

2024 Elie Wiesel Competition

3rd Place Senior Essay

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Identity and Individuality

Retaining your identity is an essential part of life that creates a diverse and balanced society. However, there are so many challenges we face daily that threaten to undermine our sense of self. Overcoming that adversity defines the strength of our identities. Throughout history, these challenges change shape, ranging from social pressure, which threatens our sense of self, to situations that necessitate official identity to be surrendered, such as Kitty Saks' story of sacrificing her identity in the Holocaust to survive. Today, we are not forced to give up our identities to survive, yet there are still pressures to change our identities in order to fit in and please others. These pressures force people into believing that there is only one correct way to act and look, and they create unrealistic expectations for society. These pressures come in many forms, including beauty standards and peer pressure, two adversities that threaten people's sense of self. While peer pressure makes people change how they act to appease others, beauty standards cause people to change their views of themselves, not just their outward appearance. Both of these destructive pressures force people to hide or change their identities, making them lose their individuality.

Social norms, such as beauty standards, set unrealistic expectations for people, especially women, making them base their worth on appearances. This idea dates back centuries, with men placing women's values on their looks and depicting them to be worthless if they cannot reach those standards or age past them. Mary Wollstonecraft addresses these sentiments in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, stating, "Women are, in fact, so much degraded by mistaken notions of female excellence, that I do not mean to add a paradox when I assert that this artificial weakness produces a propensity to tyrannise" (Wollstonecraft 80). This notion, created by men, acts on the insecurities of women by leading them to believe that they have no worth unless they fit into the stereotypical definition of beauty. This beauty standard not only lowers women's worth in men's regards, but it also takes away from their own sense of self as they question their value if they don't match these preconceived notions. These standards cause people to lose their identities as they strive to become someone whom they are not.

Peer pressure, another harmful social construct that eats away at people's identities, is a common challenge people face today. While this pressure is sometimes direct, causing people to perform actions they believe to be wrong or being put in situations in which they feel uncomfortable, there are also pressures to change yourself to fit in with others. This pressure is one I face everyday, whether I am talking to peers or choosing an outfit in the mornings. I always find myself wondering what other people think of me or how I will be perceived. Because of this anxiety of being judged, I constantly am trying to change myself to become what other people want to see, a habit that shatters my own identity as I shift into a version of myself that isn't truly who I am. In Taylor Swift's, "mirrorball," she explains this feeling, singing, "I'm a mirrorball / I can change everything about me to fit in" (Swift 1:27). She beautifully explains the feeling of peer pressure, depicting herself as a mirrorball that reflects a different version of herself to each person, specifically tailored to fit each person's expectations of her. Like Swift, I feel an

overwhelming pressure to be liked and to shy away from judgment, so I morph into different versions of myself, hoping to please everyone around me. Peer pressure is the perfect example of people's losing their sense of self because of social pressures.

Although these social pressures seem to eat away at my identity, I have found a way to conquer the challenges thrown at me. By surrounding myself with people who make me feel comfortable to be myself, I don't feel the overwhelming pressure to become someone I am not to please them. Without the weight of constantly changing myself, I can find my own identity, something that is so important today when everyone is trying to change themselves to fit into unrealistic boundaries that consume their identities. Unlike the countless people in the Holocaust who have had to sacrifice their identities to survive, we are given a chance to be proud of who we are and celebrate our sense of self and individuality. The only reason social pressures have such a strong effect today is because we give them power. By ignoring the pressures to fit in and please other people, we take away the power of social pressures and can retain our identities and individuality.

Works Cited

Swift, Taylor. "mirrorball." folklore, Republic Records, 2020.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. J. Johnson, 1792.