

# Excellence in First-Year Writing

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

Excellence  
in  
First-Year Writing  
2013/2014

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

Edited by  
Shelley Manis and Dana Nichols

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# **Excellence in First-Year Writing 2013/2014**

## **EDWP Writing Prize Committee**

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Hanna Linna

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## Winners List

### Feinberg Family Prize for Excellence in First-Year Writing

Karen Duan

“Five Minutes”

*nominated by James Pinto, English 125*

Connie Zuo

“Mao”

*nominated by Jaimien Delp, English 125*

### Matt Kelley/Granader Family Prize for Excellence in First-Year Writing

Callie Chappell

“Oedipus Tyrannus on Causality, Determinism, and Identity”

*nominated by Matthew Cohn, Great Books 191*

Sin Ye Hwang

“The Struggle of a Lonely Banana”

*nominated by Hilary Levinson, Comparative Literature 122*

### Granader Family Prize for Outstanding Writing Portfolio

Neila Fraiha

“neila100”

*nominated by Liliana Naydan, Writing 100*

Christopher J. Zysnarski

“Writer’s Home”

*nominated by Liliana Naydan, Writing 100*

# Nominees List

## Feinberg Family Prize nominees

### Student Name

Eric Achterhof  
Ayomide Akinokun  
Mallory Anderson  
Nicole Antin  
Bianca Arredondo  
Cameron Barnes  
Cici Becker  
Patrick Birdsong  
Katherine Black  
Raymond Chung  
Katie Colella  
Lauren Dodge  
Nicholas Dolnicek  
Erin Donahue  
Karen Duan  
Erich Eberhard  
Joseph Evans  
Jacob Gase  
Carolyn Gearig  
Mohamed Ghandour  
Helen Gianakopoulos  
Sophia Ginotti  
Amalia Gomez-Rexrode  
Toby Heller  
Luke Jackson

### Instructor Name

Aubrey Schiavone  
David Gold  
Bonnie Tucker  
Rachel Greene  
James Hammond  
Matthew Bellamy  
Patricia Khleif  
Christopher McCormick  
Maximillian Alvarez  
Jessica Young  
James Pinto  
Rebecca Scherm  
Kyle Grady  
Mickenzie Fasteland  
James Pinto  
D'Anne Witkowski  
Christopher McCormick  
Karen McConnell  
Bonnie Tucker  
Jessica Young  
Rachel Greene  
Bonnie Applebeet  
Emily Waples  
Sarah Linwick  
Patricia Khleif

Rachel John  
Katherine Kelley  
Rachel Kerr  
Justin Kim  
Zachary Kirkpatrick  
Julia Knowles  
Harry Krinsky  
Mary Kruk  
Lauren Krzysnik  
Erin Lashbrook  
Crystal Lee  
Jerin Lee  
Joanna Leung  
Rachel Liang  
Martha McAlister-Raeburn  
Madison McCullough  
Meagan Parmenter  
Andrea Pesch  
Eva Peter  
Allison Powell  
Jacob Rainey  
Jennifer Ramsey  
Kavita Raval  
Ilhana Redzovic  
Aaron Rosen  
Collin Rush  
Sahal Saleh  
Courtney Salley  
Meaghan Schiffler  
William Sexton

Ann Burke  
Patricia Khleif  
James Pinto  
Anne Porter  
Matthew Bellamy  
Cordelia Zukerman  
James Pinto  
Carolyn Dekker  
Katherine Goldey  
Carolyn Dekker  
Katherine Goldey  
Anna Knutson  
James Pinto  
Patricia Khleif  
Rebecca Scherm  
Jonathan Yip  
Maximillian Alvarez  
Pam Wolpert  
Katherine Lennard  
Jessica Young  
Jessica Young  
Henry Leung  
Jessica Getman  
Anna Knutson  
Rebecca Scherm  
Jessica Young  
Rebecca Scherm  
Bonnie Applebeet  
Rebecca Scherm  
Jessica Getman



Prashant Sharma  
Jacob Stanage  
Kierra Tarrance  
Megan Taylor  
Sarah Woloszyk  
Wuliang Zhang  
Connie Zuo

Anne Porter  
Jessica Young  
Rocco Samuele  
Ali Shapiro  
Aubrey Schiavone  
David Gold  
Jaimien Delp

## **Matt Kelley/Granader Family Prize nominees**

### **Student Name**

Brandon Alexander  
Rachael Ankley  
Katherine Black  
Freida Blostein  
Konhee Chang  
Callie Chappell  
Haley Fox  
Gabrielle Graves  
Derek Heitman  
Allison Hogikyan  
Sin Ye Hwang  
Sonalee Joshi  
Justin Kim  
Frank Morton  
Francine Penikis  
Timothy Precord  
Victoria Rilett  
Dominic Russel

### **Instructor Name**

Stephanie Bolz  
T Hetzel  
Maximillian Alvarez  
David Burkam  
Virginia Murphy  
Matthew Cohn  
Tim Hedges  
Tim Hedges  
Maayan Eitan  
Melissa Gelinaz  
Hilary Levinson  
Paul Barron  
Anne Porter  
Maximillian Alvarez  
Matthew Cohn  
Evelyn Adkins  
Evelyn Adkins  
Stephanie Bolz

Carley Santori  
Alyssa Skelton  
Maddie Thomas  
Jacob Tukel

Maayan Eitan  
Joseph Groves  
Virginia Murphy  
Katherine Goldey

## **Granader Family Portfolio Prize nominees**

### **Student Name**

AnnEliza Canning-Skinner  
Neila Fraiha  
Mahin Munir  
Frederick Newing  
Emily Roberts  
Andrea Rousseau  
Jacqueline Siegel  
Stacey Van Buskirk  
Alexandra Werth  
Christopher Zysnarski

### **Instructor Name**

Gina Brandolino  
Liliana Naydan  
Gina Brandolino  
Paul Barron  
T Hetzel  
Simone Sessolo  
Scott Beal  
Scott Beal  
Simone Sessolo  
Liliana Naydan



# Introduction

Every day, hundreds of students at the University of Michigan work hard to develop their skills as writers. Every winter, we have a chance to sample the fruits of this labor as we select winners for the first-year writing prize. The English Department Writing Program and the Sweetland Center for Writing established a first-year writing prize in 2010. With generous support from the Sweetland Center for Writing and from Andrew Feinberg and Stacia Smith, both of whom earned English degrees from the University of Michigan, we have developed a tradition of honoring students who have produced writing of exceptional quality. This year, thanks to a generous gift from the Granader Family, the prizes for Sweetland prizes will be more substantial.

We are delighted by this development not just because students will receive a more tangible reward for their work but also because named prizes lend more visibility to the competition and its winners. Another dimension of that visibility is this collection. In it we share the writing of prize-winning students so that other writers may learn from, and feel inspired by, their examples. Thanks to the careful editing of Shelley Manis and Dana Nichols as well as Aaron Valdez's design, the award-winning essays are shown to best advantage. As a group they illustrate how writers formulate compelling questions, engage in dialogue with other thinkers, incorporate persuasive and illuminating evidence, express powerful and poetic insights, and participate in meaningful conversations.

Many writers were involved in discussing and selecting these prize-winning essays. The electronic portfolios produced in Sweetland's Writing 100 were read and discussed by Lila Naydan, Jamie Jones, Naomi Silver, Christine Modey, and

Shelley Manis. Entries for the Matt Kelley/Granader Family Prize for Excellence in First-Year Writing were read and discussed by Tim Hedges, Simone Sessolo, Raymond McDaniel, Scott Beal, Louis Ciccirelli, and Dana Nichols. Entries for the English Department Writing Program's Feinberg Family Writing Prize were read and discussed by Christie Allen (co-chair), Julia Hansen (co-chair), Cass Adair, Bonnie Applebeet, Brittany Bennett, Angela Berkley, Kathryne Bevilacqua, Russell Brakefield, Abigail Celis, Rachel Greene, Nick Harp, Marcelo Hernandez, Alexandra Kruse, Sarah Linwick, Eliza Mathie, Melinda Misener, Aran Ruth, Logan Scherer, Aubrey Schiavone, Joshua Shipper, Meg Sweeney, Alice Tsay, Bonnie Tucker, and Pam Wolpert. We are deeply grateful to all of these writers for rolling up their sleeves and participating in the challenging but rewarding work of determining why particular selections merit prizes.

We are equally grateful to the many students who submitted essays for the first-year writing prize, and the many instructors who encouraged and supported them. As writing teachers, we relish the opportunity to learn from the challenging questions, intellectual energy, creativity, and dedication that our students and their teachers bring to our classrooms. We hope that you will gain as much pleasure as we have from reading the writing contained in this volume.

Anne Ruggles Gere, Director, Sweetland Center for Writing

Meg Sweeney, Director, English Department Writing Program

# Feinberg Family Prize for Excellence in First-Year Writing

We are delighted to introduce the winning essays from the 2013/2014 Feinberg Family Prize in First-Year Writing. This year, we received over sixty strong pieces of student writing, and twenty-four English Department Writing Program instructors participated in our three rounds of judging. At every stage of the selection process, our judges expressed to us how impressed they were with both the depth of student writing and the range of writing genres that students are producing in their English 124 and 125 classes here at Michigan. These student essays modeled strong research, analysis, narrative, and critical thinking skills, and many of our judges were inspired as readers, writers, and teachers through the thoughtful essays and essay prompts they read.

The strength of our students' academic writing across genres is inspiring but not surprising, as it is one of the goals held in common by all sections of English 124/125. Students in first-year writing courses work together and with their instructor to produce complex, analytic, well-supported arguments that matter in academic contexts, and to demonstrate a nuanced understanding of these skills in a variety of kinds of writing and in a variety of rhetorical situations. As the submissions for this year's Feinberg Family Prize demonstrated, first-year Michigan students are learning how to adjust writing for a particular audience, how to acknowledge the limitations of the scope of their own argument, how to analyze and synthesize different kinds of evidence to develop a central idea, and how to attend to the work of language itself in persuading readers of a point of view. This is just a partial list of the wide range of writing skills students practice and hone with their peers and instructor in first-year writing classes.

In considering our two winning essays this year, our selection committee was especially impressed with how both essays made use of personal experience in order to discover and articulate meaning that matters beyond one individual. We came away from reading these essays feeling that they had really taught us something new in their pursuit of real questions about interpersonal, intergenerational, and intercultural dynamics. And both essays achieved this sense of discovery through their purposeful command of detail and evidence, language, pathos, and narrative structure. We have been grateful for the opportunity to read the fine work of so many of our first-year writers, including our two winning essays. We are now pleased to share these excellent pieces with you, and we hope you will find them as inspiring as we have.

Christie Allen and Julia Hansen

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

Graduate Student Mentors, English Department Writing Program

## Five Minutes

Karen Duan

*From English 125 (nominated by James Pinto)*

Karen wrote this wonderful essay for our English 125 class. The prompt called for a personal narrative with a sense of argument, and one of the options was to write about a moment of regret.

Karen's essay stands out for many reasons that will be obvious to the reader. One, more hidden reason—a teacherly reason, I suppose—is that this piece offers a remarkable window into the writing process. Karen wrote a first draft that focused almost exclusively on the narrative's moment of transgression. After the fact, she went back and talked to her mother about their shared memory. That conversation worked its way into subsequent drafts, and in this way, the essay shifted from being static retrospection into something more powerful—a living, evolving text that becomes a part of the on-going dialogue between its two central figures.

This essay also avoids the great trap that its prompt sets. In searching for meaning, Karen does not attempt to moralize her narrative. Rather, she acknowledges and works with the messiness of lived experience. So often we try to use our writing as a way to impose order on the complicated realities that surround us. That impulse makes a good deal of sense—both psychologically and from a writing perspective—and yet it diminishes the truth-telling power of our work. Here Karen describes a tension “that cannot be resolved” and focuses on all the ways that she and her mother are different. Her essay catalogues its author's failures of empathy, and in doing so—in fact, because it does so—the essay makes a statement that feels both true and achingly empathetic.

*James Pinto*



## Five Minutes

Ever since I was young, I've dreaded trips to the grocery store. Part of this dread came from the boredom of picking through endless mounds of deteriorating vegetables. Yet, most of it came from a much more gut-wrenching feeling: humiliation. Specifically, the humiliation that surfaced whenever I accompanied my mother to public spaces.

I'm the child of two immigrants. My parents left China in 1985 for Japan. They learned Japanese and earned professional degrees there before immigrating to America. They've lived in the States for over twenty years now, with English as their third language. My father learned it by locking himself in his room and religiously watching piles of American movies. He's currently a college professor. His English is almost perfect, practically indiscernible from mine, and he speaks it everyday.

My mother's English, in comparison to my father's, seems fractured. After quitting her job to raise my sister and me, she only speaks English during limited grocery store interactions and conversations with friends I invite over. At home, she addresses me almost exclusively in Mandarin, only dropping in an occasional English word for clarification. Unsurprisingly, her pronunciation carries a sharp Asian accent.

On the other hand, my sister and I were born in the States. We speak English with a natural ease my parents have spent decades attempting to acquire, and still haven't fully acquired. This linguistic divide between my parents and us often feels like a monumental separation between our two generations. There is a marked difference between my parents, who still identify with their home country, and my sister and me, who have almost completely assimilated into American culture.

Looking back, I've always been overly conscious of my mother's broken English. It's always given me a feeling of irrepressible, face-reddening shame. I guess her poorly articulated speech served as a reminder of my family's "otherness," our oriental status, our eternal exclusion from the title of American. At grocery stores, I would rush to translate her jumbled words into "proper" English to the

cashiers. At the time, it was probably a self-defense of some sort — an inherent need to validate myself as a properly assimilated Asian-American, unassociated with my mother's choppy speech. I was ashamed of her inability to blend into American culture. I was embarrassed of her inauthentic, immigrant past. And in my own blind pursuit of American authenticity, I often scrapped my mother's pride in favor of what seemed to be a more valuable reward: acceptance. On further reflection, my embarrassment over my mother's English was probably the start of my ongoing struggle to empathize with her immigrant narrative.

Perhaps the experience that brought me in closest confrontation with this struggle happened the summer after my sophomore year of high school. I had been passing time at a friend's house, four of us drinking juice and mooching around in the July heat. When it came time to leave, my mother chugged across town in her faded green station wagon to pick me up. Two of my friends had asked for a ride, and I had cordially agreed. My mother arrived promptly, and I approached her first to inform her of our two added stops. She reacted with surprise, but warmly welcomed my friends.

Now that I think about it, my hasty notification of these additions probably caught her off-guard. She was obviously flustered when my friends entered the car. Scrambling to gather herself, she turned around and warbled a strained greeting. My friends smiled, returned the greeting, and piled into the car. As they settled in, my mother further attempted to start a courteous conversation. Yet, the syllables she desired seemed to evade her. It became increasingly clear, in between her stuttered words, that she was struggling to put together a simple question. "H-How..." We waited. An awkward atmosphere filled the car as we all sat in tense silence, awaiting the end of her question. Her obvious struggle came at the great discomfort of everyone in the car, particularly me. With each proceeding word, and no evident progress on the question she intended to form, I began to feel a familiar resurgence of humiliation. "Today, how..." We waited. From the rearview mirror, I watched my friend's eyes dart in discomfort. The silence between her words seemed to magnify ten-fold, as the heavy weight of shame overtook me.

I became restless; I could not believe she was having this much difficulty voicing a few basic words. “Um... This...” We waited. I wrung my hands in impudent impatience, internally willing her to just finish the goddamn sentence. I wanted, more than anything, for her to put an end to the uncomfortable aura that now engulfed our car. “W-weather...”

At last, I snapped, no longer able to stand the sound of her pitiful stammer. In a rush, I hastily turned around to my friends and joked, “Sorry, my mom sucks at English.”

I cannot write these words without the burdened knowledge that they came from my own mouth. Although most of the memories from the incident remain hazy and somewhat forgotten, this sentence stands out like a jagged gash across my mother’s smooth kitchen floor. To this day, I still wonder — why did I say that? How could I say that? How could I ever so blatantly disrespect the woman to whom I owe all my accomplishments? The answer eludes me; I tend to bury mortifying moments in the back of my mind, never to confront them again. And yet, I find this particular moment so poignant, so pathetic, and so telling.

After I spoke, the car’s religious silence shattered. My friends relaxed their posture and offered small laughs, before lapsing into casual conversation. I felt relief. My petty relief came at the sacrifice of my mother’s pride. I remained too immersed in the comfortable atmosphere the car had recovered to notice the way her laugh cracked. I failed to see her tight-lipped smile. I continued the rest of the car ride this way, completely oblivious to the massive amount of betrayal and humiliation I had just given to the woman sitting mere inches from me.

In the next few minutes of the car ride, my mother dropped each of my friends off at their respective homes. She maintained a stoutly pleasant expression throughout this process. Yet, immediately after they left the car, her agreeable facade collapsed. She inhaled a ragged breath, and then exploded in rage. The words she shrieked were insignificant compared to the sheer hurt and fury that accompanied them. I stared at her tear-streaked face in awe. I couldn’t comprehend my own ignorance. I couldn’t understand the fact that I had publically insulted her — that I

had both ridiculed and trivialized a humble, 20-year long effort to speak a sentence of unbroken English. It's only now, looking back almost a full two years later, that I understand the plain cruelty and selfishness of my words.

It's not within my nature to revisit unpleasant memories. Nevertheless, I can't stop myself from revisiting this one incident, over and over. I replay my voice, nonchalantly pronouncing the most inconsiderate, impertinent sentence. I replay my mother's laugh, so artificial and carefully enunciated. It haunts me. No matter how hard I try to block the scene out, the guilt endures. Those five minutes in the car were a razor-thin slice of our lives. Yet I'm sure we'll remember them, and carry them with us like a sagging weight on our chests, a load we can never completely remove. Those minutes were powerful and traumatic. They were a rare instance when the underlying tension of our relationship lay completely exposed before us.

My mother and I share a relationship marked by the contrasting languages we speak. At home, I address her in English, while she addresses me in Mandarin. Our conversations move fluidly, the two languages melding together to form a constant stream of sound. It's a bilingual mode of communication so familiar that I've never considered its significance in the context of our mother-daughter connection. I never saw its symbolic nature, until the incident in the car.

The separate languages my mother and I speak reflect the separate worlds we come from. My mother is an immigrant. She came to America with three years of university English and a stomach full of confusion, hope, and fear. She attended her first job interview while listening to English cassettes, carefully wrapping her mouth around bulging words like "schedule" and "structure." She tried her first hamburger reluctantly. The stench disgusted her, so she plugged her nose, slowly moving the sesame bread and meat down her throat. My mother is full of experiences I will never wholly understand. How does it feel to smile at the store employees who approach you in the sugary, measured voices they reserve for six-year-old children? How does it feel to listen to the laughter of the 17-year-old cashier, loud and booming, as he hears you pronounce "ah-vo-*cab*-doh"? How does it feel to wander through the Detroit Metropolitan Airport, clutching a tiny slip of paper

with the words “I don’t speak English,” carefully, painstakingly copied down by your husband? How does it feel to miss your mother’s funeral because she died across the Pacific Ocean?

Perhaps the reason I’m so stricken by this incident is because it captures my inability to empathize with my mother in its most detrimental light. My mother and I have complicated, individual identities that seldom overlap. We grew up in two different countries under two different cultures. We live largely immersed in our own bubbles of experience, unable to grasp each other’s thoughts and feelings because they are so foreign to our own. It’s a discomforting, often painful experience that breeds practically all the tension in our relationship. And that tension cannot be resolved. My mother cannot go back in time to grow up in America; I cannot immigrate to my home country. So we’re at a standstill. And yet, I find myself continuously contemplating this moment, and what it meant for her.

Three weeks ago, I broached the incident with my mother for the first time since its occurrence. I approached her, riding on a sudden wave of courage. She was drying her hands. As I opened my mouth, my attempt at a sincere tone became more of a tentative question. “Remember...that one time I told you your English sucks...?” I trailed off, unable to continue. Her hands froze mid-motion. She was rigid for a few seconds, perhaps reliving the incident, before she reluctantly responded. “Oh... It’s true. My English really is pretty poor.” This acknowledgment shocked me. In a panic, I spluttered a string of garbled reassurances that no, her English does not suck and yes, I can understand her perfectly well. She didn’t seem to hear me. She was ruminating in silence somewhere far beyond my childish consolation, until she turned around and added, “But it hurts my feelings when you tell other people that.” I blushed, feeling a familiar resurgence of humiliation, but for an entirely different reason.

My mother and I come from contrasting backdrops. Our differences often make it hard, if not impossible, to empathize with each other, and to understand the angle we approach our lives from. But when I think about my mother, I think of her bending over her glowing iPhone, carefully tapping each square key to text

me in English. I think of her sitting at our kitchen table, mumbling “avocado” over and over as she peels a yam. Five minutes is a razor-thin slice of our lives. It’s not enough to induce a revolution, and certainly not enough to resolve our tension. But it’s enough, if even just a little, to help me understand how my mother might feel when I openly denounce her English.



# Mao

Connie Zuo

*From English 125: (nominated by Jaimien Delp)*

Connie's essay comes from the meditative analysis portion of our class, the final of four essays written over the course of the term. For this essay, writers were asked to consider a more abstract concept and marry it to a question of significance in their own lives. Using the skills and rhetorical devices developed over our time together as a guide, writers were then encouraged to explore their chosen concepts/questions using detailed, concrete language and clearly articulated analysis.

I was at once impressed by the unique nature, clarity and emotional complexity of Connie's essay. Her driving question is born of a genuine curiosity about her spiritual connection to cats, and how this form of worship might connect to – even save her from – her often tumultuous family dynamics. She executes her mediation thoughtfully, recounting moving scenes with a lovely attention to detail, an intuitive sense of language and an honesty that is at once gripping, haunting and beautiful. Her analysis is quite brave and sophisticated: the eye through which she views herself, her family and her pets works to uncover a complex, fully realized meditation on love, family, worship and creatures.

*Jaimien Delp*



## *Mao*

If only I could pull off what my cats get away with. When my cat Kelsie smashed a five-hundred-dollar, collector's coffee table, all she had to do was whisk her brown-striped tail a few times and turn her fearful, clear blue eyes toward my already softening mom. Yet, when my older sister Angie and I broke a window while throwing rocks at a hornet (great idea, I know), we were exiled to our sixty-year-old neighbor's house to sit indoors and watch Civil War documentaries until we were worthy of supervision-less play again. When my other cat, Bib, dislikes the turkey tidbits in her cat food, all she has to do is flick a paw, disgusted, and wait for my dad to hurriedly open a new bag of salmon-flavored snacks for her to sample. And to think of all the times I've wished for my plate of limp, mushy eggplant to turn into chocolate cake. It's not fair, but I can't complain for too long — I too adore our family cats.

I was seven years old when we adopted Bib, and I dressed for the occasion in a white shirt with a pink, sparkly, cartoon kitten printed on it. It was from Limited Too, a store that sells little girls' clothing and the associated "coolness" at prices like thirty-five dollars for a t-shirt. I later learned by eavesdropping on my parents at night that my dad had been laid off, and we shouldn't have been shopping at Limited Too, or shopping much at all. But a little girl's birthday is a little girl's birthday, my mom argued.

Anyway, I was waiting at the door with Angie when my mom came home from work without her usual briefcase and a maroon, plastic kennel instead. On October 17, 2002, my family of four welcomed a black-and-white tuxedo kitten aptly named Bib. My mom fussed over the weeks-old kitten, scolding Bib while actually adoring every movement of her sharp, little claws. My dad was the happiest, even happier than Bib in a box of packing peanuts, as he told us about the kitten he raised as a boy growing up in poor, politically-tumultuous China. For once, my mom and dad were in agreement over something, and our family quickly centered on our newest addition as we became cat obsessed together.

A year later, I went to a classmate's birthday party with a wrapped present and returned with a calico, blue-eyed cat that the host family no longer wanted. Neither my mom nor Bib was particularly receptive of this new cat at first, but Kelsie grew fat alongside Bib as we pampered them both. My mom's grumbling about five-dollar organic milk and canned albacore tuna gave way to smiles with every purr or meow. We were happily powerless against their soft, padded feet, the little pink dots of toes and noses, the coarse tongues, and best of all, the warm stomachs humming like little lawnmowers. From afar, it must've been a funny sight – this Asian American family coddling two fat cats, cradling them like babies, letting them sit at the dinner table, and nestling their faces into thick fur that smelled like home, comfort, and faintly of Fresh Step cat litter. But our two cats have become more than just pets. Whenever the dinner table tension becomes too much, I simply abandon the cold rice I have been poking at and run to my bedroom where somewhere, under the bed or inside the laundry hamper or on top of my just-washed sweater, I find a fuzzy lump of a cat. Scooping up Bib or Kelsie, I march triumphantly to the kitchen where pursed lips are replaced by begrudging smiles of adoration. Sleepy eyelids blinking in complacent confusion, these cats have no idea that they are one of the last remaining links between my mom and dad.

Even halfway across the globe, cats still work their magic on my family. You see, my maternal grandmother, my Lao Lao, practices cat worship as well. When she found out that some neighborhood kittens had fallen into a sewage hole and that my dad, who just happened to be visiting at the time, was the one who rescued them, we never heard the end of her ballad: “*Zuo Jun Ba Mao Jiu Le!*” My father saved the cats. And the cats are saving my Lao Lao, too.

She is a tiny, wizened old lady who refuses to socialize with the neighbors, wear anything but black, or cook anything but potatoes. Although my mom urges her to try celery or carrots or anything with a speck of nutrition, Lao Lao refuses out of peculiarity and stinginess. Yet, she buys only the freshest, most expensive fish for the neighborhood cats. She throws a rag over her wild, stringy hair in a kitchen so hot that it threatens to cook you right along with the fish, not making dinner for

herself or my grandfather, Lao Ye, but for her beloved cats. While my Lao Ye visits a Buddhist temple and plays mahjong with the old men downstairs, Lao Lao keeps to herself and visits her own shrine – a pile of broken cement blocks and thrown-away newspapers where the cats live. These cats are the only things that can lure her out of her apartment. Since the car accident that's left her struggling to walk, she's been saving her toothless smiles and the energy it takes her to get down the stairs for her two daily trips – one to the market to buy fish and the other to feed the cats. It's a sacred journey to her, and when I ask to go, she crinkles her face and shakes a hand. My mom agrees, "It's too dirty. You stay inside."

Finally, after days of begging, Lao Lao shyly brings me along. She taps her cane against the wall of the garbage pile: "*Zhar.*" Here. She says it with a mixture of pride and apology, not sure what her youngest granddaughter will see in this heap of cracked clay pots and cinder blocks leftover from a nearby construction project. Flies and mosquitoes have also made this their home, but Lao Lao doesn't seem to notice the buzzing or the unforgiving humidity, although she wears long pants and a long-sleeved shirt in a hundred degree weather. She begins to call the cats in her nasally, piercing tone, and four black and white kittens come scampering out from under a broken lawn chair. Lao Lao continues her sing-song dinner cry: "*Mao, Mao, Mao, Mao!*" Finally, we see the kittens' cautious mother and a lazy, white cat that she says is the mother's son from last year. Lao Lao keeps telling me to go back, that it's too hot, but I stay and watch the cats devour their gourmet meal of liver and sausage. She never once pets them but observes and laughs childishly, clapping her wrinkled hands a few times. She squats the way the Chinese do, with their arms draped over their knees, and lovingly berates her cats. "Don't you know how much that cost, Cat?" she points a gnarled finger at the kitten who doesn't finish his share of liver. Lao Lao sighs as the cats lay down for an evening nap and says that she wishes she could see my own two cats. I know she actually means that she wishes she could see me for more than two weeks at a time, every three to five summers. I tell her that one of the kittens looks like Bib, and I see her try to smile for me. She says that she'll pretend it's my cat from now on. She picks up a twig,

traces some lines in the dust, and flings it away tiredly. By the time we leave, I sense that I've accumulated upwards of fifteen mosquito bites. Lao Lao and I later count twenty-six swelling, itching lumps, but she dabs ointment on my arms and legs with an air of approval. Somewhere in between her exclamations of "*Aiyaaa*" and "*Ni Kan Kan Ni*" (look at you!), I hear relief that someone else understands this faith of hers. I have been to her temple, and I know it is real.

I never accompany Lao Ye to the Buddhist temple, but I watch him return from it in the afternoons. Lao Ye has survived two strokes and a car accident, but this doesn't stop him from zooming away to temple in his electric wheelchair, fearless among motorcycles and cars alike. At one point, I see him dart between two taxis, either too deaf or too nonchalant to be bothered by the furious honking, before disappearing into the smog and traffic. One afternoon just a few days before I am set to return to the States, Lao Ye comes home waving a scrap of paper and grinning. He offers it to me first, then laughs uproariously as he remembers that I can't read Chinese. My cousin, Dou Dou, sets down her toddler son and picks up the paper, which is from a widely-respected, blind soothsayer. *You will live to age 83*. When my cousin reads this part, Lao Ye beams. By then, he says, I too will be holding a little one. He smokes a Marlboro and peacefully ignores Dou Dou as she berates him for not bringing her to the soothsayer with him.

The next day, she takes me on a trip to the largest local temple instead to light incense for her son, De Ze. Dou Dou married into a family of Chinese southerners, and my mom rolls her eyes as she says that Dou Dou's becoming just as superstitious as they are down south. I hold little De Ze's hand as we follow the click-clack of his mother's high heels through one set of tall, red doors, then two more. We're looking for the temple of a god that De Ze shares a name with. Dou Dou kneels in front of the statue she's looking for, and I don't blame De Ze for abandoning my hand and retreating in terror. It's a warrior god's statue, and everything from the thick, tar-black eyebrows to red-and-blue painted face is intimidating. Dou Dou finishes lighting her incense, but when we step through the next a circular doorway into a garden courtyard, she realizes that this shrine before us is

actually the one she was looking for. I guess it can't hurt to light a little more incense.

Next, we stop before a shrine of a god of marriage, and this time Dou Dou double-checks the sign before kneeling. I ask her if it's a little too early to be praying for her two-year-old at the shrine of marriage. She shrugs – we're here anyway, might as well. I wonder if anyone prayed for my parents. There are no wedding pictures in my house, no letters from friends congratulating my newlywed parents, no tacky picture frames that say "Jun and Bo, Forever and Always." However, there is a Bible. It's not so unusual to find one in a home, but in my household, the Bible's flowery, cloth-covered binding contrasts sharply against my dad's books about Python coding and physics. It was given to my parents by a group of intrusive missionaries when they were graduate students in Houghton, Michigan. I'm pretty sure my mom only kept the book for its pretty cloth cover. If my parents had read this book, maybe gone to church, would their marriage be something else today?

One night when I was in the eighth grade, my parents fought worse than ever. Angie and I were scream-sobbing, begging them to stop. I once saw a play on a school trip and scoffed at the leading actress, a woman pretending to be mad with grief; who actually clutches their hair like that and falls to their knees? But now, I was the one tearing at my own hair, choking on screams, digging my nails into my face in anguish. Suddenly, my dad lunged headfirst at our brick fireplace, looking for a way out of a marriage and life that had both become hell to him. There was a thud and a scream of pain, but at least not the crunch of a shattering skull. I kept praying in my head, little made up prayers that I repeated over and over. I had never been to church and only to temples while on vacation, and then as a curious observer. But I called to Buddha, God, Jesus, the many-armed statues I'd seen inside temples, anyone. I asked them to protect my family, adding in fancy words to try and make it sound like a real prayer. Maybe if I said *Our Father* then this prayer stuff would work. In desperation, I thought of the untouched Bible on our bookshelf. I thought about how my cousin prayed at the wrong shrine, how the soothsayer calmed Lao Ye's fear of dying too soon with a simple scrap of paper.

I thought about my Lao Lao stepping down four flights of stairs with a lame foot, swinging her bag of meats and fish. I wondered how in the world the neighbors couldn't hear us, why no one had called 911 yet.

I don't know after how long, but it finally stopped. In a living room of silence, my dad and I sat on the couch with my mom hovering nearby. He rubbed his head. There was no blood and he could speak and drink water. Angie had run upstairs to the computer to google the nearby hospital's phone number. She said we couldn't call 911 – what if they took Dad away? When my father stood up and walked to the kitchen, I followed like a timid shadow or a king's slave-servant, trembling and blank-eyed.

There, in the middle of the kitchen floor, sat Bib. My dad knelt down, broad shoulders and back blocking my view of her, and said *Mao* the way Chinese children say it when they are first learning to talk. I nodded and repeated it like an approving teacher. A forty-something-year-old man and his thirteen-year-old daughter together finding relief in repeating this monosyllabic, elementary Chinese word – *Mao*. Across the oceans, my Lao Lao is limping toward the trash heap. I hear her calling - *Mao, Mao, Mao, Mao*. This is the prayer I was looking for.



# Matt Kelley/Granader Family Prize for Excellence in First-Year Writing

In talking about the importance of early drafts, even terrible, unruly early drafts, Anne Lamott says, “There may be something in the very last line of the very last paragraph on page six that you just love, that is so beautiful or wild that you now know what you’re supposed to be writing about, more or less, or in what direction you might go—but there was no way to get to this without first getting through the first five and a half pages.” This seems an especially important idea for first-year writing students to embrace, not so that they write blindly or thoughtlessly, but so that they learn that writing is a cyclical process of pre-writing, research, drafting, reflecting, and revising. Even when a writer sets out to do one thing, by the end of their first draft, they often realize that they’ve done, or want to do, something else entirely. What they thought they knew has changed as they’ve written. The best writers trust that as they revise their work to respond to these changes, their writing has the potential to change its readers, so they do the difficult work of following that one tiny thread. The writers whose work you see in this section have challenged themselves to set purposeful goals for their writing and yet been willing to adjust those goals as they discovered new information, or as they encountered complications to their thinking or challenges from their audiences. These writers, to a person, are seeking to do something with their words, not merely to respond to an assignment. As their reflections attest, they have sought to discover not only what they are doing, but what they can do. The results, we think you’ll find, are powerful.

Shelley Manis & Dana Nichols  
Lecturers, Sweetland Center for Writing





# **Oedipus Tyrannus on Causality, Determinism, and Identity**

Callie Chappell

*From Great Books 191 (nominated by Matthew Cohn)*

Callie explores problems of identity, autonomy, and determinism in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Euripides' *Bacchae* and argues that these texts, on the one hand, may imply incomprehensible and even deterministic universes but, on the other, show that the individual subjective experience is still meaningful. She uses these ancient texts to explore problems of contemporary life, especially her own, in which not oracles and prophecy but history and distant societal structures govern much of our fates, and she contends that self-definition and free will, even if they are only subjective experiences, are more real and matter more than the vast and unfathomable world that birthed us. This paper is remarkable not only because it produces a thoughtful and nuanced reading of two difficult texts but also because it uses them as tools to conduct some deeply personal self-exploration. It demonstrates why these are Great Books: their beauty, relevance, and usefulness endure.

*Matthew Cohn*

## *Oedipus Tyrannus* on Causality, Determinism, and Identity

Questions of the extent to which nature, nurture, and free will affect our lives pervade great works, and these questions remain universally salient. Both Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Euripides' *Bacchae* propose similar paradigms about the nature of fate and how humans interact with it. This essay explores such interpretations, investigating first how the works posit fate and human agency in general and second how individuals, both the characters and myself, function in such a world. Both works present a dualistic interpretation of fate. By illustrating the gods' omnipotence, the *Bacchae* and *Oedipus* postulate that the universe is too complex for humans to fully comprehend. The salience of both works stems from their application to the universal human experience; Sophocles and Euripides both emphasize human agency, positing free will as the means by which humans interact with fate. The choices people make—the manifestation of their free will—depends on human nature. In the *Bacchae*, Pentheus' culpability stems from his inhuman nature, and in *Oedipus*, Oedipus' nature, centered around curiosity, reflects the universal human drive to understand the unknowable. Beyond merely textual analysis, the question of adoption deeply connected me to the text. Since most adoptees operate without a genealogy, larger societal ideas about fate explains our Being in the world. Oedipus functions as an exceptional test case for adoption because his realization of his identity serves as the tragic climax. Thus, Oedipus' "recognition and reversal" reiterates the importance of an essentializing interpretation of fate and how we function within it.

In both *Oedipus* and the *Bacchae*, the inevitability and unknowability of fate seems pervasive. Every culture attempts to create a paradigm that explains the universe's entropy, and in these two works, gods' determinism<sup>1</sup> provides such a

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1 Some argue that the Greek gods are merely personifications of thoughts, but this interpretation is not supported by the text, as the characters in Sophocles' *Oedipus* seem to refer to deities such as Apollo and Zeus as actual external beings. For example, when characters evoke Apollo (e.g. "Come to our aid, Apollo, save us from the sickness" (150)) it is not implied that they are calling on some internal aspect of their personalities; rather, a physically external deity.

paradigm. Here, the gods determine every aspect of life. Life, like Oedipus' prophecies, "live and flutter around him" (*Oedipus Tyrannus* 482), because understanding the world in its entirety is impossible for humans to conceive of. Consequentially, "what will be, will be" (341). Even Tiresias, the epitome of wisdom, realizes the inaccessibility of universal causality. In *Oedipus*, the gods mandate actions that fall outside human control. This paradigm is best illustrated when Oedipus pleads for Creon to banish him. Creon relinquishes his ability to determine Oedipus' fate, leaving it for "the god to decide" (1521). This demonstrates the Greek's deep-rooted belief that the gods' determination of fate takes precedence to human agency. Creon will not superimpose his authority over the iron-clad will of the gods. This testament to the divine serves as a teleological attempt to give larger meaning to a world that humans, by their very nature, cannot understand.

Similarly, the *Bacchae* functions as an even more overt testament to the gods' omnipresence. Like the universe, Dionysus' nature is too complex to understand or predict. Dionysus performs supernatural miracles for his Maenads, making "springs of wine" (*Bacchae* 814) flow from the earth, and honey "pour / From the ivied rods they carry" (815-816). Likewise, Dionysus punishes Kadmus by condemning him to exile and transforming him into a dragon-snake, doomed to lead a barbarian horde against his homeland (1540-1560). Apollo's determinism reflects humanity's attempt to explain a fundamentally unknowable world. The prevalence of the gods indicates our endeavor to create a universalizing system with which to explain a world that is not conceivable by human apparatuses of causality. Perhaps the gods are merely another construct in the attempt to create a framework with which to organize a world too complex to understand.

Although the omnipresence of the gods and the externality of fate initially appear to dominate the text, both Sophocles and Euripides couch their narratives in terms of human decision-making. This emphasis on agency indicates that, for them, free will functions as an apparatus with which to navigate reality—a comprehensive attempt to understand the universe on a grand scale. Specifically, Oedipus demonstrates how individuals' nature determines how they choose to engage with

fate, and how that engagement ultimately gives life meaning. Even though the universality of fate underlies every aspect of the narrative, Sophocles presents *Oedipus Tyrannus* primarily in terms of Oedipus' decision-making. Sophocles highlights Oedipus' choices as a product of his nature, and Oedipus' characteristics, such as his readiness to jump to conclusions about Creon (i.e. 538-539) and himself (i.e. 738, 1182-1185), factor strongly into reader's judgment of his culpability. To this end, the Messenger laments that "the worst pain is self-chosen, deliberate" (1231), indicating that Oedipus' free will, the way he chooses to navigate reality, is what ultimately condemns him. After gouging out his eyes, Oedipus cries, "Apollo! It was Apollo, my friends. / Agony after agony, he brought them on. / But I did this [his self-inflicted wounds] ... / By my own hand" (1330-1333). Oedipus realizes that, although larger divine factors influenced the physical outcome of his life, his own paradigm towards the world shapes its ultimate meaning. Thus, free will functions as a mechanism to engage and attempt to understand, even if not fully, a world too complex for the human psyche.

Although the nature of fate and causality may be beyond the scope of human understanding, the nature of the individual determines the means by which they engage that fate. In the *Bacchae*, Euripides portrays Pentheus as inhuman. Characterized as "descended from / A dragon, fathered by [.../ ...] some/ Savage murderous giant who / Battles the gods" (*Bacchae* 632-638), the Chorus portrays Pentheus as the epitome of the unnatural. Although the Chorus may be biased against Pentheus, Euripides supports this characterization through other characters' and Pentheus' own actions. Fundamentally, Pentheus' nature, one of rationality and irreverence, dictates his choices. Although Pentheus' direct responsibility for Thebes' irreverence towards Dionysus is minimal, Euripides magnifies his culpability by highlighting the connections between his disposition and free will. Although his fate is ultimately determined by Dionysus, Pentheus' inhumanity and disbelief in divinity generates the naiveté that both results in his death and prevents him from experiencing life's "joyous rapture" (277). Consequentially, Pentheus' rejection of Dionysus symbolizes his rejection of human's *primeval* nature. Euripides juxtaposes

Pentheus to those who participate in Bakkhaic revelry, those who accept their nature and revel in it, through the thematic device of wine. Tiresias contrasts wine—and by extension, Dionysus—to Pentheus as humanity, distilled. Wine symbolizes primal human nature in that it ensures “we mortals have what’s good in life” (334), and reveals what is left behind when exteriors are stripped away. Ultimately, Pentheus’ exaggerated character reiterates the connections between human nature, free will, and fate. As humans, our nature informs the actions we take, which comprise free will—the paradigm with which humans engage fate.

In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Oedipus chooses to engage his fate through an obsession with knowledge. Initially, Oedipus’ curiosity about his origins made him flee Corinth (780-798). Later, Tiresias reveals that Oedipus’ culpability, what ultimately led to his demise, was because of Oedipus’ persistent questioning; Tiresias tells Oedipus that “[he] would not have come if [Oedipus] had not summoned him” (432). Thus, Oedipus calls for his own fate. Oedipus’ attempts to control knowledge and understanding reflects a deep need to engage a fate over which he has no control, and this drive for understanding is universal to human experience. Oedipus’ exceptionality—portrayed as “god-like” by the Thebans—demonstrates how he actually represents both the citizens of Thebes and all of humanity. In the opening, the Chorus extols Oedipus as the paragon of Thebes; the “country calls [him] its savior” (49), and in return, he represents the city. It is this paradox, that an individual represents the collective, which is indicative of the universality of Oedipus’ character. Oedipus’ tyranny is not purely domination, but ubiquity. Instead of simply an individual character trait, Oedipus’ curiosity represents something far more fundamental to the human condition. Like Oedipus, humanity struggles to understand the essentializing project of history. Curiosity uniquely empowers all actions by determining how we engage with fate; thus, curiosity itself represents free will.

Ultimately, for me, one of the most interesting and resonant aspects of this investigation of fate and agency was how it relates to adoption. When Oedipus realizes his true identity, he must rely not on his genealogy, but his understanding of

his relationship with fate to make sense of his situation. Because he thinks that the Corinthians are his biological parents, Oedipus assumes their identity as his own. When Oedipus learns the grotesque details of his fate, his real father and mother, Oedipus' sight symbolizes a much deeper threat to his self-proclaimed identity. Oedipus sees the light: his "forbidden parents [...] forbidding marriage, [and] forbidden death" (1184-1185). Through apostrophe, Oedipus calls out to the mountain, Citheron, to explain his twisted fate (1391). Deprived of a genealogical explanation, Oedipus' evocation of Citheron symbolizes his need to engage larger societal interpretations of fate to anchor himself. However, the outside reflects in. Deprived of his supposed genealogy, Oedipus is left only with himself, which forces him to question whether his fate was a byproduct of his own nature. These questions, questions of identity, are strikingly familiar to adoptees.

In no other context have I investigated so thoroughly a unifying theory of fate and causality, so acquiring such a framework has been immensely freeing. Something about both *Oedipus* and the *Bacchae* rang deeply authentic to me. The ideas they present about causality and free will were intuitively interesting questions, but I never expected this work to ultimately influence my perception. Like Oedipus, I was also abandoned at birth, left to decide whether my life was merely in the hands of a clockwork universe, or a test to prove my self-worth. Some odd twist of fate landed me into a remarkably privileged social position for no reason at all. The responsibility to *make that count* was tremendous. However, adopting a framework that posits free will as a means to navigate reality creates, for me, a state of acceptance. Understanding free will as a subjective experience and a comprehensive attempt to grasp the universe on a broad scale has created a home, or at least a foundation from which to build. Beyond adoption, the issues *Oedipus* and the *Bacchae* address have resonated throughout the centuries because they reflect the way *all of us* engage the world. The longevity of these works lies, not in its fleeting metaphors, or even necessarily its historical significance. No, their portrayal of the fundamental human experience explains the works' intransience, an experience shared by Oedipus, Pentheus, and us all.

# **The Struggle of a Lonely Banana**

Sin Ye Hwang

*From Comparative Literature 122 (nominated by Hilary Levinson)*

Sin Ye's essay is a thoughtful and well-written reflection on identity and community. Her argument is rich and nuanced, and the essay is full of vivid and complex examples. In addition, by carefully reflecting on her own identity, she is able to draw connections to broader considerations of community, nationality, family, and language. Sin Ye's ability to write about such complex themes in a graceful and clear manner is impressive.

*Hilary Levinson*



## **The Struggle of a Lonely Banana**

It's the last lecture of the year for my Biology 101 class. Sitting at the back of the sparsely populated lecture hall, I glance at the others around me. Almost everyone is bored, choosing to browse the web on their laptops rather than listen to the professor's dull lecture. I myself am no different. As I browse through the course catalog, trying to decide what classes to take next semester, a seemingly innocuous course title catches my eye. "ASIANLAN 104: First Year Chinese for Mandarin Speakers – This course is designed for students with native or near-native speaking ability in Chinese." Well, that rules me out then, but for some reason, I continue reading. "Students will receive this permission [to join the class] via a placement test" ("First Year Chinese for Mandarin Speakers"). Strangely, I still click on the next link. Apparently, the placement test is today, right after this class. My fingers fly across the keyboard. I sign up for the test. All this happens in less than 10 minutes. Dazed, I come back to myself and resist the urge to slam my head against my laptop. Why on earth did I bother to sign up to take this test when I'm a Banana?

I suppose I should explain myself. Back home, I am what my people call a Banana – yellow on the outside, white on the inside. Bananas are those who are superficially Chinese by descent and appearance, but unable to speak the Chinese language. And in Malaysia, where language and cultural identity are so strongly linked as to be almost synonymous, the Banana's inadequacies in Chinese but fluency in English is viewed as a sort of mini betrayal of the Chinese heritage in favor of the white man's culture. This description of me is not entirely untrue. As one of Chinese descent, I'm expected to be fluent in Mandarin, or at least some other Chinese dialect. I am not, and as such, it follows that I am completely out of the loop when it comes to Chinese music, dramas, celebrities, and anything cultural that stems from the language. So when I can innocently remark "Angelababy? Is that a Chinese nickname for Angelina Jolie?" (It's not. Apparently, Angelababy is a famous Chinese model, actress and singer), I shouldn't be surprised that my inadequacy with the language is taken to mean my desertion of the culture. It is

embarrassing and humiliating though, when I reply to rapid fire Chinese in a halting mixture of Chinese liberally sprinkled with English. And the inevitable pitying realization that “Oh, you’re a Banana!” strikes a deep sense of shame within me, as though by being unable to master my mother tongue, I am somehow inferior or a traitor to my heritage. Even as I leave my motherland for university in America, I am still hyper-aware of the stigma of being a Banana, and my yearning for acceptance among my community has not lessened even in this English land, and I sometimes believe it to be impossible.

As I blearily wander into the classroom where I am about to take the Chinese placement test, all these insecurities come rushing back to me. What was I thinking? This is a test for people with “native or near-native speaking ability in Chinese.” What right do I have as a Banana to have the audacity to claim “near native speaking ability”? As the Caucasian proctor smoothly rattles off the instructions for the test in fluent, flowing Chinese, my feelings of inferiority hit an all time high. Here is a man with nary a drop of Chinese blood in his veins and still he has mastery over that enviable tongue which I so desire. I bungle my way through the test. The speaking test is ok – I get through with minimal use of stutters and English words. The reading test is dreadful. I haltingly recite, in almost complete monotone, “Last Saturday, Mei went to dunno to do dunno because err... I don’t know how to read this but I think it means *birthday*...” and pretty much bungle through the task. The reading comprehension is the worst. I just stare blankly at the chunk of meaningless characters, print the words “I don’t know” in English, hand in my paper and walk out with head bowed low, feet dragging on the floor and self-esteem sinking beneath the ground.

My inadequacies in Chinese meant that I sought affirmation elsewhere, and perhaps counter-productively I sought it in the bosom of the English language, thus cementing my label as a Banana. My mother, raised and educated in the Chinese tradition, “has long realized the limitations of her English,” as Amy Tan puts it when describing her own mother. Tan describes her mother’s English as “broken” or “fractured” English, lacking in proper grammar, but nevertheless “vivid, direct

and full of observation and imagery” (77-78). This is the English of my mother, which has long limited her from advancing in her workplace. And so she sought to raise me in an English-speaking environment in the hope that I would never suffer the limitations she faced. And she succeeded, perhaps too successfully. My aunts and uncles praised me for my flawless pronunciation and effortless command of English grammar. I basked under the glow of their praise, with pride undiminished even when they clicked their tongues over my failure in my mother tongue. I flaunted my effortless As in English, sneering at my cousins who barely scrape a C, all the while suppressing the knowledge that I would gain nothing but an F were I to study Chinese. And as Tan writes, “I was ashamed of her [my mom’s] English. I believed that her English reflected the quality of what she had to say” (78), I started believing that I was better than my aunts, uncles, and even my mother, as though their “broken” English reflected the inferior quality of their thoughts. But this belief merely serves to highlight just how much I yearned to compensate for my inadequacies in Chinese, and the feeling of alienation from my own family.

And it’s not just alienation from my family that I worry about, but from my peers as well. As I step back into my tiny apartment after the Chinese placement test, I see my roommate busy at the stove, preparing her standard dinner of chicken soup. I lean upon the door frame and say to her, almost too casually, “Guess what? I just took the Chinese placement test. I’m thinking of taking First Year Chinese for Mandarin Speakers next semester.” I study her face as she turns to look at me. Unlike me, she went to a Chinese school back in Malaysia, and I know for a fact that she tested into fourth year Chinese here at university. “Really ah?” she replies. “Isn’t that the one for native speakers meh<sup>1</sup>?” Her face is guileless, and she speaks the truth, but somehow, the truth still stings. “Well yeah,” I shrug as I shuffle into my room. “But I can speak enough to make small talk with my grandparents. Maybe that is enough.” I close the door without bothering to wait for her reply.

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<sup>1</sup> “ah” are “meh” are examples of Malaysian slang, used to indicate tone such as, in this case, disbelief.

I wasn't always this self-conscious about my Chinese. I still vaguely remember a time back in my distant childhood when I chattered freely with my predominantly Chinese-speaking cousins, back before the English-Chinese educational divide slowly but surely set us apart. Strangely though, there are still certain people and situations in which I feel compelled to express myself in anything but Chinese. Even when I and the other party are both consciously aware that their English is better than my Chinese, we still inevitably end up discoursing in our mother tongue, despite my constant interjections of "what does XXX mean?" or "how do you say XXX in Chinese?" Amy Tan describes my dilemma perfectly when she writes, "it has become our language of intimacy, a different sort of English that relates to family talk, the language I grew up with" when describing her mother's kind of 'broken' English (77). Though in my case I am referring to my broken Chinese, our situations are similar as I somehow find it more intimate and welcoming to say to my cousins and friends "*ni-che-bao-le-ma?*" rather than "have you eaten yet?" Perhaps it is the result of childhood conditioning, or perhaps it is because I want to meet them halfway, to show that I'm willing to compromise to relate to them. Whatever the reason, I find it the peak of irony that despite my inferiority in Chinese, I still find myself compelled to favor it in certain situations just to fit in.

About a week after the placement test, I am having dinner amongst a group of my close Malaysian friends here in Ann Arbor. We are gathered in my apartment, devouring home-cooked Malaysian food, teasing each other as we weave seamlessly between Chinese, English and Malay as the situation suits it. The boisterous mood is infectious and I find myself surprised that I can laugh along and tease back, even when the conversation flows into the less familiar Chinese. I open up my email to show them something funny, when something else catches my eye – it is the result of my Chinese placement test. With one click, I open the email. "Wow, you passed ah! Congratulations!" says my roommate as she peers over my shoulder to read the few words that prove me worthy of 'native speaker' status. I

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<sup>2</sup> In Chinese culture, asking whether one has eaten is a greeting of intimacy, similar to the English 'hello'.

am a native speaker! I am not 100% Banana! I am almost dizzy with the realization. But as I look around the room, thinking back on how, just a few minutes ago, we were happily chatting in Chinese, I realized that I already knew this. So why did I take this test?

This wouldn't be the first time I took such a test. Aunties, uncles and even my mum used to (and still do) often nag me on how "Chinese is very important! You must learn your mother tongue!" Back in Secondary School, I caved in and attended an optional evening Chinese class, hoping to narrow the language gap with my peers. However, the class, intended solely for beginners, was conducted in the Primary school. So to my abject horror, there I was, the tallest kid in class, standing out in the Secondary school's violently turquoise uniform in a sea of the Primary school's navy blue. It was humiliating. The worst part was convincing the teacher (and sometimes myself) that my inadequacy in Chinese was in no way indicative of my cognitive abilities. Just because I couldn't say 'photosynthesis' in Chinese didn't mean I didn't understand it. But when I was constantly reminded of how terrible I was at Chinese, it was easy to believe that I overall inferior. After 4 years of struggling, with not much to show but the dubious achievement of out-scoring kids 3 to 5 years my junior, I gave up and resigned myself to never escaping the label of being a Banana, my self-esteem hitting rock bottom.

So now, I am at a crossroads. With the email deeming me worthy of attempting the native-speaker Chinese class, an old door is once again open to me. Do I step through, and once again risk frustration and tears as I struggle to learn the language of my fore-bearers? Or should I forge my own path and pick up a new language I'm actually interested in – Japanese perhaps – which has yet to be tainted by the bitterness of past failures? Once again, I return to the question I asked myself back in a sparsely populated Biology 101 lecture hall: Why on earth did I bother to sign up to take this test?

I don't think I ever really intended to take *First Year Chinese for Mandarin Speakers*. Looking back, this flight of fancy was probably prompted by my yearning for some sort of outside affirmation or acknowledgement that I do know some

Chinese, that I am still one of them, that I am not 100% a Banana. Constantly focusing on instances when my inadequacies in Chinese alienated me, I tend to forget how seamlessly I can sometimes integrate into my community. I will probably never find complete acceptance, but over the years, I have gotten good at pretending, mimicking styles and cadences until I can sometimes pass off the English words that litter my Chinese with such a Chinese accent that it almost sounds like I use English out of preference (because it sounds cooler, I say) rather than out of absolute necessity. I fluctuate, though, between feeling confident that I am Chinese enough to fit in, and feeling so absolutely Banana that I fear the language and cultural gulf will only grow wider over time. But maybe some day, I can stop pretending and find that the façade of semi-competence I present to entice acceptance from my people is actually already a part of me. After all, if I can create a mask to ‘fake’ my Chinese, there must be some part inside of me that is yellow, hidden amongst the rest of the white. Right?

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# Granader Family Prize for Outstanding Writing Portfolio

## **neila100**

Neila Fraiha

*From Writing 100 (nominated by Liliana Naydan)*

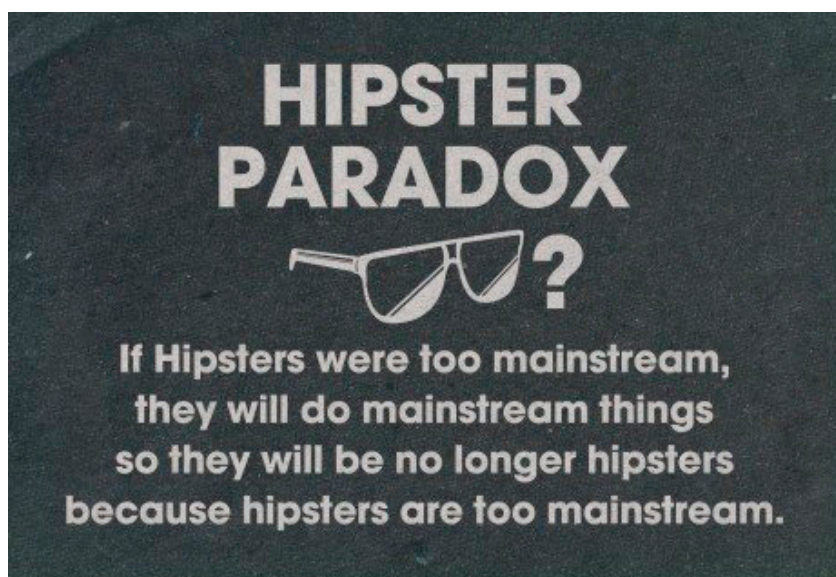
Neila's portfolio catches my attention because of the interesting perspective she brings to her University of Michigan experience and her overall experience in America. Neila came to UM from Switzerland, and her critique of American consumer culture (the theme of my course) emerges in her first essay (and my favorite of her essays) on Urban Outfitters. She makes keen insights about the commodification of counterculture, and as I saw in peer review, she prompted her peers to think critically about the subject. Likewise, Neila's subsequent papers--an ad analysis of a sexist BMW ad and an open letter to the CEO of Rolex--show that she's interested in social justice issues as they pertain to gender and social class. I feel Neila should win the portfolio prize because she sees the ways in which writing matters. In turn, she writes smart prose to promote critical thinking and create social change.

*Liliana Naydan*



## Major Essay 1: A Paradoxical Image

### Introduction



*Major Essay 1's assignment consisted of a review of a product, performance, place, or experience. I chose to review the store Urban Outfitters by evaluating certain criteria: the styling of the window displays and mannequins, the immensity of the store, the abundance of items to choose from (not just clothes), the prices, and the quality of the attire.*

*The audience I was directing my writing towards consists of teenagers, specifically girls, between the approximate ages of thirteen and twenty. Essentially, I was targeting a group of young people similar to myself. However, this text can also relate to males, as a lot of my male friends enthuse over Urban Outfitters as well. I wanted the portion of the youth who passionately admires and worships the store to read my piece, not only to agree with my praising points, but also to realize and acknowledge the downfalls and counter-culture the store promotes throughout American society today.*

*To begin with, I had an outlined idea of how I wanted to approach my piece of writing. I firstly wanted to praise the store for its success in many fields and throughout*

*American culture, but I also wanted to counter-argue its triumph by elaborating on some of its disadvantages and nonfulfillment. At the beginning, the only disadvantage I thought of was its ridiculous prices. But as I was writing the piece, a paradox arose that opposes its selling point, which you will discover as you read the piece.*

*If I were to revise my piece further, I would elaborate on specific points with a greater degree of detail. There is so much to say about this store because it has so much going on in it. However, I generally prefer concise and to-the-point texts, so that's how I decided to write mine. I got my points across to the audience throughout the paragraphs, which didn't prolong unnecessarily. My favourite feature about my piece is how I attempt to foreshadow my conclusion and ending point in the body of my essay in order to create both intrigue and suspense within the reader. I then conclude with a semi open-ended question that makes the audience think and reflect upon the actuality and future of Urban Outfitters.*

### **A Paradoxical Image**

I walked past the store as an outsider. The window displays and decorations caught my eye. There was something intrinsically attractive and addictive about the styling of the mannequins and the layout of the store. Right off the bat, you get this retro but forward, vintage but edgy feel. The majority of teenagers do not want to be seen as “ordinary,” so this unique twist can seem extremely desirable for many people. The clothes hang effortlessly from the statues; the styling is perfectly messy. As you envision yourself taking over the mannequin's body, you cannot stop yourself from walking inside...

Urban Outfitters. I would hear this name resonate throughout the room time and time again, as my friends praised the store animatedly. “How do they always seem to know exactly what the public desires?” I would hear them say that line with the utmost admiration beaming through their eyes whilst their arms performed insistent movements as if they were truly searching for a legitimate answer from the skies above. This wasn't the first time I had heard the name Urban

Outfitters, for I had shopped there in the past when I would visit the United States or Canada. And even though this store doesn't exist where I have lived for my entire life, or in most European countries, everyone I know raves about it. As expressed in *Bloomberg Businessweek's* magazine article called "Urban Outfitters, Fashion Victim," the author says, "Urban Outfitters' success lies in its ability to pinpoint exactly what kind of edge its hip – but not too hip – costumers want." For this reason, I was starting to get the impression that the popularity of this store was getting infinitely larger amongst American culture and the youth especially.

The sheer size of the store was reassuringly overwhelming. Many of the Urban Outfitters I have been to have two levels, and all of them have high ceilings and tons of space. There is so much for your eyes to attach onto, so in a semi-frantic mania, I began my path around the tables, shelves, and racks. Whoever you are and whatever your fashion sense might be, I can guarantee a large percentage of young people can find something that suits them and their aesthetic.

And this doesn't have to be limited to clothing items. Urban Outfitters is not just a clothing shop: it also sells household amenities, books, music, witty gifts for your friends, all types of accessories, shoes, make-up, and more. Whether you are shopping for yourself or your family or your boyfriend of your friends, there is always an abundance of options to choose from. Why do they sell all of this stuff? It's as though they're selling an entire identity, which pertains to a certain period of a person's life. I remember wandering towards the bookshelves and getting lost in that section; the titles of the books themselves were intriguingly unconventional and made you want to discover more. As I was flipping through some pages, there were books about drinking games, dirty language, sex positions, and other risqué subjects that parents might be offended by.

Urban Outfitters does have its disadvantages and weaknesses, which affect the consumer population. The prices, for one, are ridiculously inflated, which turn certain portions of the public away in disgust. For these groups of people, Urban Outfitters may always only amount to tempting eye-candy. In my personal experience, I have found myself on my way to the cash register to purchase one or a few

articles, when I intelligently decide to glance over the prices for the first time and stop in my tracks. See, I have a slight habit of never looking at the price tags when I should. At this moment, I realize that it is not worth spending fifty dollars for a pair of leggings. Yes, I am in love with them, but I simply cannot afford throwing away that much money for something I can buy for much less elsewhere. I am sure many other teenagers also get discouraged and repulsed by the numbers on these tags.

The equivalent to Urban Outfitters in Geneva, Switzerland, for instance, which is my hometown, would probably be a clothing store called Zara. They could not be more different in terms of style and approach, but it's the go-to shop for girls and guys my age. Zara is a more classy, elegant version of Urban Outfitters and sells a different identity, but the prices are similar. When comparing the quality of the clothes, however, there is no doubt that Zara's clothes are much better made. This makes me wonder if the overpriced articles in Urban Outfitters are even worth paying for, given that the quality is just mediocre.

There is no doubt that Urban Outfitters is a huge success in American culture, but where is it headed in the future? Most of its costumers buy articles from there to be different and stand out in a crowd, but since it's expanding and getting more societally common, a sort of paradox arises. Urban Outfitters is selling an image: the hipster mystique, which is based off of the 1960's hippie. This identity is compromised when more and more people adopt this style. You want to be noticed and acknowledged amongst a group, but today that just seems counter-productive since the "hipster" aspect of this store is turning into "mainstream."

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## Major Essay 2: The Ultimate Attraction of Stripping Women

### Introduction

*This assignment was to write a rhetorical analysis of a post-1945 ad campaign. Instead of writing an evaluative paper like Major Essay 1, Major Essay 2 is about analytically explaining the different strategies used in a multimodal text to persuade the target audience. I chose to analyze a 2002 BMW car advertisement that displays an undressed man and woman in bed with a magazine of the BMW advertisement covering the woman's face. The slogan is "The Ultimate Attraction," which does not refer to the man and woman, but instead to the man and the car. This car advertisement is a perfect example of sexualized ad campaigns and of gender imbalance, as women are degraded and objectified whilst the man dominates. There are many visual aspects of this image that reflect and contribute to gender inequality and that attract the viewer's eye to the purpose of this ad: the BMW. I then concluded by mentioning some issues and consequences that have arisen due to the increasingly used sexualized and gender advertisements.*

*Prior to writing this piece, I had background knowledge of gender imbalance and sexualized advertisements via my Geography and English Language and Literature courses during the I.B. program in high school. These concepts have always interested me, so when I found this advertisement it felt like the ideal opportunity to further explore them. I first looked at the image profoundly, picking out every little detail I noticed, and then I went on to develop each idea, tying them together through one common thread or theme. Each element I picked out had something interesting to say about it, whether I would make a personal assumption about the advertiser's underlying intent, or if I would use my prior knowledge to explain a concrete technique. During the process of writing the piece, new ideas and notions came to my attention, like the irony of the word "model." And finally, I wanted to conclude with a paragraph relaying this type of advertising to the real world: what the effects and issues are on our society, in the hopes of drawing attention to the influential prevalence of advertising, which in turn might change the way audiences perceive them.*

*The audience my piece is directed at mostly consists of younger women, possibly feminists, who can relate to the inferior and subordinate stance in which women are portrayed compared with the power and strength of men. It can also appeal to women who are subject to one or some of the societal issues that have arisen due to this representation.*

*What I like most about my writing piece is the depth and detail in which I analyzed the image. This in-depth analysis enabled me to further explore this gender theme and the techniques advertisers use in today's world. I like the fact that my interpretations of this ad are personal to me, and others might disagree or perceive it differently. If I had further worked on this piece, I would have referred to more advertisements that evoke similar notions of sex and gender, so as to enhance the significance of this issue.*

### **The Ultimate Attraction of Stripping Women**

Advertising agencies have been exploiting the notion that “Sex Sells” increasingly in recent years. Sexualized advertisements promote consumerism because these desirable images and activities attract the eye of the viewer. Because many ordinary women strive to feel desirable and beautiful, in other words they aspire to resemble the women illustrated in these advertisements, product sales are magnified. In a more specific sub-category of sexualized advertisement is gender advertisement, which can be utilized in order to depict images that display stereotypical gender roles. As Steve Craig said in his article, “Men’s Men and Women’s Women”: “Advertisers therefore portray different images to men and women in order to exploit the different deep-seated motivations and anxieties connected to gender identity.” Women are especially portrayed in sexualized ways, often dominated by men, as gender inequality is still a prominent issue in our society today. In turn, this gender imbalance leads agencies to take advantage of women’s inferiority compared to men’s. I chose a BMW magazine advertisement that explores sexualized and gender advertisements. The ways in which this BMW ad portrays the man and woman in a sexualized manner promotes gender inequality

by stripping the woman of her identity whilst tending towards male dominance. This type of gender portrayal may influence or lead to arising societal issues.



This 2002 BMW car advertisement characterizes a sense of male dominance through the man's powerful positioning, his true intentions and desires, and the woman's weak placement. The ad illustrates an un-dressed couple in bed with the man situated on top and the woman underneath. The man seems to hold the power in this situation, as he is physically above the fragile-looking woman. Humiliation is brought to women through this image, as the man does not seem to genuinely care for her, but instead uses and takes advantage of her for his own benefits concerning sexual pleasures. We can see how the woman's bra strap is coming off, which is most likely the doing of the man. He is depicted as the decision-maker in this circumstance whilst the vulnerable woman seems to be controlled by him. Furthermore, the woman's arms are hanging around his neck, almost as though she is clinging onto him in weak desperation. It seems like she is gravely in need of his presence, while he does not even acknowledge hers.

The woman is illustrated as a subordinate and passive figure in this image,



as she is stripped of her identity. A magazine with a photograph of the BMW car is covering her face completely in this ad: she is literally masked and de-faced. This dehumanization causes her to lose her identity, and borders on a sense of objectification, since an object takes the place of her face. When Steve Craig analyzes an Acura Integra television advertisement, the role of the woman is suppressed: "She is nothing more than an anonymous object of desire (indeed, in silhouette, we cannot even see her face), but her presence both affirms the heterosexuality of the group [of men] while at the same time hinting that attaining sexual fulfillment will be made easier by the possession of the car." Objectified women emphasize their uninvolved bodies and give men a superior and animated stance in comparison. The advertisement further implies female passivity as she is either unaware or is not bothered by the fact that her face is covered; instead of fighting for her equality in this situation and insisting on her worth, the woman is merely accepting her defeat.

An irony presents itself between the model of the car and the model of the posing woman in the advertisement. As the woman is stripped of her identity, we cannot give her any sort of recognition on a personal level. The audience cannot even know for sure if she is an actual model. Instead, as the picture of the BMW model is replacing her face, we can say she obtains the status of a "model" in the most objectified and ambiguous sense. In the case of the car and the woman, both meanings of the word "model" are overlapping each other, just as the magazine is overlapping the woman's face.

The setting displayed in this advertisement paints a picture of a sterile environment containing an insubstantial relationship between the man and woman, but an intimate connection between the man and the BMW. The bare bedroom set-up does not encourage an idealistic image of a romantic environment for an exclusive connection between two people. It almost seems like they are in a hotel room, further implying they are not a serious couple. Though the connection is nonexistent between the man and the woman, "The Ultimate Attraction" exists between the man and the car. This is due to the fact that the man is not staring at her face, but instead at a BMW ad in a magazine. It is also due to the



strategically placed slogan: “The Ultimate Attraction” is placed between the two figures, but slightly higher towards the man to highlight his profound attraction towards this car.

A technique used in this advertisement is the idea of an advertisement within an advertisement. This notion can be put in parallel with the concept of “metafiction,” which is when an author of fiction unconventionally alludes to the artificiality or literariness of a work. Rather, the idea presented in this advertisement would be “meta-advertising,” which is an ad about an ad. The image of a man staring at the BMW magazine ad provides the audience with a representation of how to look at this actual ad. The intense and engrossed gaze of this man gives the viewer the impression that he or she, too, should look upon this ad with similar intent, and disregard whatever distractions there might be, even if a woman is lying in the same bed.

The use of colour within this scene draws attention to the significance of the product and selling point: the BMW. The photograph of the BMW in the magazine the man is staring at portrays a bright red car. The colour red immediately directs the viewer’s eye to the most important aspect of this advertisement. Another element the viewer is directly attracted to is the bright yellow spotlight that is shining through the curtain in the top left corner of the image’s frame. This spotlight can mimic a car’s headlights, and therefore the audience feels the presence of a car, further emphasizing the importance of it. It can be said that the man drove the BMW he is staring at to a hotel room, promoting the idea of freedom and escapism. As Steve Craig expresses, “[...] cars are frequently offered as a means of freedom [...].” The two saturated components of the red car and the headlights amidst the dull colours of the rest of the bedroom stand out to the viewer. Moreover, the woman’s arms create a diagonal path from the man’s glance downward towards the red BMW, and hence direct the viewer’s eye in this same manner.

The audience of this BMW advertisement may include specific groups of men and women. The targeted men would be young adults who have an interest,

appreciation, connection, or obsession towards cars. They would be men who think cars are “sexy” and who are attracted to certain models. This ad especially appeals to young men who have the goal to later in life purchase this pricey car, or to wealthy older men who are able to own this car. In terms of the targeted women, this ad should not appeal to many of them, as it alienates a majority of the female audiences. However, if women who like to be objectified and feel “desirable” exist in our world, this ad could potentially appeal to them.

There are many consequences and effects on women in society who view these sexualized and gender advertisements. Women are often taken advantage of because historically women did not have the same rights as men, and this inequality still exists today (for instance, wages for some jobs in Switzerland are lower for women). Gender imbalance still occurs in countries such as Saudi Arabia, where women are not allowed to drive and in India, where the husbands govern the reproductive lives of their wives. Globally, women have never possessed the same authority as men, who represent dignity and strength. Violence and abuse against women are promoted as they are objectified and dehumanized in advertisements, enabling rape and sexual assault to occur more easily since no emotional attachments are present. Additionally, public health problems may arise from sexualized ads, such as eating disorders and depression. They may affect female self esteem because physical perfection of female figures makes women feel less desirable. Moreover, the abundant images involving sex encourage teen pregnancies since they are not educated about sex and important qualities of personality are excluded at an early age. Prostitution may also be a concern if nudity is increasingly portrayed in public images, because women may feel like exposing their bodies in sexual ways and engaging in sexual activities is a norm or considered ordinary.

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## Writer's Home

Christopher J. Zysnarski

*From Writing 100 (nominated by Liliana Naydan)*

When I first met Chris, he told me that he pretty much hated writing. I wasn't surprised: I'd heard this kind of line before. But Chris's development as a writer over the course of this semester strikes me as unique and deserving of recognition. Chris distinguished his portfolio by responding to writing assignments in engaging and creative ways, paying careful attention to features of visual design, and going above and beyond the requirements for the assignment.

The paper that impresses me most is the rhetorical analysis of an ad campaign. Chris got creative with this prompt and read an Ann Arbor street preacher as an ad of sorts. He provides fascinating historical context for his argument and he prompts his readers to think critically about religious divides in America. Likewise, I'm impressed with his ability to write in humorous and lighthearted ways. Whether he's writing a rhetorical description of his nut allergy in a review of North Quad's dining hall or a satirical open letter to the CEO of the Oreo cookie company, his character comes across in his writing. Clearly, Chris came to see himself as a writer over the course of this semester, as evidenced by the array of non-required texts he includes on two pages of his eportfolio: Steel Eagle and Poems.

Overall, the color scheme and general design of Chris's eportfolio shows the degree of thought he put into every part of it. I think Chris is just the sort of writer who should win this award because of how far he's come as a writer via Writing 100.

*Liliana Naydan*

## A Mute Man on the Corner: A Rhetorical Analysis Introduction

*In my second assignment, I was presented with the task of writing a rhetorical analysis of an ad campaign. Now, because one of my goals for this blog is to prove everything is an argument, I could not go about the selection of my ad in a usual method. To find an argument in an unconventional ad. I did what I deem most effective in writing all of my papers. I wandered around the city until a new perspective of an ad campaign found me. In that endeavor, I stumbled upon a man preaching on a corner. I thought nothing of it at the time. I had never encountered a street preacher before, so I listened in and took mental notes on the man as I waited to cross the street. It wasn't until I sat down at a nearby bench and digested the man's argument as a whole, along with a burrito I purchased across the street, that I realized he was an ad. An ad for Christianity. I had found my idea, now all I needed to do was put my fingers to the keyboard.*

*I began writing my paper by analyzing aspects of the street preacher scene. I scrutinized the appearance of the preacher, his tone, the way he held himself, and the scene in general, from my past memories. My analysis began to form, but I still didn't know how I would establish a context for an ad that was ever evolving with the character that presented it. My initial outline was in dire need of a few examples of ethos. Through a little help from my Professor, I found the context I was looking for. The preaching style and the rhetoric the street preacher used are very similar to evangelical methods of advertising religion. At that point, I had an ad, a campaign, and a paper to write. My first draft of the paper was very wordy and the ideas were not as refined as in the paper I am presenting here. Luckily, I brought my paper to a Sweetland tutor for review. The wonderful tutor named Sarah, helped remove the extra word baggage I placed upon the concise ideas articulated in my essay. The fluidity was aided by the introduction of some sorely needed commas, and more than a few grammatical errors were found, but at the end of the session I felt as if my paper was finally complete. I enjoyed writing about such an unorthodox idea of an ad, and I really think it makes this paper a gem. I hope you think so too.*

## A Mute Man on the Corner: A Rhetorical Analysis

“You hate God”, a man shouts at me from atop a crate on the corner of University and State street, “but we can tell you how to accept his love. You must turn away from your life of sin and immorality.” The man is red-faced from shouting. He is grey with age but still in peak health. He is balding and the little hair he does have sits in two tufts above his ears. He stands upon his crate and looks down at the people passing by. Two younger, heavy-set men in black T-shirts stand at attention on either side of the old man. The young men hold pocket Bibles to their chest and stare sternly at the crowd that has accumulated awaiting the next walk signal. All three men in the congregation are wearing worn shirts and jeans. The old man spouts a few lines from the Bible about how the city of Sodom ignored the word of God and was destroyed, in an attempt to promote conversion to the faith, but I have already tuned them out as I cross the street. It is not that I did not like their message; as a Catholic I support preaching of the Gospel. It was the presentation I had an issue with. Even so, the argument of the street corner preacher brought up some interesting methods of persuasion. Through the way the preacher presented himself, the words he spoke, and the tone he used, he attempts to promote the positive message of Christianity through negative connotations. The methods of the preacher attract attention, but do not effectively persuade most individuals.



\*Note this is not the man I saw personally, but this individual is part of the same group and it's on the same corner.

To begin with, based on the methods he used to persuade the crowd, the preacher clearly participates in a contemporary form of Evangelicalism. Evangelicalism is a movement in the Christian faith that promotes a set of similar beliefs and vocal preaching of the Bible. Evangelicalism came into being in the 1730's with the advent of the Methodist Movement. The movement was founded in England by John Wesley. It promoted open air preaching to reach the masses, identical to the way the preacher presented his similar religious beliefs.

Evangelicalism surged in America during the Great Awakenings of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Johnathan Edwards was a renowned advocate of Evangelicalism during the Great Awakening. His work caused many individuals to accept the faith and he caused a substantial revival in his Evangelical church. He spurred Evangelicalism into a new era of prominence. Evangelicalism was also a driving force behind the Civil War. To many Evangelicals, slavery was a major barrier to the advent of a religiously sound Christian America. They thought the abolishment of slavery would bring about a golden age of Christianity and democracy. This inspired the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," a song sung by union soldiers as they pushed to end the war. In 1949, Billy Graham, arguably the most famous Evangelical of all time rose to prominence. Billy Graham preached to massive crowds about Christianity. Graham preached about love, tolerance, and peace in the Christian faith. He appealed to the good in the masses instead of dwelling on their failings. The street-corner preacher could stand to learn a few things about presentation and the goal of an Evangelical message from the esteemed Billy Graham. Graham's message reached millions of people and he proved to be an influential voice in the fight to end segregation. Graham even bailed Martin Luther King Jr. out of jail. He was a religious advisor to many United States presidents, including Richard Nixon and Dwight Eisenhower. He preached a message of religious tolerance and acceptance that was widely acknowledged. His ability to persuade was renowned throughout Evangelicalism and is still a model Evangelicals strive to replicate to this day (Marsden).

In terms of the persuasion, the way the preacher presented himself played a crucial role in getting the crowds to accept his message. The informal clothing worn by the preacher could be an attempt to connect with his audience, or it could merely be a sign of his own laziness and incompetence. The preacher stood on a shabby crate in jeans and a T-shirt. The lack of professional attire seemed to indicate that the preacher did not care about how his message came across. The sermon seemed very impromptu, like three men decided to stop on the corner and preach after buying a crateful of apples at the farmer's market. The ragged jeans and T-shirts made the men look more like a gang than people on a spiritual mission. Although, looking like a gang might be one of their methods of persuasion. Something that looks more threatening draws attention better than a mild-mannered preaching. If people feel threatened they tend to focus on the threat. The more people who focused on the preacher, the more likely it would be for his message to persuade a passerby. It is commonplace for crowds to ignore passive corner advertisements, especially religious advertisements, but something that looks out of place and intimidating will draw attention.

The preacher's age also had a dual effect of persuasion on the crowd. The preacher was a relatively old man. He was most likely in his late fifties or early sixties. His age could have given the audience an impression that he was wise or that his age had taken its toll and he is now a raving old man. Though, because of the clear look in the man's eyes and relative health that he appeared to be in, I am of the former opinion. Alternatively, many individuals that passed by the preacher had a look of disgust upon their faces. It was clear that they saw the preacher as a raving old man that was disrupting their otherwise peaceful Saturday night. They walked quickly past the preacher and made sure to avoid his gaze.

The preacher stood upon a crate, which added to the threat he appeared to be. He towered over the people walking by, which caused more individuals to take notice, and it seemed to give him a sense of authority. In a way, it reminded me of other great sermons in the Bible, where Moses or Elijah preached from a mountainside far above the masses. The raised stance gives the speaker an air of



enlightenment as they preach to those below. The crate upon which the preacher stood was very unremarkable and old, which made the platform the preacher stood for seem half-baked and unreliable. It did not seem like the preacher put a lot of thought into the way he presented himself. The reddened face of the preacher spoke of great anger and distress. Surely, his reddened angry face made the audience take notice, but his anger can be interpreted in different ways. It could discredit his position because it goes against his overall message of love. Though, it could also bring the depth of his concern and passion to bear. Almost like a father yelling at his child who has transgressed. In a way, his anger can be seen as a way to set others upon the right path.

Besides the way he presented himself, the preacher spoke in a way that he believed would promote his argument. He starts off with such a negative statement that people can't help but feel some level of offense. No individual likes to be told what they think or that they hate anything, especially God. While this is an offensive statement, it is, in a way, a calculated one, because it makes people notice the preacher in their annoyance and anger. I found it to be such a baiting statement that I actually used it at the beginning of this analysis because I think it inspires some level of attention from the audience. In contrast, Dr. Dale, an author, preacher, and professor at Yale University, disagrees with me. He believes, "If in your congregation, there are persons who have grave misconceptions of the truth you will be tempted to begin by attacking and exposing what you consider to be mistakes. This is the easy way to try and set them right, but it is not the effective way" (131). As a preacher himself, Dr. Dale prefers to persuade without using a calculated offense because people have a greater response to religious advertisements when they are presented in a benevolent manner. While a verbal assault on the masses gains attention, it does not persuade. The preacher was challenged by a young man across the street at the moment I stumbled upon the scene. He was screaming condemnation on the young man unless he confessed his sins and committed his life to Jesus Christ. This was another flaw in the preacher's attempt to persuade. The preacher verbally assaults the young man, which is the

worst possible way to persuade an individual. In the opinion of Dr. Dale, “Men will not part with what they have until you give them something better.” Clearly, the youth was unpersuaded by the accusatory words of the preacher. A better alternative to the life the young man currently led should have been presented. If the preacher tried to persuade rather than intimidate, more people would have responded to his message. It was clear from the way the crowd sped past the preacher that his fear tactics had scared his audience.

The preacher was shouting at the top of his lungs to gain the attention of all who passed by. This allowed his message to reach a wider audience, but it diluted the impact of his statement and caused him to lose some credibility. The preacher was very accusatory, pointing and gesturing in an angry manner at the people who ignored him, or retaliated to his comments with a few choice words of their own. The way the preacher yelled at the crowd broke the social standard. While his presentation and message caught the eye and the ear, the tone was the greatest source of alienation for the audience. In an age where keeping to oneself or a group of friends is the expectation, a man screaming at the top of his lungs breaks the serenity of our isolation. It drops the listener into cold, hard, reality which is not anything like the enjoyable night out with friends that the audience expected.

In conclusion, it is interesting to note that while the preacher’s message was generally ignored, based on a religious landscape survey of America conducted by the Pew Forum, 78.1% of the population identify themselves as Christians (“Summary of Key Findings”). Evangelicalism and the Christian religion in general has always been a driving force in America. Yet as Americans, our society is increasingly secular; we keep all religion out of our schools and government, we debate over the insignia in “God We Trust” on our currency, and we even ignore the man preaching on the corner about a God most of us believe in some way shape and form. The preacher is muted by our secular society. Is it any wonder that he shouts?



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## A Thousand Words to Nabisco and My Dear Irene Introduction

*For this assignment, I was required to write an open letter to a business. Now, my class viewed some great examples of open letters; some funny, and others quite serious. They all sought to promote some form of change at the corporate level, and that was great. I thought the letters, especially A Letter from a Birmingham Jail, embodied the importance of free speech, whether that voice be in print or spoken word. Though, I couldn't relate to those letters. To me, it seems like so many corporations are corrupt in some way that an open letter to some big company would be like taking a squirt gun into a forest fire. While I know that a collective of small efforts can create great change, nothing jumped out at me as something more than generic corruption most corporations display. I didn't want to create a paper that was one of a million; hunting to rectify some problem against one company when the problem was everywhere, so I decided to make a satirical open letter.*

*Now, I just needed a topic, so naturally, I went to the hub of, among other things, ridiculousness. The internet. I mean Google landed you on this site right? To find inspiration for this paper I just started entered "controversy" in front of any company I knew about in the Google search bar. Now I don't want to spoil my paper so let's just say I found a company near and dear to my heart with their hand in the cookie jar. Anyway, I began the writing process and this paper just naturally came to me. Writing has really become natural from me now. I did get a bit of help with some wordy sentences and a clarification or two which were necessary for a tutor at the Sweetland writing center to fully understand my paper. She followed up the end of our session with, "so you pretty much just wanted me to tell you how good your paper was." Now, I can't say that was the only reason I went to the tutor, but who doesn't like a confidence boost? Especially after everything I have learned over the course of this class. Anyway, this is a paper where I attempt to be funny. That's my favorite bit about this paper: I had fun writing it. I can't remember the last time I said that about a paper and, with that said, I hope you have just as much fun reading my paper as I did writing it. Enjoy!*

## **A Thousand Words to Nabisco and My Dear Irene**

Dear Irene Rosenfeld,

I know you are a very busy individual, but I would like to incline your attention for a moment so I may address a concern about the subsection of the Nabisco Company which deals with the production of your Oreo cookies. Now, I am an avid fan of Oreos because they are the cookie of my childhood, and even more so, because I have a nut allergy. Most other cookies would lead to my untimely death. So, you can imagine my distress when I learned that a cookie company I trusted with my life, quite literally I may add, was cheating me for years. Yes, you know what you have done, you have skimmed out on the delicious cream in your Double Stuf Oreos. According to a very reliable CNN article by Michaela Perreira, each Double Stuf cookie only has about 1.90 times as much cream as an original Oreo cookie (Perreira). Do you know how much money and cream I was cheated out of during my childhood because of your false advertisement? At an average of three cookies per day for 16 years, you owe me fifty three pounds of Oreo crème, and that is a conservative estimate! I am terribly aggrieved by this breach of trust. How can I know for sure my next Oreo cookie, if there is a next, wasn't riding a conveyor belt right next to an assembly line of Nutter Butter cookies?

In truth, it is not even about the cream. I managed to live without it. The real problem is that blatant breach of trust. You falsely advertised your cookies as double stuffed. I would have no problem with your operation if you just indicated for all those years that, in fact, your cookies were only 1.90 times as stuffed. I speak for the community of Oreo lovers when I say that such a remark would not have caused us to love you any less. In fact, it would have been a testament to the honor and respect you, and your company, show the consumer. Instead, you fooled us with such treachery!

At this point, any respectable company would own up to their false advertising and admit their transgressions to their loyal consumers, but Irene, if I may call you Irene, you continue to deny the claim that you are cheating us out of



a tenth of a gram of crème, that we paid for I might add, with every Oreo cookie. Was that tenth of a gram worth losing our trust? Your cookies might be as pleasurable to neural receptors as cocaine (Medical News), but that doesn't mean cheating us out of a tenth of a gram will aid your profit margins to the degree of a drug lord under the same prospect. The difference in your profit margins because of this incident cannot be worth losing your consumer body. Even if limiting production cost does have a more considerable impact on your bottom line than I have indication to believe, it was a dangerous game to lie to the ones who line your pockets with our dollars and care for you.

In the minds and hearts of the consumer, there are three things that I propose must be done by Nabisco to restore this bond of trust. First, admit to all of the false advertising present on your packages. Even, advertising that is not under question which may not be true. In all honesty, I find it hard to believe that such an industrially manufactured, sugary cookie can have only eight grams of sugar. Therefore, I would start with the truth over the nutritional facts. Only when all of the information given to the consumers is accurate can the wounds of your infidelity begin to heal. Presumably, until the consumers regain their trust in your corporation you will see a decrease in your bottom line, but that is quite simply the price you must pay.

Secondly, you must pay. Yes, I know you may believe this to be an extreme proposal, but do you really think consumers would just flock back to your Oreos without compensation? Therefore, Nabisco companies must payback all the crème

they have stolen from us over the years. I know this will not be any easy task, but I think a rough estimate can easily be calculated by the same school children who brought their findings of inadequate crème to the media and scientific community for further study. Relief stands be put in place to begin the immediate distribution of the crème you stole.

Finally, Nabisco Company, the public will no longer be satisfied with a 1.90 times stuffed cookie. The final proposal for change I make is that you actually make good on your promise of a double stuffed Oreo. I know the public would definitely be open to trying one. I am sure that tenth of a gram of crème is the most stimulating to the palate and will truly bring the quality of an Oreo to a whole new level. The profits you make from the genuine Double Stuf Oreo will more than make up for any losses in product, or the consumer body, that occurred after my first two proposals.

It is with sincere hope that this will reach the sensibilities of your humanity and you will act according to the proposals presented in this letter. If the proposals in this letter are not followed, I would hate to think about the detrimental effects it would have on a love I have held so dearly for so long. Do not let this one little transgression be the end of the bond the populous has with you. We are willing to forgive Nabisco, if you seek to remedy your lies. Though, I have already forgiven you, my dear Irene.


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