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Honors
Critical Intro

Shifting the Eyes of History: Creating Alternative Perspectives

It all began with an in class writing exercise. "Today, I want you all to write an elegy for your favorite celebrity," my professor challenged. Immediately, my mind went to big names like Eleanor Roosevelt, Frank Sinatra, Angelina Jolie, and Morrissey. But as I thought about what I would say for them, I felt as though my opinions would drown amidst the common feelings surrounding such individuals. Sure, I could have tried to be innovative and highlight easily overlooked aspects of these large personalities, but that just was not enough.

I did not want to write about someone that people have mixed feelings for either, I wanted to shock the six members of my audience; I wanted my classmates to be entirely confused and possibly disturbed with my selection. Why my mind wandered down the dark path of historically plagued persons? I have no idea. But the internal pressure to be different was too high, so I began to write "To Adolf, From Eva," the very first poem in my soon-to-be collection about those who have been hated by history.

MAKING A VILLAIN:

As I began to construct and deconstruct the images I have of Adolf Hitler, multiple aspects of both his life and the impact he had on history began to almost write the poem for me. But it wasn't his leadership, his army that drew me in; the first facet that I knew I had to conclude were numbers. "Numbers are nothing /except when changing /a nation." The first line came almost effortlessly. Once I began to put his story on the page it was almost addictive–I could not stop.

What I told myself when writing about Hitler was that it had to be *about* Hitler, not the

story he told, but the one that others, specifically his loved ones, were going to tell about him.

Call me Charles Dickens but I wanted nothing but the facts. I wanted to emphasize the power he

demonstrated with his voice, I wanted to highlight the emotion he took out of all his victims, I

needed to put to words the destruction he caused, I had to display the love he earned by so many

individuals. As these qualities began to arise, something shifted. In order to scratch the deep itch

I had to make this poem different than anything else, I knew that these few stanzas could not

repeat the same hatred for this man that the majority of this earth has.

HITLER HAD A WIFE:

With this realization, everything that I had told myself this poem was going to be about,

shifted. Her name was Eva and she loved this man; she *loved* Adolf Hitler. It does not matter

what we tell ourselves about the villains of past or present history, someone out there, deranged

or not, genuinely cares about these people, who they truly are. Whether that's a mother, a sibling,

a spouse, or an admirer, people have the capacity to see greatness in anyone. Yes, even Adolf

Hitler.

Once this first poem was out there, receiving shocks and stern glances, I knew it was time

to begin constructing a list of who to write about next. This was the hard part: to pick villains

without being too cliche or too predictable. Other obvious choices made the list: John Wilkes

Booth, Jim Jones, the Klu Klux Klan. The difficult task in constructing a list of villains is

choosing figures who are not only timeless, but also people who would not immediately rise to

the top when a person google's "biggest villains of all time." This part took some discerning;

Google suggested people like Kanye West, Justin Bieber, Michael Phelps, but they were either

too obvious or niche picks. Because one can only search online for so long, I started just asking

people who their favorite or most hated person in history was.

CONSTRUCTING THE "IT" LIST:

If you haven't already asked a friend or colleague the question of who their favorite real-

life villain is, I would suggest you try; you get both very perplexed looks and incredible

suggestions if you plan on writing about these people. In order to establish a well-rounded list, I

had to rely on individuals in my life who simply knew more than I did, or at least have been alive

longer than I have.

When the conversations began, people like Patty Hearst and Ted Bundy rose to the top.

One particular aspect about the list I longed to create was that influential villains from every

generation would be recognized.

I also learned that as the list grew, so did the definition I had for my "villains." The term

began to simply mean those who have immensely harmed great numbers of people within

society, thus Hitler, Eric Harris (Columbine shooter), and the KKK. But as people like Monica

Lewinsky and Michael Jackson began to reappear on my potential list of candidates, the strict

definition I held began to shift. This is when I realized I do not just want to write about the

classic villains, but any person who has received great shame and loathing from the public. Once

I widened my qualifications, other names such as Edward Snowden and Caitlyn Jenner made the

growing list.

LANGUAGE AS A PARDON:

Once all the members of my list were solidified, the writing began. Essentially, this was the easy part; all I had to do was pick a person, learn what they did/who they killed/what they stood for, and construct a narrative that was counter-culture to the hatred they stirred around themselves. Sounds easy enough, right?

For months on end, all I did was research those on my list. Learn their family history, listen to speeches, read court reports, watch interview, look up photographs, and so much more. If I was going to shift the language that society had defined these figures to, I needed to truly know the individuals apart from who the headlines and news articles *told me* these people were. From there, I began writing.

The language within these poems was everything to the story I was longing to tell. I did not want someone to just see these "villains" as real, living, feeling human beings; I wanted the audience to *empathize* with my subjects. Quickly, I learned that language could not carry all the weight, but I needed to play with stanza structure, with font, with literary devices, and with grammar in order for a story to reach its full effect.

With the completion of more and more poems, I learned that I was missing out on another whole area of history. Not only could I strive to have people empathize with inherent villains, but I could also try and have readers vilify other normalities and characters within society.

TO SAVE OR TO SPOIL:

Once I added this aspect into the project, more and more stories were begging to be told.

For example, Michael Jackson. Known as one of the greatest performers this world will ever see

from the number one selling track "Thriller," to his famous single white glove, he will no doubt,

be celebrated for generations long after my own. But what about the story surrounding his

behind-the-scenes actions that society seems to drown out with their applause?

This shift, unique in itself, allowed for my project to encompass a whole other realm of

public figures often untouched by criticism. By allowing the different perspectives through

which I told these stories to come to life (and often portray actual people), I was not only

challenged to shift perspectives, but to question why other perspectives were in place.

To learn how I attempted to elicit both anger and empathy for a range of individuals,

please continue on and read my project, "Shifting the Eyes of History: Creating Alternative

Perspectives."

*Disclaimer: these poems, in no way, suggest any of my political or social agendas. All subjects, both people and ideologies, were chosen on bases of historical significance and societal impact.