

DESIRE AND ILLUSORY LOVE: A LACANIAN APPROACH TO “THE SEDUCER’S DIARY”

BY JEFF MATHESON

Abstract: “The Seducer’s Diary” is often described as a traditional story of seduction, wherein a crafty “seducer” chooses a victim and courts her to fall in love with him. This paper challenges such a view, arguing that a relationship is not even an option for Johannes the Seducer and that the only thing he is really after is desire itself. Drawing from the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, I will show that Johannes is nothing more than an “obsessive neurotic” who merely uses Cordelia as a mirror in which to view himself and his own desire. “The Seducer’s Diary” is not a story of the seduction of a young girl; rather, it is the story of how Johannes becomes intoxicated with his own desire.

Keywords: desire, love, imagination, language, symbolic, seduction

Within the Kierkegaardian canon, “The Seducer’s Diary” contains arguably the most detailed and extensive account of eroticism. The protagonist of the story, Johannes the Seducer, describes his meeting and subsequent courting of the seventeen-year-old Cordelia Wahl,¹ noting details such as how “beautiful” she is and how much he loves her.² However, I will argue here that the love that Johannes claims to have for Cordelia is merely an illusion. Rather, what Johannes really loves is desire itself, and Cordelia simply serves as the mirror or medium whereupon Johannes can view and fantasize about his own desire.

In making this contention, I draw from the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who argues that erotic desire is a product of one’s relationship to language and culture.³ In the Lacanian sense, because of the way that language operates in the life of

¹ Rather an ironic name, perhaps meaning “heart” or “little heart” in Latin. This name takes on significance when the reader considers the eventual nature of their failed relationship as one filled with heartbreak, especially through Cordelia’s point of view.

² SKS 2, 303, 373 / EO1, 313, 385.

³ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), pp. 412–439.

the Seducer, Johannes is akin to an “obsessive neurotic,”⁴ a diagnosis in psychoanalysis meaning that an individual becomes intoxicated with idealistic images and desires that can never be realized, but who nevertheless does not let their desires die. In other words, “The Seducer’s Diary” is not the story of how the young Cordelia becomes seduced; it is the story of how Johannes, through his intoxicating desire, seduces himself.

I will begin this essay with a brief exposition of Lacan’s work on psychoanalysis, including his theories of desire, language, and imagination. From there, I will move on to a Lacanian reading of “The Seducer’s Diary,” highlighting these psychoanalytic themes as they appear in the transcription of Johannes’ diary. This will show that under the Lacanian lens, Johannes’ actions do not truly constitute love for another person but only a kind of obsessive desire. Because Lacan’s viewpoint heavily centers around language, I will also cite from two specific thinkers on language’s operation in “The Seducer’s Diary,” Aaron Edwards and Begonya Tajafuerce, to strengthen my contention about the fundamental role that language plays in Johannes’ seduction of both Cordelia and himself.

To further reinforce the view that the Seducer’s actions do not constitute real love but merely only a type of “selfish” desire (that is, a desire focused on manipulating and controlling another person in order to satisfy his own wants), I will then draw on the work of another contemporary French philosopher, Alain Badiou. Badiou’s view is that true love is the product of an “event,” an occurrence that happens seemingly out of nowhere that disorients and fundamentally changes one’s own life and desires. Because Johannes’ actions do not indicate any motivation to truly love and revere Cordelia, Badiou’s philosophy will be helpful in further cementing the argument that Johannes is merely concerned with desire and physical characteristics, not actual love.

1. A Brief Look at Lacanian Love and Desire

Before I introduce a Lacanian reading of “The Seducer’s Diary,” I will start with Lacan’s view of the mind and its impact on what he calls “subjects”⁵—for the sake of ease, what we can think of as human beings or, specifically in this case, Johannes the Seducer. In Lacan’s view, the content of one’s mind can be broken down into three parts: the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic.⁶ Because Johannes’ experience with desire is primarily

⁴ Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 49.

⁵ Lacan, *Écrits*, pp. 189–196.

⁶ Fink, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, pp. 33–34; Lacan, *Écrits*, pp. 76, 79.

due to the influence of the latter two, I will forgo much discussion about the Real here, even though Lacanian expert Bruce Fink notes that it is also deeply related to desire.⁷

When Lacan discusses the Imaginary, he is not talking about someone's imagination or something that does not exist. Instead, Lacan is referring to the world of images, meaning, for example, what we might call pictures, reflections, or photographs. When we talk about the Imaginary, we are thinking about an image or a picture that is external to us, something that has the potential to be viewed or seen. A good example of the Imaginary is a child who sees himself in the mirror for the first time (what Lacan perhaps appropriately titles the "mirror stage").⁸ As the parents point to the child's image in the mirror and explain that the child has a reflection ("Look, that is you!"), the child begins to understand that there exists a perception of himself to other people, that they can see or "view" him. The Imaginary is simply concerned with images and perceptions, and the way in which they are understood to be outside of or external to oneself.

Closely associated with the Imaginary is the Symbolic, whereby we as a culture place attributes such as power, fame, or importance *upon* these images. We do this by virtue of "symbols," and these "symbols" are created through our use of language. The words "Symbolic," "symbols," and "language" will be used throughout this essay to refer to the value and meaning that we assign to these images. Furthermore, it is important to understand that while it is the Imaginary that allows us to view and become cognizant of the world of images, it is only because of the Symbolic and the way in which our culture attributes value to these images that "desire" becomes possible in the mind. Together, the Imaginary and the Symbolic are what constitute one's own "reality," which is not to be confused with the Real.⁹

To reiterate, one's own reality (the combination of the Imaginary and the Symbolic; the way that the world of images is given value by society) is responsible for desire. In other words, desire is a kind of construction, built by the culture that we inhabit and language that we use. As such, I will use the word "desire" throughout this paper to refer to traits, features, or things that we wish to obtain. This definition of desire will later be contrasted with love, which I will refer to as being completely true, or faithful, to an

⁷ Fink, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, p. 49.

⁸ Lacan, *Écrits*, pp. 75–81.

⁹ As a matter of fact, "reality" tries at every attempt to "stave off" the Real, refusing to accept that the world of images and their subsequent desire might not actually be "real." These two concepts are fundamentally opposed to one another.

individual, to care for them, as they are, unconditionally and completely. This theme will be explored more in the third section of this paper when I will address the philosophy of Alain Badiou, but for the time being, the main distinction is as follows: desire is concerned with traits or characteristics that society teaches us are desirable, whereas love is concerned with the whole, even if that whole is not popular in the eyes of one's culture.

To illustrate how desire is constructed by language and symbols, consider again the child who has become aware of his own image in the mirror. Imagine now that the child, while riding in the car down a street, is exposed to a billboard plastered with a famous celebrity's image. What the child understands now is not only that images of oneself can be viewed, but also that this kind of fame and value are associated with what is presented to him in this ad. This seems to be, in a Lacanian sense, the way in which desire begins to be introduced—not by the world of images alone, *but by the way that language dictates the image to us*, or in other words, by how it is framed in specific cultural contexts. I believe that Johannes' desire functions in the same way (that is, wrapped up in questions of languages and images and the relationship between the two), but I will return to this point later in the paper once Lacan's view of desire has been fully elaborated.

The problem with desire is that the model immediately gets complicated when Lacan posits the following: desire is a part of the “unconscious” part of one's mind, and the unconscious behaves, as Fink notes, “as a language . . . with signifiers.”¹⁰ In other words, the Lacanian model is that desire itself behaves just like any other kind of language that we read, write, or speak.

Take the English language, for instance. In conversation with another person, speaking and communicating both involve proper use of grammar and syntax. It would be very odd (and rather difficult) to carry out a conversation if these conventions were ignored. For Lacan to claim that one's desire functions just like a language is to claim that desire similarly follows a set of rules. To put it plainly, desire is very often sequestered within our own unconscious, but seems to emerge at various points and times as specific objects become “desirable” by virtue of one's own reality (images [Imaginary] + language [Symbolic]). Viewing an ad on television for a brand-new sports car that you believe will make you more famous or more attractive is a good example of this. Desire exists prior to seeing this commercial, but is sequestered in the “unconscious” part of the mind. Desire only truly emerges and manifests itself once it has a concrete “object” to latch onto, in

¹⁰ Fink, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, p. 113.

this case, the sports car. Desire in of itself is not bound up with any kind of object; rather, it emerges at various points in time when objects become desirable.

To complicate this already-complicated picture of desire, consider the following point: desire cannot be satisfied by obtaining the object that we desire. Because desire is both socially constructed by the world that we inhabit and only found outside of oneself, desire can never truly be satiated by obtaining the thing you seek. Fink puts this nicely: “*Human desire, strictly speaking, has no object*. Indeed, it does not quite know what to do with objects. When you get what you want, you cannot want it anymore because you already have it.”¹¹ When you finally obtain the object of your desire, it does not suddenly make you immune to the world’s idols and symbols of power, the desire persists.

That is to say, should you proceed to follow the television ad and buy the brand-new sports car you see, you are obviously no longer going to “want” the sports car anymore (seeing as you now own it), *but your desire has not gone anywhere*. If you returned home from the dealership after buying the new car only to see another television ad for extravagant clothing that promises to make you more popular, the clothing simply serves as a new medium whereby desire can emerge. Ultimately, desire is constantly bouncing around objects (from the sports car to the new clothing), as our world, through the use of language, dictates to us which images have power and value. When we get what we want, we no longer want it. And yet, our desire remains with us, waiting for its next object.

My view is that the Lacanian framework of desire makes for an extremely compelling reading of “The Seducer’s Diary,” largely because Johannes’ experience with Cordelia follows this model of desire rather closely. It is not until Johannes actually meets Cordelia that his seductive desire begins to form. Johannes’ desire does not truly seem to take shape until he both sees Cordelia for the first time and decides that “she will be overtaken.”¹² But of course, when Johannes actually becomes engaged to Cordelia, he decides, as Lacan might predict, that he no longer wants to be with her. After he gets Cordelia, Johannes’ desire just moves elsewhere. It seems that all Johannes is interested in doing is manipulating desire itself and keeping it alive at any cost. As stated above, this is what would be referred to in Lacanian psychoanalysis as neurosis, although according to A the

¹¹ Ibid., p. 51 (emphasis in the original).

¹² SKS 2, 307 / EO1, 317.

Aesthete, this is the Seducer's "intellectual gift . . . to attract her without caring to possess her."¹³ Cordelia serves as the object of desire for Johannes in this story, and ultimately is just the image that Johannes uses to view and sustain his own desire.

2. A Lacanian Reading of "The Seducer's Diary"

Consider the description of Johannes the Seducer by A in the prologue to the diary's transcription:

Behind the world in which we live, far in the background, lies another world, and the two have about the same relation to each other as do the stage proper and the stage one sometimes sees behind it in the theater. Through a hanging of fine gauze, one sees, as it were, a world of gauze, lighter, more ethereal, with a quality different from that of the actual world. Many people who appear physically in the actual world are not at home in it but are at home in that other world. But a person's fading away in this manner, indeed, almost vanishing from actuality, can have its basis either in health or in sickness. The latter was the case with this man, whom I had once known without knowing him. He did not belong to the world of actuality, and yet he had very much to do with it.¹⁴

From the outset, A provides the reader with a distinction between two kinds of worlds: what we might call our physical world (real life) and then the "other world," that is, a world made of images and ideals that is distinct from the physical world (an imaginative, aesthetic world). Given what has been said about Lacan's view of the mind, this distinction is quite useful in making sense of Johannes' motives in seducing young women. The Seducer, according to A, lives rather "vanishingly" in the actual world because his desires and intentions seem to be otherworldly, that is, caught up in images and ideals of both himself and the objects of his seduction. In other words, in the Lacanian sense, Johannes is simply concerned with his own reality, which, if we take A's claim to be accurate, is not really a "reality" in any sense of the word since it does not seem to exist, belonging to the world "behind the one in which we live."

The importance of the distinction between the actual world and the world of ideals has been initially expressed by theologian Aaron Edwards, who notes that the real dilemma within "The Seducer's Diary" is that Cordelia finds herself being seduced by a man who fundamentally cannot love her, his alleged "love" being caught between a "'real' and an

¹³ SKS 2, 296 / EO1, 306–307.

¹⁴ SKS 2, 296 / EO1, 306.

‘ideal’ image.”¹⁵ According to Edwards, the very nature of this story is such that Johannes is constantly obsessing over the “image” of Cordelia, not Cordelia herself. It is extremely significant, therefore, that one of the first times Johannes sees Cordelia, he is simply seeing her reflection in a mirror:

One of Johannes’ first sightings of Cordelia comes, aptly, through a mirror. This mirror soon becomes a kind of surrogate for his own perception: “That unhappy mirror, which can capture her *image* but not her.” This reflects his own frustration; the dialectical problem of wanting to see her at a distance but yearning to move *beyond* her mere image.¹⁶

The emphasis that Edwards put on “capturing [Cordelia’s] image” is particularly striking when looked at under the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Using Lacan’s philosophy, as a matter of fact, we can take Edwards’ reading of this story even further. If it is indeed the case that when we speak of one’s “desire” we really mean their relationship to images and language, then seduction itself ought to take on an entirely new meaning: seduction is first and foremost a question of *language* more so than manipulation or coercion. This is the point made by philosopher Begonya Tajafuerce, who notes that, like Faust, “Johannesque seduction is indeed a linguistic performance, but of a strictly poetic (or literary) sort.”¹⁷ If seduction is understood in this way (that is, strictly a linguistic sense),

Cordelia and the reader are one and the same victim of the text, which acts upon them. “The Seducer’s Diary” seduces its readers much as Johannes seduces Cordelia. The reader, like Cordelia, is carried from innocence to guilt, from unconscious to anxiety, from immediacy to (self)-reflection, from poetry to reality, and once attracted thereto, he/she is repelled and abandoned.¹⁸

The importance that Tajafuerce places on the shifting nature of emotions here is significant. Recall from earlier the proposed definition of one’s reality: the world of images as dictated by our own language. We learn to desire things because we are taught the value of that thing *through* language. In the case of Johannes, I argue that seduction looks like a combination of Edwards’ and Tajafuerce’s models. It is not *just* that Johannes is obsessed with the “image” of Cordelia, it is that he has the ability to sway both Cordelia’s

¹⁵ Aaron Edwards, “Thrill of the Chaste: The Pursuit of ‘Love’ as the Perpetual Dialectic Between the ‘Real’ and the ‘Ideal Image’ in Kierkegaard’s ‘The Seducer’s Diary,’” *Literature and Theology* 30, no. 1 (2016): p. 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁷ Begonya Saez Tajafuerce, “Kierkegaardian Seduction, or the Aesthetic ‘Actio(Nes) in Distans,’” *Diacritics* 30, no. 1 (2000): p. 84.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

and the reader's opinions of him through language, and that is what seems to be at the core of seduction. It is for this reason that Tajafuerce is absolutely correct in the claim that the reader is just as seduced as Cordelia. Our emotions as readers are just as, if not more, malleable than Cordelia's, and it seems to be because of this combination between images and language, or, more specifically, desire. We as readers step into the shoes of the young Cordelia and experience this desire firsthand through the form of linguistic seduction; we become entrenched in the world of the Seducer as it is handed to us through extremely rich language. But of course, this seduction is rather empty, being built solely on an image of the young girl that does not actually exist.¹⁹

The first hint we are given that Johannes might be more obsessed with Cordelia's image than Cordelia herself comes from the moment when Johannes decides to pursue Cordelia, as recorded in the April 4th entry:

Should I relinquish her? Should I leave her undisturbed in her delight? She wants to pay but she has lost her purse—presumably she is giving her address. I do not wish to hear it—I do not wish to deprive myself of the surprise. I certainly shall meet her again sometime; I certainly shall recognize her, and she may recognize me—my sidelong glance is not forgotten so easily. Then when I am taken by surprise upon meeting her in surroundings I did not expect, her turn will come. . . . No impatience, no greediness—everything will be relished in slow draughts; she is selected, she will be overtaken.²⁰

What I wish to draw attention to in this statement is the incredible stress that Johannes puts on the element of surprise. It is indeed true that he wants to see Cordelia again, but *only when he least expects it*. The key point in this discussion is that *it is not Cordelia that drives his desire*. From the outset, what drives Johannes is the possibility of desire or the “surprise” of desire. This is not to suggest, however, that Johannes is fundamentally *uninterested* in Cordelia. As a matter of fact, from this very same scene, we learn that Johannes finds this girl rather attractive (hence his describing her various physical features).²¹ Attraction is, after all, a typical part of romantic desire, but as the story stands, Johannes clearly has another interest on his mind: it is not just the case that Johannes wants to *be* with an attractive young woman; Johannes wishes to *overtake* her. The appeal is the chase.

Another critical example of Johannes illustrating the idea of prioritizing pure desire over Cordelia herself is the way in which he deals with the people close to Cordelia,

¹⁹ In the mirror stage, Lacan calls this the “Ideal-I.” See Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 76.

²⁰ SKS 2, 306–307 / EO1, 316–317.

²¹ SKS 2, 306 / EO1, 316.

specifically her aunt (who is never named in the story) and her former suitor, Edward. Both of these characters and their relationship to the Seducer demonstrate rather clearly Johannes' neurotic behavior. His interactions with both Edward and Cordelia's aunt are aimed not at fostering relationships, but at getting Cordelia to see a specific side of Johannes. Being seen by Cordelia, after all, is just a way for Johannes to keep his desire alive. He does not want to be seen so that Cordelia will want to be with him. Rather, if Cordelia learns to see him in a certain way, the game of desire can stay alive. This point can best be made manifest in the experiences that Johannes records regarding Cordelia's aunt:

Because of my intimate relationship with the aunt, it is easy for me to treat her like a child who has no understanding of the world. . . . With my powerful assistance on this score, the aunt is outdoing herself. She has become almost fanatic—something she can thank me for. The only thing about me that she cannot stand is that I have no position. Now I have adopted the habit of saying whenever a vacancy in some office is mentioned: "There is a position for me," and thereupon discuss it very gravely with her. Cordelia always perceives the irony, which is precisely what I want.²²

Explicitly, Johannes is interested in Cordelia's perception of irony in his conversations with her aunt. Notice, however, that it is not just that he wants Cordelia to overhear the conversation and thereby understand how interesting he is. Because of Johannes' obsession with Cordelia, he also has this desire to manipulate the aunt, apparently being able to "treat her like a child." If Johannes' desire was simply focused on Cordelia herself without regard to image, it would be odd for him to want to keep the aunt under his thumb. When Cordelia "perceives the irony," Johannes gets to see his own reflection and desire through both Cordelia's attention and the aunt's manipulated approval of him.

Recall that desire in the Lacanian sense is always a matter of the Symbolic, that is, of language. We learn about the "images" that we desire when we are presented with them, of course, but it is not until language is introduced that we learn to "desire" these things, as we learn that with these images come "symbols" of power, fame, or beauty that allow our desire to emerge out of its seemingly sequestered state. It is striking, therefore, that language plays an extremely important part in the flattery of both Edward and Cordelia's aunt. In Johannes' claim that he wants Cordelia to perceive the irony, what concerns him is not Cordelia per se, but rather the way that she responds to his use of language. What

²² SKS 2, 343 / EO1, 353.

is at stake in Johannes' relationship to seduction is fundamentally a question of language and manipulation.

The Seducer's so-called friendship with Edward follows a very similar vein with language, albeit in the opposite direction.²³ Whereas Johannes' relationship with Cordelia's aunt is primarily motivated by what he wants Cordelia to hear, his relationship with Edward is primarily motivated by what he knows Cordelia *will not* hear. He previously pitied Edward for his inability or lack of knowledge with love,²⁴ which is perhaps why he never worried that Cordelia would become interested in him:

I, however, can hear perfectly every single word that is exchanged, hear every movement. It is very important to me, because what a person may venture in his despair cannot be known. The most circumspect and most timid people at times dare to do the most extreme things. Although I do not have the slightest to do with the two isolated people, I nevertheless can readily perceive in Cordelia that I am always invisibly present between her and Edward.²⁵

These two relationships are juxtaposed rather nicely: the relationship between Johannes and Cordelia's aunt being characterized by the exactness of language and irony, and the relationship between Edward and Cordelia characterized by the lack thereof. Both are, indeed, questions of language, and although they seem to be heading in different directions, they both lead to the same point: they live to serve Johannes' uncanny use of language as a personification of his own desire and skill, and not as an attempt to sway Cordelia for the sake of being with Cordelia, as one might expect to see in a love story.

I now wish to turn to what I consider the most important scene in "The Seducer's Diary," the scene that illustrates the pinnacle of the model of desire I have been advocating for: the moment that, after their engagement, Johannes decides that he no longer wants to be with Cordelia. In order to keep desire alive, he continues to toy with her even to the point of getting her to break their engagement:

Until now I have not proposed to her, as it is called in the bourgeois sense; now I shall do it. I shall make her free; only in that way shall I love her. That she owes this to me, she must never suspect, for then she will lose her confidence in herself. Then when she feels free, so free that she is almost tempted to want to break with me, the second struggle will begin. . . . The greater

²³ "So now we are friends, Edward and I . . ." (SKS 2, 337 / EO1, 347). This is perhaps used ironically, given that nothing Johannes has done seems to be friendly.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ SKS 2, 339 / EO1, 350.

the abundance of strength she has, the more interesting for me. The first war is a war of liberation; it is a game. The second is a war of conquest; it is a life-and-death struggle.²⁶

Notice in this passage the obvious use of irony: at this point in the story, Johannes *has* proposed to Cordelia.²⁷ However, it is clear that Johannes is never content with what is happening in the present; rather, Johannes is *only concerned with what is happening in his mind, in the potential future*. In the Seducer's words, this idea is exemplified by calling it a "war of liberation; . . . a game."²⁸ This is a straightforward characteristic of Lacanian neurosis, namely, that what is kept alive in desire is not one's "object" of desire—in this case, Cordelia—but rather *desire itself*. The reason that Johannes is never content with Cordelia is because the only thing that interests him is the *possibility* of Cordelia, of being able to still pursue her. Thus, when the engagement actually happens, Johannes refuses to accept it, deciding instead to keep pushing back the goal line, always keeping the future unknown. This tactic of keeping desire and, by extension, possibility, alive should not be altogether too surprising to careful readers of *A the Aesthete's* work,²⁹ especially given the fact that the outcome of this relationship was one of the elements that truly frightened A.³⁰

The tactic of keeping desire alive is also noteworthy when considered under the Lacanian lens. Given what has been said about the function of the Imaginary and the Symbolic together to form one's reality, it would seem, then, that the Seducer's relationship with desire merely serves as a kind of "reflection." In Cordelia, Johannes does not see his future wife—he merely sees a reflection of himself and his own seductive abilities. Consider Lacan's words concerning the function of desire in the "mirror stage":

This moment at which the mirror stage comes to an end inaugurates, through identification with the imago of one's (semblable) and the drama of primordial (jealousy) . . . the dialectic

²⁶ SKS 2, 372 / EO1, 384.

²⁷ This is evidenced in a couple of places prior to this. See SKS 2, 364–365 / EO1, 375, 377.

²⁸ SKS 2, 372 / EO1, 384.

²⁹ I have in mind here the "Diapsalmata" texts, many of which describe A's boredom with the world.

³⁰ "I can picture him as knowing how to bring a girl to the high point where he was sure that she would offer everything" (SKS 2, 296 / EO1, 307). There is some indication that the phrase "offer everything" includes even a sexual relationship. See Leo Stan, "Fertile Contradictions: A Reconsideration of 'The Seducer's Diary,'" in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), p. 82.

that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations. It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into being mediated by the other's desire.³¹

According to Lacan, desire is just a kind of "reflection" whereupon the viewer sees objects in the world as reflections of themselves or, more specifically, what will make the viewer "more" of themselves or a "better version" of themselves. I contend that this is what Johannes sees in Cordelia—a reflection of himself and how much better he could be seen in the world if Cordelia stood by his side. However, given both that this self-image is not "real" in the sense of the physical world and that desire can never truly satiate that self-image, "The Seducer's Diary" is only really an account of Johannes seducing himself, not the traditional model of the seduction of a young woman.

This view of "self-reflection" gets complicated, though, when considering the fact that Johannes only seems to really express interest in Cordelia as his medium of reflection. The question must be asked: Why Cordelia? If Johannes is only interested in seeing his own reflection through the seduction of young women, why does he fixate on Cordelia in particular? The answer is rather surprising: I do not believe that he *does* fixate only on Cordelia. Following their engagement (and *only* after their engagement, when the game becomes boring and the object of his desire has seemingly been obtained), Johannes seems to be very interested in other people and other relationships. Take, for example, the encounter that the Seducer has with a young woman on Østergade sometime after his engagement:

The profile of a woman's head appeared in the next window in such a way that it turned in a strange manner in the same direction as the venetian blind. Thereupon the owner of the head nodded in a very friendly way and again hid behind the venetian blind. I concluded first and foremost that the person she greeted was a man, for her gesture was too passionate to be prompted by the sight of a girl friend. . . . But I forgive you, for the girl pleases me the more I see her. She is beautiful, her brown eyes are full of roguishness.³²

Johannes very obviously does not have a sense of loyalty or allegiance to Cordelia, as evidenced by his comments regarding the young woman in the window. Furthermore, despite his claims to truly love and revere Cordelia,³³ it does not seem to be the case that Cordelia means as much to Johannes as he wants his readers to think. The reason that he

³¹ Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 79.

³² SKS 2, 381–382 / EO1, 393, 395.

³³ "Do I love Cordelia? Yes! Sincerely? Yes! Faithfully? Yes—in the esthetic sense . . ." (SKS 2, 373 / EO1, 385).

wants her to break off the engagement and “belong to [him]” is just this same kind of self-interest.³⁴ The love that Johannes claims to have seems to be nothing more than a type of conflated desire, a fantastical image of what might be a possibility in the future, and that is all that Johannes seems to care about. It is also noteworthy that the criteria for who was desirable to Johannes was only restricted to “young girls,” a group in which Cordelia was just one of many.³⁵

The Lacanian lens of desire, as I have argued, makes for a compelling reading of this text: the way that Johannes sees Cordelia as a reflection of himself is practically identical to the Lacanian view of desire as a vehicle for our own “ideal” selves. Up until this point, however, I have only really dealt with the nature of desire itself. I now turn to Alain Badiou and his work on the nature of true and lasting love to further showcase that Johannes’ actions fundamentally cannot represent love, despite his amorous feelings for Cordelia.

3. Badiou on Love

According to Badiou, love is best thought of as an “event”—a momentous occurrence that happens without any warning and brings with it lasting consequences or new possibilities (what he will later term “truth-procedures,” “truths,” or “types”).³⁶ In other words, love happens without any indication that it is coming and has the potential to change one’s life and bring it in an entirely new direction. Badiou notes that events are of four kinds: amorous,³⁷ scientific, artistic, and political. Per the nature of this paper, I will focus only on the first of these types of events, namely, love.

Falling in love with another person is not anything that one can expect or “look forward” to: it just happens, and when it happens, one’s life has the potential to change forever and bring with it new possibilities that would not otherwise have been an option (perhaps marriage or raising children). Such life changes are conditioned upon the heed and diligence the individual gives to the event, and it is for this reason that events ought

³⁴ SKS 2, 364 / EO1, 376.

³⁵ SKS 2, 314 / EO1, 324.

³⁶ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (New York: Verso, 2001), p. 28.

³⁷ It will be worthwhile to mention that “amorous” here refers specifically to “erotic” or “romantic” love. This is separate from the kind of neighborly love that Kierkegaard himself deals with at length in *Works of Love*, which is why Kierkegaard’s personal views on love are not referred to here.

to be broken down into three separate components: the encounter, the naming, and the fidelity.

Let us think of the first part of the event, the encounter, as something akin to “happ-stance.” The nature of the event is such that it cannot be anticipated, and this is entirely due to the encounter. Consider meeting a potential romantic partner, for example. Their sudden appearance can happen anywhere, at any time. In the context of “The Seducer’s Diary,” we can pinpoint this to the first entry written by the Seducer on April 4th, where he notices Cordelia for the first time stepping out of the carriage: “Take care, my beautiful stranger! Take care! To step out of a carriage is not such a simple matter; at times it is a decisive step.”³⁸ It is clear that this is the first meeting of these two individuals, evidenced by his labeling her as a “stranger” and not yet knowing her name.³⁹ Furthermore, given the fact that this is the very first entry written by Johannes, it should not be altogether surprising that this encounter is what launches the rest of the diary and his subsequent desires to pursue her. The Badiouian “encounter” very clearly takes place in the story, but it is the following two components of the event that complicate the nature of their love.

The second point of the event-triad is what Badiou calls the “naming” of the event. In the context of love, this amounts to the actual statement “I love you” to the person with whom the event has taken place (or something to that effect). This labeling says of the participants in the event that an encounter really has taken place and that their lives have the potential to now be lived in a new way:

The declaration is inscribed in the structure of the event itself. First, you have an encounter. I pointed out how love begins with the wholly contingent, random character of the encounter. . . . This is a very difficult, almost metaphysical problem: how can what is pure chance at the outset become the fulcrum for a construction of truth? . . . To make a declaration of love is to move on from the event-encounter to embark on a construction of truth.⁴⁰

It seems that for Badiou, the “naming” of the encounter is what bridges the gap between the initial occurrence, the encounter, happening seemingly out of nowhere, to the genesis of “a construction of truth,” those changes in one’s life that bring new possibilities. Perhaps it goes without saying that this is a rather vital step: individuals involved in the love-

³⁸ SKS 2, 304 / EO1, 313.

³⁹ Johannes will only learn Cordelia’s name several entries later, on April 19th (SKS 2, 325 / EO1, 336).

⁴⁰ Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, trans. Peter Bush (New York: The New Press, 2012), pp. 40–42.

event cannot begin to build any kind of truth without the naming of what has happened. Interestingly, within “The Seducer’s Diary,” there is no naming of the occurrence of any kind. There are statements from Johannes which indicate that he does love Cordelia,⁴¹ but never, not once, does the reader find the conversation about Johannes actually declaring his love to Cordelia or vice versa.⁴² It is as if Johannes refuses to let his reader know the actual details of his proposal to Cordelia—in other words, the “naming” of the event effectively disappears. It is here that I contend that the event becomes interrupted, and as such, true love (what Badiou calls “a construction of truth”) becomes an absolute impossibility, which is perhaps one reason why Johannes cannot ever move past his own reflective desire.

The third and final component of events is what Badiou terms the “fidelity” or the “faithfulness” that one has to the event, and this fidelity is what, in turn, produces the new “truth.” Generally speaking, this kind of faithfulness is something like a recognition of the way that the encounter shaped your life and of the new possibilities that are now available to you as a result. When individuals recognize how different their life is in light of the encounter, they are presented with the choice between being faithful to the nature of the event or not. In the context of a marriage, this ought to be relatively clear. The nature of an amorous encounter is such that one is true to the rules of the marriage that would not have otherwise been a possibility. Loving and being faithful to one’s spouse and children in turn is a good example of this, and has the potential to generate “eternal truths”: as life continues and the two love participants grow together, their lives take on a completely different shape than if those people remained single, that is, if the event never happened.

It is important to note, however, that just because an event happens, it does not guarantee any kind of result. Oftentimes, participants who have gone through both an encounter and a subsequent naming cannot stand the test of time and therefore the truth does not fully come to pass as the “fidelity” falls short. The example that Badiou uses to illustrate the principle of this kind of faltering love is, perhaps ironically, the historical account of the relationship between Søren Kierkegaard and Regine Olsen:

⁴¹ SKS 2, 373 / EO1, 385.

⁴² I do not mean by this claim that the word “love” doesn’t appear in conversation between the characters. It most certainly does. I simply mean that the readers do not have access to the integral moment whereupon Johannes or Cordelia declare their love for each other for the very first time.

You find philosophers who transform love into the highest levels of subjective experience. This is the case with Søren Kierkegaard, for example. For Kierkegaard there are three levels of existence. At the aesthetic level, the experience of love is one of vain seduction and repetition. The selfishness of pleasure and the very selfishness of that selfishness drive individuals on, the archetype being Mozart's Don Juan. At the ethical level, love is genuine and demonstrates its own seriousness. It is an eternal commitment, turned towards the absolute, something Kierkegaard himself experienced in his long courtship to Régine. The ethical level can lead the way to the highest level, the religious level, if the absolute value of the commitment is endorsed by marriage. . . . Love then moves beyond seduction and, through the serious meditation of marriage, becomes a way to accede to the superhuman. As you can see, philosophy struggles with huge tension. . . . And the tension is almost unbearable. Thus, when Kierkegaard was finally unable to contemplate the idea of marrying Régine, he broke with her. In the end, he represented the aesthete seducer of the first level, lived the ethical promise of the second and failed to make the transition, via the real-life seriousness of marriage, to the third level. Nonetheless, he visited the whole gamut of forms of philosophical reflection on love.⁴³

The fact that both Kierkegaard and Regine were at one point in time engaged implies that at the very least, an encounter took place. The naming of that encounter seems to follow from this, as demonstrated by one of many letters written from Kierkegaard to Regine: "My Regine! Even at this very moment I am thinking of you, and if at times it seems to you that I am avoiding you, this is not because I love you less, but because it has become a necessity for me to be alone at certain moments."⁴⁴ It is rather clear that there was a definite Badiouian "event" in Kierkegaard's eyes, given that the "naming" of their love has been implied to occur.⁴⁵ However, what Badiou seems to indicate in his summary of their relationship is that the "tension was too great," that Kierkegaard had to break off his faithfulness to Regine in the name of the ethical sphere as opposed to the religious sphere. Such was the nature of their relationship: it included an encounter and a naming, but the fidelity fell short.

In my reading of "The Seducer's Diary," I argue that Johannes the Seducer's experience with Cordelia is missing the "naming" of the encounter and, as a result, real love is a

⁴³ Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, pp. 13–15.

⁴⁴ SKS 28, 224 / LD, 71.

⁴⁵ It may be argued that this is not altogether different from the way that Johannes talks about his love with Cordelia, and that it is not fair to claim that this implies the "naming" of an event whereas Johannes' claims of love did not. One must keep in mind, however, that Kierkegaard's own experience is historical, and Johannes' is fictional. The decision to omit the conversation wherein the declaration of his love occurred was intentional.

fundamental impossibility. Rather clearly, I think, we can point to an encounter (the carriage exit and jewelry shopping scenes), but what Johannes eliminates entirely from the diary is the naming of the encounter, the actual moment wherein he declares his love to Cordelia. My contention is that the lack of the naming fundamentally changes the nature of the third part of Badiou's theory of the event, namely, the faithfulness.

In the traditional event model of love, an individual is true to the event by being absolutely committed to what the encounter has brought him, perhaps a wife or children and loving them unconditionally. In this framework, though, it would seem that Johannes is not true to the nature of the encounter: as soon as he has Cordelia, the only thing he wants is to let her go. More directly, the missing "naming" fundamentally changes the way that the Seducer chooses to be faithful. Johannes is never faithful, not once, to Cordelia for Cordelia's sake: he is only faithful to himself and his own desires, the product of his "mirror image" and the function of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. With Badiou's model in mind, it is rather clear that the nature of Johannes' and Cordelia's relationship is not one that is constructed out of love. The way that Cordelia's seduction is structured fundamentally opposes any kind of real love, especially when love is considered as a life-altering "event." If anything, this relationship is built on flimsy and selfish desires perpetuated by Johannes himself.

This is not to imply, however, that Johannes' obsession with desire and the image of Cordelia is simply unimportant or irrelevant when it comes to the discussion of true, authentic love. As a matter of fact, Badiou is explicit about this in his description of the relationship between love and desire: "Love passes through desire like a camel through the eye of a needle. It must pass through it, but only insofar as the living body restitutes the material marking of the disjunction by which the declaration of love has realized the interior void."⁴⁶ According to Badiou, desire is a fundamental and necessary part of the process, or the event, of love. It is rather clear, in fact, that Badiou probably has Lacan in mind when he discusses the important role that desire plays in the love-process. Lacan notes that while desire focuses on parts, love focuses on the whole: "While desire focuses on the other, always in a somewhat fetishist manner, on particular objects, like breasts, buttocks . . . love focuses on the very being of the other, on the other as it has erupted, fully armed with its being, into my life thus disrupted and re-fashioned."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Alain Badiou, "What Is Love?" in *Sexuation: SIC 3*, ed. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (New York: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 274.

⁴⁷ Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, p. 21.

Still, under both the Lacanian and Badiouian models of the relationship between love and desire, I find little room for the argument that Johannes could possibly love Cordelia in the proper sense of the word, despite his claims.⁴⁸ Recall that right from the outset, what Johannes desired were Cordelia's features and nothing more: "Your chin is rather lovely, a bit too pointed. Your mouth is small, open—that is because you are walking too fast. Your teeth, white as snow . . ." ⁴⁹ Johannes is only obsessed with the "features" of Cordelia, but never really obsessed with her as a whole, as a person. As such, I believe it is evident that no "event" really occurs, that we do not get to see the actual production of a truth—that is, nothing is fractured, nothing is changed, in the Seducer's relationship to Cordelia. Nothing comes forth in the way that Badiou describes, further cementing the idea that desire is the only thing Johannes strives for.

4. Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to offer a new view of "The Seducer's Diary," namely, that it is not simply the story of the seduction of a young girl. What is at stake in this story is the obsession with oneself and with images, recollection, and idealism. This article has attempted to take this reading one step further using the Lacanian-Badiouian spheres of discussion regarding love and desire, to showcase the neurosis evident in Johannes' pursuit of Cordelia and the lack of true love and fidelity revealed by such an occurrence. Badiou and Lacan are certainly not the only applicable thinkers of love and desire within Kierkegaard's work, but I do believe they provide a solid framework for understanding what is at stake in seduction. Seduction, after all, might not be a question of another person, but perhaps primarily a question of oneself.

⁴⁸ SKS 2, 373 / EO1, 385.

⁴⁹ SKS 2, 308 / EO1, 318.