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**The Psychoanalytic Century**

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# What Freud Taught Us about Passionate Romantic Love

R. Curtis Bristol

To enlarge or illustrate the power or effect of love is to set a candle in the sun.

—Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621)

Every psychoanalyst since Sigmund Freud encounters as he did the problem of love and how to understand it in the clinical setting and real life. Freud (1914c, 1930a [1929]) asserted that love is essential to the individual and to the collective society: without love there is neurosis and chaos. The philosopher-analyst Lear (1990) observes that “Analysts tend to dismiss love as cosmological speculation for which Freud had a predilection but which goes beyond the bounds or concerns of psychoanalysis” (p. 156). Yet “. . . no aspect of Freud’s life work has been as little understood, and so misunderstood, as his contribution to the understanding of love” (Bergmann 1987, p. 156).

In matters of love, words are critical. Bergmann cites Stallworthy (1974) that poets write more about love than about any other subject. Let me define some terms necessary to an objective discourse on passionate romantic love. The word *romance* derives from the meaning “to write” in

Roman, the vernacular of Latin (Webster 1988). In medieval times romance was a narrative verse or prose about chivalric exploits by heroic knights, and later meant a fictitious, wonderful tale of adventure that idealized events and characters by use of the imagination. Later it took on the meanings of a love story in literature or real life. The imaginative overvaluation of the other remains evident in traditional and popular romance literature. And it is the narrative truth for love in reality. *Passion* is another word associated with romantic love (Webster 1988). It derives from *passio*, that is, suffering, especially of Christ and the martyrs, but also of any narrative of personal agony. It has evolved to mean extreme affect that may be sexual, but as well, fear, hate, rage, grief, or excitement. I will not dwell on the complex meanings of romance, or the contradictory meanings of passion; they are apparent to the attentive student of love. I will develop the meanings of *intimacy*, *longing*, and *desire* as they apply to passionate romance, and introduce two new terms, the “lover dyad” and “intimate dyad.”

There is good reason to distrust romantic love in real life. Everyone knows that the experience may be brief or enduring, defeating or transcendent, deflating or enlarging. Those enthralled by romance do not act with precision or objectivity. Lovers are at one moment captured by the beloved, the next doubting, critical, and dismissive. Passionate love takes an irregular course and often appears foolish and has its ridiculous eruptions and misunderstandings. No matter its twists and turns, the absurdity is more

evident to the outsider than the lovers themselves. Their emotional vitality is private, exclusive, and seemingly self-generated. Person (1988) observes: “The couple—‘we’—accumulates its own history. The lovers delight in recounting it to each other, because all its milestones, however ordinary and inert when described to an outsider . . . are sacred to them by virtue of the power they have to revivify past emotions” (p. 62).

I refer to lovers and their couple as the *lover dyad*. I explicate the individuals and their intersubjective affects along with the sociocultural value systems that are conflated into the text of passionate romantic love. I assert that passionate romantic love provides the motive for individuals within the lover dyad to integrate diverse forms and experiences of love, intimacy, and sexuality. I believe that the adult feelings or romantic love originate and are first experienced within the *maternal-infant dyad*. Love and intimacy are also evident in diverse other pairings throughout life. These I identify as the *intimate dyad*, especially evident in latency without the sexual aim, and in adolescence where there are many trials of love, intimacy, and sexuality, but not yet the integrating motive of romance per se, a developmental task that awaits the adult. (Bristol and Pasternack 1988)

Romantic feelings unite actual lived experience with myth, fiction, and biography. Any theory of psychology that values unconscious motive and conscious affect, and the genetic (historical) and psychodynamic hypotheses,

must take romantic love seriously. Feelings are what love is about. Lichtenberg (1989) observes: "In the century-old history of psychoanalysis, the aspect of psychic functioning that has been considered of central importance has shifted from trauma to instinctual drive and fantasy to ego functions and the structural hypothesis to object relations and now to affects" (p. 259). This paradigmatic shift in psychoanalytic theory is one reason that romantic love, given its complex regressive and progressive affect states, is more often written about today, for example, Bergmann (1987), Beebe and McCrorie (in press), Gabbard (1996), Kernberg (1995), Lear (1990), and Person (1988).

The psychoanalytic study of love begins with Sigmund Freud (1899a, 1905d, 1905e[1901], 1910c, 1910h, 1912d, 1914c, 1915a, 1917e, 1918a[1917], 1924c, 1924d, 1927e, 1930a). He conceptualized that the biology of desire seeks an object for satisfaction. He made clear that eros has origin in the child's relation to the mother and others and has a pleomorphic course throughout life. Its manifestation in the choice of object and the unconscious motives for excitement and satisfaction are both normative and pathological depending upon developmental history. Freud looked to similarities and differences in the genders and their development from birth to adulthood to explain love. He understood the universality of eros and its manifestation in various transcultural historical epochs. To Freud (1905d) we owe the initial effort to understand the individual and interpersonal

meanings of love based upon a developmental history and the dynamic unconscious. Since Freud, we look to the maternal-infant dyad to further explain attachment and its vast and complicated intersubjective affect experiences that differentiate into individual core gender identity, sense of self, and the defined object choices and identifications that set the stage for adult love and self-esteem (Bowlby, 1958, 1960, Jacobson 1964, Mahler 1979, Spitz 1945, Stoller 1968, 1985).

Freud (1930a) said that “People give the name ‘love’ to the relation between man and a woman whose genital needs (predominate); but they give the name ‘love’ to the positive feelings between parents and children, and between brothers and sisters of a family, although we are obliged to describe this as ‘aim inhibited love’ or affection” (p. 102). He described the origin of love and its pathway to adult romantic sexual union through the successive stages of the mother-infant dyad, love within the family—including oedipal love—a nongenital “affection” for siblings and friends, and “sublimated” love for sexual aim inhibited interests and causes expressed in social and cultural interests and pursuits. Intimacy—Freud used the word “affection”—is the emotional attachment to another absent a sexual aim; it is gender neutral throughout life. Intimacy is an essential component of romantic love when integrated with sexual desire. But other intimate dyads are independent of romance and sexuality.



Freud's views on love, eros, affection (intimacy), libido, object choice, sexual aim, and narcissism are not an integrated theory. His writings on love were not made a part of his structural hypothesis. Passionate romantic love as a topic to understand the structure, function, or motive for mental process was largely ignored by the ego psychologists. Nonetheless, Bergmann (1987) uses Freud's instinctual theory to explain that the adult search for romantic love has origins in the maternal-infant dyad. "The mother, or her substitute, becomes both the first love and the first sexual object" (p. 159). He considers Freud's (1910c, p. 222) "... statement that 'the finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it' to be Freud's most profound contribution to love" (p. 159). He adds: "Under the impact of Freud's dual instinct theory we are inclined to understand anti-eros as hate, but to the Greeks, the opposite of love was the wish to be loved. Eros also acquired the inseparable companions, Pathos, the personification of longing, and Himeros, the personification of desire. In language, the Greeks tell us that love is not love unless it is accompanied by both *desire* and *longing*" (p. 34, emphasis added). Romantic love becomes possible "... during adolescence (when) the libido (desire and arousal) makes a fresh start (after oedipal frustration and the latency period), searching for a new and non-incestuous love object, but the new love object must nevertheless in some way remain reminiscent of the old" (Bergmann 1987, p. 158).

Freud (1930a) observed that the union of lovers is stark: "At the height

of being in love the boundary between ego (self) and the object (other) threatens to melt away. Against all the evidence of his senses, a man who is in love declares 'I' and 'you' are one, and is prepared to behave as if it were a fact" (p. 66). Freud's insight persists to this day: passionate romantic love is an intimately co-constructed mutual belief system of longing and desire, a "religion of two" (Person 1988). Romantic love is desire that searches to refine the emotions and conditions of the original maternal-infant dyad, yet has the confounding history of the oedipal triad, as well as the vicissitudes of the lover dyad. It also must fit more or less the demands of others expectations and condemnations, either individual, familial, peer group, societal, or religious.

The lover dyad appears unique, fresh, and spontaneously created to the lovers. Nonetheless, it has an intricate unconscious history that relies on the sensuous love and intimacy begun in the mother infant dyad, the subsequent influence of the Oedipus complex, and the experiences, fantasies, and longings with numerous others during latency and early adolescence in various intimate dyads. These experiences and subsequent memories and sources of fantasy will have been sometimes satisfying and other times frustrating, incomplete or traumatic.

Freud (1910c) called these vulnerabilities the "necessary conditions for loving." In romantic love, the unconscious "condition" associated with object

choice and identifications from infancy or childhood sets the terms for the adult choice for the beloved. Bergmann (1987) notes that “One may differentiate successful from unsuccessful preconditions for loving.” (p. 164) The particular and peculiar preconditions of love determine and narrow the range of object choices for the beloved, and broaden the risks of dissatisfaction. “When a precondition fails to resolve the intrapsychic conflict, it leads to the creation of a fate neuroses” (Bergmann 1987, p. 164). These are the failed adult lovers in an endless search for the elusive lover dyad, repeating compulsively the unconscious pathological “condition” of the maternal-infant dyad and oedipal triadic experience, haunted by their continued but unsatisfied desire and longing. They find lovers already committed to another, or promiscuous lovers, or ill lovers, and so forth. In some, the masochistic motive is unmistakable, in others castration anxiety predominates, yet in others a too critical superego condemns the lover or the beloved. A particular precondition is the failure to integrate intimacy (Freud’s “affection”) with sexual desire and psychophysical sexuality, the Madonna-Prostitute split: “Where they love they do not desire, where they desire they cannot love” (Freud 1912d, p. 183).

The time of falling in love is when the infantile unconscious preconditions that Freud described influence the individual’s choice of lover. A particular risk to romance is a love choice that repeats the disasters of the Oedipus complex. Oedipal love is not the normative developmental

predecessor to adult passionate romance, but one of its preconditions imposed upon the history of the maternal-infant dyad. Oedipal love, for those who overcome its repression, is recalled as betrayal, feeling small, insignificant, and vulnerable, caught in the conflicted triangularity of rivalry and competition, not taken seriously, ignored, or ridiculed for the ambivalent feelings of love and hate, and having no capacity for actual sexual expression, or worse, sexually exploited. The intersubjective love of the oedipal child is different from adult romance where self-esteem is enhanced by finding in the beloved the reciprocity of intimacy, love, and sexuality. By contrast, the Oedipus complex is a disruption of intimate attachment to each parent, as Bergmann (1987) makes clear: “During the oedipal phase, *the relationship to both parents is ambivalent*. The rival parent is also loved and homosexual wishes compete with heterosexual ones” (p. 158, emphasis added).

The original aims and objects of oedipal love are repressed when the child enters latency. It is a period rich with renewed opportunities for attachment in multiple intimate dyads: with each parent—representing a repair of the oedipal rupture of intimacy with each parent that is brought on by the oedipal sexualized object relation—and with siblings, and increasingly outside of the home with teachers, friends, and others.

The adult psychopathology of triangular love requires the condition of a real or imagined third party to enable the lover to love. It is a remnant of

oedipal love, and the opposite of the lover dyad that is a twosome in structure and function. Some regard the latter as true romantic love, that is the absence of the disruptive influences of anger, jealousy, or competition with a feared superior rival. Thus defined, true love is impossible in the Oedipus complex and its failure is the motive force in adolescence and young adulthood to search again for dyadic love.

Bergmann (1987) describes love as “. . . a compound of many emotions, diverse memories, and many needs that remain ungratified in childhood that seek resolution in adulthood. People love on various levels of intrapsychic maturity. The level of development that a person has reached will to a significant degree determine the fate of adult love, and what he or she will find or will elude him.” This view is especially useful for the therapist who has the opportunity to facilitate the adult capacities to work through the infantile and childhood genetic barriers to falling and remaining in love (Kernberg 1975, chapters 7 and 8).

Many adults have the ego maturity to achieve and progress in life's demands and opportunities but remain immature in romantic passion. They cannot establish a lover dyad, nor use it as a bridge to further the goal of remaining in love. Others work through with each other, and not infrequently in therapy, the restricting preconditions that Freud described. The risks to the disruption of the lover dyad are the preoedipal traumata of frustrated

intimacy, sexual over stimulation, perversion, and the threats about losses of the loved object or the object's love, as well as the experience of the oedipal love-hate polarity, castration anxiety, and superego self/other condemnation (Freud 1910h, 1921c, 1926d). The shift from the love, intimacy, and sensuous nurture of maternal attachment, to the threats of the Oedipus complex, represents the irreparable loss of the all-providing mother in fact and fantasy. This frustrated infantile wish is sometimes resurrected in the desire and longing for adult romantic love. But an all-providing other is impossible in fact in the lover dyad as in the maternal-infant dyad, but Mother Earth love fantasies abound in many would-be lovers. Examples of the all-providing maternal figure, an unconscious fantasy projected to the other of the lover dyad, is the man or woman who expects the total attention of the beloved. A modern variant in the expanded world of the real, nondomestic professional and work opportunities for women is that her lover be the domestic anchor for their relationship.

The lover's refinding the choice of love object and the conditions for loving have potentially harsh origins and must yield in the co-constructed renewed opportunity in the lover dyad. This is the work of romantic love. If infantile love holds too great an appeal or too great a demand determined by the maternal-infant dyad, that is the Freudian ideas of instinctual fixation or regression put in object choice terms, romantic love fails and the lover dyad cannot be established or will not sustain.

One must mourn the loss of the ideal all good and providing mother, for it cannot be realized in the lover dyad that depends upon reciprocity and mutual interaction. This is a paradox inasmuch as romantic love is emotionally enhanced for those who achieve the capacity for intimacy through the truly loving intimate and sensuous maternal infant dyad, but this original love must be abandoned and mourned to realize the new adult lover dyad.

Freud understood that the adult experience of romantic love—through its object choice and preconditions—had origin in the good (ideal) and bad (traumatic, devalued) actual experiences and fantasies of the maternal-infant dyad, and the subsequent Oedipus complex. These original identifications and object choices—and their respective preconditions—persist in unconscious representations that shape all subsequent love relationships, including transference love, romantic love, aim-inhibited “love” of siblings and friends, and the sublimated affiliations of loyalty and cause. To overcome the barriers to falling and remaining in love, to realize the favorable conditions for loving and avoid the bad, lovers—male and female alike—must find new, non-incestuous partners reminiscent of the maternal-infant dyad. My emphasis on object choice may surprise some that think of Freud’s theories as dominated by the instinctual aim. This was true in his (1905a) first theory of love but was differently emphasized later on: “The object of the instinct is what is most variable about the instinct, and not originally connected with it but

becomes assigned to it by consequence of being peculiarly fitted to make satisfaction possible" (1915c, p. 122). Thus, my emphasis on identifications, object choices, and their attendant preconditions for love, that is, the lover dyad as derivative of the maternal-infant dyad, are insights I owe to Bergmann's (1987) study of Freud.

The preoedipal and triangular traumata and psychodynamics of eros are familiar to psychoanalysts but the example of intimacy (Freud's term is "aim-inhibited" or "affection") is less understood. The word *intimacy* derives from the Latin *intimus*, meaning "close friendship." It is the superlative of *intus*, meaning "within." Intimacy is the inmost and fundamental structure of relation through private feelings, what is personal, familiar, and shared. We find intimacy within love and within friendship; it may be sexual, but not necessarily. Unlike the sexual intimacy in the adult lover dyad, intimacy from the beginning of life seeks appropriate partners for expression that becomes a self-capacity. Intimacy, like romantic love, is enriched by the diversity of experience, but it does not wait for adulthood. The intimacy of lovers derives from many intimate attachments before the adult choice of a lover, especially from the maternal-infant dyad, the numerous and diverse intimate dyads of latency, adolescence, young adulthood, and the intimacy with previous sexual but not romantic lovers.

The evolving affective experience of intimacy as a self-capacity and



interpersonal experience before adult romance transcends the boundaries of age, gender, and ethnicity, and exists independently of sexual desire. These affective experiences are evident in the attachment pairings of an individual to non-parental caretakers, siblings, teachers, and friends. Companions in adventure and disaster, war buddies, friendships within the athletic team and within the workplace are a genre of the intimate dyad. Intimacy has more actual partners than sexual desire. In fact, sexual excitement and activity are frequently sought in fantasy and real life where intimacy is curtailed or impossible, examples being prostitution, pornography, and perversion.

A psychological task of adult loving realized through romance is the intimacy in the lover dyad, that is, to integrate it within love and sexuality from a diverse experience and associated affects. Romance generates new and unique dimensions for intimacy, including sexual intimacy. This is apparent in the private sexual passion of lovers, as well as their public behavior: giggling, touching, kissing, fawning, and so forth. Lovers are literally and figuratively in touch. Even their quarrels are intimate, so much so that outsiders strain to understand their content or meaning.

In existential terms, intimacy overcomes loneliness, separation, and mourning. Intimacy in romance creates a new edition of the self and appreciation for the other that transcends past fantasy and reality, a quality celebrated in the popular culture. Along with fictive characters, we yearn for

the transformation of self into couple and enhanced self-definition. Lovers are absorbed by each other and the passion and intimacy that unites them. Romantic love provides a unique window into the intersubjective world. It is a motive force known to poets and analysts as well as to lovers: in order to know the subjectivity of the self and other one must find a way to observe and articulate the inner world of abstractness and conflict. Lear (1990) observes that: “. . . for an individual to come into existence, his archaic expression of subjectivity must be integrated into the rest of his life. An individual comes to be not by abolishing archaic life, but by taking it up into a higher level of organization” (p. 23). There is a vast archaic subjectivity from the maternal infant dyad and oedipal love to take up *before* the adult task to integrate love, intimacy, and sexuality in the lover dyad.

We must come to terms with who we were, who we are, and who we can become. These self-views are each relevant to romance, but the last—who we imagine we can become—is rich to romantic fantasy and intersubjective experience within the lover dyad. To move into romantic love, we must give up—but not quite forget or ignore—the past maternal and oedipal loves, as well as those of siblings, friends, and sexual lovers, in order to flourish anew. For lovers there is a need to mourn and the fear of it. It is normative in romantic love to fear the loss of the overvalued object. The lover risks imagined losses of the beloved to a superior rival—a regressive oedipal anxiety—as well to the realities of age, illness, and death, even to one’s own

children as evident in family splits, feuds, and divorce.

We relinquish our past loves through the work of romance, by integrating them into the lover dyad. By focusing on the beloved, we mourn and work through the hold of past lovers and intimate dyads, including the maternal-infant dyad. Freud (1917e, 1930a) understood the relationship of love to melancholia. Lear (1990) interprets Freud's genius to understanding mental structures and dynamics as the consequence of his "dialectic of love and loss" (p. 158). Freud (1923b, 1926d, 1930a) recognized the preconditions to individual love established in the preoedipal actual loss of the object, or their love, and the loss of the superego love for the ego (self), a symbolic representation of the previous threats and actual losses of the preoedipal objects that were compounded by the real and fantasy losses of the oedipal loves.

Adult love risks actual loss that is sometimes unconsciously created by the predetermined conditions for loving, as in a sick and dying parent from childhood, refound in a "new" love object who is ill, dying, or unfaithful. Other losses are those lovers who become absorbed in their career or with the family of origin, at a cost to the lover dyad, and for some men the loss of the wife to her maternal love and devotion to children (Pasternack 1988). Another condition in the phase of falling in love, according to Bergmann (1997), is the mourning for the past object of love when love begins anew. It

is normal to romance to feel elevated self-esteem through the attachment and identification with the beloved. Yet some are unaccountably sad when falling in love, or angry rather than lonely when alone without the beloved. When a new love attachment is realized, some lovers fear inevitable loss. This “lowering of self-regard feelings” and “self-reproaches” (aggression turned onto the self) as in melancholia—opposed to mourning—inhibits intimacy and sexuality (Freud 1917e).

Freud emphasized that for both genders the reformed object and conditions for loving originated within the maternal-infant dyad. There are other influences on object choices too. Obviously the oedipal experience and identifications, superego formation, and the cross-gender traits of parents and siblings, contribute to what the lover unconsciously looks for in his or her “lover shadow,” that is, the real life and fantasy connections from the past that are realized in the present (Wells 1984).

Bergmann (1987) documents that the Roman poet, Catullus, wrote of love and hate simultaneously toward the same person, and that Ovid wrote about the conflict of self-love and love for another (p. 258). Freud (1912-1913, 1914c) transformed the ideas of ambivalence and narcissism into clinical theory. Ambivalence to Freud was bedrock, fundamental as bisexuality: each effects romantic love choice. Freud’s (1914c) “second theory of love,” according to Bergmann (1987), was on narcissism. It seems less

relevant to me since Kohut: many analysts no longer believe the conversion of narcissistic libido into object libido is essential for the love of another. Nonetheless, Freud, like Ovid, recognized that in love one must overcome self-absorption to join with the other the co-creation of intimacy and sexuality.

According to Bergmann (1987), Freud's (1905d) first theory of love was the byproduct of the aim and objects of infantile sexuality that culminates in the Oedipus complex. This is the reason, I believe, that many analysts understand romantic love as if it was a variant of oedipal love. It is more likely that triadic disruption of the lover dyad is a pathology of dyadic love, or at the very least, an intrusion on it with historic meaning to the individual concerning the original transition from maternal love to oedipal love and the love of others. Freud's (1914c) second theory of adult love (the vicissitudes of narcissism) was also based on the object choice: "anaclitic love" or "narcissistic love." The anaclitic love is the dependency on the beloved for nurture or protection, thereby potentially compromising ego autonomy. Narcissistic love is to find in another what one is, once was or wanted to be, or someone who was once a part of him. There is a pathological example in the lover dyad where narcissistic expectation that the beloved must become what the lover wanted but failed to be. Too great a demand that the beloved be like the lover is one of the greatest disappointments in romance. These genetic dynamics in excess defeat the transcendent quality that passionate romantic love paradoxically enriches individuality and works toward

mutuality *and* autonomy.

I believe that to varying degrees and in various combinations Freud's (1914c) original descriptions of the anaclitic and narcissistic object choices are normative to unconscious wishes in romantic love object choice. The expectation for some nurture and protection, and that the beloved share in what one is, has been or would like to be, are essential to the dynamics of the lover dyad. The "narcissistic" wish to find a lover who is a part of one's self experience of love and intimacy in the past is quintessential to the re-found object choice that is derivative of the maternal-infant dyad. Freud (1914c) believed that the narcissistic object choice was more evident in women and the anaclitic object choice more so in men. In my clinical experience with lovers today, I do not find this distinction an easy demarcation.

Bergmann (1987) validates Freud's concept of the "... tension between re-finding old love objects and the wish to move on to someone new." He adds a premise familiar to self-psychology. Upon "re-finding" the object of love, the lover will unconsciously make an effort to rework problems that are the "archaic" history of conflicts and deficits with their first objects of love. The lover who experiences renewed hope to magically correct past failures with the alcoholic, unfaithful, abusing, and so forth, parent that is re-found in the adult lover is an example. A more pathological example is the lover who projects to the beloved the psychodynamic problems of their own past and is

ready to attempt rescue by identification and projection, or to masochistically relive with the beloved the problems that belong to their unshared archaic past conditions for loving.

Some are transformed by romantic love; others are not. The attempt to magically undo childhood traumata apply to various love themes that attempt to reverse hate, indifference, or abuse into love and intimacy, and defeat and humiliation into success and triumph. There is often in such cases a confusion of self and other differentiation, a boundary already made fluid in romantic passion. The individual history of humiliation and suffering in the maternal-infant dyad, or the conditions established in the Oedipus complex, are sometimes acted out in the lover dyad through the lover's vengeance on the beloved, treating the other with the same sadism and contempt that they originally experienced. Alternately, others repeat the past and continue to masochistically suffer within the lover dyad according to their preconditions for object choice (Freud 1915c, 1924c).

I believe that the motive to repair and sustain a lover relationship is rarely based on sex, but more often on the desire to realize and sustain intersubjective intimacy. Bergmann (1987) points out that there is a "dialectic between refinding love similar to the original and the opposing wish to find another different from the original who will heal the wounds of childhood" (p. 264). In other words, the traumata of childhood doesn't necessarily

predetermine a defeating condition in the choice of the beloved, but itself may be a motive to be healed or to heal childhood hurts of the beloved. We do see lovers who are initially well-matched for the need of repair and those willing to provide it, whether mutual or one sided. However, the condition of needing repair and providing healing as central to the couple's interrelated choice of lover has the potential to transform their lover dyad into a sadomasochistic dyad, marked ambivalence in one or the other of the couple, or Pygmalion love in a dominant individual of the dyad. Some are more frankly perverse in structure and function.

In this brief paper I have attempted to demonstrate Freud's view that we love in various stages beginning at the first stage of life. The infantile experience of love and intimacy establishes the conditions for the subsequent object choices and forms of love, including passionate romantic love that is an integrative developmental epoch of the adult.

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