

Different demonstrations of love theme in the odyssey, the end of the affair, and...

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Love and the Good Life

None would disagree that all want to love and be loved. The title of this essay will likely not seem very controversial to anyone. For it seems, within everyone lies an assumption that a life filled with love is a life to be desired. Poets write great romantic poetry that their audience loves to read, and authors build great love stories just as popular. So, it seems writing to convince the reader that love is a good thing and plays a large role in a life well lived would be an unnecessary endeavor. Instead, what few ever talk about is what happens to us in love. Few ever consider why it is that we hold love in such high regard. Love is an interesting phenomenon between two people, and affects who a person is in a lot of ways. Perhaps this investigation of love will result in an appreciation of its role in life. So, the first point of inquiry is into the reason love makes a person happy. It seems it must lie in how love makes us relate to the other. The second inquiry is into the effects of love on a person; that is into what happens to a person's identity when they are in love. The last thing is to address the problem that it is not uncommon for negative emotions to sometimes be associated with love. Feelings such as depression and heartbreak are also associated with the feeling of love, so there must be something in the nature of love that might also cause suffering. To better consider these aspects of love, an analysis of the love demonstrated in the books *The Odyssey*, *The End of the Affair*, and *Vipers' Tangle* will be helpful. These texts will help reveal different aspects in love but will ultimately reveal the nature of love and the good life. Love's role in the good life is ultimately about our relation to the other.

The first aspect of love to consider is why people desire and are made happy by love. The fact that happiness is related to love is fairly uncontested but there must be some aspect of love that explains this. In *Vipers' Tangle* the writer of the diary, Louis, talks about the fact that being in love with his wife Isa brought him such happiness. He writes to her, " How can I possibly make you understand the emotion that you roused in me? I had become suddenly aware that I was no longer unpleasing, had ceased to repel, was not odious anymore. One of the most important moments of my life was when you said: ' How extraordinary that a man should have such long lashes!'" . Luckily Louis was able to see what it was that made him so happy to be with Isa. What love did for Louis was let him see himself through the eyes of another person. The fact that this other person loved him gave him a unique perspective on his own value and nature. Even something as meaningless as learning about her thoughts on his eyelashes, is something he considers to be significant in the course of his entire life. Shortly after, Louis describes this occurrence beautifully saying, " I caught my reflection in the mirror of somebody else's personality" .

This feeling is also articulated by the main character, Maurice, in *The End of the Affair*. When Maurice realizes that he is in love with Sarah, he notices that there is an odd feeling accompanying the feeling of love. He says, " it's a strange thing to discover and to believe that you are loved, when you know that there is nothing in you for anybody but a parent or a God to love" .

Maurice also notes that it is a strange experience to gain this view of yourself

from something external. He never considered anything making him valuable or loveable but now being in love with Sarah has shown him this.

Both of these characters are similar as far as they both seem to struggle with insecurity. Thus, one might assume that this feeling of finally seeing yourself as someone who is able to be loved is unique to their situation due to their nature of insecurity. But, perhaps there is some way in which everyone struggles with insecurity before they are able to see themselves through the eyes of a lover. An isolated conception of oneself limits a person's ability to ever see this value they have. Without the other person in love, it is impossible to fully comprehend oneself outside of his own perspective. Thus, when a person is able to see their worth through the eyes of their lover, this is the aspect of love that people desire and the aspect that makes them happy.

Now, the next consideration is what happens in love when we gain this perspective from another. Often times love has the ability to truly affect who a person is and change them. Thus, it appears love has some sort of relation to a person's identity in some way. Maurice mentions this similar relation when he is considering the fact that he is happy when he is in love with Sarah. He says, "the sense of unhappiness is so much easier to convey than that of happiness. In misery we seem aware of our own existence, even though it may be in the form of a monstrous egotism: this pain of mine is individual. . . but happiness annihilates us: we lose our identity". Maurice points out that he cannot as easily describe his happiness because in his happiness he has lost his identity. That is to say his happiness has caused

him to lose his perspective on how his happiness relates to his singular identity. On first read, this may seem to be a negative look at happiness, but perhaps this annihilation is a good thing. Perhaps by falling in love Maurice has lost a self-centric focus and now views everything through a consideration of Sarah. Thus, love has in some way shifted him away from his singular identity to an identity of a relationship with others. When love forces a person to consider another, it forces the person to no longer see themselves as an independent identity. Instead love changes a person's identity to a relationship with the other.

Finally, the remaining consideration is the fact that suffering is also associated with the act of loving someone. This comes as a surprise considering the fact that love is often considered desirable, but there must be a nature to love that makes us vulnerable to love. C. S. Lewis says in his *Four Loves*,

“ To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.”

In this quotation, C. S. Lewis points out that there is a vulnerability intrinsic to love. Thus, one is not able to find a way to love and not be vulnerable; the

only way to avoid this vulnerability is to avoid love entirely. So, C. S. Lewis also sees the fact that love makes one vulnerable to suffering, but that does not make it clear why exactly a person is made vulnerable. Perhaps the vulnerability again lies in a person's relationship to another in love. The fact that the love is for another human means that the love is for something that cannot be protected. In the *Odyssey*, the titular character, Odysseus, is trapped on goddess Calypso's island away from his home and wife. While trapped on this island Calypso comes upon Odysseus while he was "sitting where the breakers rolled in. His eyes were perpetually wet with tears now, his life draining away from home sickness. . . Days he spent sitting on the rocks by the breakers, staring out to sea with hollow, salt-rimmed eyes" . Odysseus is trapped on an island far from his wife and all he can do is stare out at the sea separating them and weep. The fact that he has loved another person means that he is not able to make sure he is always able to be with her. His love has been turned towards something external and he has little control over the external world, and so he suffers. He is separated from the object of his love and is vulnerable to the pain this separation inflicts. The problem also lies in the fact that loving another person means loving something that is mortal. The object of love is then something that is inevitably going to die. No one has the power necessary to protect another and keep them forever. This means that love also makes a person vulnerable to the inevitable pain of losing his lover. So, this is why these feelings of suffering are also associated with love. Unfortunately, by nature of loving something that is external and mortal means that a person must be made vulnerable to this suffering if they are to love another.

In conclusion, to understand love one must look at it through its nature of relating a person to the other. The reason love makes a person happy is a result of the relation to the other and what one gains from that relation; that is the ability to see oneself through the eyes of the other. Love also affects a person's identity because of the fact that this relation to the other makes him shift their focus from an understanding of a singular identity to a focus of his relationship with the lover. And ultimately this relationship to the other makes a person vulnerable to the pain of suffering. The object of his love is external to him and is mortal. Thus, his lover exists in a space that he does not have completely control over, and he also is not strong enough to protect his lover from inevitable death. But the intrinsic nature of vulnerability to suffering in love does not at all negate the fact that love is part of the good life. Instead, one should accept that it is nearly impossible to avoid suffering in life and embrace this vulnerability and appreciate what it means to be in a relationship with another person. Because, without others one would not be able to gain that ability to see themselves as more than just an isolated being. This relationship with others teaches a person more about himself, namely what it means for him to be in this relationship and who he is in their eyes. Others act as a mirror that allows a person to see more than just his physical reflection.