

Diamonds Are Forever?

An objective reflection on a reflective object



Photo by Owen Thomas

My boyfriend and I went engagement ring shopping this weekend. At the jeweler's, Greg and I were dumbfounded at the glitter and glory of all the gems spread before us. Diamonds, emeralds, rubies, sapphires: everything shimmered, refracting the fluorescent overhead lights into a million colors. Overwhelmed by the opulence laid out before me, I clutched my heart; Greg clutched his wallet.

I've never really been interested in jewelry. I have two piercings in each ear, but I haven't worn earrings in several years. I'll wear necklaces from time to time, but it's generally more of an afterthought if I wear one at all. Bracelets annoy me and get in my way. And I've never owned a ring that didn't make my finger itchy and pimply. Being allergic to nickel just makes it easier to refrain from wearing jewelry.

So I was a little uneasy about our search for an engagement ring. Besides the fact that I rarely wear rings, it was hard for me

to see how a tiny rock a couple millimeters wide could represent something so abstract as the concept of love, especially when only one half of the couple would be wearing it.

Love is a hard concept to tackle, after all. The Greek language has four different words for it: eros, agape, philia, and storge. Merriam-Webster defines the noun "love" in nine different ways. Entire books are written dissecting the emotion; poems and songs are written to objects of love; it's a central concept to religions such as Christianity. Love changes lives by destroying or enriching them. It can start conflict and it can end war.

Why is it that we decide to represent our undying feelings of romance with something that a slave laborer in Sierra Leone probably dug out of the ground? Why do we give the one person we can't live without an object that symbolizes pure luxury?

As it turns out, we can blame De Beers for popularizing the diamond as a symbol

of engagement. Prior to the company's brilliant marketing scheme launched in 1947, it was common for any number of precious stones to be used in engagement rings. De Beers' "Diamonds are forever" campaign was incredibly successful, and now it is rare to find an engagement ring that doesn't incorporate a diamond somehow.

Of course, De Beers simply came up with the marketing scheme; the assumption was, and still is, that diamonds are the quintessential female accessory. As anyone on Madison Avenue can tell you, diamonds are "a girl's best friend." Men don't wear engagement rings in our culture. Even if they did, the rings would probably be bare of embellishments and made of something more "manly," like tungsten, which is the material that tanks are built from. Coincidentally, that's the metal Greg wants for our wedding rings, but I digress.

The whole notion of having an engagement ring has bothered me for some time.

As a feminist, I believe in equality for both genders, and girls-only engagement rings seem pretty one-sided. Greg's not the jewelry type, so I knew I couldn't just buy a ring for him. What I eventually decided to do was to buy Greg an engagement Wii. Romantic? Perhaps not. Awesome? Definitely.

Regardless of my efforts to circumvent the engagement "system," I can't blame the diamond companies for catering to women. As the prime demographic, it's only expected that a capitalistic system would want to, well, capitalize on their biggest sellers. Women buy diamonds because they want them; women want diamonds because they've been socialized to do so. With the ever-persisting stereotype of women thinking "diamonds are romantic" and men thinking "diamonds are an investment," it's not hard to see why things have changed little in the field of jewelry over the last sixty years. Andrew Cockburn relates an anecdote in "Diamonds: The Real Story," where a diamond miner remarks on the million dollars' worth of technology and manpower for a "completely non-essential item." Another miner replies simply, "Thank God for women."

These are the reasons why my stomach was turning in knots at the little shop in Annapolis. I had never, ever considered wearing a diamond before, yet I found myself in a jewelry store with Greg, picking out something I could wear every day of my life to symbolize our undying affection for each other.

So I started to think about it, and the decision to represent eternal love with a diamond began to make sense. Diamonds are the hardest natural material known to man. They are incredibly resistant to wear and tear, prompting De Beers' famous advertising claim that diamonds are eternal. If you're going to tell a woman you love

her, giving her a gift that isn't going to wilt, crumble, or fall apart in a few years is generally a good idea. In addition, diamonds are—okay, I'll admit it—beautiful. This may seem overtly obvious, but as neither Greg nor I had ever seen a diamond that close in person until this weekend, we were dumbfounded at how stunning diamonds really could be.

Further, these gems have traditionally represented divine or supernatural powers. The translucent stones are often set into the eye sockets of devotional Hindu statues. Panic, hexes, and pestilence have historically been thought to fly from the bearer of a diamond—so perhaps the groom-to-be is buying a diamond for his bride as an act of self-preservation. Greeks considered diamonds to be the tears of gods, proving

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that diamonds have been considered much more than a simple rock for thousands of years.

These were the details I contemplated as I stood at the jewelry counter in front of the patient gemologist. The importance of our decision weighed upon me as I gazed into the glass case full of sparkly stones. It was more than a little nerve-wracking. Not because Greg and I were discussing engagement—no, we'd agreed on that a long time ago. But because somehow, this ring we were going to buy was supposed to

sum up the entirety of our relationship, our past, present, and future. I had originally wanted an emerald because green is my favorite color, and the deep green seemed to represent how deep our love ran. Plus, the untraditional choice of stone would represent our untraditional, quirky relationship. However, the gemologist informed me that that was a terrible idea because emeralds are brittle and break easily, and how would I feel about a green diamond?

Somewhat dissatisfied and still uneasy, I agreed to look at a couple small diamonds, just because I am incredibly klutzy and the thought that these gemstones are nigh indestructible is pretty comforting. The jeweler carefully unfolded the layer of black velvet encircling the loose diamond and placed it in front of us on the counter. The

first thing that caught my eye was how tiny it was—barely the size of a baby's fingernail. And then I saw the sparkle. Inside the numerous infinitesimal facets, there were a million colors, all backed by a gorgeous deep green. It was brilliant, it was mesmerizing, and it wasn't nearly as expensive as we'd expected, since it was such a small size. I finally could see why it's used to symbolize that most abstract of concepts, love. After all, love is brilliant, multi-faceted, and in the best cases, eternal.

After plenty of deliberation and discussion with Greg, I ended up picking out that tiny green diamond after all. Maybe I'm just rationalizing the fact that we spent a grand on a freaking rock, but I'd like to think there's more to the ring than that. And maybe the diamond ring itself isn't to blame for the gender gap in engagements; it's our state of mind. I think I can better understand the appeal of the itty-bitty, sparkling stone now...even though I'm still buying an engagement Wii for my boyfriend. ♦



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