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True Love Amidst Apparent Manipulation

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In the novel Kiss of the Spider Woman by Manuel Puig, Luis Molina and Valentin Arregui are cellmates in a South American prison. After many months, they develop a relationship and come to love and respect one another. However, both men want something from the other, and the novel calls into question whether the cellmates truly come to love each other, or if they merely pretend to love to satisfy their own personal needs.

This essay argues that the men truly fall in love, ultimately putting their feelings before personal motives.
In Manuel Puig’s novel, *Kiss Of The Spider Woman*, the two protagonists, Molina and Valentin, become enthralled in stories of fantasy in order to escape the hardships of their realities. Molina and Valentin, once subjected to the outside world’s norms and stereotypes, were initially unable to see how trivial their ignorance had been when they were fully immersed in their own selfish problems. These characters become more in touch with their true emotions; their subsequent actions come as a result of Molina and Valentin gaining a deep understanding of each other, rather than an apparent manipulation of each other, to achieve goals outside of the prison. The two characters were able to rid themselves of the negative illustrations society had cast upon their lives, therefore, also ridding themselves of prior selfish motives. The two start a prison sentence together as very different people, with a lack of acceptance of each other. However, as the two inmates spend more time together, Valentin listens to Molina narrate melodramas, and they soon realize that it is rather easy to let their guards down when they are free to explore what the privacy of their environment offers them. Both characters soon come to realize that the cell in which they live can physically confine them, but it cannot limit what they can become, and the validation they both learn to give one another. This understanding frees their self-seeking egos into a selfless love where their imaginations unlock the prison doors that surround them.

Puig’s readers are conflicted as to Molina and Valentin’s true motives in this text. When the reader discovers that there is a possibility throughout the entire novel that both characters are acting on their own selfish desires, some are inclined to question whether the two men ever really loved each other or developed an intense connectedness at all. The reader learns that the warden asks Molina to obtain information on Valentin during their time together in the cell that
the warden would use against Valentin. All Molina needs to do is grow close enough to Valentin so that he learns to trust Molina, and then Molina is granted freedom. Valentin also seems to gain something from

Valentin so that he learns to trust Molina, Marxist movement, once he is released from prison. Some argue that this might have been Valentin's intention all along when he was befriending Molina. Although Puig leaves the characters' motives up to the interpretation of the reader, there is strong evidence to suggest that Molina and Valentin leave these selfish incentives behind once they begin to really understand and accept each other. As Molina tells stories of fantasy worlds, both men become so immersed in the imaginary world that they forget about the world outside, and thus rid themselves of the pressures that once devoured them. This allows them to discard their previous yearnings to conform to the corrupt antics that had once controlled their lives, no longer allowing themselves to connect to others who are trapped in a vortex of distortion.

Valentin lived by his Marxist views before he was put in prison. He did everything to show his allegiance to the cause, and as a result his views about homosexuality were that of rejection and disgust. Therefore, from the beginning of the novel, Molina symbolizes the very thing that Valentin fears. Valentin, initially, does not understand Molina’s sexual orientation, and constantly taunts Molina for his life choice. Molina is a homosexual window dresser, and Valentin is initially inclined not to accept Molina’s desire to associate himself with femininity. Molina, originally named Luis Alberto Molino, adopts the name Molina to appear more feminine. To Valentin, being associated with femininity, or having his masculinity questioned in any way, is embarrassing and intolerable. Valentin tells Molina after he finishes narrating the first story that, “[he’s] sorry because [he’s] become attached to the characters.” When Molina responds by saying that Valentin might just have a heart after all, Valentin replies that his heart’s interest in these stories is more like a weakness. It is clear that Valentin relies more on logic and reasoning than on feelings from the heart because he grew up believing a “real man” was one that hides his emotions, and always maintains a cold and detached exterior.

Valentin’s first negative reaction to the melodramas Molina retells is tangible for the reader; these stories depict female characters that stray from the norm and express more control over their male counterparts. For example, in Molina’s first story, the “panther woman” is represented as animalistic, and acts as a serious threat to her husband. According to Pinet, “Valentin, particularly at first, finds these females outlandish and distasteful: they are deviants from the mother/wife figure he has been socialized to believe in. He likes the unthreatening Jane Randolph character, the conventional girl-next door type. When a woman begins to threaten him, he drops her (see his relationship with Marta.).” Valentin allows himself to give up his one true love, Marta, for the Marxist cause he wholeheartedly believed in before becoming imprisoned. As Pinet explains, “Love relationships with women must come second to the revolution because, as a dangerous distraction, they pose a threat to it.” This is further emphasized when Valentin explains to Molina, “There’s no way I can live for the moment, because my life is dedicated to political struggle, you know, political action, let’s call it.” Afraid of the extremity of his feelings for Marta, Valentin forsakes her, emphasizing that he will go to any length to bury his emotions below the surface; in doing so, he appears to be a “real man” by society’s standards.

It is obvious, therefore, that Valentin is the antithesis of Molina, who not only expresses his emotions outwardly in every aspect, but would also rather align himself with the female gender than his male gender given at birth. In the beginning, Valentin does not hesitate to explain to Molina why he is a disgrace to society. At one point Molina asks, “And what’s so bad about being soft like a woman? Why is it men or whoever, some poor bastard, some queen, can’t be sensitive too, if he’s got a mind to?” Valentin responds, ‘I don’t know, but sometimes that kind of behavior can get in a man’s way.’ Zimmerman further highlights this notion by explaining, “For Valentin, at least early on in the novel, gender categories are clearly defined, and typically feminine characteristics ‘can get in a man’s way;’ being sensitive,
even becoming ‘attached to the characters’ in a film is an expression of undesirable weakness that makes Valentin feel out of control.’” Valentin, at this stage in his friendship with Molina, believes that women act solely in relation to men. Men cannot be too sensitive because women already possess this characteristic, and furthermore, showing too much of one’s true feelings can weaken a man. Valentin, consequently, believes Molina is weak, and logically the reader can assume from this idea that Valentin would not see Molina as a candidate to carry out the Marxist cause, as the cause can only succeed, in Valentin’s eyes, with strong, manly men at the forefront. It is explicit, therefore, that Valentin does not try to use and get close to Molina from the beginning in order to recruit him to the cause.

Ultimately, it is only Molina who is able to break Valentin’s emotional barriers. As Molina tells his movie-stories, Valentin begins to escape into these fantastic worlds where his emotions are welcome to run free for the first time. Ironically, the prison offers Valentin a safe space where no one else can judge him, as he decides to share his newfound empathy. Valentin lets go of his inhibitions, and finally lets his guard down. Molina, who has always embraced his homosexuality, proves to Valentin that one is freer when they can get in touch with their true emotions. After being able to escape into the imaginary worlds of the movie-stories, Valentin begins to fall in love with Molina; instead of abandoning him like he did to Marta, Valentin engages further in the very relationships which he had once feared. Valentin demonstrates his acceptance and love for Molina, as he participates in physical acts with Molina, and begins to stop criticizing Molina’s life choices by the end. Valentin even tells Molina, “I just mean that if you like something, that makes me happy… because you were nice to me, and I’m grateful. And knowing that something made you feel good…it’s a relief to me.” Valentin wants to make Molina happy because knowing that his friend is happy satisfies his own desires. The reader can only acknowledge this love as authentic because Valentin has given up on relationships before, submitting to his prejudicial and narrow-minded views. However, this time, with Molina, Valentin acts on his passions rather than hides them and, therefore, it is evident that Valentin’s actions are pure.

Molina’s actions, similarly, affirm that he has ultimately departed from his initial planned deceit, and sincerely cares about Valentin. The two men acknowledge that they share a love of the melodramatic worlds portrayed in films, and they wish to mirror the actors’ connectedness the lovers in these films feel, in their own cell, and in their own lives. As Cohen explains, “Just as frame and enclosed tale converge, so Molina and Valentin converge, physically and ideologically. After their first sexual contact, Molina reaches for the mole on his forehead. When Valentin reminds him that it is he, Valentin, who has the mole, Molina says, ‘Mmm. I know. But I put my hand to my forehead, to feel the mole that…I haven’t got…It seemed as if I wasn’t here at all…like it was you all alone…or like I wasn’t me anymore. As if now, somehow…I…were you.” The fusion of these two characters underscores the true depth of the bond they have created. Molina feels so connected to Valentin, and because he is now freed from all outside pressures, he no longer feels only wrapped up in himself anymore. If, at this point, Molina was still considering using information against Valentin, he would be acting on his own selfish motives, and his own guilt would weigh heavily on his conscience. However, it is clear here, that Molina is not acting on his own behalf anymore because he has learned that true love is giving oneself over to another. His desires are no longer the only desires that matter, because he wishes to blend with Valentin, thus undertaking Valentin’s desires as his own. Pinet explains, “The love-making between the two men helps each on the journey back to the self as a whole person: Valentin toward the anima (as Jung termed it), or toward acknowledging the female within himself and integrating it with the male, and Molina toward the animus, acknowledging the male self and reintegrating it with the female.” The two men are no longer complete without the existence of the other. In Molina’s eyes, he and Valentin are now one; for Molina to contribute to Valentin’s imprisonment in any way would inescapably result in Molina’s restraint.

The world of melodrama and fantasy that Molina references and reenacts throughout the novel provides Molina and Valentin with the hopeful promise of an opportunity to escape society’s precedents that had once rigidly confined them. In their cell, these characters are able to be themselves without anyone judging them or holding them accountable for rules that they choose to stray from. When Molina and Valentin first enter the prison, they both practiced ignorance rather than acceptance because the world outside the prison accentuated the notion that the only way to fit in was to stay close to those who were like you, and to avoid experiencing discrimination from those who did not share the same views. Pinet echoes this
that he should never let himself be abused by anyone and that a “real” man would never let the person next to him feel exploited. However, ironically it is Molina who actually demonstrates this lesson to Valentin when he takes care of him after he has eaten contaminated food and cleans him up after diarrhea. This nurturing, loving man does not wish his friend to feel reduced and degraded, and does what is in his power to prevent it.” Again, Valentin clearly does not plan to take advantage of Molina because Valentin always saw himself as this “real man,” and therefore, he would never try to “abuse” another person because that would be contradictory to his beliefs. The reader recognizes the true effect that these men had on each other however, when Molina takes this advice and manifests it in his relationship with the very person who offered it to him, Valentin. If Molina was only getting close to Valentin in order to eventually exploit him, it would essentially be a waste of Molina’s time to take care of Valentin, as someone he “does not care about.” Furthermore, Molina internalizes what Valentin’s advice means to Valentin, and Molina does “everything in his power” to help Valentin still feel as if he is a “real man.” Molina overtly exhibits that he cares deeply about Valentin, and that he wishes to protect his friend from any pain, whether emotional or physical. This is significant for the reader to understand because if Molina were only out to do Valentin an injustice, he would not have helped him at all, and would have yielded his previous intolerance of those who are different from him, particularly Valentin.

Valentin and Molina’s submission to their intrinsic fantasies, when the outside world becomes trivial, enables them to change completely into satisfied and self-realized people. The love they develop for each other serves to justify that genuine caring for another being can breed significant progress when considering an individual’s attitude toward the world and the people around him or her. The protagonists become fully enveloped in their life within the prison, shedding all previous prejudices, as what lied beneath these prejudices, the desire to love and be loved, surfaces. Although, to most people a prison appears to represent a limiting and depressing environment, one that confines its inhabitants; in this novel, the prison acts as a liberating agent for cellmates Molina and Valentin, as they transform into better, more tolerant adaptations of themselves. As a result, they transpire into characters of their own new version of reality. Even before the characters fully evolve, Molina is able to realize the advantage of retreating from real life, exemplified as he explains to Valentin, “…let me escape from reality once in a while because why should I let myself get more depressed than I am?” Earlier, Molina also expresses this yearning for an escape as he reflects on his job, “Being a window dresser all day, enjoyable as it is, when the day’s finished, sometimes you begin to ask yourself what’s is all about, and you feel kind of empty inside.” Molina acknowledges that although a person can be somewhat happy, sometimes life is not enough to satisfy our desires.

Consequently, Pinet’s comment regarding Puig’s method of employing the melodramas in this text, rings true when she states, “First of all, he uses the movie-stories...”
as a way of survival: he creates that crucial alternative world that allows the prisoners to dissociate from their horrible conditions. Secondly, and even more importantly, he changes the movie-stories in the retelling and draws upon them for his own ends. Ultimately...rise above the victimization, [and] are even capable of destroying the existing oppressive structure."14 Puig utilizes the movie-stories in his novel to exemplify for the reader, as well as for the characters, that those who have been discriminated against are capable of rising from their sorrow to evolve into something greater than what could have ever been envisioned if they were left in the “free world.” Through the illustrations of these particular characters (men who have been discriminated against either for their sexual orientation or for their political views), Puig wishes to prove through the characters’ creation of the imaginary world, that people can find happiness amidst the backdrop of prejudice. Just like Puig “changes the movie-stories in the retelling,” Molina and Valentin similarly change the perspective of their world to eradicate the “existing oppressive structure” personified by the prison. In doing this, Puig represents the essential idea that these characters share something so special: a world in which they are free from persecution and free to be with each other; something so special that it is impossible to mirror, that only the sincerest friendship could permit something so perfect to flourish.

It is transparent from these reflections that these men were not completely happy before meeting each other. Therefore readers must consider, that if Molina and Valentin were to use each other for their own selfish motives, they would be consequently abandoning any possibility of living the life they have just discovered: a life in which they can escape into fantasy, and can subsequently relinquish all the responsibilities of their own life that no longer matter to them, and had only ever restrained them. The fantasy world in which the prison fosters is, not only a place where these characters are the happiest they have ever been, but also, more importantly, it is a place that only exists in the imaginary world. Ironically, through imagination, their personas become more real, as they learn to embrace true feelings and emotions. More specifically to the argument, Molina and Valentin yield fully to the world within the prison, so much so, that whatever happens outside of the prison no longer holds any bearing in their minds. The men do not have to succumb to outside pressures, and they do not even have to consider the possible consequences of disregarding every aspect of their previous lives. Molina and Valentin are now living solely for themselves, and therefore, the reader cannot identify their actions as anything but unadulterated and unwavering. Pinet further maintains this thought when she writes, “Thus, on their desert island, the men appear to attain reconciliation and integration.”15 Molina and Valentin have grasped sensitivity when it comes to those who are different, and have integrated this lesson into their new world. They now not only allow for acceptance to flourish between them, but also, they resonate this change in their willingness to renounce all the conditions of their old life they had once conceived necessary and essential, for each other.

After living together in their own fantasy world for six months, Molina’s sentence the way that the prison and its fantastical elements had. It is necessary to stress that Molina grew close enough to Valentin to have enough information to give to the ward but he does not do this. Instead, Molina offers to carry out actions in accordance with the Marxist cause because Valentin cannot act from prison. Molina does not have to join the cause, but it is clear he does so because he is aware how much it means to Valentin, and therefore, it is important to Molina as well. Here, again, it is evident that the two men have joined into one, as Valentin’s beliefs have become assimilated into Molina. Upon being released from prison, Molina only enjoys this physical freedom for a short time before he is shot and killed. Valentin also experiences grief quickly when prison officials beat him to near death.

In order to live the few moments of life he has left in peace, Valentin reverts back to fantasy in order to avoid life’s real hardships. In his dream-like state, Valentin imagines a conversation with Marta in which imaginary Marta responds, “Yes, this is a dream and we’re talking together, so even if you fall asleep you don’t have to be afraid, and I think now that nothing is ever going to separate us again, because we’ve realized.

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**AS THE CHARACTERS LIVE OUT THEIR TRUE DESIRES, THE READER IS ABLE TO ATTAIN A POWERFUL LESSON, AS HE/SHE OBSERVES WHAT IT REALLY MEANS TO DEVELOP SUCH A LOVE FOR SOMEONE ELSE THAT NOTHING ELSE MATTERS.**

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the most difficult thing of all...That I live deep inside your thought and so I’ll always remain with you, you’ll never be alone.”

This highlights the fact that Valentin yearns for fantasy because it is only in an alternate world, one that bears no resemblance to reality, that he does not feel alone; it is only in a fictional world that he feels free to personify a better construction of himself. In an imaginary world, those he loves never leave him, never judge him, and can provide him with eternal happiness and satisfaction. The only person to fully provide Valentin with this eternal happiness was Molina, and with him gone, Valentin is left alone to face the real world that him and Molina had tried so hard to escape. With Molina dead and Valentin trapped in this world, Molina can in a sense resemble the spider woman, indirectly and unintentionally imprisoning Valentin in his web. This is the issue, “Puig addresses in the rest of the novel: What happens when the men are parted, leave the “desert island,” and each must face reality alone? Puig knows very well that, whereas theory is one thing, reality is quite another and often messy and ambiguous.” Molina’s death simultaneously crumbles the fantasy world the two men shared, leaving Valentin alone and trapped in a web in which he cannot escape.

Valentin cannot liberate himself by fleeing to the imaginary world because Molina was the only other person who could prove its existence. and as a result, Molina’s death hampers Valentin’s happiness, as it restrains him to the real world. This point is underscored as Zimmerman writes: “As Valentine observes, Molina is “the spider woman, that traps men in her web” as story teller, Molina has exerted considerable control in seducing his cellmate. Nevertheless, in the end, it is Molina himself who is seduced by his own movie stories, trapped in the threads of a rigid script.” This quote also draws attention to the fact that, although to some readers, it initially appears as if Molina is trying to seduce Valentin with these melodramas in hopes of gaining Valentin’s trust, but in actuality, the stories ironically end up seducing both of the prisoners, as the purpose of the stories is rooted in good intent. Molina tells the stories, not to take advantage of Valentin, but rather, in hopes that their time in the cell will go faster, although eventually they do not mind spending time together in the prison. In addition, it is essential to recognize that it is not only Valentin who is seduced by the melodramas, but also Molina, who yearns for these melodramas just as much as Valentin because these fantasies grant both men escape from the intolerances present in the real world. This “seduction” is seen in a positive light because it provides the men with a fantasy in which they are truly happy, rather than a medium through which Molina and Valentin aim to manipulate each other.

This novel asserts that true love and true friendship can overcome any impediment the real world will often erect that challenges our aspirations and dreams. These barriers become especially ineffective when a love between two people exceeds real world boundaries. Cohen mentions this point at the forefront of his argument as he describes, “Transcendent love contaminates political committedness, undoing in one stroke both the ideological and the structural web.” I will even go a step further to argue that this type of transcendent love not only pollutes political realms, but social dominions as well. This is unmistakable in Kiss Of The Spider Woman, as Molina and Valentin’s unusual friendship evolves. These characters begin their journey as ignorant, intolerant people and develop into accepting beings, who illustrate that, despite their pasts consumed by hardships and their pre-prejudicial views, they were capable of magnifying their capacity to love even when at odds with the world’s curtailing nature. Cohen’s excerpt proposes that pure love and understanding, even when it catches those who experience those feelings off guard, can obliterate any prior mal intentions if the connection is profound enough. Valentin incidentally rids himself of the chauvinism regarding homosexuals that his political ideology had ingrained in him, substantiating how his love for Molina triumphs over his “political committedness.” Both Molina and Valentin allow a “structural web” to govern their lives, as Valentin fears what would happen if he ever forsook society’s norms, while Molina allows injustice to eat away at his confidence. Both men feel limited as aspects of society continuously leave them handicapped and restrained. Once Molina and Valentin give in to their true emotions, these crippling agents no longer generate any influence in their, now satisfied, lives. In compliance with those who contend that Molina and Valentin’s relationship is rooted in manipulation, one could admit that Molina and Valentin might have begun their friendship with the goal of hurting one another. However, their friendship ultimately mirrors what Cohen explains as “transcendent love,” in
that their love surpasses the initial demands they felt they needed to meet, and without a doubt ripens into a love that is so prevailing it would now withstand the greatest burdens in even the most devastating times.

The characters of this novel are in prison, insinuating that they have done wrong, and therefore, by society’s standards, these men would usually be deemed “bad” people, or people that citizens should fear. These pre-conceived notions of the main characters only add to the common belief among readers that Molina and Valentin are likely planning on exploiting each other since they are criminals, and therefore, are untrustworthy. However, the text offers enough evidence to dispel this notion. Firstly, Puig’s use of dialogue helps the reader sympathize with the characters because we can acknowledge that they enjoy films and stories just like an average person would, and they have fears and worries just like any other citizen. Similarly, Puig provides the reader with insight into Molina and Valentin’s pasts, revealing that these characters have undergone true hardships and have faced extreme adversity, and thus, the reader realizes the prisoners are in prison for less serious reasons than one might have thought. The reader needs to consider these thoughts, not to make excuses for Molina and Valentin, but rather, to exhibit that the reader should not rely on pre-conceived assumptions about these protagonists when examining the unresolved issue of whether or not they both take advantage of each other throughout the novel to achieve their own selfish needs. The problem arises when the reader does make these assumptions, and in doing so, inevitably overlook evidence to suggest Molina and Valentin are acting with pure objectives in mind.

Furthermore, if the reader is able to recognize the untainted relationship between these two characters, then they are subsequently able to appreciate the argument that Molina and Valentin were never “evil” people to begin with. Molina initially agrees to exploit Valentin because he is offered a pardon as a result, and more importantly, he does not know Valentin at this point. On the other hand, it is still ambiguous as to whether Valentin ever wished to recruit Molina as a defender of the Marxist cause, and whether or not he did, at the end it is exclusively Molina’s decision. When reflecting on these ideas, it becomes more apparent that Molina and Valentin’s journey together might have primarily been characterized by selfish intentions; however, not only is this supposed claim valueless in describing their true characters, as all people can act selfishly sometimes, but also, what is more tangible and noteworthy when uncovering the truth at the foundation of this argument, is that these characters only displayed these potential, unfavorable actions initially. This is essential because once Molina and Valentin become closer, they both demonstrate growth into better people who are able to represent unfeigned love, hence proving that even seemingly “evil” people can prevail over false impressions.

Molina and Valentin’s lives stem from repeated persecution, signified by society’s inability to accept them for the people they chose to be: a homosexual and a Marxist revolutionary. As this persecution plagued their every day lives, both Molina and Valentin had no choice but to cede to their incessant fears of the repercussions that they would unavoidably face if they were ever to express their true identities: who they would be if society played no role in their lives. For this reason, it is not surprising that the prison becomes a safe-haven, offering the cellmates the freedom to transcend real world boundaries, as well as, the enmity that reality nurtures. In Molina’s first story, the panther woman is, “All wrapped up in herself, lost in that world that she carries inside her, that she’s just beginning to discover.” This emulates the same experience Molina and Valentin undergo as they utilize the solitary sphere, in which they are confined, and its lack of accountability, to expose their innate desires and justify the authenticity of their friendship. The two friends ultimately discover that the real world outside, with its static, intolerant norms, becomes superficial and meaningless when compared to a fantasy that is capable of fusing one with his true self. It is this true self that the reader must consider when determining whether or not these characters exhibit benevolent intentions from the beginning. Molina and Valentin create an environment in which no one else matters, and society’s judgments are absent. Therefore, it is unlikely that Molina and Valentin would choose to continue to act in accordance with society’s burdens and thus, act on behalf of selfish motives, when the other alternative is to finally be completely and utterly free to explore the uncorrupted, and unequivocally pure nature of love in an unrestricted compass.