Living up to Expectations and Pressure

College, to many people, is the gateway to the future, but, for others, college is a task forced upon them by society. In the society of today, people who do not go to college are looked down upon. College students feel that the pressure is too much to handle. The poem “Suicide Note” written by Janice Mirikitani in 1987 tells a story about a young female college student struggling to deal with the pressures brought upon her. “Suicide Note” illustrates the inner turmoil many college students go through, including self-loathing, self-doubt, gender stereotypes, societal judgement and parental expectations. The message of “Suicide Note” is that even though life can be stressful, suicide is not the answer. Overall, people should embrace their imperfections and make their blemishes their strengths.

Suicide should never be taken lightly. Statics state that “suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the US” (“Suicide Statics”). Knowing that suicide is the tenth cause of death is tragic. So many people resort to suicide when they have given up hope and feel unneeded. The suicide rates for adolescents and young adults in 2015 were 12.5 thousand. Although the suicide rates are lower than other age groups, that knowledge does not make the statistic better. Suicides that are committed by younger people are depressing because young adults have so much to look forward to in their future. People who commit suicide are emotionally unstable and tend to have no one to console them.
Throughout the poem, it is clear the Asian-American female loathed herself greatly. She is not happy with her life. She considers herself a failure of a child all because of her gender and grade point average. The repetition of the words “not good enough not pretty enough not smart enough [sic]” (line 3) further support her self-loathing. She cannot see past her imperfections because she was, most likely, taught that there is no room for failure. Many college students can relate to how she feels, especially when it comes to feeling unintelligent in certain areas of education. A majority of college students feel that if they fail one test or quiz, then their college career is over.

Education is very important in Asian cultures. Asian education “is seen as the only path to success” (Breitenstein para. 7). Education to Asians is a part of who they are, and, without it, they are nothing; in other words, they feel like failures. The reason why they would consider themselves as failures is due to the constant pressure from their parents and society. Their strict upbringing is to blame as well. Strict upbringing is not unheard of in Asian cultures. More or less, it is a tradition in Asian cultures going on for generations. The word and meaning of perfection has been drilled into Asian children’s lives. Hwy-Chang Moon states that “you have to be first-rate, otherwise you may not be able to survive” (qtd. in Breitenstein para. 8). In other words, these children must be the perfect man and or woman to appeal to their parents’ and societies’ standards.

Additionally, the female doubts her abilities to be a successful student because her grades are not perfect. She feels as though the world is tumbling down on her because she couldn’t keep a perfect four-point grade average. She even says, “I’ve worked very hard” (line 7). She knows that she has worked herself to the bone to be a perfect student, but she still is not good enough. Her hard work feels as though it is not enough and is underappreciated. Arduous work, usually,
comes with an award at the end, but, sometimes, that award is not what is expected. A good example of hard work not paying off is studying for a test for hours, only to get a failing grade. Many college students relate because, sometimes, all their hard work was for nothing.

Furthermore, note that the speaker emphasizes how much she thinks about her life, if she were born a male. She states that “If only I were a son…/I would see the light in my mother’s/eyes, or the golden pride reflected/in my father’s dream” (lines10-14). She feels underappreciated for all that she has done to get this far. She wishes for the approval and pride from both of her parents, but neither one of them bats an eye towards her successes. She only receives disapproving glares and comments, saying that she will never be good enough for anything. However, she believes if she were born a male that her life would be much better. She would receive the pride, joy, and love from her parents. One does not have to be a part of an Asian society to encounter gender stereotypes. In some colleges, males tend to have an easier time with classes all because of their gender, but that is not always the case.

Women are seen as the less superior sex in many different countries, more specifically Asian countries. On the other hand, men are given the task of bringing in the money. In Asian cultures, the younger generations’ expectations are absurdly high. Asian women must be prim and proper, in other words the perfect woman. Men too are held to ambitious standards. Asian men are expected to become successful billionaire business men. Jun-Youb Lee states that “Asian Americans flock to the pre-professional studies” (para.4). They pursue the pre-professional jobs because they are seen as the stable and acceptable jobs. Both men and women are told from the moment they are born that they must uphold the family name and never let their imperfections show. These expectations are ingrained in their minds for the rest of their lives. Men and women all struggle with gender stereotypes.
Depression is a nasty and sad emotion no one should face alone. It is the main emotion suicidal people feel. The speaker shows obvious signs of depression. She feels hopeless, sad, unworthy, and guilty throughout her daily life. Her motivation is fading, and she cannot find the will to keep going. She states that “…Each failure…/ice above my river” (lines 25-28). The world around her is crumbling and crushing her mind, body, and spirit. Sadly, many college students face depression, and they do not know how to handle it.

Moreover, pressure is the true source of many problems for college students. Pressure does not just weigh down college students everyone else as well. However, pressure is different for each individual. The college student in the poem could not handle the pressure. Pressure was not the only problem that lead to her death. The other main sources were her parent’s expectations and societies’ standards. Parents are a very important pillar in many people’s lives, especially college students. They are the people college students console with because parents are pillars of support for college students. “I apologize.” (line 23) is a strong sentence in this poem because even though she has tried her hardest, she is sorry for her failed attempts at being the perfect daughter. In this world, everyone does not have the privilege of supporting parents.

Death is what many people fear, especially those that are young. Death is a frightening subject to think about because it is unknown what time someone will die or how they will die. In “Suicide Note” death does not bother the young college student. No, rather she welcomes death with open arms because it is the only way she can find solace in her miserable life. “I make this ledge my altar/ to offer penance…” (lines 42-43). This sentence shows just how much she is going through. She believes that her death will appease her parents from all her failures. She even feels as though her efforts were not for herself but rather for her parents. The line “…harder, perhaps harder to please you….” (line 9) is her thinking that she has done nothing for
herself. For many, college students, suicide is their salvation and saving grace, but it is not. There is always a better option than death.

Lastly, people accepting their imperfections would help with dropping suicide rates. Accepting imperfections is the hardest thing to do for people. It is hard because people do not like to admit that something is wrong with them or that they are not good at something. Accepting is tough, but it shows just how strong someone is when they do acknowledge their flaws. Imperfections are a part of people, and once they realize this, then they will be better off. People are happier when they love themselves. If the young college student would have accepted her flaws, then she wouldn’t have resorted to suicide.

In conclusion, college students are weighed down by the pressures of being successful. Some cannot take the pressure, which in turn results in suicide. Pressure can be overwhelming and cause one to start doubting abilities. Some even go as far as to loath themselves and question the meaning to life. “Suicide Note” illustrates the struggles college students face and how some cannot handle the immense responsibility. Suicide is not the answer to people’s problems. It hurts the people that love them dearly. People need to do what makes them happy and find others who care for them.
Works Cited


