
Helping Others Leading to Despair in the Short Story the Knife by Richard Selzer

The Joy Derived From Helping

Every year, especially around the winter holidays, companies advertise that giving is the greatest gift, and that helping someone and being charitable may make someone feel better about oneself. Because of the complexity of human emotions, giving somebody a gift, or helping him or her, cannot simply make one feel better about himself or herself. In his short story "The Knife" Richard Selzer argues that while helping somebody one becomes increasingly unhappy with oneself. He discusses this through the connection of helping somebody and hurting somebody, and by emphasis the stress that is placed on someone whenever he or she is trying to help.

Selzer states that the connection between helping and hurting causes somebody to become progressively more unhappy in their attempts to help someone. The progression into unhappiness and despair is shown through the emotional structure surrounding the main character in the short story "The Knife." As the surgeon begins the surgery to save the person's life the author uses words such as, "tulip," "slender," "gleaming," and "quietude," which all evoke a feeling of peace and serenity within the reader. This use of imagery helps to explain to the reader that as one begins helping another person, as the surgeon in the story is, they feel a sense of happiness, but quickly the feelings of happiness are blackened with feelings of fear that one is, in fact, hurting the person whom they are trying to help. The emotional connection between helpfulness and hurting helps to emphasize the point that by helping a person one becomes more unhappy because one may believe that they are actually hurting the person they set out to help, which adds stress to a person causing emotional turmoil. This is shown in the short story with Selzer's use of imagery in words like "impaled" and "dangerous." Selzer argues his point further by discussing the stress put on somebody when he or she is trying to help somebody else.

Selzer discusses how people become stressed whenever they try to help somebody else and how this stress relates to becoming unhappy whenever one is trying to be helpful. Selzer uses the surgeon in the story as a metaphor for the stress that people are put under when they try to help somebody. Everybody has problems, Selzer communicates this idea of problems through the patient in the story. The patient had to put his or her fate entirely in the surgeon's hands and that kind of pressure in real life can be incredibly stressful to whoever is controlling someone else's fate. Selzer shows metaphorically the stress that people feel through the

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)

character of the surgeon who, when it is time for business, speaks slowly, quietly, and flatly as if there is no more joy in the world. Even when one successfully helps another person there is a part that can't be completely healed, just like how the surgeon leaves scars on his patients. Selzer believes that the stress of knowing that someone has scarred another person forever only adds to his or her unhappiness.

Selzer's idea that helping leads to unhappiness is accurate because of the stress that one must face however it is an incredibly pessimistic way to look at helping. Just as one is not entirely a help or a hindrance, one may not be entirely happy or unhappy after helping. The bittersweet feeling that people derive from a hard but productive work day is the same feeling that people derive from helping others. They realize that they can never entirely help but to do their best is a reward. Selzer recognizes the unhappiness in helping just as college student recognize the exhaustion after a night of hanging out with friends, it is present and uncomfortable but the unhappiness can only be present if you first feel happiness. If Selzer's argument were entirely true, that helpfulness and charity breed unhappiness, the philanthropists throughout history would never have donated money to charity. Andrew Carnegie would not have given so much to poor communities if he was entirely unhappy doing so. Selzer's argument is true but not entirely as it ignores the pleasure derived from helping and focuses only on unhappiness.

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)