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ESSAY 1 ON ALI SMITH'S *AUTUMN*: THE EFFECTS OF ART AND INSIGHT

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“It’s all right to forget. [...] In fact, we have to forget things sometimes. Forgetting it is important” (Smith 210). So Daniel Gluck advises Elisabeth Demand in the early stages of their twenty-five-year relationship in *Autumn* by Ali Smith. The book finds 101-year-old Daniel Gluck in a senior living center, dreaming toward his last breaths, visited daily by 32-year-old Elisabeth Demand. When she cuts him out of her life, it may seem like Daniel’s influence on Elisabeth has been ineffective, yet, restored to Daniel’s company, Elisabeth remembers the Pauline Boty collage that Daniel has seared in her imagination and realizes she can apply her career of art interpretation to other aspects of life. Elisabeth begins again to stand up on behalf of herself and of powerless others, including Daniel. Elisabeth reminisces on his lessons to see other persons’ best sides, and she begins to build the relationship with her mother that she has denied for the majority of her life. Daniel’s influence on Elisabeth is therefore eventually more effective, contributing to her emergent self-actualization.

Daniel uses art to encourage Elisabeth to stand up for herself and express her creativity. When Elisabeth is eight, Daniel describes a collage by Pauline Boty that he has seen, using imagery in an attempt for Elisabeth to visualize the collage. His words and description are effective, as Elisabeth says afterward, “I like that you could maybe touch the pink, if it was made of lace, I mean, and it would feel different than the blue” (Smith 74). When Elisabeth interprets Daniel’s description, she sees the collage in her mind, despite the fact that she has never seen the collage in person. She demonstrates the creativity for which Daniel has mentored her, and she applies this creativity toward interpreting the artwork. Elisabeth activates a part of her identity, and she finds that she is a creative person, then chooses to apply her creativity toward a PhD and a career in history.

It is because of Elisabeth and Daniel’s past experiences together that Daniel is able to have this effect on Elisabeth when she chooses to pursue Boty as her dissertation topic. Daniel inspires her more than anyone else in her life. Daniel teaches her that “[t]he interpretation of art makes appeal because of experience” (Mehigan 175), which is the reason that Elisabeth is able to find part of her identity

by something so simple as a collage by a female pop artist. Daniel uses his experiences to describe this collage that he has seen, but because Elisabeth has not had this privilege of seeing the collage, she must envision the collage. Elisabeth is able to use her past experiences with Daniel to put into practice her passion and creativity. She has “appeal” to interpreting the art in hopes to impress Daniel; however, Daniel has the better motive of helping her discover her true self.

Elisabeth also stands up for herself when she is walking past an immigrant's house, which has been vandalized with paintings of anti-immigrant graffiti but also shows a tree and a row of red flowers that have been painted on it by the owners. When Elisabeth walks into a field, thinking of these flowers and the ones she sees alongside the fence, “the painting by Pauline Boty comes into her head” (Smith 138), and she realizes that “it’s the first time she’s felt like herself for quite some time” (Smith 139). Immigration is a very controversial topic in Elisabeth’s post-Brexit world, and she is able to turn a grim reminder of societal views on immigrants into something beautiful, such as a painting by Pauline Boty. Because Daniel is the one who introduced her to this painting and to Boty’s social message in creating it, he is the reason Elisabeth is able to visualize this. By envisioning the research project that can emerge from connecting the collage to immigration, Elisabeth demonstrates that she is able to apply her creative art-interpretation skills to other aspects of the world, such as immigration. Although the current immigration issue is a national topic widespread with dissension, Elisabeth uses her creativity to turn this into something in which she can “feel like herself.” Art interpretation is an ability that Elisabeth associates with herself, and because she is newly under the influence of Daniel, Elisabeth is able to employ her passion in her career to activism and academic writing.

There are many pessimistic ways to look at immigration, but Elisabeth chooses to look at the topic in a more positive manner. She “implies that there are many ways to look at that thing, none of which are objectively right” (Stecker 1). Elisabeth chooses to use one of her capabilities—art interpretation—to turn this into something she’s passionate about—art. By viewing an immigrant’s house as artwork, Elisabeth demonstrates one of the “many ways to look at” immigration, which shows her open-mindedness and ability to use her creative interpretation skills. Because she is able to use this art interpretation of Pauline Boty that Daniel has introduced her to in order to bring out her creative qualities, she suggests that Daniel is the reason for her being able to see a topic (immigration) from multiple viewpoints.

In addition to standing up for herself, Elisabeth begins to also stand up for others, contributing to her self-actualization. She decides to write her dissertation on Pauline Boty. When Elisabeth has a meeting with her dissertation chair, however, he claims that she should not choose this topic because there is not enough information (Smith 156). In response to this, Elisabeth sassily replies, “[T]hen I’d like to apply to be moved to a new supervisor” (Smith 156). This demonstrates Elisabeth standing up not only for herself but also for Pauline Boty. Elisabeth is passionate about this artist because Boty is a woman doing work in a male-dominated field, and Elisabeth is confident in the fact that she can write a groundbreaking dissertation on Boty. Elisabeth thus shows that she can stand up for not only herself but also other disenfranchised persons, which is an ability that she has not had before meeting Daniel. By standing up for others, she demonstrates selflessness, showing another way that Daniel has contributed to her self-actualization.

In standing up for Pauline Boty, Elisabeth is also arguing on behalf of all women. This scene of Elisabeth contradicting and then firing her dissertation chair on behalf of Pauline Boty illustrates the idea of feminism found in many other texts, such as *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi. This graphic novel also “affirms ideologies such as a woman’s right to freedom of expression and ‘choice’” (Gilmore and Marshall 681). By asking for a new dissertation chair, Elisabeth is arguing for her own and other women’s “right to freedom of expression and choice.” She demonstrates her standpoint on female rights and is able to express her opinion without hesitating, which shows an increase in her confidence. She finally demonstrates that she has the confidence to stand up for others, which she has not done prior to meeting Daniel. This is another example of her self-improvement.

Elisabeth stands up for Pauline Boty, all women, and Daniel while he is on bedrest and is incapable of doing so himself. Recognizing in a commercial a song that Daniel has written, Elisabeth realizes that he has not been given proper credit. She calls the agency in hopes of receiving money to maintain Daniel’s medical care, saying, “I’m calling on behalf of my client Mr Daniel Gluck whose copyright via your use in your current campaign of Mr Gluck’s 1962 hit song Summer Brother Autumn Sister is being infringed” (Smith 237). Because of the fact that Daniel is unconscious and incapable of calling the company about wrongfully using his song, Elisabeth takes matters into her own hands, showing yet another example of her standing up for others. She is able to reveal this part of her new self in which she has the confidence to call Daniel her client, despite the fact that she is neither a lawyer nor a talent agent. Her willingness to act on behalf of others is a product of

the new identity that Daniel has helped her shape, and this is shown by her willingness to stand up for others.

When Elisabeth realizes that Daniel does not love her, she leaves and cuts him out of her life for many years. This is similar to the environment and the use of natural resources. An article written about this topic states, “If humanity understood that the real-world problem is decreasing natural resources, we might attempt to solve that problem deliberately” (Fuller 249). Daniel is natural resources to Elisabeth as natural resources are to humanity and society. When Elisabeth realizes that she has used up Daniel’s resources (advice and teaching lessons) and that he has nothing left to give her (as demonstrated when he does not love her romantically), she cuts him off and refuses to talk to him. This is Elisabeth taking advantage of the world’s resources, demonstrating a “world protected for us” viewpoint. When Elisabeth has her epiphany about Daniel’s lessons being meaningful rather than pointless, she is able to switch to a “world protected from us” viewpoint. Elisabeth returning to take care of Daniel in his bedrest and arguing on behalf of him is her attempt to “solve [this] problem deliberately,” as she attempts to re-obtain her resources, while fearing it is too late to do so. Elisabeth realizing that she must adapt a “world protected from us” standpoint demonstrates her reaching her full potential because she finally realizes that she must put Daniel before herself.

Just as she works to restore her relationship with Daniel, Elisabeth begins to spend more time with her mother, Wendy, and her perspective changes so she views Wendy in a more positive light. They have never had a strong relationship, and throughout her childhood, Elisabeth believed that her mother was not as smart as her and did not have power. For this reason, she has encouraged Daniel to lie to her mother about his past of being a dancer. He has replied, “You and I will know I’ve lied, but your mother won’t. [...] A wedge will come between us all. [...] We would all be lessened by the lie” (Smith 114). Elisabeth has pushed Daniel to lie because she wanted the power in her relationship with her mother, though Daniel has known that her mother is not as powerless as Elisabeth has thought. By encouraging Elisabeth not to lie, he has attempted to allow her to see this but at first has been ineffective. Daniel has wanted Elisabeth to build a relationship with her mother and has known that building the relationship would be hindered with even a white lie about him being a dancer. Although Elisabeth is initially naive in this situation, she later realizes that her mother does have power.

Elisabeth comes to this realization when her mother is studying for a game show that she is about to be on, spitting out knowledge. Elisabeth “is faintly

perturbed. She realizes this is because she likes to imagine her mother knows nothing much about anything” (Smith 134), and she discovers that her mom is smarter than Elisabeth has believed throughout her childhood. She realizes that, had she not thought that she was more intelligent than her mother, she might actually have had a real relationship with Wendy. Elisabeth becomes aware that her mother is smart and that she has not allowed herself to see her mother as having known some things all along. This shows that Elisabeth is realizing that Daniel has been right all along—her mother is smart, and this relationship should be stronger. This self-awareness that Elisabeth develops helps her realize her faults, allowing her to become her better self.

By strengthening her relationship with her mother, Elisabeth is able to increase her confidence and to have someone to trust and rely on while Daniel is on bedrest. From multiple psychological experiments, “mother-daughter connectedness was found to be positively correlated to daughter’s self-esteem” (Onayli and Erdur-Baker 329). This is exactly why Daniel has encouraged Elisabeth to rebuild this connection with her mother. Elisabeth’s confidence is shown when she wittily remarks about her mother’s relationship with Zoe, “Unnatural. Unhealthy. I forbid it. You’re not to” (Smith 238). This is ironic because these are words Wendy has said about Elisabeth and Daniel’s relationship. After this, Elisabeth gives her mother a hug and a kiss, demonstrating that their relationship has gotten stronger. By strengthening this relationship, Elisabeth is able to see that she is more like her mother than she originally thought, and she is able to show her newfound self-esteem. Because Daniel has encouraged this relationship, he has also encouraged Elisabeth’s increase in self-confidence when it is formed, therefore contributing to her self-actualization.

When Elisabeth rejects Daniel for ten years, it does not seem as though Daniel has a lasting influence on her. As it turns out, however, she has had to cut him out of her life to realize that he has helped her create her better self. Through visualizing Pauline Boty’s collage in order to create a different perspective on immigration, through asking for a different dissertation chair in order to argue on behalf of not only Pauline Boty but also all women, and through building a relationship with her mother, Elisabeth is able to self-actualize. All of these epiphanies are due to her experiences with Daniel; however, they do not come until she has taken advantage of all he has to offer and has decided to cut him out of her life. Because of these insights into her past with Daniel, Elisabeth is able to discover her creative side and apply it to other areas of life such as immigration, her career, and increasing her self-confidence, demonstrated by her standing up for others and

reconnecting with her mother. Elisabeth has Daniel and all his shared breadth of experience to thank for her self-actualization.

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