

# The Beauty and Complexity of Love: Poetic Narrative in Pablo Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems and A Song of Despair*

Gokulapriya T<sup>1,\*</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Guest Lecturer, Department of English, Government Arts College for Women,  
Nilakottai, Dindigul (Dt.), Tamilnadu, India

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## Abstract

Pablo Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems and A Song of Despair* (1924) is a compilation of verses that established him as a quintessential poet of love; these poems illustrate his inclination for joy and dedication to life. These poems are written in a personal voice and depict his individual experiences. Neruda's poetry on love is sensual, passionate, sad, and delicate; through highlighting the worth of genuineness in love, the significance of its pain, and the universality of human experience, these poems demonstrate a profound comprehension of human conditions. The paper aims to examine, through a critical analysis method, how Neruda portrays his love with in-depth and elegant words, and also explores how the poet conveys the complexity of love. In the poems, Neruda states that his lovers are not to be with him, but whenever he thinks about them, he feels the happiness he felt at that time; it is the beauty of love, and the complexity of love is Impermanence, which emphasizes that loss and suffering are common in human experience that go beyond social and cultural divides.

**Keywords:** beauty and complexity of love, critical analysis, Impermanence, Pablo Neruda, the power of love, *Twenty Love Poems and Song of Despair*

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\*Corresponding author's email: [drgokulapriya11@gmail.com](mailto:drgokulapriya11@gmail.com)

## Introduction

Pablo Neruda's real name is Neftalí Ricardo Reyes Basoalto. He was born in Chile, a nation plagued by political instability and frequent changes in government between dictatorships and democracies. For several years, Neruda represented Chile as a diplomat in the countries of the Far East, Europe, Mexico, and Spain. With great emotional depth, Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems and A Song of Despair* (1924) portrays the beauty and intricacy of love. He connects the sky and the soil, the mild details of emotions with an abundant natural world. He surpasses all other contemporary love poets in descriptive skill.

According to Goutam Karmakar's research on "Poetic Vision of Pablo Neruda", Neruda is a postcolonial poet who has become a key figure in capturing the socio-cultural and socio-political circumstances of his nation in the modern age. Neruda's works explore linguistic and cultural transpositions, alienation, displacement, and conflicts related to race. Neruda attempts to reveal that language and racial identity are the most crucial ones for a particular culture to survive. (Karmakar,1). Janardhan states in his work that when he was in high school, he won multiple literary competitions, and his articles were published in various journals and local newspapers in Santiago. Further, Janardhan states that the cycle of love poems, *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada*, is published in English as *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*, which is one of Neruda's most well-known and innovative compositions, and his prominence as a Chilean poet is swiftly recognized by this poetry collection (Janardhan, 862). *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda* is a chronologically ordered collection of six hundred poems, published in 2003. Thirty-six different translators worked on this collection; their most well-known works exist in the original Spanish manuscripts (866). According to Patra's research on "Poems of Pablo Neruda: An Emblem of Love from Personal to Universal Echelon", one of his poems from the poetry collection *Canto General* (1950) is "The United Fruit Company," which conveys his patriotic nature. In this work, he ironically criticized the exploitation of Chile by American corporations, such as the United Fruit Company, which contributes to the terrible economic situation of several Latin American countries (Patra, 39).

The four great poets of Chile are Pablo Neruda, Gabriela Mistral, Pablo de Rokha, and Vicente Huidobro. They have one of the longest-running rivalries in Chilean cultural history. They belong to the same generation and were once members of the Communist Party of Chile. Neruda has written "Aquí estoy" ("Here I am") in response to his peers' criticism, and it was published in Paris in 1938. In it, he denounces their demonization and hostility. Notwithstanding this criticism, Neruda is regarded as one of the twenty-six writers, together with Shakespeare, Dante, Chaucer, and other renowned writers, who comprise the Western canon of literature.

Pablo Neruda differs from other poets in showing his passion straightforwardly. His poems convey emotional intimacy and gender discrimination in simple and effective ways that expose him as a youthful, joyous, and melancholy man. *Twenty Love Poems and A Song of Despair* celebrates the human physique, particularly the beauty of the feminine physique. Apart from exploring themes of love, passion, and lust, this collection of poems expertly employs figurative language and diction. Neruda conveys a sense of natural comprehension in these poems; his admiration for the natural world and its aesthetic qualities shines through his use of language and analogies. Examples from these poems are 'deserted wharf at dawn', 'memory made of light and smoke', and 'fruit of hunger and thirst'.

Susanti states in her thesis that Neruda's father opposed his passion for writing and literature, but the Nobel laureate Gabriela Mistral and many others encouraged him to write. His first work, an essay entitled "Enthusiasm and Perseverance," appeared in the local daily newspaper *La Mañana* when he was thirteen years old. (Susanti, 22). Later in life, he wrote many love poems inspired by the love he received from his nation, the rest of the globe, and the two women who never gave up on him. His views of women remained unchanged in the later poems, and the importance of living life to the fullest and accepting one's feelings is reflected in his poetry.

This study examines the intensity of love, highlighting how humans navigate both the painful and beautiful moments of life. According to Neruda's writings, desire is a fundamental component of human nature that inspires us to look for connection and love. Neruda compares human emotions to the natural world by using natural imagery to depict love and longing. This proves his conviction that everything is interrelated and there is a close connection between the natural world and human experience.

The critical analysis method is employed in this research to analyze and interpret the content and images of the poems, examining how the poet communicates systematically and objectively. Through this method, this paper examines how Neruda explores the power of love and its impact on the human condition.

Neruda's poems capture the beauty and complexity of love, portraying it as a force that brings both happiness and sadness, pain and joy. The beauty of love is portrayed as a powerful force in his poems that gradually permeates all aspects of existence, influencing feelings, ideas, and behavior. Love is represented as a universal human experience that connects individuals across time and natural features. Love is a fundamental component of human nature that motivates people to look for closeness, connection, and purpose. The complexity of love lies in its inherent complexity and ever-changing nature in life.

## Literature Review

V.P. Janardhan states in his article, "The Art of Resistance in Pablo Neruda's Poems," that a poem's enduring impact is proven by how people use it to stay inspired and motivated during difficult times. Like the lines 'You can cut all the flowers, but you cannot stop spring from coming' from Neruda's poetry, which is repeated on banners during protests against India's modified citizenship legislation. It demonstrates Neruda's poetry lines have enduring power, and people frequently seek out and invoke them as a means of inspiration, awakening, and sustenance.

Arindam Patra states in his article "Poems of Pablo Neruda: An Emblem of Love from Personal to Universal Echelon" that while living as a self-exiled diplomat in remote parts of South Asia, Neruda observes the destruction, decay, and silence of the natural world. The impulse of every significant event of the twentieth century, including the Soviet Revolution, Nazism and Stalinism, the Spanish Civil War, the World War II massacre, the Cold War, the political and economic collapse of Latin America, Vietnam, and the Age of Aquarius, Fidel Castro's Revolution in Cuba, the Student Upheavals in 1968, and the introduction of Socialism in his homeland are explored Neruda's love beyond all boundaries. His awareness of various socio-political movements is demonstrated by his reflections on those situations that show he is a political activist as well as a communist.

Asif Kamal states in his study "Pablo Neruda: Poetics and Politics" that Neruda used his poetry to support people and used poetic instruments to fight for their rights through political movements. His poetry is a symbol of tender human emotions, and love has an enormous capacity to shape society.

Goutam Karmakar states in his article "Poetic Vision of Pablo Neruda" that due to his adventurous lifestyle, Neruda experienced isolation since he was unknown to foreign nations, languages, and communities. His "Residence on Earth" (1933) explores themes of cultures, pessimism, alienation, loneliness, and dread of death. The emerging existentialism of the time was reflected in this poetry; absurdity and chaos are all around him. For him, even erotism was pointless.

Sabnam Parveen states in his article "Pablo Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*: A Note" that at the age of seventeen, Neruda wrote the poem which captures his adolescent posing of several mysteries, and also includes the solutions to those mysteries. Neruda is renowned for his use of imagery and sexuality in his work. Numerous Latin American poets have made similar attempts, but their critics do not receive them well. He creates an attractive poetic sense of love by combining his personally accepted experiences and recollections with the splendid Chilean landscape.

Amy Bonanno states in his work "Pablo Neruda: A Collection of Creative Interpretations" that Neruda has a unique voice that is complex and rich in thought. His topics encompass strange observations of inanimate objects, including sensual love and heartbreaking loss. In his early years, Neruda was undoubtedly obsessed with a particular subject, which is reflected in his writing, and the sensuality of his work has drawn much criticism.

In the work "Love and Longing in Pablo Neruda's Poetry", Sundari Irengbam claims that Neruda's romantic poems had a significant impact on the Latin American genre as well as other genres. He has inspired many poets over the years, solidifying his status as one of the greatest love poets of all time through his creative use of language, emphasis on intimacy and sensuality, and ability to convey complicated feelings straightforwardly. Neruda's love poetry is studied and appreciated for its perceptiveness and beauty still today, and his reputation as one of the greatest love poets of all time is secured.

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### **Pablo Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems and A Song of Despair***

*Twenty Love Poems and A Song of Despair* is one of his best-known poetry collections; it is extensive with desire for past love and passion, which finally ends in misery and condemnation. The poet becomes more restless and anxious because of his women, who give less importance to his love. Neruda is persistent in pursuing a rich, sensual life in Santiago, but his lovers respond to his passionate letters and messages with a notable lack of response. The only thing floating in his consciousness is the memories of resonant days, which ultimately transform into intense anguish and sorrow. Neruda's greatest wish is to be loved, but his lovers mistreat him; hence, the images of his beloved persons haunt him at night, and his deep lament increases like a sea. He compares himself to a deserted harbor and addresses him as an abandoned lover whose heart is weeping in the trench of rubble like a ruined shipwreck.

In *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*, the poet denotes that through being with his mate, he can connect with the creative spirit of nature, like spring does with cherry trees. As well as through his poetry, he denotes women as a source of lyrical creation and an object of



sensual delight. He overwhelms the female's body with cosmic items; it denotes his masculine chauvinist mentality, which views women as objects of sensual pleasure.

Through the celestial things, the poet establishes a connection with his beloved persons. The poet shifts his mood by using a lamenting tone that denotes his woman has left him and eventually been lost to him; this depressing feeling arises because he has not received any response from the woman to his letters. The poet suggests that his heart and soul are disordered and unstable. This poetry collection is the final testament to his love and sorrow. The poet relinquishes his feelings of retaliation by loving his beloved repeatedly. To comfort himself, he continues his sensual voyage by remembering his beloved's body. The depth and choice of Neruda's desolations are varied because they stem from his desire for love, abundance, and loneliness.

The poet states that he struggles to escape difficult situations, and boldly declares that he gives up on the desire and stops being receptive to acts of love. He regrets the loss of his beloved and simultaneously calls her to hear him weep and sing a song of hopelessness. The beloved's care and affection are like a fragile pot, yet the forgetfulness of love causes her to implode, similarly to a pot. By altering the poem's tone, the author likens his beloved to a rescuer. The further analysis examines the lines of a few selected poems from Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems and A Song of Despair* to understand his point of view on women, love, and despair.

The light wraps you in its mortal flame.

Abstracted pale mourner, standing that way

against the old propellers of twilight

that revolve around you. (5)

In the second poem, "The Light Wraps You," Neruda explores how love surges and then dissipates within himself, underscoring the intense emotion. He uses a metaphor to illustrate the complexity of love. The light is a symbol of love and connection, and the wrap implies that love protects and nurtures her. He refers to love as a star, a river, and a beast that troubles his heart. One of the themes of the poem is mortality; Neruda suggests that the light around his sweetheart is mortal, implying that it is ephemeral and transient. It denotes that the narrator is anxious and aware that the love might not continue forever.

The morning is full of storms in the heart of summer.

The clouds travel like white handkerchiefs of goodbye,

The wind, traveling, waving them in its hands.

The numberless heart of the wind

beating above our loving silence. (11)

In the fourth poem, "The Morning is Full," Neruda associates happiness, enthusiasm, and sunlight with the summer season. He denotes that various seasonal or climatic changes reflect his emotional condition. Neruda surveys his surroundings, but he still believes that things are incomplete and transient. Although waves are always there, they remain for a short period before crashing onto the shore. This gives the impression that the feelings associated with love are ever-changing and arrive in waves. Waves are ever-changing; at low tide, they can be modest and peaceful, but during high tide, they can grow large and turbulent. The feelings of love cannot change instantly, but waves take some time to shift before becoming something new. In this poem, Neruda refers to waves to represent his sentiments as well as the transitory nature of love.

Lament of old mouths, blood of old supplications.  
Love me, companion. Please do not forsake me. Follow me.  
Follow me, companion, on this wave of anguish.  
However, my words become stained with your love.  
You occupy everything. (17)

In the fifth poem, "**So That You Will Hear Me**," Neruda lets his beloved understand that he still thinks highly of her as a partner by calling her a "companion." In the poem, he employs figurative language and imagery to personify plants and fruits, depicting various facets of this woman, both out of love and hate. In an expression of affection, the line 'for your white hands, smooth as grapes' (17) suggests that her hands are as pure and smooth as grapes and conveys affection. However, when he writes out of spite, he says that his words, "They climb on my old suffering like ivy" (17), are hurtful because he puts himself in a dire predicament when he holds back.

Sky from a ship, Field from the hills:  
Your memory is made of light, of smoke, of a still pond!  
Beyond your eyes, farther on, the evenings were blazing.  
Dry autumn leaves revolved in your soul. (21)

In the sixth poem, "I Remember You as You Were," Neruda laments the passing of a loved one, using striking images of fall and twilight to evoke strong emotions. He uses the warmth of a blaze and climbing plants as metaphors to convey his longing. The last stanza of the poem returns to the beginning, reflecting the recurring nature of the seasons.

You keep only darkness, my distant female,  
from your regard; sometimes the coast of dread emerges.  
Leaning into the afternoons, I fling my sad nets  
to the sea that beats on your marine eyes. (23)

The afternoon serves as a metaphor for the final hours of his passionate relationship, which began in the evening, as depicted in the seventh poem, "Leaning into the Afternoons". The line shows his pitiful attempt to hold her and to prevent her from running away, but miserably, she is as strong as the ocean, and he could not control her with his love.

Something sings, something climbs to my ravenous mouth.  
Oh, to be able to celebrate you with all the words of joy.  
Sing, burn, flee, like a bellows at the hands of a madman.  
My sad tenderness, what comes over you all at once?  
When I have reached the most awesome and the coldest summit,  
my heart closes like a nocturnal flower. (47-49)

According to Neruda, his poem "I Have Gone Marking" captures the height of his emotional and bodily connection with his beloved. He indicates that he closed his heart to all the women, which allowed his life to be in perfect alignment.

My words rained over you, stroking you  
For a long time, I have loved the sun-kissed mother-of-pearl of your body.  
I think you own the universe.  
I will bring you happy flowers from the mountains, bluebells,  
dark hazels, and rustic baskets of kisses.  
I want to do with you what spring does with the cherry trees. (55)

Neruda discovers the genuine meaning of love in his fourteenth poem, "Every Day You Play," and he does so in an honest rather than fantastical way. In this poem, he indicates that he is with a lover, not simply dreaming about it. He is starting to live it and record his own experiences rather than merely thinking about what the contrast between romance and sexuality could mean.

The tone of the seventeenth poem, "Thinking, Tangling Shadows," is strange; the poet's vision is impeded and clouded by fog; his thoughts are like disorganized shadows that surround him, and his ideas are like jumbled shadows that enclose him. It means that he doubts love and attempts to understand and control it.

The lyrics from "Tonight I Can Write" are very controversial in the twentieth poem, which highlights the anguish and longing of love and implies that it transcends reality. The poem discusses the loss of an idealistic romance and the inner turmoil that arises when Neruda has let go of the former lovers. This poem is not miserable; instead, it is about healing, letting go, and moving forward. He recalls his love but lets him go on and forget it. This poem seeks to transcend the passions and sufferings of the past, which have spawned internal conflicts and troubles, leading him to adopt a more peaceful lifestyle.

The memory of you emerges from the night around me.

The river mingles in its stubborn lament with the sea.

Deserted like the wharves at dawn.

It is the hour of departure, oh deserted one!

Cold flower heads are raining in my heart.

Oh, pit of debris, fierce cave of the shipwrecked.

In you, the wars and the flights accumulated

From you, the wings of the song birds rose.

You swallowed everything, like distance.

Like the sea, like time. In you, everything sank! (83)

The Poem "A Song of Despair" explores his loss and despair; Neruda feels that he is nothing without the lady he loves, and the pain consumes him. It conveys a sense of emptiness and hopelessness through its distressing imagery. He uses rich imagery to denote the contrast between his inner struggle and the beauty of his surroundings, which highlights the depth of his feelings. The most melancholic verse implies that the poet considers existential issues related to meaning and mortality. At last, Neruda conveys a sense of hope and rejuvenation. He desires to embrace a fresh start and escape the suffering of the past. This hopeful thought conveys his apparent ability to put his sorrow behind him and look forward to the future.

Throughout these poems, Neruda declares that when he remembers the pleasure with his beloved, everything seems to fade and be left out, and his grief becomes more profound. The poet eventually comes to realize the depravity of his love life, which plunges him into extreme depression, and he reveals the harsh truth that love can drown his world and destiny. His collective memories are too unpredictable in their flow, turning inversely from hope to despair. After being forsaken by his beloved, the poet harbors bitter memories and an insatiable desire to forge a new identity. It denotes Neruda's view that love and despair are sentimental and emotive senses that change their meanings and connotations over time. The beauty of his love is explored by portraying his lover with elegant words; even though she never responds to his request, it shows his in-depth love and passion for her. The complexity of his love lies in his



ability to forget the past and move on from past sufferings and meaningless relationships, which brings internal healing and tranquility to his life.

## Conclusion

Neruda has a deep love for his women, yet he nurtures and exhausts them quickly, only to move on to other relationships. The poetry collection shows his potential for joy and devotion toward life. He invokes the beloved's physical presence, and in the last line, he accepts her departure. Even though it is possible to follow the descending approach of love in these poems, it is also evident that the poet values love and lust above all else; he idealizes passion, even though there is no love in his life. The poems explore the loss of an idealistic romance and the inner turmoil that follows the end of a former love. In his poems, Neruda used the individual wave to represent his sentiments as well as the transitory nature of love.

This collection of poems highlights the importance of love in understanding human nature by conveying its complexity, universal significance, and transformative power. Neruda's poetry evokes intense feelings of longing, emphasizing the fundamental human need for closeness, love, and connection. He universalizes the margin of love's mystery through transits, eventually into eternity; he consistently emphasizes the concept that human experience transcends cultural and personal limits and is universal. This universality highlights the notion that everybody has similar emotional experiences.

Neruda depicts beauty in the midst of sadness, suggesting that although suffering may be profound, it can also be a life-changing experience. This viewpoint emphasizes the belief that grief can catalyze reflection and personal growth, helping individuals understand the reality of life. According to Neruda, love is a strong and elemental force that can both create and destroy. This demonstrates his conviction that love can shape human beings and profoundly influence their life experiences.

## Suggestions for Future Research

Through Neruda's literary works, researchers can explore how Neruda depicts nature and environment in his poems, and consider how he portrays the interaction between humans and nature. They can examine how women and femininity are portrayed in Neruda's poetry, and how his writing either supports or contradicts patriarchal beliefs and stereotypes. They can analyze how Neruda's poetry reflects or challenges capitalist ideas and examine issues of social justice and class struggle within the framework of his communist ideology. They can study how Neruda's poetry reflects his personal psychological experiences and desires, as well as the universal human emotions and conflicts he portrays through applying psychoanalytic ideas in his writing. They can research the connection between Neruda's life and work, examining how his experiences and interpersonal interactions impact his poetry. They can determine and examine identity, politics, nature, and love, and how these themes are developed and subtle across Neruda's works. They can explore how Neruda's stylistic decisions enhance the content and power of his poetry by examining his use of language, imagery, and form.

## About the Author



Dr. Gokulapriya T holds a Doctor of Philosophy from Karpagam Academy of Higher Education, India, in 2022. She completed a Postgraduate degree from Periyar University, India, in 2016, and an Undergraduate degree from Kamarajar University, India, in 2014. She worked as an Assistant Professor of English at Arulmigu Palaniandavar College for Women in Tamil Nadu, India, in 2023. Currently, she is a Guest Lecturer of English at Government Arts College for Women, Nilakottai, Tamil Nadu, India. She has published 12 papers and two book chapters in national and international journals and conferences. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3031-7602>

## AI Statement

This document has benefited from AI-driven tools that were minimally used to proofread the manuscript. While the incorporation of these technologies may introduce some AI-generated linguistic patterns, it is important to note that the core intellectual content, data interpretation, and conclusions presented are entirely the work of the authors.

## Statement of Absence of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, findings, or recommendations presented in this paper. All conclusions drawn are independent and unbiased.

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