

***Wilted Love in Broken Flowers,***  
***a film by Jim Jarmusch***

Reflections on non-love

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The director and writer, Jim Jarmusch, says of this film that it is about when you are yearning for something missing, but you don't know what you are missing. When we chose the theme for this year's series, *What Is This Thing Called Love?*, this film came to mind. One might too easily make the statement that Don Johnston, the protagonist of the story, is missing love. However, such a conclusion may be premature, so I would rather leave it as a question, is he missing love? No matter the answer to the question, I will state that Don suffers from non-love, an ill-defined term I have designed for the purpose of this discussion. I do suggest that as Don becomes aware of his non-love, and his realization that something – maybe something else other than love – is missing, his journey can teach us some things about the nature of love.

While *Broken Flowers* is considered one of Jarmusch's more accessible films, this is only relative to his other work. Jarmusch is not a writer who intends a specific message or wants to provide specific meaning. In fact, he states that it is not his job to know what something means, that it is his job to make the movie, and as such the audience's interpretations may be more important than his own. He encourages us as viewers to be active in wondering about the character and the story, rather than passively accept what is being offered, a challenging task if you are hoping for basic entertainment. Of course this appeals to me as a psychoanalyst where my job is to actively listen for the unconscious, not simply accept what is consciously offered in a session with an analysand.

The film begins with the journey of a letter, being deposited in a mailbox in a nondescript location, going through the mail system, even on a flight, eventually arriving at the home of Don Johnston. Just before it is taken to his door, the mail carrier passes the home of Winston and his family, with children in the yard, toys scattered around, and music playing, a contrast to Don's empty, silent, manicured yard. Right away we as viewers are confronted with a loss of something vivacious, something libidinal, in the scene. Inside we meet Don sitting still in his quiet, dark living room, a contrast to the film playing in the background, namely, *The Private Life of Don Juan*. As Sheri enters the room it is clear we are witnessing the end of a relationship, one in which she has been a mistress to a bachelor. When Don says he gets it, she responds “No you don't. But it's okay. That's the way you are. You're never going to change.”. She is identifying that there is something that interferes in his having a relationship; it is acted out when he calls after her, but then has nothing to say. As such, the first aspect of Don's non-love is not a loss, as one cannot lose something that was never there. Some of this is evident when later Winston expresses sympathy for Don's loss in saying “I'm sorry.” to which Don

responds, “Me too....I think.”. However, while Don has not been able to love Sheri in any sustainable way, this does not mean that he is missing the ability to love.

After Sheri's departure Don crosses the River Styx of the property line, from his sterile and sedate yard to that of Winston's family, libidinally chaotic and vivacious, where he is readily accepted, where whatever he is missing is irrelevant. It is here the letter is opened, “Sometimes life brings some strange surprises”, and Don learns that he has a 19 year old son who may be seeking him out. Of course this letter is the catalyst for change in this tale; it seems that Don has never reflected on his non-love and this news will insist on an introspective journey. The letter alone does not engage Don, as he wishes to write it off as nothing or as someone playing a joke on him, but it certainly captures Winston's attention. Winston has more than enough excitement and curiosity to share with his friend, first exclaiming, “Congratulations! You're a father!”. Winston loves a good detective story, and Don's new mystery is irresistible.

Over the next scenes Winston cajoles Don into action, contrary to his usual passive acceptance of his non-love and its consequences. Initially Winston uses his own energy to keep the curiosity going, coming up with a plan to discover which of his girlfriends from twenty years ago may have written the letter. He has tracked down the women from Don's list, and booked flights, hotels, and rental cars. But he also insists that it is Don who carries out the project. When Don tries to have Winston do the journey for him, Winston responds like a good analyst, “Me? Impossible! I've got three jobs and five kids. And besides, it's your life. I've merely prepared the strategy, but only you can solve the mystery. .... Because you understand women.”.

Before we continue with Don on his journey, there is the important scene of the Sunday brunch. First, we witness Don having a tea party with one of Winston and Mona's daughters. He is clearly able to play, teasing the girl about how her father is really a famous detective. And talking to Mona, he sincerely declares her to be the perfect woman. The film suggests that she is warm, sexual, loving, and maternal, and she is likely a type of person Don has never been able to seek for himself. I suggest that this scene demonstrates Don actually has the ability to love, and while still very reserved, he is able to express this sincerely in this milieu. Thus another aspect of Don's non-love is that he does not seek what he truly desires.

Don eventually begins the journey to find the possible mother of his possible son, and in the airport we see him for the first time not wearing a track suit (which we may surmise has symbolized his apathetic approach to living). With a hint of flirtation he admires an attractive woman sitting next to him in the waiting

area, and we can easily imagine this as a repetition of his relationships, highly sexual but without any acknowledgment of the desire for something fulfilling on a deeper level of attachment to the other. On a bus after the flight he observes two adolescent girls gush over a handsome young man. Don seems to be reminiscing, identifying with the young man, possibly imagining him as his son, a chip off the old block, each driving off in the same white rental car.

Arriving at Laura's home, he is greeted by her daughter, Lolita (Lola) who definitely lives up to her namesake from the Nabokov novel, instinctually flirting with the much older man. Fortunately Don is not a Humbert Humbert (the novel's protagonist), and he is not distracted from his investigation. Laura does not immediately recognize Don, but is pleased to see him. Dinner briefly allows the veneer of family, and Don does spend the night. My impression is that Laura is very much like Don, quite comfortable with highly charged sexuality; also similar is that she seems to have no real interest in seeking a deeper connection with him. As he leaves, her invitation to him to return sometime seems mostly a polite afterthought rather than an expression of desire. While Laura seems to have been very willing to share a passionate sexual relationship, she would never share a deeper love with Don.

Dora's home is far more austere, far more a facade, than Don's own home, every element designed to be pleasantly appealing but also completely unobtrusive, without any original creativity that might inspire passion. It certainly seems a reflection of Dora, who is highly controlled and inhibited. We are also introduced to Ron, Dora's husband, who is subtly but deeply controlling of her, in part reflected in his possessive jealousy of her in the presence of Don, her former lover. Ron chose her career - real estate rather than bottled water - chose the colour of her business card - pink as a companion to his blue. Her only independence was refusing to have children with her husband. In a reaction formation to his jealousy, Ron brings out a photo of Dora, from when she was seemingly a very different person, though he is compelled to stake his claim by describing her as "my straight little Dora". One might postulate that Dora has only changed superficially in all these years, that she is quite dependent in her character. Don, who was unwilling to invest himself in her, was ill suited to meet her dependency needs, so instead she found Ron, an abusive man quite willing to control this vulnerable woman.

Carmen, or Dr. Markowski the animal communicator, is the next person in Don's investigation. She is also possessively guarded by her assistant, with hints of more than a simple employer-employee relationship

between the two. Unlike Laura's warmth, or Dora's distancing anxiety, Carmen's reception of Don is much more hostile, barely covered by her civility. She will barely endure Don's presence, and is definitely not nostalgic about their past. When Don remembers her passion for the law – maybe also her passion for him – Carmen's response is, “Yah, well. Passion's a funny thing.”. This statement does echo the problem of Don's non-love, that it is not a matter of passion that is missing, rather something else much more tied to one's spirit or soul. She elaborates further telling Don, “Animals can tell us what they want, but that doesn't mean that's what's best for them.”, probably a message to him, or a reflection for herself, or both. Maybe Don hoped sexual passion would replace whatever he was missing, but getting it did not mean it was good for him.

While Carmen maintained her civility, Penny quickly shows outright hostility. She too is guarded by another, whether friend or lover, we do not know; but when Don asks if Penny lives there, the question is met by a paranoid, “Who's asking?”. The man already seems to be seething. It takes a while for Penny to recognize “Donny”; any hint of nostalgia in her voice quickly disappears when she challenges him with, “What the fuck do you want, Donny?”. Her anger only becomes more severe when he asks her if she has a son, and Penny's guardian lashes out, knocking Don unconscious. Waking in his car in the middle of a field, Don has learned nothing pertaining to his immediate investigation, but he has been faced with the severe animosity to which his non-love has given birth.

Don's last stop on his voyage is to visit the grave of Michelle. He first picks up a bouquet of pink flowers from the florist, Sun Greene, who tenderly asks about and cares for his injuries. We already know that Michelle is not the author of the letter as she died five years ago, but it is further confirmed by the epitaph on the tombstone which indicates she was a beloved daughter and sister, not a wife or mother. Did Winston plan this leg of the journey? It is doubtful as Winston is libidinally fascinated by the living mystery, unlikely wanting to pursue a dead end. Yet for Don, he knows this marks a very important point in his journey, a point where he is realizing just how much he is suffering as he integrates his experiences of the last few days. His only words are, “Hello, Beautiful.”, as he then sits down in the rain, clearly depressed. While sad, this scene actually speaks to hope. While we, and Don, may not yet understand what he is missing nor the true nature of his non-love, one can state that there would be no hope for his future if not able to mourn. I do not intend to be too optimistic as there is no guarantee of successful mourning, but I do interpret the scene at a gravesite indicating the potential for mourning and not simply as depression.

Who sent the letter to Don informing him of a son? Jim Jarmusch had each of the actresses compose a letter from the perspective of their character, and he then took elements from all the letters, combining them to create the one that is featured in the story, so it comes from all the ex-girlfriends and from none of them. Jarmusch intentionally leave us, the audience, as uncertain as his protagonist. The investigation has revealed little. Winston's advice to bring pink flowers and to look for an affinity for the colour in the women's lives has only led to uncertainty. Inquiries about children seems to have excluded the women as mothers to his possible son, with the exception of Penny, though she seems the least likely of the group to have sent such a notice to Don. But the important, though unintended, consequence of the journey and resulting uncertainty has been Don becoming more conscious that he is desperately missing something in his life. He is confronted by his non-love and its effects on him and others, how it interfered with ever achieving a relationship which may have helped fulfill him, or at least be able to deal with this missing thing within him in a healthy manner.

The sequence of Don's journey also reveals something to us when regarded as a metaphor for his relationships, the repetition compulsion of his non-love. Laura (and Lolita) represents the first phase of his relationships, with apparent warmth and definite sexuality quickly enacted. It is also casual and limited in depth, with no expectation of a future, wonderful as an affair but not offering anything further that might build a relationship of depth. If the aim is for something fulfilling, there is already something missing. The next phase, as exemplified in Dora, is an anxiety and cold distance arising from the realization that something is missing. We see that Dora wanted, maybe even needed, to be influenced and shaped by her lover. We might be fair in saying that this is pathological in her case as it has led her into a marriage with a controlling and abusive man. However, as an ideal for a relationship it could be very healthy for two individuals to influence each other, to shape and be shaped as one builds on a bond that is more meaningful. It requires the individual to invest in the other and to allow the other's investment in oneself, something that Don does not allow. Such lack of investment changes the trajectory from the initial warmth to a disappointed cooling in the couple.

With the failure of mutual investment in the relationship and each other, hostility begins to grow, as represented by Carmen, the third part of Don's path. Differences in a relationship are essential in maintaining individuality, necessary for the couple to develop and avoid a fusional dyad lacking important boundaries. (As an aside, elements of such an unhealthy dyad can be seen in Dora's marriage with Ron). In a relationship where two individuals are investing in each other differences can be tolerated or even celebrated. Without the

foundation, differences start to become intolerable, evidence of the divide between the individuals. While Don and Carmen remain polite, clearly Don cannot relate to her as an “animal communicator”, a concept completely foreign to his life in computers. His inability to relate is symptomatic as he repeatedly describes Carmen as an animal psychic who reads the minds of her clients' pets, clearly vexing to her. Penny reflects the phase in Don's relationships where the differences have become insurmountable, feeding hostility, allowing outright aggression and injury. When Don visits Penny and her posse, in the more remotely rural setting with motorcycles and junk cars, it is hard to imagine that they ever shared a bond. The expression of Penny's anger is very clear, and in a moment there is violence and Don wakes up alone.

And so, in Don's last stop to visit Michelle's grave, we arrive at the inevitable conclusion of his pattern. The relationship is dead. There is no hope for resurrection. The only thing left for Don is depression and emptiness. Here I wish to make a distinction between the metaphor for Don's repetition compulsion enacted in relationships, and the narrative of this story. When we are suffering our unconscious conflicts we are unaware that we are repeating our neurotic patterns. The ex-girlfriends are seemingly so different that Don would have been unaware that he was doing the same thing over and over again, destined to always suffer his non-love and remain unfulfilled. His only conscious awareness would be the depression he experienced once the possibility of love was dead. In this story, however, he is not re-enacting a relationship, rather he is gaining a new perspective by reflecting on the past rather than reliving it. And it is an active reflection rather than a passive remembering as he is there in body, facing emotions of which he had been unaware, experiencing the consequences he had previously ignored. He also needed an other, in this case Winston, to be able to take this journey. Without question there are parallels to a psychoanalysis. This is why I suggest that there is hope when Don is at Michelle's grave. He has become conscious of his whole process, not just the unsatisfying endpoint of melancholia.

Here I will highlight another element in the film somewhat tangential to the thoughts I have offered thus far. Repeated in the film is a playful but important confusion around names. Most entertaining is Lolita, who is completely ignorant of the Nabokov novel and how closely she resembles her namesake. Also amusing is the coincidence of Winston, the name shared by Don's neighbour and Carmen's dog, and both Winstons leading their friends to a new awareness. The visit to Dora follows Laura, and Dora's husband Ron notes the similarity to Don in name. Most significant is that Don must keep spelling out to others that his last name is

Johnston – with a 't' – to dispel the comparison to Don Johnson, the handsome actor most famous for his role in Miami Vice during the 1980s. This correction is tied to Winston's describing Don as a Don Juan, the most essential confusion. On the surface Don could be regarded as Don Juan, the legendary, fictional womanizer. But Don scolds Winston for calling him that; Don Juan is typically portrayed in film as a lively, libidinous, and charming scoundrel which Don Johnston instinctively knows he is not; or maybe it is anxiety regarding the original story where Don Juan runs out of life before he can repent his sins and he is damned.

I suggest that the confusion of names is also a confusion of identities, and as such evokes the idea of the false self. A very rough explanation of Donald Winnicott's theory is that some people will develop a false self which is presented to the world in order to protect from exposure the deeper, mostly unconscious true self, a defense constructed very early in life. In this sense, Don's non-love could be associated with a false self, an identity that may idealize sex without the need for commitment as proof of independence from others, though ultimately a denial of a vulnerable dependency with desires of love and care from the other. I again refer to Don's description of Mona, Winston's wife, as the perfect woman, the most maternal of the women portrayed in the film. He can safely be near her love and care because sexual desire is disassociated via his love and loyalty to Winston.

Returning home, Don has a new level of awareness, the most painful realization being that he is missing something. He makes a feeble attempt to blame Winston for his pain, for being beaten up, wishing to insist that this was all Winston's idea and there was nothing in it for him. But Winston will not accept such responsibility, saying, “It's your life. You've got to live your life. Right?”.

Don encounters the young man he had previously seen at the airport returning home. Don's fantasy, reenforced by the pink ribbon from the man's mother tied to a bag, is that this is his son, and he desperately tries to compensate for what is missing within by being a father. At first this goes well, when Don provides food that they can share. The young man even asks for advice, and Don is able to share some of his recent enlightenment.

“The past is gone. I know that. The future .... isn't here yet, whatever it's going to be. So all there is .... is this .... the present. That's it.”

The young man is grateful that Don did not offer “some fatherly sounding bullshit”, and with the rejection of Don's paternal wish, he panics. He overwhelms the young man by insisting he is his father, and the young man flees, frightened off by this crazy man. As Don stands desperately in the middle of the street a car drives by

with another young man staring intently at him, yet another potential son who is lost to him. A hidden trick of the film is that the actor who is the young man in the car is in reality the son of Bill Murray. In the very last shot the camera pans completely around Don as he stands alone in the street. This echoes what Don has just said, that he is just in this moment in the present, with no past or future to run to. It is the moment before either retreating into his old ways with no hope of change, or taking what he has learned in an attempt to build a different future. Jarmusch ends the film, leaving us observers in that ambivalent moment of the present; he provides no answers just as there is no answer for Don, or us, in that moment.

At the beginning of this discussion I stated Don suffers from non-love, warning that this was an ill-defined term. Analyzing the film has highlighted some features of this non-love. It is not an inability to love nor an inability to receive love in any absolute sense. It is tied to Don's repetition compulsion which has condemned all romantic endeavors to death. One may readily postulate that there is a link to a false self, an identity which prevents any seeking of a love object with whom he could allow attachment. There is no certainty that Don can overcome his non-love and truly appreciate what is missing within.

We are left with questions and uncertainty. Who sent the letter? Does Don actually have a son? Are there other aspects of Don's non-love which can be understood? Will Don ever understand what is missing within? And even if he does, will he be able to overcome what is missing and be able to move toward fulfillment? Is there hope that he could enjoy mutual attachment? Jarmusch has done his job and given us a film, and now it is our chance to see if we can find meaning.

Thank you.