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Cracking the Aura of the Appeal

Sydney Plantz

Both Hannah Gadsby and Craig Thompson demonstrate the common desire for people to feel loved and accepted by their community. For some, admission to a selective society comes effortlessly, but for others, like Gadsby and Thompson, who do not as easily fit in, social belonging is a struggle that is often paired with destitute desire. In their personal stories, *Nanette* and *Blankets*, the authors both share their journeys in finding the true value of their self-worth among a society where they did not fit in. Through the narratives of Gadsby and Thompson, comedy sheds a critical eye on the psychological impact of trying to fit into societal ideals in an attempt to crack the aura of the appeal and promote self-acceptance.

Before dissecting Gadsby and Thompson's individual narratives, it is important to understand the reason people are drawn to community membership in the first place. According to researchers at Stanford University and University of Waterloo, social belonging is one of the deepest rooted human desires, so much so that without it, one can predict early death on the same level as a life of continuous smoking (Walton et al. 513). Social belonging is important to humans because it provides a strong base of purpose and self-worth in their lives. This purpose drives people to live meaningful lives, impacting their length and quality of life. From this, it is clear that people physically cannot live a normal life alone, without acceptance from a social group. While it is clear that certain morals and labels connect individuals in society regularly, like political ideologies, and occupations, these researchers wanted to explore the extent to which social connectedness exists in day to day interactions. The researchers concluded that mere belonging, like sharing a birthday with someone, increased people's levels of motivation. This is initially surprising because sharing a birthday is a very arbitrary thing and does not seem to have any intrinsic significance. However, this finding makes sense because even mere belonging to a group means that someone "shares a common definition of themselves" with others (Lau 220). Because they share a common trait, the positive characteristics of one group member

tend to be applied to all and, in turn, this benefits an individual's sense of self and develops purpose.

While there is a strong value to group membership, it can be argued that acceptance of yourself is more important than acceptance from others; one must be confident in who they are before they can associate themselves with a group. This is because the membership will be based off an incomplete persona. To further illustrate this claim, psychologist Christina Star describes the sense of self as a personal anchor (Star). It is the only thing that grounds someone through internal conflict when others are the waves that push them in all different directions. There can be no safe boat without an anchor; there can be no whole, strong individual without knowing, understanding, and accepting who they are.

In her special, *Nanette*, standup comedian Hannah Gadsby accentuates the emotional struggle involved with living as an outsider in society to stress the importance of social belonging. Gadsby is gay, originally born and raised in Tasmania, where homosexuality was a crime until 1997. While growing up in a society knowing that she had to hide her identity is emotionally damaging, Gadsby jokes that “[she] had to leave as soon as [she] found out [she] was a little bit lesbian” (*Nanette* 00:03:31). More harshly, members that did not fit into Tasmania's social mold were told to “get [themselves] a one-way ticket to the mainland [Australia]” (*Nanette* 00:04:18). Even further, Gadsby continues exemplifying her trauma by joking that she should, “pack [her] AIDS up into a suitcase there and fuck off to Mardi Gras” (*Nanette* 00:04:10). The psychological impact of these statements is overlooked because Gadsby initially presents an impenetrable comedic front as her coping mechanism. Being told to leave and never come back because she would never have been accepted as a value to her community because of her natural-born characteristics is no meager joke. Additionally, by severely stigmatizing homosexual people as a population of diseased individuals instills both false beliefs and fears about gay people. This only further alienates the already disgraced group in Tasmanian society. These statements were made by people that should have loved Gadsby unconditionally, people like family, neighbors, and peers. Gadsby learned to replicate and internalize this same hate, becoming homophobic herself, and she reflects that she soaked herself in shame and hid in the closet for ten years.

Gadsby emphasizes even further struggle after exposing herself as a member of the gay community to convey to her audience her magnitude of isolation. Even after accepting being labeled as gay, Gadsby still did not feel fully confident in her “community”. As a quiet person, Gadsby felt she could not match the persona she thought she was supposed to have. Gadsby inquires, “Where are the quiet gays supposed to go?” (*Nanette* 00:06:26). Gadsby's question is significant because even when she found a group with an encompassing characteristic, she still felt she still did not belong. However,

it was not the other LGBTQ+ people around her refraining from including her, Gadsby had not yet fully accepted herself. In order to cope with her feelings, Gadsby adopted self-deprecating humor as her defense mechanism. She constantly made fun of her own homosexuality and social interactions, leaving out the impact of her lasting trauma and replacing it with punchlines. By forming a career out of shaming herself, Gadsby was only adding fuel to the isolation that she experienced, indicating to her audiences that it was okay to laugh at others' expense.

After building up the depth of her isolation, Gadsby embodies her newfound mental strength to show her audience the importance of accepting themselves and others. Gadsby had started by sharing a joke about hitting on one man's girlfriend. The man stopped himself from throwing a punch because he realized Gadsby was a woman, and he says he would not hit a lady. The audience laughed at the punchline, and Gadsby moved on to the next joke. However, later on, Gadsby revealed that the same man had come back and beat her up because he eventually realized her sexuality. She was badly injured but did not seek medical attention because she was ashamed of herself. Finally completing her full story and sharing her abuse with the audience is representative of Gadsby's long overdue acceptance of herself. She now understands she is worthy of medical treatment and a value to society. Further, Gadsby now shares her whole truth in a packed Sydney Opera House with pride. She no longer feels alone and is able to develop her career and focus on making an impact on society, rather than changing or suppressing herself to conform to societal standards. Therefore, Gadsby's journey provides support for the argument that acceptance of oneself is more important than other people's collective opinion. Though Gadsby can still be considered an outsider in society, she is content with who she is. From experiencing both the highs and lows of Gadsby's journey from her point of view, the audience can begin to understand the importance of accepting others regardless of their identifying labels and to appreciate the value of individuality over group membership.

Similar to Gadsby, Craig Thompson developed his narrative about his own struggles with belonging to stress to his audience the importance of personal acceptance. Growing up in a lower-middle-class family, Craig felt isolated because he had fewer luxuries than most of his fellow classmates. As an example, Craig was never able to go skiing at his annual church camp because the pass cost more than the Thompsons could afford to spend. The other students all laughed and pointed at Craig alone on the bus on the way to the camp, and one kid even held a sign up to him labeled POOR (Blankets 78). The irony in this matter is that supposedly secular students were sporting only name brand clothes and bullying on the basis of wealth. While their religion emphasizes treating thy neighbor as thyself and charity to the less fortunate, the children emphasized the ingroups and outgroups of their

society. In reflection of his experience, Craig comments, “Something about being rejected at CHURCH CAMP felt so much more awful than being rejected at school” (Blankets 78). While with a group that was supposed to have the same deeply rooted values of faith, Craig was still all on his own. From the quote, it is clear that Craig had a more difficult time accepting the ostracization from those who were supposed to make him feel connected to God than from the school bullies who were known to be mean. Therefore, not only was Craig isolated at school, the loneliness extended to a place where all students should have come together on their foundational religion. By definition, Craig should have felt accepted by others of the same faith, but that is far from true.

Thompson illustrates the void created in his life by his lack of social belonging to address the psychological impact of isolation to his audience. Craig became depressed after years of emotional and physical trauma in his life. As a child, Craig used dreams of race car driving and floating among the clouds to escape his reality (Blankets 40-42). As he grew older, his thoughts became more severe, and Craig began to think of life as only a passing means to heaven. He longed for “an eternal world that would wash away [his] temporary misery” (Blankets 52). This is a powerful statement because it means that Craig did not want to live life on Earth, a sign of his overarching mental illness. Without a sense of purpose, Craig had no sense of self, and without a sense of self, there was no way Craig could have been accepted into any of the social groups he strived to be a member of.

Thompson revealed his sheer obsession over his pen pal and short-term girlfriend, Raina, to highlight pivotal moments in his journey to self-acceptance. When Craig found Raina, he finally saw a sense of purpose in his life. He relied on her as the sole source of all of his happiness and viewed her as his personal angel. After meeting a single time at church camp, Craig and Raina became pen pals. He was so obsessed with the flirtatious letters that “a momentary lapse in [his] and Raina’s correspondence only intensified [his] illness” (Blankets 154). In context, Craig is relating to a cold that he was fighting, but this can be applied to Craig’s mental illness as well. He was so reliant on Raina’s letters to occupy his thoughts and help him block out his aforementioned misery. When the letters stopped coming, his physical and mental condition worsened. The average individual would not become reliant on letters from a new friend as their sole source of joy.

Later on in the story, the two ended up spending a couple of weeks together during their winter break, and after only a few days, Craig portrayed Raina as a superhuman godsend. He painted her as an angel with cascading wings and a shining halo, floating above others that worshiped her. He, too, worshipped her (Blankets 306). Craig had been alone for so long that when he finally found someone who accepted him, he was addicted to her affection. He barely even knew her, but his life basically depended on her acceptance of

him. It was unhealthy. In the end, Raina too rejected him because she could not live up to his idealized expectations.

With Raina no longer in his life, Thompson finally began to accept himself as who he really was, and he flourished, further exemplifying the importance of self-acceptance amidst social isolation. Craig no longer relied on either religion or Raina to fill the void in his life, so he was able to focus on improving his self-image and moved out of his parents' house, into the city. Craig was able to light aflame all of his ties to his relationship, except the quilt she made for him, without combusting himself because he was now defined by more than the subject of Raina's affection. He later denounced his faith to Christianity because "it denies the beauty of being human, and it ignores all these gaps that need to be filled in by the individual" (Blankets 533). Craig's statement is not only applicable to his beliefs on religion, but it solidifies the depth of his own personal journey. Craig no longer sees life as temporary and unimportant, but he sees individuality as beautiful. His social isolation does not impact his capability to be happy anymore because he now has a strong sense of self. Craig's journey shows the audience that it is okay to not fit into any one social group. He formed his own social space from the lessons that he learned from both his religion and his relationships, exemplifying the claim that anybody can find happiness, so long as they accept themselves.

In their desperate attempts to fit into pre-existing societal groups, both Gadsby and Thompson suppressed their true identities and found themselves buried in psychological distress. They finally found true happiness when they learned to accept themselves, regardless of society's unchanged opinions. Therefore, these comedies urge their audiences to disregard the lure of membership to one specific community for them to be able to truly view themselves as valued individuals.

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