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Love as an Active Choice

Writing Process

For this assignment, my professor asked us to find an image and to analyze it for its accurate (or inaccurate) depiction of love based on the works we read from Eric Fromm and bell hooks. I found this three-framed image of a moving statue by Tamara Kvesitadze and thought it was a great representation of Fromm's paradox that in love "two beings become one yet remain two" (19). From there, I began to examine the other ways the image aligned with Fromm and hooks' concepts of love and discussed with my professor the best way to organize my ideas.

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Love as an Active Choice

Madison Millhouse



“Man and Woman” by Tamara Kvesitadze

Thanks to Nestor Haddaway, one cannot simply ask, “What is love?” without instinctually following it with the lyrics “Baby don’t hurt me, don’t hurt me, no more,” and I couldn’t bring myself to do it in this essay. However, now that I have posed the question—and gotten that song stuck in my head—I’d like to ask the question in a better way: How does one love? The root of society’s widespread confusion on love is that it is not asking the right question. By asking how to love, one can then move on to ask more specific questions, particularly, how to maintain one’s individuality in love. I argue, with the help of Erich Fromm’s book *The Art of Loving* and bell hooks’ book *All About Love* that this image of a moving statue, *Man and Woman*, by Tamara Kvesitadze (Fig. 1) represents the answer to this question with its oscillation between the individuality and the connectedness needed for mature love. Contrary to the

common conceptions that love is simple and out of one's control, love is an *active* balance—a constant motion—between being together and yet separate.

Before analyzing the image, one must define a couple of words and address a couple of misconceptions surrounding love. To start, one should define “love” as they interpret it. In this essay, love is an act, a choice. Fromm's definition of love as “an active power in man” (19) is complemented by hooks' definition “as the will to nurture our own and another's spiritual growth” to emphasize this concept of love as a verb (6). Love is oftentimes believed to be a noun, something one receives if they are lucky enough. Love is also believed to be uncontrollable, something one falls into without choice. And these conceptions can be compiled to make a distinction between mature and immature love. Mature love lies closer to the definition of love already defined, while immature love is the common misconception of society. Mature love is the appreciation of the individual, while immature love sees others solely in the light of their purpose to them. Mature love is a challenge and a choice, while immature love is the belief that love is simple with the right person. And mature love is the acceptance that what is right now will not necessarily be right in the future, while immature love believes that love lasts forever when it is “true.” These distinctions are vital for the comprehension of love in this essay, but also for the application of love in one's life.

Looking first at the two figures in this image as they are separate, one sees two aspects of mature love in action. The first aspect is the appreciation of the individual. As the two figures first approach each other, there is a sense of individuality between the two. One is not seen simply as the role they play in the other's life. The way they stand and simply look at one another creates this sense of the desire to know their whole story yet also of the comprehension they already have of said story. According to Fromm, “Mature love is union under the condition of preserving one's integrity, one's individuality”; thus, before mature love can develop, each involved must be certain that the other sees them as they are, as an entity outside of them (19). This certainty is what exists between the two figures as they stand in awe, determined to know the other. The second aspect of mature love depicted is the fact that love doesn't always last forever. As the two figures have phased through each other and are now separated in a more detached and tragic way, one sees that even though their love was so true, so right, it still wasn't perfect. hooks, with personal experience on the matter, says, “True love does not always lead to happily ever after, and even when it does, sustaining love still takes work,” which emphasizes that love has its ups and

downs and sometimes it doesn't end the way one wants it to (181). The two figures have tragically experienced a disconnect. However, because they experienced mature love, because they continued to treat each other as the individuals they are, neither of them was broken. As important as it is to see the value in the separateness of the figures, one must also appreciate the connectedness.

For society, the basic concept of connectedness in love is easier to grasp than separateness, but the ability to achieve it is just as difficult. Looking at the two figures as they embrace, once again, one encounters the question: how to love. Once each figure is certain their individuality is appreciated and safe, they then engage in actively loving each other. Because they each are free to be their own entities and to *choose* to love the other, their "love is an action, the practice of a human power," which brings up the concept of love as a verb again (Fromm 21). As the figures embrace and connect their souls, neither is focused solely on the love they are receiving; rather, they are focused on the love they are giving. To love requires the exposure of one's true self. When the figures are within each other, they are forced to see the gaps—the faults—they each possess. To love is a terrifying process as one is brought to see themselves as they truly are, but it is critical "that we want to grow and expand, to become more fully ourselves" (hooks 181). In order for mature love to exist, one cannot simply tolerate but must desire to face their true self as well as to help the other do the same. To love requires commitment to the uncertainty, to give up oneself in the hope of the favor being returned and to let oneself be vulnerable (Fromm 118). When two people commit to this defenselessness, they fill one another's shortcomings with hope and love, as the figures do when they phase into each other. In the compilation of all these acts, one loves maturely. However, the major impact of this image does not lie solely in the figures as they are separate or solely as they are together; rather, it lies in the activity between the two.

Love is not static, and people in love are not independently separate or together; therefore, the most important aspect of this image is the figures' oscillation. Love exists in the balance and is "the paradox ... that two beings become one yet remain two" (Fromm 19). This paradox is not equivalent to the concept of two halves making a whole; love is two whole people, coming together to make something better, something stronger. This challenging idea is expressed in the figures as they have phased into each other; one can still see the two outlines of separate entities even as they are completely together. One must

recognize the other as something outside of them while simultaneously allowing the other to be someone within them, which, of course, is not easy. There are ups and downs, and mistakes are always made. But contrary to the belief that this is a sign of the lack of love, mature love actually “thrives on the difficulties” (hooks 181). If the figures never parted, they would never unite. Love exists in the moments where two people phase out momentarily, where there is pain and frustration and confusion. Love exists in the vulnerability so that one can grow and expose themselves more fully to their true selves, and then return to their paradox. Love exists in the care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge exchanged between the two (Fromm 24). As the figures move, one sees the whole story: the appreciation, the acceptance, the act, the confusion, the pain, the return. Love is anything but easy, but the struggle is the most important part.

Society’s bad luck with love is rooted in the fact that it isn’t asking the right questions, and it lacks proper definitions for the terms it uses on a regular basis. Love is romanticized to be simple and secure, to be only a source of one’s *own* joy. But the reality is that love takes effort. Love is an art, a skill one practices. Love is an oscillation between within and without. Love involves arguments and mistakes, vulnerability and exposure to one’s true self. There is no stability, only the decision to find balance on the unlevel foundation. And all of these concepts are expressed in Kvesitadze’s oscillating statue as it shifts in a paradox from the two to the “one yet two” and then back to the two (Fromm 19). Returning to the question, “What is love?” the answer can seem grim: Love is work; love is pain; love is finite. But while all these characteristics may seem to ruin romance, by simply looking at the movement between the two figures, one can see just how truly beautiful this kind of love is.

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