

Are Men Necessary? By Maureen Dowd

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Subject

Book Review: Are Men Necessary? By Maureen Dowd

Many books on the market discuss the differing nature of the sexes. Conventional wisdom indicates that a man asked how to get someplace that he will give directions laced with compass points, tenths of miles, and street names. The same conventional wisdom indicates that a woman, asked for the same information, will give directions that contain landmarks, usually followed by the warning that “if you see [fill in the blank] then you’ve gone too far.”

I chose Dowd’s book due to her approach to this age-old issue. She discusses this dichotomy using sharp wit, which seemed appealing. Her work leaves many readers laughing at her observations, many of which were broad enough to be perceived as parodies. Her humor, however, has an edge to it. This paper will examine Dowd’s use of humor in the text and how that humor retains the reader’s interest in what she has written.

The Nature of Humor

Something is humorous if it is perceived as being funny. Something is ‘funny’ if it is found to be amusing, something that might make the average person laugh. Humor is often used to bring an intended audience together. Maureen Dowd brings her readers together by allowing them to share in the absurdity of what she has written. When she writes about powerful women "los[ing] altitude at Oxygen" and getting "evicted from Barbie's dream house" (104) she brings with these criticisms with easily understood images with the power to make the reader smile.

Togetherness?

Dowd questions the Cinderella complex seemingly shared by men and women. If women seemingly wish to be rescued, Dowd points out, then men wish to rescue them. She observes this phenomenon through the context of movies; she observes that men tend to rescue women in subservient roles, particularly those with whom they cannot communicate: the Mexican maid in

Spanglish, the Dutch maid in Girl with the Pearl Earring, and the Portuguese maid in Love Actually.

The reader laughs at this observation, then stops to think. What point has Dowd just made, the reader might wonder. What more might she have to say? By keeping the reader amused, Dowd disarms them in the manner of a good standup comic, rolling on to another joke before the reader realizes that he or she has been offended or before the reader can identify the serious point that she is making.

But if humor draws people together, are they really being drawn together by this text? Dowd also seems to seek to divide by her words. While apparently critical of the “alpha mom” married to an “alpha man” with “alpha children” that she drives around in an “alpha SUV,” she is less kind in her criticism of men. Men, apparently, occupy a kind of limbo in which the feminist movement has not occurred. They are still attracted to, and take advantage of, women’s vulnerability.

And yet Dowd is not entirely kind to women, either. She questions whether women have regressed from the power play of the Sexual Revolution to the power-through-sex from the “big busts of the Plastic Revolution” (10). If women are regressing, she seems to say, writing something that can produce laughter will just seem like humor to those that don’t want to see, while perhaps egging on those women who recognize themselves in these painful, laughable anecdotes into some form of action.

Is there a Solution?

If a solution exists to Dowd’s concerns, it seems that she is not eager to produce it. It seems enough for her to keep her readers reading through short, aggressive anecdotes. She seems to revel in the skewed world that exists between the sexes; the reader is left with Maureen Dowd wearing a wry smile while a man squirms uncomfortably during a conversation of which he has limited understanding. This tendency becomes readily apparent in her anecdote about the “male-dominated preserves of the FBI and the CIA” (86). Rather than explain the differences that exist in the reasoning

processes of men and women, Dowd mockingly says that men will fail to work together, “clawing each other’s eyes out--no matter what color alert we’re wearing this fall” (86). She has the opportunity to discuss a real issue; however, she settles for arguing semantic stereotypes.

Dowd apparently laughs at the feeling of "pride" that she experiences over the way that "women have taken control of the two preeminent male preserves of America--politics and sports--and ruined them" (76). They are no longer exclusive areas of male excellence, Dowd explains; rather, they have been “Oprah-ized,” touched by the alpha woman, and men must become more feminized in order to succeed. The tables of power are turning and yet Dowd is unclear on whether she feels that this change is a positive one. Better then just to laugh at it, rather than explain why this feminization is, in her eyes, a negative form of ruination.

With her example, Dowd might be laughing and the reader might be laughing, but that laughter comes with the recognition of a situation that has no viable conclusion. Dowd’s laughter has a tinge of mockery with which the reader may or may not identify it based upon his or her gender.

Conclusion

As stated earlier, something is humorous if it is funny or amusing. However, amusement is sometimes facetious, lacking purpose. Regardless of the statements that Dowd makes throughout, that lack of purpose is what the reader is left with. For all of her willingness to point out the division between the sexes, Dowd makes no effort to suggest a way to heal the rift. This lack of effort renders all of her intelligent and humorous - albeit pointed - observations virtually useless.