

Story 2084 (Dictated)

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Location: Ankara, Ankara Province

Date: November 8, 1961

Leyla and Mejnun¹

The story that I am going to relate to you is a typical ballad² of the old times. Like most ballads, it is a simple story of a love affair. Although it is simple, and although it contains nothing new, it is a valuable tale about marriage problems in former times. Love stories were not always happy accounts. In fact, they were sometimes tragic, as this one is.

There was once a young, beautiful girl named Leyla who fell in love with a boy named Mejnun. They were madly in love and wished to be married. In order to do that, however, they first needed the consent of their parents. Mejnun's parents were pleased about the love felt by the young couple, and they were quite willing to consent to their marriage. The parents of Leyla, however, were

¹The Turkish spelling of Mejnun is Mecnun.

²The narrator misuses the term ballad here. A ballad is a sung narrative that is usually a page or two in length. The full text of Leyla and Mejnun is book length. Furthermore, not all ballads relate love stories.

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displeased about the romance, for they intended to give their daughter in marriage to a wealthy suitor [named Ibn-us-Selám]. Despite Leyla's repeated protests, they hastened to wed her to this older man.

Leyla was extremely unhappy, and Mejnun was so sad that he was unable to remain in their town and view her as the wife of another man. He therefore fled that town and began to live in a nearby desert. There he talked to himself as he wandered about aimlessly. He did not want the company of anyone, not even of his closest friends.

After several months had passed, the news of his death reached the town. Great grief caused Leyla to become ill.³ Her sorrow deepened and deepened until doctors were consulted about her condition. No one among them was able to cure her illness, and finally she died of a broken heart

When the two lovers died, the whole town mourned their loss. Leyla's parents mourned the loss of their

³In some variants Leyla dies of grief first. A friend of Mejnun carries the news to him in the desert and tells him of the location of Leyla's tomb. By then Mejnun's health has deteriorated so badly that he has to stagger and finally crawl to her grave. He lives for only a short while after that.

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daughter, and they then regretted what they had done.

This typical ballad ended in this way--in tragedy.⁴

⁴The full text of the romance of Leyla and Mejnun runs to more than 300 pages. This tale is a thumbnail summary of the action and lacks entirely the many lengthy love songs which comprise the dialogue of the two principal characters. Leyla and Mejnun is a cante fable, partly narrated, partly sung, and many audiences savor the sung passages as much as they do the plot line. It is often performed by an âşık, a folk minstrel, who, as often as not, is either illiterate or semiliterate.

A somewhat fuller summary in English can be found in J. W. Gibb's A History of Ottoman Poetry, II (London: Luzac, 1965), pp. 175-189. The 1965 text is a reprint of the original text of 1902.

Probably the most important full text in Turkish (1535) was composed by Fuzuli (1504?--1556). It has been rendered into excellent English by Sofi Huri and published in London in 1970 by Allen and Unwin. This was preceded in the 12th century by Leila and Majnun, a Persian text by Nizami.