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Unrealistic Partner Standards Lead to Unhappiness

‘The Barber’s Unhappiness’ is a short story by George Saunders about an unmarried middle-aged barber who finally finds his love interest. It is quite evident from the title that the story focuses on the unhappy life of the barber; however, it aloes involves the general themes of romance and standards of the general public in terms of marriage. The story is an attempt by the author to critique society’s materialistic and unrealistic relationship standards, as well as the attitude of the public towards less attractive and charming people like the barber. It also shows how Mickey, the barber, is able to achieve his happiness after rejecting those standards to find a loyal and reliable partner.

“The Barber's Unhappiness” describes the unhappiness of Mickey, who is living with his domineering mother. The barber is not so handsome, nor does he have appreciated or highly valued profession. His mother has ensured his single statue by always discouraging him from getting involved with any girl. Moreover, due to his own skeptical and judgmental views about the attractiveness of women, he is unable to approach any girl. However, he wishes to meet his dream girl and settle into a loving relationship. He tends to “ogle” women; “Mornings the barber left his stylists inside and sat out front of his shop, drinking coffee and ogling every woman in sight” (p. 137). He used to spend all of his time at his shop, as his mother kept a strict eye on him and did not let him move.

Mickey’s mother and uncle contributed greatly to his unhappiness. His mother did not want him to get married, and his uncle often critiqued and mocked him. They used different tactics to keep him for achieving his dream and becoming happy. Once he got the chance of attending a dinner party, where he could get the chance of meeting the pretty girls, however, his mother kept him engaged, by asking him to make the dinner for her and did not let him go. The author described the scene in words, “When he said he was running late, she said never mind in a tone that made it clear she was going to accidentally on purpose burn herself again while ostensibly making her own omelette. So he made the omelette (p. 139).” His mother did not want him to get married; therefore, used such tactics to keep him busy at home. The barber could not go on that meeting; however, he was again invited to another such meet up, and finally succeeded in attending that. There he met with a girl who was going on a date with some other guy. The guy insulted him by saying that she was not according to his standards and he did not like the women who were fat and were not attractive. Mickey desired to become close to her, however, could not dare to do so. At one incident, he was mocked by his uncle to get married to any old age woman, who consented to marry him; otherwise, he would stay single his whole life. This prompted him to make the advancement and prove his uncle wrong, and he was able to get the attention of that girl. When she visited his shop, he became nervous, and the author described his thoughts by mentioning, “Did she like the shop? He took big bold steps with his head thrown back so he’d look happy. Happy and strong, with all his toes. With all his toes, in the prime of his life (p. 169).”

Saunders has shed light on the typical standards of the society in terms of developing the relationships. He has highlighted that the bodies of women are objectified and the men show their interest only in those women who are attractive, have a nice figure and are not fat. The author has also provided some insight into the thoughts of the men who think that fat women are not attractive and does not deserve to get the attention of the handsome and rich men. On the other hand, attractive women are not ready to accept the less popular, handsome and well-established men. Both of the genders try to find all the qualities in their prospective partner and do not hesitate from rejecting the individual, who does not fit on their scale of popularity, and well-established status. The author has shed light on another sick mentality of the modern generation, which is developing relationships for the sake of fun and entertainment and not on the basis of love and affection of each other. He mentioned in the story that

“He regarded her fondly from across the table, waiting for her to catch him regarding her fondly, so he could quickly avert his eyes, so she’d know he was still possibly interested, and then she dropped her menu and bent to retrieve it and the barber had a chance to look briefly down her dress ” (p. 165).

He has presented the examples in his story, where people made fun of each other and tried to undermine each other in front of other people, without caring about the emotions of the other person (Saunders).

The different thing about the story is that Mickey did not think like the other members of society. He wanted to get married and settled in his life, without being too considerate of the beauty standards of the society. He also got sick of the mocking of his uncle, who thought that his profession was the hurdle in the way to find some attractive girl. He finally met Garry and realized the fact that she was perfect for him, which motivated him to make the advancements, without being too cautious of his status and age. The author has tried to show that the standard of developing the relationship should be the attraction and love between two people and not just the physical appearance and social status of each other. Shedding light on his past relations, the author shared that “He could say he’d love a chance to cut such excellent hair, then slip her a card for One Free Cut and Coffee. That had worked with Sylvia Reynolds, a bank teller with crow’s-feet and a weird laugh who turned out to be an excellent kisser” (p. 166). After spending a major part of his life, without having any love relationship, Mickey was able to accept the fact that he does not need to follow the typical and unrealistic standards of the society. He realized that he could win the heart of some lady, due to his attitude towards her and he became successful in that as well. He was able to become happy as Garry approved his feelings towards her, as well as reciprocated them. The author mentioned the ending in words, “Here I am," she said, with a shy, pretty smile. "I'm so glad you are," he said, and bent to unlock the door of the shop (p. 174).” They were able to find their own happiness, without caring about the typical standards of society (Saunders).

The story by Saunders is the perfect depiction of the wrongful and unrealistic relations standards of the people of the modern generation. He has highlighted through the story that people base their relationships on physical attraction and social status, while not giving any importance to the emotions and perception of the other person. He has presented the example of Mickey's mother, who tries to control him, as well as of Mickey, who just wanted to find love and peace in life. Due to his pure intentions and true feelings, he was able to win the heart of the lady he liked, through which the author tried to present the message that love does not depend on physical appearance or social status.

Work Cited

Saunders, George. *Pastoralia*. A&C Black, 2000:135-174.