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How “Friday Black” Satirizes Consumerism

Black Friday, a term made in 1950-1960s by police officers, was used to describe how customers tended to get violent after Thanksgiving. Companies did not like this, as it painted that time in a bad light, so instead they changed the meaning to detail a time of sales and spending, though the violence still stood. Customers would still be violent on Black Friday; some even being killed during Black Friday stampedes. Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah wanted to comment on this issue with consumerism in his first debut, publishing “Friday Black” in 2018. He decided to comment on the issues with consumerism through a satire format, which utilizes rhetorical devices to highlight flaws in a topic in order to provoke change. In “Friday Black”, Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah uses techniques such as burlesque, reductions, and caricatures of customers, as well as violent diction and wordplay to overall get at his goal to satirize the poor treatment of employees by both customers and the brand itself, which can negatively affect the employees psychologically, represented through anecdotes and understatements.

Brenyah’s most obvious target is customers, in which he builds a burlesque caricature for while also painting violent scenes around them using personification and imagery to call out how customers are selfish and do not think of the employee. The customers are a prominent feature in the book; however, they are constantly described as hungry, savage, and barbaric with a lack of

higher English skills. When the narrator describes the customers, they are “gnawing on [items]” (Brenyah 109), “foam [dripping] from [their] mouth[s]” (Brenyah 106), and “licking [their wounds]” (Brenyah 106). The burlesque caricature of customers satirizes them to be close to wild animals, bringing out to an absurd amount how customers can be selfish and not consider the feelings of workers. This is also shown in how they speak in broken English and barely care the people they have killed. When the narrator finds the mom who used to have a daughter and husband but now has a television instead, the mom says that her child and husband are dead, however she also adds how “[her child] was weak. [Her husband] was weak. [she is] strong.” (Brenyah 112) as she pets the face she drew in blood on the TV. Not only does she speak brutally and in broken English, but she also is desensitized to the death of her child and husband, only thinking of them as weak while she is strong for getting the deal. The broken English represents the selfishness as well, as the customers only care about their own aims, reflecting on how they only use the necessary words and phrases to get what they want. It characterizes the mother, as well as all other customers in the store as so devoid of empathy when shopping on Black Friday that they completely forget about the reason why they went shopping in the first place, also reflecting how customers forget that employees are real people as well. There is also a lot of repetition with words like “hisses”, “blood”, “broken”, “dead” and other grotesque words to paint a dismal picture of the mall on Black Friday, leading to feelings of discomfort and portraying what workers have to go through every day, giving more sympathy to them. The door between the workers and the customers as well is personified to “wine and rattle” (Brenyah 104) as well as “creak and groan” (Brenyah 105), adding onto the painful, discomforting tone the text is trying to convey.

In terms of brands and the job itself, Brenyah wordplays brands to be counterparts, such as “Northface” being turned into “Poleface”, as well as understatements, personifications, and metaphors to display how it is not only the customers fault, but the bigger companies fault as well. This not only furthers the violence present throughout the text, with the name “Poleface” literally meaning that a pole was shoved through someone’s face, but it also represents copyright and how companies have so much power that the satire itself could be taken down in the blink of an eye just for using the wrong word. They, however, do nothing with this power, the mall management in the text saying “‘Black Friday is a special case; we are still a hub of customer care and interpersonal cohesiveness’” (Brenyah 108). The mall has the power to stop all of the violence and somewhat help the employees; however, they do not. They instead decide to make a PR statement that only understates the issue by calling it “a special case”, which helps the overall image of the company while putting vulnerable workers into situations that could be dangerous for them. They blatantly encourage the employees into these situations by having them compete for who can get the most sales to get an item of their choice, making the employees selfish as a result. The greed of companies can also be found in how they handle holiday seasons, having “Christmas [be compared to] God [th]ere” (Brenyah 110) by the narrator. This statement can reflect on the customers, and how they determine the mental well-being of the employees at the end of the day depending on how much they need for the holidays. However, it also reflects on how holidays, such as Christmas, are times of extreme profit for companies such as mall chains and brands, so they try to maximize sales through the illusion that they care for the holidays like “[inescapable] Christmas music play[ing] from [invisible] speakers” (Brenyah 110), making sure that the employees are only at the mercy of how much money Christmas can make that year, making Christmas comparable to a god.

Finally, with the use of anecdotes, understatements, and diction, the narrator shows how this poor treatment of workers can affect them negatively. For example, the narrator uses an anecdote about the old sales lead Wendy, and how when she made homemade pie that everyone but her and the narrator ate: “Wendy and I were the only ones who didn’t have the shits all day. Who knows what she put in the pie. I made it my mission to beat her. And I did. I squashed her” (Brenyah 110). Wendy food poisoned everyone so she could win the Black Friday game, something the company started, leading to the main character getting extremely competitive just to beat her. This inciting incident was the drive that led the main character to be so egotistical in the text, as they climbed their way to the top and beat Wendy, making them better. The mall made them, as well as all other mall employees, like this, not caring how it affected their health but instead wanting to maximize profits. Another negative impact of Black Friday is the apathy and desensitization given to the employees. Specifically, this can be seen with Lance and how the narrator talks about him. He is usually “rolling teen[s] toward[s] body pile[s]” (Brenyah 113) or “[bringing] a pallet jack, his broom, and some paper towels [to clean up the dead bodies]” (Brenyah 109). Based on the specific choice to use his name whenever cleanup needs to be done, it can be inferred that he is the cleanup crew for Black Friday, as “[on other days,] if somebody dies, a [real] clean-up crew comes with a tarp” (Brenyah 108). The narrator specifically talks about whatever he is doing with complete apathy, as if it is just another occurrence in the grand scheme of things, even though someone just died and he is cleaning them up. Lance also shows desensitization through the way he has not quit yet, as Duo, who is a new employee, “poked [a customer] off the wall with his reach [and the customer] fell on her neck” (Brenyah 109) before quitting the same day because “That shit is sad,” (Brenyah 112). Duo, after a death, quit because he was new to the job, however it can be inferred that Lance has been doing the job for a while

because of the way he cleaned multiple bodies the same day without wavering. To Lance, cleaning up a dead body is just another part of the job that needs to be done, which is an understatement and reflects on how the employees are being desensitized through all the violence, which is good for the job but is also a negative psychological impact that the companies and customers are inflicting onto them.

Overall, Brenyah uses satirical techniques such as burlesque caricatures, anecdotes, diction, understatements, and wordplay to comment on the greed of customers and big companies and how it affects the employees who just want to do their jobs. Through his satire, he effectively comments on the poor treatment of employees and the dangers of Black Friday, allowing people to reflect on themselves and how they behave in stores, instigating change for more people to be nice to employees.

Works Cited:

Adjei-Brenyah, Nana Kwame. *Friday Black*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018.