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Fostering Love

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* explores the meaning of love through many different relationships, predominantly that between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy. Austen uses this particular couple to argue that love is vulnerable, which encourages the audience to nurture a respect for love. The relationship between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy demonstrates that love requires constant learning, that love is built on honesty, and that love cannot be rushed.

Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy both undergo dramatic transformations as their relationship develops because of the learning that love demands from them. The most valuable knowledge that they obtain on their journey towards love is a better understanding of their own characters. Elizabeth performs close reading on many occasions, especially when she receives the explanatory letter from Mr. Darcy after his first proposal. This particular close reading forces Elizabeth to realize the details of her nature and helps her to gain a new self-understanding: "Till this moment, I never knew myself" (159). Mr. Darcy is transformed by Elizabeth's rejection to his first proposal and admits to her: "I was spoilt by my parents, who ... taught me to be selfish and overbearing, to care for non beyond my own family circle ... such I might still have been but for you, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth! What do I not owe you! You taught me a lesson" (282). As the characters learn about themselves they experience different reactions, Elizabeth is

“absolutely ashamed of herself”(159), and Mr. Darcy is “properly humbled”(282), both of which lead the characters to discover their authentic and honest selves. By removing their designed disguises and characters, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy are able to be honest with themselves, with one another, and can relate to each other without the hindrance of artifice. Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy also learn about each other through close reading one another’s language, actions, and expressions. Elizabeth teases Mr. Darcy on many occasions to see how he will react and uncover his character. While dancing with Mr. Darcy at the Netherfield ball she engages him in ‘lively’ conversation in an attempt to provoke him and discern his nature (69-71). Even as the couple grows closer Elizabeth continuously teases Mr. Darcy as a means to unearth further details of his character, “it belongs to me to find occasion for teasing and quarrelling with you as often as may be” (291). Austen suggests that the teasing and provocation will be a continuous part of their relationship because of the authenticity it fosters. Austen argues that love is vulnerable because of the strenuous and profound self-realization that must continuously occur. It is suggested through the relationship of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy that if learning and self-reflection should ever end, so too would their love.

Patience is another element that Austen argues is essential to the development of love. Elizabeth captivates Mr. Darcy early in the novel, “Darcy had never been so bewitched by any woman as he was by her” (38), but it is not until the end of the story that Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy express and share the same feelings towards each other (279-284). The amount of time that passes between their first encounter and their engagement is proof of the patience that is required for love to thrive. Another connection between love and patience is demonstrated when Elizabeth defends Mr. Darcy while asking for her father’s

approval in their marriage, “his affection was not the work of a day, but had stood the test of many months suspense” (289). Patience in this sense can be understood as proof that Mr. Darcy’s love is sincere. Austen suggests that anyone who is truly in love will be patient, and simultaneously that one who is patient will allow love to be nurtured. In this regard, the vulnerability of love comes from the trust and strength required to endure the time it takes to foster love.

Austen emphasizes the importance of timing for love, in terms of the uncontrollable, unpredictable powers that bring Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy together. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner take Elizabeth to Pemberly only because of an unforeseen business engagement of Mr. Gardiner’s that restricts the length of their vacation (182). Mr. Darcy’s early return to Pemberly is also the result of chance timing, “business with his steward had occasioned his coming forward a few hours before the rest of the party” (194). This coincidental meeting provides Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy with an opportunity to reconnect as more honest individuals than they were during their first encounter. Such reliance on coincidence highlights the vulnerability of love and demonstrates how love is completely at the mercy of timing.

Austen uses the elements of learning, patience and timing to highlight the vulnerability of love. These elements can stand alone, but they are also interconnected; trusting in the power of timing requires patience, patience must be learned, learning can be greatly impacted by the timing of particular lessons, and patience is required for learning. The dependence of each factor on the other demonstrates how easily the environment for learning, patience, and timing can be lost, how easily love can be lost, and consequently, love’s vulnerability. In presenting love as vulnerable, Austen asks the reader to nurture a

respect for love and be cognizant of the forces it requires, and must overcome, to thrive. Similar to how love demands Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy to be patient throughout their relationship, Austen asks the reader to be patient as Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy develop their love. Austen uses the relationship between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy to dispel the common notion that individuals 'fall in love' and that love is a strong, resilient force, and suggests instead that love is vulnerable and must be fostered.

Works Cited

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2004. Print.