

Now the Rich Want Your Pity, Too

“Sob sob sob”, it sounds from the upper middle class as they drag themselves, and their children, from one open house at Yale to another at Harvard. Not only is the American upper class shaming the lower class for not succeeding in the society, but according to the author Richard V. Reeves, they have begun to whine about their “stressed” and “miserable” lives.

The article “Now the Rich Want Your Pity, Too” was written in October 2019 for the New York Times by the author Richard V. Reeves, who is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. He argues, with a satirical and uplifting approach, that the loud sobbing of the upper class is self-inflicted and a major problem, because it distracts from the serious and real problems of the poor. He does this with the intention, or simple request for them to stop “...asking for sympathy from everyone else”¹ He also wants them to acknowledge and appreciate that they are not powerless as opposed to the poor. His humorous way of doing so fits well with the receiver, the readers of The New York Times, who mostly consist of young college graduates and high-income earners.

One way in which the author conveys his attitude to the issues is by using interposed sentences, which create an audacious and sarcastic effect. For instance “*Staying at the top, it turns out, is exhausting...*”² and “*The raw competition for success, so the argument goes, hurts the winners...*”³ These interposed sentences create a powerful tone of criticism and sarcasm, towards the rich, which makes the article interesting and entertaining to read. Sarcasm, in particular, is one of the author’s most effective literary devices. He uses the sarcasm to criticize the upper class and the meritocracy in a subtle and exquisite way. This can be seen when he compared the difficulties of the poor to the problems of the wealthier class. He writes, “*But there is no moral equivalence between the stress of a senior executive staying up late to polish a presentation for a client and the stress of a retail worker unsure if she will get the shift she needs to make rent.*” By using this comparison, he stresses the small and insignificant problems of the affluent members of the society, while belittling them with a satirical approach. The quote also demonstrates

¹ p. 3 l. 90

² p. 2 l. 9

³ p. 2 l. 31

how he uses pathos, as an important tool for his argumentation, by emphasizing the distress of the poor. However, not only is he affecting the readers by appealing to their emotions. Reeves also relies on statistics to support his argumentation. He argues, with a reference to the Brookings Institution, that, “...*top 10 percent of male earners born in 1940 can now expect to live... 12 years longer than male earners born in the same year in the bottom 10 percent.*”⁴ The statistics, together with his background of working with economic studies, give the article a great amount of ethos. As a result, he achieves great credibility as well as connecting with the reader through emotions.

Another way in which the author connects with the reader is by using a casual and informal style of language, which targets a large audience. The style of writing from line 64 to 75 is marked by a particularly entertaining informal use of language. This is, among other things, due to the frequent use of em dashes, which breaks up the sentence and enhance the readability. This can be seen in the sentence, “*The problem is not so much that rich people are spending as much as they are on these goods — although that, too, is absurd.*”⁵ The em dash, in this case, contributes to a casual and lively tone but also makes the following sentence extra emphatic. It can be seen, extra clearly, when the writer proposes his advice to the wealthy people. “*I have some better — and cheaper — ideas to improve the lives of the rich.*”⁶ In this regard “and cheaper” appears very prominent and concurrently giving the sentence a superior and condescending tone, towards the rich, by criticizing the class and their spending habits. However, the derisive tone is also achieved with the words “Just stop” and emphasized with repetition. He repeats these words after explaining how the upper class, according to him, are using money and energy on things that are pointless. For instance, “*If you are spending thousands of dollars and thousands of hours cultivating your children to get them into the most selective institutions: Just stop. Your kids will be just fine attending at good public university.*”⁷ The phrase creates a ridiculing tone because of the way the author is using his words to wake the upper class from their delusions. As a result, the informal language lets the author show personality and attitude towards the subject in a humorous way, and contributes to a very readable and amusing article that lifts the gloomy topic regarding the dilemmas of the meritocracy.

⁴ p. 2 ll. 33-35

⁵ p. 3 ll. 66-67

⁶ p. 3 l. 72

⁷ p. 3 ll. 72-72

Most of his arguments revolve around the problems regarding the sobbing upper middle class in the meritocracy. However, another problem of the meritocracy includes its harsh and wrongful way of treating the unsuccessful. Many people argue that meritocracy has led to a more righteous society and especially a more equitable education system. Fareed Zakaria, who is a journalist from CNN, defend the meritocracy as beneficial, for the time being, in the newsbreak "Meritocracy under assault". He explains how, before meritocracy, *"...people moved up in the world through a clubby, informal system that privileged wealth, social status and family connections"*; but is this description of society very different from today? Does everyone, despite their social status, have the chance to succeed because of their own merits? The meritocracy can, at first sight, seem like a wonderful system that increases motivation and opportunities among people. Nevertheless, it is accused of creating a society where the wealthy are praised for their merit, while the lower class are blamed for their poverty and unintelligence, which is considered to be self-inflicted. It has been criticized for creating a society where the disadvantaged social classes are not only blamed but eventually also shamed for their failure. However many will still argue, that the misery of the poor is caused by laziness and people who do not seize opportunities. The reality is, on the contrary, that not all people start on equal footing. Wealth and a good social status play, no matter how much you deny it, a big factor when it comes to success. The meritocracy, as it works at the moment, is only worsening the situation and guilt among the poor. Experts therefore argue that, not only is the meritocracy a big myth, it also creates an incredible inhumane system, because who would want to help the poor if their misery is self-inflicted? The rich? Probably not. It may turn out that meritocracy is not the best system after all and at the moment as shame has never been an effective path to prosperity and progress in a society.