

INTRODUCTION

They used to love us. We used to have a future. We would fall asleep in their arms.

We shared our fears and gave them a map to our insecurities. We loved their sense of humour and perspective on our lives. We travelled with them, understood their feelings for their parents, perhaps even decorated a home together. They were our best friend.

And now we are devastated.

We dignify this special pain with a powerful name: *heartbreak* – because it simply feels as if something essential, something fundamental, in us has shattered. We struggle to describe quite what we are going through. Sometimes, for a few hours, it seems we will almost cope. Then we are abruptly reminded that everything good has gone from the world. What we feel most of all is alone – alone with the sadness and confusion, the anger and the incomprehension.

One of the biggest ambitions of art has been to meet us in the dark, to join us when we're broken and lost – and to remind us of things which, at this moment, we find hard to see: that our pain makes sense, that we are still viable, loveable people, that we will recover and that, however individual the precise details of our suffering may be, we are in fact participating in a sorrow that is common to many.

Everyone we admire, everyone we find interesting has had, or will have, their heart broken. Our heartbreak seems to cut us off from the rest of humanity – secretly it brings us closer together.

What follows is a journey around the universal story of heartbreak.

WHY DID THEY LEAVE US?

They've gone – and what we need most of all is to understand *why*?

What is striking is that, despite what friends and well-meaning acquaintances tell us, we already know. It is us.

We firmly and naturally assume that the explanation has to do with our miserable failings, our dispiriting character and our wearisome appearance. They've gone because we weren't good enough. They got to

know us intimately, far better than almost anyone else has ever done and then, inevitably, they saw the truth behind our characters and were horrified. It is not the relationship that failed: we failed.

But, counter-intuitively, what seems most obvious to us in our hearts might not actually be true. There is a famous experiment in the history of psychology which pinpoints our tendency to project: that is, to read decisive, clear explanations drawn from our minds into what are in fact ambiguous situations in the world beyond us.

The Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), as it is technically known, was developed in the 1930s by the American psychologist Henry Murray. It presents us with a series of images and asks us to say what is going on. People tend to have quite specific ideas of what is happening



The Thematic Apperception Test consisted of images, similar to this one, showing provocative, ambiguous scenes.

in each scenario. For example, based on the picture above a number of conclusions could be drawn:

- She is fed up with him; he is weak and a bit boring.
- She has just told him that their relationship isn't working and that she is leaving.
- He has just told her they have to break up and the reason has something to do with their sex life. He is not as fulfilled as he wants to be.