REFLECTING ON

“THE PYRRHIC VICTORY”

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# Abstract

 One of the most difficult and challenging things that a person has to do in life is often to simply look back and reflect on the past. We often look at life as a mission, that we have to reach a certain destination or achieve a milestone and then, we make it the sole purpose of our existence.

In reality, life is a journey with many unexpected turns and just when you think that you’ve learned the map and can already predict when the next turn will come, life surprises you again. “The Pyrrhic Victory” is an autobiographical, coming of age story that describes my journey to self-realization and discovering my own truths. It’s about dreams and disappointments, hope and heartbreak, love and hate, happiness and emptiness, but in the end, it’s about learning to let go, learning to go with the flow and most importantly appreciating what you have. The writing process was enlightening and full of new discoveries, sometimes even surprising, just like the plot itself, as each outcome was totally different from the intended one. The central aim of the story is to portray and share the experiences that have shaped me to become who I am today and that many readers may find common traces and familiar patters which will connect them with this story.

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# Introduction

I’ve come to the realization that autobiographical pieces aren’t easy to write. At first it seems that you just have to tell about yourself and what can be easier than that? When in reality the whole process makes you look at yourself from a retrospective angle and face many truths that you didn’t want to acknowledge. It forces you to leave your essence and look at everything from the outer perspective.

Self-reflection is necessary to achieve self-realization. Only by analyzing the past, the patters and behaviors that we used to engage in, will we be able to grow and find the truth. Our values, perceptions, goals and beliefs are always subject to change if we are on the path to self-realization and enlightenment. Only by going trough different obstacles and facing challenges are we able to grow and reevaluate certain aspects in our lives. Sometimes, when we are in a certain situation, we don’t always recognize that it’s a life lesson that we need to comprehend and that in my opinion, everything, always, happens for a reason. Those situations or life lessons, as we may call it, often feel like a punishment and bring many hardships into our lives, but at the end they take us to where we are meant to be.

I decided to call this piece “The Pyrrhic Victory”’ for a reason, as I achieved my dreams and it was supposed to feel like the greatest victory, but it came with too big of a cost: my happiness, and in result, my disappointments became my defeats. This story takes you to a journey that at first seems to be about dreams and aspirations but in reality, they come at a big cost. Sometimes what we want is not what we need, and this realization isn’t easy to grasp. We desperately want to hold onto the things that we love, not realizing that they’re only holding us back from being fulfilled.

# Methodology

As it’s an autobiographical piece it’s not easy to identify a specific method or a strategy for writing. While doing research and literature review, I had to concentrate on notions such as “The American Dream”, “Stardom” and the feeling of “Armenianness”. It was a creative writing process and I put an emphasize on projecting my ideas in a friendly, casual and relatable manner and tone. It was important to me to make it easy and enjoyable to read as I didn’t want to burden the reader with too many specific and unnecessary details.

 While examining different types and styles of writing, I realized that “breaking the fourth wall” will be an ideal stylistic choice in this type of writing. I wanted the reader to follow me through my journey and to engage them in a “dialogue”. The use of metaphorical questions was a very helpful and an effective choice regarding that manner. The notion of “breaking the fourth wall” has always been fascinating for me whether it’s used in theatre, filmmaking or writing. There’s something very appealing and attention grabbing when that invisible barrier between the author/character and the audience is broken. In that way the audience and the reader get to become a part of the story and have their “input” in it. Being able to connect with your audience and make them believe and live through the experience that you’re sharing is the ultimate goal for any creative project. Besides grabbing the attention of your audience it’s not less important (if not more) to keep the attention of your audience and not lose their interest, because once it becomes boring or uninteresting to them, it will be very hard to regain their attention and interest. It’s important that the reader believes what he’s being told. I would like to engage the reader not only by making my story interesting and exciting to follow but also, I will try to make them feel like the story is about themselves and make sure that they find a personal connection to it one way or another.

My most powerful tool regarding my methodology was my ability to reconnect to my memories. I had to achieve a certain mental state in order to accurately express the emotional and mental aspects connected to my story. I would like to say that my most powerful strategy was to learn to let go of “academic” and “mechanical” style of thinking and finding ways to be more creative and exercise my creative freedom in a correct manner. I learned that in this type of writing, not everything has to be 100% accurate as something might make sense in real life but in writing it might seem abstract, so in this case, abstract writing was more logical and ironically appropriate in order to correctly represent the events that took place.

 The stylistic and linguistic choices differ depending on the specific “phase”. When writing with the voice of the teenage version of myself, I used a more casual tone and teenage slang, whereas in the sections when I reflect on my teenage experiences, I took a more mature and even a philosophical stance.

# Main Plot

The central and core concepts of my paper are revolving around the notions of the American Dream, Stardom, “Armenianness” and self-growth. The narrative of the story is very subjective and personal, yet every person may find objective and common truths hidden behind the words. The reader will have the opportunity to follow me throughout my journey and to “grow up” with me.

At first glance, my story seems to be very personal and subjective, but the larger story is about something that each of us has experienced or gone through: going from having high and idealistic aspirations to huge disappointments, going from having a vision to feeling utterly confused and disoriented and vice versa, going from being a teenager with big dreams to becoming a young adult who’s forgotten what it means to dream and to believe in miracles.

The story starts off with a general remark addressed to the reader before it proceeds to become a personal “diary”. It starts with me describing my aspirations to become a famous Hollywood actress with the child-like naivety that I had at that time along with descriptions of my personal perceptions connected to notions such as “Greatness”, “Mediocrity” and the “Inner Child”, where I describe what those ideas mean to me and how they’re correlated to the main story. It starts with a young girl who’s full of dreams and hopes and proceeds to portray a teenage girl who has already achieved those dreams but doesn’t feel happy or content with that realization.

Most importantly there is the contrast between the expectations and the reality: the expectations of me living in my dream city and the reality of that city turning out to feel like a dull and an empty place, and the expectations of the overwhelming emotions that I was supposed to feel when I finally achieved my dreams and the reality of feeling dull and empty inside.

# Literature Review

The concept of the American Dream has shaped the worldview and the mindsets of millions of people and it was the single most important aspect that made me fall in love with the thought of going to the US. It became a prayer for people all around the world who believe in equality, justice, social and economic freedom. The US has always been a country of opportunities, no matter if you’re Black, White or Asian, no matter if you have a low or average income, you can succeed there because it’s a country of freedom, opportunity and dreams. There’s actually more to the concept of the American Dream that meets the eye. Research suggests that this concept is not only connected to intrinsic and extrinsic goals but that it’s also connected to the well-being of an individual. Ryan and Kasser (1993) suggest that lower well-being is associated with having *extrinsic motivation*; when people constantly have the need to feel rewarded, while *intrinsic motivation* is congruent with inherent growth tendencies. Thus, we can say that the concept of the American Dream has two sides to it; assuming that happiness can be achieved through striving to become wealthy, famous and attractive, when in reality, well-being is connected to the intrinsic values that come along with it; personal growth, self- realization and actualization.

 For me personally, the American Dream wasn’t about having a high paying job, a two-story house and a model family, for me it was about making it in the country of opportunities, making it in Hollywood, where anyone can become anything no matter where they come from.

 To conclude, we can say that maybe people who are so fascinated by the concept of the American Dream aren’t looking for materialistic satisfaction or fame overall, but deep down they’re craving the feeling of being recognized for who they are and feeling appreciated for what they've come to as a member of society, as a professional of a field and simply as a person.

The American Dream is entrenched in American popular culture (Winn, 2007). In the American society it’s all about opportunity, freedom and equality, so when it comes to social status it’s not determined by your race, income or economic status. In the country of opportunities your social status is defined by your choice: it’s based on *your lifestyle choices, cultural tastes and social affiliations.* It’s basically about how you *portray yoursel*f and who you choose to be. The privilege of identifying yourself as a part of the high-class community is not limited by social or economic limitations. How you dress, how you communicate, how and when you spend your time after work, how you entertain yourself are the factors that determine your social class. Your educational level and cultural background are the major influences of your status.

Celebrities and pop culture have never been more influential as they are now and they have affected me tremendously, as I used to dress up in gowns and imagine myself winning the Oscar. According to Steinheimer, celebrities and their social/economic status heighten our perception of *American social mobility* and the image of fame and wealth creates the *illusion* of materialistic success being possible for anyone. We see Celebrity magazines creating images of celebrities gaining overnight success and rather than focusing on the personality or the behavior of the celebrities that have an influence on teenagers and young followers, we look at celebrity success stories as a prevailing notion of success. Celebrities seem to provide proof that the American Dream of going from rags to riches is real and attainable (Steinheimer, 2011). The idea of becoming a celebrity has never been more realistic or achievable as it has been nowadays, when there are platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram etc. It has come to the point where celebrities aren’t just people who have great talent or unique personalities, but rather anyone who has a wide range of audience, has many followers on *social media* becomes automatically a celebrity. It has practically come to the point that you can achieve the American Dream via social media, you can just do something without even going out and enjoying the comfort of your own home and in the process gaining millions of followers and becoming an influencer, thereby becoming a wealthy and a successful person. On one hand, this easy kind of access to “celeb-life” only accentuates the concept of the American Dream, when literally anyone who has access to internet can become a celebrity overnight, but on the other hand, for me personally, this kind of “access” only undermines the original concept of the American Dream, which is not only about opportunity but it’s also about hard work, determination and skill.

 The concept of the American Dream is also connected to immigration and thereby assimilation. There are nationalities, mostly European or Scandinavian, whose cultural identities are much closer to the American one, compared to Caucasian or Asian nationalities which have a “harder” time assimilating. Assimilation and acculturation is something that comes with painful realizations and consequences for the Armenian-Americans.

 Gorgorian accurately mentions the psychological hardships that come with acculturative stress, which refers to the psychological or physical strains that individuals experience due to the acculturative process (Gil, Vega, & Dimas, 1994). The acculturative process may not only lead to individual mental and psychological issues, but it may also turn to a family issue, which is known as an *acculturation gap,* which occurs between different members of the family who assimilate and acculturate at different rates, which results in cultural differences and perceptions.Such stress may include language problems, perceived discrimination, perceived cultural incompatibilities, and commitment or lack of commitment to culturally prescribed protective values or behaviors such as familialism and cultural pride (Vega et al., 1993).

For Armenian-Americans the notion of protecting values and keeping cultural pride is more relevant than for any other ethnicity group. Considering that the Armenian nation has survived a Genocide it can be assumed that for Armenian-Americans the need for protectiveness and preserving is something that has become a part of the Armenian DNA and has implemented itself so strongly that the pain of having to live through that inhumane experience has become something that’s being passed from generation to generation.

 For Armenian-American’s assimilation and identity are not only about being a part of an ethnic group but more about *feeling* of belonging to that group. Bakalian (1993), being a third generation Armenian-American knew very little about the Armenian identity and the identity of her Armenian grandparents. Bakalian explores not only the individual, but also the collective Armenian American identity. She evidently explains how Armenian-Americans see themselves as an ancient nation and how assimilation serves as a threat to that nation and its cultural heritage, although most Armenian-Americans have tried to keep their backgrounds and recreate new communities.

Once again connecting to the concept of the American Dream, the concepts of wealth, materialistic success, power and social status are the factors that seduce and lure in immigrants from different ethnic backgrounds, where some of those groups assimilate and embrace the new culture easily and with open arms, while others find it very hard to preserve their cultural identities and national heritage and rather than seeing a fresh start they see a threat to their national identity. Assimilation has also been called a “white massacre”, a poignant analogy to people who have suffered numerous massacres and a genocide (Bakalian, 1993).

 The cultural identity struggle is an issue that doesn’t go by Armenian-Americans. Michael J. Arlen’s “Passage To Ararat” is about his own journey of discovering his Armenian identity which he was “deprived of’. Arlen shares his “fascination” and mysterious interest of Armenian identity as his father, being Armenian, never seemed to be keen on talking about “Armenianness” or anything Armenian. As mentioned before, most Armenians have the urge to protect and preserve their identities and Arlen’s father had the same exact urge to protect and preserve but ironically, it was from anything Armenian or connected to Armenian identity.

 The concept of the American Dream and my perception of it was mostly influenced by the mainstream ideologies that were described in the works mentioned above. I also was “deceived” by that illusion and was fascinated by the mere idea of it, let alone the possibility of achieving it. That kind of extreme fascination and admiration only led to a new discovery and to the realization of what’s actually important. It led me to redefining my own national, cultural and personal identity which changed my whole perspective on life. The superficial fascination with stardom, fame, wealth, materialistic and social success got replaced by the raw admiration of my true identity.

When it comes to stylistic choices, the use of vignettes in “The House on Mango Street” by Sandra Cisneros is fascinating. Cisneros is sharing “series of forty-four vignettes--some as short as a few paragraphs, others as long as four or five pages--written in a language that is easily accessible and in a style that is sophisticated in its presentation of voice and theme.” (Sanchez, 1995). As the event’s that take place in my narrative are during the times of me transitioning from a child to an adolescent and an adult, they are similar to Cisneros’s approach as her vignettes are *concerned with the confusion involved in the transition from childhood to adolescence.* I believe that this will help me to reflect on my journey, connect to my current identity and just serve as a helpful guide to understand my own feelings and reflect on my choices which will eventually become my narrative.

# Writing Process

The writing process was completely “free” and unstructured. I didn’t have a strict strategy or a timeline of the events that I had to write in that specific chronological order. My writing process was deeply connected to my inner state and emotional well-being. Some days when I had to face small disappointments or regular everyday challenges, I felt more inspired and inclined to write about the times when I had to face the first and the biggest disappointment in my life. Some other days when I felt especially at ease in my current state and position, I felt inspired to write about the realizations that I came across at the end of the story: when I realized that my hometown was the place where I’m most happy and that my current lifestyle is more than fulfilling for me. The writing process was also ironically connected to one of the key concepts in my story, the realization that one has to go with the flow and can’t control everything. So, I just let go and let the ideas come to me.

 The positive aspect of this free creative writing style was that it allowed me to reflect upon my past and discover new truths and come across new realizations along the way. I constantly had to be in the state of “nostalgy” and reminisce about the times when I was a kid whose heart was full of love for life and soul was full of hopes and dreams. When I mentally had to transfer back to those days, it helped me to portray the events of that time much more accurately and realistically as I would also indulge in that mental state and feel as if it was happening to me all over again. That sense of “reality” that came to me every time that I had to remember a certain event has helped me to write in a more influential and captivating manner, as it made me more connected and intertwined in the story.

I had to pay attention to the aspect of time during my writing process, as I had to write both about the events that took place many years ago, as well as my retrospective views upon them and the conclusions that I came to. Besides, describing past and present events, more importantly I had to correctly project my emotional and mental state during the times when I was a teenager and the “grown” state of mind that I achieved after going through those events.

I also had to decide what “chapters” of my life to include within this story that would connect to the central idea of my paper. I found ways to connect different events to each other within the paradigm of “what’s meant to be will be and everything happens for a reason”. I decided to present a two-dimensional story: one from the eyes of a teenage girl who used to see the world through rose colored glasses, and the other from the eyes of a young girl who learned to see everything as it is, without floating in the clouds of imaginary illusions.

There were times when I had to be more precise and accurate as to depict all of the little but necessary details which would help to make sense of larger themes and connect otherwise disconnected notions to each other. Other times I had to generalize some minor incidents and connect them to much bigger themes in order to make them connect to the central idea of my story.

The combination of these two elements is the fundament that has made this story come to a full circle. This whole writing experience was like putting together a mosaic, where in order to create a clear, yet a colorful work of art, not only does one have to connect the big pieces together but also find the correct and “fitting” particles that would complete the whole thing. Also, if we compare the voice of the author to the colors of the glass of the mosaic, it will most accurately reflect the message that the author wanted to deliver to the reader through words, just like an artist highlights the true essence of the work by choosing the correct color of the mosaic.

# Challenges

Some of the challenges that I had to face while writing this paper were mainly concerning the content of the story. It’s really hard to distinguish your voice as an author and as the main character of the story because as an author you have to be more objective and “impartial” and have the ability to filter unnecessary information. Meanwhile, when you’re also the central character of the story, everything feels personal and important, every little detail seems to be a piece of a puzzle. The ideal solution is to find the golden middle and learn to distinguish between the information that would be interesting to the reader while also capturing all the little details that would help to complete the story.

 Sometimes it seems that the chain of logical reasoning is obvious but in the creative writing process some things may not connect to each other even if in real life they happened in chronological order, so I, as an author had to exercise my ability to look at the story from a third perspective in order to understand if the events that take place in my story are relevant to the main plot.

 The last challenge that I had to face was to choose an appropriate title for this type of autobiographical writing. I wanted it to be intriguing and eye-catching, while also giving a hint as to what the paper is about without it being too straightforward. At first, I came up with the title ‘The Cost of “Happiness’ which seemed very appropriate considering the main moral of my story but then I came across the notion of “Pyrrhic Victory” which is a victory that inflicts such a devastating toll on the victor that it is tantamount to defeat, as it takes a heavy toll that negates any true sense of achievement. So, with the last click of my imaginary “light bulb”, I decided to go with the second title.

# Conclusion

To sum up, I would say that besides being a creative process, this was also a learning experience. This whole working process has taught me to be more considerate, pay more attention to details, and most importantly how to look at things from a “birds eye view”. I had to explore three different perspectives: as the author, as the central character and most importantly as the reader. Besides looking at my teenage years from a retrospective point, I also wanted to observe myself as the author of this story and analyze it through the eyes of the reader, which would eventually help me find the perfect solution which would make it an interesting read. In this specific type of writing, I had to strictly distinguish two voices within myself, I had to explore myself as the author, and make choices while remaining impartial and objective, while also maintaining my voice as the main character of the story, who has to be completely integrated in it. I had to be passionate, yet objective, demanding, yet “free”, but most importantly I had to be me ☺

 This experience has made me grow not only as a writer, but as a person. I got the opportunity to explore different sides of myself and discover new truths about myself. Only during the creative writing process did I realize how far I have come in the emotional and mental sense and how all of these experiences have shaped my worldview and perceptions. I feel eternally grateful for the lessons that I’ve learnt not only due to the experiences that I had to go through in my story but mostly due to the opportunity to look at the whole thing from the outside. I still have a long way to go to become a writer, yet a good one, but I got a sense of what it feels like to create something and how rewarding of an experience that might be. I got a hint of my own style of writing and realized the stylistic path that I would like to follow as a writer. I found a piece of myself, that I thought I have lost, in the search of the answers.

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