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HONRS 201 Critical Essay

Why do we do the things we do? A driving force is behind each action in life, but how can we determine whether the influence is our own or our society? One important life decision is marriage. Recently, it seems men and women do not take marriage as seriously as before, often feeling the reassurance of a quick divorce if things do not go well. After reading *The Aeneid* I began to wonder how much views of love and marriage have changed from one time period to the next. Are they two completely separate things or did they rely upon each other? In addition, how were adultery, divorce, and remarrying perceived among the general population? So I did some research and compiled a type of time line.

Let us first begin in ancient Greece and Rome. According to Psychology Today, Greeks felt love was a very manly emotion. It was important to have love for your fellow man, but when it came to marriage, inheritance overruled all emotion. Producing a male heir was a big deal among royal families and many times if the king only produced daughters, marriage to a male cousin was arranged. During this time in both Greece and Rome, women really were not seen as much beyond arm candy or a means to power. A lot of marriages were based solely on money or power, rather than love or devotion, a concept that applied throughout most of Western civilization. In fact, men of Rome sometimes would trade their wives (Psychology Today). Women were often left in the shadows and told to remain quiet. They were weak, uneducated, and their feelings were seldom considered.

Moving on to the medieval times, in Europe it seemed everyone had a say in who you would marry, except for you. Especially among the elite and royal classes, many times sons and daughters were paired to wed into powerful or noble families (Poise and Passion in the Middle Ages). However, the further down you move in class rank, the greater chance you had in a relationship made from love.In any circumstance, Love was not considered a strong enough basis for marriage, while power, money, and survival were. the standards for marriage among the well-known remained similar to those of ancient Greece and Rome. This was a trend that continued through much of history, and the thought of love did not enter into marriage consideration until the Victorian era.

By the 1600s people were taking into account the emotion of love, but too much love between husband and wife was frowned upon. Open display of affection was considered rude or vulgar and pet names took away from the manly role of a husband (Psychology Today). People were meant to love their spouses behind closed doors, yet to refrain from over infatuation. The 1700 to 1800s opened the eyes of people to a variety of considerations. Love gained more credibility, but women were also taught to pay attention to money factors. Bridal attire changed for women as well, taking on a more virtuous and innocent look. This shift in women’s dress brought on one problem though. Infidelity arose among husbands who found it hard to corrupt such an innocent figure and would rather pay a prostitute (Psychology Today).

Marriage was not heavily based upon love until the 20th century. The twenties were a time of friends, love, and fun. Saturdays suddenly were known as “date night” and couples embraced every aspect of love. However, marriage is not as stable as it once was (Psychology Today). By the fifties, there was a lot of social pressure upon the single. Marriage became something that was expected of everyone and choosing to remain single was considered a monstrosity. While the incidence of divorce was becoming more common at the beginning of the 20th century, rates skyrocketed by the 1970s. Women’s rights movements were empowering the voices of women all over America. Soon, arguments between spouses could be settled with a divorce and it was no longer a social stigma to be single (Psychology Today).

And now we are faced today’s views on marriage and love. It is becoming more common for couples to wait longer before they marry. Often, individuals choose to move in together as a test for what married life will be like. Partners want to make sure they can coexist before making a final decision and tying the knot. However, while marriage rates have plummeted since the beginning of the 20th century, women have not ceased to dream of their wedding day (Psychology Today). Through time, the wedding ceremony has shifted from focusing primarily on the male to being all about the bride. The cake, dresses, flowers, decorations, and sometimes music and venue are nearly all controlled by the bride and her family. If you have seen an episode of *Bridezillas* you can understand how big of a deal this all as become. Even the slightest discrepancy to the original plan can set off a tantrum or meltdown in the calmer brides. So much time and effort goes into planning these dream weddings, but how many actually survive through the years?

According to the Centers of Disease Control, as of 2010 the marriage rate was about 6.8 out of 1,000 people. Compared to this 6.8, the divorce rate was 3.4 out of 1,000 people. This means of all the new marriages, half are likely to end in divorce. It is not a very reassuring thought, even when you are still years away from marriage. With the way marriage and love have evolved over the years, it is possible we will see an even higher amount of divorce rates. We have come a long way to have these relationships based on love, but the rate of divorce leaves me questioning just how stable love is as a foundation.

”Love is like a diamond; for as a diamond is beautiful to look upon, so is love fair, but as the diamond is poison to anyone who swallows it, in the same manner love is a kind of poison and produces a baneful raging distemper in those who are infected by it,” Jens Peter Jacobsen. The concept of love has been around for centuries, yet each generation thinks of love differently. Can we accurately define the word in a way universal to all situations? While we cannot quite give it a set meaning, the effects of this emotion are viewed nearly every day. As Jacobsen said, love is beautiful to the beholder, yet it can quickly become poisonous, deeply infecting its victims. The story of Dido and Aeneas in *The Aeneid* is just one example of the effect love has on the human mind. Is it better to marry someone you love or someone you can tolerate?

Referring back to the description of love and marriage in ancient Greece, recall love had no part in the final decision. According to the Oxford Online Reference, Dido was once a Pheonician princess, but at the death of her husband, she flees and founds Carthage. Roman mythology suggests her hand in marriage was sought out by the king of Lybia, but her wishes were not to be married again. In *The Aeneid,* Virgil uses this history to craft an instance in which Dido lets her guard down and falls in love again. After finding Aeneas shipwrecked, Dido offers the hospitality of Carthage to the goddess born son. Dido’s sister, Anna, convinces her to form a union with their new guest, suggesting the possibility of an alliance between Carthage and the Trojans. And Dido’s love for Aeneas intensifies. Venus and Juno seize this opportunity and aid in kindling the fire burning within her heart. Soon the two are marriage, yet this new found love and joy has yet to be explored before Mercury summons for Aeneas to return to his homeland and fulfill his responsibility. Dido finds out about Aeneas’ plans and her love quickly shifts to rage (Aeneid, Book IV, line 300). When she confronts him about it, Aeneas tries to explain the duty they each have to their home and that the love between them should not be turned to anger. However, Dido cannot overcome the emotion she now harbors. Dido starts throwing around possibilities and even wishes to have had a child with him. She begins to talk of suicide and upon Aeneas’ departure, sets fire to herself.

When Aeneas meets back up with Dido in the underworld, she is very cold toward him. Not only does she refuse to speak, Dido also clings to and hides behind her first husband. How quickly the burning desire she felt for Aeneas has changed and how great it has affected her. Was life without Aeneas so much of a burden that she could not stand to live a moment longer? Did she expect him to turn around and pull her off the flames of the pyre? More importantly, Dido left behind her sister and the city she had formed. And all of this happened because of love.

Today we view marriage and love a bit differently than the ancient Greeks, but perhaps there are some aspects that have changed for the worse. While we would like to believe a marriage based on love will never fail or falter, time has proven love alone cannot sustain a lasting relationship. The ancient Greeks and Romans may not have had all the best reasoning for marriage between two people, but more often than not, spouses stayed together much longer than they do today. So what makes a marriage successful? Is it the power of love or the basis of money and stability? I feel it is a balance of both. Without money and stability life is rough, but a relationship without love can be mundane and miserable.