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Humanities

The Woes of Success

The Saturday Night Live (SNL) skit, “Career Day” written by Eli Coyote Mandel and the article “Success Doesn’t Equal Happiness. Make Sure You Know What You Really Value In Life” by Garrett Gunderson both explore the pressure society puts onto people to feel as though they need to strip themselves of their happiness in order to be successful. As a satire, “Career Day” strives to highlight these issues through extreme and humorous exaggerations to show the reality of working to great lengths in order to become wealthy and successful. This skit focuses on a bitter and apathetic elderly man, Abraham H. Parnassus, who has a very victorious career as an oil barren, and his dramatic experience presenting at his son’s annual Career Day at school. On the other hand, “Success Doesn’t Equal Happiness” takes a more argumentative approach, and it discusses the personal experiences of Gunderson, and how his dream of becoming happy and successful quickly became blinded as he slowly lost track of the future he originally dreamed of. It serves as a reminder that success may not provide happiness if it is not the future that brought passion and love to the table from the very beginning. Mandel’s satirical piece of “Career Day” uses burlesque, reduction, and irony while Gunderson’s piece “Success Doesn’t Equal Happiness” utilizes anecdotes, rhetorical questions, and irony in order to show the pressure society feels to work great lengths in order to be successful. Mandel is able to embody all of these qualities through one person, Parnassus, more effectively showing the effects of succumbing to the pressure of what society wanted him to be.

Both pieces utilize irony to show the burdens of becoming successful, that although hard work is required to become successful, it becomes an obligation rather than an option. A common misconception in modern-day society is that money equals happiness, and in order to get a large sum of money is to be successful through any job that involves business, medicine, law, or technology. Although over 8 billion people live on this planet, there are many people that have similar interests in these fields, including entrepreneur Garrett Gunderson. When he was starting up his business, “[He] used to drown in [his] drive to success” (Gunderson). There are a vast amount of competitors across the market, competing to get the best chance they can get to receive the highest-paying job. While it is true that working hard allows people to accomplish and carry out their dreams in life, it can slowly become an expectation rather than an option to choose the job that makes the most money over the job that truly brings happiness, causing people to be “lethargic and worn out” (Gunderson). Wealth, success, and luxury is what society defines as happiness, but it’s ironic that although Gunderson was able to check all of those boxes, he was never truly happy. Similarly, in “Career Day”, Parnassus discusses how “oil has little to do with profit ... Oil is about domination of the spirit” (Mandel, 2:15 - 2:21). However, oil is one of the most profitable natural resources that allowed Parnassus to come out victorious, that his domination of the spirit allowed him to destroy his enemies so that he could become number one. Both the sketch and the article show that they are clearly distraught from his time working as an entrepreneur and an oil baron, respectively, and constantly working towards their goal with limited free time and small breaks allowed them to stray from the goal they originally strived for. It was not a job filled with passion but mere obligation, effectively being shown through both “Success Doesn’t Equal Happiness” and “Career Day.”

Gunderson uses personal anecdotes and rhetorical questions in more of an argumentative manner to showcase his singular perspective on how the pressure of society's expectations affected him. He reflects on his periods of distress throughout the early stages of his business to show how success without passion or meaning feels hollow. To escape this inevitable hole of hopelessness, Gunderson discusses that in order to achieve total fulfillment, "Value [should] be found in your own perspective" (Gunderson). Values that are held closely to the heart fuel what is desired, what matters the most. These values also set a reminder that relationships and health still matter, that even though this dream will take up majority of the time, if they are not addressed and align with what wants to be pursued, there will be minimal happiness even if all of the milestones have been reached. Gunderson acknowledges this and asks himself, "Have you forgotten the future you originally dreamed of that drove you into entrepreneurship?" (Gunderson). This rhetorical question stems from his lack of attention to other qualities about his life because he was so hyperfixated on becoming a multimillionaire. Although he accomplished that goal, it was difficult for him to snap back into reality when he was completely consumed by the work and the need/want to become successful and own a lot of money. Gunderson effectively uses anecdotes and rhetorical questions to showcase the issues of society's expectations on a regular entrepreneur like Gunderson, but fails to effectively embody the full outcomes and characteristics of the situation because of his one-sided perspective on how he feels on the subject matter.

Mandel uses burlesque and reduction, in addition to irony, to universally embody the outcomes and characteristics of a businessman who held the belief system that success and money equaled happiness throughout his entire life, more effectively showing these ideals in a broader light rather than a singular perspective. The main character of "Career Day" follows a

bitter father named Parnassus, who was a person who followed the belief system of what society wanted all workers to be, successful. He is a wealthy oil man who seems zany, hollow, and miserable. This is shown through a conversation where his former competitors were brought up. Parnassus responded, "Crush your enemies. Grind their bones into the dirt" (Mandel, 1:20). He is everything society wanted someone like him to turn out, and everything Gunderson warned about in his article. Parnassus perceives the competitiveness in the business world as real war, feeling the need to work even harder to ensure his victories in life. Mandel reduces everything down to winner vs. loser, and holds this overarching pressure that the weakest cannot survive, that if Parnassus and his son wants to succeed, he needs to be at the top and cannot lose to anyone. When everyone in class began pointing to Parnassus' son that he was the weakest link, he tells him to "Feel this, boy. Understand the pain. You think I was always the picture of strength I am now?" (Mandel, 2:40 - 2:46). Parnassus is essentially stating that the only way to measure someone's worth is by noting how much they have gone through, that going through harsh work environments is the only way to get to the top, and in theory, make the most money. Mandel utilizes reduction and burlesque through Parnassus to show the different effects of how succumbing to the pressure of society can look like, and in this case, Parnassus grew up to become a bitter and miserable businessman.

Ultimately, both Mandel and Gunderson effectively use irony to show what the reality of becoming successful really looks like. Gunderson uses personal anecdotes and rhetorical questions to strengthen his argument of how society affected him, while Mandel uses burlesque and reduction within a character to universally show how someone can evolve to become a bitter person due to the burdens of needing to be on top. Gunderson's limited perspective on these

ideals causes Mandel's broader comedy sketch to better showcase the expectation that people need to strip themselves of their happiness to be successful.

Works Cited

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