

Moonlit Irony: Excavating the Metaphysics of Marginalized Relationships in “The Goose Fish”

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Abstract: Howard Nemerov’s 1977 poem “The Goose Fish” is lauded by critics as a staple of poetic irony. With a close reading of the poem’s several intertwining layers of consciousness and social narrative, and engagement with relevant scholarship on the life and works of Nemerov, I argue that this irony is twofold: while it is undoubtedly an ironic manipulation of a sexual encounter, it is also a more serious commentary on the condition of shame and sexuality in marginalized relationships.

Rife with dark irony, Howard Nemerov’s “The Goose Fish” (1977) meditates on sex and secrecy as contextualized through the relationship between two lovers. Both a symbol of shame and destiny, the figurative goose fish overshadows the lovers’ sensuality. It evokes a sense of foreboding within the context of their relationship while illustrating a broader social landscape that is as ugly as it is alluring. Building metaphorical layers onto the scene of an intimate exchange between individuals, the goose fish symbolically excavates the spectres of social shame, painful irony, and tragic predestiny in marginalized relationships—queer, class-divided, pre-marital, or otherwise.

The specific circumstances of the lovers’ relationship are ambiguous; we know only that its nature is somehow forbidden. The situation could be manifesting in several ways; it may be a simple matter of a love that has yet to be officially consummated—the lovers are young and thus open to a number of social roadblocks in their pursuit of a union. The issue could be one of class, with the lovers being restricted to nighttime trysts beyond the expectations of

their “real” lives. There is room as well for a queer reading of the poem. The lovers are “conspiring hand in hand” (Nemerov 14), suggesting a unity of motivation and, therefore, of a shared social shame in the action. In every possibility, the strong allusions towards a typified state of marginalization make the poem applicable to a variety of specific social concerns, and the poem’s mechanics lay the groundwork for analysis of marginalization as an emotional, as well as social, state of being.

The appearance of the goose fish following an act of sexual intercourse positions the fish as a conduit for shame, and the presence of shame is underscored by the implication that the lovers are committing a social transgression. Thinking themselves alone, they “suddenly embraced” (3), but the implied progression of action is interrupted by the advent of the goose fish “turning up, though dead, / His hugely grinning head” (17–18). It appears “As though the world had found them out” (16), shattering the illusion of the private sphere created by the lovers’ merging shadows and physical closeness. The interruption is both literal and metaphysical, as the lovers are evidently more than capable of conjuring their own shame and being “Embarrassed in each other’s sight” (13). James Kiehl observes Nemerov’s fixation with “the idea that our mode of observation significantly determines what we see” (238). The lovers exist within a moment in time wherein sight itself is determined by the appearance of the moon; their intimacy is disruptively illuminated by what they see, moonlight being the only mode of observation available to them in the surrounding darkness. The evocation of shame at the sight of the goose fish is therefore a symptom of the presence and effect of previous shame on their relationship, cutting intimate moments short and tainting their experience of each other.

At the same time, the fish embodies the lovers’ potential as a couple. In a manner that chips at, if not hacks down, the poem’s fourth wall, the goose fish is recognizable to the lovers as both a symbol and a prophetic vessel. Although “They knew not what he would express” (Nemerov 30), the lovers “took it for an emblem of / Their sudden, new and

guilty love” (34). Their choice is a calculated and conscious one, despite its emotional urgency. Examining Nemerov’s image- and symbol-based poems, Kiehl questions if “we see things because we are there in nature, or [if] things exist [...] because we see them?” (Kiehl 257). This question is highly relevant to the lovers’ decision to adopt the goose fish as a talisman to ward off future potential harm, anticipated as an inevitable outcome of their union. The fish seems to exist in a liminal plane between the real and imagined, anchored to the physical only because it has been seen by the lovers and made real by their anxieties. The two go on to adopt the goose fish as “their patriarch” (Nemerov 37), entrusting their fate as a couple to a symbol that is both ambiguous and enigmatic. In a sense, then, their shared sexual guilt is self-affirming. Once again, there is a clash between real strife and laughable naivety.

The contrast between the fish’s omen-like presence and the lovers’ choice to adopt it as a symbol of their love reveals the forbidden nature of their relationship. They attempt to “make a world their own” (27) but cannot escape the eyes of society, as transmitted through the goose fish’s unblinking and darkly comical watchfulness. The fish’s associations with comedy and amusement strike an ironic chord under the ongoing development of a moonlit tryst. Sensuality, comedy, and irony clash jarringly. The result is an image of a relationship that, despite its situation outside of public knowledge, is entirely bound up within the expectations of a society that compels and rejects it simultaneously. In this manner, the poem introduces moral undercurrents that are left open for readerly interpretation. Dale Smith identifies poetry as “a system of moral inquiry” whose “force of relation, of acknowledgement, exposes conditions of thought and feeling” (113). Smith speaks here of the expression of human relationships in poetry, and “The Goose Fish” is certainly focused around this expression. In this case, though, the “conditions” exposed by the poem are both externally and internally sourced. The lovers’ shared ruminations on shame imply a level of self-awareness that is nevertheless dependent on the symbolic goose fish to predict the future.

This symbol identification also signifies the couple's awareness of the social frameworks they are transgressing. In keeping with the characters' adoption of the goose fish as a symbol for the future, they question their belonging in society but are still able to invest their trust in the fish, "That rigid optimist" (Nemerov 36), to epitomize their potential.

In another ironic discordance with the lovers' emotional investment in the future, the ugliness of the goose fish forebodes the potential ugliness of the relationship. Its grin is described as "peaceful and obscene" (29), a direct tie to the sexual encounter between the lovers. Being as clandestine as it is, the relationship is unlikely to survive "the hard moon's bony light" (11) or rather, the judgment of society, as transmitted by the goose fish and illuminated by the moon. The lovers are faced with two options, both painful; they may continue to love in secret or end the relationship altogether. The poem alludes to a potential for strain and tarnish on the union, but the commentary on ugliness as it relates to romance is twofold, criticizing a society that would exclude marginal love as much as it criticizes those who subject themselves to love on the margins. There is a dark irony embedded in this criticism and a sense of hopelessness accentuated by the goose fish's death-induced stasis. The resulting effect is a kind of shadowy tongue-in-cheek humour quite typical of Nemerov, who "considered puns to be like Freudian slips—the sentinels of the unconscious ... [which allow] us to glimpse the deep associations hidden under logic and rationality" (Pettingell 707). For the lovers, the "logic" of consummating their mutual love is overridden by socially imposed shame, with the goose fish acting metonymically as a "deep association" to their awareness of marginality. In this case, the goose fish as a prediction of misfortune unearths a deeper association with marginalization.

On a darker level, the goose fish tarnishes the sensuality between the lovers in a way that suggests that sex itself is fundamentally ugly. While the poem's themes are not anti-sexual, the personification of the goose fish digs at an underlying conception of sex as an animalistic urge, messy and

unattractive, as opposed to its glamourization in popular culture. The poem invites an examination of these concepts, their roots and their manifestations. The stigmatization of sex frequently feeds into the social rejection of marginalized groups—most notably, LGBTQ+ individuals. Deborah Lupton points to how “[n]egative emotions such as blame, fear and disgust have been evident [in public] responses to people with HIV/AIDS,” diseases associated most commonly with gay men (Lupton 2013). The social declaiming of sex on the margins, alongside its association with animalism, casts the poem’s sexual context in a complicated cultural light. When seen through this lens, however, sex is also an undeniable drive, which harkens back to the speaker’s commentary on marginalized relationships. If the union is as inescapable as it is forbidden, then the ugliness is unavoidable. The goose fish’s horrendous appearance and situation within the poem work together to come to this conclusion, with shame standing in as both a literal emotion and a symbolic aspect of the goose fish. For the lovers, socially constructed sexual guilt is a self-affirming prophecy, part of the cycle of secrecy and marginalization they are trapped in.

Nemerov’s use of prophetic language and concluding allusion to the zodiac foreshadow the lovers’ future together in a negative light. The disappearance of the moon leaves the poem somewhat open-ended, as all prior action is illuminated and contextualized by the presence of the moon. Shortly after the lovers’ encounter with the fish, the moon disappears “Along the still and tilted track / That bears the zodiac” (Nemerov 44–45), concluding with an invocation of predestiny that links the zodiac’s symbolism to that of the goose fish. The goose fish’s ominous symbolism builds to this final assertion of the lovers’ lack of control over their future together and serves to recall the notion of inescapable ugliness and pain resulting from their union. While the lovers are willing to attempt to build their own future and are more or less reconciled to the uncertainty of it, this final line seals their fate in the stars. The implication of unavoidable tragedy in love has ties to romantic-tragic fictional tropes, and the concept of sealed fate enhances the dark irony of

the poem as a whole. The accents of these tropes further underscore the poem's ironic subtext, as they clash with the fact that there is something truly, unironically pitiable about these lovers. Like fated protagonists from a heroic ballad, the lovers' chief concerns are their need to be together and the social barriers preventing them from accomplishing this union publically. Nevertheless, they bend themselves unswervingly on the mission of transgressing those barriers, physically and symbolically.

Through a blending of the physical and metaphysical, "The Goose Fish" is both intimate and socially provocative. It is quintessential of Nemerov's distinctions as a poet, viciously humorous, and steeped in symbolism, while being simultaneously grounded in a concrete scenario with strong physical and sexual associations. Secret love overlaid with shame and guilt builds an emotional framework that becomes increasingly cosmic as the poem progresses, reaching beyond the circumstances of two human beings to scrape at the barnacled underbelly of a social ugliness embodied by the corpse of a fish. The hapless lovers are caught between the compulsion of love and its tragic implications: they are trapped by the future yet enthralled with the present, and over everything presides the goose fish, grinning gill-to-gill at the irony of it all.

Works Cited

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