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A Degree in Privilege:

In "Is This Kansas?" by Eula Biss, she describes the privilege and entitlement that takes place within universities. Through short anecdotes, irony, imagery, and juxtaposition, Biss highlights how these unsettling double standards and privileges that take place within universities reflect broader inequalities that people must deal with daily in society. As a result, it causes the reader to question the safety and privilege that are often taken for granted.

From the outside, college campuses are typically seen as a fun and enjoyable place where kids mature and grow into adults. However, within college campuses, the whole culture is flawed. Through her use of vivid imagery, she recalls some of the reckless behavior that is common within university culture, describing students wandering around half-naked and drunk, as if it were a normal thing to do. This behavior ranged from "car crashes" to "alcohol poisoning" (Biss 131), suggesting that the absence of consequences is rooted in privilege. This behavior was pardoned, particularly when white students were involved. Biss suggests this is because the people responsible for holding them accountable see the students as "the quickly dying sparks of [their] former selves" (Biss 132), which shields them from the consequences that students of color might face. This nostalgic view allows for very dangerous things like, date rapes and DUI's to be swept under the rug. Through disturbing imagery, Biss challenges the reader to recognize how this lack of accountability creates a culture where serious consequences are rare, allowing harmful behaviors to continue. Through Biss's personal anecdotes, she forces the reader to confront how through privilege, destructive behavior is excused within university

MWA Paper

Conor Hilton

10/13/24

culture, which ultimately represents broader societal inequalities, like in the way white students get shielded from consequences, while students of color don't have the same leniency.

Biss challenges the common expectation that college student's reckless behavior will end after graduation, and they enter the real world. Although society seems to think that college is a temporary phase of carelessness, a diploma does not automatically change their mindsets. The privilege shielding students during their college years can persist beyond graduation. Biss recounts an incident in which she attempted to shut down a weekday party. Weirdly enough, she found a grown man "suspended upside down" while siphoning beer into another man's mouth (Biss 133). This shocking anecdote, involving fully grown adults, reveals that the reckless mindset that was excused in college does not simply disappear with a diploma. By sharing this anecdote, Biss emphasizes that privilege continues to shield adults from accountability, suggesting that the societal inequalities within university culture extend into adulthood.

In the workforce, there are certain power dynamics where lower-level employees are treated as lesser valued people. This gives privilege to the higher-ups in companies. Biss highlights how the same privilege is embedded within the classroom. Through her experience as a graduate instructor, Biss describes how "students were subjects of this education, which was acted out upon them. They either absorbed it or did not," (Biss 135), showing how the education system does not prioritize students' individuality. Biss reflects that the "philosophy of education" seemed to "not only to encourage but to depend on the quiet resignation of the students." (Biss 135). The students, especially the ones that do not benefit from privilege, are expected to accept

MWA Paper

Conor Hilton

10/13/24

the circumstances without question. Biss shows this through a short anecdote where she recalls her time as a graduate student. She felt “distasteful” towards the education she was immersed in, she often found herself “impatient” and “argumentative” (Biss 135). So, like an adult, she wrote letters to the English department hoping to improve things. However, this angered the people in power, who called her a “presumptuous young lady”. All of a sudden it clicked for her. She was not seen as someone whose opinion was respected, but as a child who was out of their place. Despite being a graduate student, they viewed her as inferior and expected her to comply. By showing how students are expected to acquiesce in the education system, Biss critiques the way privilege operates in the classroom. The favoritism towards positions of power while silencing certain groups reflects broader societal issues, where the privilege shapes people's experiences in society.

A majority of people form their opinions based on what they hear on the news. Because of this, the media plays a huge role in shaping public perception of privileged behavior. In Biss’s rhetoric class, her students were intrigued to find out that she previously lived in New York City. Biss’s recounting of her experience in Iowa City starkly contrasts with the expected dangers of New York City, which her students perceived. Big cities like New York City have a reputation for being dangerous and full of crime. So, her students asked her many questions about it, like “where [she] worked’ and “where [she] lived”, but also “if [she] had been scared’ and if “men had harassed [her] on the street” (Biss 136). They were surprised to find out that Iowa City made her feel far more unsafe than New York City ever did. In Iowa City, she regularly talked to the

MWA Paper

Conor Hilton

10/13/24

police, could not sleep because of loud parties, was harassed on the street, and even had her apartment broken into multiple times. Her students' shock at her feeling safer in New York City than in Iowa City shows the irony in their perception about privilege and danger. Through Biss's anecdote and irony, it forces the reader to think about their own perceptions shaped by the media, and how these perceptions can excuse reckless behavior while ignoring the dangers people without privilege have to face. This stark contrast between expectation and reality highlights the inconsistency within the media that creates a false sense of safety. These mixed perceptions factor into broader societal inequalities, where the actions of certain groups of people are either pardoned or ignored based on their status.

Racism and privilege are not only prevalent within universities, but it is also a serious issue that takes place in every level of society. Although laws may have changed since the Civil Rights Movement, racial inequalities still continue in society. Through Biss's anecdotes about university culture, she forces readers to confront the unsettling truth that the privilege within universities reflects broader inequalities in society. For example, mistreatment seen in the criminal justice system, housing, and education. The inconsistencies in the criminal justice system, where certain groups of people get different consequences for the same behavior based on their race or who their parents are. Biss's personal anecdotes reveal how power and privilege structure lives way beyond the college years. This creates the notion that if someone grew up with little money, or is of a certain skin color, they are inferior to people with privilege. This creates a cycle of inequality that starts when they are a child.

MWA Paper

Conor Hilton

10/13/24

In reading “Is This Kansas”, I found Biss’s critique of privilege in the classroom and in society relevant to my own experiences. Her arguments of how privilege works in university culture reminded me of moments where I have seen people with power avoid severe consequences. For example, I know someone whose father is very wealthy and powerful. This person was involved in a very tragic car crash that resulted in someone’s death, yet they received nothing more than a slap on the wrist. This tragic incident is a clear example of how privilege can shield people from severe consequences, just as Biss describes. Biss’s essay really opened my eyes to how prevalent privilege is within society. The way some people can advance in life just because of the color of their skin or who their parents are, really rubs me the wrong way. Overall, my experience with this essay has made me realize the inequalities people have to face and confront the hard truth that people are treated differently based on their privilege.