

2011 / 2012



Excellence in First-Year Writing

The English Department
Writing Program and
The Gayle Morris Sweetland
Center for Writing

Excellence
in
First-Year Writing

2011/2012

The English Department Writing Program
and
The Gayle Morris Sweetland Center for Writing

Published in 2012 by MPublishing
University of Michigan Library

© 2012 Gayle Morris Sweetland Center for Writing

Permission is required to reproduce material from this title in other publications, coursepacks, electronic products, and other media.

Please send permission requests to:

MPublishing
4186 Shapiro
919 South University
Ann Arbor, MI 48109
lib.pod@umich.edu

ISBN 978-1-60785-275-9

Table of Contents

Excellence in First-Year Writing

Winners list	6
Nominees list	7
Introduction	11
Feinberg Family Prize for Excellence in First-Year Writing	14
Matt Kelley Award for Excellence in First-Year Writing	56
Sweetland Prize for Outstanding Writing Portfolio	76

Excellence in First-Year Writing 2011/2012

EDWP Writing Prize Committee:

Katie Will, Co-Chair

Steve Engel, Co-Chair

Tim Green

Joe Horton

Frank Kelderman

Justine Niederhiser

Melody Pugh

Stephen Spiess

Sarah Swofford

Jessica Young

Sweetland Writing Prize Committee:

Alan Hogg

Dana Nichols

Administrative Support:

Laura Schulyer

Perry Janes

Winners list

Matt Kelley Award for Excellence in First-Year Writing

Sarah Leddon: “The Public Woman’s Guide to Getting By: Navigating the Early 20th Century” nominated by Sara Lampert, History 195

Margaret Scholten: “Fate and Transition” nominated by Sayan Bhattacharyya, Great Books 191

Sweetland Prize for Outstanding Writing Portfolio

Jiatu Liu: nominated by Gina Brandolino, Writing 100

Clarissa Ortiz: nominated by Gina Brandolino, Writing 100

Feinberg Family Prize for Excellence in First-Year Writing

Carlina Duan: “If You’re Happy and You Know It, LOL” nominated by Jeremiah Chamberlin, English 125

Margaret Hitch: “Taking a Page from Fun Home: Relations Between Reading and Reality” nominated by Tiffany Ball, English 124

Alyssa Lopez: “Different Family, Different Culture, Same Me” nominated by Joseph Horton, English 125

Nominees list

Feinberg Family Prize

Student Name	Instructor Name
Aamina Ali	David Green
Eleanore An	Megan Sweeney
Kelsey Bare	Cordelia Zukerman
Michael Bode	Samiya Bashir
Megan Callahan	Samiya Bashir
Brandon Canniff	Christina LaRose
Bethany Canning	Ilana Sichel
Amber Cathey	Jessica Young
Ashwaty Chennat	Jessica Young
Adam Clover	Emily McLaughlin
Al Fallick	Jeremiah Chamberlin
Caitlin Fey	Jeremiah Chamberlin
Sierra Grant	Jessica Young
Alex Haase	Emily McLaughlin
Molly Harris	Samiya Bashir
Dillon Horne	Joe Horton
Luke Jacobi	Samiya Bashir
Breanna Johnson	Daniel Birchok
Lindsay Johnson	Samiya Bashir
JC Jones-Kern	Samiya Bashir
Molly Joyce	Ilana Sichel
Melanie Kappadakunnel	Jessica Young
James Keating	Emily McLaughlin
YeoWon Kim	Harim Kwon
Peter Leonard	Joe Horton

Dominic Leoni	Christina LaRose
Christopher Lin	Ruth McAdams
Jenna Liss	Ruth McAdams
Reid Lott	Samiya Bashir
Andrew Lyng	Ilana Sichel
Katie Mays	Kodi Scheer
Andrew McClure	Nan Da
Avery McIntyre	D'Anne Witkowski
Chelsi Modest	Christina LaRose
Devon Mulry	Harim Kwon
Danielle Olgin	Katie Brion
Jordan Orringer	D'Anne Witkowski
Nathan Palaparathi	Samiya Bashir
Tommy Pendy	Jeremiah Chamberlin
Vinh Pham	Brad Wetherell
Allison Schaffer	Cameron Gibelyou
Matthew Simpson	Jessica Young
Margaret Starr	Joe Horton
Olivia Stephens	Christina LaRose
Ben Tift	Katie Brion
Linsa Varghese	Nan Da
Tessa Wiles	Jessica Young
Han Lin Yeo	Samiya Bashir
Diana Zhang	Tiffany Ball

Matt Kelley Prize nominees

Student name	Instructor name
Brena Bullock	Tatjana Aleksic
Karthic Epker	Evangeline Lyons

Ana Guay	Netta Berlin
Kate Johnson	Tatjana Aleksic
Sara Ann Knuston	Lolita Hernandez
Manoj Kowshik	Joseph Groves
Seth Lang	Timothy Hedges
Taylor Leamon	Kenneth Garner
Sarah Leddon	Sara Lampert
Lauren McGee	Richard Persky
Danielle Olgin	Katherine Brion
Schuyler Robinson	Lolita Hernandez
Allison Schaeffer	Cameron Gibelyou
Margaret Scholten	Sayan Bhattacharyya
Brian Schwartz	Kenneth Garner
Orlando Shaw	Aaron Cavin
Sunny Singh	Richard Persky
Ben Tift	Katherine Brion
Karen Toomasian	Aaron Cavin
Christopher Wasun	Sayan Bhattacharyya

Portfolio prize nominees

Student Name	Instructor Name
Kaitlin Choquette	Timothy Hedges
Yaquir Gleiser	Christine Modey
Mariam Khan	Gina Brandolino
Claudia Lau	Lila Naydan
Michelle Lee	Christine Modey
Jiatu Liu	Gina Brandolino
Clarissa Ortiz	Gina Brandolino
Madison Sandmeyer	Christine Modey
Carolyn Tappan	Dana Nichols
Kaitlynn Wargo	Julie Babcock

Introduction

The solitary parts of the writing process can make us lose sight of the importance of conversation to any piece of academic writing. When we write to enter the scholarly conversation, to help address questions others have already asked and to raise—and often start to answer—new questions that can further the discussion, we often feel alone. But behind almost all academic writing is a conversation between the author and many other readers/writers, who are responding to drafts as the piece of writing takes shape.

The English Department Writing Program and the Sweetland Center for Writing established a first-year writing prize two years ago in order to celebrate the accomplishments of student writers near the beginning of their careers at the University of Michigan. Last year we added the upper-level writing prize, to honor the excellent writing students continue to achieve as they pursue questions of particular interest to them in their majors. Writing classrooms at this university are remarkable for the conversations they foster, perhaps especially in writing workshop. In workshop, students take each other's work as seriously as any piece of published prose, debating its argument and talking through its rhetorical choices. In helping a fellow writer hone an essay, each peer reviewer gets the chance to teach writing—an opportunity that gives them insights they can take back to their own work.

We hope that all student writers will continue to seek out conversation about their writing even after they leave the structure of the writing classroom. The two of us have participated in a writing group with two other colleagues for eight years now, and we treasure this chance to share our work—sometimes very rough, still groping for its argument—with each other. In the space of our writing group, we leave our administrative selves at the door and dive into intellectual questions and rhetorical nuances as we work together to help the author further the scholarly conversation as persuasively and powerfully as possible.

Last year we were pleased to announce that the Sweetland first-year writing prize would be named in honor of Matt Kelley. This year, we could not be more delighted to add that the English Department Writing Program first-year writing prize will be named in honor of the Feinberg Family. We want to extend our heartfelt thanks to Andrew Feinberg and Stacia Smith, both graduates of the University of Michigan English Department, for their generosity in supporting this prize. These prizes allow us to honor the achievement of student writers and to shine a spotlight on the importance of writing in the academic pursuits of this university.

We also want to take this opportunity to thank the many people who have made this year's prize and publication of prize-winning essays possible. Judges of the electronic portfolios produced in Sweetland's Writing 100 were Danielle Lavaque-Manty, Naomi Silver, Tim Hedges, and Dana Nichols. Entries for the Matt Kelley Prize for Excellence in First-Year Writing were judged by George Cooper, Shelley Manis, Jamie Lausch, Carol Tell, and Dana Nichols. In the English Department Writing Program, the judges were Tim Green, Joe Horton, Frank Kelderman, Justine Niederhiser, Melody Pugh, Stephen Spiess, Sarah Swofford, and Jessica Young, with Steven Engel and Kathryn Will serving as chairs.

And let us conclude by thanking all the students who submitted essays for this prize, who made the judging so wonderfully, wrenchingly difficult. You teach us and inspire us every day, with the challenging questions you pose in our classrooms and the contagious intellectual energy you bring to answering those questions.

Anne Ruggles Gere, Director, Sweetland Center for Writing

Anne Curzan, Director, English Department Writing Program

Feinberg Family Prize for Excellence in First-Year Writing

We are extremely proud to recognize the work of three of the English Department Writing Program's finest first-year writers. The winners deserve our congratulations: their essays were selected from a group of over fifty impressive submissions, and the decisions of the prize committee were, as always, difficult. The English Department Writing Program teaches over 3,800 students per year in first-year writing courses who combined write over 15,000 essays. So these essays are truly the best of the best.

This is the third year of the writing prize, and we continue to be impressed with the wide range of nominations that demonstrate the many genres of writing taught by EDWP instructors, not to mention the variety of writerly skills they help students develop. The essays you have in front of you demonstrate not only the work of three outstanding individuals but the tradition of excellence in the English Department Writing Program. Though the assignments that produced the winning essays—and the essays themselves—are diverse in style and scope, they share an important commonality. A primary goal of the English Department Writing Program is developing students' abilities to “produce complex, analytic, and well-supported arguments that matter in academic contexts.” Without question, all three of the winning essays make arguments that *matter*, both inside and beyond the college writing classroom. Each paper's author resists the allure of broad conclusions in favor

of genuinely exploring the personal and public dimensions—and often, the contradictions—within a complex topic. From technology’s role in human happiness to the politics of ethnic and sexual identity, these arguments wrestle with big questions but refrain from providing simple answers.

Such sophistication is an impressive achievement for a writer, especially given the resistance of much public discourse to “arguments that matter.” Many Americans want their public servants to lay out specific plans for improving the economy, or to explain precisely how they’ll balance the federal budget. These are complex issues, and candidates for national office tend to avoid untangling them in favor of easy talking points. Such rhetorical moves tend to stifle conversations instead of encouraging meaningful dialogue. The writers of these essays, however, are willing to acknowledge the power of uncertainty. Their essays lead the reader through a process of genuine exploration of challenging and complex topics. It is their ability to follow a path of investigation and inquiry that sets up these students for success not just in college writing but in the world beyond. These essays mark the promise of students who can actively participate as global citizens by asking questions rather than accepting simple answers.

The playwright Eugene Ionesco wrote that “it is not the answer that enlightens, but the question.” These winning essays demonstrate the power of inquiry to engage with difficult questions not just in the academic setting but in the larger world. And so we invite you to jump into these essays and join the writers as they offer arguments that matter.

Steven Engel and Katie Will

Co-Chairs of Feinberg Family First-Year Writing Prize Committee

Graduate Student Mentors, English Department Writing Program

If You're Happy and You Know It, LOL: An Examination of the Evolution of Happiness Across Generations

*From English 125: Carlina Duan
(nominated by Jeremiah Chamberlin)*

Carlina Duan's driving question for this essay is a straightforward one: "What is happiness?" Yet the result from her inquiry is anything but simple. Through a rigorous examination of where she and her friends find happiness, coupled with research ranging from the fields of psychology to sociology, Duan arrives at a unique and original claim: The increased reliance on social media for communication, along with the accompanying habituation that occurs from audience feedback (e.g., retweets, "likes," hearts, etc.) on their posts, has rendered Generation Y unable to know when they're happy on their own. In short, they only know they're happy when someone signals—digitally—that they should be.

First, this thesis alone should be commended for its originality and sophistication. But as Duan builds her argument over the course of more than a dozen pages, stitching in vivid scenes from her own life to balance the academic research, she arrives not at the easy conclusion that society is (as my grandmother would say) "going to hell in a handbasket." Rather, she inverts the conclusion to shed new and surprising light on the topic.

But more than anything, what is most admirable about this essay is the author's ability to sustain an argument that continues to grow and develop at each turn, expanding from the personal to the global. And all with exceptionally thoughtful and concise prose.

Jeremiah Chamberlin

If You're Happy and You Know It, LOL: An Examination of the Evolution of Happiness Across Generations

I'm late.

Class started ten minutes ago. My alarm clock scowls, and I'm a scramble of legs and arms as I hurl feet into sneakers, dash from bed to table, stuff Cheerios into mouth, and curse myself for staying up late again. But as I grab the door knob, I pause.

My laptop sits angelically on my desk. If I squint from this distance, I can decipher the Firefox Internet icon, pulsing like an invitation. I put up a new Facebook profile picture yesterday. Taken by the Chinese seaside, the photograph featured me posing barefooted by the shore. One hour after posting, four of my Facebook friends had "liked" my picture, and three had commented their praise. I felt good.

Which is to say, I felt beautiful—radiant in a sort of self-relieving glow. People "liked" my face! People thought I was worth looking at! Their admiration marked the approval I needed to keep living my life as me. I didn't need to cut my hair. Didn't need to wear more make-up. According to my Facebook friends, I was golden, gorgeous.

Plopping my backpack on the floor, I inch towards my desk. In a flurry of familiar clicks, I open a new Firefox window, type Facebook into the address bar, and eagerly wait for my home page to load.

36 new Facebook notifications lie before me, brilliantly outlined in red.
36 more people who had "liked" and commented on my profile picture.
36 reasons to blush; caught in a warm cloud of flattery.

Joy rushes in. I'm happy at being "liked," happy at being noticed, happy at having somebody tell me I resemble an *America's Next-Top Model* contestant.

I'm now twenty minutes late for class, yeah, but I'm in for a beautiful day. And the rest of my Facebook-friending, Internet-surfing generation is with me.

In September 1988, reggae musician Bobby McFerrin released a spunky new track that surged in popularity. Titled "Don't Worry, Be Happy," the song featured whistle-filled acoustics and an amiable, buttery melody. "Don't worry!" Americans became fond of exclaiming, "Be happy!" The song captured a new American theory of happiness—happiness as denial of one's troubles, and gratitude for what was at hand. Generation X, personified in Douglas Coupland's books and films like *Reality Bites*, might have found happiness singing along with McFerrin. But in modern society, this leisurely contentment is rare. Instead, happiness in the 21st century is accompanied by an urgent self-absorption.

So how—and why—did the perception of happiness change? Today, our world loves to chit chat. To our friends, we continually gush over the latest technological trends, styles, and appliances. Our fingers kiss buttons in a rapid-fire stream of clacking. Our eyes glaze over and spin like glinting CD discs. And around us, the chirp of computers, cell phones, and iPods never ceases. At the height of this social atmosphere lies my generation, Generation Y: the babies of the 1980s and 1990s. In a recent *Newsweek* article, author and physician Dr. Andrew Weil, the founder of the Spontaneous Happiness program, scorns our easy accessibility to the media: "Many people today spend much of their waking time surfing the Internet, texting and talking on mobile phones, attending to email, watching television, and being stimulated by other new media—experiences never available until now" (10). Needless to say, we live in a world peppered with distractions. As a result, Generation Y has grown up with a philosophy: to be heard and accepted in society, we must talk back. This need for constant communication has sparked a unique happy-state mentality in our generation. In order

to be happy, we must be in near-continuous contact with our environment. Consequently, we become increasingly conditioned to understand—and to feel—happiness based on the approval of others. In short, we’ve lost the ability to know when we’re happy on our own.

As our global awareness expands through technology and increasing travel, my generation experiences insecurity. Suddenly, not everything revolves around us. The world is also about Canada. And Germany. And India and Spain and France. We’re forced to view society through a universal lens. We begin to question our own self-worth in such a huge world.

The media has further contributed to this sense of smallness. As we focus more on the colossal size of the Earth, our self-view shrinks. With TV channels blaring 24-hour news, magazine articles touting the effects of the Chinese economy upon American goods, and newspapers highlighting celebrity red carpet events, we feel even tinier. Author and psychologist Jeffrey Arnett, a research professor at Clark University, examines the discordant effects of globalization on teenagers. He notes: “The images, values, and opportunities [adolescents] perceive as being part of the global culture undermine their belief in the value their local cultural practices. At the same time, the ways of the global culture seem out of reach to them, too foreign to everything they know from their direct experience” (778). We’re disoriented at the amount of cultural information available to us. When we glimpse the larger world, the task of fitting in suddenly seems overwhelming. We fear losing our importance within all the facts we’re being fed. This sense of cultural exclusion guides us towards a natural human instinct: comfort. In our insecurity, we flock towards a support system to amplify our own meaning. We turn to social networking sites.

My Twitter home page refreshes itself every second, as the lives of others pop up on my screen in clipped, 140-character blurbs. Each day, I add my own blurb to the mix. There’s something therapeutic about inking your own state-of-being onto the Internet, where you know countless others are

sitting at their screens, watching. On the Web, you can edit to satisfaction. You can make mistakes and erase them. You have the pleasure of perfecting yourself. As *New York Times* essayist and author William Deresiewicz puts it, “When we speak in our own names, on Facebook and so forth, we’re strenuously cheerful, conciliatory, well-groomed” (7). Best of all, we have a guaranteed audience. According to the Facebook Company Statistics page, Facebook currently has more than 800 million active users; the average user having about 130 Facebook friends, with “more than 900 million objects that people interact with (pages, groups, events and community pages).”

It seems my fellow Americans and I all feel the urge to insert ourselves into a list of Facebook notifications. And why not? Facebook makes us feel temporarily wanted. We’re delighted at being important enough to merit a friend request. When the red notification button pops up, we may internally squeal. Clicking the notification produces the same feeling of eagerness we get when peeling open a neatly wrapped birthday present—wondering, is it the dream gift I’ve always wanted? Or is it something even better? We ponder our Facebook notifications with a mixture of hopeful anticipation and greed. In fact, our brains are wired for this. Scientific evidence tells us dopamine—the neurotransmitter responsible for feelings of pleasure—plays a role in our never-ending enthusiasm for Facebook notifications. Psychologist Susan Weinschenk argues that the brain is attached to these notifications:

“With the Internet, Twitter, and texting we now have almost instant gratification of our desire to seek. [...] We get into a dopamine induced loop...dopamine starts us seeking, then we get rewarded for the seeking which makes us seek more. It becomes harder and harder to stop looking at email, stop texting, stop checking our cell phones to see if we have a message or a new text.” (1)

In short, self-validation becomes a scary addiction. When we discov-

er that somebody comments favorably upon our photos, “likes” our statuses, or “Friends” our account, we feel a strong sense of achievement at having “done” something to earn others’ approval. We know that through a hubbub of other online users, we were the ones important enough not to be skimmed over or ignored. And we always want more.

The design of Facebook and other social media sites only serves to enhance our satisfaction. On Facebook, the existence of the “Like” thumbs-up button—opposed to a “Dislike” button—amplifies our quest for smiles. Whether we make a conscious effort to or not, we beam at the amount of “likes” our Facebook selves accumulate. It’s simple: to be liked creates happiness. The popular blogging site Tumblr utilizes a similar “like” system, where users can click a heart-shaped button for posts they find enjoyable. The more hearts somebody gets, the more loved their blog is; and thus, it can be assumed the happier they become.

In a 2009 scientific study of 596 online blogs, researchers Ko and Kuo discovered a correlation between happiness and blogging. Instead of promoting loneliness, they demonstrated that blogging actually has psychological benefits (Ko and Kuo 75). This makes sense. On the Internet, we’re suddenly not so alone. We look towards the Web for intimate conversations, good company, and attention. As a generation, isolation seems to be our greatest fear. Psychology professor Jean Twenge, author of the nonfiction book *Generation Me*, observes that our solitude has actually increased over the years: “More than four times as many Americans describe themselves as lonely now than in 1957” (110). Blogging, chatting online, and Tweeting calm our worries of obscurity. Just as we’d act if given a compliment, we glow when something online is directed at us. Social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr are kings at feeding our own self-confidence. As Deresiewicz comments, “We’re all selling something today, because even if we aren’t literally selling something [...] we’re always selling ourselves. We use social media to create a product—to create a brand—and the product is us”

(7). When we're "bought" by others through their acceptance of us, we earn our profits in happiness. Thus, Twitter Retweets and Facebook comments act as forms of currency propelling our joy. We're glad to make the cash, because it means we were objects of desire, and being desired makes us happy. Yet it's clear that this longing for social acceptance has been stamped within us for centuries. After all, isn't the classic fairytale *The Ugly Duckling* all about fulfilling the wish to belong? His happily-ever-after moment—finding a family with the swans—loosens a visceral yearning in everyone, not just Generation Y. But while the human race has preserved this hunger to belong up until modern-day, 21st century inventions such as Facebook have piqued our appetites by providing visual, concrete mediums for us to experience our joy. Facebook acts as our physical certificate of acceptance within a community, outlining our achievements on "Walls." We actively watch our happiness grow on the screen in ways that the Ugly Duckling never could; and we can return to the exact moment of this joy, over and over again.

Furthermore, our virtual Facebook walls present us with physical archives of our likeability—evidence that is preserved to the exact date and from the exact people. In our modern era, "likes," statuses, and comments are documented and saved on the page. This provides a historical contrast. In the past, acceptance and its accompanying happy ending have only included those directly involved. But now, Facebook and other technologies provide a visual symbol of happiness; a happiness that can be relived by everyone who sees the source. We can point straight to our Facebook pages to anyone and smugly show off how Joe the football player accepted our Friend request. Each individual has an equal chance to fit in, achieve joy, and consequently witness how others fit in. In this way, happiness becomes all about proving our own acceptance to our community.

And it's an urgent sense of happiness. Our joy today is quick, fleeting. Armed with our cell phones, we are pushed towards what Rockefeller University's Bruce McEwen, professor of neuropsychiatry, coins "a wholly

artificial sense of urgency” (Michaud 146). Faced with speedy communication networks, we falsely believe that there’s always somebody waiting for us to reply. This seemingly pressing duty results in a short-term mindset—a mindset that freakishly resembles our conversations. We’re engrained to live our lives based upon actions that only just preceded the present, mirroring our habit to reply to what has just been said. Thus, 21st century interactions reflect qualities of the Facebook Newsfeed. We behave dependent upon Facebook time stamps of “a few seconds ago,” “a minute ago,” “2 hours ago” . . . the point being we operate with a perception of only the near future, the reply back, the “next hour” rather than the “ten years from now.” (Facebook interestingly makes it difficult to navigate back to one’s actions “a year ago,” choosing also to direct its attention to current day.) Generation Y lives specifically in the present, choosing to ignore tomorrow because of our society’s emphasis on what just occurred. As a result, we generate a happiness that is instantaneous and rapid to desert us.

Moreover, our emotional spectrum itself becomes trimmed to the emoticons of a computer keyboard. Happiness—along with sadness, confusion, fear, even seduction—are imprinted into digital faces sent rapidly by hitting the “Return” key. The instant-message era has transformed Generation Y into an instant-emotion era. Abbreviated phrases such as “LOL,” “WTF,” and “FML” have caused our ancestors to scratch their balding heads, yet conversely, they’ve allowed us to expand upon our functions as fast-moving, “live in the moment” human beings.

Our urgency is further illuminated through our quick pleasure of gaining material goods. A few days ago, I ordered a new iPhone from the Sprint company. On the store’s glinting walls hung an advertisement. The poster featured an iPhone bathed in glowing light, beaming underneath bold lettering: “Our greatest reward is making our customers happy.” Like the majority of its customers, I wanted to believe that Sprint didn’t care about my money; that it only cared about my smile. As the salesman touted the voice-

recognition features of the iPhone 4S, a grin slid across my face. Sprint's ad was working. I was irrepressibly happy. I relished the iPhone 4S because of its refreshing possibility: touch-screen, music, Internet... I wanted the swift, cursory pleasure that tagged along with a new cell phone, because I hungered for the magic that this attainment promised. I wanted to belong in the hip, trend-setting group of iPhone users. But I also knew, unconsciously, how rapidly this group's invigoration with the iPhone 4S would fade once Apple released the iPhone 5, the iPhone 6, and onward...

I'm not alone in my current enchantment. In November 2011, Newsweek magazine predicted 30 million iPhones to sell within this year's holiday season (Streib 25). The release of the iPhone 4S has prompted a dash to phone retailers to purchase the latest, hottest gadget. This sale pattern is described by psychologists as "hedonic adaption," a phenomenon where people quickly embrace changes—for example, in the marketplace—"in order to maintain a stable level of happiness" (Rosenbloom 1). Basically, we shop geared towards a happy "buzz," and upon its disappearance, we buy newer material goods to reclaim the feeling. Instead of finding contentment with what we currently have, our minds flood with objects we don't own—but feel we should attain to belong.

While the advertisement industry has always planted this insatiability in consumers, modern-day advertisements seem to be even more pressing and omnipresent. Our dependence upon the Internet in schools, in the workplace, and at home creates an information-surfeit. When we seek information on websites like Twitter and Facebook, we also receive pleas to purchase. Generation Y has grown up with the media instructing us we need material goods in order to gain fulfillment in our lives. As a result, happiness becomes all about indulging our need to belong, and publicizing our belonging to others. On Black Friday this year, I accompanied my eager sixteen-year-old cousin to the Briarwood Mall at midnight. Armed with a purse full of coupons and cash, she dove through the doors of Macy's like a frenzied truck driver,

barreling through the aisles. When we returned home, laden with shopping bags, my cousin darted straight to the computer. She immediately logged into Twitter. “I’m just so happy!” she hooted, and typed: “Black Friday success! #forthewin.”

My cousin wasn’t the only one who broadcasted her delight. I logged onto Facebook that night to greet numerous statuses boasting grand deals. One of my high school classmates bragged: “Got a buncha cute stuff, hell yeah :) :)!” with fifteen different people “liking” her new investments. Of course, material happiness isn’t new to us. What is new is the way we enhance our happiness by broadcasting it to others. I wasn’t sure if my cousin’s true happiness stemmed from her great deals, or from telling others so she could receive their public praise.

Yet a happy status is simply that: a status—a current standing that disappears with the passage of time. It can be said that Generation Y has no concept of sustained, long-lasting happiness. Instead, our happiness is status-like in its brevity. And as soon as it disappears, we run back seeking more. More importantly, our happiness doesn’t stop at the individual level. It encompasses our contentment at a societal level as well. Our Founding Fathers plugged joy into our Declaration of Independence, emphasizing the concept’s communal importance: “...[citizens] are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” The objective was for each individual to chase after his own happiness, which would heighten the country’s overall wellbeing.

In Bhutan, a small country in the Himalayas, this idea is portrayed quite literally. The government measures Bhutan’s prosperity in terms of “gross national happiness (GNH).” The country emphasizes psychological wellbeing over economy; arguing that happiness, rather than economic growth, is a better indicator of national success (Arora). To effectively assess happiness, Bhutan implements a series of annual surveys. The surveys ask citizens to rank their degree of happiness on a numerical scale, in areas such

as “health, time use, education, culture, good governance, ecology, community vitality and living standards” (Centre for Bhutan Studies). The results of these surveys create national policies geared towards those specific areas. Great Britain has also embraced a similar policy, creating a Happiness Index to measure its citizens’ levels of contentment. Other countries across the globe, like France and Canada, are currently considering adopting similar proposals (Stratton). Yet despite the program’s rise across the world, our nation has yet to measure our own happiness. It can be argued that this is a good thing. After all, do we really need another governmental invasion of our personal affairs? Besides, it’s hard to weigh happiness when it’s such an individual, subjective term. But perhaps the deeper reason behind our reluctance is that we know an American Gross National Happiness would be impossible. In the United States, Generation Y’s happiness is portrayed as an impersonal abstraction. As an age group, we are happiest when we’re the furthest away from our physical, “real” identities. We gain joy when we’re purchasing goods, on the computer, or being told virtually of our assets. Instead of acknowledging our own virtues, we base our happiness upon what others think of us, eagerly trying to see ourselves from their eyes. In the guise of Facebook “likes” and Twitter Retweets, our happiness is calculated by the social acceptance of others. We don’t know how to measure our own happiness, because we’ve become so accustomed to having others measure it out for us.

Current research reveals that as a generation, our view of happiness differs drastically from that of our parents. A 2010 psychological experiment, carried out by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania, investigated the shifting types of happiness that occur over a lifespan. The experiment, which analyzed over 12 million personal blogs, surveys, and laboratory results, demonstrates that the meaning of happiness is shifting entirely across different generations: “When a 20-year-old and a 60-year-old express feeling ‘happy,’ they are likely feeling different things. When individuals are young, they

primarily experience happiness as feeling excited; however, as they get older, they come to experience happiness more as feeling peaceful. Furthermore, an age-related increase in focus on the present moment appears to drive this shift” (Mogilner 396). At one end of the spectrum, happiness for our elders is still locked in a long-lasting tranquility. At the other end, happiness for us evokes a fleeting excitement, maintained through today’s acquisition of compliments or material objects. The outcome from this experiment points to separate generations and their differing interpretations of happiness, which leads us to a startling conclusion. Our generational seniors would most likely provide survey results that contrast our own.

Even more troublesome are our own assessments of happiness in others. A new research study executed at Stanford University shows that current college-age students do not know how to read happiness in their peers. Alex Jordan, the Ph.D. psychology graduate student who conducted the experiment, recorded his participants’ miscalculations of happiness in others. He discovered: “...a sample of 140 Stanford students [were] unable to accurately gauge others’ happiness even when they were evaluating the moods of people they were close to—friends, roommates and people they were dating” (Cope-land 1). The results are disconcerting. Why can’t we figure out when people of our own age—people who we should connect the easiest with—are happy? Perhaps this effect is due to our lack of physical interactions with one another. By sending one another smiley faces and Facebook Friend requests online, we’ve developed a lack of awareness about tangible friendships, forgetting what a true LOL really looks like outside the computer screen. Instead, our focus has adjusted to view happiness online, through belonging in a technology-dependent community. Jordan’s finding presents an eerie possibility: if we are unable to monitor happiness in our closest companions in real life, how can we be expected to monitor happiness within ourselves?

It can be said that by seeking happiness in public recognition, Generation Y is diminishing its own definition of joy to shreds, re-shaping

“happiness” to mean “self-validation.” The United States fails to measure happiness in its citizens because its youngest generation doesn’t take societal assessments of happiness into consideration. Instead, we associate happiness with attention-grabbing networks like Facebook, text messaging, and material goods. An American Gross National Happiness would be better renamed as an American Gross National Desire to Belong. Our quest for happiness, then, masks our desperation to fit in, leaving Bobby McFerrin’s lyrics—don’t worry, be happy—to collapse like ghosts. But is this ultimately as gloomy of an ending as it appears to be?

After all, as we grow with our gadgets, so does the rest of the world. Our dependence upon technology has molded an evolving society. While we fix ourselves inside online commentary, we also produce passion. The Internet makes room for more voices to be deemed significant, and heard. At its core, our desire to belong within a community is a worthwhile one. Groups can enhance our own value, give us the support networks that we need, and allow us to learn more about those around us—and ourselves. Our thoughts (in notification-form) serve as forms of happiness for others. Tools we rely upon for pleasure, such as Facebook, may be making us more conscious of each other’s emotions, dreams, and questions. As we update our Twitter statuses, we are essentially giving others more opportunities to better understand us. So maybe it’s a good thing that our country can’t assess our happiness. Maybe it reflects our own joy as a complex, dynamic piece—not something that can be mapped out on a flat scale. Perhaps we are, in a sense, happier than our predecessors have ever been, because we are unafraid and more aware of our own growth on the screen.

Works Cited

- Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. "The Psychology Of Globalization." *American Psychologist* 57.10 (2002): 774-783. PsycARTICLES. Web. 21 Nov. 2011.
- Arora, Vishal. "Would Bhutan's Happiness Index Work in Britain?" *The Guardian*. 14 Apr. 2011. Web. 21 Nov. 2011.
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2011/apr/14/david-cameron-bhutan-happiness-index>>.
- Centre for Bhutan Studies. "Results of the Second Nationwide 2010 Survey on Gross National Happiness." *Gross National Happiness*. The Centre for Bhutan Studies, 25 Jan. 2011. Web. 04 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/>>.
- Copeland, Libby. "The Anti-Social Network." *Slate Magazine - Politics, Business, Technology, and the Arts - Slate Magazine*. 26 Jan. 2011. Web. 21 Nov. 2011.
<http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2011/01/the_antiso-social_network.html>.
- Deresiewicz, William. "Generation Sell." *The New York Times: Sunday Review* [New York City] 12 Nov. 2011: SR1+. Print.
- Ko, H-C, and F-Y Kuo. "Can Blogging Enhance Subjective Well-being through Self-disclosure?" *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 12.1 (2008): 75-79. Print.
- Michaud, Ellen. "Sleep To Be Sexy, Smart, and Slim." *Reader's Digest* Apr. 2008: 140-49.
- Mogilner, Cassie, Sepandar D. Kamvar, and Jennifer Aaker. "The Shifting Meaning of Happiness." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 2.4 (2011): 395-402. Print.
- Rosenbloom, Stephanie. "But Will It Make You Happy?" *New York Times* 8 Aug. 2010, Business sec.: 1. Print.
- Stratton, Allegra. "Happiness Index to Gauge Britain's National Mood". *The Guardian*, 14 Nov. 2010. Web. 27 Nov. 2011.

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2010/nov/14/happiness-index-britain-national-mood>>.

Streib, Lauren. "Black Friday Breakdown." *Newsweek* 26 Nov. 2011: 25. Print.

Tomlinson, John. *Globalization and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999. Print.

Twenge, Jean M. *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled--and More Miserable than Ever before*. New York: Free Press, 2006. Print.

Weil, Andrew. "Don't Let Chaos Get You Down." *Newsweek* 10 Nov. 2011: 9-10. Print.

Weinschenk, Susan. "100 Things You Should Know About People: #8 — Dopamine Makes You Addicted To Seeking Information." *Applying Psychology to Understand How People Think, Work, and Relate - What Makes Them Click*, 7 Nov. 2009. Web. 04 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.whatmakethemclick.net/2009/11/07/100-things-you-should-know-about-people-8-dopamine-makes-us-addicted-to-seeking-information/>>.

U.S. Travel and Tourism Industries. *Office of Travel and Tourism Industries*, 1 Jan. 2011. Web. 03 Dec. 2011. <<http://tinet.ita.doc.gov/>> .

Taking a Page from *Fun Home*: Relations Between Reading and Reality

From English 124: Margaret Hitch (nominated by Tiffany Ball)

*This essay demonstrates Margaret's concise, clear, and analytical writing style as well as her ability to grapple with a complicated fictional form—graphical narrative—and a difficult political subject—identity and sexuality. Her deep analysis of reading, reality, and memory shows sophisticated thought and writing about a topic just touched on in class, transforming the idea from a briefly discussed theme of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* into a convincing theory of the novel. Where Margaret's writing excellence is most observable is in her dense close readings of the memoir, close readings that brilliantly consider *Fun Home* as both literature and visual culture.*

Tiffany Ball

Taking a Page from *Fun Home*: Relations Between Reading and Reality

Throughout Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, the author (and inextricably, the narrator) methodically sifts through her parent's and her own visual and textual memories in order to make connections between them and better understand the events that shaped their lives and identities. She examines details of her parent's past histories and marriage, the questionable nature of her father's death, and the realization of her own sexuality. As she studies these events through her memories, she simultaneously studies the books and texts that the characters read at these times in their lives. Through sequences of remembered images, recollected dialogue, and thoughtful narration, Bechdel reveals how this fusion of reading and reality directly affects the characters' identities and views on the world.

The truth behind her father's death is one aspect of her life that Alison tries to more fully comprehend in the novel. Within the first two pages of the book's second chapter, "A Happy Death," Alison questions whether this death was accidental or suicidal and considers this question within the context of her father's reading habits and certain printed texts surrounding the event. As an author, Bechdel makes the points she is trying to get across clear through her thoughtful arrangements and juxtapositions of images and text on each page.

Within these first two pages, the attention in the panels is split equally between real-life scenes of action and stills taken of printed or written materials. By focusing half of the attention of her memory on the texts that she has read, Bechdel alludes to the importance of reading on her basic views and understandings of reality. At times these panels focused on reading seem to even visually overpower the scenes of reality. There is much more detail in the representation of the texts than in other scenes. On the cover of the copy

of Camus' novel, *A Happy Death*, Bechdel pays great attention as an artist to the wrinkles in the author's face and specifically describes the texture of his coat collar with focused, crosshatched lines (1 below), while in the real-life depiction of her father's funeral, the faces and clothes of the mourners are left smooth and non-descriptive (27) (2 below). There is a similar attention to detail in the rendering of the shadow and texture in the image of a dictionary page (28) (3 below). The layout and font choice is specific and descriptive of each printed material, from the exacting scientific conventions of the dictionary definitions to the juxtaposition of institutionalized print and personal handwriting on the office memo (28) (4 below).

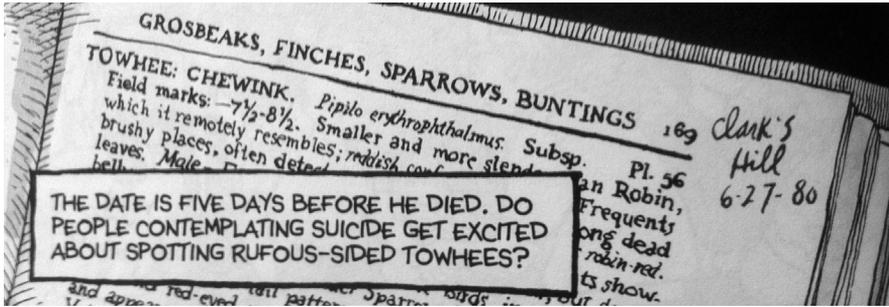
1.



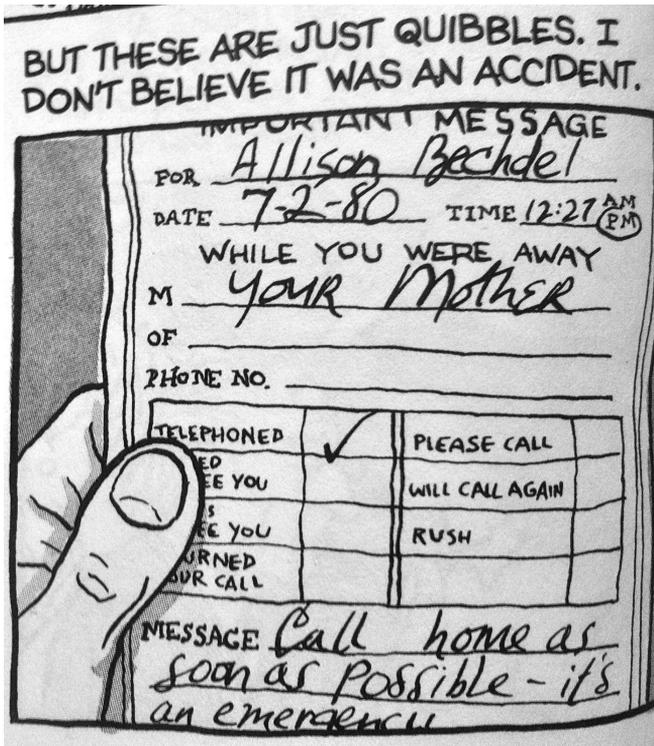
2.



3.



4.



Bechdel shows us these printed details more vividly than the settings within which she reads them in order to point out their significance in the story. In order to show a reversed passing of time, Bechdel twice shows us a

panel of a newspaper on a table littered with breakfast detritus. A paper is shown at Alison's place at the table after her father's death, and then again at her father's seat before his death (1 above and 5 below). The placement and repetition of this representation of printed text reveals how the act of reading was intrinsic to both her and her father's daily lives. The details in the breakfast table debris of empty coffee mugs and used dishes are carefully and beautifully observed, yet the newspaper itself still takes the center of attention in the scene, standing out in white on the blue wash of the table and its contents, attesting to its paramount importance (27).

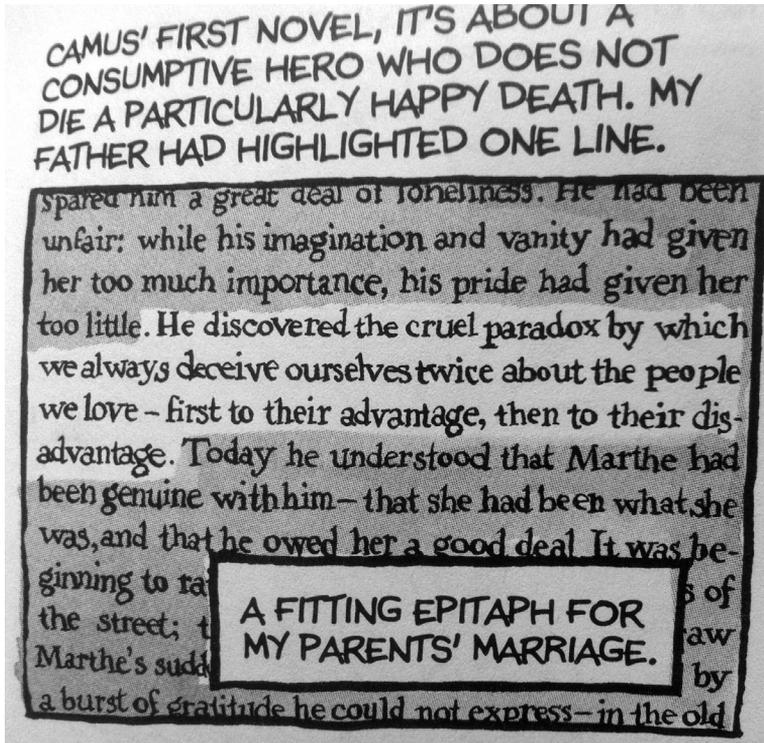
5.



Bechdel indicates the active presence of these printed texts in the characters' views of reality by bringing our attention to her father's marginal notations. In her father's copy of Albert Camus' book, *A Happy Death*, Bechdel finds that he has highlighted one line of the text (28) (6 below). Bechdel illustrates this notation visually by highlighting the line in white

against the blue-toned passage and additionally explains its context through text in the gutter of the panel.

6.



In the panel that shows the dictionary page (3 above), Bechdel again reveals an example of the dynamic part her father played in his reading by including a handwritten note he had scrawled in the margin relating the date and location that he had spotted the type of bird defined on the page (28). These two details demonstrate how reading was not a passive act for Bechdel's father, but a continuous thinking process by which he sought to make connections to his own life.

Bechdel's choices in visual arrangement and focus could tell a story all on their own, but Alison's narrations in the gutters of each panel work to

explain more fully the complexities of the stories she tells and the questions she asks. Her words fill in the blanks for the audience, while still maintaining the necessity of her images for full comprehension. For example, in one panel we are shown the aforementioned image of Camus' novel sitting on a breakfast table (1 above). In the gutter of this panel, Alison speculates, "There's no proof, but there are some suggestive circumstances... the copy of Camus' *A Happy Death* that he'd been reading and leaving around the house in what might be construed as a deliberate manner" (27). Although we may have been able to glean a connection from the visual juxtaposition of the newspaper headline of her father's death and the book's title, Alison's narration more assertively informs us of the relation she saw between her father's readings and the possible suicidal nature of her father's death. In the gutter text, Alison sites her parents' divorce as a possible cause to her father's suicide. Then, she visually presents the line her father had highlighted that reads, "He discovered the cruel paradox by which we deceive ourselves twice about the people we love- first to their advantage, then to their disadvantage" (28). Beneath the image of this text Alison comments, "A fitting epitaph for my parent's marriage" (28) (6 above). Through this sequence of words and images, Bechdel simultaneously reveals the connection that her father made between the text and his own life, and uses this connection to support the opinion of her father's death as a suicide.

Throughout the entire novel, Alison constantly questions her sense of reality, and in her analysis of her father's death, she proceeds no differently. Just as Alison begins to find evidence in her father's readings to support the theory of his death as a suicide, she turns around and questions this evidence itself. In resistance to the idea that her father had turned to Camus' dark-themed novel for suicidal reasons, she wonders, "Should we have been suspicious when he started plowing through Proust the year before?" (28). Then, to repudiate her assumption that her father's marginal notations were made in a state of depression and pessimism about his own life, she reveals the im-

age of the dictionary page marked with his bird-watching notes and in the gutter text asks, “Do people contemplating suicide get excited about spotting rufous-sided towhees?” (28) (3 above). Through these contrasting examples, Bechdel points out how reading affects people in both trivial and critical ways.

The last panel of these two pages brings all these trains of thought to an interesting, seemingly disjointed conclusion. Despite her last few arguments, Alison reverts back to her original belief in the suicidal nature of his death. She asserts, “I don’t believe it was an accident” (28). The image that she pairs with this statement is that of the office memo she received when she was notified of her father’s death (4 above). As mentioned earlier, the image of this text is carefully observed. We see a recognizable, standard fill-in-the-blank printout, on which the immediate facts of the situation have been transcribed by some secretary, herself unaffected from the importance of the event, in a quick, matter-of-fact scrawl. We see the note through Alison’s eyes, as she holds it for the first time. The image is honest and specifically descriptive of an important experiential moment in Alison’s life. I believe that Bechdel chose to juxtapose that final statement with this image as a way to show how, despite her efforts to explain her father’s death, its suicidal nature is a fact that she knows based more on her raw emotional intuition than on anything factual.

The reason Alison has such a strong intuitive feeling about her father’s actions perhaps lies in the degree to which she has gone to learn about her parents’ pasts and understand their mental processes. In chapter three, “That Old Catastrophe,” Alison recounts events that took place from the period during the early stages of her parent’s relationship, when her father was in the Army. By studying the letters that her father sent to her mother while he was away, Alison pieces together the nature of their relationship and lives at that time. She discovers her father’s interest in novels by Fitzgerald at that time, and notices how his own identity seemed to both arise from and reflect

ideas from these texts. We can clearly see the way reading affected her father's view of reality through the thoughts reflected in his letters.

We first see Bechdel's father reading a copy of Fitzgerald's biography during his time off in the Army barracks, as his bunkmates sift through porn and sci-fi magazines. Next, we see him writing a letter to Bechdel's mother, and finally, we are shown a close-up of this letter itself, its contents written in a distinctively messy, handwritten scrawl. This sequence of events shows us the presence of literature in her father's life, and his direct reaction to this reading through his own writing. In her reading of the letters, Alison notices how he often references his readings in the letters, and in the first bit of text from his letters that is revealed to us, he begins to make connections between the portrait of Fitzgerald in the biography and himself. Her father writes, "He reminds me of myself. Especially the old 'emotional bankruptcy'" (62). Even in these first few panels, it becomes apparent that her father used reading to connect to and expand on the way he views his own identity.

Through her narration, Alison goes on to point out the many parallels she finds between her father's life and the life of Fitzgerald and his characters that her father does not himself directly point out in his letters. First of all, she sees a similarity between her father and the character of Jimmy Gatz. In her view of both of their histories, she finds many likenesses. "Gatsby's self-willed metamorphosis from farm boy to prince is in many ways identical to my father's" (63). Later on, she notes that both her father and Gatsby were in possession of large, conspicuous libraries, and argues, "My father even looked like Gatsby, or at any rate, like Robert Redford in the 1974 movie" (64). Alison also makes an interesting comparison between her father and Fitzgerald himself. She points out that Fitzgerald and her father were both forty-four when they died. In fact, she finds their lives had, "The same number of months, the same number of weeks" (85). Alison, like her father, seeks to make connections from reading to life. But unlike her father, who uses these connections for the purpose of self-assessment, Alison makes these

connections as a form of research that aid in her attempts to understand the people and events around her.

In certain statements, Alison seems to suggest that her parent's literary tastes are based on the comparisons they find between the text and their own lives. When recounting how her mother chose to hold on to a certain poem by Wallace Stevens instead of giving it away, Alison wonders why the poem was so special to her mother. She first offers its Catholic themes as the reason, but then goes on to hypothesize, "Perhaps she also liked the poem because its juxtaposition of catastrophe with a plush domestic interior is life with my father in a nutshell" (83). Similarly, she wonders about her father's interest in Fitzgerald's writing. "I think what was so alluring to my father about Fitzgerald's stories was their inextricability from Fitzgerald's life . . . such a suspension of the imaginary in the real was, after all, my father's stock in trade" (65). She sees her father's interest as stemming from the way his and Fitzgerald's views of reality mirrored one another. Through these two examples, Alison theorizes that her parents liked the reading material that they did largely due to the extent to which the characters or concepts were related to themselves and their realities.

The many aspects of Fitzgerald's life and writing that have obvious parallels in her father's life may have held much interest for him, but we can also see in his letters his attraction to the ideas Fitzgerald presents that he finds foreign. He is impressed by the outrageous drunken adventures that Fitzgerald and his wife partake in. To him, their actions make them appear to be "pathetic, fabulous, mediocre geniuses" (62). He wants to be like them by engaging in that kind of behavior. He writes to Bechdel's mother, "I want you and I to go on a roaring drunk. I want to wake up somewhere not knowing how I got there like [Zelda and Gatsby] did in Brussels" (65). Her father also takes note of the extremely romantic language Fitzgerald used in the courtship of his wife during his own stint in the Army. Her father sees the parallel in his situation and seeks to emulate this zealous romanticism in

his early relationship with Bechdel's mother. He begins to passionately confess his love in his letters, declaring, "I love you, I love you, you crazy wonderful girl" (63). Through his reading her father discovers a way of life and thought that attracts him. In his writing, he attempts to mold his identity within this image.

By analyzing her parent's reading choices in relation to their own lives, Bechdel discovers an almost cyclic nature in the way these fictions and realities affect each other. She suggests that her parents are attracted to books in which they can find comparisons to their own lives. As they read, they make the text uniquely special to themselves by subjecting the unalterable print to these personal connections. Conversely, through showing the transformations in his writing, Bechdel makes clear how her father changes his own behaviors and views in reaction to his reading. The characters change their reading of the text to fit their own lives, and simultaneously change their lives to fit the text, making fiction and reality one and the same.

Characters in the novel use reading in order to reinforce and change certain facts and truths about themselves, but they also use reading in order to understand these truths in a way that they would not be able to on their own. In the novel, as Alison becomes aware of her sexuality, we see how reading aids her in the way she sees and understands this facet of herself.

Becoming sexually aware is a slow and almost universally confusing experience. It's a facet of our lives that remains completely private, absent from any kind of formalized education. We are left to figure it out, essentially, on our own. Alison recounts how, "in a manner consistent with my bookish upbringing" (74) she dealt with this experience by turning to books for help. The image of a dictionary page highlighted with certain terms appears again and again in the novel, in an attempt to show the way in which Alison went about making sense of complicated concepts in her life. The use of a dictionary is especially helpful as Alison first begins to ask questions about her sexuality. As a youngster, we see her make sense of her first physi-

cal stirrings when she runs across the word, “orgasm” (171). As a teenager, she is hesitantly intrigued by another word, “lesbian” (74). We are shown gay terminology in the dictionary yet again when she comments on the “queer” business of her father’s death (57). The nonfictional nature of this specific kind of text is demonstrative of the first, most basic type of reading that helped Alison begin to understand her sexuality.

Alison describes how the realization that she is a lesbian came to her through reading, referring to it as, “a revelation not of the flesh, but of the mind.” She presents her story to us through a sequence of images all surrounding spheres of literature. We are shown scenes depicting book pages, book spines, book covers, card catalogs, library stacks and circulation desks, glimpsing titles and words that give a sense of the subject matter she is studying (75). She becomes instantly intrigued when she first stumbles upon a book about lesbians. She furtively returns to books of such nature again and again until she has cast off all wariness about her interest in the subject and thoroughly researches homosexuality at her local library. A few panels later, she comes out to her parents (77). Without having had any gay physical encounters, she knows, only through the power of printed text and her own sense of self, that she is a lesbian. This illustrates not only the power of Alison’s inherent self-knowledge, but also the way that the information and connectivity that she gains through reading influences and heightens aspects of this self-knowledge.

Even after Alison becomes aware of her sexuality, reading still has a strong influence on her sexual and romantic growth and relations. Books are a prevalent force in the retelling of her first lesbian relationship. Our initial visual glimpse into the intimate life of Alison and her lover is an image of two pairs of legs on a bed strewn with paperbacks (7 below).

7.



Reading and sexuality are presented together in what Alison identifies as a “novel fusion of word and deed” (80). Again, we see a dictionary being used, this time as sexual stimuli, as Alison and her lover read the origins of sensual words together in bed (80). We see the two read together in bed multiple times, examining the stories for the surprising sensual abilities of the words (81). In their relationship, both physical and literary explorations are brought together as a means for sexual stimulation.

Through her character’s experiences, Bechdel has illustrated the many ways in which our interpretations of what we read affect our thoughts and actions, and ultimately shape our identities. We find connections to our own lives in reading, and use these fictional examples as a kind of evidence to our chosen identities and actions. Books also present to us ideas and experiences that we are not able to access in our realities. We choose certain behaviors in attempts to try to recreate these experiences ourselves. The knowledge gained through printed texts can also more directly influence us by providing information that gives context to what we already know about our own natures. In each of these reading processes, the boundaries between reality and fiction begin to blur and fade away as the two work as one in the creation our singular identities.

Different Family, Different Culture, Same Me

From English 125: Alyssa Lopez (nominated by Joseph Horton)

In only eight pages, Alyssa opens the door to her family and culture. In the best sense of the personal narrative, she shows the humorous, gut-wrenching and ultimately life-affirming moments of a family reunion in Reading that help make her who she is. She not only excels stylistically with her vivid use of scenic writing (every time I read this, her dad and Nana leap off the page), but she understands, as all good writers do, that readers are looking for connection—in her struggle to connect with her family, we root hard for Alyssa, and when she finds her moment of blissful belonging at the end, so do we.

Joseph Horton

Different Family, Different Culture, Same Me

My dad lets out a hearty laugh as we pay our \$1.50 fine and pass through the tiny line of toll booths off of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. It has been nine years since he and I have visited his side of the family, and you can see the relief in our faces to almost be back in his native Pennsylvania after our long trip from Michigan. Only now, after twelve hours of highways and semi-trucks, twelve hours of smooth jazz and random country stations, twelve hours of coffee cups and bathroom breaks, does he roll down his window and contentedly light a cigarette. We are finally back in his hometown; Reading, Pennsylvania, the city where it seems on every street he could tell you a story about a mischievous adventure from his childhood. Our beat-up '90 Dodge Dynasty glides down the freeway for a few minutes, becoming engulfed by the massive buildings and never-ending apartments of downtown. Tossing his glowing cigarette butt out of the window, my dad takes one more out of the case – much to my dismay from the back seat – and, lighting up again, asks me, “So Aly, you know what to say to your Nana and Abuelo when you see them... right?”

My dad's family is the most stereotypical Puerto Rican family that I know. All of my uncles, aunts, and cousins live in town, and it seems that every time I hear stories from my dad, a new relative pops up as a part of the family. They are the exact opposite of my mom's small, white, Midwestern family from Michigan. In her family, everyone is much more reserved, standoffish, and loves the extreme Michigan weather. On the other hand, the Lopez family is full of a bunch of loud, tan, habitually warm-blooded, smokers. That's why I loved visiting when I was a kid. I tried to absorb all of the excitement, laughter, and constant surroundings of their fluent Spanish as it flew past me. Only able to visit once a year back then, my dad and I were constantly doted on. My aunts, or *Titís*, made all of our favorite foods, like *arroz con pollo* and *banana pasteles*. My *Tíos*, or Uncles, would sit me

on their laps and coax me to repeat little words in Spanish that they pointed out, hoping that their lessons would accelerate my language and make me a full-blown fluent speaker by the next time we met. My Nana would sing to me Spanish lullabies before I went to bed, her thick accent mesmerizing me into dreams. I relished the attention as a child, and now I couldn't wait to see my obnoxiously animated family once again.

I shift our sleeping dog around on my lap in the crowded back seat, and get a huge puff of smoke in my face. The next few minutes are filled with random Spanish phrases and words that my dad spurts out. They have no meaning to me, yet I try to understand for his sake. He is concerned with my appearance to all of his family, and his newfound preoccupation with cigarettes shows me he is also worried about how he will look as well. Once again, he starts up the hurried lecture I've heard three times already during the car ride of the correct ways to pronounce our welcome blessings: annunciating each syllable in the word "*ben-dee-see-own*," or "*God Bless You*," and stressing the importance of the double kiss on the cheek and a big, sincere hug. With that, we pull up to the small, white brick house on Pear Street and stretch our legs. I can't wait to finally be able to act Puerto Rican for a change. *It feels so good to be back.*

Our arrival was planned as a surprise for my Nana's 75th birthday. The only person who knew we were coming was my Tití Jackie, who strategically arranged for both my Nana and Abuelo to be home in the kitchen when she let us in. Like clockwork, we rang the doorbell once and heard her heavy, deliberate footsteps stomp through the living room to the glass door. Stepping aside, she waved us over to the stairs where no one could see us. "*Dios te bendiga, gracias a Dios que llegó bien. Gracias a Dios*," she whispers, thanking God for our safe trip, while giving us both long, overwhelming hugs. She smelled just as I had remembered, of lilac and cooking spices. Instantly I felt at home.

My Nana was so surprised that she began to sob upon seeing my

dad. She clutched her oldest son while tears ran down her wrinkled face and dropped to the floor. They shared a great hug, while my dad whispered his blessings into her tiny ears. Watching them from the kitchen door, I saw my dad's tall body carefully wrap his arms around his mother's frail stature. When they finished, I was sent over to my grandparents to bid them "Bendición" with two kisses and a steady hug each. Their reaction seemed satisfied, but after it was over there was nothing more for me to say. I stepped out of the way for my dad to make conversation, and slowly lost grasp of what was being said through their energetic interjections and joyous laughter.

Nine years and four Spanish classes since my last trip to Pennsylvania, and I was no closer to being a part of my dad's family than I was the last time I visited. My language was nowhere near the fluent Puerto Rican I heard my dad speak on the phone. I'd all but forgotten the Spanish classes of my past – instead I had begun to focus on all of the chemistry, physics, and calculus classes that dominated my schedule. I expected everything to be the same with my dad's family, but now I was older. No longer was I a child to be pampered, nor was I excused for not knowing how to communicate in Spanish. My family expected me to know more. Why didn't I?

Before ten the next morning, it seems the entire Lopez family has descended on my Nana's house. I hear what sounds like hundreds of footsteps reverberate off of the basement walls as I get ready to go upstairs. My dad has been up for hours, and back to his regular Pennsylvania routine of Puerto Rican brewed coffee, *Telémundo*, and the local Spanish newspaper. Coming down to grab a set of glasses, he sees me standing in front of the mirror. "A plaid shirt? It makes you look too white. And why don't you throw on some more makeup? Cover up that white skin, you gringa!" Gringa, his pet name for my mom and I – Spanish slang for a white girl – stabs my heart with pain. He grins jokingly as he walks back up the stairs, but doesn't see the panic on my face as I turn around to examine myself more closely. Sure, I knew that I wasn't as tan as my dad or any of his family – I inherited my mom's pale skin,

which covers up any hint of Hispanic heritage my father may have genetically passed along. However, I had never realized it was so obvious until my dad so bluntly pointed it out. Desperate to look more Puerto Rican, I chose a less ‘country-inspired’ top, and threw on another couple of layers of translucent powder. *Hopefully that’s enough.*

As soon as I got upstairs, crowds of uncles, aunts, and kids swarmed around me, waiting to catch a glimpse of their elusive niece or cousin. Each received a customary hug, and two kisses on the cheek, but when there were no more hugs to give out, I froze up. My Tío Gilbert stepped up and asked me how old I was, to which I shyly answered “Oh, umm 16.” My cousin Ruben chimed in with another question: “What have you been up to in school?” The questions were all easy enough, and I thought I’d be able to get away with not speaking any Spanish for a while. Then, my father yelled from the back of the crowd, “How about showing them your Spanish, Aly?”

In my mind, the entire room went dead silent. I fumbled around with a few things I could say, but nothing I had practiced seemed correct at the moment. “Ummm, ¿Yo estudio... er... mucho química y matemáticas?” My statement about having lots of chemistry and math classes came out as a question. *How could I fix it? Should I try to say it again?* My mind was racing with possibilities, but my humiliation made me decide to stay quiet. Immediately I could feel my face turning bright red as I awkwardly lowered my gaze to the floor, hoping no one would notice my flawed Spanish. There was silence throughout the circle around me as my uncles and cousins tried to find something to say. I couldn’t help but see a glimpse of disappointment in my dad’s eyes as I stumbled through that simple sentence. Sensing my discomfort, my Tío waved it off, speaking in his thick accent to my other cousins with a wide smile on his face, changing the topic and seemingly forgetting the incident.

I had no clue if my Tío was talking about me or something else afterwards; all I wanted to do was go back downstairs and hide my face. In

my dad's eyes, I had disappointed him. I didn't have his family's characteristic deep tan skin and loud, energetic laugh. He had instantly been able to fit back into his old lifestyle by taking up his habit of smoking two packs a day, and swearing like a sailor again. What could I do to be more like him? And now, after all of my practice of many different sentences about my life and school, I couldn't even say something correctly in Spanish? I looked around the room and saw a sea of bronzed skin that I didn't have. Feeling like I didn't belong, I resorted to standing against the wall and avoiding contact with as many people as possible. This just wasn't working out.

"So wait, who's the white girl between Ashanti and José?" I heard a woman's loud voice ask from the other side of the thin living room wall. It was one of the first bits of English I had heard very clearly in a while, and her words pierced my heart for a moment while I listened for a response. The digital camera with all of the family pictures was making its way around the room to all who wanted to see, and from what I could tell, the woman was looking at the picture of all 12 cousins. "Ay, ¿la niña de Frankie?" *Frankie's girl?* I wanted to turn around and look at the picture myself, but couldn't bear the thought of the woman seeing me. I did not want to be the "white girl." Fighting back tears, I made my way to the back door and snuck out to the garage, hoping no one would be able to find me there.

I wish I had been able to deal with my family more directly, instead of running away. Instead, I called my mom back home, and cried into the phone. "Mom? ... Can you come get me? ... Just skip work! ... PLEASE?" By this time I was blubbering hysterically, to the point where not even I could understand myself. I babbled on about my stupid white skin, and how much I wished I had the same personality and looks as my dad and his family. "If... I looked like... dad... it'd be... easier!" I got out through gasping sobs. I knew in the back of my mind that it really wouldn't, but it felt good to blame my bad day on something that was out of my control.

My mom let me cry out my frustrations before she started to calm

me down. After a few moments of silence, she began, “Aly, I’m not going to come get you. Calm down. Take a few deep breaths and listen to me.” She waited until she heard me actually begin to breathe normally to speak again. “You are a smart, beautiful girl, and your dad’s family sees that. They don’t care if you speak Spanish or not, they just want to see you being happy. You haven’t seen them in a long time, and it’s not like they expected you to have changed that much. You’re the same little girl they remember from nine years ago, and they still love you the same as back then. Make the most of this experience.” With tears still in my eyes, I listened to everything she had to say. It made sense to me. I still had the same white skin and inclination for English as I did the last time I had visited. That much hadn’t changed.

When I finally hung up the phone and dried my final tears on my black sweater, I saw the layers of powder from my face cover my sleeve like a white glob. It was no use; I was not tan, and never would be, but why should that stop me from getting to know my family? I hadn’t driven twelve hours out here to sit in a dark, dusty garage and cry about things I couldn’t change. Wiping off the rest of my make-up, I eventually got up and went back into the busy house.

My cousin Ashanti caught my arm as I was making my way back to the living room. “There you are! Come look at what Lily made on her computer!” she said with bursting excitement. I smiled and followed her to my cousin Lily, who was sitting on the couch surrounded by at least a dozen of my other cousins. Her face spread into a wide smile as I walked up, and she turned the computer for me to see. On the screen I saw the picture of me and all of my cousins, edited with a plain purple frame and four simple words: *Todos juntos otra vez*, or “All together again.” At that moment, my eyes started to wet again, but this time with tears of happiness. Looking up, I saw twelve other tan faces smiling back at me, and felt immensely proud to be a part of my Puerto Rican family. It didn’t matter that I didn’t look exactly like my cousins; I realized they still loved me because I was a part of their

family. Our blood bonds are much stronger than my white skin.

Sure, I wasn't coddled by my Tíos and Titís anymore, but I began to make jokes about my less than perfect Spanish, and stumbled my way through forced conversations about school and food. "La comida es muy bueno," *The food is really good*, I commented to my Tití Jackie with my young cousins on my lap, watching her cook rice around the stove. Her genuine smile seemed to appreciate my effort to fit in, and made all the difference to me.

A few days and hundreds of hugs later, my dad and I packed up the car to head back to Michigan. We had said goodbye to the majority of our family the night before, and now only my Tití Jackie, Nana, and Abuelo were left to see us off. We all exchanged long embraces and I could feel my eyes well up – this time wondering the next time I would see my family again. A knot formed in the pit of my stomach, and I felt I could not even speak without bursting into a hysterical fit. After hearing their blessings for a safe trip, I plopped back into the car and waved to the three of them, fighting back the tears. Perfectly planned, my dad pulled out his last cigarette from the carton and lit up as we pulled out of the driveway. We sat in silence for the first five minutes of the ride back, both noticeably sad to leave our family. Throwing his cigarette butt out the window, my dad finally turned to me and said, while smiling, "Your Nana wouldn't stop saying how much you look like me when I was your age. I should show you pictures some time, you really have the Lopez 'features'." Smiling, I looked at my dad and saw the same eyes, nose, and hair that I had. We did look pretty similar, but I had never really noticed.

I never told him about my tears in the garage – it didn't really matter after our short conversation in the car. My skin was white, but I was still a part of his family. I will never have tan skin like my dad or his family, but I've come to accept that truth. I'm still not fluent, but hope to minor in Spanish at the University of Michigan. Further, I now strive to push myself to

become fluent so that one day I could have a real conversation with my aunts and uncles. More than ever, I want to demonstrate my pride in my Hispanic heritage and continue the Puerto Rican legacy to my future children by being able to teach them Spanish as well. The bonds that I feel when I'm with my family are much deeper than any other worry or preconception I may make up about myself. So what if I can't speak perfect Spanish at the moment? *Yo soy puertorriqueña*. I am Puerto Rican, and proud of it.

Matt Kelley Award for Excellence in First-Year Writing

Few periods in life are as chaotic as the first year of college. The changes freshmen undergo are rapid and dramatic. Some of them have left home for the first time. Some are figuring out how to meet their basic needs without familial supervision and, as the bleary eyes we professors see around mid-semester attest, how to get adequate sleep. All of them are navigating the social minefield of roommates, friends, clubs, teams, and organizations. The heady freedom of college leads them to ask pointed questions about who they are and, even more perplexing, who they hope to be. Let's face it: academics can sometimes hold a low place on the priority list. The classroom, it can seem, is not where the real action is.

There's one notable exception to that rule: the first-year writing classroom. That exposed, privileged space consistently provides a venue for academics and the first-year social experience to collide. Perhaps it's because the classes are small, and their professors relentlessly insist that they participate in discussion. Perhaps it's because their professors give them assignments that challenge them to write and think in ways they haven't before, and then make them reflect on the process. Perhaps it's the intimacy that these classes so often create. But whatever the reason may be, freshmen tend to open a window that allows us to see the transformation they're undergoing, and we become their witnesses.

The essays that follow give us insight into students who are stretch-

ing themselves to make leaps. They surprise and delight us in the engaging and honest ways in which they read and respond to texts. As professors, we see a remarkable range of smart, insightful, and compelling writing from all levels of students, but in fact nothing quite compares to freshmen. They are students in the crucible. For those of us who love teaching freshmen, the opportunity to play a small role in their journey is nothing short of an honor.

Dana Nichols

Lecturer, Sweetland Center for Writing

The Public Woman's Guide to Getting By: Navigating the Early 20th Century

From History 195: Sarah Leddon (nominated by Sara Lampert)

This paper is beautifully written and demonstrates an exceptional command of the course material. I particularly appreciated Leddon's relaxed and authoritative narrative voice. Leddon also does an excellent job capturing the complexity of working women's position by placing a range of scholarly arguments in conversation, supported by primary examples.

Sara Lampert

The Public Woman's Guide to Getting By: Navigating the Early 20th Century

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the advocating woman was no longer a rare or shocking sight in urban America. In fact, she had become a staple in cities. Workingwomen toiled in dreary factories during the day and openly socialized in local dance halls after dusk as middle class women attended to their homes but also publically protested for their voting rights. Though the workingwoman was an expected part of cities, she remained overlooked by the leaders of society: men and middle-class women. Her rights unrecognized and her pay measly, she was left to navigate the complex spheres of urban dating, consumerism, and political protesting as a perpetual underdog. Much was demanded of her: she had to satisfy men, elicit middle-class charity, and conform to labor leaders in order to function as an accepted member of society. Middle-class suffragists also faced daunting dilemmas as they worked to convince the majority of middle-class men and women who opposed their demands. Both workingwomen and middle-class suffragists manipulated their appearance and behavior in order to appease their critics. The former accentuated their meekness and distanced themselves from middle-class consumerism while the latter attempted to blend into their docile, feminine counterparts. Many people viewed, and still view, these women's responses as vain attempts to conform, but a closer reading of their stories will reveal that they used the various demands placed on them in order to expand their freedoms and create a unique meaning for themselves.

As the working class grew in number, the urban landscape changed to accommodate their desires for fun and recreation. Public dance halls sprung up near working class neighborhoods and offered young female laborers in particular access to “a magical world of pleasure and romance.”¹

1 Kathy Peiss, “Dance Madness,” in *Cheap Amusements*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 88.

Women were able to enjoy meeting, dancing, and flirting with eligible men after a long days work and used the halls as centers of expression, freedom, and sexual intimacy. Because dance halls were commercial enterprises, women could only enjoy them if they had enough money to spare. Though both male and female patrons earned money, the disparity between the “living wage” earned by men and the significantly curbed “woman’s wage” allowed men greater access to costly entertainment.² Historian Kathy Peiss argued that while these halls provided an opportunity for relaxation and socialization, everything occurred within in a “heterosocial context of imbalanced power and privileges.”³ This economic upper hand translated into an implicit pressure on women to ingratiate themselves with the money holders—men.

Incapable of paying their own way in dance halls, women negotiated their worth by seeking popularity on men’s terms. Women accordingly presented themselves in the most sexually appealing light. They donned “high-heeled shoes, fancy ball gowns... and cosmetics” so they could use their physical appearance to entice men and gain their favor.⁴ Drinking alcohol, a ritual traditionally linked with male bonding, also became an avenue for women to earn praise and approval from male companions. The most common way of securing a man to pay for the night’s entertainment was offering varying degrees of sexual favors, a practice known as ‘treating.’” Mainly limited to flirting, treating allowed women to participate socially while not explicitly engaging in taboo practices such as premarital sex.

While dance halls allowed women to express their sexuality, they also pressured women to sacrifice feminine independence. Some women embraced their dependency in order to navigate the equally precarious world of consumerism. Considered slightly more moral than prostitutes, “charity

2 Nan Enstad, “Fashioning Political Subjectivities: The 1909 Shirtwaist Strike and the “Rational Girl Strikers,” in *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 99.

3 Peiss, 107.

4 Enstad, 107.

girls” attended dance halls and fully acknowledged the use of sexual favors as a legitimate way of earning status and goods. Charity girls were widely recognized fixtures in dance halls. Peiss affirmed that the substantial presence of charity girls in city dance halls proved the growing understanding “of the need to negotiate sexual encounters” for “commercial amusements.”⁵ Reformer Jane Addams viewed these “women who openly desire to make money from the young men whom they meet” as products of an unfair system.⁶ Addams placed the blame for this sexual pressure on the capitalists who “organized enterprises which make profit out of the invincible love of pleasure,” asserting the power of consumerism as an additional overwhelming pressure on working women.⁷

Whereas both Peiss and Addams linked dance halls, “charity girls,” and treating to consumer culture, Peiss recognized the power girls could assert in dance hall interactions while Addams viewed dancing workingwomen as mere pawns of greedy businessmen. Addams viewed the commercialization of recreation and the unequal heterosexual dynamic that followed it as “wretchedly inadequate and full of danger to whomsoever may approach it.”⁸ She neglected to view any positive consequences in the lives of female wage laborers. Though widespread treating led to men’s expectation that women would be willing to exchange sexual favors for companionship, Peiss demonstrated that not all women followed this “dangerous” trend. She gave the example of a hatcheck girl who immediately informed a potential date “there was nothing doing [sexually]” at the end of the night.⁹ She proved that women were not exclusively obedient to the sexual will of men in dance halls but actually had authority and could dictate what would or would not be exchanged during a date.

5 Peiss, 112.

6 Jane Addams, “Youth in the City,” Chapter 1 in *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1909), 3.

7 Addams, 2.

8 Addams, 5.

9 Peiss, 112.

Other women joined in the consumer culture of the dance halls as equals to men, participating in once explicitly prohibited behaviors such as smoking, loud talking, and sexual advances towards men. These forms of uninhibited behavior remained controversial and certainly unacceptable outside of dance halls, but were permitted, even encouraged, within halls because of women's status as prized flirts. Women were therefore granted greater freedom in some ways because of these dance hall demands. Peiss showed a similar pattern in regards to the exceedingly over-the-top styles women were adopting at dance halls in order to differentiate themselves and attract male companions. Though "this practice reinforced women's objectification," it also "allowed them an outrageous expressiveness prohibited in other areas of their lives."¹⁰ Though dance halls did promote the participation of young working women "by pandering to their love of pleasure" in order to turn a greater profit, women had agency in using the halls as opportunities to gain freedom, socialize, and express themselves sexually and creatively.

The overwhelming glamour, wealth, and scope of American cities yielded an intoxicating consumer culture that drove the wealthy to chic department stores and the wanting to cheap knockoff stores. Highly concentrated urban population caused daily interactions between the rich and working class, causing dreams of leisure and money to fill the heads of covetous urban laborers. Theodore Dreiser captured this materialistic envy in *Sister Carrie*, a novel centered on a young woman who came to Chicago looking for work and an exciting urban life. Carrie, the protagonist, arrived in Chicago shabbily clothed and quickly grew embarrassed when she sensed her "shortcomings of dress" after judgmental stares from the finely adorned women around her.¹¹ Dreiser conveyed that consumer culture greatly affected lower class women because of their proximity to the upper and middle class. Carrie responded to these societal pressures by becoming a wage laborer,

¹⁰ Peiss, 107.

¹¹ Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 21.

albeit reluctantly. Although ultimately Carrie turned to other means to secure wealth and popularity, Dreiser recognized an important relationship between consumerism and wage labor. Theresa Malkiel also suggested wage labor as a method of participating in consumer culture in her novel *The Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker*. The main character, Mary, similarly worked as a wage laborer in order to supplement her income, presumably for extra earning spending money, while living with her family. While Malkiel did acknowledge a diversity of motivations for wage labor and most of her characters worked in order to survive, by including Mary, a laborer who could afford a winter coat, she too asserted that wage labor provided an opportunity to participate in consumption and displays of visible wealth.¹² Wage labor offered women an opportunity to be independent of their families and earn money, allowing them to use their freedom and signs of visible wealth to express themselves.

During the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike, the workingwoman was conflicted as the effects of consumer culture and the demands of labor leaders clashed. Calling for their right to unionize and for fair wages, wage laborers (who were primarily women) protested publicly during a bitter New York winter. The media sensationalized the laborers as “fashionably dressed hell-raisers.”¹³ This and similar assumptions effectively “undermine[d] working women’s claims as political actors” because fashionable clothes implied the workers earned comfortable wages and were simply frivolous consumers.¹⁴ Their desire to participate in consumer culture and emulate upper-class style landed them in hot water with the anti-strike media. Labor leaders countered by filling their socialist papers with stories depicting the strikers “as proper

12 Theresa Serber Malkiel, *The Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker: A Story of the Shirtwaist Markers' Strike in New York* (New York: The Co-Operative Press, 1910), 5.

13 Nan Enstad, “Fashioning Political Subjectivities: The 1909 Shirtwaist Strike and the “Rational Girl Strikers,” in *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 84.

14 Enstad, 84.

charitable subjects.”¹⁵ Historian Nan Enstad argued that while the poverty of many strikers was incredibly devastating, labor leaders also ignored strikers’ claims as political actors. By only focusing on strikers as the “deserving poor,” the leaders appealed to middle-class charity rather than demanding that female laborers had a right to contribute to workplace decisions.¹⁶ Female strikers were consequently represented as one of two contradicting images: irrational “consumers having fun” or rational yet “thinly clad, downtrodden, and powerless” women.¹⁷

In her contemporaneous fictional account of a female striker, Theresa Malkiel suggested that labor leaders held stronger suasion with the protestors than consumerism. Labor leaders had an active role in the lives of protestors. They organized rallies and delivered speeches, helping unite a massive movement. In *Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker*, a labor leader delivered a speech that greatly changed Mary’s outlook on the strike and life. Mary originally felt the strike was fairly pointless and would never deeply affect her life as a more privileged and “free-born American” wageworker. She changed her mind, deciding that it “was a pretty smart woman who said that the trouble with us girls is our seeing life from its funny side only... life was a pretty serious proposition, and us girls should take our time to think more about it.”¹⁸ As a labor activist, Malkiel perhaps exaggerated the rapidity of a striker changing her opinion in order to emphasize the unity and strength of the movement she so passionately believed in. Regardless of her intentions, Malkiel demonstrates that labor leaders were active in manipulating the movement by placing the agency for Mary’s shift on the labor leaders. Enstad showed that labor leaders were “literally trying to change who working women were” with their journalistic discourse and personal appeals. Together, these sources revealed labor leaders held the dominating authority for the strikers. Consequently,

15 Enstad, 101.

16 Enstad, 101.

17 Enstad, 96, 103.

18 Malkiel, 7.

workingwomen represented themselves as the stereotypical image of middle-class charity.

Though the workers were pressured to conform to labor leaders' ideals, Malkiel emphasized that the worker found meaning in her "opportunistic" poverty. Malkiel depicted the Jewish girl protestors, the most desperately poor of the strike, as tremendously proud and capable. When admiring the bravery and relentlessness of the "Jew girls," she commented, "They always stand on their dignity as if they were still God's chosen people" in spite of their horrible circumstances.¹ As labor leaders "emphasized impoverishment" in order to appeal to the middle class, workers obliged but also chose to use their poverty as a source of inspiration and pride.²

Middle class representational politics powerfully impacted the labor movement as the working class strove to appeal to the middle class, but shaped the suffrage movement in a different way. Suffragettes were mainly middle-class women, unlike strikers, but they too had to convince middle-class men and women who opposed them. Workingwomen, at the guidance of labor leaders, became the antithesis of middle-class women. The cartoon "Two Phases of Yuletide: The Struggle for Bread and Bargains" depicts the purposeful contrast of the striking working class and the middle class. The protestors wear plain shawls with little decoration as they march en masse hoisting protest signs that reads "Shirt Waist Strikers" while the middle class women are depicted as wearing luxurious hats and frantically shopping for bargains at a "Shirt Waist Sale."³ While the cartoon was clearly a fictionalized account, it highlights how strikers were publically represented and subsequently viewed. This juxtaposition accused the middle class of irresponsible behavior but also "catered to the middle class" by "obscure[ing] strikers' elaborate fashions and emphasiz[ing] impoverishment."⁴ Cartoons and com-

1 Malkiel, 12.

2 Enstad, 105.

3 Enstad, 104.

4 Enstad, 105.

mentary like this one created the image of brave but needy strikers in order to appear appropriately deserving. Suffragists, conversely, desired not to gain the pity of the middle class but to blend in with them. The suffrage movement depicted the “female voter as a womanly woman engaged in materialistic reform,” an extension of the good, domestic mother.⁵ Her looks were particularly important; she was warned that if she lacked beauty, “our men won’t listen.”⁶ Suffragists attempted to seamlessly merge the image of the advocating woman and the dutiful housewife, hoping to convince their peers that they posed no new threat to society.

While emphasizing their similarities to “normal” middle-class women, suffragists did acknowledge their significant differences. Suffragists radically called for the political recognition of women but did so in the context of the theatre- an already acceptable avenue of public femininity. Suffragists adopted theatrical traits, using “their voices, bodies, and personalities to draw attention to themselves.”⁷ Coordinators did not shy away from the controversial limelight but instead “staged elaborate street parades and pageants, delivered open-air speeches... and rallies... put on street dances, outdoor concerts... [sold] consumer goods designed to promote the cause, and used every conceivable form of publicity stunt to advertise their campaign.”⁸ These entertaining and boisterous methods of gaining notice linked feminine political activism with the theatre. Historian Susan Glenn argued that while these public methods clearly separated the advocate from the housewife, they translated seemingly extremist activism into the familiar, and accepted, style of the popular stage. The traditional middle class did not immediately accept suffragists because of their connection to the glamorized theatre but were more willing to pay attention to suffragists’ claims because of the spectacle

5 Susan Glenn, “The Eyes of the Enemy,” in *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), 133.

6 Rose Young qtd. in Glenn, 141.

7 Glenn, 132.

8 Glenn, 129.

that accompanied them. While this strategy gained attention, Glenn believed the suffragists ultimately “undermine[d] their political message.”⁹ This consequence was also found in the labor movement. Nan Enstad similarly contended that laborers were not viewed as political actors because of their depiction in the media as weak recipients of charity. While the politics of representation drove female laborers and suffragists in opposite directions, its effect was the same for both parties.

Public women held a precarious place in urban society. The workingwoman was encouraged to embrace liberal sexuality and grew into an immoral sex symbol, demanded by the middle class to dress respectably and traded her meager wages for petticoats and frocks, yet simultaneously told to look pathetic and helpless in order to seem “deserving” of welfare. Through the diversity of her responses to these competing demands, the female laborer created a unique identity and established individuality. Suffragists similarly felt pressure to conform to the middle class’s idea of appropriateness. They tried to remain as indistinguishable from the typical housewife as possible, accentuating their femininity and commitment to family. When forced to address their differences, they did so in the charming and widely accepted style of the theatre. Both laborers and suffragists manipulated their image in order to accomplish their respective tasks, though they lost their entitlement to political legitimacy along the way. While the public woman did not enter the twentieth century with all of the freedoms and rights she deserved, she did assert her independence, purpose, and authority within a constricting context.

⁹ Glenn, 131.

Fate and Transition

*From Great Books 191: Margaret Scholten
(nominated by Sayan Bhattacharyya)*

Margaret shows an exceptional mastery of prose style in this essay, which is a model of lucidity and logical exposition. A salient feature of her essay is that, in this essay, she has not only articulated interesting and original insights about the plays that she is writing about, but has, additionally, put those insights in dialogue with observations made by contemporary critics—which reminded me, when I read it, that all good writing is a conversation—with oneself and with others.

What Margaret does in the final paragraph of the essay is especially elegant. In writing an essay such as this, in which the prompt demands a comparative analysis, it is all too tempting for beginning students to focus simply on similarities and contrasts purely at the surface level of the texts in play. Margaret, however, steers clear of the merely superficial, and brings her essay to a conclusion by pointing out a less-than-easily-apparent, but nevertheless deep and essential, commonality between the eponymous heroes of the two plays she is writing about, which has to do with a fundamental understanding of the very genre of tragedy. By weaving this insight, which is derived from a nuanced understanding of what makes a tragedy tragedy, with the question of historical development that posed by the prompt, the conclusion of Margaret's essay is a satisfying tour-de-force.

Sayan Bhattacharyya

Fate and Transition

The contrast between the heroic code of Homer and the ideals of democratic society can be concisely explained with an analogy. Under the Homeric code, a hero must be like a bulldozer: anyone who gets in the hero's way – by dishonoring them or being on the opposite side of a conflict – must be demolished no matter the costs. What matters most to the hero is gaining glory for himself and his people. The democratic code, on the other hand, is like an oar rowing through water: a leader must carefully guide and persuade others to the benefit of him and his people. Eventual consensus and agreements are an integral part of the democratic process, as are alliances. The *Ajax* and the *Medea* take place at the crossroads of these two different ideals, and given the vastly different natures of the two codes, the plays do not end well. The eponymous principle characters in the two plays represent the old Homeric ideals, while their opponents – Odysseus and Jason, respectively – embody the newer ideals of Athenian democracy.

The most basic source of conflict in the *Ajax* is the feud between the title character and Odysseus. Both of them are considered heroes, and both of them have been fighting together against the Trojans for years by the time their conflict begins. Ajax loses to Odysseus in a contest to win Achilles' armor, and he feels such deep shame and dishonor that he attempts to exact revenge. The goddess Athena prevents him from killing Odysseus and the other Greeks; she causes him to have hallucinations that he is carrying out his plan, but in reality he is slaughtering the army's livestock. When his madness is lifted and he realizes what he has done, Ajax is even more ashamed of himself: "Here I am, the bold, the valiant,/ Unflinching in the shock of war/
A terrible threat to unsuspecting beasts./ Oh! what a mockery I have come to!
What indignity!" (*Ajax*, ln. 355-8) He eventually commits suicide by falling on his sword, despite the pleas of his wife, Tecmessa, who begs him to live and ensure the welfare of his family. Ajax proves to be firm and unmoving in

his beliefs. He stays loyal to the ideal of the Homeric hero even when it leads to his death and the likely suffering of his loved ones.

Odysseus' thinking is more flexible, and he may remind us of Pericles from Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War*. As leaders, both of them often have sensible opinions, and when their ideas are unpopular they handle the situation diplomatically. For example, when the citizens of Athens want to ignore Pericles' advice and press to attack the Spartans by land instead of by sea, Pericles does not give in to their "anger and poor judgment... and confident of his wisdom... he attended to the defense of the city, and kept as quiet as possible" (*The Peloponnesian War*, 2.21-2.22). Odysseus is similarly careful around the goddess Athena. Normally he trusts Athena, who protects him, but when she exhorts him to confront Ajax in his moment of disgrace, Odysseus is reluctant at the ethical implications. "But to laugh at your enemies," argues Athena, "What sweeter laughter can there be than that?" Odysseus replies: "It's enough for me if he stays just where he is... I wish I were anywhere but here!" (ln. 78-80, 88) He does not adhere blindly to the ideals that most of his comrades follow, and he is able to consider different points of view. According to theater reviewer Bill Marx: "Instead of agreeing and shutting up, Odysseus dares disagree. He can't help but see in Ajax's irrational deed a mirror of his and others fragility, their tender hold on sanity and the tenuous worth of their military honor" ("Fuse... Theater"). Later, Odysseus convinces his commanders, the Atrides, that Ajax must be given respectful funeral rites despite having lost his honor. Ajax's funeral can be seen as the symbolic passing of the heroic age, and the beginning of a new era that would eventually lead to the democratic system in Athens as it existed in Sophocles' day.

The *Medea*, like the *Ajax*, is primarily concerned with a conflict between the title character and another person. Medea is a royal from the eastern land of Colchis, and is reputed to be ruthless and skilled in magic – qualities that she used to assist her Greek husband Jason in completing his quest for the Golden Fleece. By the time the play begins, however, their lives

have already entered into a tragic spiral. The main cause of this is their lack of comprehension of each other's viewpoints, which differ greatly. On the one hand there is Medea's code, which is similar to Homeric ideals: honor must be upheld (and dishonor avenged) at all costs, and steadfast loyalty to one's allies, such as one's spouse, must be maintained. "[Medea] is like Achilles, and her thumos [passion] is equivalent to his menis [divine fury]. She will not have her enemies laugh at her. She carries out the Homeric maxim, help your friends, and harm your enemies" (McDonald, "Review...*Medea*"). When Jason marries another woman, Medea takes this as a sign that he does not love her and would rather cast her off for someone else. She reclassifies him as an enemy and decides to exact revenge upon him in the most painful way possible, even if it ends up harming her as well. In her plot to murder Jason's second wife and two sons, Medea acts upon undiluted ideals of honor and shame – ideals appropriate for the world of the *Iliad*, but less so for the world in which Medea finds herself living.

In contrast to this code by which Medea lives, there is the new code embodied by Jason and what he represents: the pragmatic ideal that leaders should do whatever needs to be done in order to preserve the safety of their constituents and allies. Yet if Jason's behavior is matched up with Athenian ideals, it is clear that he would not meet the standards expected of a democratic statesman, since he is not skilled at influencing others or taking their arguments into account. For example, Jason claims that he is securing the future of Medea and their children by negotiating a second marriage to the daughter of Creon, the local king. He does not understand, however, that this is an extreme affront to Medea's honor – in fact, he insults her when she rages at him for making such a decision – and he does not realize just how far she will go to regain it by making him pay. None of Jason's excuses and explanations are sufficient to make her change her mind. His lack of diplomatic skill is further evidenced when Medea, in the first phase of her plan, pretends to apologize for her earlier behavior. She makes one request of him:

“I... am going into exile from this land;/ But do you, so that you may have the care of them,/ Beg Creon that the children may not be banished” (Medea, ln. 938-40). Jason replies: “I doubt if I’ll succeed, but still I’ll attempt it” (ln. 941). When Medea suggests that he ask his new wife to talk to Creon for him instead, however, he agrees. “I will, and with her I shall certainly succeed” (ln. 944). While Jason is interested in the safety that comes with his connection to Creon, he is far less enthusiastic about the responsibilities that accompany his new political position.

What drives the plot is that neither side stops to fully consider the position of the other. Instead, each only acts as he or she deems fit, and nearly all of their dialogue with each other is condescending and insulting. For example, when Jason tells Medea that she has a “stubborn temper” and that she is “going to be exiled for [her] loose speaking,” she retorts: “O coward in every way—that is what I call you” (ln. 447, 450, 465). No amount of advice from their allies and the Chorus is able to effectively change their behavior. Essentially, Jason and Medea sit on opposite sides of a deep trench without a means or the will to build a bridge. Euripides seems to suggest that these two systems are completely incompatible, and that one of them must, in the end, win out over the other. Given the play’s finale, in which Medea flies away in a chariot pulled by dragons, it is the new, Jasonian ideals which will be the ones that remain.

Overall, it is clear that neither character is admirable. Medea is willing to commit disturbing, violent acts in the name of revenge. Instead of directly harming Jason, she decides to destroy the people closest to him. She even allows her rage to override her love for her children, telling herself that she is murdering her two sons to protect them from the harsh treatment that might await them once she has been exiled. “I must face this thing... Oh! Oh! ... Poor heart, let them go, have pity upon the children. ... No! ... This shall never be, that I should suffer my children/ To be the prey of my enemies’ insolence./ Every way it is fixed” (ln. 1051, 1056-7, 1060-2). She then

tells the children: “I wish you happiness, but not here in this world./ What is here your father took” (ln. 1073-4). In addition, she assassinates Creon and his daughter by lacing a dress and diadem with a gruesome poison. Jason commits crimes of a different nature. He acknowledges that in the past he did use Medea’s help in his quest for the Golden Fleece, but once she is no longer advantageous to his career he discredits her in order to make himself look more accomplished – favored more by divine will than by Medea the foreign sorceress:

“My view is that Cypris was alone responsible/ Of men and gods for the preserving of my life. ... it was love’s inescapable/ Power that compelled you to keep my person safe.” (ln. 527-8, 530-1) He is selfish and arrogant; when mourning the deaths of his children, bride, and father-in-law, he focuses on his own pain before considering the suffering of the victims. “For me remains to cry aloud upon my fate,/ Who will get no pleasure from my newly wedded love,/ And the boys whom I begot and brought up, never/ Shall I speak to them alive. Oh, my life is over!” (ln. 1347-50)

In his unflattering portrayal of these two characters, is Euripides criticizing the shortcomings of both systems? Is he making a comment about how the selfish extreme of each ideal can cause more pain than benefit in the long run? The reviewer Marianne McDonald points out that “Euripides has his Medea confront Jason, opposing a barbarian to someone ‘civilized.’ The civilized Jason is more barbaric in his emotional callousness than the barbarian Medea, but by the end of the play she exacts a barbaric penalty” (“Theater...*Medea*”). Euripides may be arguing that while the code of the Homeric heroes died out because of its inefficiency and because its justice system was punitive, the Athenian democratic ideal, too, will not survive unless its leaders remain loyal to their allies and not merely to their own interests, and, more generally, unless the people work together and uphold the rule of law.

When examined closely, the *Ajax* and the *Medea* are remarkably similar tragedies. Both Ajax and Medea represent a dying way of life, and in

the face of new and perplexing ideas and situations, they feel threatened and are afraid for their futures. After being greatly wronged, they plan out their revenge according to the archaic code that has always served them well in the past. Their loyalty to these ideals causes them to brush aside their duties to family members and even to their allies and hosts. Ajax fails in his attempt at revenge and commits suicide; Medea succeeds all too well and escapes without any retribution, but still must suffer from the knowledge of the destruction she has caused. That is why they are the main foci of these tragedies, instead of their opponents, Odysseus and Jason. While the latter two characters do not survive unscathed, and have difficult roads ahead of them, in a symbolic sense they were the winners from the very beginning. They represent the forerunners of the democratic society that both Sophocles and Euripides lived in. Ajax and Medea, on the other hand, cannot win no matter what they do, and the audience pities them for the extremes they are driven to in an attempt to fight back against their fate.

Works Cited

- Euripides. *Medea*. Trans. Rex Warner. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, year unknown.
- Marx, Bill. "Fuse Theater Review: A Flawed But Compelling 'Ajax' at the American Repertory Theater." *The Arts Fuse*. The Arts Fuse. 3 March 2011. Web. 17 December 2011.
- McDonald, Marianne. "Theater Reviews: Euripides' Medea." *Didaskalia*. *Didaskalia*. 1994. Web. 17 December 2011.
- Sophocles. *Ajax*. Trans. John Moore. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, year unknown.
- Thucydides. *The Peloponnesian War*. Trans. Richard Crawley. New York: Free Press, 1996.

Sweetland Prize for Outstanding Writing Portfolio

Jiatu Liu

From Writing 100 (nominated by Gina Brandolino)

Jiatu is a non-native student who began his university studies in his homeland of China and transferred to U of M for the fall 2011 term. Over the course of the semester, he faced many of the same struggles most non-native students do—problems understanding the more difficult readings assigned and working through the tougher aspects of English grammar and mechanics—but he emerged as the one of the strongest writers in my course.

I could easily see Jiatu's strengths as a writer even early in the semester, but he was genuinely surprised when I expressed this to him. I remember him sitting in my office and telling me, "no one would ever call me a good writer in China." The reason why, he told me, is because assessments of writing as he experienced them in his native country emphasized vocabulary sophistication. I think Jiatu does write with good vocabulary (though he says his Chinese teachers disagree with me), but his great talent as a writer comes from his ability to see and express relationships between ideas.

You can perhaps best see this talent—and his frustration with how his writing was judged in China—if you read his outgoing writer's state-

ment, where he explains his view that “topic is the soul of essay” and bemoans that the writing in English he did in China was based solely on how many TOEFL words he integrated. These essays, he says, had a “stuffing of fancy words without any spirit.” All of Jiatu’s essays for Writing100 have an abundance of spirit and demonstrate that he is, more than just a good writer, a great writer, and the reason why is because he is such a fine and careful thinker.

Jiatu’s e-portfolio is a wonderful showcase of his coursework and development as a writer. With attention to design and detail and the aim of piquing the interest of his readers, Jiatu has crafted compelling reflections for each of his essays and carefully chosen and captioned pictures from his travels to enhance and tie into content. All the writing you will find there is excellent, but let me recommend my favorites, Jiatu’s 2nd assignment and his revised DSP.

Gina Brandolino

jiatu liu's e-portfolio
Not just another WordPress.com site

Search: Go

Outgoing Writer's Statement

Writing: Digging a Well

The idea of a well is good in the sense that I can use it for both of my writer's statements. But this time, I would like to compare the writing process, with digging a well as opposed to drinking from a well in my incoming writer's statement.

The aim of digging a well is, obviously, to have access to water of good quality. Therefore, correctly identifying the spot to dig the well is the most important and meanwhile the most difficult part. The reason why it is difficult is that we cannot accurately predict whether or not there will be abundant, high-quality water under the spot we choose before we get started. We can only use our experience and some intuition to make some wild guess. However, there is still the possibility that we get nothing after making great effort.

This is very similar with my topic-finding process. Topic is the soul of an essay. All the content is constructed around the central topic and used to serve the topic to make it stand out. If I succeeded in finding a good topic, my words would flow onto my paper, just like water spurting out from the well. The only thing I need to do would be refining my words and fixing mechanical errors. This was what I experienced when writing assignment 2. In that assignment, I was asked to identify my high school to correspond to one of the schools described by Anyon. So the topic was actually fixed and I had no choice. But fortunately, it was a good topic. I just recalled my "disastrous" third-year high school life. The essay was then well

assignment 1
assignment 2
assignment 3
assignment 4
directed self-placement essay
incoming writer's statement
outgoing writer's statement

<http://jiatuliuwriting100.wordpress.com/assignment-2/>

Under Coercion

There are 6 billion people in the world, and nearly 1,000 million of them—including me—are in my province, Shandong. The high population density leads to fierce competition, and consequently, high school students in Shandong have to fight against the highest college admission score requirement in the whole nation. My high school—Yantai No.2 Middle School, in the aspect of college admission rate, is the best one in my city. Those so called upper class students—children of military officers, government officials and wealthy merchants—attend my school to receive education. In this essay, I will first depict my third year in high school by illustrating how and why we seek for right answers and how teachers treat students. Then I will summarize Anyon's description of the "middle-class school" and compare with my school. After going through the details below, readers will find that because of the "right-answers seeking" and "high-grade pursuing" property rather than the revenue level of students' parents, my school is exactly what Anyon calls a "middle-class school."

The most unforgettable year in high school was my third year. It was like swimming in the sea of math functions, English grammar rules and chemical equations. Test papers came to me like a tsunami—all of my extracurricular activities are devastated because I had to finish all the papers. I was really interested in Japanese and hoped that there was a Japanese club so that I could make friends with other people who had the same interest as well. But the fact was that no single club could survive on this academic land. If a student was—unfortunately—ill and could not come for classes, the case would be even worse since he/she had to do all the homework (usually six test papers per night) in order to catch up with the progress. School was a huge “time squeezer,” who desires students to contribute every “drop” of their time to studying. For us, there were seven weekdays per week. The only difference was that we could do our homework at home in Saturday and Sunday. “Weekends” don’t end anything; instead, they mark the commencement of a new round of “homework bombing.”

The aim of assigning such mammoth amount of homework, according to our teachers, was to make us well prepared to get right answers in every type of problem. Let’s take math as an example. We have 8 books for high school math, and each of them covers two to three different topics: functions, conic sections, basic calculus, three-dimensional geometry, etc. For each topic, we would be assigned about thirty double sided test papers. By solving these problems, we were expected to correctly attack as many problems as we can in “Gaokao”—the Chinese version SAT. Without right answers, one cannot get a high grade in the college admission test; without a high grade, one cannot get enrolled in his/her ideal college; and again without a diploma from a renowned college, one’s hope of getting a good job will become minimal. This “chain process” has been ingrained into most Chinese parents’ and teachers’ minds. When two mothers run into each other, something they will compare is not their children’s leadership or social ability, but their grade. The one whose children gets higher grade will become the “winner” and the other

will admire a lot.

I clearly remember what my teacher told me when I had a problem that was not included in our test material. When learning conservation of energy, I wondered why the earth could rotate around the sun without energy input from external sources. I brought this question to my physics teacher who simply told me, “Don’t worry about it. It will not be covered in the exam. Jiatu, don’t waste your time thinking about such problems. Think about how to master exam materials.” There was not even a little explanation to my question. Teachers just deemed students’ enthusiasm in researching such problems as a “waste of time.” As a result, many students don’t know how to choose their major when attending college because their interest in what they learned in high school has already been suffocated. Most of them are subject to their parents’ selection. It is hard to imagine how a person can do the work which he/she is not passionate about in the rest of his/her life. Unfortunately, this is something that truly happens.

Thus it is not hard to find out the affinity between my school and the “middle-class school” described by Anyon. Her statement “One must follow the directions in order to get the right answer...” (193) and a child’s words “(what we do is) store facts up in your head like cold storage...” (195) generalize what we were always doing in high school. We were machines doing repetitive work every day and the only advancement was that we could solve new problems whereas machines could not. Nevertheless, my school is not as good as Anyon’s middle-class school in the aspect of creativity. Anyon says that in the school observed, “Creativity is not often requested...” (194). The case is even worse in my school because creativity is never addressed in my school. Though our government is always emphasizing the significance of elevating creativity of the whole nation, I didn’t see any effort from my teachers to sharpen our innovation.

In fact, most Chinese high schools are in the same pattern as my school. This education system determines China’s standing in the world: it is

a “world factory” but not a “world producer.” Student’s passion is dampened, curiosity is killed, and creativity is restricted. When we finally go to jobs, we cannot design appealing and creative products. We can only reproduce mobiles, cars and computers according to the blueprints provided by foreign countries. We are copying others’ results with little modification. Americans have Facebook, we have renren; Americans have MSN, we have QQ; Americans have twitter, we have weibo. It seems that China spends a lot of money nurturing “plagiarizing talents.” Yes, we did produce our own fighters, but we still relied on Russia for the core part of the airplane—the motor. The lack of creativity dictates that my country can by no means be the most powerful one in the world. We urgently need improvement in our education system to change the status quo.

Outgoing Writer’s Statement

Writing: Digging a Well

The idea of a well is good in the sense that I can use it for both of my writer’s statements. But this time, I would like to compare the writing process with digging a well as opposed to drinking from a well in my incoming writer’s statement.

The aim of digging a well is, obviously, to have access to water of good quality. Therefore, correctly identifying the spot to dig the well is the most important and meanwhile the most difficult part. The reason why it is difficult is that we cannot accurately predict whether or not there will be abundant, high-quality water under the spot we choose before we get started. We can only use our experience and some intuition to make some wild guess. However, there is still the possibility that we get nothing after making great effort.

This is very similar with my topic-finding process. Topic is the soul of an essay. All the content is constructed around the central topic and used



Jet d'Eau, a large fountain located in Geneva, Switzerland. I hope that my words can spurt out like the water does.

However, sometimes even though the topic is good, it is still hard to develop the essay. At these occasions, my words would soon cease to flow. This happened in my assignment 4, in which I was asked to synthesize at least 4 essays I have read and argue about a common topic that was mentioned in these four essays. I chose to talk about financial reason acting as motivation pushing the authors out of the “working-class” cycle. But after I finished arguing about the financial reason, I have only covered 3 pages (the requirement is 4-5 pages). However, I have run out of my words. I felt like I was stopped by a chunk of hard rock lying between my well and the source of thoughts. I can access the water right after I break the rock, but the rock was so hard that I spent the whole afternoon and failed to get even one step forward. Staring at what I have written on my screen, I felt frustrated and powerless. Thankfully, with the help of Gina, I broke the rock and finally got to their interest part, the one that I should really develop.

Thus, after the whole semester training in writing, I found that determining the topic of the essay is paramount for me now. In my incoming writer's statement, I compared my struggling of fulfilling the length requirement with drinking from a well. Now I realize that the length challenge can be readily solved if I could pinpoint a good topic. This resembles digging a well. If you found a good topic, you might have some hard time while digging the well, but finally you would get to the water and have a happy time drinking from it. Just like my assignment 3 described above, though the digging process was painful, I managed to make a good well at the end. However, if I didn't find a meaningful and insightful topic, all my efforts will become in vain. If I dig a well on a beach, I would never find the water I want. It may take me a whole day to stuff my essay with dry sentences and still cannot make it long enough.

Therefore, topic finding was important, but in China's English education, it may be the least important part. In all of China's English exams, the abundance of words and variation of sentence patterns are the only concern. If a student uses 8 TOEFL words or several inversions in his/her essay, he/she will almost be guaranteed a high score. These mechanical portions, which should be the least important, are now the only pursuit of test makers and test takers. Most of students' essays are, therefore, stuffing of fancy words without any spirit. This is also part of the reason why there are so many agencies aiming at writing application essays for students. They can make essays more specific, whereas most students cannot. I hope that with my future writing courses, my ability of finding topics could be further sharpened and my essays can shine due to their insightful thoughts.

Clarissa Ortiz

From Writing 100 (nominated by Gina Brandolino)

Clarissa's e-portfolio was the winner, free and clear, in the class vote for best e-portfolio; she got more than double the votes of the e-portfolio that came in second place. When you look at her e-portfolio, you can understand why. Clarissa went above and beyond course requirements and even instructor expectations to make her e-portfolio truly her own—as she says on her welcome page, she has a “knack for video editing,” and you will find an awesome video she made about her initial experience (not) writing the DSP. Clarissa also includes original art and her own photos on her site. The strong sense of Clarissa's identity that shines through in the details of her e-portfolio are also evident in her work for Writing 100 displayed there, certainly her incoming and outgoing writer's statements, but also in her reflections on her formal assignments, and in those assignments themselves. I think my favorite was Clarissa's third assignment, which led her to reflect on, among other things, her dad's job. But all of Clarissa's papers were thoughtfully written and carefully edited, and they are all good reading.

Gina Brandolino

clarissa ortiz's e-portfolio
Now this is my kind of writing...

Incoming Writer's Statement Directed Self-Placement Essay Assignment One
Assignment Two **Assignment Three** Assignment Four Outside Writing
Outgoing Writer's Statement

Assignment Three

January Poll

What was your childhood dream?

- To get receive a letter from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
- Live in a world of Pokemon
- Live in Barbie's mansion, wear her clothes, and drive her convertible
- Become the next Power Ranger
- Other:

Vote

View Results Share This Polidaddy.com

Which movie are you anticipating most?

- The Hunger Games



Courtesy of http://avlistonpaper.blogspot.com/2010_06_20_archive.html

Oh My Thesis

How in the world do I write a thesis? I kept racking my brain with that sentence when the class was given an assignment to come up with two thesis statements for our next assignment. I really felt like I had no idea what I was doing (like I was back in Spanish class). All the examples we were given were more like thesis paragraphs instead of statements and I had no idea how to interpret this book.

<http://clarissaortizwriting100.wordpress.com/assignment-3/>

Reflection: Oh My Thesis

How in the world do I write a thesis? I kept racking my brain with that sentence when the class was given an assignment to come up with two thesis statements for our next assignment. I really felt like I had no idea what I was doing (like I was back in Spanish class). All the examples we were given were more like thesis paragraphs instead of statements and I had no idea how to interpret this book.

The Mind at Word: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker, by Mike Rose, was a hard book to get through. I was constantly asking myself, “What did I just read?” Luckily, I understood the message of the book, which I enjoy, but I feel like Rose needed to find different ways to explain it.

After a class of going through sample thesis and I felt just a tad bit

more confident in writing Assignment three. I sat in front of my computer and started out with an outline. I laid out three jobs and wrote out their similarities, differences, and most importantly (and the most difficult) the main idea. I continued and just started typing out whatever for my thesis and as much as I could that revolved around my outline. When I was done I discovered that my thesis only appeared to be a lot harder to write than what it really was.

From there I kept on writing about each job and if I ran out of ideas I'd move on to the next job. Then I would fill in the quotes and citations that matched the ideas I was mentioning in the paper. I thought meeting five pages was going to be really difficult, but I had no problem, especially after adding in the quotes.

The peer and professor review really improved my paper as well. They were able to catch errors and tell me if I got off subject. The structure of the paper was confusing in itself, but it was much easier for me to write it that way.

Overall, I really enjoy my paper and how it turned out. I feel that my thesis is well written and having that thesis helped the rest of my paper out.

If You Can't Handle the Heat, Don't Do a Working Class Job

Throughout history jobs have been characterized by their level of intelligence. Even today people make comments such as, “Well, that job couldn't be too hard, it's practically brainless,” or, “Wow! You must be really smart to do that!” Society needs to stop assuming the level of intelligence that is put into work. Jobs, such as being a hairdresser, waitress and an airline customer service agent are thought to be working class jobs and require a minimal amount of intelligence, but on the contrary each job contains its own set amount of skills that an employee must develop to be successful. Each one of these occupations may have their own tools and amount of education needed to receive the position, but each has to have great communication skills, for they work directly with customers, and need to maintain quality of work in a busy setting. Rather than using the traditional type of education, these jobs require intelligence that can only be learned by working.

Although an airline customer service agent seems to be considered a working class job, the fact is that these jobs are threatened of being replaced by machines. Today, if you were to walk into the McNamara terminal at the Detroit Metropolitan Airport, it is flooded with kiosks ready to take your reservation and hand over your ticket so you could quickly continue to security. Just as William F. Roth said in *The True Nature of Work*, “... why don't we allow machines to do as many sacrificial jobs as possible...” (28). If customer service is being so easily replaced by kiosks, than it should be considered a lower class job. My dad works for Delta airlines at the counter. His job is to check passengers in, give them their tickets and help with the boarding process and I will use him as an example throughout this paper.

Hairdressing is another one of those lower class jobs, although currently is not threatened by being replaced by machinery. To become a hairdresser you cannot go into your average university and ask about their program in hairstyling; one doesn't exist. However, there are schools of

cosmetology where people can focus on areas of hair, makeup and nails and obtain certificates for whichever area they prefer. If you're job searching you can't just waltz into a salon and ask if they are hiring, because it takes a great amount of experience plus most salons require certification. They don't let just any regular person chop people's hair. The salon's goal is to give the customer the best look the customer wants, but also a good experience so that person will come back and hopefully bring more friends. In schools of cosmetology they teach the hidden tricks for every tool. Scissors aren't always used by cutting in the same way. In Mike Rose's book, *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker*, he states, "... Her or his toolkit can include several different types of scissors, a range of combs and brushes... these instruments [are about] variation and technique to gain particular effects..." (39) There are styles and positions to hold the scissors and ways to make the scissors give some kind of texture (38). To every instrument there's more uses than what a regular person who hasn't taken any beauty classes wouldn't know about.

The only tools waitresses have to worry about are their paper, pen and some patience (sometimes a pitcher of water or coffee too). A waitress must rely heavily on skills of communication, memorization and patience to get through the different attitudes of people. Also, some strength and tolerance to large hot plates being bustled around. There really is no training for this occupation, other than the on the job training on where things are, what items are on the menu and maybe even how to handle certain situations that occur. "You know, " Rose's mother says to him one day, " you learn a lot as a waitress. You work like hell. But you learn a lot," (24).

Because air travel has such a technology based core, airline customer service agents need to be trained on different computer skills. Delta's computer system is full of codes that wouldn't allow just any person to get on and mess with the system. My dad gets flown out for a couple of days to train on different aspects of the airlines procedures and most importantly how to work

the system. I remember my dad handing me a thick set of flashcards and going through them with him. He had to memorize every airport and its code that coincides with it. If my family were traveling somewhere he could jump on any computer in the airport and check our flights, how many people were on it, who the people were and what seats they were assigned just by pressing a series of codes. It sometimes amazes me how he can do that, but then the tricky part is spitting out codes when it's busy and you have angry people who missed their flight because they took a longer time at the bar and missed their call.

Each of these jobs require skills but for different kind of tools: manual, communication/memorization and technological. Even the kind of education that goes into each job differs, from schooling, to paid training to simply starting the job and learning as you go. But whether you study in a book or go to school the real learning comes from the interaction with your job and customers, not in classrooms. These similarities are an essential part of the job and I will explain the importance of communication, especially in a busy setting.

Hairstylists need to be skillful in multitasking, while in a busy setting. Generally, people take their hair very seriously and if it comes out wrong then hairdressers deal with anger and frustration. When getting a hair cut, we are trusting someone to make semi-permanent changes to our hair. We trust that they are well equipped, know what they are doing and make our hair look great. Hairstylists have to interpret what people are saying, but also have to use their experience to determine what looks good for the customer. If the customer isn't happy the stylist risks losing even more clients and even their own credibility. Hairstylists need to deal with the stress of waiting customers and the possibility that the customer might not like the result. There are many factors that could cause someone to not like their haircut, but the stylists job is to fix the problem, so the customer is happy again. The stylist can't just stand and wait for the hot iron to heat up, instead they have to be

engaging and keep the client entertained and talking. Just as Rose has stated, it's important to know the lifestyle of the client so their hairstyle can make sense (44). Conversation can tell the stylist a lot about the person and there's a reason behind it. It's not just mindless chatter. Also, Rose mentions, "The work is physically demanding as well..." He then goes on to mention the hours on the stylists' feet, repetitive motions and getting on and off of stools (49). Styling isn't just an easy-breezy job, but can be stressful at times and the hairdressers must keep up their game through the whole day, or risk making a mistake.

Here's another stressful situation: You have an order to deliver, a pitcher in your hand, a tray of steamy hot food in another and five other tables to attend to. There's no time to rest, but that's all about waitressing, staying calm and managing time when the whole diner is screaming at you. If you make a mistake there are the people who are okay with it and polite. Then there are the people who couldn't care less how many orders you have, they just want their food how they like it. Now, people can't just go spitting in their customer's food like in the movie "Waiting..." when an irritable woman insults every worker for not cooking her steak the way she liked it (even though some people deserve it, just like she did). Even though the waitress might be on the verge of tears from the rude comments and demands, they have to suck it up and continue until break or the end of their shift, just as Rose says, "The work required that she tolerates rude behavior and insult, smile when hurt or angry" (26). They continue carrying scorching hot trays of food on both arms and they continue seating more customers and smiling along and apologize for any waits or mistakes. Being a waitress, Rose's mother had to physically and mentally push through exhaustion (26). There are many people who can't keep their composure through stress like this and waitresses train themselves everyday. Like the saying goes, "If you can't handle the heat, stay out of the kitchen!"

Airplanes don't just take off by themselves, so the airport staff need

to be on top of the ball, especially when there is a crowd of people who need help. Passengers in the airport can be extremely rude, just like costumers can be to waitresses. They blame all their problems on customer service agents and expect them to fix all of them in a snap. They don't understand that there are consequences to missing your flight and it costs money to put you on another. There are certain procedures the customer service agent needs to abide by and it's not their fault if the passenger can't get exactly what they want. These customer service agents are put under a lot of pressure, especially if there was, for example, a delayed flight, and there is a long line waiting, only getting longer. But composure must be kept or the stress will just overwhelm you. That agent must work efficiently, remember flight times and numbers and 100 different codes to get through the lines, while keeping the customers as happy as they possibly can.

These three jobs are all very different by the type of training and what they use at their job. Each has its own setting, but within that place each employee must directly interact with the customer and learn to communicate, even when the customer is unapproachable. These skills only come through interaction, whether it's dealing with an upset client or managing your time. Every situation is different and the worker needs to use their previous experiences to get through the new one. People talk about the amount of smarts others need for a certain type of job. But that traditional intelligence only works if you're alone and you never have to deal with your customers directly, which isn't how the real world exactly works. Situations can't always be learned through books and the classroom. It needs to be experienced.

Reflection: The Hardest Paper Ever

This paper was the most difficult paper to start and complete. Without a doubt.

I had gone through three ideas. Two shot down by myself and the next by my professor. Unfortunately, I had already started watching the movie

that I was going to use as a source for it, so that ended up being a waste of an hour of my weekend. And the worst part was that it was already Sunday night and the rough draft was due the next day! I wanted to wait for the weekend because I knew I'd have more time to think about it and I'd be able to spend a Saturday and Sunday evening trying to find an idea.

I think what made the progress of my paper almost impossible was that I knew the paper was hard so my brain didn't want to find anything. I had to force myself to lay out all of my sources and find a connection. The idea sounded much more horrible than actually doing the task. I found a common ground from four sources and my thesis was very simple to construct. I started writing quotes here and there from each of my sources and how they connected to each other and back to my thesis.

After filling up three out of four paragraphs of my sources the fourth became the hardest. I felt like I was stretching out the meaning of my source and it didn't fit with the rest of my sources. I had to adjust my thesis a little to make my source work and I felt that each bit of information ended up falling in place.

I saved my introduction and conclusion for last, because I knew that those two paragraphs were the ones that I could be the most creative with. They were very simple and I'm glad I was able to link everything together. Especially throughout my paper, I've been making connections between sources which added length and detail. I had been struggling on length throughout the whole paper and even after adding onto my thesis I wasn't able to meet the requirement at first, but I feel my content is very well written.

How Much It Has Is Not the Same as How Much It's Worth

Throughout our lives our income has an ability to hold us back from what we want in life. We couldn't get that toy that all of our friends had because our parents said we needed the money for groceries. Or we can't go hang out with our friends because we added on extra hours at work. But what happens when our type of education is depicted by how much our family makes? Isn't that going too far? In the essays of Laurel Johnson Black, Jean Anyon, Alfred Lubrano and book by Mike Rose, family income can make a difference in what kind of education we receive. That separation even causes difficulty in transitioning from one type of education to another. The smartest student at a lower income school can still struggle the most in an upper class classroom.

Where do the brightest thinkers really come from? Do they happen to just be that way or were students taught to think outside the box? "School experience, in the sample of schools discussed here, differed qualitatively by social class," concludes Jean Anyon, in her essay "Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work" (201). Anyon takes a sample of different groups of schools, each group characterized by family income. She identifies very noticeable differences in teaching styles and curriculums between each group. The upper class family schools taught the children to be more critical thinkers and creative, while the lower class focused more on "just getting the right answer" (Anyon 192, 200). The teachers of the working class students taught them to follow her steps, and only her steps. Students were to copy what she had or else "it [the answer] was wrong" (Anyon 191). Throughout Anyon's description of the working class the phrase, "The teacher wrote it and the students copied it down" is written abundantly. There was no room for any suggestions from the students and even when one tries to say anything the teacher shoots her down and tells the students that they have to obey her rules and steps only (Anyon 191). These schools were preparing the students

to become what their parents were and that was people who obeyed what their bosses told them to do and do things right. In the higher class schools students were encouraged to challenge answers and if they didn't agree with something they were allowed to question an answer (Anyon 199). While the Executive Elite is guided to prosper in the work field, the working class stays as the working class (Anyon 187). Unfortunately this is only because of the type of family income and kinds of jobs their parents have which determines how these students are taught. Learning habits when you're younger makes it harder to change and forget. Teachers and their curriculums already started the divide, according to Anyon's essay, when the students are young. These students weren't even given an opportunity to go the next step.

In Laurel Johnson Black's essay, "Stupid Rich Bastards," she mentions her note taking: "In lectures, I took notes furiously, narrative notes, full sentences, trying to get the exact words spoken by the teacher. I knew if I took down just a word here and there I would have to fill in the gaps with my own words, and those words were horribly wrong" (21). Throughout the essay Black described her experience coming from a low income family and going to a private college to further her education. This quote screams out that Black had a working class education Anyon had described in her essay "Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work." In her classes Black was so focused on copying every word from her professor because she knew she wasn't didn't know how to think critically, or "make the right words." She wasn't taught that way. How the professor said it was the only right way and she didn't want to mess up her notes by letting herself put her own thoughts into it. "The products of work in this class are often written stories, editorials and essays...", cites Anyon when she talks about the Affluent Professional school in her essay (195). This school was just under the Executive Elite, but is still considered one of the upper class schools. Black never had experienced writing an editorial and so she would just summarize the article because she didn't understand it and what she was supposed to do (Black 20). Chal-

lenging or asking a question didn't exist in Black's world. Only "stupid rich bastards" could do such things. Fifth graders in the upper class schools were learning how to write editorials, while Black's first time doing one wasn't until college. Black is a clear example of the difficult of transitioning from a lower to a higher education. Because her family was part of the poor working class, along with the rest of the community she was taught to be part of the working class. In the upper class schools students were taught to be individuals and opinionated, while in the lower class, the schools Black had attended, were taught to copy and not to go off track from what the person in charge says.

Years ago the American education process was based on a track system. This system split students onto different paths of education, college preparatory and vocational for example, which then lead them to what type of jobs they will have in the future (Rose 167). This system is brought up in Mike Rose's book, *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker*. Unfortunately, the track system was corrupt and many students were placed in tracks based on their family income and, even more inappropriate, their race (Rose 168). If the students had a doctor as a dad then they were put into the college prep track, while the students who had a dads who worked as electricians were put on the vocational track. The teachers divided the students into the classes their parents were in, just in an educational setting. Although, the schools intentions were meant to help organize the large amount of students coming in to gain an education "the process made the quality of participation highly unequal," states Rose (168). There was no equal chance for the students throughout this system. Bright thinkers were probably completely ignored if they were from a lower income class.

It is possible to grow up in a lower class home and find ways to go against the odds and still achieve that higher level education. Alfred Lubrano's father had worked all of his life, putting aside his own dreams, to give his son the best opportunity. He wanted his son to escape from being a blue collar

worker, because Alfred couldn't rely on just education alone. Alfred's father had to sacrifice his own wants as well. Lubrano was able to go to college and move up in the ladder. But in his essay, "Bricklayer's Boy," after completing school Lubrano moves on to make almost the same salary as his father does (351). His father is angry and tells him that he breaks one of the "blue collar rules": "Make as much money as you can, to pay for as good of a life as you can get" (Lubrano 351). He states that his father "figured an education—genielike and benevolent—would somehow rocket me into the consecrated trajectory of the upwardly mobile, and load some serious loot into my pockets" (Lubrano 351). This lower class and upper class tension is caused because although Lubrano receives a white collar education he is still attached to his blue collar world. Lubrano and Black both are similar in a way that they were both able to go against the odds and move a step closer to the "white collar" world. However, they both could not break the connection from their blue collar lives, Black with her language and attitude and Lubrano with his family and career choice. Black grows to become a teacher who helps the transition from blue collar to white collar go easier for the lower class students. Income is not the only determiner of class and happiness. Although Lubrano's job paid very little he was living the upper class dream by doing what he loved to do.

Money does matter. From the evidence shown in Mike Rose's book, students are discriminated against by their families social class and in Jean Anyon's essay students are taught differently between family incomes. Both Lubrano and Black were able to overcome the barrier that separated the privileged from the poor, but, especially in Black's case, transitioning from a lower class education is a difficult journey. At a young age our brains start developing around the difficulty of the curriculums. To change would be difficult and only those who are best adept to change will succeed (which is most likely the upper class students). How much our family makes should not affect the quality of our education and it definitely should not depict what our future

goals in life should be. Why would teachers lie to us and tell us we could be whatever we wanted to be? Just because someone comes from a low social class doesn't mean that they should and are meant stay there.

Featuring student essays by:

Sarah Leddon

Margaret Scholten

Jiatu Liu

Clarissa Ortiz

Carlina Duan

Margaret Hitch

Alyssa Lopez