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Traces of Ink

In every high school there is always a select group of “smart kids.” They are the ones that get straight A’s, fight for front row seats in the classroom, and dream of graduating with a golden tassel on their hats. Then there are other kids who are quite the opposite, some call them “underachievers.” College challenges the idea of what it means to be educated from the very start. The admission process at Southern Methodist University surprisingly does not merely just focus on the SAT, ACT, GPA, and other traditional benchmarks for admission; rather, they view applications with regard to achievements outside of academic arena. This arouses a question of whether there is more to being educated than mere academic success? The film, *An Education*, explores what an education truly is by showing a young woman, Jenny, struggling with the choice of a formal education or romantic relationship. Jenny discovers that through pursuing exclusively one or the other she would never become a truly educated person developed to her full potential.

It is hard to fully understand the dilemma which Jenny faced without first defining education. Can an education simply be defined as walking across the stage of your high school or college? The society’s view of education has varied throughout the years. For example in the 1940s, roughly 50% of individuals had a high school diploma and less than 10% had their bachelor’s degree. In the 1940s, education was not as important as wit in everyday life matters. Comparing it to today where nearly 90% of the population has graduated high school and around 30% have a four-year degree (Stoops 2004). This data reflects the increasing importance of higher education as a requirement for jobs.

Education is not merely what you learn in the classroom, but rather how you apply it to the real world. The learning center at Southern Methodist University describes their motto as, “What good is all this knowledge if you don't share it?” This quote shows that the value of education lies in what can be accomplished with it, and only a person sufficiently knowledgeable in current events of the world and needs of fellow humans would be able to apply his or her education well. Only through making mistakes can we learn life’s lessons and be able to develop a full understanding of life.

Bill Gates, Michael Dell, Mark Zuckerberg, and Steve Jobs all have one attribute in common – they all became extremely successful without a college degree. These people were able to apply what they had learned previously in the classroom to develop products that changed the society forever. At the same time they all had life skills that allowed them to create such innovative companies Microsoft, Dell Computers, Facebook, and Apple. The examples above show that hard work can compensate for the lack of formal education.

There are different ways to acquire life skills; however, most life skills are acquired through making mistakes. *An Education* illustrates a story of a teenage girl at the threshold of adulthood who learns life’s most important lessons and makes mistakes along the way. The girl, Jenny, is about to graduate high school in a suburb of London when she encounters an older man named David with whom she starts a passionate and destructive relationship. The relationship with David has a profound impact on Jenny’s life. Jenny gives her virginity to him, drops out of high school, loses her parents’ trust, and puts her college career in jeopardy.

One scene in particular exhibits the physical aspect of their relationship. On Jenny’s seventeenth birthday, she planned to lose her virginity to David. The two are in bed when suddenly David pulls out a banana suggesting that Jenny use it to deflower herself. This incredibly awkward suggestion quickly kills the romantic atmosphere and Jenny decides to postpone losing her virginity until the next night. The cinematography of the scene shows the transition from childhood to adulthood, which is awkward, exciting, and scary at the same time. This scene, unlike nearly every other scene in the movie, lacks music to demonstrate seriousness, intimacy, and anticipation. The lights are also dimmed to bring a sense of importance and focus attention on the two of them. The scene begins with showing a reflection of Jenny and David in the mirror rather then actually in bed. The fact that they are reflected in the mirror together symbolizes intimacy and closeness as if the two of them are completely alone and David is bringing her into his adult world. Awkwardness and embarrassment are evident as Jenny quickly buries her head in the pillow when she realizes what the banana is meant for. However, her mood quickly changes to that of seriousness as she stops smiling and looks directly at David. This indicates that she is indeed ready for the transition. Jenny looks and acts more grownup by no longer being the giggly, bubbly child that she once was but rather a young woman. This scene is among one of the most important scenes in the film because it portrays Jenny maturing and becoming an adult and beginning to learn about true passion.

Jenny’s short-lived relationship with David shows its devastating consequences in the scene where her father confronts Jenny about her lies. Just as in the last scene, it opens up with Jenny being reflected in a mirror. In this case it shows quite the opposite of the previous scene, a very saddened version of Jenny. She now has to stand as an adult on her own, without David, and face the consequences of her actions. Interestingly, the scene shows Jenny and her father in close proximity to each other yet separated by a door signifying emotional separation. In addition, her father appears with no background thus demonstrating his seriousness and sincerity during the scene. Also in the scene Jenny evidently wants to be a child again as she is dressed in pajamas and later in very modest clothes in contrast to her stylish and grownup clothing when she was with David. The coffee and biscuits demonstrate what true love and forgiveness are when Jenny’s father apologizes and tries to make peace with her. She realizes that her relationship with David was not true love, but rather teenage infatuation and instead sees the true value of love that accepts unconditionally.

Jenny’s story seems like a typical “coming-of-age” story. A precocious, intellectual teen, she is like a child putting on grown-up’s clothes that fit neither in size nor in fashion, a rebel child who would smoke, drink, and date a much older man just to assert her independence. Perhaps, the most important lesson that Jenny learns and that will have profound impact on the rest of her life is learning about who she is. In the beginning of the story, she does not know who she is or who she wants to be; but she does know who she doesn’t want to be – a child. By the end of the film and after much heartache, Jenny seems to emerge as a much more mature adult with a stronger sense of identity. She now realizes that will adulthood come responsibility. Jenny overcomes her heartbreak and enters Oxford despite the mistakes that she has made. Frequently, we see the same occurrence in real life – through intense pain and distress emerges an understanding of life that makes an individual more educated, and, moreover, enhances his or her ability to be educated.

Education is not merely a measure of years we spend in school or number of titles we earn; neither can the number of hardships we have been through measure it. Rather, it is the interaction of the two definitions that creates a person who is open to knowledge, realizes the necessity of using that knowledge wisely and possesses means of doing so. Education can help the person get through the hardest of times by providing hope, as, when faced with injustice or cruelty we can turn to History and remember the Holocaust and realize that our own hardships are miniscule in comparison of those who went through it. Education can inspire, as we read beautiful words of Shakespeare, Hamilton and Dickens. Life’s lessons like empathy, suffering, and fellowship, all help fully understand the friendship between Hamlet and Horatio, man’s struggle to identify his place in the Universe, and the pain David Copperfield felt as Dora passed away. Without first learning from life what these things mean, the words in the books would remain just that – traces of ink on paper.

Works Cited

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