

Lee is in the trap: a close reading of "prep"



Prep, written by Curtis Sittenfeld in 2005, was a New York Times bestseller. This narrative gives a glimpse of the prestigious boarding school experiences of a poor girl named Lee Fiora who comes from Indiana. The author directly reveals struggles involving social classes and race relations at the end of the novel by arranging an interview between Lee and New York Times reporter Angela Varizi. The resulting article suggests that differences created by social class disparities make Lee become an outsider on the campus. After all, Lee says that she feels she is left out by the wealthier classmates. It is indeed possible that Lee gives out her negative ideas about Ault, her school, for revenge. However, Lee's preparations before the interview and her reactions to the consequences show that she unconsciously gives a negative picture of Ault.

Lee intends to say something positive to benefit Ault. She prepares standard answers to the questions Varizi may ask: " I'd developed two standard answers to this question, which I varied depending upon my audience" (357). Both answers to the question " Why did you go Ault?" are not Lee's real thoughts about Ault and both answers are white lies. Lee initially answers that she went to Ault because she saw Ault's catalog on TV shows and in Seventeen magazine, and is attracted to the glamorous campus. Then she says that students at Ault have various resources and that students and teachers have closer connections due to the small class settings. Those answers that Lee originally prepares are impeccable. When Varizi tries to seduce Lee into telling the truth at the beginning, Lee is still defending Ault's benefits. Varizi asks, " I' m wondering if you think the faculty shows favoritism toward wealthy students. ' No, not really" (359). Lee says that

there is a young teacher who is friendly with the “bank boy” in her grade, but Lee carefully defends Ault by explaining the situation that the teacher has a closer relationship with the “bank boys” not because they are rich, but because the teacher coached them in the soccer team. Lee intends to set up a positive image of Ault in the aspects of social class, but Lee does not realize that saying “bank boy” can be quoted by Varizi as a selling point of her article. Lee unconsciously designates the “bank boy,” thus revealing the extent of class tension on the campus. Once Lee finds out that Angela Varizi is going to put “bank boy” in the article, Lee stares at her: “Please don’t” (360). She begs Varizi not to include such words since she knows that harsh consequences can result from her unconscious mistakes.

When we go through Lee’s four-year life, we can clearly discern Lee’s personality at Ault. She is quiet and she hardly talks in class. She is neither outstanding in academics nor in sports. She does not want to get attention from others; even when she is in a bad condition, she still wants to hide her emotions. Lee wants to be a transparent and invisible person at Ault because she is so anxious about her appearance, social class, and wealth. Lee in fact panics about the consequences of self-revelation: “My heart hammered, and my fingers were trembling” (369). With this kind of personality, how can she intend to give a negative image of Ault? She surely knows that if she says anything explosive about Ault, the bad consequences will bring her to the center of focus. So, the only reason that Lee tells the truth is that she is seduced by Varizi, who uses a self-disclosures story to evoke Lee’s empathy. Lee trusts Varizi and tells Varizi her secrets. So, from Lee’s perspective, Varizi is not an interviewer, but a listener. However, the situation is

completely different for Varizi. She is a professional journalist, and she is skilled at arousing people's enthusiasm. To get useful and genuine reports is her job. Lee has been trying to avoid being the center of the topic for four years, so it is not reasonable for her to intentionally put herself into the heart of the storm: "The person I was as of this moment, the person the article made me, was the precise opposite of the person I had, for the last four years, tried to be. It was the worst mistake I could have made" (370). Lee is annoyed by Varizi's betrayal and regrets what she said about Ault: "Why on earth had I told Varizi my secrets, what good had I imagined would come from it? This was how it always was with me — I wasn't able to tell that something was happening (that I was, for Angie's benefit, digging my own grave)" (370). She shows her irritation towards Varizi by calling her when the article gets published.

Looking at Lee's preparation before the interview, we can see that her attitude is towards Ault is not hostile. After all, she prepares standard answers beforehand. Lee has panicked reactions when her schoolmates criticize her, and we can detect her tough situation when she stays in the dorm all day long when the article comes out. We can tell that she is abashed and embarrassed by the article. She does not expect things like this to happen. Therefore, she does not intend to depreciate Ault.