**National 5 Folio High Quality Exemplars**

**Discursive Essays**

**A Hard Pill to Swallow**

Every day women across the globe consume a potentially life-threatening medication in an attempt to control unplanned pregnancies. The trend of taking ‘the pill’ is a growing epidemic among young women and is seen as a positive and perfectly safe way to prevent unplanned parenthood. The vast majority of the developed world’s population use some sort of contraceptive and almost all of these people experience at least one side effect as a result. It is almost guaranteed that at some point in your life you will make the decision to use a contraceptive, and for the majority of females who make this decision will choose to settle for birth control in the form of a pill but, do you consider the consequences of the possibly harmful medication?

We are led to believe that this method of preventing pregnancy is entirely safe and will not lead to serious health complications however, this conspiracy couldn’t be further from the truth.

Women’s mental health can suffer severely as a result of the continuous consumption of the pill. Over 100 million have made the decision to use the oral contraceptive tablet in an attempt to prevent pregnancy or control menstruation. Links between the pill and depression have been established, showing that women using this form of contraception are far more likely to get diagnosed with depression or others forms of mental illness. 1.7% of women not on the medication were prescribed anti-depressants in 2016, consequently, there was a significant increase of 2.2% of women who did take the undeniably dangerous contraceptive being prescribed a variant of anti-depressant.

Besides mental health issues the pill can lead to the development of serious, sometimes life-threatening, physical health problems which are often overlooked by the those who chose to use this form of contraceptive.

You may feel that one of the benefits of using this form of contraceptive is that it is highly convenient. Many people say that it is a very convenient method however, this is simply a myth which consequently leads to many women opting for this form of contraception. Women who are using the medication must consume the pill at the same time daily, with a window of three hours either side. This pressure results in many women missing pills or stressing about whether or not they are still guaranteed that the pill is working. If the pill is taken out with the allotted timeslot then it can lead to bleeding, stomach pains, sickness and may even cause excess consumption of the medication in an attempt to make up for missing a tablet which has severe dangers.

So many women have high levels of stress surrounding the use of the contraceptive and worry about becoming infertile as a result of taking the pill. It is more likely for those who have continuously used the oral contraceptive pill for five or more years to have a thinner endometrial lining, the lining of the uterus where an embryo would implant itself during pregnancy. The thinner lining can lead to fertility struggles and can decrease the women’s likelihood to become pregnant or have a successful pregnancy. As a result, women are suffering due to the fact that they have a desire to have children and are finding it difficult to conceive because of factors that they were previously unaware mattered.

In 2016 a woman named Charlotte Foster went into cardiac arrest and died after suffering an embolism in her lungs. Her doctor verified that the cause of the embolism was the fact that she was taking the oral contraceptive leading up to her death. It has been proven that the oral contraceptive can lead to the development of blood clots in the body, particularly the legs and lungs, that can prove to be fatal. Once again, the death of a woman as a result of a lack of education surrounding the medication shows that time and time again women are inflicting harm and endangering themselves by continuously using the oral medication.

Many argue that the use of the oral contraceptive is great for anyone wanting to regulate their menstrual cycle however, using the medication to do so has serious potential hidden dangers. The pill can actually lead to bleeding between natural periods and can happen if even one pill is not taken when it is intended to be. Due to the fact that the woman has total control over when they take their medication then they can also choose to always take the pill and simply skip their periods which has severe consequences to their health. Doctors have discovered that while it can be fairly safe to skip periods for an extended period of time it can cause ‘breakthrough bleeding’, unpredictable bleeding, and these medical repercussions can take a long time to both emerge and return to normal.

Not only would other methods of contraception have the same advantages and be safer, but they would also be better for women’s physical and mental health. The oral contraceptive pill endangers people’s well-being and can cause long term, irreversible problems that can impact daily life.

There are many solutions to this problem which affects so many women daily, leaving them feeling more comfortable and happier. One solution would be to consider another form of contraceptive such as an implant which according to research by MSD had less than a 1% failure rate when inserted correctly. These come with some disadvantages but many more advantages and those who opt for this method are proven to have significantly improved health conditions. Before choosing to dedicate yourself to the consumption of the pill you need to consider what is best for you and your situation. Would you rather almost guarantee that you cannot conceive or that your health, and life, are not in danger? There is overwhelming evidence that the use of the oral contraceptive can be highly dangerous, yet people continue to use it as their main form of contraception despite the high cost it comes with.

Word Count: 1000

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**“Gloriana”**

Born 7th of September, 1553, to the infamous King Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, would become in many’s eyes the greatest Queen in English history. Beloved, adored, and worshiped by her people - despised, loathed, and feared by her adversaries. Wise, courageous, powerful, and fierce. However, one must ask how she has built such a reputation. Let us explore.

Elizabeth’s ascension to the throne would prove treacherous, and tragic. Her mother Anne Boleyn would be beheaded 19 of May, 1536 (on order of her father Henry VIII), stranding 3 year-old Elizabeth, a bastard. As a teenager, she would be sexually abused by her vile stepfather,Thomas Seymour, until she was cast off by step-mother Katherine Parr, when she was 15. In 1553, her half-brother Edward VI would die of Tuberculosis, resulting in a deadly grapple for the throne, in which the life of Edward’s named successor Lady Jane Grey would be claimed by Mary I, who would be proclaimed Queen on July 19th 1553. During her reign, Mary would imprison Elizabeth in The Tower of London for 2 demonic months, under accusation of treason, and threat of execution (Elizabeth was raked into a plot by Sir Thomas Wyatt, who sought to restore the Protestant Church of England built by Elizabeth’s father Henry, and overthrow Mary, demolishing her radical Catholic England).

Elizabeth was eventually freed, due to lack of evidence. 17th of November, 1558, Mary died. With disdain, she named Elizabeth, her half-sister, her successor. Elizabeth was crowned Queen 15th of January, 1559. She overcame debilitating trauma. She survived the attempts of Mary I and others to take her life. She succeeded through cunning, and cleverness. She has the perseverance, and strength, of a true Queen.

Never before had a woman ruled England without a bold, chivalrous, and commandeering King by their side\*. Queens were to be submissive, and pious, and most importantly, produce heirs. Elizabeth proved these perceptions asinine. She ruled without a King, and ruled to spectacular success. She would not be married off to appease the blustery old men of her court. She was Queen, and would reign as her conscience dictates. She would further defy gender roles during bloody war with Spain, as she vowed she herself would take up arms, and defend her country to the death. To her soldiers, she cries,

“I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a King!...I myself shall take up arms!”

Elizabeth not only defied what it meant to be Queen of England, but completely redefined it. Elizabeth, I believe we’ll both agree, is a feminist icon.

Contrary to what popular history may suggest, Elizabeth was highly merciful. Of course the common case often brought up condemning her to be a ruthless tyrant is the case of her cousin Mary Stuart (Queen of Scots). The story we were taught as children is that of poor, helpless Mary Stuart being imprisoned for 19 years, then beheaded by her cousin Elizabeth, due to her Catholic faith. This image of Mary being a meek and merciful damsel is false. Mary was incredibly dangerous. Mary sought to overthrow Elizabeth, and claim her throne. Elizabeth was Protestant, and viewed as an enemy by The Pope, who called for all Catholics in England to rebel against Elizabeth, and to slit her throat (even stating they will be rewarded by God for her murder). The Catholics rallied behind Mary, and began gathering armies to take down Elizabeth. And so, to crush the rebellion, and protect her own life, as well as her people’s lives, she had no choice but to execute Mary. It was her cousin’s head, or her own. Mary was executed 8th of February, 1587. Elizabeth wept.

Elizabeth’s immense grief is proof of her humanity, and heart. She detested the suffering of others, especially those who she loved most - her people, for whom she had much mercy. She even outlawed the medieval methods of execution, methods that were torturous and excruciating. Elizabeth is famous for her logic, and calculating nature, but so too should be known for her compassion, and empathy.

Elizabeth achieved great things during her 45 year reign. However, possibly her most outstanding achievement would be her defeat of the Brobdingnagian Spanish Armada. In 1588, she and her navy would defend their land, and obliterate their colossal nemesis in a blaze of blood and glory. The English would use ‘hell-burners” - ships loaded with timber and set on fire, then sailed towards the enemy, scattering their ships, to be blasted to damnation one by one. Their strategy proved extremely successful. The mighty Spanish empire was humiliated. England would survive. They were victorious. Elizabeth had won. Most monarchs born, reign, and die without progress made, and without impact made. Not Elizabeth. When she came to the throne, England was a small, and heavily troubled, and weak country. When she left, it was a European superpower, thriving in a golden age, of culture, and art. She evolved England, and made it into something beautiful.

At 10 o’clock at night, March 23rd, 1603, after ferociously battling illness, Elizabeth would fall into a deep sleep. She never woke up. James VI of Scotland would be crowned James I of England just a few days later. England and Scotland were to brought together, under one king.

She overcame childhood trauma. She survived the deranged Mary Tudor’s attempts to have her killed. She united England under one unanimous church. She defeated the most powerful empire on the planet. She ruled without a king, and was/is an icon for the empowerment of women, and an inspiration to all mankind. She defied and redefined what it mean to be Queen of England. She was courageous; she was merciful; she was cunning; she was wise; she was powerful; she was accomplished; she was ambitious; she was clever; she was brilliant; she was glorious. She was Gloriana: The greatest Queen in all of English history.

\*successfully/ to the full extent of their reign.

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**AN UNDER-USED MIRACLE**

What if I told you, you could become immune to debilitating diseases just from eating a few pieces of fruit or vegetables? Or you could be walking around, perfectly healthy, with a pig`s heart in lieu of your own? This may sound like science fiction but in a few short years, this could become the norm. With the aid of genetic engineering, humanity could reach new heights in the medical and agricultural fields of science. We could be a better species for ourselves, for others and for the environment around us.

Genetic engineering is the name of the process of changing plants’ or animals’ genetic material, in order to provide a benefit to humans. This is done at a molecular level and sometimes the edited organism is indistinguishable to its original counterpart.

In regards to the medical applications of genetic engineering, it is a wonder we are not seeing more headlines about it. From metabolic disorders to cystic fibrosis, genetic engineering could be the answer to hundreds of thousands of prayers from people who suffer from inherited genetic diseases. The science behind most gene-editing is as complicated as it gets, but can be relatively easily understood in simplified terms. The main two tools currently used in most genetic labs are two similar types of DNA found in bacteria. The first “clustered, regularly inter-spaced, short, palindromic repeats” (thankfully shortened to “CRISPR”) cuts out parts of the targeted DNA, therefore, changing a cells genetic structure. Think of CRISPR as a pair of genetic scissors. The second tool employed by geneticists is the Adenine Base Editor, also known as ABE. ABE is not able to cut out parts of the genetic sequence, but can completely change them. If CRISPR is a pair of genetic scissors, ABE is a genetic pencil. Wielding this pair of powerful tools, the world`s top geneticists at leading universities, such as MIT and Harvard, have the ability to not only solve the world`s most widespread problems, like lack of food and poor health, but re-write life itself for the benefit of all mankind.

Although this could be seen as a modern-day miracle, a major reason a large portion of the public are against genetic engineering are its ties to religious and moral beliefs. Many people of faith believe that by changing life at such a fundamental level, humans are trying to “play God”. People of religion do not want other humans changing plants, animals and themselves in such a drastic way that it would change the course of their natural lives, as they see that only their God should have this decision. Because of this, numerous anti-genetic groups and associations have been formed to lobby and protest against the development of new technologies and to stop existing proven ones being used. In my opinion, I do not agree with these views, as I see genetic engineering as more of a blessing than a curse. Personally, I do not think that religious peoples should see this as humans trying to imitate God, but should see it as their God giving them the ability to help each other.

Despite the views of these religious groups, gene editing technology could be seen as a modern-day miracle to literally billions of people throughout the world. Droughts, floods, plagues of insects, soil composition, crop diseases and even some human diseases: this list reads like something from the Old Testament, but in reality, these are all issues faced by farmers in the twenty first century. Thankfully they are also all either completely preventable or at the very least treatable with the use of genetically modified crops (more commonly known as GM crops). In the past two decades, starting mid 1994, scientists have made breakthrough after breakthrough in the field of genetically modified organisms (G.M.O.), especially in farmable crops. An example of a more notable crop is the “Flavr Savr” tomato, the first commercially sold genetically engineered food, engineered to remain fresh for longer. Another example is a genetically engineered aubergine nicknamed “Bt brinjal”, was first used in Bangladesh to help farmers struggling with the local insects, which had decimated their harvest the previous year. The aubergines are modified to be resistant to the insect larvae by producing a protein which causes them to stop feeding, while remaining safe for human consumption. This technology is not limited to egg-shaped purple vegetables, as over 80% of all the field corn and cotton grown in the United States of America also contain the exact same Bt gene, found within the Bangladeshi aubergines, making them insect resistant. These examples prove that GM crops can be an incredibly useful asset within the agricultural world.

However, we must remember that the world of genetic engineering is not all sunshine and rainbows as the owners of these miraculous plants are still companies and at the end of the day, as unfortunate as it is, are not out to make the world a better place but out to make cold hard cash. As their aim is always to make a decent profit, these companies will employ a plethora of tricks to ensure a continued income. One such tactic used is something known as “terminator seeds”, which are genetically altered to be completely sterile, meaning that after a prespecified length of time the seeds die off and can never germinate. This forces the farmers into a cycle of having one or two harvests of their GM crops, before having to purchase new batches of seeds. While this practice is frowned upon within the pro GM community, it is still perfectly legal. This is because each new type of GM seed is technically a whole new species, therefore allowing the company who invented it to patent the species. Basically, creating a micro-monopoly of this unique type of seed.

In conclusion, genetic engineering solves many great problems imposed upon mankind. We seem happy to accept a genetically engineered medicine such as insulin, but remain wary of GM crops. I feel this is a biased view as these same crops are the way to eradicate the world’s main issue of feeding itself in the future. We, as a species, must overcome our fears and uncertainties about this wonderful technology, if we ever hope to create a better world.

***(word count: 1040)***

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**War to end all Wars**

203 million people have lost their lives during the last century due to war and related tragedies– to put this into perspective, that is 38 times Scotland’s population. The treaty of Versailles signed e century ago made the fate of the vast majority of those souls. But what if there could’ve been a way to stop these catastrophic losses. Well if Germany won WW1, it would’ve been more peaceful and fewer lives would’ve been lost. But of course, I am going into a no-man’s land of information for this, where either side of humanity dare not tread, to appease the truth.

87 million deaths are attributed to the deadliest form of ideology - Communism. It started with the Soviet Union, the menace of the world lighting it a blazing red – well almost! There is an insurmountable amount of deaths accounted to communism, but why would this be solved in this alternate world. Communism could never rise to power due to the Russians conceding their valuable core of agriculture and industry in Europe. War and annihilation of states would have been blocked because of the absence of Russification. An infamous example of this is Holodomor in Ukraine. Between 1932-1933 6-7 million natives died so the pure-born Russian colonizers could come in. Stealing their land and taking it for all its worth. This has a direct correlation to Ukraine’s modern-day broken state. Another blunted edge to this sickle is the stopping of Mao- first leader of communist China- who started a ‘cultural revolution’ where leading philosophers and academics were killed by their own students because they were freethinkers and independent of the state. This led to a haltering of China’s development where people’s lives have been cut short; limited on freedom; starved to death by famines and most recently sent to ‘camps’. The termination of communism would wipe off almost half of the death toll, I believe this makes a strong case for this diversion in our history.

War is harsh, strong and unforgivable, WW2 proved this as well as showing the worst of human nature with the Holocaust along with the utter shattering of lives. WW2 would not occur, because there would not be the right conditions most importantly because of no Hitler. The Germans were once a huge ethnic group stretching deep into the heart of Russia. After the war, though, they were all ripped out of their homes of centuries into an alien state not known to them. The people were divided and conquered from their distinct communities by the German states, assimilation was the aim, not conservation. And because one German- Hitler- went haywire! This alternate world’s peace would also shade them from our darkest hour, the Holocaust, which was one of the most despicable acts in human history. This means millions wouldn’t die in dehumanising tortuous ways. Which would leave society more enlightened and prosperous as the idiotic ideas of eradicating homosexuals, disabled and religious people, would be unthinkable. Furthermore, creating a more co-operative society allowing people to be less reminiscent of the past and not segregate and exterminate each other. To me, this means we are able to see the full picture and not be blinded by the establishment, that clearly just wants to control you.

Stability is what keeps a country together; people rioting, protesting and bearing arms is not. Our world seems in tatters with areas in civil wars and insurgencies. Argentina once a wealthy country, now tatters through juntas and instability, because of Democracy. It is the connector across the world to our troubles by ineffective leadership and constant change. It has embedded itself in us taking control. The people are sick and tired of this. In a more peaceful world monarchies keep order, as it adapts when the time comes. While here the normal Joe is stuck in between goliaths who vi for control. The world around shows the same stains of democracy. That people don’t want the revolutions of Europe shoved down their throats. As history repeats itself and led to a new dictator in all but name. The people would rally for this as it brings a new hope to them as everyone gets what he or she wants, and order is maintained so that hope doesn’t turn to screams.

In Africa especially, countries are ruined states. From dictators, fear and genocide. I see colonial empires as the main reason for these desperate states. This alternate world differs as decolonization would be earlier without these side effects, due to Germany having no economic ability to hold onto African colonies. So, they would use forced diplomacy as what they can’t have others can’t either. This causes more peace and less devastation as the newly independent countries would be able to develop alongside other nations across the world, as technology started to develop extremely fast with colonization still intact. This has left countries still behind in the times with little access to basic resources such as plain old water; and left the most defenceless people to deal with poverty, malnutrition and disease. There is political instability in Africa, as businessmen and nations alike see it as a resource. This would stop and lead to Africa being an equal place to countries across the world. Africa has seen the worst political and social outlook since decolonization in our world. So, it is obvious that it would be better to have It happen quicker and allow them to thrive in this alternate world where Germany won WW1.

We have been winning a losing battle in our world to create peace but still, 203 million are dead, from what mere squabbles and atrocities, a tragedy. It shouldn’t happen. This alternate world heals this and lets people have families and grow. Though I must admit this is highly optimistic with human nature in the picture, but what if we learn from our ancestors and find our way to stop from happening again.

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**There will be Blood**

When was the last time you bought a box of tampons or any other type of female sanitary product? Did you notice the extortionate price? Have you ever considered why they are so expensive, or why they are classed as a ‘luxury’ item? As a girl, I often wonder these things but one thing I do know, is that it is bloody frustrating.

Currently, women’s sanitary products are taxed at 5% VAT in the UK and are classed as a ‘luxury item’; ask anybody with a uterus and they will tell you they are anything but luxurious. Every year, women in the UK spend an estimated £15 million in VAT from tampons and other sanitary products and individually, women will spend around £18,000 on sanitary products in her life. That is a whole lot of money that most men will never have to pay.

In 2015, an activist, Laura Coryton presented a petition proposing that the UK government bring in a zero-rate for women’s sanitary products which obtained over 320,000 signatures. Tesco reduced prices of almost 100 women’s sanitary products in July 2017 by paying the tax, therefore preventing the customers from having to pay it themselves. A couple of months later, Waitrose and Morrisons did the same. Also, in 2018, free sanitary products were added to the toilets in all schools, colleges and universities in Scotland, meaning girls don’t even need to ask. This kind of change is good; however, it is not enough; the UK government needs to take action and get on board. In the 2017 Scottish general election, one of the governments tax proposals was to put pressure on whichever major party won to abolish the VAT on tampons. Until this happens, the Scottish government is calling for Scotland’s portion of the tampon tax fund to be given to the Scottish government. Scotland is more advanced than the rest of the UK when down to removing the tax, however, there has been little change made since the election. This must improve. I understand why the government wants to tax tampons; half the population need to use them every month, hence more money for the government. However, politicians are detached from the issue as most of them are men and do not understand the issue to the same extent.

Furthermore, there is the issue of low-income households. “Period poverty” is a serious issue in the UK with 68,000 women living in shelters, temporary housing or sleeping rough on the streets, having no access to the sanitary products they are in desperate need of. These women are cold, hungry and poverty stricken. The tax on the products makes it even more difficult for these women to purchase their own with the very little money they have. These women must resort to using ripped up pieces of cloth or cotton and using them as tampons, using newspapers or socks or even stealing sanitary products from the shops simply because they cannot afford them and are desperate. If the NHS provide condoms and contraceptive pills for free, why not essential women’s sanitary products? Condoms and the pill are not necessary for day to day life. Tampons are. It is not by choice that women need them, we cannot prevent it.

In addition, certain countries in the world don’t tax tampons. Ireland has a zero-rate tax on sanitary towels, tampons and panty-liners, Canada has a no goods and services tax (GST) on feminine hygiene products; Nicaragua, Jamaica, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania and Lebanon also do not tax these products. Why can’t the UK do the same? Canada is the 20th wealthiest country in the world with its GDP per capita being £31,934 and Ireland is the 14th wealthiest country with its GDP per capita being £33,882, both ranking better than the UK; they obviously do not feel the need for the tax and are not at a disadvantage from not having it. So why does the UK find it necessary?

This is the question I found myself asking: where does the money go? An article produced by Metro in 2017 stated that tampon tax was supposed to go to women’s charities, however they claim some of it is being used to support an anti-abortion group. Yes, money from a women’s sanitary necessity is sent to an association which prevents women from having freedom and control over their bodies. Women should not have to pay the tax in the first place and when they do, the money should go towards something that most women support and agree with, not something the complete opposite.

In 2017, there was a total of 208 female MPs elected in parliament; 32% of the MPs elected. What does this have to do with tampon tax? If 32% of the MPs elected are female, this means 68% are male. Therefore, it is mainly men who decide to tax female sanitary products. Men who do not understand how much of an outrage it is and how unfair the system seems. It should be women in charge of making these decisions for themselves; from women, to women. I should not feel, as a young girl, that I am being punished for being a female. It is, frankly, gender discrimination. Men must pay tax on razors and some may argue it is the same principle, but men don’t have to shave to be socially acceptable; women need these sanitary products, so they can simply leave the house. Women across the country feel like they must pay a price, quite literally, for being female; we are being bled for taxes. Menstruation is stigmatised and so are periods in general, the tax does not help. It alienates it, as if we must be punished for bleeding. It is perpetuating stigma.

In conclusion, the government needs to recognise how outrageous taxing women’s sanitary products is and how unfair and discriminatory it is. The stigma around menstruation must end and vast improvement needs to be made on the government’s part. Periods are the origin of life; without them, none of us would exist. So, women should be allowed to menstruate without worrying how much it is costing them. The tax on female sanitary products must end. Period.

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**Food for Thought**

When you pay for food, you’re not just paying for the food itself, but the cost it’ll have on your body. In the same way, the NHS are having to spend over £230 million on our bodies as a direct result of the impact obesity is having on Scottish residents. This colossally bloated figure has been required for drugs to tackle diabetes and obesity over the past three years in this country – 5% of the population are currently diabetic, with the majority (220,000) having type 2 diabetes. With this number rapidly expanding, should the NHS continue to feed this habit with subsequent cash injections?

What gives weight to this obesity crisis? It has ballooned to the point that The Independent has reported that there will be 26 million people in the UK who are obese by 2030. This is a 73% increase from the current 15 million. Even more alarming, over 150,000 children are obese in Scotland alone. Such weight issues are accompanied by a range of medical issues. For example, if you have a body mass index of 30 or higher you are more likely to suffer from heart disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, or even a stroke, all of which are creating a huge strain on the NHS.

Many would argue that the NHS should be treating all of the above complaints as it is a public service funded by taxes from everyone. According to the NHS Constitution England:

“Nobody is excluded, discriminated against or left behind” – compassion, humanity and kindness are central to its mission. A number of doctors would agree with this stance, stating that the treatment of patients should be on medical grounds, not based on any moral judgement of the lifestyle choices which may have contributed to their illness. However, with a quarter of NHS funding currently being swallowed up by obesity related diseases in a time of austerity and an ageing population, decisions have to be made about how to employ limited resources:

“The NHS is committed to providing best value for taxpayers money and the most effective, fair and sustainable use of finite resources.” (NHS Constitutional England).

Bearing all of this is mind, we have to acknowledge that while we all have a right to high-quality healthcare, equally we have the responsibility to treat the NHS as a valuable resource. In these times of financial hardship, choices have to be made in terms of what to prioritise and people must take ownership of their own health. Some illnesses might be avoided if they are linked to individual lifestyle choices. According to the NHS website, regular exercise has the capacity to “reduce your risk of major illnesses, such as heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and cancer by up to 50%, and lower your risk of early death by up to 30%.” From a balanced diet (800 calories per day) to a bit of daily exercise, the BBC Fast Fix documentary has proved that it is possible to reverse some of the symptoms of Type 2 Diabetes in some cases.

Should this onus on personal responsibility for health and wellbeing extend to patients paying for lifestyle-related medical interventions? 7% of people participating in a BBC poll (2013) indicated that “People should pay for treatment linked to smoking, drinking or obesity”. Some people felt that charging such patients would motivate them to be more proactive in their lifestyle choices. However, many medics have argued that people cannot be blackmailed into lifestyle choices nor would they wish to discourage them from seeking medical help as it is a basic human right which many would perceive to be morally wrong to deny .

This hefty issue also has more underlying complications. In spite of lifestyle rationing, some people may still develop Type 1 diabetes or carry excess weight despite making healthy lifestyle choices. As Conservative Health Spokesperson Jackson Carlow stated:

“Of course, not every case of diabetes is related to weight, there are a range of reasons”.

Type 1 diabetes occurs as a result of the body’s own immune system destroying the cells needed to regulate blood sugar. Similarly the NHS UK website indicates that not all weight gain is due to excessive calorie intake. In some cases underlying medical conditions such as an underactive thyroid or steroid medications used in the treatment of arthritis and asthma can also lead to obesity.

Nevertheless it remains undisputed that encouraging patients with obesity related illnesses to lose weight can only be a positive thing for many reasons. Dr Clare Gerada explains the health benefits of losing weight:

“Obesity is a different matter. Operating on a very fat person is more dangerous. Anaesthetically it’s harder, the surgery is harder and the rehabilitation takes longer. So it’s medically legitimate to withhold treatment from some very overweight people. But it should not be done for social reasons”.

Thus the argument weighs heavily in favour of a more proactive approach to individual health and wellbeing. The Scottish Government have launched a “Diabetic Action Plan” to increase physical and health wellbeing from a young age, preventing the risk of obesity or related illnesses. By offering all school children two hours of PE a week, this allows them to take part in exercise in a safe, fun environment if they can’t for whatever reason at home. The Scottish Government have also announced that “a £50 million investment in school sport” will take place to increase physical activity. Furthermore action is being taken to provide children with a healthy, balanced diet by “extending free school meals of P1-3 to improve health”, said a Scottish government spokesperson. A sugar tax has been put in place to reduce the risk of both health conditions to discourage people spending more money on food or drink higher in sugar. Writing for BBC News, Nick Triggle stated that:

“It will be imposed according to the volume of the sugar-sweetened drinks they produce”. Beverages containing above 5g per 100ml of sugar will be taxed 18p per litre whilst those in excess of 8g per 100ml will be levied 24p per litre.

A lot to digest but we need to start tackling the root of the disease rather than its symptoms especially as the NHS is under huge financial strain and needs to prioritise where the money should be spent. Instead of shedding thousands of pounds on medication and surgery for weight related illnesses, more proactive initiatives are needed by the NHS. Such developments as the “Diabetic Action Plan” demonstrate that a healthy diet and increased exercise is the best medicine any individual can take.

Word count: 1021

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BBC Fast Fix documentary

**Why should we watch the Oscars Awards today?**

Over the last few years The Oscars (The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences) has faced serious scrutiny from the media, pressure groups and the general public itself. Many, myself included, are sceptical about the lack of representation throughout the decision-making process and we have every right to be. The Oscars is the most recognisable movie award ceremony in the world and the industry around it is heavily shaped by its outcomes. If we want the film industry to be the best projection of talent it can be then I believe we need to start reshaping the Academy Awards. If the Oscars are to remain relevant and to continue influencing and nurturing burgeoning talent, then they must practice inclusion and listen to the criticisms from campaigns such as, “#Oscarssowhite”.

Race is, arguably, their biggest hurdle to overcome. When we compare the racial representation of Oscar winners from 1980-2015 to the population in the U.S., it is evident that there is a ‘race sway’ towards white actors and actresses. Where 64% of the U.S. general population was white, 84% of male winners and 89% of women winners were Caucasian?  Those who identified as black made up 12% of the male population and 13% of female but only 10% of male winners and 9% of female winners. Hispanics are far more under-represented with 3% of winners for both men and women and yet Hispanics make up 17% of male and 16% of females in the U.S. There are no Asian or ‘other’ winners on the female records either although this group makes up 8% of the female population. It would be easy to single-out the Academy for these statistics. However, Hollywood itself does not cast enough minorities in potential ‘Oscar winning’ roles. In 2017, the media, diversity and social change initiative at California’s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism found that of 4,583 speaking roles from the top grossing 100 films (2007-2017, excluding 2011) 31.4% were female and 13.6% were black. Of these 100 films, 25 did not feature a single black character in a speaking role and 54 did not include a single Hispanic speaking role. It’s not that ‘minorities aren’t Oscar winners’, it’s that not enough roles are given to non-whites or written as ‘racially available’. Films with minorities in lead roles often make more revenue so it also makes little business sense.  We should feel a level of discomfort when we watch white person after white person collecting their award and we should demand change.

In 2017, a reliable news source was informed that some older members of the Academy hadn’t even bothered to watch one of the best picture nominees for that year, Jordan Peele's ‘Get out’, which features a black lead character being racially targeted and experimented on by a large, Caucasian, psychotic family. This shines the “super-trooper” on another problem, the demographics of the Academy membership itself. In 2012, the Los Angeles Times sampled 5000 of the 5765 Academy members and found that 94% of members were white, 77% were male and 86% were aged over 50 years. This demographic is hardly representative on the basis of race, gender or age group. If this is the body making the decisions about which films and individuals receive the highest accolades in the industry, then it is hardly a beacon of diversity. However, there is awareness of this issue and there are moves to adapt. An initiative in 2017 showed 774 new people invited to become members and more diverse groups of people were being encouraged to join. Women are being encouraged to get involved as they have been underrepresented for too long. The #Metoo movement has highlighted sexual harassment in the industry making this gender balance even more important if the Academy is to survive into the next decade. New, more representative, members will help inject some new ideas and revitalise the Academy making it more relevant to a contemporary audience. This is clearly a progressive step.

Another area for improvement is addressing the number of members voting in each category, as it is currently highly unbalanced. For example, the number of votes needed to nominate a certain actor was 203 in the same year that only 22 votes were required for a costume designer to be nominated. This is highly inconsistent and helps to create an image of certain specialties being far more important than others. Whilst the acting categories are more popular with the general public, I believe that the Academy should be more responsible. It has a duty to filmmaking, as a whole, and could help to elevate the recognition of other categories such as sound, editing and costume design. It should not just be about delivering click bait regarding who wore what dress to the event, the Oscars should inspire people who are watching and broaden out the options for those wanting to get involved in the industry. If the body making the decisions think less of certain categories then this will restrict new talent coming through in these categories and narrows future creativity. There is so much more to the film industry than acting alone.

With the amount of criticism given to the Academy in recent times and the new diversity-widening plans for the members’ board, it seems as if the Academy Awards are going in the right direction. The Oscars have become very unpopular in the media particularly over the last decade and the Academy must make changes. I believe that this is happening though. Casting for big roles is becoming more open to diverse groups and in the near future, with the right amount of help, I believe that we can truly celebrate great art and film for the whole world to see. With an overhaul in voting privileges and encouragement for specialists in

less appreciated areas of movies, we will have the perfect foundation in place to create a progressive and forward thinking Oscars that is more representative and inclusive of society.

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**‘Thirteen Reasons Why’ - ‘Taboo’ or ‘too much’**

Suicide is the third leading cause of death for young people between the ages of ten and twenty-four. The rate of suicide has almost tripled since the 1940s. This is an incredibly important issue in today’s society, it is often overlooked and almost always avoided entirely. The ‘Thirteen Reasons Why’ franchise, developer by Brian Yorkey (based on the 2007 novel written by Jay Asher), attempts to bring light to many of the issues that young people face today. The show tackles many difficult issues including mental health issues, sexual assault and suicide. The novel and hit show are based around the suicide of a young girl named Hannah Baker. The protagonist, Hannah, created a series of tapes which depicted the callous behaviour of her peers and how this ultimately contributed to her death.

The show has been criticised for glamourising suicide and manipulating it into a twisted, love fuelled teen drama. Hannah’s attempt is shown to have a lot of thought and time put into it. So much so that she is able to create ‘tapes’ about this who have wronged her and her contributing ‘reasons’ to ‘why’ she did it. This is an accurate in reflecting how many people battle with suicidal thoughts for prolonged periods of time. However, this is not entirely accurate of their experiences and this dramatisation makes suicide look like an act of revenge (through the tapes and narrow focus on one narrative) and could lead to others contemplating suicide as a result of this.

The impression given by the shows way of presenting the broad range of issues seems as if it’s more financially driven and heavily focused on reaching a large amount of views. The show should be solely to raise awareness of these problems. An example of this is in the book, Hannah chooses to take her life by overdosing on drugs. However, in the TV series, they portray her suicide in a particularly graphic and unsettling way. In this scene, Hannah self-harms in the bathtub of her home. The scene was extremely gory and unnecessarily long which made it incredibly uncomfortable to watch. It is all very dramatised, mainly for increasing views and for the reaction of the public.

On the other hand, the show helps people who are unaware of the effects their actions have on other people. It helps educate and people are more informed on the matters at hand. It also has helped change people’s way of thinking and helped address how things we say and our actions can impact on someone. The show also displays the effect suicide has on a community, lots of people were visibly upset and shocked, and the majority of people felt an incredible amount of guilt. It shows the devastation that is a result of Hannah’s suicide and how the community will better their ways for the future. It also shows how bullying can impact an individuals life and invites the audience to think before they speak and act. The show actively encourages people to speak up about the previously ‘taboo’ subjects. The aim is to persuade people to get help. However, as it gains popularity in pop culture, people could view Hannah’s actions as desirable and an idealistic way to get reverence on those who may have wronged them. They could view Hannah’s methods as ‘cool’. A fear in many is that others many follow in her footsteps.

After Hannah suicide, the tapes she left because the great do you malicious attacks against the people who mentioned on name, one boy (Tyler) had rocks thrown through his windows due to his appearance on Hannah’s apes. Some even suffered space harassment and some were physically abused. One character named Alex, attempted this would suicide because of all the pressure that the tapes put him under. Also, Because everyone was so focused on Hannah is tragic death, they neglected the well-being of people like Alex who were in desperate need of help. In the second season of the show, a character called Justin started abusing drugs to the circumstances surrounding Hannah’s of Hannah’s death, this shows the sheer desperation Justin character in the whence you go to feed his addiction. He gets in trouble with the police. Unusual actions of the characters are realistic examples of collateral damage of hands suicide

Throughout the shown them is sexual assault. In one scene in particular Hannah is at a party and witnesses one of her friends get raped.  They show accurately portrays the situation of her wanting to look away and get out of the room but she’s in shock so she can’t move. This is a major step forward for the show as sexual assault is rarely spoken about and the show has to the situation making it a way to seek help for sexual assault victims.

Another main issue that has sparked some major backlash is the producers showing the disturbing scene of Hannah’s suicide. Although the scene is very realistic, it may be counter-productive and verging on dangerous as the producers failed to take the advice of psychological professionals and completely disregarded their concerns over the safety of the public. Elana Premack Sandlar describes the scene is ‘traumatising’. A number of people believe that the scene may be triggering, especially to people who have suffered or are suffering from a mental illness. However after concerns rose the show added warnings about potential triggers before the graphic scene.

In conclusion the show ‘13 reasons why’  helps bring taboo topics to light by using the large media platform they have created. However, there are many underlying factors, like the glamorisation of suicide, which amount to create a negative view of the show. In my opinion, I believe that the show is a great tool for raising awareness of suicide and other the issues mentioned in the show.

Word count:975 words

**Creative Essays**

**Folio Piece Creative Essay Final Draft**

Her jacket was torn and bloodied at the shoulder. She’s more exhausted than she had ever been. The only thing keeping her from collapsing was the massive amounts of adrenaline pumping through her veins. It was night-time in the city that never sleeps. Ella thought she would have been fine going down a back alley she usually doesn’t take. It was already pretty late due to excruciatingly long delays on the subway. She had to get home. But she couldn’t have anticipated witnessing what she did.

As she turned the corner next to a familiar bar to go down a back alley, her blood ran cold. The first thing she noticed was the man leaning against the dumpster. He was bleeding. Badly. From under his dark hoodie she could see the blood stains had painted his white t-shirt a deep red. From what she could tell, the source of the blood was a deep wound hidden by his hoodie. There were bruises ringing his young face and his arm was bent in an unnatural direction. His head was slumped against his shoulder and his face hidden by shadow. A large, imposing man stood over him, his icy features; grim and unfeeling. Crouching next to the tall man was a wiry man wearing a greasy coat, rifling through a backpack. In the standing assailant's hand was a switchblade. She had been frozen with fear, the macabre sight before her rooting her to the spot. The crouching man finished rummaging through the victim’s backpack and smiled as his hand emerged with a wallet and a phone. As he held up the phone to admire the expensive model, he noticed her standing there.

Panicked, he had jumped onto his feet and yelled to his accomplice. The brute of a man had turned, switchblade in hand, and advanced toward her. Ella’s hand had instinctively reached into her jacket pocket, her fingers closed around her bottle of pepper spray she was now thankful that her mom had made her carry. The knife-wielding assailant reached out to grab her arm but she had been too fast. Her hand had shot out of her jacket as she pressed down on the pepper spray nozzle. The large man had fallen back, clutching at his eyes and roaring in pain. The rat-like man had looked dumbfounded by this small framed girl toppling his partner in crime with a single blow. Deciding that he didn’t want a blast of the spray himself, he hurried inside the nearby back entrance to a bar, dragging his blinded associate with him. Once they were gone, Ella ran to the wounded man.

After checking he was still conscious, she reached for her phone to call an ambulance. Ella could see he was losing blood. She told him to press down firmly on the knife wound and focus on her face, help was on its way. She continued trying to talk to the man, making sure he was still aware of where he was. She kept on reminding him that there was nothing to worry about and that he’ll be fixed up in no time but in reality, she was mainly trying to reassure herself. After what felt like eons to Ella, the red flashing lights finally arrived. Two EMTs hopped out and made short work of properly and carefully placing the victim into a stretcher. As they were closing the doors to the ambulance Ella took one last look at the man’s face. He was deathly pale and shivering. She hoped he would be all right.

After the man had been safely taken away by the ambulance, she turned and went down the alley she had originally planned to go down. She was almost to the other end when she heard the door behind her open again. Out stepped the two men from before. Both were wielding knives. They looked around the alley before locking on to her. The slim, greasy man shouted a colourful and fluent stream of abuse at Ella before starting his charge. Her fight or flight instinct took over and her legs sprang into action. She sprinted down the remainder of the alleyway and burst into the street beyond. But this street was different from the one at the front of the bar. It was completely deserted. She didn’t have time to orient herself with the unfamiliar street. The two men were gaining speed behind her and she needed to move.

She dashed down the rugged pavement, narrowly avoiding the plethora of small potholes. Fortunately, her pursuers weren't so observant and Ella could hear them stumble and trip behind her. She hazarded a backward glance and saw that the larger of the two men had fallen on the minefield of holes. His vision was probably still recovering from his encounter with her pepper spray, Ella thought. However, that still left the Rat-Man. She ducked into another alley and continued down it. Her mind was racing, she was in a cold sweat, she didn’t know what to do and she was running out of alleyway. It wasn’t until she had reached the end of the alley that Ella realised there was nothing left to do but face the Rat himself. She turned and with a shivering hand, drew her weapon-in-a-bottle.

Rat’s breaths were ragged, but his knife wielding hand was steady. A crooked smirk flashed on his face. Without warning, he lunged at Ella. The knife grazed her shoulder as she tried to dodge it and she let out a cry of pain. Ella spun on her heel, and sprayed a cloud of pepper spray at her opponent. As Rat coughed and yelled, he brought his hands up to his burning eyes. That was her chance. Seeing this opportunity, Ella dashed past him, back out into the street. She ran for some time until she was on a somewhat-familiar street. She leaned against a lamppost devoid of light and clutched her wounded shoulder. She brought out her phone and called her mom. She wanted to be in her house, warm and safe. The streets and alleys of New York were freezing.

**WORD COUNT: 1020**

**The Fall of Settlement Cecilia**

I was fourteen when it happened. I was enshrouded within the glowing embers of sunset,and the colossal black silhouette of city devoured the landscape. Row upon row upon row upon row of sharp, smooth, round, pointy structures, that pierced the tender underbelly of the soft blanket of clouds above, and the sky bled crimson. The sun slowly sank beneath a distant ridge of dusty rock, and the dry and desolate land; the cracked barren valleys; the crooked wind-blasted scree; the gleaming metallic military base, lodged roughly in the hanging cliff-side: crawling with tanks, stacked with rockets, (its runway bathing in its sickening silvery-blue hue, stretching long into the vast adjacent ocean of pure and absolute nothing) - were to be drenched in darkness.

As curfew’s siren wailed, I felt the icy night air flow deep within my aching lungs, as I wandered the streets flooding with blackness. I drifted beneath the rattling steel shutters, beneath the wafting wavering washing lines strung amongst building’s walls, an on, across the lumpy tarmac of the playground, where all would be silent but for the creaking swings which cried out in rusty agony. I strolled nonchalantly the streets flooding with night’s inky blackness, and as I whistled, I gazed as my breath burst into a puffy cloud of vapour, which would ascend to the heavens, only to fall, flatly. I delve deeper into the void of Settlement Cecilia, the last settlement - humanity’s final hope.

The settlement was built for those men who survived the war. The location for the

settlement was a far-sprawling destitute desert, so remote and arid, that vulture’ skulls would fracture under the titanic weight of the burning sun, and be ground into the dust. Cecilia was built to protect its citizens from the many wars widespread across the globe. To ensure maximum security, an enormous military base was scraped into the rocky cliff-side. The city’s remote location ensured no enemy could reach it, and the strong military presence ensured no enemy could breach the settlement’ s towering walls. Cecilia was truly an outstanding achievement.

But then, an event would happen to scar the world, forever. The Battle of Styx. This battle forever marks the day when humanity descended, into hell. On that day, over 6 billion people would shriek out in terror, only to fall silent. The Earth’s crust would crumble beneath the march of a thousand armies. A thousand armies who marched in the squelch of their blood-soaked black boots through the cold grassy mud beneath a low black-white sky, to be dragged down into the molten madder ooze churning below. The cause of this catastrophe was the detonation of a new super-weapon - a weapon so devastating, so deadly, it would bring the entire world to its knees. Man should have never entrusted himself with the power of a God. We tried to harness the instrument of our own destruction. What fools we were...

The weapon’s detonation released billions of tonnes of toxic radioactive dust, which would smother the atmosphere. The Earth’s axis would be devastatingly disturbed, causing remaining continents to freeze over in unthawing sheets of ice, crawling, remaining crystal clear, sharp, and white, without life nor spirit left to wander. The crops would die; the forests shall fall; the oceans would rise; the earth shall tremble; humanity would suffer. In desperation, all those who lived fled to Settlement Cecilia - the last remaining settlement.

However, the settlement would soon become derelict. The settlement’s remote location, once its greatest asset, would become its demise. Food became scarce. Millions would starve across the city, and the dark damp pavements were laden with hungry men, women, and children, many of whom would flounder helpless, groaning, clutching their red-hot stomachs. I shudder to remember, vividly, the sound of their sharp bones scraping the black brick wall against which they sprawled, drawing blood from their blue paper-thin skin. Overpopulation, and panic, resulted in the healthcare system collapsing. Outside hospitals, mass slaughter would occur, as crowds of thousands would bite, scratch, kick, and trample each other hysterically as they bolted for the doors. Many contracted infectious diseases due to malnutrition and poor sanitation, due to the sewage system, which had completely frozen over in the harsh winter. The narrow winding streets and back-alleys we a-flurry with hundreds of thousands of frenzied flies. The internet was dead. And there was nowhere to go. We were trapped within the chaotic cramped cluster, of the rotting, settlement Cecilia.

It was only a matter of time until the government evaporated, and people turned feral. The city separated into savage tribes. Each tribe would seek control of the settlement, and reign war and bloodshed upon their rivals. Tribes would compete for members, and the most barbaric tribe was often the most respected and feared. They would hold competitions to see which tribe was the most brutal, by, in a public spectacle torturing their slaves. The tribe which inflicted the most terror and excruciating pain would win (I was a slave to one of these evil tribes, and experienced these monsters’ tortures, however, my life was spared due to an incoming attack from a rival tribe, which would claim my masters’ lives). These tribal wars continued for years on end, until, there was nobody left. Yet somehow, I survived.

These events brought me to where I was, wandering the abandoned pavements, where the silence screeched in my pounding head. I now showered in the streaking amber beams of starlight, as the veil of darkness swept over me. Mile, upon mile, upon mile, upon mile. Week after week, day after day, hour after hour, without as much as a whisper heard. The breeze had faded. Everything was still, and eerie. Nothing moved. And all was quiet. And all was quiet. And all was still. The air was thick and smooth, without ripple. I walk on. The blackness was blinding. I walk on.

Until I thought I heard something, no, someone. The call danced around the smashed and battered streetlights, as the cold vacuum was snapped. I call back. No reply. I call again. No reply. But then from the distance sounded a voice, a reply. Then I realised: I was not alone.

Word count (including title) = 1090.

**A Good old tale**

Life is a simple thing and can change for the good or bad in an instant. We all have (or should have) these moments as they are a great opportunity to reflect upon who we are and what we have done. So here is mine about a tree and a strong wind:

Strolling along a long drooling path flowing out on to my usual route follow the pavement cross the road look both ways, keep the dogs tight -or they’ll run for the woods. Then dropping down into the rough path to the brook. I do this every day still now as you read, I trod along with my dogs with the howling wind at my back and front keeping me aware, now more than ever before. You see you never really pay any attention to what’s right in front of you and how it can change your life – or more likely just make a good tale to tell.

Walking along this same way with a starving wind behind me stronger than my normal days walk, is when I hear a screeching crackle and whimper breaking through the wind to and tearing through the landscape. Instantly I break out sprinting to grab my dogs not knowing what has risen. As I turn the wind pulls down my hood blocking my view. Eventually as I retain my fading vision, I see that where I stood a minute a go now lies an old, weak and bleak tree not worth its own weight. It was there laying there in a thousand pieces littering the road and pavement directly where I always cross.

Not until I reach the tree do I come to realisation, what if I stopped to let my dog pee on that post, what if I had first gone to the toilet to relieve myself before I left. Who ever knew saving it for later can save your own skin. That tree that had laid long dead with no arms to hug or hold on to the world. And long withered away roots that would have held it tight in place. To blame for these dishevels is a storm long ago that fought off stronger trees, but not this one. It was always right in front of me an oblique towering hand with a hollow centre long rotted by the years. It was always right there broken to the winds will and never making a sound. Who could blame it for wanting to come down with a bang taking its own drama with it. It was ignored. It was left to die. So why wouldn’t it wish to seek its final hurrah. With all this in my mind I might have wanted to have a good long sit down at home. But then the wind forced me for once to look both ways.

In my state of realisation, I only thought about myself and then I looked around and saw a car metres away from the site with a few limbs of wood on its bonnet. Then to the left another one halted to a standpoint. No one was caught in the fall- thankfully- but it was a site for all of us, we had been so close. Those two cars had slowed down before so one could pass by the other. But what if they hadn’t, its normal enough to see cars speed along that road next to my primary school at double the limit and not be stopped. You always have to be aware of everything that surrounds you in life. That tree whistled to the wind but was never feared. So, it was left to fall on its own devices when it should have been torn down so if someone like me or those to cars where not almost in the crossfire of mother nature. This incident stays in my head never leaving, it happened months ago, it felt like I was miles and miles away from it when I was no more than a dozen steps and so was everyone else. From this I have had a petit crisis on how life is never more than those few dozen steps away from being crossed off, so you and I must make the most of it as by putting yourself in danger just adds to it, with a nice good old tale to tell.

On the road again, every day since I see the shrivelled trunk of my petit crisis lying on the edge of the pavement. I have since this, now truly paid attention to my environment which has the desire to explode everywhere. I walk down to the brook the same, pass the spot where I was and listen truly to the hidden whispers of the trees creaking and whimpering among themselves, with the wind smiling in agreement. Scaring me into a run as if they were about to come crashing down. But trees have fallen since and now I jump and climb over them as if they were a jut up in the landscape, but I wonder if they had some untold story made from their collapse, if someone was where I was, but more what lay ahead for them and that tree as it is most certainly still there.

A few dozen steps are all a person needs to see the picture form a different view. I thought of myself till I looked around, I thought of the goods and bads for me and not for those around me. But now here I stand next to the stump that never leaves, waiting for time a tree whistles through the wind.

Word count: 939

**Life in a Different Light**

Big family. Big part of my life. Probably the biggest Celtic fan you would ever meet. An even bigger feeling of emptiness now that she’s gone. My Mum has four sisters, all married, all teachers and all mothers. A teacher herself Gran was always there to guide and direct us all, yet now without her I feel lost, helplessly searching for the way home.

All my life, home had meant religion, family and most of all love (as well as a bit of Celtic). Growing up in Glenboig, Granny Esther always loved the Church and it acted as a second home for her. She also came from a very big family herself and ended up teaching two fifths of her own children. Kind. Caring. Funny. Everything a Gran should be and more. I admired her passion and determination in so many ways. She offered a great deal of devotion to the Catholic Church throughout her whole life and had the chance to witness all three of my sacraments, which means a great deal. Such devotion was mirrored in her passion for sport, something I could always relate to. Obsessively scrutinising every Celtic game and practically hitting every volley in unison with Andy Murray. I consistently strived to make my Gran proud - although I was always forced to Irish dance at the family parties, I secretly loved it, even more so to see my Gran smile.

Living so close to my Gran made her one of the most treasured people in my life. She was that stable figure, day or night, if I needed looked after or even just to pop in to say a quick hello. Throughout the years, I learned to appreciate everything she did for me especially from a young age. Whilst my parents would be working tirelessly and we knew she was coming to look after us, my sister and I spent the five minutes pending her arrival frantically tidying our rooms - this was particularly necessary as my sister had a renowned reputation of leaving her worn underwear all over the floor. Her room inspections seemed all that mattered at the age of just a young toddler. I will never forget the immediate panic when Mum announced that my Gran was coming and we just knew.

Another experience that left a lasting impression on me is that our Gran always held girl and boy cousin sleepovers in which she made her famous fish and chips. The cousins ate very reluctantly: we were told off if we ‘smacked’ our food at the table. As a consequence, we learned over time some of the greatest life lessons of all; to sit up straight not just at the dinner table, not to watch the Disney Channel “rubbish!” and most importantly never to sit on the cushions!! There are so many memories of our Gran that we will continue to cherish and that will live on forever.

This had been the Gran I had always known until the year of 2016. The year our lives changed forever and not for the better. It was the month of July and my Gran was taken into hospital feeling very poorly, so the doctors ran tests. They discovered it was cancer. Bowel cancer that had already spread to other parts of her body. The chemotherapy treatment was quickly put in place in order to allow my Gran more time. The cost was a loss of a scary amount of weight and hair, but one thing that never faded was her smile and her desire to fight back. She smiled through the pain, the sadness and even at Papa’s questionable jokes. Her determination to take this disease on was evident in the constant application of make-up, no matter how she felt accompanied by the purchase of another soon to be adored item which she unveiled to me on one visit. She took me through to her bedroom and there she was. I saw my Gran rediscovered. She was wearing the most beautiful wig and my Mum said she looked 35 again. Even though it changed her both mentally and physically, she was still my Gran, always was and always will be.

For two and a half years my Gran fought the hardest fight. She overcame the smallest and biggest hurdles, yet eventually lost the race. In September 2018, we were told she only had days left. Yet, four months later she was still going. The house itself also changed, her bed became a hospital bed, she was on oxygen as well as having 24/7 care. Then came December 2nd. For many it signalled the rush to buy presents, to set up the tree, to prepare dinner. For us, it simply felt like my gran was running out of time. My Mum had left in the morning before I had woken up and didn’t return until 6 o’clock that night. My brother Ciaran and I had spent most of that day putting up Christmas decorations, embellishing the tree and dancing to Christmas songs, having the best time. Little did we know, my Mum, all four Aunties and my Papa had been enduring the worst day of their lives. My Gran had passed away. And yet so had her pain. Surrounded by family, she took her last breath and was gone. I didn’t know what to feel. Sad? Guilty? Relieved that she was no longer feeling pain? After shock came tears and following that came more tears still.

At the end of the longest week of our lives came the funeral. I had never been to a funeral nor did I know what to expect. The intimate church was overflowing, with people even standing in the car park to pay their respects. It was the greatest celebration that my Gran or any of us could have asked for. The amount of tears shed and the people gathered as one, showed an infinite abundance of love for Esther O’Neil. A love that I will carry forward, through the loss and the pain. Each day still comes and goes, bringing with it life in a very different light.

**The Eyes of the Eagle**

I opened my eyes to a world full of unfathomable fear and exasperating loss where the streets lay wrapped in a bulging blanket of bigotry. It was for this reason, and the stories my mother had told me, that I struggled my way to the edge of the barren tree quaking with trepidation. My mother was nowhere to be seen and I recoiled at the thought of having to do this alone. There was no way I could guarantee that I would survive this, that I would not be one of the less fortunate ones who plummeted directly to the unyielding ground below. I reluctantly peered over the edge at the sheer drop which faced me. Disconcerted, but overcome with an instinctual sense of longing, I knew that it was time.

I drew in a short breath, acknowledging the distress which shook me to my core. In that moment, stuck between a life of limitations and a life of possibilities, I reached my decision. I let go of all my nerves and leapt into the air.

Suddenly, I found myself plunging towards the impenetrable ground at an alarming speed. All of the lectures I had given myself in a desperate attempt to assure myself that everything would resolve itself, that the accumulation of every miniscule problem or dilemma would soon unravel and leave me with a clear path to happiness and to freedom was forgotten instantaneously and I felt my guard crumble around me. Thinking back to those stressful evenings where I would never be good enough, I remembered a story my solicitous mother had told me. Her soothing voice played in my mind as if she were here beside me now, reminding me of the story of a young girl who had wished her life away for nothing but a certificate which gained her only a sliver of approval from her acquaintances. She had sacrificed all that she had, and in the end, was left with nothing but a sense of defeat and segregation. “Forget,” I heard her whisper. “forget every reason why you won’t succeed and believe the reason you will.” In that instant I felt the wind curl around my wings, and I was wrenched horizontally upward into the sky.

The wind lashed against my side, blowing my feathers inelegantly in the whooshing air. For some incomprehensible reason I no longer felt out of step, I simply felt free. Free from the shackles which had bound me to my small, isolated piece of the world, free from the destruction of my comfortable home and free from the instabilities of my inadequate life. Feeling as courageous as a valiant knight I felt like I had the world under my wing. I glided across the frozen fields taking in the sight of a single small fox struggling to find his next meal in the frosted grass blades. It was only then that my attention fell on the question laid before me, ‘What now?’ My mother told me that I would succeed in this part of my journey, but I had never thought to ask where I was supposed to go afterwards. Now that I was without her, I was left feeling terribly mislead, as though someone had just delivered a mighty trojan horse and I had welcomed the traitors with open arms. What I had thought to be my carefully calculated plan was being torn to shreds from the inside out. It felt like someone had ran their razor-sharp talons across my weakened breast.

Without warning, I found myself in a situation where I was faced with a choice- to risk a life rich in stability for a life of freedom. All of a sudden, a ferocious wind whipped me off my course and into a rigid rock. It came from nowhere, yet I knew it would happen, it was nothing but what I had always expected, that despite my best efforts I would be unable to prevent the potential issues I was now faced with. I felt the blood pumping through my veins as my body fell clumsily and lifelessly to the thawing ground.

After a brief moment of unconsciousness, I was blinded by the rising sun, which brought light and a new sense of hope with it. The light broke through a hidden opening in the mountains, illuminating a new path which offered an abundance of alternative futures. The choice was mine to make. Despite all that had happened, all that I had fought continuously for, I felt liberated as I swiftly adjusted my path from one based on what others had told me was right, to one where I prioritised my personal well-being. Although I may have had to face death, destruction and pain in this new world, I had also never felt stronger. This was where I belonged.

Softly, I perched on a bare branch protruding from a fragile tree as I stood on the peak of the tallest mountain in the range and gazed out over the dismantled ground before me. As I speculated my journey from being a follower to a lone wolf, I could not bring myself to regret my decision. Reflecting on my days of following, I could not remember anything but the feeling of a white-hot branding iron being lodged in my throat every time I opened my mouth to speak. I had been unwanted, and I knew that, but here I was free to live for nobody but myself. As the strings fell away, so did my puppet master, I was no longer restricted by the overwhelming movements of others. I had found my calling and I was free. All along I wondered what the key to freedom was, but now I know. Courage is the key.

**Yeah, I babble. Now shut up please!**

I’m a babbler. I babble. Through near enough anything, I babble. Whether its sports, work or possibly any activity you can imagine (obviously excluding anything like funerals. I’m not a monster!), I babble. But what I’m known most for babbling throughout is Movies, T.V, Entertainment for the eyes and NOT THE EARS as my mum says. My chatter is normally ‘poorly timed’ and is rewarded by none other than a reptilian hiss from my right side. When not ‘poorly timed’ my chatter is usually comedic, this has been proven as my words are usually greeted by a great guffaw from either end of the couch. What really annoys me though is when myself, being a cinematic connoisseur, I decide to share some knowledge about the behind the scenes work of a film or TV show or talk about my passion in a small harmless sentence is attacked by harsh language and disapproval. This has stemmed me into tracing my babbling roots and discovering why i cannot stop myself from expressing my passion in a way that is unappreciated fondly.

One of the reasons that I became interested in film in the first place can be traced back to when I used to be temporarily abandoned by my parents and left to deal with my torturous sister until I reached breaking point. Breaking point usually was reached when my sister either spat in my mouth whilst piercing my nostrils shut or drubbed me until my body was a plumptuous red. This meant I was left to scavenge for stimulation but was eventually called to television by the jazzy disc for Dreamwork’s Bee movie in which I just couldn't refuse watching. This led me to continuously watch Bee Movie every free day that I had until the disc became abraded. My newly found obsession was halted and I soon had to find a new film to binge. The only films left in our pile of have scratched discs were Ben Hur and Atlantis and so this left me distraught as at the time these were the two most dull films ever to be produced and so my mum, instead of giving me pocket money, took me to buy a new DvD from the £5 rack in HMV every weekend, meaning I had to go to exceptional lengths to decide on which film i

was to pick. This was the beginning of my critically minded reviewings of movies and love for surveying produce of the silver screen.

My love for superhero movies has only grown throughout the years but recently it has formed a new connection between blue screen tech and I. I’ve loved superheroes ever since Spider-Man 3 came out in cinemas (although that rendition was a flop) and the world that filmmakers and writers create around these characters still puts me into a dwam like state whenever I view any hero flick. My inexhaustible affection for these films mixed with my current acting/filmmaking prowess lead me to have a great desire to create and learn about such films myself. This is where my infinite viewing time on youtube was put to good use as when I searched ‘superhero film techniques and how to write’ I was encountered by multiple videos which contained a similar title. They all contained the phrase ‘Video Essay’. I watched one or two of these videos which were almost like reviews, which i have been doing myself for years, but were in the form of a spoken essay. I was instantly hooked on them. They spoke to me. My nerdy side and the side of me which had just begun to undergo film classes at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. It was the perfect blend. When I dug deeper the videos contained analysis on many more different genres of film. It made me understand so much more about film and TV and their inner workings, what makes them watchable or dier and if my opinion on films that I have seen matches with professional writers and filmmakers. This is when my babbling problem seemingly became irrevocable and began to become entirely intolerable for my parents.

My most stupendous peeve is the moderate hypocrisy that arises when I speak whilst watching something with my mother. I’ll say something which will gain a look of more than faint distaste and a comment usually consisting of the words “shut” and “up” and everything else in between and just as everyone sitting, or in my mum’s case lying with her legs flailed out, has settled my mother will then proceed to do exactly that of which I myself have just been verbally harrassed for. She speaks. She mutters. She hauls her phone out of the crevice in the couch and inspects her recent facebook feed to find a funny video featured on her Mums’ Facebook page that is worthy of pausing whatever show or movie we are viewing, right after she has exclaimed that she is “so tired” and “needs to get to bed so can you stop making us pause this just to listen to you talk”. Hypocrisy. My father is just letting it slide but to attempt to show any sign of control over the lounge he murmurs from his little region in the couch whilst being spatially dominated by my mother’s feet, “Come on Gillian ” As if this is any way to present the clear power imbalance in the room !

In conclusion, I will probably never stop babbling through movies or shouting whilst playing sport or chatting in class. This is my way of expressing myself and I will never stop loving film. Through reflecting on my past days I have realised what I thought may have been an illness is actually something that now I take great pride in. I can boast about the sheer extent of my film knowledge and create short films for my petit fanbase. If ever bored I can easily just sink into my bed and put on a long video essay or a 4 hour history of the entire marvel cinematic universe. Film is the best thing in my life and if having lots of expression of this is “annoying” then I may as well just seclude myself inside my own babble friendly bubble. I think the only way to fix future family turmoil is to revert back to my younger ways and watch everything by myself to avoid confrontation and a negative feeling around me, that is after my mum and I finish all 9 seasons of The Walking Dead!

**My Struggle.**

 My mask. My war paint. My suit of armour that has protected me from the wounds I have suffered at the expense of society’s harsh judgement. I was so obsessed with make up I couldn’t bear to face the world without it.

I had just started settling into the monotonous routine of a high school student. Waking up early for school had always been incredibly difficult for me. However, it became almost natural when I started becoming interested in my appearance. Now, you may be wondering how exactly did I become so engulfed in my own looks? It all started with a comment.  A single remark. A boy brought to my attention that I was the only girl not wearing make up and with my bad skin I really should be. Those were the words that haunted me for the next 3 years of my life. Many people Don’t understand the weight that their words carry, a single , passive comment about my face caused me years of distress and heartbreak. Why did I care about what other people people thought? Because I wanted nothing more than to fit in, my younger years filled with doubt about whether I fit in or not , if I was popular enough and if boys liked me. So that weekend I rushed into boots and bought the most full coverage foundation I could find.

When Monday morning rolled around i had never been so excited for school in my life. I started my morning at 6 am where I slathered on a thick layer of cheap foundation. I felt invincible.i shot down every negative comment that flew to me from the mouths of naïve children who didn’t know any better. I never knew how something so simple could give me so much confidence. For the coming weeks I adopted the routine and it became my norm. I was hooked. Every month adding a new step to my routine ; manipulating my eyebrows into perfect arches, coating my eyelashes in thick mascara to make them appear fuller. The more and more steps I added, the earlier I got up.

Then came exhaustion. The 4 am starts to my day had finally caught up to me. The endless cycle of early morning rises had left me unable to focus in school. In classes I paid attention to whether my eyebrows were uneven or if my foundation was blended enough instead of the lessons I was being taught. Make up consumed my life , my world revolved around why I wasn’t good enough to face the world without my mask of make up. Make up became a chore but that’s all I had known , people complemented me on it , I felt secure. No matter how many unruly comments were made about how thick my eyebrows were or how orange my complexion was, these comments were no match to my new found ‘confidence’ it made no difference to me if someone didn’t like my make up. It was my make up. I still stuck to the same products and regime , they were all I knew and I wasn’t brave enough to break the habit.

 the day finally arrived where I overslept.

My whole body was filled with terror. I braced for the worst. I geared up for the action that was going to occur.  I had worn make up to school ever single day for 3 years, How would people react to my bare, unworthy face? I braced for impact. When I arrived at school that morning, I was overcome with anxiety. I never understood how much of a grip make up had over me. The thought of people realising something had changed about me lingered over me like a heavy, black storm cloud, weighing me down. Fear consumed my body with every step I took,  The last thing I wanted to do was stand out. As I approached into the crowded school the hairs on my neck bolted upright. The bomb finally dropped. However, nothing had changed. Heads didn’t turn , people didn’t stare. Surprisingly nobody could really see the difference apart from the fact my eyes weren’t painted in a smokey brown cat eye like usual. I was shocked. After years of continuous battles with my self worth nobody cared about how I looked , and I had never felt so liberated. I focused more on class , I realised school isn’t made for you to look your best and remembered how lucky I was to be getting a good education.

Looking back on my experience , I’m glad it happened. Not only has it gave me a new outlook on my appearance , it has gave my love for make up a new perspective. Now, I use make up as a form of self expression. When I use make up now I do whatever I want , it has no rules. Gone are the days where I was too scared to try anything new in case I messed up and had to start the whole routine all over again. Make up isn’t a burden to me anymore. It is not a chore , it is a choice. My experience has taught me to have a thick skin and not give in to other people’s ideas of how I decide to live my life Although the emotional shell shock still stays with me to this day, Make up is a part of me and always will be. I am free of the strain my self confidence put me under. I am freed from the rigorous training that society’s cruel standards forced upon me. I have served my time under society’s harsh judgement. My battle with self worth was long and gruelling.  Although now I am not the most self loving person I could be , I can comfortably go out without spending 3 hours perfecting my looks. And that , is why I am the person I am today.

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Contributions by: Lois Maxwell, Zack Barr, Craig Paterson, Sean Chapman Reilly, Calum Grant, Callum Meldrum, Niamh McGuire, Rachael Dick, Harry Wales, Lucy Wilkie