

## *Career Success at What Cost?* *Work vs. Personal Life in The Devil Wears Prada*

Directed by David Frankel; Produced by Fox 2000 Pictures; Runtime: 110 minutes; 2006.

Reviewed by Rafal Cebula and Debra R. Comer

We all hope to have a boss who guides and inspires us to fulfill our professional goals as we contribute to our organization's success. However, recognizing how rare that kind of mentor is, many of us are content to work for someone who is ineffectual, but pleasant. Such a person is, at least, more tolerable than a boss who makes every workday a living hell. *The Devil Wears Prada* brings to life that very terrifying scenario. The film is based on Lauren Weisberger's (2003, Doubleday) eponymous bestselling novel, which supposedly draws from Weisberger's experiences as the assistant to Anna Wintour, editor-in-chief of *Vogue*.

The film's concept is simple: Andrea Sachs (Anne Hathaway), a wide-eyed college graduate who won writing prizes as a student but is unable to secure a job in journalism, settles for a job that is related only tangentially to her chosen field. Andrea (Andy) becomes the assistant to Miranda Priestly (Meryl Streep), the ultra-high-maintenance editor-in-chief of Manhattan-based *Runway* magazine. The tasks Miranda assigns her – ranging from finding and fetching only vaguely described pants to scoring the latest unpublished Harry Potter manuscript within mere hours – have nothing to do, of course, with Andy's journalistic talents.

One problem Andy faces is her inability to fit in with *Runway*'s corporate culture. Whereas her co-workers dress in impeccably put-together top-designer ensembles, Andy wears a comfortable off-the-rack sweater and sensible shoes. She sees no reason to change herself for a job she is using only as a steppingstone for a job at a "real" magazine such as *The New Yorker*. She ignores the taunts of her co-worker Emily (Emily Blunt), who puts down Andy's uninspired outfits. Andy, who sees fashion as useless and irrelevant, has no intention of becoming a part of the fashion industry. For her, this job is just a means to an end. Nigel (Stanley Tucci), Andy's co-worker, comments on her refusal to conform: "You are not trying. You are whining.... You don't care. Because in this place, where so many people would die to work, you only *deign* to work."

Indeed, Andy eventually comes to recognize that *Runway* sells an image, and that her adherence to this image is part of her job description. Dispositionally conscientiousness and hardworking, she becomes a walking advertisement for *Runway*, displaying the company's *haute couture* values. As she concedes her previous image to one of style, grace, and elegance framed by the clothing of the designers she once found so contemptible, she crosses a boundary. Her friends and boyfriend question her transformation. But Andy, striving to fit into her new role and please her boss, is too busy for introspection.

Andy's conversion increases her willingness to respond to Miranda's unreasonable requests, which are all the more irritating in that they come at any and every time of the day. From 6 a.m. until 2 a.m., Andy can be found answering the phone, dropping whatever she is doing to tend to Miranda's demands. Indeed, a key theme in *The Devil Wears Prada* is work-life balance. When Andy skips out on friends and family, telling them – and herself – that she is working hard only in order to attain her ultimate goal of a position as a true journalist, her friends worry that she has been seduced by her current job responsibilities, which she has come to take seriously. In time, putting work first costs Andy her closest friendships, including her relationship with her boyfriend. As Andy's job at *Runway* obliterates her nonwork life, she complains to Nigel, who has become her

mentor and *confidant*, “My personal life is hanging by a thread.” He explains, “That’s what happens when you start doing well at work. Tell me when your whole life goes up in smoke. That means it’s time for a promotion.”

It is interesting to compare Andy’s sacrifices with Miranda’s efforts to separate her own personal and work lives. When Andy is required to deliver mock-ups of the magazine to Miranda’s home after ten o’clock each weeknight, she is banned from interacting with Miranda’s children or even going beyond the first floor. Although Miranda hasn’t the time to be a doting mother, she thinks often of her children, whose daily schedules she coordinates and whose special occasions she celebrates. When inclement weather strands her in Miami, she calls on Andy to find a way to convince an airline to traverse a mere hurricane in order for her to make her daughters’ recital the next morning. Ironically, this impossible task abruptly ends an evening that Andy had planned with her father. Andy exhausts herself, doing everything she can think of to book a flight for Miranda, before accepting the inevitable reality that she must disappoint her.

Can people at the upper level of a corporation afford to have meaningful personal lives? Not necessarily. According to *The Devil Wears Prada*, by the time someone makes it to a top spot, it may be too late. Certainly Miranda is not immune to work’s erosion of her personal life. Already twice-divorced, she learns that her third husband wants out. Apparently, one cannot hold a highly lucrative, demanding, and prestigious job and also maintain a fulfilling personal life. When Nigel finds out he might become his own boss at a designer label, he looks forward to removing the shackles of a demanding career. He tells Andy, “For the first time in eight years I’m going to be able to call the shots in my own life!”

The film warns of the danger of giving up one’s personal time in an attempt to succeed in the world of work. Andy’s job as Miranda’s assistant distinguishes her resume even as it exacts a huge toll on her life outside work. The supporting characters repeatedly tell Andy that she has a choice – that she can decide to leave her job. She has to decide whether to surrender her personal life for the advantages that working for Miranda Priestly confers. And she makes her choice. As Emily observes, “You sold your soul to the devil when you put on your first pair of Jimmy Choos.” Whether or not the job is worth Andy’s personal and social life becomes the driving point of the film. As work consumes almost all of her time, she cancels dinner dates, loses sleep, and misses her boyfriend’s birthday party. Her single and resounding excuse is that she has work and that she has no choice in the matter, to which everyone responds insistently that she *does* have a choice — and that choice is to quit. Andy refuses, claiming that she is not the kind of person that quits.

But what kind of person is she becoming? When Andy accepts Miranda’s invitation to accompany her to Paris for fashion week, she knows full well that she is taking Emily’s place. In Paris, Andy sees Miranda backstab a dear friend in order to keep her job. During a car ride in a subsequent scene, Andy tells Miranda that she could never backstab a friend. Miranda reminds her that she has already betrayed Emily.

*MIRANDA:* You chose to get ahead. If you want this life, those choices are necessary.  
*ANDY:* But what if this isn’t what I want? What if I don’t want to live the way you live?  
*MIRANDA:* Oh, don’t be ridiculous, Andrea! Everybody wants this. Everybody wants to be us.

At this point, Miranda, whom Andy has been trying so earnestly to impress, bears the very message of Andy’s friends. The job is Andy’s choice, and she has *chosen* to live life this way. Andy then has a revelation about what she deems important in her life. In a grandiose gesture, she flings her company-issued cell phone into a nearby fountain.

After leaving *Runway*, Andy applies for a job at a newspaper. With a positive, albeit brief, reference from Miranda, she clinches the job. The film ends happily enough, as we are left to infer that Miranda, despite her cold demeanor and exploitation of Andy, is satisfied with the choice Andy has made for herself. Through her journey of ridiculous errands, stressful assignments, and seduced conformism, Andy has developed a deeper understanding of the role work plays in her life. She may live for the job, but that does not mean that it is all she lives for.

*The Devil Wears Prada* begs comparison with *Swimming with Sharks* (1994, directed by George Huang, Lions Gate), another film in which an idealistic neophyte sacrifices his personal life to be on constant call as the assistant to a demanding executive. In *Swimming with Sharks*, the protagonist, Guy (Frank Whaley), takes a job working as the personal assistant to Buddy Ackerman (Kevin Spacey), an unprincipled bully of a Hollywood studio boss. Whereas Miranda is exacting, she also elicits sympathy; sleazy and abusive Buddy is the true devil. Although the protagonists in both the *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Swimming with Sharks* take their demeaning positions for promised career payoffs and lose their selves to their jobs, there is a key difference (beyond the fact that Miranda calls Millennial Andy's cellphone, whereas Buddy pages GenX Guy on his beeper). Andy is temporarily sucked into her job, but she finally draws the line and regains her values. Able to see herself as her friends see her, she remembers what is important and reclaims her identity and her life. Poor Guy loses his soul.

Do today's twenty-somethings care more about work-nonwork balance than their counterparts a decade ago? The literature on integrating one's personal and work lives is massive and still mounting. But it emphasizes work-family issues. Given that the average age at which Americans start their families is later than it was a generation ago, it is worthwhile to focus on the efforts of young adults to build their careers as they establish meaningful personal relationships. *The Devil Wears Prada* brings these broader work-nonwork issues into clear focus.

---

*Rafal Cebula is a senior majoring in Labor Studies and Asian Studies at Hofstra.  
Debra R. Comer is a Professor of Management at Hofstra's Zarb School of Business.*

REGIONAL LABOR REVIEW, vol. 10, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 40 - 41.  
© 2007 Center for the Study of Labor and Democracy, Hofstra University