

The Imperfect Perfect Essay

By Bianca Pahler

“She should have died hereafter...There would have been time for such a word...Tomorrow and...and...sorry can I start over?”

I whispered to my English teacher, struggling to remember the foggy words of Shakespeare. I avoided the glances of my classmates; they coughed and shifted uncomfortably. He staggered, crossed his arms, and breathed,

“Sure, go ahead.”

“She should have died hereafter....” I continued.

I knew that my grade would falter for starting over, but my essay score was all I could think about. The percentage pierced my brain, taunting me with its loudness and red font.

I stumbled through the rest of the monologue. My eyes watered. My strained throat screamed at me to stop. But I finished, now repeating in my mind that I failed again at writing, a subject I loved as a kid and now found disappointment in.

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At a young age, my writing flew from my brain to my hand like lightspeed. It was an exciting practice. I took assignments head-on, acquired positive results, and helped others. Creative writing and poetry allowed me to explore my beliefs and experiences and appreciate nature. I would write about the lake I passed on my walks with my dad and the experiences I had in a religious family. Journaling became a system for relaxation and reflection. I shared some and hid others, but nonetheless I was proud and passionate about my poetry and tales. Writing became an innate part of my identity. I enthralled myself in practice, always volunteering to write for the school newspaper or submit a story to a competition. My love for writing grew.

I was perfect. I thought of perfection as the only way we could define writing. If each section was formatted correctly, if the work was original, if I got an A, --- the result, I was perfect. Figuring things out on my own left me feeling accomplished. Asking questions wasn't necessary; each pathway I took led me to fun, excellent writing.

My way of thinking changed when I went to high school. My small 19-people class turned into 300, with over 1200 kids at the school altogether. My naive, ambitious eyes stared downward as I realized that my classmates were also at the top of their classes. As I entered my courses, I remained silent. My eyes gawked at the pages we read. My anxious fingers that tapped on the wooden tables kept me stressed rather than inspired and concentrated on the lessons. Writing became a chore instead of a passion.

My perfectionism, however, would not let me fail. I expected everything to fall into place. Each word had its place in the puzzle. I flashed my fingers across the keyboard, *click-*

click, anticipating an A-worthy essay. I held myself to such a high standard that anything below my expectations would be devastating.

One of the topics we wrote about in class in my sophomore year was Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. Reading a denser book with big themes and prominent motifs, I believed I understood the story...mostly. I wrote my essay with a thesis we formulated in class and evidence I collected at home. I whipped through it, hoping my innate writing skills would help me along the way. Twilight peered through my window the night before as I turned it in the following morning, anticipating good results.

What I was hoping for turned out to be a faltering knick to my head. I stepped into the icebox classroom with fantasy posters and a cleaned whiteboard, and I hurried to my seat. There was faint chatter among the students as most of them recited lines or participated in conversation. I drew out my phone to review my Shakespeare monologue for the class. Each word flowed through my head, stringing together like a braid. Papers rustled. I was ready. My teacher, Mr. Brett, brown haired and a khaki wearer, silenced the class and grabbed our attention at the front of the room.

"Good morning everyone, hope you guys didn't stay up too late last night. Before we start our monologues, I have everyone's essays from two weeks ago. We all did pretty well. If you have any questions, meet me after class."

He walked to me and handed me my essay. The thick, dry papers collapsed in my hand as I dropped them on my desk.

"D--"

The red lines ran across my paper like the blood on Lady Macbeth's hands. The words "I don't understand" and "This isn't clear" scattered on the pages, fighting for more attention. A tightness strained at my throat. The icy room turned colder. Groans and cheers circled around me, yet I could only think about what fell in front of me. I tried to keep my emotions tamed. My blurry vision showed otherwise. I kept pushing myself farther and farther down into my chair. I wanted to hide in a cocoon till the class was over. Oh god, what happened?

"Okay, class, let's quiet down. Let's start our presentations. We don't have all of the time in the world."

One by one, kids performed their pieces, but I was left empty in my vast desert. I was unable to focus on the bubbling demonstrations, only the continuing questions and lamentable situation. *I mean, I should've done this before, right? I reread the essay. I needed to start earlier. That was it. I can't believe I let myself down. I am such a---*

"Bianca, after Chris, you will be up to present your monologue."

Oh.

"Tomorrow...and tomorrow and tomorrow...sorry can I start over?"

I went up to do my monologue, and all I could think about was the mistakes I made. Even though my reverie, I knew that I needed to ask for help. I discovered the faults of perfection and that I wasn't immune to it.

"...Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

After my performance, I stagger to my seat, walking on stilts, a tightrope. I waited for this to be over. I lingered even though I didn't want to. I needed to stop my cycle of thinking. I went up to my teacher after the bell.

"Hello, Mr. Brett. I didn't do too well with my essay. Umm," I sucked in some air. "I was wondering if I could have any help with improving my essay. I should've asked earlier."

I didn't want him to know I was crying. I kept my eyes on the shaky paper I presented in front of him. He gave a loud sigh, and I sensed the shift in his feet.

"I see that you misunderstood some of the evidence or you need a review. I suggest going to the tutors, they are helpful. Come back, rewrite a few essay paragraphs and that can help with grades. It is okay that this wasn't perfect."

I held on to my breath.

He continued. "I just want you to come to me if you need help. I would rather you come to get help than become emotional later on. It is hard, but you got it."

Mr. Brett gave me a closed-mouth smile and led me out the door. The icebox room turned warmer as I settled myself back into the hallway. Lingered students surrounded the lockers as the bell was seconds from ringing. I gave an appreciative thank you. Even though my face felt numb, the letter still dawned on the paper; I walked through the walls, holding on to the knowledge that I wasn't going to be perfect every time.

This was not the first or last time I would experience this feeling of disappointment coming from an assignment. Writing gave me a sense of belonging, but it transformed into a chore, a thing I had to do to be respected. I realized that I would compare myself to the worth of my writing. If some assignment I had wasn't perfect, I wouldn't treat myself with compassion. I hurt knowing that I lost some of my love of writing due to a constant, controlling thought.

Now, as a college student who still battles perfectionism, I have learned the true definition of perfection for writing and myself. You or whatever you write will not be perfect. Its flaws, individuality, and emotion will carry their own perfection. And as you would care for a friend if they messed up, you have to hold on to your self-compassion if you make mistakes. As I continue to write, I now focus on improving rather than achieving perfection on the first try. I believe my artistry is not defined by my achievable goals and expectations of myself. It is defined by my passion and what I learn from the experience.