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Why Satire Fails: A Satirical Analysis of an Ineffective Critique on College Admissions

The college admissions process is notoriously gruesome, often requiring children to spend years procuring the unsaid requirements to stand even a chance at acceptance. Thus, this system is repeatedly satirized. However, the key difference between satirical pieces such as these and harsh, aimless comedies is their ultimate goal: to inspire change in the audience they are critiquing. This by itself is a momentous task, requiring tactful implementation of the critique as to avoid the alienation of those who are in the position to — or to not — make a difference. The importance of this tactfulness is evident in the lack of it, such as with Kate Youell's self-labeled satire, "The Ins and Outs of the Scary College Process." While the piece aims to critique the college admissions process and expectations, the manner in which she attempts to do so falls flat. The satire fails to demonstrate the flaws in the ultra-competitive college admission system primarily because the author alienates those she means to inspire, college admission authorities, immediately attacking them with her poorly placed line of consent, inadequate appeals to pathos, and juvenile tone.

While the author immediately crosses the line of consent, intending to create a blunt, incredulous feeling, the rushed nature of this placement restricts the piece from ever being considered by their target audience, authorities of college admission. Typically, the use of a

delayed line of consent allows the audience to form a sort of connection with the author, seeing their own thoughts within the writing and creating a safe, non-oppositional environment. This thus means the audience, when they *have* crossed that line, and are no longer able to doubtlessly agree, must question their *own* lines of thought that lead to this. If such a ridiculous, insane, or wild statement could result from a given thought process, then it is necessary to further evaluate the line of thought. In essence, a delayed line of consent almost acts as an appeal to ethos, crediting the thought process by sounding like the audiences' own. This technique is excellent at bypassing preconceived barriers against opposing opinions or ideas. And for a system that dates back hundreds of years, long-standing in both its process and stubbornness, the line of consent would be a vital tool to compel the college system's authorities into considering the opposition. Yet, Youell disregards the technique in favor of one that is significantly less effective at her ultimate goal. She aims to immediately make the reader understand that the process is so extreme that, “[y]ou’re already late. If you didn’t start your college application as you eased out of diapers and into Pre-K you’re behind.” (Youell). While this makes the accused issue obvious, it makes that *accusation* seem meritless. The audience never gets the chance to see any of their likeness in her writing, so they can easily write her off with bad time management, melodrama, or laziness, without ever reflecting on themselves. Therefore, by this placement of the line of consent, the author immediately jeopardizes her very own goal.

In the following text, the author continues to neglect her audience through lackluster appeals to pathos, that fail because their context is contingent on a high schooler's knowledge rather than a college officer's. While appeals to pathos can typically stress the importance of the argument, showing why it should matter to the reader, the author uses reasoning that would fail

to influence anyone other than her and her age group. For instance, the author tries to stress the unfair expenses and effort required to merely show interest in a college, saying, “It’s important to show the college that you are interested, so click on those email links, spend money to fly to those places, take those tours and see how the people that got accepted to your dream schools live their lives.” (Youell). And yet, nothing is clear to a reader with little context. The issue she is trying to point out is exclusive to those who have recently experienced it, which most college system authorities have not. It isn’t obvious to the readers *how* much time, or money, or effort that would cost, because the author assumes the readers already know. Translating to a student perspective, this piece would read more like, “To have even a chance at getting into a college, I must arrange the visit, pay hundreds of dollars for the visit, take time out of my schedule to visit, and do it all over again for every single school.” But to a college officer, who not only lacks this view but is a *part of this process*, this could read as “Students have typical visits to college. We can’t afford to cover thousands of students’ costs, so they cover the much smaller, individual fee, but we make reaching out easy with a simple email. Students get a feel of what college life is like.” Because this appeal to pathos is contingent on the perspective and the context, instead of using diction, exaggeration, or other literary techniques, and a clearly defined issue to force a certain viewpoint, this appeal fails in many cases. Even when she provides more context, like in, “For the personal narrative, you have to show the school who you are but you only have 650 words to do so,” this still fails to act as an appeal to pathos (Youell). She provides a more direct confrontation of the issue, but she doesn’t emphasize how difficult it is, thus making it seem like a realistic expectation. A more effective use of technique could have been the use of parallelism to emphasize the many, many aspects of a human being, for example, “For the personal narrative, you just have to demonstrate your likes, your dislikes, your sense of humor, your

values, your loved ones, your semi-loved ones, your platonically-loved ones, your first year, your second year, your third year, your fourth year, . . . and your eighteenth year, using 650 words or less.” Because she did not fully flesh out the appeal to pathos, the reader does not have to directly confront the impossibility of the task, again allowing them to write it off on the author as a lack of creativity, or hard work, or ability. While the author repeatedly attempts to use pathos to emphasize the impossible process of college admissions, she relies on the knowledge and commiseration of fellow peers, thus limiting the scope of the satire to miss her target audience entirely.

Similar to how the underdeveloped appeals to pathos and the immediate line of consent allows the audience to critique the author rather than reflect on themselves, the use of a juvenile tone, writing, and argument frames *the author* as bratty and immature, discrediting her entire argument. One of the worst instances of this in the reading is when she attempts to critique the inconsistent standards, claiming that “[t]he admissions process doesn’t entirely make sense. If people can get rejected from Harvard but have a 1600 SAT and a 4.0 GPA WHAT ARE THESE COLLEGES’ STANDARDS?” (Youell). What may stand out is the juvenile tone—while uppercase *is* utilized in official writings, here it is brash. The author does explain the conundrum, but she again leaves an underdeveloped appeal to pathos that makes this uppercase writing and distress seem sudden and tactless. Additionally, this sentence contradicts her own thoughts. Was she not, mere lines earlier, discussing how a person cannot be reduced to such little information? This contradiction makes her writing and arguments seem unthought-out and underdeveloped. Finally, perhaps the worst aspect of this is the breaking from the satire all together. While most satires do try and push to an extreme, they rarely step out of the satirical

view. That is, after all, what a satire consists of. So the initial line, blatantly stating it as a fact rather than through the use of satirical techniques makes the author appear as if they don't even know what they are writing. To appeal to those from a well-respected, long-standing, and credited process, it is vital to appear as credible, yourself. And yet, combined, these repeated instances throughout the text make the author seem youthful and incapable of forming a sound, credible argument, discrediting her to the target audience altogether.

While the complete avoidance of the college officers in the author's satirical writing is so extreme that it could be argued she never even intended it for them at all, this would then strip away a requirement of a satire: the call for change. Throughout this dissection, there has been the underlying assumption that the reason why the satire fails, why the line of consent, appeals to pathos, and the juvenile tone all fail to convince the target audience, is that the target audience was college authorities. They are, after all, directly in the position to make change. But it is necessary to address the question: could the satire be aimed at a different group? Could these perceived flaws actually be perfectly fine? In short, no, not while maintaining the status as a satire, or without significant contradiction. It still holds true that the piece has context that is assumed to be known by the reader yet is only actually known by those who have gone through the college process recently, namely high schoolers and recent graduates. However, if it was assumed that high schoolers and recent graduates are the true target, this raises an issue: if the goal was to inspire change, as is necessary for a satire, then the author would be simultaneously critiquing how overworked students are while calling for them to work harder to bring this change. Thus, either the author intended the audience to be high schoolers, thus undermining the piece entirely as a satire, or, the piece *is* a satire, but aimed for another group that lacks the

required context. Thus, accepting her own label as a “Satire,” she fails to consider the audience in her piece, thus making the satire ineffective.

In Kate Youell’s piece, “Satire: The Ins and Outs of the Scary College Process,” she fails to effectively direct her point to an audience that could truly make a difference, thus undermining the satirical goal of inspiring change in college admissions. While she attempts to use satirical devices to convey her argument, namely an immediate line of consent, appeals to pathos, and tone, her lack of consideration to the college officers makes the satire ineffective at achieving any actual goal.

Works Cited

Youell, Kate. "Satire: The Ins and Outs of the Scary College Process." The Bolles Bugle, 2024, bollesbugleonline.com/opinion/2024/10/04/the-ins-and-outs-of-the-scary-college-process/ . Accessed 17 Dec. 2025.