Different Sisters

Can a person have both happiness and success, or can a person only have one? In “Sadie and Maud,” by Gwendolyn Brooks, two sisters had different views on happiness and success. Throughout life, everyone chooses a different path to achieve goals; one can decide to pursue higher education, start a family, move to a different country, or simply stay home. In “Sadie and Maud,” by Gwendolyn Brooks, Sadie was happier and more successful than Maud, as seen through the structure of the poem, the life choices they made, the moral expectations of society, and the knowledge they had.

Primarily, the structure of the poem demonstrates how Sadie was more content and successful than her sister. According to “Understanding Poetry”, an article by the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Writing and Reading Center, “A poem's structure functions on two levels: its physical form and the arrangement of its ideas” (University of Massachusetts). The punctuation is not consistent throughout the poem. Some lines in the poem end with a period, some lines end with commas, and some lines have no end punctuation at all. This variation in punctuation shows the inconsistency in their relationship. They did not get along because they had different opinions on success and happiness. They would either come to agreements and end the discussions they had (as shown by the periods), or just continue (as shown by the commas or lack of punctuation). The capital letters at the beginning of each line illustrated new beginnings in their lives, and the lines grouped into four stressed the need for family. Also, the wording
throughout the poem expressed the positive and negative relationships between the two sisters. The author, Gwendolyn Brooks, referenced society’s attitude on the different lives Maud and Sadie experienced. Brooks hardly mentioned Maud’s life throughout the poem but gave much personal information about Sadie’s life; this portrays how society concentrates on the people that go against its standards and beliefs of how a person should live his or her life. It also depicts how society significantly manipulates an individual’s life and choices.

Along with the structure of the poem, Sadie’s life choices made Sadie feel happier and more accomplished than Maud. The lines, “Maud went to college./ Sadie stayed at home” (Brooks lines 1-2), clearly demonstrate that the sisters chose different paths in life. The author did not talk about Maud much because Maud decided to go off to college and thus did not have a big impact on the family. In lines 3 and 4, Brooks says, “Sadie scraped life/ With a fine-tooth comb,” to show that Sadie got the most out of life in the choices she made. Sadie—without being married—chose to start her little family by having two girls; Maud chose to continue her education and not have children. Sadie’s happiness consisted of watching her children grow, learn, and love her. Children are a little version of oneself. The parents teach the children, and the children teach the parents. “Happiness is more than a pleasurable emotion, it is your compass, your teacher; it is creative and a source of inspiration and fundamental to any real success in life” (Lynch 1). The choices Sadie made in life influenced elements which contributed to her happiness. The compass represents the elements that guided her life. The teacher symbolizes a source of gaining knowledge. The creativity represents the unexpected way Sadie lived her life within a very structured society. The compass, teacher, and creativity are essentially what Sadie’s character was composed of and are the basis of her inspiration to stand up against society.
Additionally, social and moral expectations influence happiness and success; Sadie was more joyful and successful than Maud because Sadie defied these expectations. People should not follow these expectations because they are not ideal. A woman should not do what society believes is right; she should have her own guidelines to abide. Sadie became a single mother, which society disapproves, and she did not attend college. Her family was disappointed and embarrassed because she had two children without being married: “Maud and Ma and Papa/Nearly died of shame./” (lines 11-12). According to the article “Happiness from Ordinary and Extraordinary Experiences,” in order “…to enjoy the greatest happiness… the extent to which an experience is ordinary or extraordinary. …ordinary experiences as those that are common, frequent, and within the realm of everyday life. Extraordinary experiences… are uncommon, infrequent, and go beyond the realm of everyday life” (Bhattacharjee 2). Sadie did not conform to social and moral expectations/rules; instead, she took extraordinary risks, broke the role of a woman, and became a mother and father for her daughters.

The experiences of Sadie’s life were unexpected and uncommon for young women during that era and now. On the other hand, Maud attempted to be normal. Maud continued her education by going to college, followed the rules by not doing what her sister did, and remained a woman in the eyes of society. As a result, Sadie’s life appeared to be filled with more happiness, as opposed to her sister Maud. Sadie demonstrates that the main principle in an individual’s life is the crucial element of family. Although she was socially accepted, Maud failed at establishing her own set of morals; she focused on learning the morals of society rather than creating her own. On the contrary, Sadie formed her own boundaries in which she could live among. In a way, Sadie had control over her life, for she became comfortable with the opposition
of society. The self-morals that Sadie established created a shadow over Maud’s acceptance in society.

Moreover, the type of knowledge gained by the sisters differentiated their happiness and success with Sadie being the victor. Different factors contribute to happiness and success:

“Numerous studies show that happy individuals are successful across multiple life domains, including marriage, friendship, income, work performance, and health” (Lyubomirsky 1). Thus, there are various ways to achieve happiness in distinct areas of life. In comparison to Maud learning in college, Sadie obtained her knowledge through the obstacles present in her life. After Sadie died, her girls left the house and went to live their lives together: “When Sadie said her last so-long/ Her girls struck out from home” (lines 13-14). The daughters used what Sadie had left for them, “(Sadie had left as heritage/ Her fine-tooth comb)” (lines 15-16), which was her way and view of life. Her perspective on life meant they had to pick every little detail and be happy, for that would lead to success. The girls used their mother’s experience and knowledge rather than their aunt’s.

The narrator states, “Maud, who went to college, /Is a thin brown mouse. /She is living all alone / In this old house” (lines 17-20). Maud chose to be educated; however, she had a lot of college debt. Maud could not afford to live on her own, so she lived in her parents’ old house. She was alone and unhappy, living in an old big house with no one to share it with. The mouse comparison also represents bad health conditions. Maud was unhappy because she did not have any relationships with her family or friends (Lyubomirsky). She regretted not spending time with her sister and nieces. While both could have set aside enough time to spend with their family, Sadie was the one who chose to prioritize the fundamental element of family. Although Sadie did
not obtain a higher education like her sister, she utilized her lifelong knowledge and experiences by consciously spending time with her daughters.

Ultimately, the poem’s structure, the sisters’ life choices, society’s moral expectations, and the sisters’ knowledge exhibit how Sadie was more joyful and more successful than Maud. Fulfilling life depends more on one’s outlook on life than one’s actions. The choices made in life also influence success and happiness. Sadie was content with her lifestyle and choices. Maud who followed the expectations set by society ended up alone. Maud was successful in the aspect of continuing college education and not having children before marriage; Sadie was successful and happier with being a mother and teaching her children. Maud’s college education tempts one to believe that Maud achieved happiness and success. However, one realizes that a college education is not the center of an individual’s life in comparison to family. Regardless of Sadie’s lack of education, the poem portrays her as having a more positive way of living. Although her parents felt ashamed of her position in society, her two daughters overpowered those negative feelings. As a result, she was happier and succeeded in caring for her two daughters. A person can have both happiness and success.
Works Cited


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