The immediate result of Mr. Darcy's reluctant reassessment is that "he began to wish to know more of her."[26]

Although Mr. Darcy's sudden interest in Elizabeth Bennet is, on one level, simply a necessary stepping stone in this elaborate but not unpredictable courtship plot, and while Elizabeth's good looks certainly do not set her apart from the general run of novel heroines in the nineteenth century, Austen's depiction of Elizabeth's beauty and Darcy's response to it is freighted with subtler meanings, too. To "know" Elizabeth is to overcome his aristocratic distaste for her "vulgar" family, to reassess his lifelong assumptions about the importance of birth and breeding, to learn to find virtue, kindness, and other admirable qualities in a social realm where it would not have occurred to him to look.

The novel makes Mr. Darcy's response to Elizabeth's dark eyes a "starting point for education" in the broadest sense—in Mr. Darcy's case, ultimately bringing about a radical alteration of his worldview. Here, as in other literary texts, beauty has a crucial narrative function that also offers a productive starting point for analysis.

Exercise: Choose a literary or cultural text in which the representation of beauty features prominently. Examine closely the language used to convey beauty, and consider what values, ideals, or judgments are associated with it. How might beauty be said to incite "the search for something beyond itself," or to act as a "starting point for education"? Or does it resist this framework, and if so, how and why? What kind of ideological work do you think the representation of beauty performs in the text? What cultural assumptions does it challenge or reinforce?

9. Analyzing captivity

Rebecca Harrison, Ph.D.

Mary Rowlandson's 1682 captivity narrative—a cornerstone in colonial studies and the first American best seller—documents the trials and survival of an affluent woman taken as a prisoner by the Narragansett Indians, after witnessing the devastation of her community during King Philip's War. While this text was clearly used to justify colonial expansion and violence against

potential of being removed from one's home culture. This story, like many female captivity narratives, reveals a woman capable of breaking the boundaries of "civilized" culture while captive. She finds strength, agency, and, at times, freedoms not assigned to her in her own community; she discovers the monetary value of her labor; and she is mournful upon her return to white, Christian culture. Consequently, her captive body in this text subtly subverts her home culture while attempting to stand as a model of Puritan womanhood. Various signs in her text—such as Rowlandson's stealing of food literally from the mouth of a starving, captive English child—invite us to question such binary categories as "civilized" and "savage," "superior" and "inferior," and "free" and "captured."

Rowlandson's narrative represents only the beginning of a long line of texts by women participating in the discourse of captivity—a cultural mythology that allows women to address their place in and against social confinement. Kate Chopin's 1899 novella *The Awakening*, for instance, documents a married (and socially and spiritually captive) woman named Edna Pontellier, who interacts with Creoles during a summer vacation. Edna's newly found consciousness and sense of liberty leads her on a quest for autonomy in a world where such a state is all but impossible for a woman. In the face, however, of the unrelenting captivity of marriage and "true womanhood"—as defined by the strict Southern culture to which she originally belongs—Edna ultimately resists what she terms "soul's slavery" by drowning herself in the sea.[27]

Not surprisingly, signs of female captivity continue well into the twentieth century. Jane Campion's 1992 film *The Piano*, for example, centers on Ada McGrath, a nineteenth-century single mother married off by her father to a man whom she has never met. Thrust upon the foreign coast of New Zealand as Alisdair Stewart's bride, Ada comes into contact with the native Maori and George Baines, a white settler living among them. Baines manipulates Ada at first via the possession of her beloved piano, but she eventually discovers her own passion and needs through him. Baines's character crosses cultures, resists patriarchal systems, and recognizes Ada's authentic voice—her piano playing.

Ada's husband attempts to force her into accepting the role of his wife, and she consents, but only after sending a parting note to Baines, which Stewart intercepts. As a violent reminder of her status as his property, to do with as he will, Stewart severs one of Ada's fingers (and thus her musical "voice") to

reestablish his claim on her body. Alisdair does give Ada to Baines—much like a piece of property—but she resists her continued social imprisonment by attempting to drown herself, along with her piano, in the sea. Unlike Chopin's Edna, though, Ada does not die. In the silent depths of the ocean, she chooses to save herself and define her own path in life, even if that means social ostracism. Baines restores her artistic voice by fashioning her a metal fingertip, and Ada embraces her revised identity as a woman of difference. "I'm quite the town freak," she remarks, "which satisfies."[28]

Exercise: As the above texts demonstrate, the experience of captivity makes the captive (and the reader) question the very nature of who is free, to what end, and under what circumstances. For this exercise, select a text featuring a female protagonist "caught in" or "captured by" a foreign culture—even if that "culture" is the family of her fiancé or members of a different class. Contemplate how the work represents, repeats, challenges, or transforms the signs of captivity and liberation. To what ends? What meanings arise through your chosen text's semiotic relationship to the genre of captivity narratives?

10. Analyzing disability

Susannah Mintz, Ph.D.

The Clint Eastwood film *Million Dollar Baby* created a firestorm of debate when it appeared in 2004. Described by critic Roger Ebert as a "masterpiece," the movie nearly swept the Oscars that year, earning four awards, including Best Picture and Best Director. But its controversial ending did not please all viewers, and so offers us a compelling example of how the meanings of textual signs can shift depending on perspective.

Million Dollar Baby follows Maggie (Hilary Swank) from her poor beginnings in the Ozarks to stardom as a boxer under the guidance of trainer Frankie (Eastwood). In the final segment, Maggie's neck is broken during a title match, and she ends the film a quadriplegic, one leg amputated because of bedsores. In a scene clearly intended to be heart-wrenching, Maggie tells Frankie, "I can't be like this . . . Don't let 'em keep taking it away from me. Don't let me lie here till I can't hear those people chanting no more."[29] At Maggie's own request, and against his initial religious misgivings, Frankie administers a fatal injection of adrenaline, and Maggie dies.