

Bended-Knee Proposals: Reconsidering the Tradition

Whenever a major holiday like Christmas, New Year's, or Valentine's Day approaches, it's almost a given that some friend or acquaintance from Facebook will get engaged. Their smiling faces will show up in your feed, and if you're lucky, maybe even a real action shot or video which catches the special moment as it unfolds: guy on one knee, girl with hands over face covering her surprise and glee.

I've noticed a revival in these types of proposals in recent years. They're sweet, romantic, and everything a girlish heart could possibly desire, right? Yet in spite of all this, I've had a nagging dislike of them for years.

I recently started pondering what drives this dislike. Some of it, I had to admit, probably hearkens back to the classic books I read as a child and adult. Checking off the proposals from these works, I realized that none of them used what is considered the traditional route of proposal on one knee:

- *Little Women*: Meg and John Brooke get engaged in the hallway of the March home, Amy and Laurie get engaged sitting side by side in a rowboat, and Jo and Professor Bhaer get engaged under an umbrella in the rain.
- *Little House on the Prairie*: Laura and Almanzo get engaged sitting side by side in the buggy in which most of their courtship took place.
- *Anne of Green Gables*: Anne and Gilbert finally get together while sitting next to each other on a bench in a garden that was a special part of their friendship.
- *Pride and Prejudice*: Lizzy and Mr. Darcy have a commonplace engagement while walking side by side down a road.
- *Emma*: Mr. Knightley finally proposes to the title

character on a walk.

What all of these examples do contain, however, is a very basic, friendship-based approach to love. In every instance the suitor does not treat his lady-love as a goddess whom he must worship on bended knee, but as a companion with whom he desires to walk through the ups and downs of life.

Although perhaps not intending to, the bended-knee proposal seems to do the opposite. It places the woman on a pedestal as the most important one in the marriage, while signaling that romantic chivalric love will be a continual part of the relationship. While almost every female would likely love for such to be the case, any reasonable individual will tell you that such is not the reality.

As it turns out, I am not alone in my negative qualms of displays of chivalric, romantic love. In 1941, author J.R.R. Tolkien raised similar issues in a letter written to his son:

*“There is in our Western culture the romantic chivalric tradition still strong... It idealizes ‘love’ – and as far as it goes can be very good, since it takes in far more than physical pleasure, and enjoins if not purity, at least fidelity, and so self-denial, ‘service’, courtesy, honour, and courage. **Its weakness is, of course, that it began as an artificial courtly game, a way of enjoying love for its own sake without reference to (and indeed contrary to) matrimony. Its centre was not God, but imaginary Deities, Love and the Lady. It still tends to make the Lady a kind of guiding star or divinity** – of the old-fashioned ‘his divinity’ = the woman he loves – the object or reason of noble conduct. This is, of course, false and at best make-believe. The woman is another fallen human-being with a soul in peril. ... It is not wholly true, and it is not perfectly ‘theocentric’. It takes, or at any rate has in the past taken, the young man’s eye off women as they are, as companions in shipwreck not guiding stars.”*

Tolkien's words should give us pause. As he implies, there are still many good things about chivalric love, not the least of which is kind and gracious treatment of women. But does an over-emphasis on such chivalric love lead to a distorted view of the marriage relationship? And does the bended-knee proposal set a precedent from the beginning for this same distorted view?

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