

Strength of weakness in jane austen's persuasion

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Jane Austen quotes in her novel, *Persuasion*, " Here and there, human nature may be great in times of trial, but generally speaking it is weakness and not its strength that appears in the sick chamber, it is selfishness and impatience rather than generosity and fortitude, that one hears of [...]." In other words, when people are in the midst of suffering, their instinctual reactions are filled with self-indulgence and impatience. They naturally tend to think of only themselves and not about others when faced with troubles and are quick to seize help for themselves in fear of failure. Based on instances from Betty Smith's novel, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, and Mark Twain's novel, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, I defend the validity of Jane Austen's claim discussing human nature in times of trial.

Betty Smith demonstrates in her novel, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, the impulses that humans react to in certain situations of suffering to make themselves feel better. For instance, before Francie and Neely went to be vaccinated, Katie refused to go and comfort them because " she knew she couldn't stand the ordeal" and justified her actions by thinking, " They had to be vaccinated. Her being with them or somewhere else couldn't take that fact away. So why shouldn't one of the three be spared?" (Smith, 144). As a mother, she knew it would be painful to see them in pain, so instead of being there for them as she should, she decided to spare herself that pain by leaving them alone to handle the pain on their own. She selfishly dumped an even deeper pain on her children by abandoning them to face a great fear without the presence of their mother in order to relieve herself of the pain she would have shared with her children, if she was there to comfort them. Furthermore, when describing the brutality of the teachers in public schools,

Smith explains, " Married women were not allowed to teach in those days, hence most of the teachers were women made neurotic by starved love instincts. These barren women spent their fury on other women's children in a twisted authoritative manner." (Smith, 153). Because these women were suffering the deprivation of love and marriage, they made others suffer as well by treating the product of others' relationships cruelly. Instead of properly doing their job, they decided to take out their frustration on the students, who were already having a hard time with their peers, in order to somewhat relieve their own misery. Moreover, when Francie and her brother challenged the man to throw the tree at them in order to possibly take it home, the man agonized, " Why don't I just give ' em the tree, say Merry Christmas and let ' em go," but realized " if I did that, all the other would expect to get ' em handed to ' em. And next year nobody a-tall would but a tree off of me... I gotta think of myself and my own kids." (Smith, 203). Therefore, the man chucked the tree at the kids and risked the lives of the children by putting them in danger because he was fearful that he would run out of business and money for him and his family. He chose money over the kids' health and cost them a lot of pain so that his family would be saved from the pain of poverty. In times of suffering, it seems that human beings, such as the ones in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, automatically care for themselves out of fear rather than help each other out in times of need, creating a narcissistic environment.

Mark Twain's novel, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, also illustrate ideal examples of the greed that is developed through hardship and suffering. For example, after Injun Joe stabbed the doctor, he " put the fatal knife in

Potter's open right hand," accusing him of his own crime. (Twain, 64).

Knowing he would suffer plenty if convicted of murder, Injun Joe frames Potter in fear that he would be caught of his terrible actions. He places the burden on Potter instead of accepting the consequences and unfairly claims freedom for himself. Additionally, after Tom claims that he is a " forsaken, friendless boy" whom nobody loved, he decides to run away and " lead a life of crime." (Twain, 81). After experiencing a heartbreak, Tom, stuck in his own misery, decides to run away without thinking about anyone else's future sufferings due to this rash resolution. Instead of worrying about how this would affect his family and friends, he pursues his own interests of alleviating his troubles by running away from it and completely disregards everyone else's struggles. Furthermore, when Huck and Joe both deplored Tom of their yearnings to go home, Tom, still consumed by his grief, refused to let them go; when they did, he realized it was " very lonely and still" and " made one final struggle with his pride" until he bribed them back. (Twain, 99). Tom couldn't bear to dwell alone in his sorrows so he tried all sorts of things to bring them back to suffer with him. He chose to ignore his peers' desires and fulfill his own by going against their wishes and forcing them to stay on the island with him. Ultimately, when faced with difficult situations, people will look to their own outlet of relief and neglect their own companions.

Betty Smith's novel, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, and Mark Twain's novel, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, confirms Jane Austen's assertion about how often times, human nature is brought to be selfish than generous in times of suffering. Blinded by pain and suffering, people will tend for their own needs

rather than cooperate with others to assist one another because they are so afraid of falling and not being to get back up. Even if there is a rare case of generosity, there will always be that hesitation inside of them that wonders whether it is worth it to sacrifice rather than to indulge.