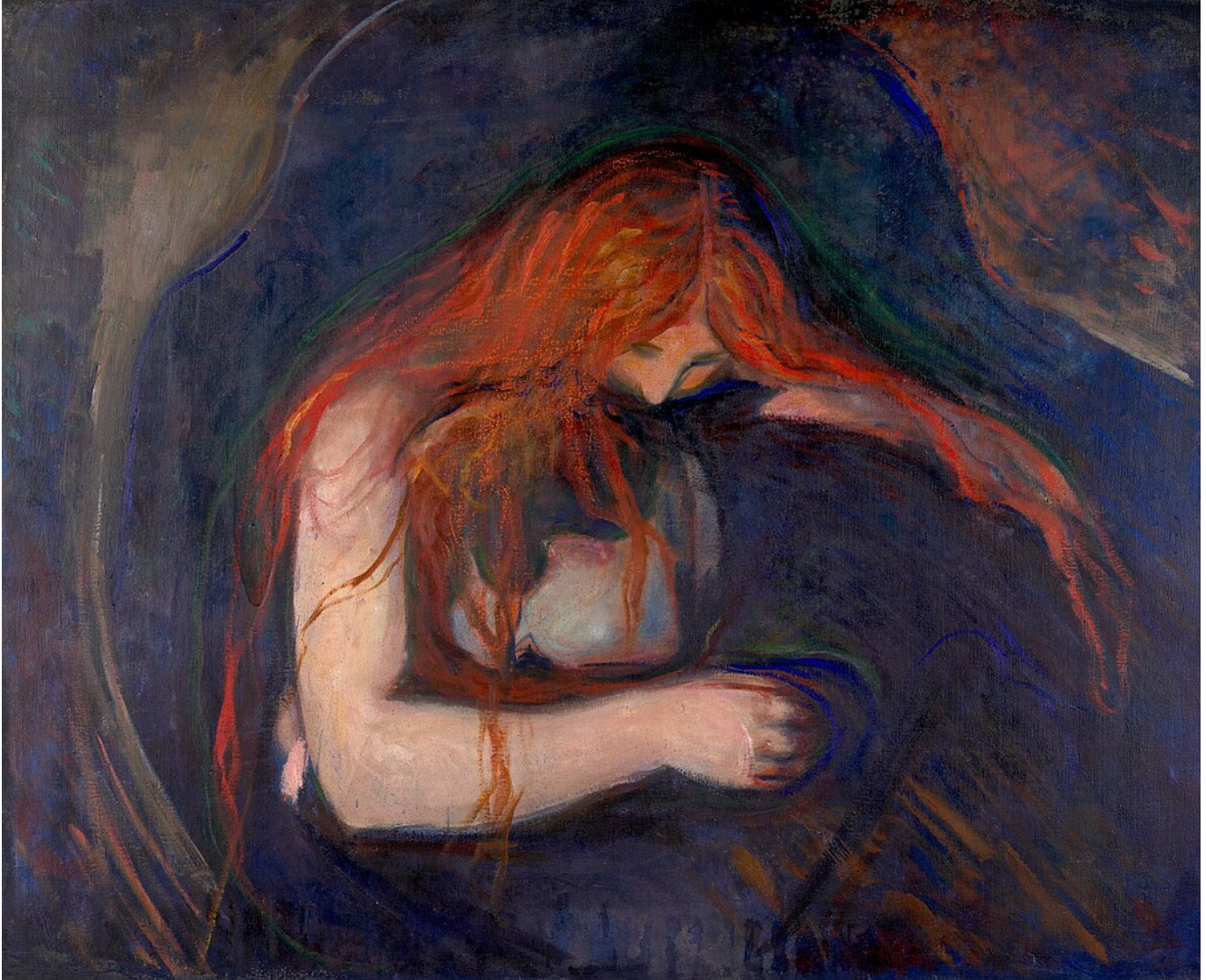


# Love and Pain

by [Lucius Falkland](#) (February 2024)



Love and Pain, Edvard Munch, 1895

## The Other Woman

For a while, I kept you separate from each other  
Like a mistress and a wife. You do the same.  
The resonance; my spirit, but far younger;  
My second youth, who glowed just when I glowed,  
And the Other, who, with just the slightest warning

In the eyes, the merest hint of opaque glass,  
Or discordant, nervous words, "Shut up, shut up!"  
Would appear. And any glow was a reflection in the ice:

"This isn't over yet!" she'd spit out, ominous.  
"Can't I take you anywhere?! Have you no reverence?!"  
My heart pumped as though life was under threat;  
Her Arctic blast would petrify my confidence  
And in that moment, in her eyes, I'd feel worth nothing,  
Not even the dirt between those Kings Lynn cobbles,  
And like a child, his mother dark-despondent,  
Slapped and slapped again by the only one he loves,  
I'd be shaking, "What have I done . . . to deserve this?"

"I can't do this anymore. I'm sorry. I knew this was a  
mistake."

One afternoon she appeared at Lower Morden stables  
In that same semi-trance I'd seen before,  
Repeating her lines in a gnostic ritual,  
A response to a malevolent universe  
In which she is just about surviving;  
A street child in the Leningrad winter:  
She has to think of herself, finds nothing wrong  
With using people, with marrying a man she doesn't love,  
Because nobody really cares about her,  
Not her best friend, not her parents, not me:  
"I can't do this anymore. I'm sorry. I knew this was a mistake  
. . ."

Then, gradually, after a long silence, she is gone  
And it's as though she was never there.  
I hear the apology as my second youth just about  
Accepts that something went wrong.  
Then the love glows like a Victorian lamplight,  
Such that I doubt my memory:  
I keep you separate.  
I try to pretend only one exists;  
That there are not three of us in this relationship.

But she will always return; the frightened, belted child  
Who turns me into herself.

## The End of the Affair

*... love dies, affection and habit win the day.* –Graham Greene,  
*The End of the Affair*

We took branches from that enchanted stem  
That night we met. Asleep yet while awake,  
We lay down upon the yellow sand to dream  
Of our life and the literature we'd make.

The fumes, like gentle music, made it clear  
As those waterfalls, just like a downward smoke:  
I'd leave my kids, my wife of twenty years.  
We'd abandon stable, dull: You'd leave your bloke.

"By Christmas," we sang, gazing at the moon,  
"These spiritual halves will reunite,  
Bisected by the gods, they'll re-fuse soon,  
In a world of purple haze; of evening light."

Then gradually the dream was less surreal:  
We'd take our time, see who we truly were.  
Elopement would transpire. We made a deal  
To wait for summer; to destiny defer.

Then we awoke, just like an infant crying  
In the night, and with no language but a cry,  
To diurnal life of work and bonds and buying.  
It was wearing off, now only slightly high.

We took branches from that enchanted stem.  
This time the dream was more surreal than ever:  
I'd stay with wife and kids, you'd marry him

But we'd cuckold him and have a child together.

You looked into the legal situation,  
Concluded it was morally quite fair:  
It was Fate who had burned us with temptation.  
It'd wreck our lives one day; we didn't care.

Then we awoke and stared across the morning bay.  
We were sober; there were no more flowers about.  
Affection, habit, we knew now, had won the day.  
Affairs die when the dreams run out.

### The Theatre of Conflict

I'm trapped in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre  
Watching the first night of Macbeth.  
She ascends to the outer Heavens of elation  
And falls to the magma-filled pits of fury;  
Is blown off course, like those Viking raiders,  
To the biting Greenland of despair  
And even though she throws me to the tundra  
With her Fagradalsfjall-like eruptions  
I see my own reflection in her Tsunami ebbs and flows  
Which creates a tidal power I've never felt before,  
A power strong enough to fuse tectonic plates.  
Life outside the theatre carries on,  
My son turns twelve soon; my duties are there  
In the Non-Fiction section of affection and habit  
But, transfixed by this production,  
I cannot leave.  
I have stood up and moved to the exit,  
Where the usher stands, torch-in-hand,  
But I don't quite want to go.

Shady Meg

You wrote that, "though nineteen years older,"  
I somehow "bottled your spirit,"  
As you sat behind me, inspired  
By seventeenth century verse;  
Wishing it was "us two being wedded."

I wished it too, as midlife visions  
Clouded me like sandalwood incense,  
Enchanted me, like Latin Psalms,  
Until that night a different spirit  
Entered you or did it emerge from you?

At some imprudent word of mine,  
Your eyes glazed,  
As if etched in Hogarth's Gin Lane,  
And the whole world, including me,  
Became as threatening as cholera.  
You entered that fever-trance,  
Repeating those lines  
Like an incantation.

Trapped in our room,  
In that Kings Lynn vicarage,  
Now a money-making hotel,  
I sat, transfixed.  
Energy drained,  
Intimacy drained,  
The certainty you were true love drained:  
Each line cut me,  
Until I was so numb I would have  
Sliced my wrist just to feel something again;  
To feel something for you:

"I want to go home.  
I knew this was a mistake!"

He's a good man!  
He doesn't deserve this!  
I can't do this anymore!  
So what if I don't love him!  
I'll marry him!  
Who really marries for love anyway?  
I've worked so fucking hard!  
They'll all take his side!  
It's my career!  
Fuck it!  
What's wrong with a bit of materialism?!  
I want to go home . . ."  
You collapsed on our bed,  
Weeping into a curled lump.

We passed that black diamond mark,  
Making our way to the station,  
Where the young witch's heart burst from her chest  
As they burned her, so it's said.

All feeling evaporated from me,  
I shivered at the thought of last night.  
Then I wondered what "Shady Meg" had done  
To make the men of the Ouse so petrified.  
What had they seen in her?  
Was my life just seventeenth century verse?  
Was I just playing a part  
That so many middle-aged men have played before?

### Leaving the Manor House

Like that abandoned manor house,  
You draw me in with an intellectual sparkle.  
Thomas Hobbes, Ben Jonson, other heretics,  
All met there, clandestinely,

Just as we must meet.

Like me, and that Cotswold hall,  
A sense of history tingles within you:  
For us, something beyond the mere material  
Seeps through those seventeenth century stones  
And seems to glow through you and me  
Such that your world is my world.  
You burn through my boarded windows  
And I burn through yours.

But as I return, now, to explore it again,  
I am fully aware of the risks:  
The rotten floor boards,  
The ceilings that could collapse violently,  
The particles of asbestos,  
The wasps' nests that emit the faintest sound,  
If any sound at all.

In the flooded dining room,  
I remember your eyes, glassy,  
As I suggested we go elsewhere for coffee.  
In a second, I'm no longer your lover.  
I'm all that is evil.

"I just want to go home, to be honest.  
I think we need to spend some time apart."  
And you are gone.

For an hour, I pace around Chipping Norton,  
Shivering with shock;  
That feeling of worthlessness.  
Eventually, you say, "Sorry,"  
As usual.

I know I must leave the manor house.  
The thrill of the exploration,  
The intimate immersion,  
Is not worth the swarms,

Not worth the asbestos.  
Still you draw me in but I know  
I am worth more than this.

Gradually, one delicate step at a time,  
I make my way towards that broken window.  
The glass catches my jacket  
And pulls me back inside:  
I tear my way forward.

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Lucius Falkland is the *nom de plume* of a writer and academic from London.

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