

■ MAKING COMPARISONS

1. Kipnis notes that we feel like a failure when love fails (para 8). What might Mrs. Mallard say about this?
2. What might Kipnis say in writing a review of Chopin's story?
3. Comment on Kipnis's statement, "A life without love lacks an organizing narrative." How might this apply to our story?

MEGHAN O'ROURKE

The Marriage Trap

Meghan O'Rourke (b. 1976) is a poet and critic who has been widely published, winning numerous prizes and fellowships. She was a fiction editor at The New Yorker, served as poetry editor at The Paris Review, and is a contributor to the New York Times. Her first book of poems, Halflife (2007), was published by W. W. Norton, and her memoir about the death of her mother, The Long Goodbye (2011), was critically acclaimed. She graduated from Yale University, has taught at New York University and Princeton University, and currently lives in Brooklyn, New York. O'Rourke posted her essay on Slate in September 2003 as a review of and response to Kipnis's Against Love: A Polemic. She won the Guggenheim Award for General Nonfiction in 2014.

The classic 1960s feminist critique of marriage was that it suffocated women by tying them to the home and stifling their identity. The hope was that in a non-sexist society marriage could be a harmonious, genuine connection of minds. But forty years after Betty Friedan, Laura Kipnis has arrived with a new jeremiad, *Against Love: A Polemic*, to tell us that this hope was forlorn: Marriage, she suggests, belongs on the junk heap of human folly. It is an equal-opportunity oppressor, trapping men and women in a life of drudgery, emotional anesthesia, and a tug-of-war struggle to balance vastly different needs.

The numbers seem to back up her thesis: Modern marriage doesn't work for the majority of people. The rate of divorce has roughly doubled since the 1960s. Half of all marriages end in divorce. And as sketchy as poll data can be, a recent Rutgers University poll found that only 38 percent of married couples describe themselves as happy.

What's curious, though, is that even though marriage doesn't seem to make Americans very happy, they keep getting married (and remarried). Kipnis's essential question is: Why? Why, in what seems like an age of great social freedom, would anyone willingly consent to a life of constricting monogamy? Why has marriage (which she defines broadly as any long-term monogamous relationship) remained a polestar even as ingrained ideas about race, gender, and sexuality have been overturned?

Kipnis's answer is that marriage is an insidious social construct, harnessed by capitalism to get us to have kids and work harder to support them. Her quasi-Marxist argument sees desire as inevitably subordinated to economics. And the price of this subordination is immense: Domestic cohabitation is a "gulag"; marriage is the rough equivalent of a credit card with 0 percent APR that, upon first misstep, zooms to a punishing 30 percent and compounds daily. You feel you owe something, or you're afraid of being alone, and so you "work" at your relationship, like a prisoner in Siberia ice-picking away at the erotic permafrost.

Kipnis's ideological tack might easily have been as heavy as Frederick Engels's in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, but she possesses the gleeful, viperish wit of a Dorothy Parker and the energetic charisma of a cheerleader. She is dead-on about the everyday exhaustion a relationship can produce. And she's diagnosed something interesting about the public discourse of marriage. People are more than happy to talk about how unhappy their individual marriages are, but public discussion assumes that in each case there is something wrong with *the* marriage—not marriage itself.

Take the way infidelity became a prime-time political issue in the '90s: Even as we wondered whether a politician who was not faithful to his or her spouse could be "faithful" to the country, no one was interested in asking whether marital fidelity was realistic or desirable.

Kipnis's answer to that question is a resounding no. The connection between sex and love, she argues, doesn't last as long as the need for each. And we probably shouldn't invest so much of *our own* happiness in the idea that someone else can help us sustain it—or spend so much time trying to make unhappy relationships "work." We should just look out for ourselves, perhaps mutually—more like two people gazing in the same general direction than two people expecting they want to look in each other's eyes for the rest of their (now much longer) lives. For this model to work, she argues, our social decisions need to start reflecting the reality of declining marriage rates—not the fairy-tale "happily ever after all" version.

Kipnis's vision of a good relationship may sound pretty vague. In fact, she doesn't really offer an alternative so much as diagnose the problems, hammering us into submission: Do we need a new way of thinking about love and domesticity? Marriage could be a form of renewable contract, as she idly wonders (and as Goethe proposed almost 200 years ago in *Elective Affinities*, his biting portrait of a marriage blighted by monogamy). Might it be possible to envision committed nonmonogamous heterosexual relationships?

Kipnis's book derives its *frisson* from the fact that she's asking questions no one seems that interested in entertaining. As she notes, even in a post-feminist age of loose social mores we are still encouraged, from the time we are children, to think of marriage as the proper goal of a well-lived life. I was first taught to play at the marriage fantasy in a Manhattan commune that

had been formed explicitly to reject traditional notions of marriage; faced with a gaggle of eight-year-old girls, one of the women gave us a white wedding gown and invited us to imagine the heartthrob whom we wanted to devote ourselves to. Even radicals have a hard time banishing the dream of an enduring true love.

Let's accept that the resolute public emphasis on fixing ourselves, not marriage, can seem grim, and even sentimentally blinkered in its emphasis on ending divorce. Yet Kipnis's framing of the problem is grim, too. While she usefully challenges our assumptions about commitment, it's not evident that we'd be better off in the lust-happy world she envisions, or that men and women really want the exact same sexual freedoms. In its ideal form, marriage seems to reify all that's best about human exchange. Most people don't want to be alone at home with a cat, and everyone but Kipnis worries about the effects of divorce on children. "Work," in her lexicon, is always the drudgery of self-denial, not the challenge of extending yourself beyond what you knew you could do. But we usually mean two things when we say "work": The slog we endure purely to put food on the table, and the kind we do because we like it—are drawn to it, even.

While it's certainly true that people stay in an unhappy relationship longer than they should, it's not yet clear that monogamy is more "unnatural" than sleeping around but finding that the hum of your refrigerator is your most constant companion. And Kipnis spends scant time thinking about the fact that marriage is a hardy social institution several thousand years old, spanning many cultures—which calls into question, to say the least, whether its presence in our lives today has mostly to do with the insidious chokehold capitalism has on us.

While Kipnis's exaggerated polemic romp is wittily invigorating, it may not actually be as radical as it promises to be: These days, even sitcoms reflect her way of thinking. There's an old episode of *Seinfeld* in which Jerry and Kramer anticipate most of Kipnis's critique of domesticity; Kramer asks Jerry if he and his girlfriend are thinking about marriage and family, and then cuts him off: "They're prisons! Man-made prisons! You're doin' time! You get up in the morning—she's there. You go to sleep at night—she's there. It's like you gotta ask permission to, to use the bathroom: *Is it all right if I use the bathroom now?*" Still, love might indeed get a better name if we were as attentive to the intellectual dishonesties of the public debate over its failings as we are to the emotional dishonesties of adulterers.

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■ THINKING ABOUT THE TEXT

1. O'Rourke claims that as a culture we are happy to talk about unhappy individual marriages but not about marriage itself. In what ways do your personal experience and your cultural experience (reading novels, watching films and television) support or contradict this observation?