Farewell, Love – and Good Riddance!

Sir Thomas Wyatt, in this modern day and age, embodies the persona of a gloomy teenager clustered in the corner of an ill lit coffee shop furiously penning gloomy lyrics about love and all other manner of heartbreaks. Wyatt suffers – quite extensively – from a case of unrequited love. The object of his affections – possibly Anne Boleyn, though no hard evidence of that possibility exists – simultaneously appears to repel and fascinate him. Repulsion takes center stage in his thirty-first sonnet, titled “Farewell, Love.” At this point, Wyatt has become so disenchanted with love that he wishes to discard it altogether. Instead of fighting for love, Wyatt fights for his freedom. After all, love causes little else but emotional and physical agony, to the point that Wyatt feels trapped by it. He laments that love weakens the mind and claims that only the most foolhardy should even desire to pursue it. Wyatt also compares love to a prison of the senses and believes that ultimately nothing positive can come from it. Allowing himself any further dealings with love could lead to his social ruin, and such a loss would cripple Wyatt. With “Farewell, Love,” Wyatt suggests that only self-destructive fools actively pursue love.

Media as a whole has long since lauded love and the pursuit of love as righteous and desirous. Men and women alike fight for love. They openly yearn for it. Poems, stories, and songs praise love for its selflessness and lament at its absence. Wyatt, however, cannot stand to remain chained by it. He desires, above all else, freedom from his wretched love: “And ‘scape forth, since liberty is lever” (8). “Lever” here means “dearer,” a term usually applied to the object of his desires and not for his freedom from that object. Wyatt desires that liberation,
however. Perhaps Wyatt once fought for love. Perhaps in his youth, Wyatt had once optimistically wished for love. However, as he transitions from that optimistic youth to maturity and old age, Wyatt realizes that the value he used to place in love cannot compare to the value of his freedom.

Wyatt claims that love not only causes emotional anguish but physical pain as well. “Thy baited hooks shall tangle me no more” (2), he declares, as well as lamenting that, “Thy sharp repulse, that pricketh ay so sore / Hath taught me to set in trifles no store” (6-7). Wyatt uses visual imagery here – the baited hooks, as well as relating the act of rejection to a painful “prick” – to present love as a force that causes agony. His use of a word like “tangle” to describe love’s hold on him makes one think of a trap and exudes a sense of confinement. Wyatt compares the pain of rejection to a sore. He has prodded and poked at that rejection, never allowing himself to move on and heal from it, and so he continuously suffers.

The pain that love causes, Wyatt goes on to say, does not just suddenly manifest. It circulates gradually, like a poison: “With idle youth go use thy property / And theron spend thy many brittle darts” (11-12). The object of Wyatt’s affection seems to attack him with his own spurned affections, her “many brittle darts” like poisonous projectiles. Poison works at the body slowly and causes a great deal of agony, and so once again, Wyatt reiterates that love equals not just pain in its simplest form but a slow, gradual toxin that drags on. Love snares Wyatt and cages him within a mess of true emotional anguish, so much so that it causes him a great deal of physical pain. The longer Wyatt pursues that love, the longer he must suffer. With that in mind, Wyatt appears to have written “Farewell, Love,” as a method of seeking closure and ultimately seems to achieve his desire to finally rid himself of love and all the pain associated with it.

Love not only causes pain, Wyatt stresses, but it also dulls the wit. Wyatt stresses that “Senec and Plato call me from thy lore / To perfect wealth my wit for to endeavor” (3-4). To
“perfect,” in this instance, means to strengthen or fortify. Wyatt explains here that love cannot have more value associated to it than the strength of the mind. Wisdom and the act of gaining knowledge do not – and ultimately, cannot – go hand in hand with the pursuit of love because love makes a mockery of the wise man. Love does not equate to maturity, and so Wyatt demands his desired paramour to “…go trouble younger hearts” (9). Younger hearts can do battle with love, and younger hearts can bear the scars of that battle. Wyatt has grown above the wiles of his younger heart, and not because he avoided love from the beginning. Wyatt has love tangle its hooks into him just as any other foolish youth would. He experiences the pain of rejection and also experiences firsthand the way love turns men into fools. Wyatt knows to desire that which he cannot have for long enough, or to desire that which clearly does not desire him will ultimately ruin him. Wyatt learns this lesson, and has enough presence of mind to renounce love altogether before it does ruin him. “I am no longer your prisoner,” he seems to say to his love. “I am free of you.” The maturation of his mind – the wisdom and knowledge he discarded love for – allows him to accomplish that break.

Wyatt personifies the very force of love as a prison and warns that the act of pursuing love will reap no rewards. After he has denounces love and commands it to trouble young, foolish hearts instead of his own, Wyatt continues with: “For hitherto, though I have lost all my time / Me lusteth no longer rotten boughs to climb” (13-14). “Time” here could refer to Wyatt’s youth. He wasted his youth – his “younger heart” – chasing after a love that would never reciprocate and has no more time to waste because he has reached a level of maturity not available to him when love had held him caged. This reiterates his claim that youth foolishly pursues love, and only the wise and mature know when to give up on it. Wyatt concludes that he no longer desires to climb the “rotten boughs” of love, equating love here to a tree with rotten branches. By pursuing love, Wyatt has spent his youth “climbing rotten branches” – chasing after
someone that does not love him – and that has ultimately gotten him nowhere. Multiple branches – multiple rotten branches – could represent the continuous paths Wyatt may have taken in the pursuit of his lady love. Each attempt has proven unsuccessful because Wyatt trod on already rotten branches, meaning that his attempts were pointless in the first place. With wisdom and maturity, Wyatt finally grows to realize this. He understands that he has gained no reward from his long and arduous pursuit of love because no reward exists.

The loss of identity can scar a person to his core. Wyatt fears that love will cause him to lose sight of who he is. “...Go trouble younger hearts,” he commands his desired paramour, “And in me claim no more authority” (9-10). His identity – as a person and as a man – holds a great deal of importance to him, as it would to any man of that time period. Love has taken his authority – taken his very self – away from him. Love has put Wyatt at the mercy of someone who does not even return his affections. Love has stripped him of his dignity and even his security, for love makes him foolish and unwise. A man puts a great deal of value in his reputation and his control. Wyatt’s reputation would contribute greatly to his position in society and the way that society views him. It would rock the foundations of Wyatt’s world for a woman to tear him down to such an extent that he fears the loss of his identity. Should his pursuit of the woman continue and word spread throughout society of the wreck she had made of Wyatt, his reputation would suffer a great blow. He rejects love because otherwise his position in society – the very manner in which he lived and worked – could deteriorate.

Suspicion abounds that Wyatt desires the King’s wife, Anne Boleyn. The fact that the object of his affections already has a husband does not help matters in the least. The fact that her husband holds the mantle of kingship threatens not only Wyatt’s reputation but his life as well. To desire the Queen begets only heartache and – in most cases – death. Perhaps the thrill of the forbidden fuels Wyatt’s advances as much as his supposed love for Anne. Wyatt’s “younger
heart” thrives for foolhardy adventures and lustful dalliances with the beautiful Queen. His older, wiser heart, however, recognizes that the resulting scandal would surely not end well for all involved. Wyatt does not reject love simply because it constrains him emotionally and wreaks havoc on his mind. He rejects love because otherwise he forfeits his own life.

In conclusion, “Farewell, Love” illustrates Wyatt’s gradual disenchantment and ultimate denouncement of love. He wishes to no longer fight for his love but for his liberty. Wyatt strives to cast love away because his experiences with it have only ever ended in pain and suffering. No longer trapped within its clutches, Wyatt sees that his youth and immaturity led him astray and that he should turn his thoughts and ambitions to the pursuit of knowledge. He leaves love to the foolhardy youth, where it belongs. Love, after all, bears no fruit and reaps no rewards. Instead, love leaves behind only bitter disappointments and dead ends. It threatens the very pillar of one’s social standing, should he allow it to continue. “Farewell, Love,” Wyatt’s ode to that so fearsome adversary called love, acts like a buffer between his ignorant youth and his wise old age. “Love has rejected me,” he scoffs, “and so now I shall reject it back.”