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Comparative Analysis

A Higher Standard

In our society it is very common for teachers to be merely labeled as good or bad by parents or students, but the standard by which they are labeled is stricter for teachers than other professionals. In Tom Perrotta's *Election*, he writes about Jim McAllister, a high school teacher who is highly regarded by his students and has "a way of explaining complicated things so they made sense to you, connecting current events with familiar details from our own lives, asking questions that really made you think" (5). In David Schickler's *The Smoker*, Douglas Kerchek is also a high school teacher who is "a font of intrigue for the all-female population of St. Agnes" (1). Despite the fact that Mr. M and Douglas are the admired teachers in their respective stories, they both face the challenge of maintaining the image of a good teacher that is set for them by society, showing that teachers are held to a high standard of ethical behavior and their popularity does not make them exempt from constantly having all of their actions evaluated through the eyes of the public.

Even though both Mr. M is considered to be good or popular teacher in the eyes of his students, this does not necessarily mean that he is happy with his life outside of school, or that he is performing positive actions outside the classroom. In this instance, Perrotta places Mr. M in an unhappy marriage and he takes advantage of the opportunity by having an affair with the ex-wife of a former colleague. Mr. M's actions are far from the positive example that he is expected to set as a teacher, because even if teachers are not in front of

their students inside the classroom, they are supposed to exhibit exemplary behavior. Mr. M compounds his mistake and makes another one inside of the classroom by throwing away two votes in the school's election for class president. This action not only leads to consequences, but the national media publicizes his mistake almost immediately. The moment in which Mr. M decides to rig the election by throwing out two votes for Tracy outweighs everything he has done as a teacher because he did not exemplify the honesty and respect he is expected to convey at all times.

In the heat of the moment, Mr. M feels as though he has the right intention because he was rigging the election in order for Paul, a student he felt was best suited to be President, to win the school election, but his dishonesty and selfishness effectively ruined his career. As a result of his actions, Mr. M realizes "the fact that [he'd] forfeited [his] right to call [himself] a teacher" and that he had "been caught violating the closest thing [he] knew to a sacred trust. [His] days at Winwood were over" (161). Ironically, by writing a letter of resignation he is precisely demonstrating the opposite qualities because he is being honest and owning his actions. In addition, Mr. M is in a position of tenure, and could have chosen to have the union fight for him because "given that the only evidence against [him] was circumstantial, there's a pretty decent chance [he] could have denied everything and gotten away with it" (161). Unfortunately, he did not make the honest decision while counting votes for the election and in the end, Mr. M pays the price by forfeiting the career he has truly succeeded in and begins selling cars, demonstrating the unique and strict standard that the public sets for teachers.

While Douglas does not directly make mistakes that demonstrate the strict standard set for teachers, he is still held to the same standard by one of his students and her parents.

His student, Nicole Bonner, invites him over for dinner with her family after she gets into Princeton because Douglas wrote her letter of recommendation. It initially seems like it is a simply a nice gesture, but it quickly becomes clear that Nicole's parents are holding Douglas to a higher standard, but in a different way than Mr. M faces the standard. Douglas does nothing wrong during the story, but Nicole's parents were not solely inviting him over to thank him because they had greater expectations in store for him. This is presented when Mr. Bonner states, "Paulette and I would like to arrange a marriage between you and our daughter here. Our only child" (6). Even though this is an extreme case, her parents held Douglas not only to his role as a teacher, but suddenly with the expectation that he would be their daughter's husband. This situation is unique to Douglas as a teacher because it is within this position that he develops his relationship with Nicole, but it also gives her parents the impression that he will make a great husband.

Unlike other professions, a mistake such as cheating on your spouse, or rigging a small-scale election can negate every positive achievement of a teacher and result in the end of their careers. This high standard seems to be unique to teachers, whereas other professionals are typically still employable after similar actions, which are either not publicized, or forgiven after a period of time. Mr. M's frustration about this becomes apparent when he states, "I [wonder] how it is that Bill Clinton got to be President and Clarence Thomas got to sit on the Supreme Court, while I ended up here" (179). As a teacher, the public expects him to never slip up and make a mistake that would set a bad example for students because he works with them on a daily basis and is expected to mold his students into adults of high character. Even though Mr. M is not in nearly as powerful of

a position such as President, or Supreme Court Justice, his track record of being excellent at what he does is not enough to save his job, or himself from the criticism.

In *Election* and *The Smoker* two different, but well-regarded teachers walk into a classroom every weekday to be evaluated by the students that sit before them, but when the bell rings at the end of the day, they both must continue to be the best role models they can be in order to meet the strict standard that is set for teachers. No matter how many awards they have won, or how many students classify them as cool, both Mr. M and Douglas are expected to live up to a certain quality by their students and even their parents. Even if students laud them for their ability to make sense of real world events, or invite them over for uncomfortable dinners, they can still expect to be held to a higher standard than the President of the United States.