

Shattered Glass

Student's Name

Institution

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Shattered Glass is a 2003 film about one of the most notorious scandals in modern journalism that occurred in 1998. It depicts an extremely quick rise and awful downfall of a young, talented journalist Stephen Glass who has illustrated a vivid example of the notion of the non-journalist. *Shattered Glass* is based on the real-life events described in details in the article of the same title by Buzz Bissinger.

The phrase *Shattered Glass* has, in my opinion, several possible explanations. First of all, it is a felicitous metaphor that gives a precise opinion of the journalist's life that has been shattered after revealing all his frauds. Glass could no longer work in his beloved field of journalism. No editor would hire him after the scandal unraveled. Moreover, other spheres of his life have been severely damaged as well. At that time, he attended Law School. After graduation, he could not find any job as he was mistrusted on the basis of his former mistakes. He was denied a right to pass the bar exam and practice law. Fed up with constant prejudices that interfered with his career in the law sphere, Stephen Glass hired a lawyer to "file a brief with the California Supreme Court, arguing that his client has the good moral character to be admitted to the California bar" (Nocera, 2011). Glass was forsaken by everyone but his family. Therefore, there is no denying the fact that his life has been utterly shattered and laid in pieces.

The second possible interpretation of this metaphor is the supposition that a solid and decent reputation is an extremely fragile thing. It is especially true for a journalist whose whole career may be destroyed by one suspicion in covering the unchecked facts or in plagiarism. The contemporary society has established high standards for the qualitative press. Anything that seems suspicious is either labeled yellow press that is spreading gossips or is severely punished through legal persecutions and administrative penalties. Reputation of a journalist has to be crystal clear in order to have his articles published in a respected newspaper or magazine. Any black spot on this pristine reputation will prominently stand out and may lead to shattering the trust to the journalist's words. The former editor Charles Lane of *The New Republic* still admits his utter distrust to Glass, "If it was sunny outside and Steve and I were both standing outside in the sun and Steve came to me and said, 'It's a sunny day,' I would immediately go check with two other people to make sure it was a sunny day" (Leung, 2009). In a nutshell, reputation may be best compared to a glass that is transparent and clearly demonstrates all mistakes, even the most diminutive ones. In a way, it is like a magnifying glass with two reverse lenses – one that diminishes accomplishments to something self-understandable, and another that enlarges faults to monstrous sizes.

One more probable explanation of the metaphor "shattered glass" may be applied in the macro sense to the field of journalism itself. Nowadays, it has become similar to the mining field full of shattered glass. Journalists have to tread carefully among these broken pieces not to damage themselves and their magazines. Information has never been so available and abundant, at the same time, being extremely perilous. Politicians, celebrities, and ordinary people's actions may be reported, yet any trace of unfaithful or unchecked fact may lead to long litigation processes aimed at protecting the right for privacy and persecuting supposed calumny. These hazardous facts may be referred to as pieces of glass that are able of shattering lives and reputations of journalists as well as individuals in the center of their attention.

Shattered Glass may be viewed as a manual guide for starting journalists about what mistakes are to be avoided at any cost. Ironically, the movie may be regarded as a reference

book with miscellaneous useful pieces of advice on how to become a rising star in the world of high-scale newspapers and magazines, though this fame will be not very long-lasting. “At 25, Stephen Glass was the most sought-after young reporter in the nation’s capital, producing knockout articles for magazines ranging from *The New Republic* to *Rolling Stone*” (Bissinger, 1998). The first part of the film reveals the secrets of becoming a successful writer in a short time who is able to earn more than \$150,000 annually and whose articles become the hallmark of any respected edition.

First of all, a promising journalist has to graduate from a prestigious school with extensive curriculum and numerous extra-curricular activities. One of the possible variants is the Highland Park High aimed at producing young geniuses and future *crème-de-la-crème* of the American society. Education at the school is on the highest possible level, so that, average children seem to be slow and even slightly retarded on the background of their sophisticated peers. Anyway, an educational institution for a future breakthrough in journalism should be “a rigorous, competitive school where it wasn’t unusual for 5 percent of the senior class to be National Merit semifinalists” (Bissinger, 1998). He/she has to be an active participant of various activities aimed at developing rapid and inventive thinking. Moral and spiritual values are not in the limelight of educators as their superior goal is to bring up an ambitious professional able of building a brilliant career.

University education is compulsory as well. However, as the Glass’s example has proved, high grades and specialized education are not of primary importance. The main thing is to participate in the university newspaper, preferably becoming its chief editor. The ideal variant is to achieve this high position during the first years as it will make a young journalist look extremely talented and eligible for the world of adult journalism. However, it does not mean that a young journalist should lag behind his/her classes as it would result in an unattractive average mark of the diploma. Internship in a respected edition is a must. This is the best time to find connections that could facilitate the process of integrating into the staff. A young journalist should become indispensable to the chief editor. He/she has to be noticed. Therefore, there has to be a plan how to stand out on among other young interns who seek a way to establish themselves in the field of journalism. As a rule, university practice does not entail real writing, rather being a person who fulfils secretary duties. In these circumstances, a young journalist has to design a step-by-step plan how to show off the most advantageous sides of his unrivaled personality. Right before the graduation, he/she must receive some plausible recommendations that would testify his/her talents and add up to the diploma.

One of the most essential tasks of a young journalist with huge ambitions is to develop an appropriate character that has to look harmonious and natural. This task should have been accomplished since the high school, so that the university would become the testing place of its implementation and improvement. Stephen Glass has devised an ideal character that complemented his appearance. It looked so natural and harmonious that his former colleagues still did not find out how much of it was merely an act. “He had appeared, amid the self-centeredness of the capital city, as refreshingly flexible” (Bissinger, 1998). Vulnerability, friendliness, amiable character, and insecure behavior may become the guideline of the behavioral patterns. At the end of the 20th century, these qualities made Glass noticeable and easily trusted. He seemed to be effeminate, not very manly and self-confident. Therefore, on the subconscious level he could raise no suspicions and made everyone want take care of this innocent child and guard him from the cruelties of the surrounding predatory world. At a glance, it seems weird that such an insecure person could become successful in the world of journalistic sharks that certainly overshadowed their animal counterparts in their

obstinacy and single-mindedness of getting their “prey” having sniffed a possible media sensation. Nevertheless, amiable character and genuine affection may make the colleagues adore a young journalist. Arrogance so typical of the overly confident youth has to be forsaken. Modesty and some deal of self-deprecation are sometimes useful. Glass seemed to be derogatory of himself and dissatisfied with his articles. He was never going to publish anything, even being fully aware that the presented articles had been brilliant. Their only fault was revealed a bit later. Senior colleagues will be flattered if a young journalist turns to them for advice. A modest behavior, knowledge of all the latest gossips and constant readiness to help are the key factors of the initial success for a young journalist in the office. The gender issue seems to be of primary importance as well. Nowadays, the society does not ostracize people of a different sexual orientation, yet it is better to preserve the fuzzy gender identity. If a young journalist is a male, he should avoid being aggressive and womanizing as it will lead to stiff competition with other males. If a young journalist is a female, she should avoid being overtly sexual and attractive as it will not only cause other women’s envy and men’s courtship, but also contribute to the image of a pretty but silly Barbie girl. Glass has shown a possible way out: slightly androgynous behavior is not going to irritate any sex, rather causing curiosity and a parental wish to take care of a person who is so different from the rest.

The quality and quantity of accomplished work are also essential for launching a successful career of a young journalist. An ambitious person will never apply to editions that are out of the first echelon league of the American press. He/she will send his/her CV to editions with long-established traditions and the well-known brand name, for instance, *The New Republic*, *The New York Times*, *The Harper’s* and the like. There is no sense in opting for a more modest newspaper as a true talent deserves to be noticed and acknowledged from the very beginning of professional activity. Hard work is a must. However, there should be something unrivaled about the author’s writing style in order to have his/her articles published. Humor, bright quotes, and extraordinary topics are essential. Glass spent all his time working and writing. During nine months, he slept only 2 hours per day. His diligent work brought fruitful results: “contributing writer for *Harper’s Magazine*, contributing writer for *George* magazine, contributing writer for *Rolling Stone* and, of course, associate editor of the *New Republic* magazine in Washington, D.C.” (Ray, 2003).

Nonetheless, a young journalist who has successfully surpassed the above mentioned steps to fame and writer’s glory has to be extremely careful of not following the Glass’s example up to the bitter end. The movie *Shattered Glass* also serves as a vivid example of how not to be a journalist. It makes viewers doubt about the chief factors of success in the profession of a journalist. It raises an essential question of what has to be of primary importance to a journalist. Stephen Glass did not manage to become a true journalist and even today is cited as the greatest fraud of modern journalism. His first mistake was deeply engraved into his character and was cultivated by his parents and brother. His desire to be noticed and appreciated was the consequence of a childish psychological trauma that may be partly blamed for the mayhem of his youth. He was constantly on the verge of stress and was afraid not to meet up with his parents’ high expectations. An attempt to jump over one’s head and constantly nagging fear failure are two feelings that signal of the journalist’s possible incompetence. A person has to be ambitious and to strive for the acme of perfection, yet he/she has to be aware that it is impossible to be liked by everyone and to accomplish something that is physically impossible.

The major crime of the contemporary journalism is exploiting false facts, quoting non-existent personalities, and publishing invented stories if it is not a fiction magazine, of course. The desire to impress readers and colleagues should not outweigh the law of credibility. All the facts and names mentioned in an article are to be checked and re-checked multiple times. A journalist has to be sure that there is no grain of untruth in his writing. If a journalist can be accused of lies, he/she must have a capacity of providing immediate and undisputable evidence of his innocence. It is the major rule of the journalistic ethics. A person who is guilty in outrageous lying does not deserve to remain in the field or supported by his/her chief editor and colleagues. This happened to Stephen Glass who violated this golden rule of journalism. “*The New Republic*, after an investigation involving a substantial portion of its editorial staff, would ultimately acknowledge fabrications in 27 of the 41 bylined pieces that Glass had written for the magazine in the two-and-a-half-year period between December 1995 and May 1998” (Bissinger, 1998). Moreover, he never ceased lying, conjuring one story after another to cover the previous inconsistencies. He relied heavily on his previous experience as an editor, so that his articles would pass numerous checking procedures. His seemingly authentic stories were incredible, yet looked truthful. This happened due to his cunning scheme of four facts that followed each other in succession in one article: the first fact had to be mostly true, the second one – much truer than invented, the third one – partially invented, and the last fact was wholly invented. This writing style is certainly not the one appropriate for a journalist. Rich imagination and lively language is a bonus for a journalist, but they should not be confused with sheer invention.

The most awful about Glass’s fraud was that he involved and damaged other people. His actions were enormously harmful for *The New Republic* that had suffered from public censure and distrust. Although the magazine published *The New Republic’s Apology To Our Readers: A Report* in which they “offer no excuses for any of this. Only our deepest apologies to all concerned”, the editorial staff had to endure countless hostile reprimands (Editors, 1998). Both chief editors of the magazine covered Glass’s lies as they trusted their writer and defended him against critical remarks. “*T.N.R.*, despite a rich history as one of the country’s leading voices, has never fully recovered from one of the greatest discovered frauds in journalistic history” (Bissinger, 1998). It is utterly not journalistic behavior, if colleagues and the magazine have to pay for the writer’s mistakes. A guilty journalist has to acknowledge his mistakes and apologize for the invoked harm rather than hide behind the backs of his adversaries who have been kept in the dark about his constant lying. The only excuse for Glass is that ultimately, he acknowledged his fault and apologized after going through psychological treatment. He was an abusive liar due to a serious psychological disorder. Since the scandal, he has changed and now he is told to be unable of any, even the most trifling white lie. “The infamy of his misdeeds will follow him forever. But if anyone can be said to have redeemed himself by his subsequent actions, it is Glass” (Nocera, 2011).

Professional incompetence of a journalist is the central issue raised by the film. *Shattered Glass* emphasizes the prime importance of credibility and truthfulness for the qualitative press. It depicts the inner work of a magazine office and the intricate relationships between workers from various power positions. One more non-journalistic behavior is the relationship between the chief editor and the owner of the edition. That is though being of secondary importance in the film but essential in the real world. Owners seem to believe that they have a right to command the paper’s policy and topics, interfere with the publishing process and order journalists what to do. Even if they have no idea about the inner workings of the paper, they want to feel being a big boss. At the same time, the chief editor is the real commander of the office. He/she is a buffer between excruciatingly difficult work of the

journalist and often weird whims of the owner. The first chief editor of *The New Republic* was fired because he openly confronted the owner. Charles Lane who substituted him on this post was more successful in maneuvering between frequently rebellious journalists and unrealistically demanding owner.

“There are so many show-offs in journalism. So many braggarts and jerks. They are always selling, always working the room, always trying to make themselves look hotter than they actually are...It's true, journalism is hard work, everybody's under pressure, everybody's grinding to get the issue out...Some reporters think it's political content that makes a story memorable. I think it's the people you find...Journalism is just the art of capturing behavior. You have to know who you're writing for. And you have to know what you're good at” (Ray, 2003). These opening lines of the movie are its most essential theses about the choice that the majority of journalists have to make – whether to have a bright, yet fleeting career that will end in a steep downfall into the pit of lies and invented facts, or to follow the professional ethics code in a scrupulous way that will bring a journalist to the journalistic Olympus and the Pulitzer's Award after long years of diligent work and let him/her stay there up to the career end.

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