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Babette's Feast: The Persistence of Love

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"After one's first viewing of Babette's Feast, a film by Gabriel Axel, one may easily think that the main point of the film revolves around interpretation of religion and food. Although these certainly are two major aspects, I personally found that in many ways, love and the way it persists through time is a major feature of the movie as well. Thanks to Axel, the movie can be viewed through the lens of love, and as the plot unfolds, it becomes more obvious that the persistence of love is a point Axel wanted to send to his audience."



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Introduction

After one's first viewing of *Babette's Feast*, a film by Gabriel Axel, one may easily think that the main point of the film revolves around interpretation of religion and food. Although these certainly are two major aspects, I personally found that in many ways, love and the way it persists through time is a major feature of the movie as well. Thanks to Axel, the movie can be viewed through the lens of love, and as the plot unfolds, it becomes more obvious that the persistence of love is a point Axel wanted to send to his audience.

The First Encounter

It is my belief that Axel created the scene in which Lorens and Martine first met with the intention of revealing the face of "love at first sight." As Lorens arrives in the village, Martine looks up at him as he looks down on her from his horse. The camera pauses on his seemingly distraught face for several seconds. Perhaps Axel intends to reveal the worrisome thoughts going through Lorens' mind. I got the sense that he

immediately fears that if he falls for her, he would eventually have to leave and would never see her again. I think that Axel makes it clear that Lorens is very intrigued by Martine in this scene. Even the music, cautious and steady, gives one the feeling that Lorens is deep in thought yet cautious of what his actions should be.

This scene ends as Lorens watches Martine walk back home, and the narrator says, "And at that very moment he had a vision of a higher and purer life, one without creditors' letters or parental lectures, and with a gentle angel at his side." It seems to me that Axel adds a narrator so that he can easily explain things that the audience may not pick up on the first time the movie is viewed. These words of the narrator certainly stimulate the audience's mind to think about how love may become a recurring theme.

The Departure

The first time Lorens decides to leave the village after a visit, he tells Martine "I have realized life is hard and cruel here, and that there are things that are impossible." This line portrays his justification of leaving. I see this as his way of telling himself that his life is supposed to be spent somewhere other than in this simple village. He kisses her hand slowly and the look on his face is stern as if he were trying to stifle his emotions. There is only the light of a candle between the two and tears can be seen welling up in Martine's eyes. The melancholy sound of piano music is heard in the background, and Martine watches as he rides off. It then shows Lorens staring out of a window with the same sad expression that Martine had. Once again we find Lorens justifying his departure and explaining to a fellow officer what he chose for his future. The fact that he

finds it pitiful that he has fallen in love with a maiden that “can’t even afford salt for her soup,” says a lot about him in his youth and about how physical matters seem important when it comes to love. The fact that he wants to forget all about his time spent on the coast tells me that he is scared to love, because he doesn’t yet understand the spiritual power of love that allows it to persist even when the person one loves is not physically present.

I think that in her own way, Martine also tries to justify to herself not continuing her relationship with Lorens. She was presented an opportunity for love but it would have taken her away from her father and his work. The way she was raised by her father plays a major role in this, because he had taught his daughters that “earthly love and marriage with it, are trivial matters, in themselves nothing but illusions” (Avila 3). To me, this proves that the daughters were raised to not focus on earthly matters or physical relationships. Spiritual love should be between oneself and God, but maybe Martine simply did not realize that one can have spiritual love for someone other than God. Simply put, Martine was raised to “long for eternal joy, but flee earthly satisfactions,” (Greydanus 2-3) which I believe limits her ability to express her love to Lorens.

The Return

Nearly fifteen years after the death of the pastor, his daughters and faithful community still have a passionate love for him that has most definitely persisted in his absence. I see the dinner celebration as a clear representation of their love for him that has not diminished simply because he is gone from them. They still honor him by respectfully acknowledging his portrait as well as citing favorite

passages from his writings and sermons. Axel reintroduced Lorens to the storyline and does this purposefully with the intent to confirm his stance that love is persistent. After all, if the love for the Pastor can persist nearly fifteen years after his death, couldn't Lorens have loved Martine without her being physically present throughout most of his life?

When I think of vanity, I think of excessive pride in appearance or achievements, both of which are physical things that can distract one from spiritual things such as love. So when Lorens looks in the mirror and says "vanity," I can only imagine he is thinking of his life which he has lived without Martine so that he could focus on things that he has come to realize are not important. I find it interesting that he only stops to reflect on his vanity once he is an older man, but perhaps Axel did this to show that it is never too late for one to realize and correct his or her mistakes, especially when they involve something as significant as regret involving a deep spiritual love.

Axel includes a partial flashback in which Lorens talks to his younger self and says, "You must prove to me that I made the right choice back then," which was to leave Martine in his pursuit to become a decorated general with many earthly accomplishments, which he has in fact achieved. "His life has been spent acquiring fame, power, and wealth, and neither has been mean of spirit," and he is now "unsure of what he left behind" (Gibbs 4-5). His solemn and depressing facial expression and tone of voice lead me to believe that he is nervous that he will have to face the realization that he in fact did make the wrong choice, but that he also wants to try to justify his choice to leave.

During my second viewing of the film I realized that the majority of the scenes involving Lorens focus on his love for Martine but make no mention of the woman he married. The one scene in which the audience is introduced to his wife visibly portrays her wealth and the luxuries that she and Lorens have been accustomed to. I believe there is only one scene like this because to Axel, a lavish lifestyle is meaningless when it doesn't involve the grace of true love. I also believe that Axel makes it a point to not bring his wife into the story more than once because it would portray the physical aspects and possibly even more meaningless aspects of love that would detract from its spiritual importance.

As Lorens and his aunt are on their way to the supper, he asks, "Can the sum of a row of victories over many years be defeat?" I believe that this is how Axel informs the audience that Lorens is beginning to feel weary of his decision to leave Martine all those years ago. After all, he "has obtained everything he set out to gain, and yet remains profoundly unhappy," because "he rejected the vision he had of a purer life with her to focus entirely on his career" (Curry).

The return of Lorens brings back the emotions of love he and Martine had after nearly a lifetime of being apart. During the feast, there are no words spoken of the love between the two, but to me it is clear that they still have a connection because they smile at each other frequently, and quite obviously revel in the joy of each other's presence. During the feast, Lorens finally realizes that "mercy is infinite and imposes no conditions" (Edwards 430). I think that Axel brilliantly creates a scene in which love can be felt, not heard, simply because it does not need to be said.

The way in which Lorens disappeared, yet returned to the sisters' home many years later "demonstrates the presence of mystery in the ordinary world" (Edwards 430). I believe this "presence of mystery" that has led Lorens to return to Martine is the love he has had for her over the course of many years.

The Profession of Love

Lorens' profession of love to Martine does not come as a surprise. The preceding scenes do not need to explicitly state that he has been in love all these years because it is quite obvious. This scene, however, gives the director the chance to clearly express his view that love persists in the absence of those we love. It is not physical because physical love is meaningless without spiritual love. The love between the two has become an "infusion of grace... in which the profane has transformed into the sacred" (Edwards 427). If their love had not been spiritual it would not have persisted.

This scene is set up the same way as the scene when he left her the first time. They are standing at her door with a candle between them. Slow violin music is playing in the background, but this time it does not sound as sad, but instead, feels hopeful. Lorens professes that he has been with her every day of his life not in flesh, but in spirit, which is what he has realized is actually important. What strikes me as intriguing is that he says, "For tonight I have learned, my dear... that in this beautiful world of ours, all things are possible." This line is extremely important, because many years prior he had stated that the world is *cruel* and that some things are *impossible*. This is Axel's way of showing

how love can shape our whole perception of life. Only once he spent his entire life loving her did he realize having love in spirit is all that matters, and that it is possible to love someone without being with her or him every day of one's life.

Conclusion

The first time I watched *Babette's Feast*, I expected it to be a simple movie about food, which I would have to watch through the lens of a chef or expert on fine French cuisine. However, I have now realized that the director created this film for a much deeper reason. I personally found that this reason was to introduce his audience to the beauty of love and how it can persist and persevere even between two people that live separate lives. For, "what is not seen as real is as real, and perhaps more real than what is seen" (Edwards 430). The audience of this film does not have to be theologians or experts on cuisine to find the deeper meaning that Axel intended.

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