The Power of Acceptance

Literature in many ways is but a reflection of real life, frozen in time for us to grapple with and understand. We are allowed to see others struggle in perspectives we may never have considered and apply this understanding to our own lives. A fundamental question that can arise from literature or life is what is the driving force of happiness for people? I believe that acceptance is king and that men and women both value acceptance for who they are above all else.

People want to be accepted, even by people who may not be supportive or ideal; this is the power of peer pressure in its most primal sense. Consider the Underground Man from *Notes from Underground*. He wants to be kept in the loop about the celebration that Simonov is planning for Zverkov, but he doesn’t even like Zverkov. The Underground Man doesn’t seem to like hardly anyone. Why does he go through the trouble of attending a party for someone he doesn’t like? Because acceptance is so important to individuals that even being accepted by hated people is better than being accepted by no one. Liza visits the Underground Man after their original encounter because he is the only person to show some concern for her, even if he is also being rude during the course of the conversation.

Félicité in *A Simple Heart* also has reason to reject the person she seeks acceptance from. Her rough childhood may have lent itself somewhat to this outcome, but her love of Théodore is strange. He practically rapes her on their first encounter yet she is willing to see him again and eventually prepares to marry him. She wants to be accepted by him because she did not have anyone else, even if logic dictates that he might not be a good person to be around. Félicité also helps her nephew despite knowing that her sister and her sister’s husband are trying to use the
boy to extort Félicité. If she did not care for him or want his acceptance, she would not have given her time or funds to the family.

People want to be accepted for who they are. The Underground Man does not want to have to become a more social person for people to accept him. He recognizes that he’s a pessimistic person who most people don’t like and that’s why he values Liza’s acceptance so much, even if he blows it with her. The Underground Man also wants to be accepted by Zverkov and his friends for who he is. It is not enough for the Underground Man to simply act like the others in order to be a part of their group; he wants them to recognize him as important the way he is. He recognizes that they have no interest in him because of his personality. As Dostoyevsky says through the character of the Underground man, “Good Lord, what kind of company is this for me? And what a fool I’ve made myself in front of all of them!” (Dostoyevsky 748).

In the case of Félicité, she is not willing to give up her virginity immediately to Théodore in order to gain his love. While she grows to care about him deeply, she has a deeply held belief that she does not want to give up just to appease him. She wants Théodore to accept her for who she is and is even thrilled after some time that he wants to marry her. Had he refused to see her without her giving up her virginity, she likely would have dismissed him. Théodore says “it was the drink that did it” (Flaubert 785) in order to explain his behavior. His reaction shows that he does not intend to force her to do anything.

When people are not accepted, they become emotional. The degree to which people become emotional and what emotion is exhibited obviously depends on the individual, but the feeling is always there. When the Underground Man believed that Simonov and Zverkov were making fun of him, he began to become more irate and drink more. Their mocking of him was
symbolic to him in that he was not being accepted as part of the group, much in the same way he lashed out when everyone showed up late to the party but did not inform him.

Félicité wants Théodore despite their rocky start and is prepared to marry him. His accepting of her is important to her as her first love and a potential stable in her life. When Félicité discovers that her man is to marry another woman and she’ll never see him again, she is furious and deeply saddened. Flaubert says “she threw herself on the ground, screaming and calling on God” (Flaubert 786). This emotional meltdown is what fuels her to make life-changing decisions; she loses the only person that she feels accepts her as she is.

Emotions can make acceptance seem unimportant, though it is only temporary. When the Underground Man hands Liza money in order to hurt her, he is acting irrationally due to anger. The importance of having Liza accept him seems to become trivial in the face of an apparent revenge. It doesn’t take long, however, for the Underground Man to come to his senses and regret his decision. The Underground Man says that “A moment later, like a madman, I hurried to get dressed. I threw on whatever I happened to find, and rushed headlong after her” (Dostoyevsky 779). If he truly does not care about what Liza thinks of him, he would not have left his house at all to look for her. It is his permanent character flaw in being self-loathing and egotistical that prevents anything from coming of his regret, but the emotion does pass and the desire to be accepted does resurface.

Félicité does not get mad very often, though one of the few times she does she was mad at Mme Aubain for acting as though Victor is unimportant. Félicité eventually calms down and rationalizes that Mme Aubain is just worried about her daughter and is letting emotion get the best of her too. Even positive emotion seems to sometimes cloud what may be important. When
Félicité asks Mme Aubain if she can have Virginie’s hat after she’s passed away, the two of them embrace each other in tears. It’s after this occasion and when emotions are balanced once more that both of them seem to have a greater appreciation and acceptance of each other and reveal what is really important. In the words of Flaubert, “Félicité was as grateful as if she had received a great favor” (Flaubert 799).

What people do not enjoy is loneliness or rejection. The Underground Man had an air of arrogance about him and insisted that he was superior to others in his own mind. He tortured himself day in and day out and the only small relief he found was in the arms of Liza, someone who was willing to accept him despite his flaws. No matter how much the Underground Man tries to put on a front in thinking that his loneliness is the best way to live, his happiness is never found in isolation nor in emotional instability. Throughout the text you can find him either putting himself down or as a defensive mechanism mocking everyone around him, always in emotional turmoil because he has had no one to turn to.

For Félicité the distinction between a lonely life and a life with loved ones was clear to her. Her childhood was filled with turmoil and abuse as well as a deep sense of isolation. In stark contrast Félicité greatly enjoyed her time with Mme Aubain and the children. They were a group of people who accepted her and loved her, despite sometimes have disagreements. When Mme Aubain was gone and her things were being taken away, Félicité was hurt. In the words of Flaubert, Félicité was “numbed with sadness” (Flaubert 804). The truest despair she felt was when she was finally left all alone after experiencing what it was like to have a semblance of a family.
People may have a vast amount of differences, but the value on acceptance transcends any barrier. Félicité’s character is a female with limited intelligence who is essentially part of a servant class living in Normandy. The Underground Man is a male who considers himself quite intelligent living with a servant in France. The lives that both of these people lead are as immeasurably different as the personalities that they display. These divisive characteristics nonetheless are subdued by the characters’ immense appreciation of genuine acceptance. It seems to be the only thing that gives a true sense of purpose and happiness to these characters. For Félicité this happiness comes in the form of almost any human being who accepts her for who she is and values her presence. She would not have spent nearly fifty years with Mme Aubain if she did not feel that her friend/employer accepted her. For the Underground Man it seems to fall almost exclusively to Liza’s acceptance of him, if only for a brief time. This was one of the few occasions where he actually showed regret and the only occasion where that thought of regret remained with him even years later. It is apparent despite these distinctions that these values are practically universal, even if they are applied to varying degrees or from various perspectives or experiences.

Different authors may have different ideas for works and different ideas about themes of such works. Different characters within a given story may have different personalities or may even be of a different species. There are common attributes however that tie us all together in a meaningful way, regardless of being in a story or living in the real world. Despite differences of sex, time period, and personality, it is clear that people value acceptance for who they are above all else.
Works Cited
