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A Sunless, Healing Heart:  
An Examination of Queerness, Trauma, and Unconditional Love in  
Edith Johnstone’s A Sunless Heart  
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Abstract  

A Sunless Heart by Edith Johnstone was originally published in 1894 and received mixed reviews due to its melodramatic quality and nuanced vignettes of lesbian desire. The novel is an example of queer love at the fin de siècle and details a passionate affair between two women, Lotus Grace and Gasparine O’Neill. The relationship’s tragedy and great romance command reverence, and Johnstone’s grasp of romantic lyricism is evident in scenes of deep yearning and lingering touch. This essay addresses the disparity between what critics have described as affectionate friendship, and what is an intense lesbian relationship. This project asserts that criticisms such as Martha Vicinus’ claim that female desire is a mimicry of heterosexual relationships are damaging and limiting. I attest that Johnstone’s novel disrupts the original narrative that lesbianism is a subset of platonic female friendship, and instead illuminates the intensity of Lotus and Gasparine’s love for each other. Contemporary literary theory provides the tools necessary to move away from criticizing lesbian love as though it is a perversion of friendship and encourages the deconstruction of limiting boundaries on literature with queer subtext. The space between female friendships and female desire is not liminal; instead, it is marked by distinct experiences of body and soul. This essay explores Lotus and Gasparine’s relationship without the reductive lens of an affectionate friendship, and instead with the
profundity of queer love; an unparalleled experience that is utterly complex, limitless, and stunning.

*Keywords:* Lesbian, queer, queer theory, Edith Johnstone, trauma, love, 19c lesbian, lesbianism, unconditional love, Gasparine, Lotus, boarding school, female desire, desire, 1800, 1800s queer

In Edith Johnstone’s *A Sunless Heart*, Lotus’ personhood is inextricably tied to inaccessibility and lovelessness. She feels powerful when she withholds and denies love, and similarly, when she rejects others’ love. Lotus’ trauma inhibits her from seeing relationships as loving connections void of the necessity to earn love before receiving; instead, they are mere transactions. Consequently, Gasparine’s love is intimidating to Lotus, as she would have to allow herself to be fully vulnerable; loving Gasparine would mean participating in something too important to squander or jeopardize. However, Gasparine’s presence in Lotus’ life slowly dissolves the calcified walls around her heart and proves to be the only relationship capable of healing her trauma.

*A Sunless Heart* is told in two parts: the first chronicles a deeply enmeshed bond between siblings Gasparine and Gaspar O’Neill. The second details the nuanced and romantic relationship between Gasparine and Lotus Grace; the latter suffering deeply from a history of sexual assault. Lotus listlessly engages in relationships with one of her pupils, Mona Lefcadio, and her biological daughter Ladybird, conceived after she was raped as a young teenager. Ladybird, called Lady, is under the impression that she is motherless, and that Lotus has adopted her as her ward; this creates a painfully ironic dynamic where the young girl yearns for
a mother, and Lotus proves herself to be incapable of motherhood. Finally, when Lotus reaches self-actualization and decides that she is ready to take on the role of mother and have a committed relationship with Gasparine, she is killed in a train accident along with Mona.

The dynamic of female-to-female relationships at Lotus’ boarding school resemble real life phenomena in the mid to late nineteenth century. In fact, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s research asserts that relationships at all-female boarding schools revolved around deep emotional connections and ritualistic acts to care for one another. Rosenberg writes that “…young women’s relations with one another were close, often frolicsome” and they “spent long solitary days with each other, curled up together in bed at night to whisper fantasies and secrets” (21). However, Rosenberg comments that these bonds were “female friendships,” while Lotus and Gasparine’s bond was neither friendly nor platonic. Martha Vicinus builds on Rosenberg’s concept of ritualistic expressions of desire by commenting that “[t]he loved one became an object of a desire that found its expression through symbolic acts rather than actual physical closeness” (605). While these criticisms are outdated and overlook the erotic capacity of Lotus and Gasparine’s love, it is worth noting that Lotus does rely on her seemingly unemotional acts to execute the emotional labor necessary to express admiration. Additionally, Marcus notes that “[d]istance was a means of deepening pleasure,” which directly correlates to Lotus’ inability to facilitate closeness with people in her life (605). The boarding school setting coupled with Lotus’ history of sexual assault leads to her tendency to hold people at an arm’s length in order to anticipate their impact on her life.

Gasparine is the only person whom Lotus allows to become close to her; she confides in Gasparine about her most harrowing trauma, which deepens their closeness and love. And yet,
Lotus’ experience with sexual assault further prevents her from securing her most meaningful relationships with Gasparine and Ladybird. In an impassioned confession to Mona, Lotus utters “[t]he ruining of a soul through untold, inexpressible torture of body, through shame, fear, horror... makes uprightness impossible“ (141). Concerning trauma, Roy Bean states that in intimate relationships, “individuals who experienced combined forms of abuse in childhood” fall back on “distancing and self-isolation [which] inhibit the development of romantic attachment [and] contributes to poor relationship quality” (436). Lotus evades forging deeper connections in order to avoid confronting her fear of abandonment. For example, she confides in Gasparine that she feels contemptuous towards her pupils whose relationships are shallow; “...they do not even wish that you should love them as you could; they do not comprehend such depth... The world is amused at deep grief, or bored, Is deep grief sacred?” (Johnstone 136).

Lotus’ ironic defense mechanism is to play cat and mouse with relationships that could prove that meaningful and reciprocative love is possible. Instead, Lotus attaches her sense of self to deep grief and surviving sexual trauma, while shying away from the possibility of unconditional love with Gasparine.

Lotus’ inability to demonstrate her fondness in ways that differ from acts of service speaks to the transactional and ritualistic nature of her love for Gasparine. For example, consider Gasparine’s first impression of Lotus immediately following her beloved brother’s death; Lotus hurries about her rooms tidying: “[m]agically the room changed under the strange girl’s hands. The dust, the dirt, the closeness vanished” (Johnstone 96). Tenderly, Lotus then whispers, “I shall stay here til you sleep” (97). Lotus’ intimacy is gleaned from actions, carefully articulated physical touch, and sparing verbal confessions. Another example: Lotus grades Gasparine’s
students’ papers because she knows that it is a difficult task for her. Lotus expects nothing in return for this gift; she is truly happy to labor in order to prove her affection to Gasparine. In wonder, Gasparine asks Lotus “Why do you do so much work for other people when you don’t believe it’s any good?” To which she replies, “My dear, when you can do a thing, and are asked to do it, that seems to me the best reason” (144).

Gasparine’s reciprocal and devoted love for Lotus, despite the palpable trauma she clearly wades through, is undeniable. After spending several months at the boarding house called the White Cottage, Gasparine’s “steps were drawn each day by some mysterious force. To hear the name Lotus mentioned, however casually, even by a schoolgirl, made her heart bound,” and upon being asked if she and Lotus are friends, Gasparine replies: “I do not know that we are; only I love her” (125). Friendship and love existing as two separate entities leads to Gasparine’s loss of self in pining after Lotus, even when they are emotionally distanced from each other. Gasparine works to learn Lotus’ well-kept secrets, listening at her knee during her tearful soliloquies. Now and again, Gasparine is rewarded with tender affection: “Lo bent and kissed her; a long, sweet kiss. Then Gasparine went away, pledged. For what? A perfect love? What is a perfect love? Service and utter self-abnegation? Nay; there is more” (133). Lotus’ sparingly rationed affection keeps Gasparine always on the alert for more opportunities to earn it, and Lotus is faultless under Gasparine’s endless gaze; she is perfect “as snow—when it fell trampled perhaps by busy, thoughtless, careless feet… but white to [her] eyes, Lo, always” (149).

Gasparine eagerly wishes to evince her unwavering adoration, and eventually, comes to terms with the notion that being enveloped into Lotus’ life is synonymous with being loved by her. At last, “Gasparine understood how close she had come into the confidence and trust of Lotus”
Gasparine accepts this nearly impalpable state of closeness as a satisfactory proxy to having a committed relationship with Lotus.

Overall, Lotus and Gasparine’s relationship does not mirror tired and exclusionary queer tropes; for example, they are not mere affectionate friends, and neither partner physically resembles the stereotypical “butch” lesbian. However, Lotus does embody a sentiment that Lillian Faderman describes as being “flipped” (170). According to Faderman, butch lesbians in the mid twentieth century often assumed the traditional gender role of “husband” in relationships; people fulfilling this role were dubbed “stone butches” and “observed taboos similar to those that were current among working-class heterosexual males” (169). They were “supposed to control emotions” and “be the sexual aggressors,” and if a butch allowed a femme-type lesbian to be sexually aggressive towards them, they were effectively “flipped” (169). Modern discourse has acknowledged that these stereotypes are undoubtedly outdated and incorrect; gender dynamics and emotional expression is vastly more nuanced than a butch/femme dynamic. However, Lotus’ behavior falls into these broad categorical stereotypes in a parallel way: she is emotionally vacant, her vulnerability is difficult to access, and she does not relinquish power, sexual or otherwise, in romantic entanglements.

For comparison, Lotus and Mona’s relationship is an example of Lotus’ stronghold on attachment and how the “stone butch” lesbian trope manifests in her behavior. Lotus plays into Mona’s infatuation because it is safe in its vapidity, intensity, and dispensability. Additionally, their relationship is marked by sadistic qualities and systematic withholding of affection, which speaks to its superficiality. Ultimately, Lotus doesn’t allow or accept Mona’s love because it cannot compare to Gasparine’s. After frustrating Lotus, Mona pleads “If I have annoyed you, I
am very sorry. If you would tell me what I have done, or what I can do! ... The night is an eternity of despair if we part in anger!” (Johnstone 143) Desperately, Mona begs Lotus to say just one word that might suggest the possibility of forgiveness, and instead, Lotus tells her coldly to go. Lotus’ deliverance of the final word in their exchanges upholds her position of power in their dynamic; her word is non-negotiable. Mona cries that to love Lotus is “as bitter as it is sweet,” yet continuously seeks validation and affection from her. When Gasparine confronts Lotus about her tumultuous bond with Mona, Lotus confesses that “[it] is not so much that I do not love Mona as I do not believe in her love for me” (136). Lotus’ emotional limitations keep her from accepting even the most convincing evidence that she is surrounded by a network of love.

Ladybird is the most direct recipient of Lotus’ negligence and inability to access difficult emotions. Lotus allows Ladybird to painfully question her motherless existence without giving the answers only she can provide. Her decision to withhold information speaks to her desire to remain at the helm of each important relationship in her life and to remain blameless in a circumstance where childhood trauma is present. Lotus and Ladybird’s relationship lacks depth because of Lotus’ paralyzing inability to take ownership of her motherhood; instead, their bond is composed largely of seemingly endless, painful yearning that is sparsely marked by poignant, private moments. For example, one late night, Lotus wraps her daughter in a shawl and tells her “‘we two will stay here, and talk to the grass, and the sky, and the wind; and they will tell us wonderful things’” (181). It is in these moments that Lotus is equipped to meet Ladybird with the same openness with which the young girl approaches her. Instead of confessing the truth to her daughter, as her heart so aches, Lotus takes comfort in the child’s golden kisses and
innocent musings. Mothering from a distance grants her the privilege of disappearing when the emotional burden is too great; yet she still benefits from the precious moments of heart and soul connections.

Lotus’ emotional brokenness and inaccessibility are impossible for her ward to realize. During a conversation where Lady asks about mothers and why she does not have one, Lotus explodes with frustration and fear:

Look at me, straight in my eyes... I think you are an abominably ugly little girl; your dress is ugly, your face, and eyes, and hair, are ugly, very ugly. I’m glad you don’t belong to me. I expect it’s because you’re so naughty and ugly you’ve got no mother. There! (163)

Lady is immediately crushed by this outburst. In an attempt to console her, Lotus backtracks and reassures Lady with the notion that, someday, her mother might come back home to her. The fact that Lotus feels such satisfaction from competing with and besting a young girl speaks to her insecurities in self-expression, confidence in her choice to keep the truth from Lady, and her ineptitude with complex emotional situations. However, it is at this moment that the idea of being honest with her daughter first formulates in her mind and taking ownership of her past mistakes is set in motion.

This conversation with Lady catalyzes Lotus’ soul searching about the ramifications surrounding her inability to own up to motherhood. Her previous trend of ignoring situations that proved to be too complex forms a fissure, and Lotus confesses to Lady that she bore deep sadness for many years, and “had to live in the desolate place at the end of everything; and it broke her heart” (187). The mythical ends-of-the-Earth setting that Lotus speaks of refers to the way she has lived her life up until present day-- existing merely in an ether that resembles
reality but is inexplicably separated from all whom she loves. Lotus desperately wants to tell her daughter the truth but is not quite ready; she explains to Lady that she must watch the road leading up to the White Cottage carefully, because in three days’ time, her mother may walk up the road to finally meet her. In her tender, old soul manner, Lady tells Lotus that she does not need a perfect mother, she simply wants “a mother, in a dress” like hers (187). By spinning this tale, Lotus gives herself equal permission to come home to a life forever changed, or to simply vanish from the lives of the people that mean the most to her. As her feelings come full-circle, Lotus thinks despairingly, “[h]er little child-- neglected, hated, unowned! A passion of remorse overcame her. Why could she not love?” (188).

Ultimately, Lotus learns that she is not incapable of perfect, unquestioning love; and Gasparine is the paramount remedy to a life spent in lonely wonder. Lotus arrives at Gasparine’s figurative doorstep, the debris of her trauma and perceived lovelessness cleared away in order to have a deep soul connection with her. Lotus and Gasparine’s love are not platonic, nor based in friendship. It is the deepest, purest bond that they each have experienced; Gasparine does not seek closeness with Lotus to selfishly advance her life, and she is not dangerous as Mona is. Instead, Lotus and Gasparine embody “what women may be, and often are, to one another” (90). Their connection illustrates the profundity of queer love; an unparalleled experience that is utterly complex, limitless, and stunning. Gasparine’s wholeness and capacity for love steadily and passionately heals Lotus, and she confesses:

When life seems dull, when I remember how poor and plain I am-- when the streets seem dreary, the shops dingy, the people selfish and uninteresting... you come along and all the street lights up... suddenly a flash of you passes through me, and life is worth living again...
and I would not change, or be other than I am, for all the world, if being so, I had to lose you. (140)

Gasparine and Lotus exist in the liminality of unconditional love and suffering; they both desperately wish to grasp infinitely onto love that is fleeting in mortality and in steadiness. To devote oneself in the presence of impermanence is the human condition; the reality of Earthly passions, and why love is so beautiful, so boundless, and so heartbreaking.
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