

Eastern Washington University

“Between the bitter and the sweet”:

longing and intimacy in Sappho’s and June Jordan’s love poems

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June Jordan (1936 - 2002), Jamaican-American poet, activist and educator is most known for her political poetry while the breadth of her work spans many themes. At the core of her work, she writes as a lyrical poet which shows her readers how important it is to see the core human emotions of longing and intimacy through the personal “I.” It is this clear pillar of Jordan’s work that draws direct line to the originator of the love lyric: Sappho. Even more so, June Jordan’s love poetry reverberates with the language, the themes, and the power of Sappho’s many-centuries’ influence on Western poetry.

Both June Jordan and Sappho’s works put the reader inside the speakers’ bodies with potent detail, and oftentimes pulling from natural phenomena to match the intensity of emotional and sexual communion. They even share a constellation of imagery including reptiles, the influence of celestial bodies, and the fire underneath the skin when one is lit with desire for another person.

The connections between their work are clear: they write about their intimate moments. They don’t obfuscate the universality of love and desire with over-intricate verbal density and instead lean into using language to embody private moments. They write about the bitterness experienced after their same-sex loves have left them. And even with this bitterness, Jordan and Sappho write about how they would welcome the intimacy again without hesitation. Through reading Jordan’s work, we witness the evolution of lyrical poetry through June Jordan’s love poems while discussing the reverberations of Sappho’s poetic fragments in her work.

It is fascinating to see how much subject matter June Jordan has explored in the breadth of her work. Her political analysis, observations on American racial violence, her experience with sexual violence, her love of music, and dozens and dozens of topics show her fierce intellect and deeply feeling personhood. She tackles such atrocities as the South African apartheid, detailing the futility and violence of the bombings in Baghdad. And she spends the same energy on her lyrical poetry: treating sexual arousal, affection, her personal life and heartbreak equally to ghastly and global affairs. We see through her work and Sappho's that lyrical poetry treats the personal moment as important enough to record, share, disseminate, repeat, and model. And Jordan's lyrics are just as potent as Sappho's, so many years later, and echo Sappho's brevity—whether intentional or not—her imagery, her sweetness, and her bitterness too.

We don't know if Sappho also recorded the darkest atrocities of humankind. We are aware that she lived during warring times, and we do read some references to wartime in her work. It may speak to her evergreen poetical genius that she chose to write lyrics of love and longing over those depicting war too.

“I” as Universal:

Poetry that focuses on the personal has the ability to be felt more deeply and more widely by readers than the poetry of largesse, or of a specific time, place, and history such as done in epic poetry, or outside of the “I” perspective. It's the immediacy of lyrical poetry that drives at a deeper connection between all humans. If the reader can take the “I” in the lyric poem to speak directly to their life, their experience too, the poem has become the most effective. And even

though Jordan and Sappho both depict intimacy with same-sex loves, the gender of the subject is not necessarily important for the reader to put their own object of affection in her place. For Jordan, the lover was Haruko. For Sappho, it is likely that it was a woman named Atthis. Even with the addressed loves having specific names, the poems still feel like the reader could have felt what was written about their own. This is the “I” as universal: as common as the experience of love, sexual desire, and loss of love, lyrical poetry such as Sappho’s and Jordan’s help all of us find the words to describe how it has felt to be one human in love with another.

Sappho and June Jordan’s poems span the spectrum of intimate moments. It seems to be the most common theme of intimate lyrics is that of powerful or elemental love. In her poem “Poem for Haruko,” Jordan writes:

How easily you held
 my hand
 beside the low tide
 of the world (475)

In this selection from Jordan’s poem, it is clear that she writes about her love for Haruko and Haruko’s love for her as an example of allowing oneself to be moved by elements outside of one’s own control. Despite “the low tide of the world,” Jordan’s speaker is allowing themselves to be taken up and changed by another person, just as the world’s “low tide” moves in and out, outside of the control of one individual. This concept of elemental sweeping mirrors Sappho’s poem “Without warning”:

As a whirlwind
 swoops on an oak
 Love shakes my heart (Barnard 44)

We see Sappho has also allowed herself to be shaken by the presence of a lover. In both Jordan's and Sappho's poems, the natural elements of a whirlwind swooping on a tree and the idea of being held below the low ocean tide shows that the speakers could not predict the movement, they could only allow it to take them and change their experience in their lives. Just as a lover comes in and changes them unpredictably.

Maybe an even more powerful change of course in one's personal is that of sexual desire. Our poets depict that un-rational, all-encompassing quality of physical, sexual desire and the sharing of bodily pleasure. In the 4th section of June Jordan's "12:01AM," she writes:

Forget about fever
 Forget about healthy or unhealthy
 this or that
 At times
 The flesh below the thin skin
 of your naked leg
 seems to my pilgrim lips
 a living column smooth but swollen
 with the juice of my new
 Destiny (476)

And, with equal sensuality, Sappho writes addressing Eros as the god of sexual desire and sensual pleasure :

Eros the melter of limbs (now again) stirs me—
 sweetbitter unmanageable creature who steals in (Carson 265)

It's important to point out the use of the words "fever" and "unmanageable" in these poems as ways to describe what feels like madness when swept up in a moment of desire realized. Both favor a more conceptual approach to sexual desire rather than relying on description of the physical elements of the sex act, although Jordan does hint at the bodies participating with "pilgrim lips" and "naked leg." Similarly, Sappho gives us just a bit of embodiment with the words "melter of limbs."

Just as important for lyrical poetry as the subject of sexual desire is that of a more tender, quieter, and domestic love. Sappho writes in "If you will come":

I shall put out
 new pillows for
 you to rest on (Barnard 45)

This poem, short and sweet, evokes feelings of comfort, care, and gentle invitation toward a lover. As if completing the scene, Jordan writes in "Mendocino Memory":

I found the other half above the pillow
 where you lay
 asleep
 face to one side
 with nothing in this world
 or the next
 to hide (491)

Let's continue this conversation of pillow talk poems with Sappho's:

And with sweet oil
 costly

you anointed yourself

and on a soft bed

delicate

you would let loose your longing

and neither any[]nor any

holy place nor

was there from which we were absent

no grove[]no dance

]no sound

[(Carson 187)

There's so much gentleness in Sappho's and Jordan's care for their lovers. And, Jordan shows her lover's care for her in return. In this excerpt from "Poem for Haruko", Jordan writes:

to how you held a towel

wide as your slender arms are long

to fold around me

shivering from the bathtub

how you held a children's story

close to my almost closing eyelids

how you held me

free

as I could ever hope
to be (485)

The subject is showing the speaker in Jordan's poem almost parental love with the level of care shown in this domestic sphere. I can almost hear Jordan's speaker using Sappho's poem "Tell me" to ask her love:

Out of all
mankind, whom
do you love

Better than
you love me? (Barnard 58)

But just as great love comes in swooping like an uncontrollable squall, love often leaves the individual lost and yearning. Sappho and Jordan both hold in their collections deeply evocative lyrics of loss, heartbreak, and bitterness. Sappho writes in "It is clear now":

Neither honey nor
the honey bee is
to be mine again (Barnard 55)

And, she writes in "Day in, day out":

I hunger and
I struggle (Barnard 56)

And, she writes in "Pain penetrates":

Me drop

by drop (Barnard 61)

In just as existential and bereft tone, June Jordan writes in her 5th section of “12:01AM”:

Then how should I
subsist
without the benediction of our bodies
intertwined
or why? (476)

And, Jordan writes in even more painful detail in “Update, for Haruko”:

More than two months since a carousel of misery
accursed and violent ensnared my mind and
spinning me vertiginous in solitude and
alternating trustful lust with lyrical delirium
or pain irregular as drought or rain
crushed out the flowering of surprise and still today drains
all the colors of the world into the pointless
pulverizing dry bed of a dried up hand (479)

Just as Sappho set the foundation for what would become all of Western pop music (remember Haddaway’s “What is Love (Baby Don’t Hurt Me)”), we see the Sapphic lyric of heartbreak perpetuated by June Jordan clearly. In every “I” or personal moment June Jordan writes, her poems are made universal and ready-for-use for whenever a reader should need to commiserate love lost, or celebrate the beginning of a new affair.

Constellation of Imagery:

No poet owns the things of the world. But when the pens and tongues of two poets overlap so clearly, it is important to shine a light on the intersections. When one thinks of the breadth of a poet's work, let's say Walt Whitman's: we conjure up his iterations of drift and debris, of selfhood, of cosmos, of soldiers, maybe. Leaves and grass. Carl Sandburg's breadth includes the machines and dusk and smoke of a steel-mill roof and ice and snow. Lorine Niedecker: the loon, the lake, the house, the whispers of flooding. So, too, we see Sappho's constellation of imagery including fire, quince-apple, purples, Aphrodite, garments, and maidens. It is curious to me to find in both June Jordan's and Sappho's love poetry images of reptiles, the moon, wind, and water. Their constellations of imagery also overlap so much in the manner that they use the cosmos and heat to convey desire, longing, and love lost.

It must be so rare for a poet to select a reptile to illustrate the pest that is heartbreak, but maybe not so rare at all. It's true that when a reptile is near, it's not usually by choice nor is it a situation where one can feel at ease, much like how heartsickness feels. And Sappho, with what limited text we have written by her, used this analogy in her poem "With his venom":

Irresistible

and bittersweet

that loosener

of limbs, Love

reptile-like

strikes me down (Barnard 53)

And so, too, June Jordan many-hundreds of years later used the same image in her poem titled

“Poem about Heartbreak That Go On and On”:

bad love last like a big
ugly lizard crawl around the house
forever
and never change itself

into a butterfly (483)

Both poems correlate bad, bittersweet, yet irresistible love to a reptile and with June Jordan’s poem using the imagery of a butterfly, it echoes the thought that she’s struck (or, stuck) down as Sappho wrote directly. Reptiles, stuck to the ground to crawl or clamber over only, can not be free to move in the sky like easy love.

And much less rare is any poet’s utilization of the cosmos to depict emotions difficult to describe on the Earthly plane. Even so, our poets Sappho and Jordan write for us the night sky, the moon, and the stars to specifically depict the longing that happens once a lover has left.

Sappho writes in “Tonight I’ve watched”:

The moon and then
the Pleiades
go down

The night is now
half-gone; youth

goes; I am

in bed alone (Barnard 64)

This poem is almost line-for-line reprised in two of the following June Jordan poems. From “I train my eyes to see”:

And like the stars
above the dark far streets
between us (496)

And then in the 7th section of “12:01AM”:

I am my soul adrift
the whole night sky denies me light
without you (477)

And countless more times does June Jordan use the moon, the stars, and other celestial bodies to depict growing love and also waning love. In the breadth of Sappho’s work, celestial bodies are called upon just as often to express adoration. Both of these poets aim to aggrandize the objects of their affection to match the power of stars and moons.

A good example of June Jordan using the cosmos to lift up the significance of a loving moment is in an excerpt from the poem “Mendocino Memory”:

Half moon
cold and low above the poplar tree
and sweet pea petals
pink and white/what
happened

on this personal best night
for casual stars
and silky constellations
streaming brilliant
through the far
forgetful darkness
of the sky (491)

The last major overlap of Sappho's and Jordan's constellations of imagery is that of heat, fire, coolness, the cold, and the switching between these two sensations while representing desire and bittersweet loss.

There are two exact poems that use the sensation of heat connected to lust or desire that precede a moment of lonesome longing. In Sappho's poem #46 that Mary Barnard has titled "Thank you, my dear" we see more gratitude than in a selection of June Jordan's "Poem for Haruko":

Now I do
relive an evening of retreat
a bridge I left behind
where all the solid heat
of lust and tender trembling
lay as cruel and as kind
as passion spins its infinite
tergiversations in between the bitter

and the sweet

Alone and longing for you

now I do (475)

In this poem by Jordan, there's clear mention of reliving moments of heated passion with her ex-lover, both "the bitter and the sweet" where we read Sappho's poem as more thankful for the moments that had passed, despite being alone "as the hours have been endless to me while you were gone":

You came, and you did

well to come: I needed

you. You have made

love blaze up in

my breast—bless you!

Bless you as often

as the hours have

been endless to me

while you were gone (Barnard 46)

I see the mention of heat in the same space as time has cooled it off in both of their poems.

Another conversation between their poems discussing the heating up and cooling off of passion are the two following poems. First is Sappho's:

you came and I was crazy for you

and you cooled my mind that burned with longing (Carson 101)

This poem should be read in conversation with June Jordan's "A Poem for Haruko 10/29":

because

it's about my anger

smoldering

because your stillness

kills simplicity

and chills

this willing ardor

swept back

into realms of doubt

and ordinary feats

of regular and unimpassioned

sensible retreat

wherein an ending to my love

for you

will stretch its scaly

full length into light

that shrivels

innocence

and warps the silent mouth

of adoration

into bitten
 blighted
 bloom
 Oh! If you would only walk
 into this room
 again and touch me anywhere
 I swear
 I would not long for heaven or
 for earth
 more than I'd wish to stay there
 touched
 and touching you (481)

No poet owns the millions of things of the universe, but Jordan's and Sappho's constellations of imagery overlap in their parts of the sky. Of all the items and sensations in the world to pick from, our two lyrical poets chose from such similar images to depict equally similar themes. This conjures the notion of "as it is above, so it is below": might there be a universality beyond our current consciousness to the human body, sexual desire, and the mysterious ways of nature and the cosmos?

We read through June Jordan's lyrics and feel Sappho's legacy living in them. Both of these poets so clearly illustrate how the capriciousness of intense amorous love can be. Even though they hold bitterness and heartsickness in the place of the intense desire, they would still welcome their lovers back. June Jordan writes:

Oh! If you would only walk
into this room
again and touch me anywhere
I swear
I would not long for heaven or
for earth
more than I'd wish to stay there
touched
and touching you (481-482)

And although Jordan may not directly be quoting Sappho in her writing, it's clear that she is the
"someone" in this poem by Sappho as translated by Anne Carson:

someone will remember us

I say

even in another time (297)

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