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Advanced Writing

May 30, 2016

Red Dress

Happiness does not come from getting external fulfillment, but from fulfilling your internal expectations. Red Dress, by Alice Munro, is a story about a girl's changing perspectives on happiness. The narrator first thought that she could gain happiness by fulfilling others' expectations. After talking to Mary Fortune, she changes her perspective drastically; she realizes that happiness isn't about fulfilling other's expectations, but is about changing your perspectives and increasing your self-esteem.

In order to fit in the society and not being left out, Alice cares deeply about other people's views and strives to fulfill others' expectations. Family and peers are both important to teenagers, influencing teenager's attitude significantly. In the beginning of the story, Alice's Mom compares Alice to Lonnie, as Alice's Mom wants Alice to be lonely, so that she meets the criteria of having a "composed, polite, appreciative expression" (187). Alice's Mom talks to Lonnie and Alice differently; she often asks Lonnie about her own opinions, saying things such as "What do you think of it, Lonnie", which shows respect. Consequently, Alice feels as if "Lonnie were grown up and I[Alice] were still a child" (187, 188). In contrast, Alice's Mom "enrages" Alice, saying "I doubt if she[Alice] appreciates it" (188). To let herself become happy, Alice tries to sooth her mom, by fulfilling her expectation, being outstanding in the crowd.

The other source of societal pressure is school. Poor performance at school influences how other people view Alice negatively, which leads to her unhappiness. Because of the poor performance, she thinks that she is different from her classmates, which makes her "never

comfortable for a minute” at school (189). Additionally, her low self-esteem makes her not willing to attend the dance. Before the dance, she keeps thinking many of ways to let herself not appear in the dance; she says “something had to happen, to keep me from that dance” (189). Since she knows that she will not be invited to the dance by other male classmates and to gain happiness, she resorts to staying at home and escaping the dance. However, she still tries to find a partner to dance with, as it is what the society expects people to do. In the process of fulfilling the expectation, she ironically gets offended by other boys, by noting that “he[Mason Williams] steered me, stumbling to the edge of the floor. He took his hand from my waist and dropped my arm”. Additionally, even when she finds a partner who treats her better at the end, she still feels unhappy, since the boy only cares about having a girlfriend, but not her feelings. The boy keeps talking about a hockey game, even when his friend already leaves: “He[the boy] did not seem to notice that he was now talking to me instead” (193). The conversation ends with Alice’s perfunctory “H’m hmm” responses, and her realization that fulfilling others’ expectation cannot make herself happy.

The only time that makes Alice feel happy from the bottom of her heart is when she talks to Mary Fortune, a girl who is confident and is not a “boy-crazy girl” (192). After talking to Mary Fortune, Alice changes her perspective on life and others’ opinions. As Alice is “listening to her[Mary], She[Alice] felt the acute phase of her unhappiness passing.”, she realizes that “here is[was] someone who has[had] suffered the same defeat as she[I] had – she[I] saw that – but she was full of energy and self-respect” (192). She finally understands that obtaining happiness is not about fulfilling what others expect, but about having self-respect and different perspectives of viewing an event. Before talking to Mary, she was afraid of “being[be] left out”, thus wanting “to hide... [and to] get out without seeing anybody”. However, after talking to Mary, she finds out that those who are boy-crazy are “idiots” who always get messed up by love (191, 192). Alice also changes her attitude towards dancing

and being in the crowd, eventually saying that “I[Alice] found that I was not so frightened, now that I had made up my mind to leave the dance behind me. I was not waiting for anybody to choose me. I had my own plans, I did not have to smile or make signs for luck” (193). She finally realizes that being happy does not need to relate to other people; by changing her perspectives, she can gain happiness by herself.

Some people might argue that Alice is happy in the end of the story. She only looks happy instead of being happy. The reason why other people think that she is happy because she says “my life was possible” and this is the first time she got a boy that kisses her asks her for a dance without other people tell him to do so (193). However, other readers might feel that she is happy because the readers have the stereotype of being happy which is to fulfill others expectation. In Alice’s word, she has not been happy but she is glad that she finally knows the way for getting happy. In her word choice, we still can see a lot of negative words, “I[Alice] understood what a mysterious and oppressive obligation I had, to be happy, and how I had almost failed it, and would likely to fail it, every time,” that shows the negative emotions that Alice has and the responsibility of being happy becomes a pressure to Alice (193).

Being happy isn’t about doing what others expect you to do. In Red Dress, Alice gains happiness by changing her attitude towards herself instead of expecting others to change and treat her better. You need to fill your heart with self-esteem and change the way you view yourself. The most important thing about being happy is how way you act and think, instead of depending on others. If we only focus on how other people treat you, you will never be happy, since there are too many people around you, wanting too many different things. How can we ever fulfill everyone’s expectations?

[Old Version]

Nowadays, people define happiness as fulfilling societal expectations or gaining good reputation from others. People care a lot about others' view of themselves and aren't able to see themselves from a different perspective, which lead to unhappiness. When the narrator is young, she never cares about others, which allows her to lead a happier life. For example, she notes that "in the days when I was unaware of the world's opinion. Now, grown wiser, I[Alice] wished for dresses like those my friend Lonnie had, bought at Beale's store" (187). Because she cares a lot about other people's opinions, she is never happy and never lives her own life. Things are especially debilitating when she performs in front of others or when she's the center of attention. For instance, "when I[Mary] was asked a question in class, any simple little question at all, my voice was apt to come out squeaky or else hoarse and trembling" (189). She cared about how people commented on her and she had low self-esteem so she could not perform well. Moreover, since most people viewed Alice negatively, she never feels happy because she isn't the type that people pursued. Consequently, because

of the low self-esteem, she sometimes misunderstands others' views or comments towards her, as demonstrated in the following: "I felt this as keenly as he did and imagined that he was exchanging looks of dismay with his friends." This wasn't what exactly happened, but is instead the narrator's own imagination. Sometimes, in order to protect ourselves, we try to over-analyze the situation, but end up making a worse decision.

Some people think that fulfilling other's expectation and having an occupation that everyone dreams of would make them happy. When you are in the lower position in society, you will always think that being rich and gaining others' respect will grant you happiness. However, people do not gain happiness from fulfilling the society's expectation. In the story, Alice had this idea when she hadn't met the expectation from either her mom or her classmates. She thought the only reason she could not be happy was because she couldn't gain respect from others. When she was dancing with Mason Williams, she notes that "he steered me[Alice], stumbling to the edge of the floor. He took his hand from my waist and dropped my arm" (191). Later, when she has a chance to dance with Raymond Bolting, she thinks she would be happy since she finally got a guy to dance at the prom. Ironically, instead of being happy, she feels that Raymond does not care about her inner part, but instead kept arguing about a hockey game with Harold Simons.

Alice never got happiness from other people, except from talking to Mary Fortune, even though talking to her was different from dancing with the boys. While talking to Mary Fortune, Alice gains internal support and inspiration from Mary Fortune which increase her self-esteem and change her mind to not caring about other's opinions – especially knowing the adversities faced by Mary Fortune, "here was someone[Mary] who had suffered the same defeat as I had – I saw that – but she was full of energy and self-respect" (192). One of the ways that makes Alice happy is changing her perspective on other people's thought on her. For instance, after talking to Mary Fortune, she is no longer the girl that hid in the

bathroom in order to escape the awkward scene where she was left out of the dance; she develops self-esteem and is not worried about how people look at her since she has her own opinion of herself. Moreover, how you look at yourself changes the way that others see you.

Being happy isn't about doing what something others expect you to do. You need to fill your heart with self-esteem and change the way that you look at yourself. The most important thing about being happy is the way you treat and think, instead of depending on others. If we only look at how other people treat you, you would never be happy, since there are many people around you. In *Red Dress*, Alice gains happiness by changing her attitude towards herself instead of expecting others to change and treat her better.