

Mimetic Desire

I'm going to talk about mimetic desire, which comes from literary theory.

If I lost you by saying the words "literary theory," I promise that unlike most theories, mimetic desire is actually very *practical*. It can explain everything in your life from the books you like to read, the career you choose, and even the follies of your love life. If this all sounds completely absurd, perhaps you are also right to be cautious.

But let's start by defining mimetic desire, which boils down to this idea: we desire things or we desire to do things *not* because we actually want them, but because we want to be like a person who does those things. What does this mean concretely? To use an example from literature—since this does come from literary theory—in Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary*, the main character, bored with her marriage, has an affair not because she is in love with that man but because she wants to be like one of those romantic heroines, straight out of the romance novels she's always reading.

Madame Bovary the book is no romance novel. And Madame Bovary, the character, is no romantic heroine. Because she does not actually love him, she never finds lasting happiness in the affair, and it all ends pretty disastrously for everyone involved. Its author Flaubert once famously declared, "Madame Bovary, c'est moi." Madame Bovary, that's me.

And that is me—as well. Ever since I learned of mimetic desire, I began seeing my own desires through this mimetic lens. So for example, I really like the writer David Foster Wallace. But did I only like Wallace I wanted to like the type of person who read Wallace? Did I like guys who liked Wallace because I wanted to be the type of person who dated guys who liked David Foster Wallace? Did I want to write nonfiction because in fact I wanted to be like David Foster Wallace?

One conclusion from mimetic desire is that our desires are neither individual nor genuine, that we simply reflect the people around us. Our hopes and dreams—the stuff we consider core to our identity—do not originate from us. While I don't study literary theory, I do study neurobiology. You may have heard of mirror neurons. A certain of group neurons will fire in each of our brains when we do something, such as raise our left hands. Right now, in the brains of every single one of you, some of those same neurons are also firing because you have watched me raise my left hand, even though you haven't even moved your own hand. Try this next time you're in a conversation: scratch your nose and see if your conversation partner mirrors you to scratch her nose too. So on a basic level, we are biologically wired to mirror the actions of those around us.

But completely accepting mimetic desire can lead to a kind of emptiness. Elif Batuman—who aside from being a fantastic writer, is also an alumnus of Lowell House—makes an argument against mimetic desire in her book *The Possessed*. "[Mimetic desire] made love totally worthless...The drive to commit generous errors, which I thought of as the only possible egress from the prison of self-interest and inertia, was made out to be a form of egotism." In mimetic

desire, the object of desire—in this case the lover—is superseded by the ideal of the person we want to become in having that object.

The insidious extension of this is that what we desire is not actually our end goal, so even when we obtain it, like when Madame Bovary has her affair, we are still not satisfied. Like Elif Batuman, I don't believe this is necessarily true because some desires are genuine and love is meaningful, but I do believe it is sometimes true. Our challenge is sorting this out.

I recently decided not to write my neurobiology thesis. When I told this to my advisers and parents, I felt their disappointment more strongly than my own. Now this was telling sign that the desire for a thesis belonged to other people rather than me.

So instead of spending this past weekend writing my thesis, which would have been due four days, from now, I took a trip to New York City to do what I really want: journalism. I met with editors and writers and interviewed people for articles I was writing. One person I interviewed was a neurobiologist who had recently published a book. He was interested in talking about the book, but when asked about his research, his face immediately lit up. When he said, “My happiest days have been in lab,” I believed him. This was genuine desire.

The neurobiologist and I are opposites in our desires. I don't dislike research but talking about it does not make my face light up. This weekend New York, as I ran around in the rain doing interviews and trying to write on the subway, I was very happy.