraka, and Gregory Corso. With a deliberate approach toward poetry, these men, scholars, and hipsters were able to convey the very unconventionality that governed their everyday lives. In his poem entitled "Marriage," Gregory Corso impeccably epitomizes the rebellious, hipster attitude of the beat generation by rejecting marriage as a traditional institution.

To fully appreciate Corso's "Marriage," one must first become familiar with the historical background and the impetus for this counterculture. In *The Portable Beat Reader*, editor John Holmes explains that the Beat Generation was a direct result of recent American involvement in World War II and the Cold War and an active rejection of those wars. The passage goes on to say that, "instead of obeying authority and conforming to traditional middleclass materialistic aspirations, these young people dealt as best they could with what Holmes called their 'will to believe, even in the face of an inability to do so in conventional terms'" (qtd. in Charters xx).

This youthful rejection of conventionality manifests in "Marriage." With just a cursory glance, "Marriage" appears to be 112 senseless lines that Corso scribbled down while frantically debating the option of marriage, asking the reader "Should I get married? Should I be good?" (Corso 1.1) Yet a more circumspect and considerate analysis of this poem suggests the presence of a more profound meaning. Gregory Stephenson reviews "Marriage" in his book *Exiled Angel*,

explaining that Corso “satirizes the rituals and conventions of courtship, sexuality and marriage, contrasting the individualistic, imaginative, poetic spirit of the poem's narrator with the norms and expectations of society” (Quoted in “On ‘Marriage’”). While “Marriage” is in some sense free-form rambling, it is not mindless in that it portrays a common desire of the era: a longing for identity and individuality. Corso suggests that one loses himself in marriage:

Then all that absurd rice and clanky cans and shoes

Niagara Falls! Hordes of us! Husbands! Wives! Flowers! Chocolates!

All streaming into cozy hotels

All going to do the same thing tonight (5.1-4)

Corso describes this typical newlywed tradition with horror, exemplifying his fear of being a mindless member of mainstream society.

Corso uses language to powerfully demonstrate his internal conflict, seeking to express individuality but concomitantly fearing growing old alone. He juxtaposes these two desires by creating a normal, traditional situation, and then inserting elements of his own absurdity:

But I should get married I should be good

How nice it'd be to come home to her

and sit by the fireplace and she in the kitchen

aproned young and lovely wanting my baby

and so happy about me she burns the roast beef

and comes crying to me and I get up from my big papa chair

saying Christmas teeth! Radiant brains! Apple deaf! (6.1-7)

By doing this, Corso demonstrates that marriage and individuality are mutually exclusive. One cannot reasonably have them both. Thus, Corso predicts the inevitable fate of the beatsters: either

the “doom of conformity” as Richard Howard would say (Quoted in “On ‘Marriage’”), or the doom of eternal solitude.

The mere absurdity of the words Corso employs is evident enough of his message of non-conformity. In his discussion of dating, he strays from the standard dinner-and-movie tradition, suggesting, “Don’t take her to movies but to cemeteries/tell all about werewolf bathtubs and forked clarinets” (1.3-4). Corso certainly had no interest in “all the preliminaries” (1.5), presenting them as ridiculous modern rituals. Corso’s friend, Nora Sayre, suggests that his preaching of non-conformity was well-received by fellow Beatsters, but not so much by many scholars of the time. In “The Poet’s Theatre: A Memoir of the Fifties,” Sayre says “certainly, when Ginsberg subsequently lauded Corso as ‘a great word-slinger . . . a scientific master of mad mouthfuls of language,’ he was celebrating a form of poetry that was anathema to much of Harvard” (103).

Tantamount to Corso’s diction is the poetic structure he utilizes in “Marriage.” There is nothing orthodox about this poem. The first stanza has a loose, inconsistent rhyme scheme that is non-existent in the rest of the piece. Capitalization is sporadic. There is no definite rhythm, nor is there a consistent number of lines in each stanza. Yet, “Marriage” maintains a mysterious, inexplicable rhythm that allows it to be read smoothly and coherently as poetry. In an interview, Gregory Corso once explained, “‘I will just let the lines go with the rhythm I have within me, my own sound, that would work, and it worked.’ In ‘Marriage’ there was hardly any change--there are long lines, but they just flow, like a musical thing within me” (Quoted in “On ‘Marriage’”).

Corso concludes “Marriage” by professing what he believes to be most essential to the question of marriage: love. He says “O but what about love? I forget love/not that I am incapable of love/it’s just that I see love as odd as wearing shoes” (9.1-3). He suggests that marriage has

simply become a tradition, a mandatory step in life as opposed to a manifestation and public expression of love between two people.

Corso would probably prefer the “I Love Lucy” type of marriage- the kind that is completely contrary to societal beliefs (in that it was interracial), always entertaining, and founded purely on love (Halberstam 196). At the end of the poem, he professes a submission to attentively await this strange, unique love, which he summarizes “Like SHE in her lonely alien gaud waiting her Egyptian lover/so I wait-bereft of 2,000 years and the bath of life” (10.3-4). As a Beat writer, Corso actively struggled with conventionality in his poetry and in his life; as a vital voice of the 1950s generation of hipsters, he certainly succeeded in that struggle.

Works Cited

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