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The Writer-of-Violence-as-School-Shooter-Stereotype: How Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Public Fear Make Writing Violence Dangerous for High School and College Students

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**The Writer-of-Violence-as-School-Shooter-Stereotype:
How Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Public Fear Make Writing Violence Dangerous
for High School and College Students**
Matt Foy

In 1999, nine days after Columbine, the student, a ninth-grade boy from Wheeling, Ill., was arrested and charged with disorderly conduct, though the police considered more serious charges, including mayhem. Classmates thought of him as an “unpopular nerd,” [the boy’s family-law attorney Micki] Moran says, and made fun of his black clothes. One day at lunch, a group of kids approached him; one said, “You’re like those kids at Columbine.” The boy responded, “I could be.” On the strength of those three little words, Moran says, hysteria broke out at the school as rumors swirled about his possible intent. His locker was searched, and the baseball bat found inside was labeled a weapon. The entire school was evacuated. The boy spent six months in counseling and is now flourishing at another school. The school has said that under the circumstances, it acted appropriately. (Cloud, 2001, para. 11)

This *Time Magazine* excerpt from “The Legacy of Columbine,” published on March 11, 2001, nearly two years after the infamous attack at Columbine High School, is a chilling reminder of the culture of fear that consumed the United States in the wake of the massacre, at that point the most horrific incident of gun violence in a United States school. The bloody rampage of teenage gunmen Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold,



respectively 18 and 17 years old and both seniors at upper class, mostly white Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, instantly captured the awe, grief and outrage of the public and the commercial news media.

Harris, Klebold and their thirteen victims have been dead for over a decade. But even today the ghosts of Harris and Klebold — dark-haired, trenchcoat-wearing, Marilyn Manson-worshipping, gun-wielding misfits set out to avenge years of bullying from nemesis jocks and rejection from popular girls — stalk the halls of U.S. high schools, colleges and universities. As the unnamed Illinois youth in the Cloud article found out, it can be perilous to bear any resemblance to the ugly stereotype of a Goth loser with an axe to grind with the popular and the privileged.

Eight years removed from high school myself, I shudder to recall how lucky I was to escape the fate of the unnamed boy from Illinois. When the Columbine massacre occurred, I was a high school sophomore in a small, quiet Iowa town. Like so many white, rural communities, my town and school were petrified by what happened in Littleton. In retrospect, it is unsettling to see how hysterical we became when rich, white kids died in gunfire when we barely muster a frown for gun violence in poor communities. At the time, I was as guilty as anyone, acting as if violence in schools was a brand new phenomenon. As information (and misinformation) about Harris and Klebold, and what might have sent them down the path to infamy reached rural America via a constant onslaught of commercial news media (hereafter, *the media*) reports, I feared for my safety, like a lot of other high school students in my situation. But I identified with a different group of post-Columbine casualties.



I was not afraid because I thought a Columbine copycat incident was headed to my town. I was afraid because I knew there was a possibility that I could be perceived as a Harris or a Klebold, an imminent threat, in the eyes of those in charge of preventing that copycat shooting from commencing. Despite being relatively benign for a high school student and having no violent incidents in my past, I fit the profile — and still do a decade later to a limited extent. I have dark hair. I still listen to Marilyn Manson. I occasionally don a long black trenchcoat. I like video games, some violent in nature. I frequently discuss violent movies with my friends and classmates. Despite being mostly well liked, people knew me as someone who liked being alone and that did not enjoy partying like high school students are supposed to. I have written violent fiction stories in several high school and college classes.

In sum: I fit the profile of a quiet, shadowy loner with an affinity for violent media and writing. In the wake of Columbine, I fit the profile of a would-be mass murderer, a wolf biding my time in a henhouse of innocent students. As Columbine-mania spread, would anyone look past the images being promoted by the media long enough to know the difference between a killer and someone who coincidentally fits a hastily assembled profile of one? I can definitely say it is scary when the media effectively says “this is what a killer looks like,” and shows the country a composite sketch of you. In a span of mere days, I had been booted from the safety of the majority and forced to take refuge with a despised, hunted subculture.

Luckily for me, I was liked and known well enough at school not to be treated as a serious threat to public safety. I recall being asked a few suspicious questions (though,



admittedly, I was waiting for the accusation to come and might have been preemptively ready to fight), but I was never detained or closely examined as a potential psychopath; therefore I was spared the traumatic experience I dreaded from the moment I found out Harris and Klebold wore trenchcoats and listened to industrial music.

Paralleling my own experiences, the initial firestorm of Columbine-mania seemed to burn off in time, though the lingering effects of the Goth loser stereotype continue to fester. Ten years later, we are all a little wiser. We now know that Harris and Klebold were not obsessed with Marilyn Manson (though Klebold did apparently like his music to some extent). They did not create custom Doom video game levels that reconstructed the hallways of Columbine. They were not all-American good kids bullied into a desperate act of retaliation but were bullies themselves who went out in a fantastic blaze of wrathful aggression. And while the media was heavily criticized for its initial handling of Columbine, it was ultimately responsible reporting, both immediate and over the course of a decade, that helped bring a voice of sanity to the hysterical climate of fear surrounding youth violence and school shootings.

But for all the stereotypes that were debunked in the wake of Columbine-mania, it is one of Harris and Klebold's initially less hyped school shooter traits that would take on greater life eight years later: their history of violent writing. The duo was reported to have written disturbing essays, fictional stories, and blogs that in the wake of their massacre appeared to be glaring red flags of their violent intentions.



On April 16, 2007, four days before the eighth anniversary of Columbine, 23-year-old Virginia Tech University¹ undergraduate Seung-Hui Cho,² a native of South Korea with a documented history of disturbing behavior, engineered two separate shooting attacks over a span of three hours on the Virginia Tech campus. Cho shot and killed 32 students and faculty members, wounded 17 more, then killed himself in worst school shooting spree in U.S. history (in terms of fatalities).

Cho's horrific attack thrust school shootings back into the national headlines and again intensified public fear of school shootings that had been mounting with each Columbine-reminiscent attack. To make matters worse, the Virginia Tech massacre seemed to confirm fears that Columbine had saturated U.S. culture to the point it was inspiring young killers to try to trump it. In a self-produced video message explaining the motivations for his crimes, Cho professed his admiration for Harris and Klebold and made it quite clear he saw himself as carrying on their work, forever binding the two killing sprees.

In the days following Virginia Tech, it was widely reported that Cho, an undergraduate English major, had alarmed his teachers and classmates with his disturbingly violent writing. He was not the first school shooter to be identified with this trait after Columbine. Jeff Weise, perpetrator of the 2005 Red Lake, Minnesota, massacre, was another school shooter who was reported to have written and shared violent material in the period before his attack. In each case, news of the shooter's

¹ Full name: Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

² Or Cho Seung-hui. Reports on the incident vary in the arrangement of his name.



writing past led to speculation that those who knew of their writing should have known something was wrong and that the writer was imminently dangerous, a so-called ticking time bomb waiting to go off.

In the wake of the deeds of Harris and Klebold, Weise, and (especially) Cho, as well as other pre-Columbine school shooters, writing violent material, especially violent fiction, has been stigmatized as the symptom of a violent mind. In turn, young (typically) male writers who write violent fiction have been stereotyped as more likely candidates to commit real-life violence and have been scapegoated for the threat of future school shootings. This stereotype, the writer-of-violence-as-school-shooter, is the subject of this study.

The Writer-of-Violence-as-School-Shooter Stereotype: Overview and Key Terms

Certainly in this sensitized day and age, my own college writing — including a short story called “Cain Rose Up” and the novel *RAGE* — would have raised red flags, and I’m certain someone would have tabbed me as mentally ill because of them, even though I interacted in class, never took pictures of girls’ legs with my cell phone (in 1970, WHAT cell phones?), and never signed my work with a ‘?’.

— Stephen King, in his essay “On Predicting Violence,” written in response to the Virginia Tech massacre (2007, p. 1)

The writer-of-violence-as-school-shooter stereotype (to be referred to as *the stereotype* for the sake of brevity) is the existing assumption that writers of violent creative fiction (or *writers-of-violence*, as I will refer to this population and its members) are more conspicuous candidates to commit on-campus firearm violence than other



possible populations. This article, which is exploratory in nature due to the fact that this stereotype has not yet been addressed in the world of academic research, examines: (1) the construction of this stereotype, (2) how writers-of-violence have been scapegoated for the larger problem of school shootings in the U.S., and (3) the stereotype's impact on those who negotiate it in their daily lives. Before delving deeper into this largely unexplored social issue, the terms *writer(s)-of-violence* and *school shooting/school shooter* should be clearly defined.

The term *writer-of-violence* refers to high school and college-aged writers of violent fiction.³ Often, the stories written by the individuals in question are shared in school classes such as fiction workshops or posted online. The violence in these stories typically is assumed to be of a graphic, gory, and disturbing nature, wrought with murder, blood and guts, and at times sexual abuse or suicide. However, the offending violence can be evident in the language and mood of a story; truly, some of the most notorious works of school shooters feature no blood or fatalities at all.

The term *school shooting* refers to a mass murder incident on a school campus in which students or former students use firearms to kill fellow students, faculty or administrators, innocent bystanders, and often themselves as their final act. The term *school shooter* refers to the individual(s) whose actions constitute a school shooting

³ Violent writing can also occur in such forms such as poetry, stage/screenplay or the increasingly popular blog. However, the enduring public perception of the writer of violence seems to have shifted to the writing of violent fiction. This study focuses on violence in fiction but considers other forms of violent writing, though violence in other written media are worthy of attention in later studies.



incident.⁴ With these key terms defined and established, I will overview the rise of the stereotype as a force in U.S. culture.

After Columbine: School Shootings as Social Epidemic, and the Hunt Intensifies

In the decade following Columbine, school shootings have been publicized as an extreme symptom of a U.S. society overwrought with violence. According to one article, there have been almost 600 school shootings (not including prevented attacks) in the past 20 years (Wong, 2007, para. 2). Even before Columbine, there was a call to explain why gun violence in U.S. schools was a growing issue (e.g. Sudo, 1998). But Columbine was the perfect storm that intensified the problem of school shootings from *something that happens in other, more dangerous schools to something that could happen in our school unless we do something about it*. When it seems only a matter of time before the next attack, much thought and effort has gone into trying to figure out how to identify potential threats and reach them, by understanding or by force, before they “pull a Columbine” and “shoot up their school,” as has entered the lexicon.

How can anyone link a child’s mind to those of Harris or Klebold, two of the most infamous mass murderers in U.S. history, without ever knowing that duo? Perhaps it is because, as onlookers, we could not shake the feeling that we knew Harris and Klebold

⁴ Other noteworthy instances of violence in schools that do not fit these criteria, while not to be diminished in relevance, will not be considered in this article. Examples include: the 1927 Bath School disaster (bombs, not guns were used, though at 45 fatalities it remains the worst incident of mass murder in U.S. school history); the 1970 Kent State University incident, in which unarmed students, some protesting the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, others uninvolved in the protests and walking to class, were shot and killed by Ohio National Guard members; and the 2006 Amish school shooting in Pennsylvania (the gunman, Charles Roberts, IV, was neither Amish nor a student).



too well, well enough that even though we never met them, we recognized them and knew enough about them to spot those who could end up like them. Through the media and public discourse, we were flooded with reports of the duo's physical characteristics, personality traits, likes, dislikes, etc. that caused us to feel as though we truly knew them inside-out.

There was Harris, the bitter, hostile, morbid, Hitler-obsessed alpha Goth who terrified his classmates with his antisocial behavior before turning Columbine into his own personal game of Doom. And there was Klebold, the intelligent, fragile, withdrawn follower who was so easily brainwashed by Harris because, well, he just wanted a kindred spirit with whom to share his love of Marilyn Manson and violent video games. In viewing Harris and Klebold's publicized personae not as those of two individual sociopaths working in tandem but as archetypes and representatives of a dangerous subculture of school shooters and potential school shooters, supposedly we, concerned members of society, can use what was known about Harris and Klebold to spot others who might be planning similar incidents in our towns, or just as bad, could be inspired by the events at Columbine to mimic them or even top them. But when misinformation becomes part of the equation for picking killers out of a crowd, witch hunting can ensue.

In the aftermath of Columbine, schools across the U.S. heightened security, and the search for potential disciples of Harris and Klebold began in and out of the classroom. Parents and administrators, overwhelmed with fear for their own children's safety, hunted for clues as to who could be the next killer aiming at infamy, often relying on the popularly circulated but marginally accurate profiles of the Columbine duo, as well as



other available information on school shootings, as primers. Finding a killer has never been as simple as looking for the guy in the trenchcoat. But while this simplistic thinking is flawed, tragically ignorant and discriminatory, perhaps the feeling of becoming the hunters, not the hunted, against the mounting wave of school violence is a small comfort.

In an article written after 2008's Northern Illinois University shooting (the most recent high profile rampage as of this writing), James Alan Fox (2008), professor of Criminal Justice and of Law, Policy and Society at Northeastern University, explains the paradox of trying to predict acts of violence that are unpredictable:

In the aftermath of a shooting, we inevitably search for clues that may have alerted the campus to a student who was profoundly suicidal and bent on revenge. Yet, predicting rare events such as a campus shooting, is virtually impossible. Thousands of college students exhibit warning signs — yellow flags that turn red only after the blood spills.

Overaggressiveness in trying to identify and coerce a troubled and belligerent student into treatment can potentially intensify feelings of persecution and precipitate the very violent act that we're attempting to avert. Moreover, as with the shooter at Northern Illinois, the warning signs are not necessarily obvious, if even present. (p. A36)

Specific to this study, one of the identifiable traits seized on by the public was Harris and Klebold's history of writing violent, disturbing material. However, attention to Harris and Klebold's creative writing was only lightly reported in the immediate aftermath of the shooting, and even then it was obscured by more sensational aspects of the case, such as



Nazism, pop culture, Goth subculture, gun control, and bullying in schools. The idea of violent creative output as an indicator of true violent intentions may have been introduced to many after Columbine, but it would be Cho and his deeds at Virginia Tech that would thrust violent writing to the forefront of the discussion on school shooter traits.

Virginia Tech: The Stereotype Takes the Spotlight

By the end of April 18, 2007, U.S. television viewers became uncomfortably intimate with Seung-Hui Cho when Cho's multimedia manifesto, a collection of 28 self-made videos and 43 photos Cho mailed out to NBC in the time between his two shooting sprees, was broadcast across the nation. The decision made by NBC and other media outlets to broadcast portions of Cho's rambling, hateful epitaph to the society he despised ignited a firestorm of debate over journalistic ethics and victim's rights. As this was going on, another aspect of Cho's shadowy profile was highlighted in the media: Cho's history of disturbing writing, which was framed as one of the earliest indications that authorities at Virginia Tech should have known Cho posed a safety issue to his fellow students.

The following excerpt was printed in the *New York Daily News* (Lisberg & Kennedy, 2007) on April 18, the same day Cho's manifesto was gathering its own share of media attention:

Teachers and classmates at Virginia Tech tried to raise the alarm about senior English major Cho Seung-hui, the creepy, blank-eyed loner whose writings were so psychotic that students actually discussed when he would shoot up the school.



But because Cho never did anything overt, there was little campus cops or university brass could do.

“They would say, there’s nothing explicit here. He’s not actually saying he’s going to kill someone,” said Lucinda Roy, former chair of the English Department, who warned police and university officials about Cho in the fall of 2005 and begged him to get counseling. (p. 2)

If violent fiction was the bloody paper trail into the mind of one killer, could it be an indicator of violent intentions in other authors? Do writing professors have the duty to hunt for mental illness and dangerous inclinations in their students’ writing? Despite most writing instructors lacking formal education on how to spot, approach and help a student who could be dangerously violent, they have been called on to diagnosis and initiate action against potentially dangerous students based on what they can glean from their writing.

One advocate of this new duty for writing teachers is Rob Jones, whose professional title according to the *Salon* article “Deadly Prose” (Richards, 2007) is “senior vice president and lawyer for claims management and risk research at United Educators, a large educational insurance company” (para. 8). While traveling to colleges to suggest to educators that they should take disciplinary action against students who turn in disturbing writing, Jones said:



Traditionally, [instructors] have thought of themselves as nurturing academic or creative faculties. They don't think of themselves as counselor or being warning systems for spotting mental health problems. We'd like them to think of whether they could be gatekeepers for identifying students at risk. (quoted in Richards, 2007, para. 8)

Here, we see the enhanced scrutiny of writers-of-violence that manifested after Cho's massacre. In the wake of Virginia Tech, violent student writing was such a hot topic that, as in this example, parties with interests in combating school shootings mobilized against writers-of-violence.

What exactly did Cho write that could be such a resounding death knell for the Virginia Tech community? The writing in question is two one-act plays, titled *Richard McBeef* and *Mr. Brownstone*, as well as a short fiction story about the planning of an on-campus shooting spree that has not yet been released to the public. After Cho's writing entered the public forum, the perceived link between violent writing and violent intentions in writers-of-violence became well publicized in the media and in turn was invoked as grounds for disciplinary action toward writers-of-violence (e.g. Collins, 2007; Leachman, 2007). Creative writing classrooms across the United States have been probed as breeding grounds for school-shooters-in-training (*Los Angeles Times*, 2003; Berger, 2007).

After the Virginia Tech massacre, I experienced another eye-opening brush with school shooter stereotypes. At the time of Cho's massacre, I was finishing my career as a college undergraduate. In my final semester, I was cultivating my creative writing talents



in a fiction workshop. It was a positive, anything-goes kind of class in which senior-level writers are encouraged to break the rules, write with passion and, if necessary, “fail spectacularly,” as my teacher liked to say. This is the kind of artistic license creative writers dream about.

I tend to write stories with elements of violence in them. As I previously stated, I am not a violent person and have no violent incidents in my past. I choose to write stories with elements of violence and death because I am entertained by such stories and because I am comfortable working with these elements. Having written violence for many years and having never committed a single violent crime, I personally (if unscientifically) reject the theory that violent writing is a symptom of a violent mind.

As I wrote my final story for the class, I had my strongest brush with the writer-of-violence-as-school-shooter stereotype. I had assigned myself an intriguing writing exercise: starting my story with the most horrific, blasphemous murder I could conceive and then turning the story into a comedy. I started my story with a bloody, blasphemous sex murder, revealed it to be false, and morphed the story into a farcical coming-of-age tale. But I almost scrapped the project before it was ever shared, and fear was the cause. As I reviewed my story for submission, I had a realization and said aloud: “After what happened at Virginia Tech, I could be kicked out of school for writing this.”

The Virginia Tech massacre was still a hot topic on college campuses across the U.S. But even before Cho’s objectionable one-act scripts “Richard McBeef” and “Mr. Brownstone” went public, I was very aware of the stereotype that school shooters supposedly foreshadow their future deeds through violent writing or some creative



output. Since I began seriously writing in my youth, I have been aware that I put myself in harm's way by choosing to write violence, and it took me years to write and share a violent story without fear of reprisal. Once again, I was afraid that I was putting myself in a compromising situation though I had done nothing wrong. I was afraid to share my creative passion with those whose opinions I valued.

I could only hope that my professor (whom I admire tremendously and who inspired me to pursue the career of teaching) would not give into hysteria and pass judgment on me as a person because my story was violent. He did not let me down, and my uncensored story was met with unprecedented (for me) enthusiasm and praise. But I will never forget that, if my teacher would have given into the fear and bought into the stereotype, I would have ended up being questioned as a madman by school authorities — or worse.

As it was after Columbine, I was lucky after Virginia Tech, but in another time and place, my life could have been seriously impacted by the fear that seems to heighten with each high-profile school shooting. As I did eight years before, I wondered what it would be like to be stigmatized as a potential school shooter because I share a pastime with an infamous mass murderer. The best way to find out what it is to live with the stereotype, and how serious its implications can be, is to find out more about the experiences of others. At a time when fear of school violence and writers of violence has never been higher, these questions are just the beginning of what should be an ongoing conversation on the topic of the stereotype and the implications for those who navigate it.

Methodological and Organizational Overview



My examination of the writer-of-violence-as-school-shooter stereotype employed a hybrid qualitative-rhetorical methodology that: (1) gathered through qualitative interviewing real-life experiences and perceptions of individuals who navigated the stereotype and (2) analyzed the texts of those interviews, as well as other texts relating to the stereotype, through critical scapegoat analysis. My understanding of scapegoat analysis was inspired by the writings of Kenneth Burke, as well as Burkean analyses by critics such as Barry Brummett, Celeste M. Condit, and Brian L. Ott and Eric Aoki. In addition to interview data, I also applied scapegoat analysis to media reports of the shootings at Columbine, Red Lake, and Virginia Tech, as well as other selected documents and stories that contribute to the formation of the stereotype and how they contributed to the scapegoating of writers-of-violence for the ongoing threat of school shootings.

I firmly believe this knowledge was worth pursuing for its potential to help prevent harmful scapegoating for the unfortunate, though seemingly inevitably ongoing, social issue of school shootings. It might not always be possible to save the victims who fall to school shooters' bullets, but through self-reflection, understanding and knowledge, we as a society might combat unnecessary victimage that creates collateral damage to the school shooting phenomenon.

Interview Analysis: Themes and Variations

As one of its foremost objectives, this study examined if writers-of-violence actively resisted their scapegoating for the problem of school shootings and/or their stigmatization as tragically violent. Given that six individuals, a relatively low number of



participants, consented to an interview for this study, reaching a definitive yes or no answer to this question is not scientifically plausible, nor was ever considered a possible outcome as the study was designed.

Based on analysis of these six interviews, this study reports three recurring themes: (1) participants reported personally rejecting the concept of violent writing as a strong indicator that an individual is tragically doomed to be violent him/herself; however, no participants reported a public display of this rejection of writing as a fatalistic indicator of a violent fate; (2) a majority of participants view disturbing writing, including that including upsetting violence, as a valuable art form, rather than a despised symptom of a sick mind, thus invoking transcendence for violent writing, as opposed to victimage; (3) when asked to describe their default image of a writer-of-violence, several participants recalled images consistent with Harris and Klebold, rather than Cho or any other school shooter whose violent writing drew more intense media attention; however, participants also confessed feelings of guilt for possessing these images and showed traces of comic thinking in discussing the folly of such stereotypical images. On the topic of writers feeling pressure to censor violent themes out of their writing out of fear of being stigmatized as violent, opinions were mixed, with participants surprisingly appreciating some effects of the stigmatization of violent writing.

One theme that recurred throughout these interviews was a resolute but non-public rejection of fatalism in violent or disturbing writing. Though not every participant writes violent fiction in a sense that they would fit easily into the writer-of-violence-as-school-shooter stereotype as described throughout this study (and thus, was not



specifically defending himself or herself or their own art), each participant rejected the idea that violent writing should be unequivocally interpreted as a red flag for impending violence.

While not all participants were writers-of-violence per se (i.e. they do not regularly write violent material nor consider violent writing a significant factor in their self-image), all participants demonstrate a greater appreciation for and knowledge of the craft of writing. Thus, they possessed a broader and richer understanding of violent writing, one that goes well beyond simple bloods, guts, and body counts. Their broader definitions suggest more artistic value in violent writing than the obscene blood orgies or thinly veiled suicidal cries for help that frequent media descriptions on alarming student writing. Far from mere hackery or threat dropping, participants view violent writing, when done skillfully, as a tool for challenging readers and exploring taboo subjects.

For example, one scenario that came up repeatedly as necessitating violent imagery was rape. Participants felt that glossing over the graphic sensory aspects of rape, while PC, would rob the reader of the chance to gain understanding of the act and its consequences. In the example of helping readers understand one's experiences dealing with rape, these participants move from a tolerance of violent writing to transcendence, the reconstruction of violent writing as a valuable artistic tool, not an inflammatory or sick-minded lashing-out gesture. Through carefully constructed and well-placed images of violence, a writer can, as one participant said, create something that "better highlights our world, the human condition, the voice that is speaking to us."

Through incorporating violent images into situations better explored by doing so,



a writer can illuminate elements of society and the individual mind and spirit that he/she could not otherwise. One participant went beyond this being an option and believes an ethical writer *has* to go to whatever lengths (or depths) necessary to convey a vital message to the audience. One participant noted two kinds of uncomfortable created by writing: “(1) the kind that shakes you deeply and (2) the kind that makes you feel filthy,” and championed the former while questioning the latter.

This transcendent view of appropriately utilized violent writing was the primary resistance tactic participants showed toward the scapegoating of writers-of-violence. While embracing this transcendence, they rejected fatalism and the idea that violent writing alone begs intervention, though allowing that the writer’s behavior *can* be an indicator of mental illness or violent tendencies. Participants did not show evidence of previous resistance in a public forum. For the experienced writers interviewed here, the presence of violence itself is not inherently good or bad. It can be welcome or even necessary, or it can be crude and distracting — even threatening in a way that calls for authority intervention, a possibility for which participants allowed under dire circumstances.

But what is the litmus test for when violence is welcome in a story? While a non-writer or novice might look for over-the-top bloodshed or extreme language as the line that must be guarded, participants looked to the story itself and its relationship to the violence in question. If the piece is “served” by the violent content in question, then it is not merely acceptable but necessary; it transcends fears of violent writing and writers-of-violence and becomes necessary for the piece to succeed as art. On the other side of the



spectrum, participants agreed with the popular sentiment that violent writing *can* indicate mental disturbance if alarming enough, though none were comfortable drawing a line as to when the writer needs to be evaluated. But more often, they felt, excessive or unnecessary violence came from the writer over-striving for shock value. Participants spoke comically when asked why they thought young writers felt the need to push the envelope with violent imagery. They noted a pop culture that, as one participant observed, “fetishizes” violence, as a factor in young artists feeling the need to shock their unshockable audience in order to get attention.

When appealing to a jaded and desensitized audience, it can take a shocking act for a piece of art or entertainment to get noticed. Guns and violence are no longer shocking; in fact, they seem to be the bare minimum for a story to resonate with some readers. If violence can be found in every medium, writers and other creative artists must strive to top what is all around us. Recognizing this, it makes sense why Cho would forsake a gun for a cereal bar in *Richard McBeef*. Cho classmate (Ian McFarlane) who gave *Richard McBeef* and *Mr. Brownstone* to AOL noted, “[Cho’s] plays had really twisted, macabre violence that used weapons I wouldn’t have even thought of” (Cho Seung-Hui’s Plays, 2007). Had John, the protagonist of *Richard McBeef*, attacked Richard with a gun, it would have been run-of-the-mill and, like the rest of Cho’s writing, completely forgettable if not for his rampage.

While discussing the business of unprecedented violence as a tool for salient writing, participants painted the picture of society’s disturbing double standard, one that is “puritanical” toward violence, obscene language, and sex at the same time it bombards



people with “beautiful” images of violence. Participants felt writers-of-violence face a conundrum in sharing their own images in this environment: how will their story be remembered if it’s climax has been done countless times? Many attempt to defamiliarization the act by intensifying the violent act. Unfortunately for them, in the school shooting era, they recognized is just as likely to get a writer suspended as praised. It is likely that most writers-of-violence who fall under suspicion merely go too far. Thought participants sympathized with writers who feel the need to resort to over-the-top violence in order to get noticed, they admitted they could be shaken by violent writing to the point they could fear or be concerned for the safety of its author. This admission was often phrased in the form of a tone of confession or lament.

When asked what would be present for them to continue fearing a writer-of-violence after initially feeling that way, participants repeatedly focused on their preexisting image of the writer’s personality or past. The most alarming image, it seems, comes from popular portrayals of loner school shooters, particularly the angry Goth loner archetype. Realism also seems to play a role in setting off concerns for the wellness of a writer-of-violence. If the writing is *too real* or seems like it could be a true retelling of a traumatic incident, participants admitted that would increase their concerns over the writer’s wellness.

Participants confessed difficulty in separating the author from their character, even though they expected readers to do the same for their characters. They recognized the knee-jerk reaction to a shocking piece of student writing and recognized that the same standard does not apply to established authors. They note the double standard for



suspicion of writers-of-violence, one that is magnified when the writer has a menacing image or a tragic past.

One of the enduring debates involved in navigating the writer-of-violence-as-school-shooter stereotype is what action should be taken if, for whatever reason, a writer seems to be a clear threat to him/herself or someone else. No clear consensus emerged in the interview process in terms of a protocol to help educators act when faced with alarming student writing. When asked how (hypothetically) they would “draw the line” as to when a student needs to be evaluated because of something he/she has written, participants struggled to come up with a definitive measuring tool. But all advocated active intervention (as opposed to absolute transcendence or indifference to the situation). But participants offered disparate views on how this intervention should occur. One view said his/her first step would be to meet with the student first before initiating official action (such as involving a counselor, principal, or police). This approach is consistent with the view that the majority of writers-of-violence are benign and more in need of understanding than discipline. In this scenario, only extremely troubling encounters would warrant the involvement of school or law officials.

A survey of post-Virginia Tech articles on violent student writing indicates, based on the discourse of teachers interviewed, this seems to be a popular approach. As one teacher told *The Patriot Ledger*, “Kids this age will write stuff that may seem on the surface disturbing, but when you investigate it, the students says ‘Oh my gosh, I’m only kidding,’ or its lyrics to a song. I’ve heard that one several times before” (Collins, 2007). Other articles, some predating the Virginia Tech massacre, warn against snap judgments



before approaching the student first. One participant agreed with based on his/her experiences in the classroom, saying most violent material he/she has encountered was not purposeful upsetting. Initiating knee-jerk disciplinary action in these instances would be greatly detrimental to students and introduce distrust or resentment into the classroom's teacher-student dynamic.

In contrast, another participant said in the absence of a preexisting relationship with the writer, they, too, would talk with the student but also report the incident to authorities. Again, this approach places value in establishing a relationship with the writer through direct communication. It is unclear, however, why this participant said they would "report" the incident as well, presumably to someone such as a counselor or an administrator. This would seemingly threaten to undermine the teacher's threat assessment of the writer if it differed from that of higher-ups.

The first participant discussed also said he/she would discuss the situation with a colleague in the absence of a relationship with the student. The language used was different than the previous example. The other participant said he/she would "report" the incident, implying an official action or a request for an outside party to intervene. The latter example, however, seemed to be more of an unofficial meeting between two colleagues, one that would not entail any official action but would be more exploratory in nature. However, without shielding the identity of the student in question, it would be impossible to control outside forces once this information is shared with a third party.

Shifting from the current state of the stereotype to its origins, participants as a group were aware of high profile attacks such as Columbine and Virginia Tech, but not



all were aware of violent writing's role in scrutiny of those incidents. Though these interviews took place approximately two years after Virginia Tech, as opposed to a decade after Columbine, Columbine was the more memorable incident. One of the more unexpected outcomes of these interviews was the disparity in opinions of Cho compared to Harris and Klebold. Ten years after the attack at Littleton, participants admitted initial and lasting sympathy for Harris and Klebold and remorse for how the incident played out in the public forum.

In contrast, they did not grapple with such sentiments when grappling with the events at Virginia Tech. Rather, the events at Virginia Tech were either easier to reconcile or were too familiar to make the same mental footprint. Since participants were only familiar with the events at Columbine and Virginia Tech through media coverage, it is tempting to frame these statements as proof that the media portrayed Harris and Klebold in a more human light than Cho. But other factors should be considered before jumping to such a conclusion.

In terms of demographics, participants had more in common with the Columbine duo than with Cho. That more time has passed to cover more aspects of the Columbine case could also be a factor. But given that some participants volunteered their sympathetic feelings toward the Columbine duo unprovoked (they were merely asked to explain their feelings and memories of Columbine), it is clear, even a decade later, that sentiments on Columbine are still mixed. Given that Harris and Klebold are more infamous and controversial for peripheral issues other than their writing, it is not surprising that participants to whom the craft of writing is very important feel less enmity



toward Harris and Klebold than Cho, whose reputation impacted the writing community immediately. As someone who suddenly and effectively damaged the credibility of writing (one participant said it was “literally hours” after first hearing about the events of Virginia Tech that he/she knew about his creative writing misadventures) Cho did no favors for one of the marginalized groups he probably hoped to inspire with his killing spree. Where Harris and Klebold are capable of drawing sympathy from this group, Cho draws only contempt (or occasional indifference). In death, he is not welcome in one of the groups he is most commonly identified with.

The rejection of Cho is not the only instance of members of the writing community working together to protect the integrity of their craft. One issue examined here is that of censorship; specifically, if the stigma of violent writing pressures writers-of-violence to forego violent imagery out of fear of stigmatization. The interview process did not reveal a clear conclusion on whether the writer-of-violence-as-school-shooter stereotype silences writers-of-violence in the classroom. One participant believes it does but was mixed on whether these invisible restrictions are overtly harmful to the craft of writing. It is somewhat surprising to hear even a partial endorsement of fear-induced censorship of violence from a writer. Perhaps this is a case of an artist caring more about his/her craft than about absolute freedom to practice it.

One participant advocated self-censorship if one’s story contains elements that might be upsetting to a particular audience. He/she went on to equate refusal to consider one’s audience to an abuse of the craft of writing. In contrast, another participant was against outright censorship. He/she instead advocated letting the writing and



workshopping process run its course and meeting with students on an individual basis when violent content becomes a possible issue.

Here, the chapter ends on a curious note. In these statements, we see all three participants valuing order in the classroom, and in the first statement, order in the field of writing itself. But all three place the onus of preserving order on a different source. The third statement (anti-censorship) places the onus on the teacher, who should be responsible for identifying students in need of help, talking with them, and acting based on the results of that discussion. The participant feels that a teacher's caring and tolerance of his/her students will permeate into the classroom culture. The second statement (self-censorship) places the onus of order on the individual writer, particularly on his/her responsibility to fit into the classroom culture. This seemingly places value in conformity, but it could also be viewed as simply the strategy of audience analysis. Serious writers, such as those who aim to have their work published, learn to seek out the right audience for their work. It is hard to blame a writer for wanting to please his/her class with their writing, and not making an audience uncomfortable or fearful is part of appealing to it.

The first statement is the most unexpected outcomes from these interviews. Few (myself included) would expect a creative writer to view censorship with anything but contempt. But the participant appears to recognize the limiting of violent imagery, such as that which might cause an audience to question the mental state of an author, as an extrinsic governing system, a sort of invisible hand, which protects the reputation of creative writing. The participant, whose stories contain violent content but not of a gory, gratuitous nature, does not value wanton violence in literature and views it as something



as an embarrassment to the craft. On the other hand, he/she is interested, for example, in woman's issues, and values visceral, violent imagery if it helps the reader understand an important issue (he/she used "rape" and "the fall from grace" as examples). With "trash" (i.e. gratuitous or unnecessarily violent imagery) being more of a red flag than violence that integrates well into the context of its story, extrinsic pressure to avoid writing and sharing "trash" raises the overall quality of writing in schools by keeping unwelcome violence out of publicly shared work.

One caveat: this philosophy places a great deal of responsibility on audiences to tell the difference between gratuitous and worthwhile violence. As with any form of censorship, it could conceivably go too far and dissuade writers from violent imagery that would benefit an audience. That concept may seem Orwellian, but overreaction to the work of benign writers-of-violence is already a common occurrence. It is not inconceivable that overreactions will continue or exacerbate. This would be disastrous. Participants agreed unequivocally that violent writing is not only tolerable but valuable.

As long as people are living in a violent world, experiencing violent episodes, and are bombarded with violent images so stylized they seem beautiful, they will require mechanisms to help them cope or understand their world. For many, writing is one of those mechanisms. To lose it to fear and public hysteria over school shootings would eliminate one avenue of negotiating a violent world when it is needed more than ever.

Future Directions

In studying school shootings, particularly those from 1995 and beyond, I was overcome by (1) the purveyance (and often irrationality) of scapegoating efforts meant to



combat school shootings; and (2) how many of the misconceived offspring of scapegoating efforts are still malignant years to follow. This study attempted to unravel one of the lingering malignancies of scapegoating efforts. But there is still much work that needs to be done to undo the others.

For future directions, I suggest more interviews with those who have experience navigating the stereotype. I hope in time this study will help generate awareness of the stereotype, which in turn could entice more who have navigated the stereotype to become interested in participating. Under the right conditions, I believe a panel approach, where several participants could gather in a single setting and discuss their experiences amongst themselves with limited guidance from the researcher(s), would be ideal. I originally hoped for the opportunity to assemble a panel but was unable to gather nearly enough interested participants. A panel has marvelous potential for data gathering, as it would promote camaraderie among participants and allow them to consider different perspectives on their own experiences. This approach would require considerable time and resources to assemble a panel (I feel 5-to-15 participants would work well), but it could be an incredible opportunity to gather candid data from multiple sources.

If this study is step one in data gathering, there is no way to predict when step two, such as those suggested above, will be completed and brought into the public forum. In the meantime, I present a series of suggestions for action, which I hope will help combat the scapegoating of writers-of-violence in the immediate future.

Suggestions for Action



No academic study would be complete without suggestions on how to approach a solution. This study was designed to begin a conversation on the writer-of-violence-as-school-shooter stereotype; ending the conversation will undoubtedly take much, much more work. With that in mind, I offer five suggestions based on the findings of this study. Based on this research, I invite writers-of-violence, writers of non-violence, educators, law enforcement officials, and anyone interested in protecting young people from fear-induced scapegoating for school shootings to: (1) recognize that the pantheon of literature is filled with violent stories that have entertained and enlightened generations of readers; (2) reject zero tolerance and zero tolerance-type policies toward violent or disturbing writing, as well as zero tolerance policies toward other behaviors casually associated with school shooters; (3) adopt a comic frame of acceptance toward artistic expressions that incorporate violence. I will now explain my rationale for these suggestions.

Recognizing Violence’s Role in the Pantheon of Literature and Our Culture

“I wish nobody had to read it, but this happened, and this is one way to teach the truth. It's purposeful literature.”

— Holly Levitsky, associate English professor, Loyola Marymount University, on why she teaches Holocaust literature and other dark material to her students

(quoted in Leachman, 2007)

In sifting through a variety of supposed red flags for possibly disturbed students, I found a variety of ways authors (ever so politely) suggest that student writing should be mined for signs of impending danger. One such suggestion stayed with me longer than others. It suggested a student who “depicts anger, frustration, and the dark side of life in



school writing projects” exhibits signs of being a possible threat to school safety (Campbell, 2007, p. 8). My initial reaction to this was to angrily wonder aloud how a person who *knows* the dark side of life is supposed to survive it if they cannot communicate their experiences without finding themselves in more trouble than they are already in. Did the author even stop to consider that writing a story about the dark side, one that incorporates anger and frustration that such a life can surely inspire, is how a writer keeps from being swallowed up by the darkness?

It is not enough to merely acknowledge that not every piece of violent writing is directly linked to a palpable threat; that is far too obvious to be of any relevance. It is important that all interested parties recognize that violent writing has a distinct place in the lineage of literature, one that young writers should not be discouraged from imitating and one day joining. Contrary to what is implied so often in the school shooting era, violent imagery is not relegated to genre fiction, amateurish, grotesque shock writing, or threats, direct or veiled. Violent writing is a form of artistic expression and, for some, a coping mechanism one can employ to negotiate a society laden with violent imagery. At least one APA study (Pennebaker, 1997) notes that writing about “emotional experiences” can be therapeutic. While this theory needs further testing from the Communication Studies discipline, the fact that writing is a cathartic tool for *some* people means educators need to recognize that immediately disciplining a student for writing a violent story risks silencing a voice that needs someone to hear it.

Perhaps proving whether writing is a cathartic tool for a significant portion of individuals struggling with violence, anger, or depression was beyond the scope of this



study. But violent writing is beneficial to society in many ways beyond personal catharsis. Violence entertains many people who will never commit a criminally violent act, as a quick scan of movie or TV listings on any given night will prove. (On the day this paragraph was written, the top three grossing movies were *Inglorious Basterds*, *District 9*, and *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra*. Enough said.) But long before *CSI* was on every night and Torture Porn horror movies dominated the box office, people looked to literature for images of violence. Some of those images are studied in the very schools in which student writing is mined for signs of violence.

Though you will not find his work on many class reading lists, Stephen King's name is frequently invoked as an example of someone whose work writers-of-violence could be mimicking, ostensibly because he is a widely successful author who does not have a violent past. King himself dabbled in writing about school violence (*RAGE*, *Cain Rose Up*); not only did he not shoot up his school, his work spans genres (e.g. *Hearts in Atlantis*, "Rita Hayward and Shawshank Redemption") and has been consistently popular for decades. So, as many experts ask, "how do you tell a potential school shooter from a student following in the footsteps of Stephen King" (Langman, 2009, p. 184)? There is no easy answer to this question, but for it to even matter, we must recognize that the presence of violent imagery alone is not an indicator that the piece is the work of a dangerous or sick individual. And it cannot mean that the work is automatically without redeeming qualities.

If we view violent writing and its body of authors comically, it is plain to see that some of the enduring writing of our time is violent or disturbing and came from the pen



of authors who were familiar with the dark side of life. One story that immediately comes to mind is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's classic "The Yellow Wallpaper." Often interpreted as an artistic portrayal of serious postpartum depression, the story derives much of its power from the fact that Gilman is widely reported to have suffered from a similar bout of depression herself. We applaud Gilman for writing what she knew, but we subconsciously shame today's generation of depressed writers from working through their own troubles in a public forum.

I read "The Yellow Wallpaper" in a college freshman in an English class and happened to keep the anthology we used. In looking through that anthology years later, I see that many stories we read in that class are filled with violence, depression, anger, and darkness: Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," T.C. Boyle's "Greasy Lake," Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron," Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Joyce Carol Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" and Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried" were all a significant part of my early training as a student of great literature.

That we hold these stories up as great art while simultaneously shunning students who write about violence or depression is a travesty and a great hypocrisy. If students are asked to read and appreciate violence in English class, why should they be discouraged from writing violence down the hall in a writing class? Further down the hall from where these amazing stories are being studied, students can learn about the Holocaust, the Civil Rights protests or the art of self-defense. It goes much deeper than curriculum. Growing up, young people (particularly males) are taught to admire iconic football players,



cowboys, and superheroes whose appeal is derived from their ability to vanquish their enemies through sheer physical force. Our nation's central figure, the President of the United States, commands the most powerful army in the world. Yet, when a young writer attempts to make sense of it all in their writing, educators are now supposed to recognize violent thoughts as a sign of mental illness. If violence is at the forefront of a student's mind and this is a negative thing, we are all to blame.

One way we can address this as educators is by refusing to quarantine writers-of-violence before giving their stories a fair, comic chance. Rather than seeing violent content as immediately demanding discipline or intervention, read the story and consider it on its own merits. Give the writer the benefit of the doubt and recognize that not only is violence everywhere today, but it has been a part of our literary history virtually forever. And if there is reason to believe a student might be in imminent danger from their life on the dark side, we must proceed with compassion, not intolerance and overzealous discipline.

Rejecting Zero Tolerance of Violent Student Writing

As its moniker implies, zero tolerance is an extreme form of intolerance. As Cornell (2006) notes, zero tolerance policies are attractive to administrators who no longer wish to be crucial factors in the disciplinary process beyond signing off and enforcing an unseeing, unthinking monolithic policy that creates a police state. Despite its widespread adoption in the school shooting era, zero tolerance policies in response to school shootings have been roundly condemned by experts. In fact, the abominable nature of zero tolerance has been so established by the academic community that I choose



to largely gloss the scope of arguments against it (those arguments for it are negated by the folly of creating a prison environment in schools). For those who desire a more detailed denouncement of zero tolerance, I recommend starting with the excellent study *Zero Tolerance, Zero Evidence: An Analysis of School Disciplinary Practice* (Skiba, 2000).

My research did not turn up specific instances of zero tolerance policies toward violent student writing. One of the unfortunate problems with zero tolerance policies is they are so widespread yet are rarely publicly protested until a student suffers such undue punishment that it captures the attention of the news media. If a student has been egregiously punished through zero tolerance, I did not find evidence of it in my literature review or interviews. But I feel it is necessary to be aware that such policies, if they do not already exist, could one day be enacted if the scapegoating of writers-of-violence continues and fear continues to mount. In that event, it is imperative that such a policy be met with universal rejection. For those students who write violence to cope with a violent world, zero tolerance essentially leaves only two options: seclusion or execution. You might find a similar dilemma in Holocaust literature.

Adopting a Comic Frame

If this study is successful in discouraging the future scapegoating of writers-of-violence and promoting more acceptance of violent writing as a socially valuable entity, I will be wholly pleased with its outcome. But while I am feeling optimistic, I wish to close the study with a more universal plea for the adoption of the comic frame and widespread rejection of the tragic frame.



Scapegoating efforts always seem to end with someone paying a penance far beyond what it called for based on their actual transgressions. As wrong as this is, it is no less troublesome that the true causes of the social breach go unaddressed even as the goat is sacrificed. Thus, guilt is bound to reemerge and someone will have to be needlessly sacrificed all over again for the same issues.

The comic frame of acceptance (Burke, 1984) though it is only one alternative to tragedy, is a natural remedy to the tragic frame. Rather than putting writers-of-violence on suicide or terrorist watch because past school shooters have dabbled in violent writing, rather than dividing them from their classmates and marginalizing their art as disruptive, threatening and worthless, why not recognize that violence so permeates our art and popular culture that we are all responsible for and participate in its widespread appeal? In the event that a student's writing is so violent that they appear to be a threat to themselves or others — comic frame or not, it has happened and will happen again — we owe it to the author to put his or her work in its proper context. In our society, even with blood on their hands, the most blatant criminals are owed the right to defend themselves and to explain their actions. We owe it to the student, in no small part because in our own way every one of us has bred an acceptance and glamorizing of violence into our culture. Only an inconceivably puritanical soul would be qualified to shun violent art merely because it is violent.

If comic thinking can eliminate the need for scapegoating writers-of-violence, it can completely eradicate the practice of scapegoating throughout all of our society (victimage can only exist in the tragic frame). If we were to embrace forgiveness of



others for their transgressions, view our opposition as mistaken, not evil, look inward and recognize that we, too, are flawed and contribute to society's ails, and work together to address the true causes of our collective guilt in its many forms, at long last we could begin to address the prejudices, ignorance, and past wrongdoings that prevent us from maximizing the experience of living in a society.

In closing, I would like to borrow a quotation from Condit (1994):

The comic frame tells us that we are all, inevitably, impure. To the extent that we strive for understanding and a better world, we must forgive each other our failings, for we are each equally the clowns of our own dramas (p. 81).

I hope this quote provides a glimpse of a future in which we deny tragic victimage for comic collaboration. After all, if we were somehow able to throw off the shackles of tragic thinking and victimage and work together and within ourselves, violent writing would lose its attraction and its vitality. Students could write stories about clowns — imperfect, self-aware, lovable clowns — instead of doomed goats and executioners too blind to know their guillotine cannot cut through the true sources of their suffering. This would be the greatest development in literature yet.

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