


*Merry Ann
DeVaney
Sauls*

**WRITING
CONTEST**



Scan the QR code for
details, contest rules,
and entry form!

ELIGIBLE SUBMISSIONS:
Projects completed for a Cottey class
between
MARCH 25, 2025 & MARCH 23, 2026

DEADLINE TO ENTER:
Monday, March 23, 2026,
11:59 PM

**FIVE CATEGORIES WITH PRIZE
MONEY FOR WINNERS IN EACH:**

- Introductory Writing (FWS 101 & WRI 102)
- Academic Writing
- Capstones
- Professional Writing
- Creative Writing

QUESTIONS?
Email Dr. Sarah Polo
(spolo@cottey.edu)
or Dr. Jon Green (jgreen@cottey.edu)

**Cottey College
&
the Cottey College English Department
present**

Write On, Sister

**Winners of the
Merry Ann DeVaney Sauls
Academic Writing Contest
2026**

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About the Contest

The Merry Ann DeVaney Sauls Academic Writing Contest was developed to enhance the prestige of academic writing in the disciplines at Cottey College. The contest is financed through a generous endowed fund established by Merry Ann DeVaney Sauls, a 1959 Cottey graduate. Ms. Sauls sees writing as fundamentally important to success in any endeavor and sponsors the writing contest as a way of furthering that vision.

All students are invited to submit writing composed in Cottey courses to the contest. Internal judges from Cottey College perform initial assessments of the pieces. Then, finalist external judges, typically professors or professionals in the relevant disciplines at other colleges, universities, and workplaces, rank the best pieces in each category.

The winners are honored at a public ceremony. The full texts of the winning pieces are shared online via this publication.

For more information about the contest and its past winners, visit the contest section of the [English Department's portion of the Cottey website](#).

The co-sponsors of the contest, Dr. Jonathan Green and Dr. Sarah Polo, wish to thank the internal and external judges for their service and commitment to recognizing exemplary student writing.

Contest Judges

External Judges

Dr. Gina Pugliese

Dr. Julie Perino

Joaquin Gavilano

Jared Kohn

Lucia Green

Internal Judges

Dr. Trisha Stubblefield

Dr. Sarah Quick

Dr. Julie Tietz

Dr. Sarah Polo

Dr. Claire Mills

Dr. Jacob Levine

Dr. Jon Green

Kim Severance

Dr. cody page

Professor Theresa Spencer

Introductory Writing

2nd Place:

JJ Anne Scobee Channer, “Rhetorical Strategies in Academic and Popular Texts”

Popular texts and academic texts are vastly different, but both have similar messages and outcomes. The two texts being compared in this essay are different, yes, but they have one thing in common: They bring attention to the psychological effects of child abuse, both long and short term. The academic journal uses logos to present facts about the topic, while the popular text utilizes pathos to convey the information. Authors can deliver the same topic, in this case, the psychology of child abuse, using different rhetorical strategies. Both texts use pathos, but for different reasons; the academic text also incorporates logos, while the popular one does not. The two authors build up their point using pathos to draw readers into the text and keep them interested. Both texts also use storytelling to keep the reader’s attention, albeit in different ways, but the strategy is the same nonetheless. The academic text “*Child Abuse*,” by Monica Sweeney, and the popular text “*My Hero Academia Vol. 30*” by Kohei Horikoshi are two examples of this. “*Child Abuse*” is an article that goes into detail about the issue of child abuse being ignored by families and institutions, which has allowed it to persist and severely harm the victims. Sweeney emphasizes that trauma during childhood disrupts emotional and identity development, relationships, and often leads to long-term issues. “*My Hero Academia Vol. 30*” focuses on the backstory of a character named Dabi and how his father’s actions affected him. During this arc, Dabi appears in front of Endeavor and Shoto, his father and younger brother, revealing himself to still be alive, years after he was pronounced dead.

Pathos is used in both texts to keep the reader’s attention, but is demonstrated in different ways. The first few panels of “*My Hero Academia Vol. 30*” show a fight that eases into something more emotionally serious as Dabi comes face-to-face with Endeavor and Shoto. It builds up by cutting to Dabi’s mother, Rei, seeing a pre-recorded video Dabi had broadcast during the fight. This demonstrates pathos by showing the reader how Dabi’s actions are about to affect not only the people on the battlefield, but those watching. He states, “To date, I’ve killed over 30 innocent people in cold blood... and today I’d like everyone to know exactly what drove me to such despicable acts” (Horikoshi, Volume 30). From an author’s standpoint, writing Dabi this way draws readers in just like it does in the story. Using pathos in this instance to insinuate that the atrocities that the villain has committed are due to a traumatic past, causing the readers to feel an emotional response.

Pathos is also used in “*Child Abuse*,” but is applied differently. When speaking on sensitive matters such as the abuse of children, one has to apply a method of tenderness when presenting the information to the audience. Sweeney does this by stating, “There is something deep in all of us which is unwilling to accept the fact that the abused child is, and has always been a hidden fact of life...” (Sweeney, 615). The effect this sentence has on the reader is monumental; it causes them to feel grief for the children who have been ignored for so many years, or even guilt for being one of the people to overlook signs of domestic violence or neglect. The primary use of pathos is in the first two paragraphs of the article to hook the readers in with these strong emotions about such a harsh topic. In addition to the previous line, the three sentences of the article use the same strategy. “While it is only recently that the topic of child abuse has begun to get attention, the issue has become a matter of increasing concern. A conspiracy of silence in the past has allowed it to go unaddressed. The Church and families themselves have been very slow to admit that this is a serious problem and silence has kept this distasteful issue at a safe distance from us so that we might be spared the uncomfortableness of coming to terms with it...” The diction Sweeney used evokes emotion from the reader, drawing them to further read the article.

Multiple rhetorical strategies are applied in “*Child Abuse*,” not only pathos, but logos is also used extensively. “*Child Abuse*” presents the facts of child abuse without using a character to portray them. The third paragraph immediately dives into the effects of abuse on a child’s psyche and how it typically happens when children are at their most impressionable. Further on, she continues this pattern by talking about how high alert children of abuse are: “They are constantly on alert, checking out the safety of their moment-to-moment existence not only for potential physical injury, but also psychological injury such as betrayal, abandonment, or injustice” (Sweeney, 617). These examples are logic-based, showing the reader that time and effort were invested in writing this article. Logos is the primary rhetorical strategy implemented in academic studies, just like it is in “*Child Abuse*.” Sweeney keeps the reader’s attention while creating an engaging, easy to understand, and easy to retain environment. Logos is used to inform and spread information, which is how it is used in this article. Sweeney works to educate her readers about child abuse, the signs, and to bring attention to the fact that this topic is often ignored and disregarded. Bringing this information to the public spreads awareness, accomplishing her goal. Comparatively, the popular text does not use logos due to the lack of necessity. Adopting logos into a manga would change the intended audience, and the original audience would no longer connect to the text the same way.

Storytelling has been a way to keep an audience captivated for centuries, and it is no different here. In “*Child Abuse*,” storytelling is used to show the progression of the effects of abuse. “Child abuse is often the bitter fruit of abuse previously inflicted on the perpetrator him/herself in childhood. People who injure others do so because they have not dealt with and over come their

own pain. Adults who in childhood suffered abuse, humiliation or neglect coped by repressing and putting into deep freeze their feelings of helplessness and shame. Tragically, it is this suppression and denial of their own childhood hurts that leads to abuse in the next generation...” The sequence of events Sweeney displays in her writing follows a stereotypical story, urging the reader to continue reading the last few paragraphs of the article and further learn about the effects of child abuse. Similarly, “*My Hero Academia Vol. 30*” uses storytelling to keep the reader engaged, but for a different reason. “*My Hero Academia Vol. 30*” is a manga series, and the overarching plot is the entire premise, but what stands out are the smaller stories, such as Dabi’s. Dabi’s story is one of pain, abuse, and revenge. The line: “... my father forced the woman who became my mother to marry him. That’s when my father created me, in pursuit of his selfish, egotistical dream. But alas, I was a failed creation. It didn’t take long for him to reject me. I was tossed aside and forgotten.” (Horikoshi, Volume 30) This scene describes neglect, a form of emotional abuse. The effects of this manifest in violence in Dabi’s case, which is common for children who do not have an outlet. Horikoshi and Sweeney both demonstrate the development of child abuse as a person grows, often resulting in violence toward others if a professional is not sought out for help.

The use of rhetorical strategies is used across all forms of literature; popular and academic texts are just two of the examples. The two texts, “*Child Abuse*” and “*My Hero Academia Vol. 30*,” demonstrate the use of pathos to keep their audiences interested in the psychological effects of child abuse. Logos is used extensively in Sweeney’s article, providing the facts behind child abuse and how it affects children later on in their lives. While storytelling is not a rhetorical strategy, it is a tool writers use to convey and explain information. Horikoshi and Sweeney use storytelling in two different ways, but both use the strategy to keep the reader’s attention. The use of literary devices across different texts shows that rhetorical strategies are not limited to academic and informational texts. They are used across all forms of writing, simply in different ways.

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Introductory Writing

1st Place:

Rachel Ewing-Merrill, “Ballot Initiatives as a Path to Protect Reproductive Rights”

When the United States Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 with its decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, the nature of reproductive care in America changed overnight. *Roe v. Wade* was the 1973 Supreme Court decision that protected the right to safe and legal access to abortion for nearly 50 years (Center for Reproductive Rights). Once it was overturned, that protection disappeared, and control went back to the states. Across the country, clinics have shut down, care has been delayed or denied, and people have been forced to travel or go without care altogether (Baden et al.). Abortion bans and restrictions have caused a significant decline in access to reproductive services, especially in the South and Midwest. This is not just about the loss of the right to abortion; it is about women being put at risk. Patients experiencing medical emergencies have been turned away from hospitals, doctors have reported delays in care until someone’s life is at risk, and providers are leaving states with restrictions, deepening existing “maternity-care deserts” (Baden et al.). Beyond abortion, the loss of access is affecting broader reproductive care, including miscarriage management, contraception, and prenatal services. Maternal mortality is expected to rise, especially for Black and Indigenous people. Reproductive access is central to the right to life, health, and the freedom to make personal decisions. It affects whether people can access chemotherapy during pregnancy, escape situations of domestic violence, or prevent forced pregnancies resulting from rape (Human Rights Watch). Removing access to abortion does not protect life; it puts lives at risk. This is no longer a political issue; it is a public health crisis. In order to combat the dire consequences of the *Dobbs* decision, we must look to state-level efforts, particularly ballot initiatives.

Within a month of the *Dobbs* ruling, 43 clinics across eleven states had stopped offering abortion services (Baden et al.). That number rose to 66 clinics in fifteen states within just over three months, with no clinics remaining in the fourteen states enforcing complete abortion bans. Since the ruling, approximately 22 million women and girls of reproductive age now live in states where

abortion is heavily restricted or completely inaccessible (Human Rights Watch). The map

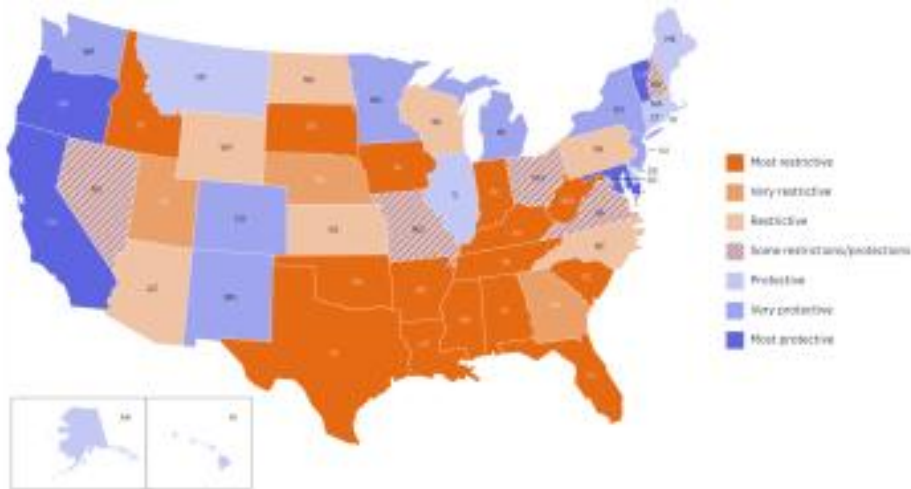


Figure 1
"Abortion Policies and Access After Roe"
Photo Credits to Guttmacher Institute

included here shows just how widespread these restrictions are across the country, highlighting how where you live has become a major factor in whether or not you can access care. It also demonstrates how certain regions are completely isolated, surrounded by states with strict abortion laws, making it even more difficult for individuals in those areas to find the care they need. This means that in heavily restricted states, only those who have the financial means and are able to travel can access abortion care. For many, that includes taking time off from work, arranging childcare, and covering the cost of transportation and the procedure itself, all while trying to navigate a legal and political environment where seeking care can feel risky, or even criminal, for both patients and those who help them. As a result, low-income individuals, mothers, and others without the resources or freedom to travel are often forced to carry pregnancies against their will. This deepens existing inequities and reinforces a system where access to reproductive care depends on one's resources and circumstances, rather than being guaranteed as a fundamental right.

All active state abortion bans include exceptions intended to "prevent death" or "protect the life" of the pregnant individual, but these exceptions are often written in vague, non-medical terms, leaving healthcare providers in an impossible position (Felix et al.). Without clear guidance, doctors must weigh the risk of prosecution or losing their medical license against the urgent needs of their patients. This legal uncertainty forces providers to delay or withhold care that would typically be standard practice. Patients with life-threatening complications, like ectopic pregnancies or miscarriages, are being turned away or forced to wait until they are on the brink of death. Some have been left to bleed at home for days. Others have been forced to travel long

distances to states where care is still accessible, simply because doctors in their home state are too afraid to act (Human Rights Watch). Amber Thurman, a 28-year-old mom from Georgia, is just



Figure 2
A picture of Thurman and her son
Photo Credits to ProPublica

one heartbreaking example of how dangerous these restrictive laws really are. After having complications from a medication abortion, she went to the hospital for help, but because of Georgia's strict abortion laws, doctors delayed giving her a standard D&C procedure: a common and typically safe treatment used to remove tissue from the uterus after a miscarriage or incomplete abortion to prevent infection (Surana). She waited more than 20 hours while her condition got worse, and she ended up dying from an infection that could have been prevented. A state review later confirmed that her death was preventable. Forcing doctors to choose between doing what is right for their patients and protecting themselves from criminal charges is highly unethical, and women are going to continue to die as a result.

The reasons that a person chooses an abortion are deeply personal, and the government should not have a place in that decision. Sixty percent of women who have abortions are already mothers (Sanger-Katz et al.). Just under 50 percent of women seeking abortions are living under

the federal poverty line. The reality is that many women are desperate enough to turn to unsafe



Figure 3
A picture of a pro-choice protester
Photo Credits to CBC News

methods of abortion when access is restricted. This includes attempting to self-manage abortions without medical supervision or turning to unregulated or dangerous substances. Restricting legal access does not stop abortions; it only makes them more dangerous, especially for those without the resources to seek other alternatives. Before *Roe v. Wade*, this was all too common, with estimates from the 1950s and 1960s suggesting that between 200,000 and 1.2 million illegal or self-induced abortions happened each year (Gold). In 1967 alone, nearly 830,000 illegal abortions took place. Illegal abortions accounted for 18 percent of maternal deaths in 1930, and by 1965, they were still responsible for 17 percent of all pregnancy-related deaths. This shows that banning abortion does not get rid of it; it just forces women to turn to unsafe methods. History has shown us that when legal access is restricted, women's lives are at risk. The consequences of this can be deadly. By making abortion illegal, we only push women into more dangerous situations, where their health and safety are at risk.

The harm caused by the *Dobbs* decision is deep and far-reaching, and it disproportionately affects those who are already most vulnerable. But it does not have to stay this way. While federal protections have been stripped away, there is still real power at the state level. Kansas took this approach, and in 2022, it became the first state to protect reproductive rights through a ballot measure after the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* (Stuart). In August 2022, during the primary election, Kansas voters voted against a proposed constitutional amendment that would have



Figure 4
“Signs in favor and against the
Kansas Constitutional Amendment”
Photo Credits to Politico

removed abortion rights from the state constitution. The amendment was defeated with 59 percent voting against it. This outcome was not expected, given that Kansas is traditionally a conservative state. The results were largely due to record-high voter turnout and a highly organized pro-choice campaign. Ashley All, president of the Kansas Coalition for Common Sense and a key figure in the pro-choice campaign, described this victory as a turning point in the national conversation about abortion rights. She noted that the “historic victory gave Americans hope at a very frightening time and changed the way we talk about abortion rights in the months and years that followed.” The success of Kansas' ballot measure shows that, even in a conservative state, voters can come together to protect reproductive rights when given the opportunity.

Following the Kansas victory, many states have introduced ballot initiatives to protect reproductive rights. A ballot initiative is a citizen-driven process that allows individuals to propose new laws or constitutional amendments and gather signatures to qualify their proposals for the ballot (Ballotpedia). In 2024 alone, ten states had abortion rights ballot initiatives, with seven out

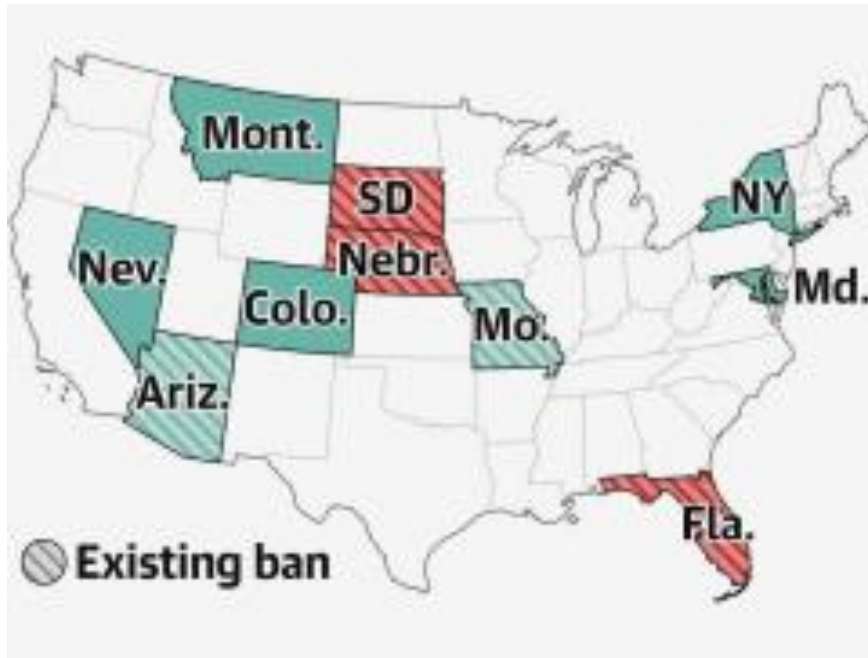


Figure 5
 2024 abortion ballot measure results
 Photo Credits to The Guardian

of ten of them passing (Guarnieri and Leaphart). In Florida, over 57 percent of voters supported the abortion rights measure, but it fell short of the 60 percent majority required in the state to amend the state constitution. These results prove that even in politically conservative or swing states, voters are showing strong support for protecting reproductive freedom when given the chance to vote on the issue. Ashley All explains, “Using ballot initiatives to protect abortion rights in certain states gave power back to voters who overwhelmingly support reproductive rights. This is especially important in states where the state legislatures do not represent the views of most voters on this issue.” Sixty-three percent of Americans believe “abortion should be legal in all or most cases” (Pew Research). This disconnect between public opinion and political action highlights a growing gap in representation where elected officials are not reflecting the will of the people. In states where politicians refuse to protect reproductive freedom, ballot initiatives allow citizens to take matters into their own hands, ensuring that access to reproductive care is not dictated by political agendas. They create a path to secure reproductive rights in state constitutions, guaranteeing that people can get essential medical care when they need it most.

One limitation of ballot initiatives is that politicians can try to override them by adding restrictions that make access more difficult in practice or challenging them in court. In November 2024, Missouri voters passed a constitutional amendment protecting abortion access, but politicians are currently trying to pass a resolution that would “undo most of the protections,” eliminating “access to abortion in all pregnancies except in cases of rape, incest, medical emergencies, or

fetal anomalies” (Miller). Ashley All expressed, “The chances of anti-abortion politicians ignoring the will of the people is almost certain.” While it’s true that politicians can attempt to challenge or restrict the impact of a ballot initiative, the very process of a ballot initiative itself reflects the will of the people, which is hard to ignore. The courts often take into account the public’s vote, making it harder for politicians to challenge the results of a ballot measure. In many cases, if politicians try to override a decision that has strong public support, it can actually backfire, creating more disagreement and fueling stronger rallying in future elections. The ability for voters to directly enact change through a ballot initiative is a powerful tool, and when politicians attempt to undermine that process, they risk losing support. This highlights the strength of the people’s voice and the power citizens truly have in politics, even when it doesn’t seem like it.

The consequences of the *Dobbs* decision are not theoretical. They are happening now, and women are the ones bearing the brunt. People are being forced into dangerous situations simply for trying to access life-saving care. And the most vulnerable are bearing the heaviest burden. This is not just about abortion. It’s about fundamental human rights, safety, and the ability to make decisions about our own bodies and lives. That’s why ballot initiatives matter. They give power back to the people when politicians refuse to listen. They allow us to protect each other, even in states where legislatures are actively working against reproductive freedom. But this tool only works if we use it. We must continue to push for state-level protections. We must keep organizing, signing petitions, showing up to vote, and demanding that reproductive care be treated not as a political bargaining tool, but as a fundamental right. The stakes are too high to stay quiet. If we don’t act now, more people will be harmed. More lives will be lost. This moment calls for urgency, not just from lawmakers, but from all of us. Protecting reproductive rights isn't optional: it’s essential.

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Academic Writing (Short)

2nd Place:

Juliet Anahi Ramirez, “Inebriation Dependency as Presented in Shakespeare's Sonnet 29”

In Shakespeare's 29th sonnet “When, in disgrace with fortune in men’s eyes” the speaker is lamentingly reflecting on his isolation and supposed uselessness as an artist when compared to others in the artistic community. He cannot help but compare himself and desire what others have that he lacks, yet these feelings, he states, completely diminish and become wholesome once he thinks about a sweet love. I argue that Shakespeare is depicting this sweet love not as an accepting human lover, but as an accepting form of intoxication such as alcohol inebriation. Through devices Shakespeare uses such as personification and symbolism, I will make the connection that this welcoming feeling free of judgment is actually brought to him through alcohol use.

While most literary scholars and critics traditionally interpret this sonnet as one focused on love, they automatically assume the love being directed is toward another human being. While the theme of love and salvation is undeniably prevalent within the sonnet, there is no direct indication of the love coming from a physical being because the description is incredibly symbolic. In the first quatrain of the sonnet, lines two and three read “I all alone bewep my outcast state, / And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries” introducing the idea of there being a heaven or some form of higher power (Lines 2-3). While this can imply that there was a multitude of empty prayers shot out into the distance that received nothing in return, a sign of spiritual impotence or a symbol of last resorts helping in no way, we can also make the connection that Shakespeare introduced the idea of heaven to begin alluding to a sin soon to be committed. The fact that the speaker is not calling out to heaven, but rather troubling it by crying out countless times with no response and assuming the reason to be its deafness, insinuates that the speaker has had a repetitious pattern of asking for a different path, an improved self, or healthier coping mechanisms. By the description of heaven being deaf, we can assume that it has not granted the speaker any wish or listened to any prayer and offered no consolation. Therefore, the speaker has no reason to quit this problematic behavior because he has not been granted an epiphany of self-realization needed to begin a new path towards comfortableness in his emotions.

The following quatrain introduces the speaker's stage of negative comparisons with other artists that lead into the main problem of him simply not being palatable enough to attract crowds, friends, or supporters. This connects further into the idea of insinuated alcoholism by highlighting the exigence behind his need for an alcoholic outlet to be able to cloud the negative plaguing sober thoughts. In line five, the speaker states that once cursing his fate, he wishes himself to be "one more rich in hope" where Shakespeare uses "hope" to allude to a potential feeling of salvation or change to come (Line 5). Yet, the speaker is not hopeful that things can change for him in a way that will allow him to be content with his being and stop depending on alcohol for the warmth of anti-judgmental acceptance. He follows this thought in lines seven and eight where the speaker shares that he is "Desiring this man's art and that man's scope, / With what I most enjoy contended least" stating that the root of this problem is being caused by an insecurity in his artistic performance or output (Lines 7-8). He does not believe he can perform as well as other artists which brings the speaker a sense of possible existentialism due to the fact that the very thing that brings him the most enjoyment now keeps him the least content. This feeling was brought upon him after alluding to the discovery that he is not regarded as one of the best in the artistic circle and he is actively realizing the people surrounding him are ridiculously advanced.

This pitiful discussion about his shortcomings as an artist have been noted by many critics, stemming from his rhyme scheme failings seen as a "serious technical blemish" by etymologists such as Sir Denys Bray. This is an argument presented in Philip McGuire's scholarly article "Shakespeare's Non-Shakespearean Sonnets" where he focuses on rhyme scheme and format of Shakespearean poetry sharing a contrasting idea of his artistic failures. He states that the misused rhyme scheme in the first and third quatrains with the repetition of the word "state" could actually be purposeful in order to "bring out the stark contrast between the poet's apparently outcast state and the state of joy described" therefore leading the readers into a new reinvented scheme mirroring a new reinvented artist through alcoholism (McGuire 305). The misused rhyme scheme lies in the words "state", "fate", and "gate" in which "state" is used in the second line of the first quatrain to rhyme with "fate" resulting in a *abab* pattern. Yet, in the third quatrain "state" is used once more in the tenth line to rhyme with "fate" meaning that instead of an *efef* rhyme scheme, we are left with *ebeb*— "six rhymes rather than seven— and thus a variation of the rhyme scheme the consensus says should be there" (McGuire 305). While described as both a technical blemish and a stark contrast, I believe this odd rhyme scheme could be the representation of his intoxication shown through his art. With the implied love of alcohol, it can also be assumed that this specific sonnet does not follow the correct Shakespearean rhyme scheme because the speaker was too intoxicated to be able to follow this order, either by a drunken mistake or a newfound confidence to experiment with his art. Through alcohol use, he can feel as though he has become a new and transformed person, perhaps more sociable to attain the friends he mentioned he lacked or obtained a new scope that others have to conjure art no one would have begun to expect, due to his intoxicated state.

In the final quatrain, he fully introduces his love, his salvation, his alcohol which in reflecting– he states in lines ten through twelve, “Haply I think on thee, and then my state, / (Like to the lark at the break of day arising / From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven’s gate” firmly stating that by taking in this accepting love, all of his past problems and feelings seem to be erased, completely depleted and defeated (Lines 10-12). This immediate effect on his behavior and outlook represents the sudden wave of calmness brought to him as a result of a common dependency on alcohol use. The personification used in line twelve with the speaker sharing that his emotional state is actively singing can be seen as an effect of his intoxication, forming a livelier and ecstatic version of him once he rids himself of plaguing sober thoughts stemming from negative sober feelings. Not only this, but line twelve can also be seen as a mockery to deaf heaven by flaunting his sinful love to the heaven that didn’t offer him consoling when previously pleading and praying. The speaker has returned and instead of crying out to heaven painfully attempting to rid himself of addiction and dependency, he has now embraced that alcohol use is a part of his identity and his love only grows stronger, proudly flaunting it by singing hymns at heaven’s gate.

In Robert Crosman’s scholarly article, “Making Love out of Nothing at All: The Issue of Story in Shakespeare’s Procreation Sonnets”, he states that Shakespeare’s sonnets can be viewed as autobiographical. He supports this claim by sharing that “autofiction is often about the way narrative conventions learned from literature shape the ways we live our lives” as well as the ways in which we then represent our lives which would allow for further analysis on how Shakespeare’s probable personal insecurities have shaped the way he handles coping mechanisms as represented in sonnet 29 (Crosman 473). The stories shared in his sonnets are presented in third person due to the entirety of his poetic creations possibly allowing for a non-linear connected reading, meaning that his problems faced personally will then be portrayed as his speaker’s problems to handle and struggle with, finally in his ending recalling a solution to his personal issues. This embracement of alcohol is now realized as a positive constant in his life– he does not care that heaven is deaf, he sings to it anyway, simply happy that he has found a love he can claim welcomes him with encouragement.

To conclude, Shakespeare uses metaphors and personification to introduce a dependency on alcohol stemming from his insecurities and lack of confidence as a successful artist. By not following the original formatted rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean poem, the speaker was able to represent a state of intoxication in his 29th sonnet. This form of probable auto-fiction would furthermore allude to a connection between Shakespeare’s personal artistic insecurities communicated in this poem through an alcoholic coping mechanism resulting in a renewed confidence. Through this introduction of an intoxicating and welcoming non-judgmental love, Shakespeare is able to form this poem into a true sonnet, keeping the main characteristic of love alive, just in a non-conventional manner.

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Academic Writing (Short)

1st Place:

Rachel Ewing-Merrill, “Heteronormativity, Gender Performance, and the Desire to Be Seen in *Little Women*”

Greta Gerwig’s film adaptation of the classic novel, *Little Women*, follows the four March sisters, Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy, as they grow up in Civil War-era New England. The movie explores the sisters’ everyday lives, ambitions, and relationships. Each of the sisters has very different dreams, but the film emphasizes that no dream is more important than another (1:31:36-1:32:17). Jo pursues writing and disregards her love life, Meg hopes for a family of her own, Beth’s musical talent is overshadowed by a case of scarlet fever that ultimately takes her life, and Amy tries to balance family expectations with her desire to become an artist. As the sisters move from girlhood into adulthood, the story explores how each of them figures out who she wants to be. In my analysis, I will be primarily focusing on the main character, Josephine “Jo” March. I argue that Greta Gerwig’s *Little Women* exhibits the performative nature of gender and the societal pressures of heteronormativity. Additionally, I reason that this queer analysis speaks to a desire that we have in modern times to see ourselves reflected in media.

Gerwig’s film does not follow a traditional chronological structure; rather, it moves back and forth between different points in time. The movie opens with a scene set years into Jo’s future (00:01:16). She stands outside a publishing office in New York City, taking deep breaths, as if she is gathering courage. When she finally goes inside, she pitches her novel while pretending to be “a friend of the author,” rather than revealing that she wrote it herself, demonstrating that she expects her work will not be taken seriously if she is honest about being the author. The publisher reads her sample and crosses out whole pages while laughing to himself. He then tells her that he will work with her in the future under one condition: “if the main character is a girl, make sure she’s married by the end” (00:03:48). This scene was written particularly for this film adaptation and is not in the book, exemplifying this adaptation’s unique focus on heteronormativity and gender roles. By starting here, Gerwig highlights the pressures Jo faces as a female writer and

sets up the tension between Jo's own desires and the norms she is expected to follow. This opening prompts viewers to watch the rest of the film with these themes in mind.

When Jo learns that her father has become very sick while away at war, she tries to gather enough money for a train ticket so her mother can visit him. Instead of asking her wealthy aunt for help, as she was told to do, Jo chooses to cut and sell her hair to contribute the money herself (01:12:15). When her sisters discover what she has done, they are astonished and somewhat repulsed, immediately telling her that she "looks like a boy." Their reaction demonstrates just how drastic and socially unacceptable this choice was at the time, especially given the period's strict expectations around femininity and appearance. In "Critically Queer," Judith Butler describes gender performativity: the idea that gender is not innate, but rather something we do through performance and replication of the gender norms we are socialized with (Butler 22). Through this framework, it is apparent that Jo's decision to cut her hair is more than just a personal sacrifice: it also serves as a refusal to perform gender the way she is expected to. She does not seem concerned about how others will perceive her gender; instead, she prioritizes doing what she believes is morally right in helping her father. This scene shows Jo stepping outside the norms in her society, reinforcing the film's larger pattern of presenting her as someone who pushes back against the gendered expectations placed on her. In one of the film's most pivotal moments, the March sisters' neighbor and close friend, Theodore "Laurie" Laurence, confesses his romantic feelings for Jo (01:36:37). In the scene, Laurie pours his heart out, insisting that they are meant for each other and that he can make her happy. Jo tries to let him down gently at first, explaining that she does not feel the same way, but Laurie refuses to believe her. As he keeps pushing, Jo becomes more frustrated and emotional, maintaining that they would not be good together no matter how perfect he is. She tells him that she cannot love him the way he loves her, and that marrying him would make them both miserable. This scene serves as a compelling example of Jo's struggle with heteronormativity. In "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," Cathy Cohen defines heteronormativity as the everyday practices and larger institutions that reinforce the idea that heterosexuality and straight relationships are the natural and only way to live (Cohen 440). Jo appears to be deeply torn in this moment, struggling with the fact that she cannot make herself love Laurie, even though she wishes she could. She knows that loving him back would make everything simpler. It would align her with what her family, her community, and society expect of her, and yet, she refuses to pretend.

In "Performing Disidentifications," José Esteban Muñoz explains that to disidentify means finding parts of yourself in something that wasn't made to represent you and transforming its meaning (Muñoz 12). From the first time I watched *Little Women*, I saw Jo as lesbian-coded because I was disidentifying with her: reshaping aspects of her story to make room for my own identity in a narrative that doesn't explicitly offer queer representation. However, I am not the first or the only person to read Jo's character in this way. In an article from *Them*, a trade publication, Michelle

Hyun Kim discusses how readers have questioned Jo's gender identity and sexual orientation since the novel's original publication in 1868, and argues that Gerwig's interpretation deliberately leans into these queer readings (Kim, "The New 'Little Women' Basically Proves Jo March Is Queer"). Kim pays particular attention to Gerwig's meta-ending, which directly addresses why Jo ultimately marries Professor Bhaer, a German tutor whom she met while pursuing her writing in New York. The scene initially presents Jo excitedly preparing to confess her feelings to the professor, only to cut abruptly to the same publishing office from the film's opening scene, where Jo sits at the publisher's desk discussing her latest book. This ending departs from the original novel, as Jo ends up writing a book about her life titled *Little Women*. The publisher tells Jo, "If you decide to end your delightful book with your heroine a spinster, no one will buy it" (02:03:14). Jo begrudgingly concedes, and then the film cuts back to a classic scene from a romance movie in which Jo kisses Professor Bhaer in the rain (02:04:07). Almost immediately, however, the film pulls away from this traditional ending and shows Jo alone, proudly holding her book, leading a school, and surrounded by her family rather than a romantic partner (02:07:20 – 02:09:32). In this way, Gerwig's meta-ending invites disidentification. As Kim suggests, this structure makes the ending feel deliberately unsettled. Instead of neatly resolving Jo's story, Gerwig leaves it open, creating space for viewers, especially queer viewers, to see themselves in Jo by looking at the ending in another way, rather than simply accepting it as Jo's true "happy ending."

Ultimately, Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* presents Jo March as a character who repeatedly defies gender norms and heteronormative ideals. When read through the lenses of Butler, Cohen, and Muñoz, it is clear that Jo's story exhibits several queer themes, even though the film never explicitly names her sexuality. Gerwig's meta-ending, in particular, refuses to settle on one clear resolution, instead presenting marriage as a narrative and economic compromise for Jo rather than "destiny." This ambiguity allows viewers of *Little Women* to disidentify and reimagine Jo's story to reflect their own experiences. Gerwig's adaptation shows that representation does not always require explicit labels or new stories; instead, it can come from revisiting classics and intentionally creating space for viewers to see themselves reflected.

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Academic Writing (Long)

2nd Place:

Izzy Rutherford, “The Rhetoric of Diary-Writing as a Form of Self-Directed Education”

Introduction

Diaries are a moderately misunderstood form of writing that lacks a more diverse, overarching scholarly study within the field of writing. A large part of this has to do with the lens through which such texts have traditionally been viewed, often placing it outside of the literary sphere and instead using a more history-driven lens. In doing so, diaries as rhetorical tools used as a form of self-directed education have frequently been excluded as relevant artifacts for such studies because of their subjectivity. Scholars have noted we tend to focus on famous authors and their diaries which hampers the use of diaries as a field of study. Recent work has been done to challenge these assumptions, taking into account the different rhetorical choices diary writers made in their writing. Diaries have been used for a variety of purposes, often becoming a text where the author also takes on the role of the target audience. In other cases, the diary becomes a more public text which the writer’s family may view and comment on. The diary, as a result, serves a variety of functions depending on the needs or desires of the writer.

For some, the diary becomes a tool for self-instruction, a way for the author to further educate themselves. Other writers have used the diary as a form of self-expression, a way to work through their daily struggles and resolve inner conflicts, a tool for discipline, and a way to record their daily lives. Understanding the flexible nature of diaries is essential to their study within a scholarly setting. This voluntary form of writing created a space in which women could bolster their writing skills and focus on their own experiences as a lens of writing. Victorian girls, for instance, were often encouraged to write as a form of self-improvement. In many cases, they were considered to be public texts that were intended to be read by the family. These young women, however, were not as receptive to this idea, preferring the diary to be a private document for their eyes alone. Through this growing conflict, many of these girls had the opportunity to better develop their voice in their fight for autonomy. Civil War diaries provided a safe space for many women to cultivate their new, public identity. It was a place for them to reflect on their identity and how it relates to the world around them. In many ways, it also became a tactic used for self-preservation in the

face of the societal constraints that governed the actions of women. Student diaries allowed a variety of students the chance to find their voice and challenge the academic space. Throughout these different examples, one is clearly able to see the ways in which diaries often represent a form of resistance for the diarist.

The goal of this paper is to understand the different ways in which women have historically used diaries in their lives through the Victorian and Civil War eras alongside the importance of looking at student and daily diaries. Such a wide focus will aid in showcasing the broad spectrum of research that surrounds the rhetoric of diary-writing and the ways in which they have been used to cultivate a variety of skills. While there are clear distinctions between the writing of these eras, the goal is to focus primarily on the intersections to highlight some of the core functions of diary-writing. Studies often tend to focus on one specific area to analyze the historical significance of the writing, but this paper will look more towards the rhetorical spaces these women have constructed for themselves. While women's diaries are considered to be a form of informal education, the term-self-directed education better encompasses the function of diary-writing. Through the use of diaries, diarists have had the opportunity to build on a variety of soft skills. These highly transferable non-technical skills are essential in terms of rhetorical adaptability, determining how one might alter or adjust the ways in which they communicate to become an effective rhetor. While many scholars touch on the different skills diarists have implemented in their own writing, there appears to be a lack of focus on the ways in which the diary has become a pedagogical tool that responds to the needs of the women using them. In my study, I argue that through the use of diaries, diarists have had the opportunity to build on their self-reflection, critical thinking, observation, and conflict resolution skills, constructing their own unique genre of writing that reframes the diary as a skill-building practice in the realm of rhetorical education

Studying Women's Diaries

Before looking at the historical examples in question, one must understand some of the broader aspects of the scholarly conversations in question. Suzanne Bunkers and Cynthia Huff do well to set the stage for such arguments in their introduction of the book *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women's Diaries*. They work to showcase "... a genre that challenges boundaries and enhances transdisciplinary thinking by indicating how the content and form of diaries disclose how we construct knowledge..." (Bunkers and Huff 1-2). Diaries are considered to be rich texts that contain the narrative of a specific individual which is often one of the reasons that they are underutilized. Reading them shows the ways in which these artifacts take on a personal form by revealing how women engaged with writing outside of the academic framework. Even ordinary or "daily diaries" are relevant to the discussion by illuminating some of the looser writing conventions practiced by women. Due to the fact that diaries do not have fixed narrative boundaries, certain diaries are often privileged more than others for their perceived historical or

biographical insights. Such studies focus more on diaries through the author's lived experiences rather than for their rhetorical choices. Daily diaries are often dismissed because they are often viewed as being more mundane compared to other types of diaries. As a result, by expanding the area of study, diaries can be analyzed through the lens of self-directed education as the diarist showcases the ways in which they implement a variety of skills commonly taught in formal education.

Self Reflection

Diary-writing provides many young writers a private space for them to process and work through their identities and experiences without outside pressure. Unlike in a formal education setting, where self-reflection is a critical process that allows students to reflect and improve their levels of understanding in the classroom, the diary allows writers to acknowledge and interpret their lives in a self-motivated space. The struggle for the freedom to write is easily embodied in Victorian era diaries. In Jane Hunter's 1992 article "Inscribing the Self in the Heart of the Family: Diaries and Girlhood in Late-Victorian America", one is able to find that many diaries were not considered to be private texts. While it was still a place for the girls of this era to write down their thoughts and other musings, the lack of confidence most likely hindered the types of thoughts or opinions they might have added. The purpose for diary writing was to "... fill the time of privileged daughters.... with girls recording in their diaries their obedience..." and it "... considered character-building, time-filling, and refining" as key aspects (Hunter 55). Rhetorical education and self-improvement, in this sense, went hand-in-hand. This, however, created a growing tension between the writers and their parents in determining what should be included in a diary. As a result of the lack of confidentiality, many of these diary-writers were selective in what they included in their journals, having to negotiate with their private and public selves. In many cases, these girls were being asked to repress parts of themselves to "fulfill" their familial obligations. Hunter uses the diary of Alice James, her early accounts up to when she turned nineteen, regarding her "...struggles to suppress her spirit and negate desire..." to show "...the impact of narrow parental expectations on girls' behavior and self-estimation" (64). Her diary served as a way to counteract the debilitating influence of her family on her psyche and revise those expectations in a way that allowed her to hold onto her sense of autonomy. Diaries, in a lot of ways, served as a way for young girls to overcome the difficult expectations they had to face.

Civil War diaries also fall well into the category of self-reflection. It is a relatively well known fact that the Civil War played a large role in opening up new roles for women in the workforce that had not been open to them in the past. This is clearly described in Kimberly Harrison's article "Rhetorical Rehearsals: The Construction of Ethos in Confederate Women's Civil War Diaries" which describes how "Taking on such active roles... called into conflict their identities as women. To deal with identity challenges, women turned to their diaries" (243). The diaries provided these

women a safe place to explore and come to terms with this new role in a safe space. Their expanding responsibilities were creating significant conflicts with the ways in which they framed their private and public selves and understanding how to navigate these spaces required them to analyze and reflect on the “identity challenges” in question. The diary, as a result, gave them the opportunity to work in a self-motivated space to cultivate their new voice.

Critical Thinking

Diary-writing also cultivates critical thinking skills as diarists work to challenge social expectations regarding their lives and the environments that they live in. In many ways, these spaces serve as a form of self-evaluation for women to formulate persuasive arguments to determine how best to move forward with a personal issue. The diary, in this way, serves as a space for women to experiment with various narratives to support their shifting identities through the rehearsal of their rhetorical strategies. Once again, take Civil War diaries, for instance. Many women found themselves struggling to balance the private and public images with their changing roles. Women could still be punished for speaking out of turn or acting in a way that could be deemed as wholly “unfeminine” (Harrison 247). This is where the importance of ethos continues to come into play for the diarist, using the diary to build their own credibility and knowing how they should react in the face of challenge. Some diarists, for instance, note the importance of silence as a rhetorical strategy, knowing what sort of actions may benefit a situation more than others. In Kimberly Harrison’s book *The Rhetoric of Rebel Women: Civil War Diaries and Confederate Persuasion*, she uses the diary of Kate Cumming, a Southern white woman who used silence as a form of self-preservation. Through the study of this diarist, Cumming hits on how “Southern white women’s wartime diaries offer an ideal opportunity to... articulate and at times rationalize their choice of silence, rejecting the definition of silence as a lack of response” (48). The use of silence proved to be an essential rhetorical strategy that a variety of women have used throughout history. By speaking out in certain situations, many women faced the fear of branching out into that “unfeminine” terrain and facing punishment. Cumming’s diary showcases the ways in which she analyzed certain situations and worked to determine what could be considered a safe space to speak out.

Observation

Another noteworthy skill utilized by diarists in their writing is that of observation. Many diaries, especially the ordinary or “daily” diaries constructed by women are based on their abilities to notice and record a variety of daily events, allowing them to better their own situational awareness. Where many may feel that diaries are more often grounded in the realm of self-reflection, these writers are also accounting for the details they have observed in various interactions or situations throughout their entries. The diary of Annie Day, used in Jennifer Sinor’s 2002 article “Reading the Ordinary Diary” offers a simplistic example of a diarist paying close

attention to daily life and effectively enhancing her abilities to summarize events with concise details. As Sinor puts it, Annie Day's style of writing could be described as "measured" through her "explicit desire for order and the resulting peace of mind such cleanliness affords her" (130). Her way of describing events is considerably short and to the point, working to put forth precise estimates to maintain detailed entries. Such details can easily be observed by focusing on her sentence structure and word choices. Annie Day, through her writing, easily showcases her own attention to detail, translating the types of events that people often overlook in a way that is easy to interpret.

Conflict Resolution

Diarists also outline the ways in which they make use of conflict resolution in their daily lives, expressing the ways in which they have used the diary to navigate tensions between their private identities and social expectations. In the article "What Use Is This Diary?": Writing Traditions in the Bryn Mawr Back Smoker Diaries", Juli Parrish describes how students made use of negotiation to create a compromise between the different parts of their identity - the inclusion of the personal voice with their academic voice. Starting in 1977, Bryn Mawr College implemented an extracurricular diary-writing practice for students to voluntarily take part in so that they had the opportunity to explore writing without the effects of academic pressures (Parrish 61-63). Students often struggle with understanding and implementing the academic voice, and the diary allowed these young women a space to test forms of expression that merged their private and public selves. These diaries, in many ways, allow students to identify their personal struggles for them to later overcome, especially those written for those written with the writer also taking on the role of the reader.

Conclusion

In examining the different rhetorical purposes for which these women kept diaries, one is able to see the ways in which diary-writing is an essential part of studying self-directed education. Through this practice, women have continuously worked to cultivate a variety of skills including self-reflection, critical thinking, observation, and conflict resolution outside of the academic influence. Victorian writers, for instance, often had to negotiate their private identity with public expectations, eventually challenging the system that aimed to "correct" their inner thoughts. The diary served as a way for young women to challenge the influence of their parents to better support themselves, as was depicted in the diary of Alice James. In this same way, many Civil War women used their diaries to also negotiate with their private and public identities. In this case, however, these women were actively working to shift their identities to create the "new" more public woman. The diary served as a way for them to practice this public identity and determine how they could convince those around them that the public woman was necessary. In doing so, they were able to rehearse and plan their responses in the face of possible conflict,

using their critical thinking to determine the best way to respond to a possible issue. Daily diaries, through their use of conciseness, allowed women to build on their situational awareness skills. Moving forward, the field would benefit from expanding their study through the use of a wider variety of diaries. In doing so, scholars would have the opportunity to utilize common diaries along with non-literary diaries rather than focusing on fame. The use of ordinary diaries, for example, could do well in expanding the field of study by looking at the rhetoric of creation - the stylistic choices implemented by the diaries. By shifting the angle of the study to also focus on diaries as self-directed tools, scholars could focus on the ways that this genre of writing has aided informal, or self-directed education, as opposed to formal education.

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Academic Writing (Long)

1st Place:

Destiny Agbonyeme, “The Issue with Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting”

The practice of female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C) has been a widespread practice for a very long time in history in different parts of the world, even still being practiced today in some parts of Africa, with the largest concentration of women and girls that have been cut being in Nigeria, the most populated country on the continent. According to Olunuga et al, at least 10% of the global total of women and girls that have experienced FGM/C are Nigerian, amounting to at least 20 million, with some figures predicting percentages as high as 20%. Reasons for performing the procedure vary across regions depending on socio-cultural settings, but it is a fact that there are no known health benefits to FGM/C, and it actually does more harm than good. *The main issues with female genital mutilation or cutting are the immediate and long term health effects that can be detrimental to the victims, as well as the psychological trauma that women and girls go through before, during, and after the procedure is completed.* One way this problem could be addressed is by emphasizing the importance of education and awareness of the health issues associated with FGM/C from the local level, helping to enforce already existing federal laws.

Female genital mutilation is comprised of any procedure that involves partial or total removal of the female external genitalia, or any intentional damage done to the genitalia, and it classified into four types. Type 1, the removal of the clitoris, and type 2, removal of the clitoris and parts of the labia, are the two most common types of FGM performed in Nigeria. Trends in the prevalence of FGM/C vary depending on the region, but the reasons remain similar across all fronts, including the endorsement of FGM from cultural traditions, the idea of female subjection and the control of female sexuality, and the lack of healthcare knowledge, simply not being aware of the risks associated with the procedure. Nigerian researchers Sanni et al conducted a retrospective analysis of trends in FGM and its associated factors among women of reproductive age in the country between the years of 2011 and 2021, analyzing trends across geopolitical zones, states, areas of residence, and the role that different social identities such as class, religion, or education level play into why the practice still exists today.

Researchers found that FGM was still alarmingly prevalent in the southern region of Nigeria, specifically in the southwest, including states such as Oyo, Osun, and Ekiti—all with very similar cultures and deeply rooted traditional beliefs. There were no notable findings in terms of religion and FGM practices, as numbers were high whether participants identified as Muslim, Christian, or belonging to any other religion. However, they did find that women living in rural areas and women with non-formal, primary, or secondary education levels had higher likelihoods of circumcision compared to their urban, tertiary-educated counterparts. This connection with area of residence, education, and prevalence of FGM suggests that those living in urban areas may have increased access to education and exposure to already existing anti FGM campaigns, implying that more education and empowerment especially in rural areas where these practices are more rampant may help to abolish the practice, however, this has proven to be difficult over the years.

The country has made various efforts to abolish FGM/C once and for all, even passing the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act in 2015, which included provisions for the criminalization of the practice of FGM, but the issue is the lack of enforcement. Most Nigerians are not even aware of this act, and the reporting system intended to monitor this illegal activity has been incredibly uncoordinated, contributing to the public's distrust in the system altogether, making it difficult for those being subject to FGM/C to come forward about what has happened to them. In fact, the lack of enforcement only exacerbated the problem, especially during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic as it made way for the opportunity for the secret practice of FGM. While the government was more focused on combating the virus that had taken over the world, healthcare resources had to be diverted from anti-FGM programs, only putting more young girls and women at risk. The United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women also launched a three-year intervention plan in southwest Nigeria called the Stopcut project (Olunuga et al., 2025) in attempts to improve policy and law implementation to reduce the prevalence of FGM, such as establishing an alliance with government representatives, civil society organizations (CSOs), media agencies, community leaders, and law enforcement officers to implement advocacy and campaign activities from the local level all the way to the federal level, but due to many obstacles such as the medicalization of FGM, social norms, and myths, the practice only continued to evolve, ultimately hindering the success of the Stop Cut project.

Olunuga and fellow researchers concluded that while the Stop Cut project had the right idea on how to handle the issue, they should have intensified their efforts in community education, specifically dispelling the myths and misconceptions surrounding FGM, emphasizing the harmful consequences such as clitoral cysts, bleeding, fistula, urinary infections and retention, and vaginal tears among others. Most importantly, they should have promoted alternative rites of passage, especially for those communities that endorse the practice as a coming-of-age ritual. They also suggested that the federal government should allocate resources for the prosecution of

parties that are still actively participating in FGM, influencing smaller governments to strengthen law enforcement mechanisms and establish improved monitoring systems to promote the enforcement of existing anti-FGM laws. Lastly, they emphasize the empowerment of civil society organizations with resources, training, and support to enable them to effectively implement interventions on the community level, monitor FGM/C cases from the grassroots, and provide support services to survivors who come forward. Like many other crimes in Nigeria, FGM is often swept under the rug because people know that if they choose to report, no action will be taken by law enforcement, and they are more likely to face persecution from their local communities. To rebuild the people's trust, if the justice system will openly take a stand against FGM by making an example out of those who continue to indulge in the practice, it will encourage more people to come forward, ultimately putting an end to the practice one day.

In Nigeria and other parts of West Africa, the most considerable obstacle in the way of abolishing FGM is the strong cultural influence associated with the practice that also leaves women with lasting psychological effects. Omigbodun and researchers conducted interviews with women of the Izzi sub-tribe of the Igbo ethnic group in Southeast Nigeria, one of the few places in the region where FGM is highly prevalent, even more so among younger women. In this community, women born between 1999 and 2003 presented higher rates of FGM compared to older women born between 1959 and 1963. Some of the reasons why FGM is such a popular practice is mostly because it is seen as a compulsory rite of initiation. If a woman is not cut, she is essentially shunned from the community, being denied matrimonial rights, or the ability to participate in community affairs. Even if she does get married, once she bears children, her children will be seen as subhuman because she as the mother will not truly be seen as a woman unless she is cut. To gather more data on the prevalence of FGM and how it affects the women in this community psychologically, researchers interviewed 38 young and older Izzi women who had undergone FGM/C in both rural and urban settings, and many of them described the five stages they went through around the time they were cut, from the emotional suffering they endured before deciding to go through with the procedure up to the emotional turmoil they went through post-procedure.

Unlike women of other ethnic groups, Izzi women go through FGM at a later stage in life, usually during adolescence or early adulthood. Up until they are cut, Izzi women are described as "akpapyi," which has many negative connotations as told by participants who described feeling anger, sadness, shame, and embarrassment when they were uncut. Some participants even reported feeling isolated and withdrawn from society due to the stigma surrounding uncut women, such as being seen as more sexually promiscuous and "fidgety." These women especially by teased and insulted by their peers, mostly women who had already been cut, essentially pressuring them to follow suit. Once these women made the decision to be cut, many would describe a feeling of great joy or happiness, mostly because they would finally escape the

“akpapyi” experience, seeing a clear rise in their social status within the community. However, these feelings would only last until the time immediately before they are cut, where many participants reported feelings of fear, immense anxiety, and terror, especially when hearing the screams of other girls getting the procedure done.

Leading up to the procedure, most women who have been cut would stay quiet about their experience, largely because they knew how painful the procedure was, but also because expressing pain displayed weakness. Because of this, women making the conscious decision to be cut would be left in the dark about the truth of the procedure up until the time they go to the facility to be cut, where cutters would commonly use aggression to obtain their compliance. Many women described being held down by multiple women or even being sat on by a man while their legs were held open to keep them still and prevent them from running away. Not only was expressing pain by screaming seen as displaying weakness but so was experiencing complications post-cutting.

Some women reported feelings of happiness after the cutting, largely because they had finally escaped the “akpapyi” label and would receive special treatment from family and friends during the recovery period. For some, going through the procedure finally meant they could join in mocking the women they were just once a part of. However, most women reported mixed feelings and experienced looming fears of death due to post-operative complications such as excessive bleeding, clouding of consciousness, and fainting. One participant even reported feelings of anger and regret, feeling betrayed by a family member who lied about the truth behind the procedure. These feelings remained relatively the same for most participants for a long time, with many reporting experiencing flashbacks every time they encountered a sharp object or witnessed someone with a cut or scar on their body, as well as experiencing symptoms of anxiety, depression, or something like post-traumatic stress disorder. Some participants also reported feelings of grief and regret when describing how they procedure made it incredibly difficult for them to bear children, firmly stating that they would never let their daughters go through what they went through.

Because many Izzi women undergo FGM at a much older age, they are fully aware of what life was like before getting cut, so many believe that to escape social stigma and live a better life in an elevated social status, they must be cut, often not being made fully aware of the physical and psychological toll the procedure could take on them. Many young Izzi women are made to believe that FGM will benefit their lives, mostly because of the way it is promoted to them by older women and other members of society. This phenomenon emphasizes the importance of community-specific, culturally sensitive interventions where women who have been cut are given the opportunity to freely express their opinions and the raw experience they went through to younger women, giving them the chance to weigh their options on both sides and make a fully

conscious decision as to whether to go through with being cut. Like many other women's issues in Nigeria, women are pressured to stay quiet about their negative experiences, only promoting the positive aspects of things like marriage and childbearing to encourage the youth to engage in it as well, not being made fully aware of all that can occur. This can even make those experiencing the negative aspects feel abnormal, only isolating them further.

On the other hand, there are arguments made in support of the practice of FGM/C, the largest one being that it simply an aspect of culture, and judging it or deeming it as negative is coming from an ethnocentric point of view, as most cultures in Nigeria have some harmful or less than ideal practices that are still endorsed to this day. For example, the practice of scarification on the face or body, although waning in popularity among the younger generation, is still done today, despite many describing it as child mutilation. A study was conducted in southwestern Nigeria by Obiechina and Olutayo, observing the trends and attitudes towards facial scarification among the young and older generations. Reasons for the practice included adherence to tradition, identification of royal lineage, enhancement of beauty, family decisions, or to claim the ownership of a child, among others. Responses were similarly distributed in terms of those who liked their facial marks, disliked and would like to remove their facial marks, and those who were indifferent towards their facial marks. It was reported that a large number of respondents had their facial marks because they wanted to be identified with the traditions of their people, something that resonates with a lot of Nigerians because the country is so ethnically diverse.

Ethnic diversity is both the beauty and the curse of Nigeria, contributing to many disputes and disagreements between communities, but no matter what, Nigerians are always proud to represent their respective cultures to honor their ancestors, and for many, this includes outward displays such as tattoos, piercings, face paintings, and facial scarification among others. Shaming these cultural practices stems from the rejection of traditional African cultures, many of which were ridiculed by the Europeans during the era of colonization and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, which forcefully stripped many Africans of their cultural identity. With the rise in Pan Africanism and re-embracing these once dishonored practices, Black people across the diaspora are rebuilding the stolen history of their ancestors and reclaiming their roots.

However, it is important for Africans to realize that while it is important to preserve culture, it is also important to recognize that not all aspects of culture are to be preserved, especially when it involves physical harm of the youth, many of whom are too young to consent or even be aware of what is being done to them. Obiechina and Olutayo found that while most people had facial marks for the purpose of identifying with their culture, a considerable number of respondents either disliked or were indifferent about their facial marks because they believed they were permanent and could not be removed, suggesting that more respondents would choose to remove their marks if they were aware that they could be removed. Treatments to remove facial

scars are available in Nigeria, also sparsely, such as dermabrasion, scar revision, chemical peeling, and dermal micrografts, suggesting that moves to modify or abolish certain practices lie entirely in raising awareness in local communities, just like with FGM.

Due to the complex, multifaceted nature of FGM practice in Nigeria, it may take a long time for it to be abolished in practice. However, by remaining consistent in providing context specific efforts, such as educating the public, including men, women who have already been cut, and women who have not been cut, of the health risks, and revising and enforcing already existing laws surrounding the prohibition of FGM. It is also incredibly important to engage with cultural and religious leaders, as these figureheads will have greater influence over their communities than most government officials, as well as those in what Nigerians consider to be highly respectable professions, such as healthcare or law practitioners, contributing to the demedicalization of FGM. As long as this remains consistent, with time, FGM will be fully abolished, prioritizing the safety of women and girls in the most populous Black nation on Earth, potentially influencing other countries and regions to mirror their actions, ending sexual violence against women worldwide.

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Professional Writing

2nd Place:

Puja Kharel, “Be a Changemaker Service Project: Grant Proposal”

Your Name(s): __Puja Kharel_____

Date: ___09/07/2025_____

Project Name: _____Zero Hunger Plan_____

Issue to be addressed: Describe the issue that you would like to address. Why is this issue important? What specific community needs do you want to address? Why are these issues important?

- Hunger, starvation, poverty, and malnutrition are major problems for families in Nevada, Missouri. Many children from low-income families depend on school meals during the week but don't always have enough food at home, especially on weekends. This can lead to poor health, difficulty concentrating in school, and long-term struggles. I want to address hunger because I believe everyone deserves enough food to live and grow in a healthy way. Ending hunger is also one of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 2: Zero Hunger), which makes it part of a global mission as well as a local need.

Project Narrative: Describe a service project you will lead that will benefit the issue you have identified. What specific actions can you and your team realistically take to contribute to the solution?

- My project will support Healthy Nevada's School Backpack Program, which provides weekly food backpacks for students from low-income families. First, I will apply for a grant from the Serbentez Institute for Women's Leadership. I will also meet with **{Name of the Executive Director of the organization}** at Healthy Nevada to better understand their needs and how my project can best support their mission. And, if I receive funding, I will use it to buy snacks and fruits from Walmart. These items will then be donated to Healthy Nevada for their backpack program. In addition to providing fruits, I will also organize a service day where I can help them assemble and deliver backpacks with Healthy Nevada staff.

Project Rationale: Explain in approximately 100 words how completing this project will allow you to further develop your leadership skills.

- I believe this project will help me grow as a leader by teaching me how to write grants, manage time, organize volunteers, and collaborate with both campus and community partners. It will also allow me to apply my communication and leadership skills in a real-world project. Also, leading this work will prepare me for my future goals in diplomacy and public service by giving me hands-on experience with community engagement and problem-solving.

Learning Goals: List two personal learning objectives that detail what you hope to gain from this service experience.

Learning Goal	Activity/resource that will assist in this learning	How will you assess this learning?
Improve my leadership and organizational skills	Applying for the grant, planning food purchases, organizing service days	If receive grants then reflect on how well the project stayed on schedule and how many students got involved
Strengthen my collaboration and communication skills	Meeting with {Name of the Executive Director of the organization} at Healthy Nevada, working with Cottey students and faculty, and coordinating with Walmart	Feedback from Healthy Nevada staff and a self-reflection on my teamwork and communication

Project Support: Describe what individuals or organizations will be required to support the implementation of the project.

- First of all, my major source of support is the Serbentez Institute for Women’s Leadership. Also, I will surely need help from Healthy Nevada and their staff, especially **{Name of the Executive Director of the organization}**, to guide me and to coordinate the backpack program. I might also need help from some of our college students volunteering in Healthy Nevada preparing the snack backpack for kids.

Project Budget: Grants for student-led initiatives range from \$100 to \$200. Provide an itemized budget of the funds needed to complete the project. You may complete this [purchase requisition](#) as part of the funding process.

Budget for my Zero Hunger Project:

- Apples (100 @ \$0.97 each) – \$97
- Oranges (100 @ \$0.98 each) – \$98
- **Total: \$195 (within \$200 grant limit)**

Project Timeline: Break down your project into manageable steps. When will these steps be completed? When will the project be completed? Be specific and think through the steps necessary to complete your project.

Week 1	Tasks to complete: Apply for the grants
Week 2	Tasks to complete: Meet with {Name of the Executive Director of the organization} at Healthy Nevada
Week 3	Tasks to complete: Receive grant funds; purchase fruits and snacks from Walmart.
Week 4	Tasks to complete: Assemble snack backpacks with Healthy Nevada, create an expense report, and submit the final project report.
October 7	Draft of final report due for conferences. All projects must be completed by this date.

Project Assessment: What outcome do you hope to achieve? (Education/awareness, change people’s behavior/attitudes, fundraising, etc.) How will you know your project was a success? You should plan the method of assessment at the beginning of the project and describe the results in the final report.

- The main outcomes I hope to achieve are raising awareness about hunger in Nevada, encouraging more students at Cottey to get involved in service, and helping Healthy Nevada provide consistent food support for children. I want students to see that even

small actions, like donating snacks or giving time to pack backpacks, can make a real difference.

- The project will be successful if I am able to deliver the planned food donations, involve some Cottey students in at least one service day, and receive positive feedback from Healthy Nevada staff about the impact of the project. Thus, through this project I will be able to address Sustainable Development Goal 2, which is Zero Hunger.

Professional Writing

1st Place:

Cassidy Barker, “Persuasive Letter to the DOJ (Department of War)”

Cassidy Barker

Environmental Studies and Political Science Student

December 9th, 2025

Pete Hegseth

Secretary of Defense

1000 Defense Pentagon, Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Hegseth,

I am writing to you to express my sincerest concern and disappointment in the United States Department of Defense’s lack of action towards the national security threat that is climate change. As of December 9th, you have been in office for 318 days. In those 318 days you have thoroughly dismantled the DOD’s stance on climate change, twisting it for your own benefit. You stated on X, formerly known on Twitter, that “The [@DeptofDefense](#) does not do climate change crap,” however in past Pentagon reports climate change was deemed a national security threat. In October 2021, the Department of Defense released their *Climate Risk Analysis* which reads, “To keep the nation secure, we must tackle the existential threat of climate change.” Do you see the wording there, Secretary Hegseth? Existential threat. If you are unsure what the term existential means, let us look at the Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition, “concerned with or involving human existence or its nature.” We can also delve into the definition of the word threat, though you may be more familiar with this term. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the definition of threat is “an expression of intention to inflict evil, injury, or damage.” Since we’ve now covered our definitions, I hope that these two words “existential threat” have become a little clearer to you, and more than “climate change crap.” Yet with Washington’s track record of gutting government websites and agencies like the EPA, I wouldn’t be surprised if you don’t understand the gravity of the situation.

However, you are not the only one who does not understand this, Secretary Hegseth. Lee Zeldin, the Administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency was sworn into office on January 29th, 2025. Four days after you were sworn in, Secretary Hegseth. Since Zeldin has been in

office, resources have been cut and health standards have been rolled back. In a July 2025 article, Democracy Now interviews the former EPA principal deputy assistant administrator for science at the EPA Office of Research and Development, Dr. Jennifer Orme-Zavaleta. In this interview, Dr. Orme-Zavaleta discusses how the current Trump administration, the one you and Zeldin so dearly love, has essentially eviscerated the EPA and with that comes all of the life-saving research that the agency conducted.

Yet, Mr. Secretary of *War*, does this even matter to you? I've waxed poetic about the state of our government and how you seem to lack any common sense when it comes to the environment, but there is something I think you may be familiar with. The military industrial complex, our home-grown American soldiers. Soldiers, bases, everything which allows for the United States to have the largest military in the world, is at stake due to climate change. According to the peace and security expert, Michael Klare, who I hope you are familiar with, in his 2020 book *All Hell Breaking Loose* military installations along our coasts are at risk of flooding and storm damage. Secretary Hegseth, how would you feel if the department of defense didn't deal with this "climate change crap" and left the F-35C (CATOBAR), one of the most expensive modern day planes the American navy utilizes to "climate change crap?" If you aren't aware of the cost of these planes, as you are with many other things, let me make it clear for you. According to Lockheed Martin Aeronautics Company, the F-35C (CATOBAR) ranges from \$100.1 million to \$200 million. In 2010 \$2.1 billion was awarded to Lockheed Martin for the fourth lot of F-35s to be produced. This is a multi-billion dollar industry, and yet your blatant ignorance costs the United States not only monetarily, but in safety.

Not only are you risking the finest American weapons, you are risking the lives of American men and women. In the Department of Defense's 2024-2027 *Department of Defense Climate Adaptation Plan*, climate change is acknowledged as "fundamentally alter[ing] the conditions that shape military operations at home and around the world. At the same time, climate change is reshaping our strategic interests." Yet when you took office on January 25th, 2025, things changed. The Guardian reported on October 14th of this year, 2025, that the Pentagon was "retreat[ing] from the climate fight even as heat and storms slam[med] US troops." Troops who are being actively threatened by rising heat along our coasts. The SCIF wrote in September of this year that a silent threat looms over the head of the US military, rising temperatures. Secretary Hegseth, are you aware that in the summer of 2024 there were over 3,000 cases of heat stroke amongst the US Armed Forces? This was over one singular summer. As we approach the tipping point as it is so often called, our troops must scale back their training days for their own safety.

Yet the Department of Defense does not deal with this "climate change crap," right? With that, I want to ask you a simple question, Secretary Hegseth. When naval bases like Norfolk and Corpus

Christi are wiped off the face of the earth, where will the Department of Defense be? Will you be rushing to aid families in these areas who've lost their homes and loved ones, or will you be floundering because you've put the United States at risk? As the globe reaches its peak temperatures due to climate change, humanity faces new and daunting threats. Are you up to the challenge, Secretary Hegseth?

Best,
Cassidy Barker
Congressional District KS 4

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Creative Writing

2nd Place:

Kaylan Davis, “December 8th”

December 8, 1941

Dear Diary,

I used to think the harbor was beautiful. I used to think the loudest sound in the world was the ocean waves crashing against the rocks near our house. But yesterday morning the sound was something else entirely, like the air itself was being ripped apart.

I was helping Mama make breakfast when we heard the first explosion. The windows rattled so hard I thought they would jump right out of their frames. Papa ran outside, and I followed even though Mama told me to stay put. Over the harbor, there were planes. I thought it might be some sort of show, but they weren't flying the way the American ones do. They swooped low and fast, and there were red circles painted on their wings.

I didn't understand at first. I thought maybe it was a drill. The Navy men are always practicing something. But then the smoke started to rise, thick and black, darkening the blue sky. It didn't look like practice. It looked like the end of the world.

Mama and Papa began talking to the neighbors over the phone. Words like “attack” and “Japan” and “war” floated around our living room. Mama kept her pressed her hand to her mouth. Papa kept shaking his head and saying, “Not here. Not Hawa’ii.” But it was here. It is here.

Last night the island felt different. The streetlights were dark because of the curfew, and the stars seemed sharper somehow, like they were watching us. I kept thinking about the sailors in the harbor. Some of them buy lunch from Mama's food stand. Some of them smile and tip their hats. I wondered how many of them are gone now.

Today at school, they sent us home early. Some of the boys tried to act brave, talking about joining up when they're old enough. But I saw Tommy crying during lunch because his brother is stationed at Pearl. I didn't know what to say to him. I don't know what to say to anyone. The Yamamoto's across the street up and moved last night, Papa says there's no telling where they could have gone.

I used to think living in Hawaii meant we were far away from everything important. Wars happened in places across oceans, in history books with black-and-white photographs. Mama says we have to be strong. She says America will answer, and that this will change everything. I think she's right about the last part. Even now the air feels heavier, like it knows something about the future that we don't.

I wish I could go back to the day before yesterday, when the loudest thing in the world was the sea. But I suppose there is no going back.

Creative Writing

1st Place:

Cassidy Barker, “Serenity in the Louisiana Wetlands”

As our rental van sped down the bumpy backroad toward the very tip of Louisiana where the wetlands meet the sea, I felt this odd sense of serenity. The land here is flat, not the midwest flat with lazy hills and soft curves, but the sharp contrast one can only find where the sea brushes the sky. Draping moss and twisting vines weave themselves with the gnarled fingers of the live oaks and cypress that scatter the landscape. Through the hazy window, wet with morning drizzle, the trees seem to be dying; maybe they are. The salt of the ocean is seeping into the land, sickening the plants and weakening the Earth. Large and small homes dot the world around us as we speed by, teetering on lanky limbs high above the historic wash of flood waters. Their paint is peeling, shutters hanging on by a single screw. My mind turns inward. Our destination is the Mississippi Delta and all I can think of is the inescapable death of an ecosystem. Every year the land sloughs off like the flesh of a carcass. The wetlands are dying. A flash pulls my attention outside of the van. I ask my professor what that towering building is looming in the distance with its blinking orange lights and dark billowing smoke. She says it's Formosa Plastics, one of the main contributors to the environmental disaster here known as “Cancer Alley.” Our van groans as it slows for men with lights in their hands, their orange lights winking a message of doom. I don't think we're supposed to be here. The factory has sapped the life out of the land, like a tick feeding off a fawn. Once we pass Formosa the world opens, becoming far more empty and much more... wild. The last remnants of the great Mississippi Delta stretch out in front of me, the sun rising over the bay. It's like the Earth is claiming her hold over us. Yet we're reminded that in the next two decades we will lose this land and all it means to us.

Capstones

1st Place:

Grace VanEngen, “Many Madonnas: How the Queen of Pop Maintained Her Crown, 1982-2000”

It's no surprise that the title, Queen of Pop, has been bestowed upon none other than Madonna herself. Scholars debate what exactly made Madonna as popular as she was and continues to be. Her willingness to confront societal taboos about sex, gender roles and religion, her activism during the AIDS crisis, or even her various film appearances which have made headlines for decades. However, it was no one factor alone that cemented Madonna as the Queen of Pop and allowed her to maintain that title. In fact, instead of diminishing her popularity, all of Madonna's "faces" made her pop star appeal even stronger. Madonna gained and maintained popularity because of her ability to challenge traditional feminine gender roles and continuously remake her image. Her flexibility allowed her to stay relevant through her debut with "Everybody" in 1982, through the height of her fame in 2000 with her eighth studio album, *Music*.

Madonna Louise Ciccone was born in Bay City, Michigan, on August 16, 1958.¹ After the death of her mother, on December 1, 1963, from breast cancer, Madonna matured rapidly. As the eldest daughter, she inherited a lot of maternal responsibilities. Madonna's father, Tony, remarried in 1966 to Joan, a woman Madonna fought with constantly, even into her early adulthood. Madonna's brother, Christopher, wrote that while the other Ciccone children eventually grew to love Joan, Madonna remained hard-headed and stubborn, despite her and Joan sharing many personality traits.² The lack of a respected mother figure helped Madonna establish her hyper-independence and perhaps even contributed to her future image as a rebel.

As Madonna reached her teens, she acquired an interest in dance. Her talent in this field would become integral to her success as a performer, and many critics even noted Madonna's stage presence played a more prevalent role in her fame than her voice.³ Her father made her pay for her own lessons, which she took under Christopher Flynn at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.⁴ Flynn was not only her first dance teacher, but also her introduction to the gay community. Madonna would go on to incorporate many aspects of gay culture into her image and her music,

¹ Mary Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2023), 5.

² Christopher Ciccone, *Life with My Sister Madonna* (New York: Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2008), 32.

³ Robert Palmer, "Pop: Madonna Sings at Radio City," *New York Times*, June 7, 1985, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/06/07/arts/pop-madonna-sings-at-radio-city>.

⁴ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 34.

in addition to being an avid supporter of the community during the height of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s.⁵ In 1976, after graduating high school, Madonna enrolled as a dance major in the University of Michigan. Her ultimate goal was to dance with Alvin Ailey, a pioneering choreographer in modern dance. In 1977 she auditioned with his company and was accepted into its six month summer dance program in New York City.⁶ Flynn recognized her ambitions, and he encouraged her to drop out of the university and move to the city permanently, where her dance career was more likely to flourish. In 1978, Madonna left Ann Arbor for New York. She arrived with only \$35 in her pocket. According to her own account, she hailed a taxi and told it to take her to the “center of it all.” The driver brought her to Times Square, where she was awestruck by the bustle of the city.⁷ This glorified recollection, recorded in memoirs and biographies by Madonna, can be interpreted as another attempt to portray her daring and ambition. Whether the story is true, we will never know, but we do know that Madonna considers it a vital aspect of her creation story.

Madonna moved around constantly, sleeping on the floors of dingy apartments, and even in the dance studio. Her willingness to pursue her passions despite hardship was a testament to her strong will and determination to succeed. Still, she was not accepted into Ailey’s company, and was too old to take beginner classes at the Martha Graham School. So, she danced in a company managed by Pearl Lang, whom she had met at a dance festival. However, Madonna began to question if she even wanted to continue dancing; whether it was really her passion. At a party, she met Dan Gilroy, a musician. Gilroy showed her his guitar, and it fascinated her instantly, further igniting her interest in being a musical performer. In 1979, she worked in Paris on a show managed by Vanloo and Perrin, but she lacked creativity as an artist.⁸ She decided to return to Gilroy and drum in his band, The Breakfast Club. While she had little experience with the instrument, her father had ensured all the Ciccone children had a solid musical background, particularly in piano. But Madonna wanted to be more than a background character. While she tried to get the band members to let her be the lead singer, they refused.⁹

Ultimately, Madonna left *The Breakfast Club* to start her own band, *Emmy*, in 1980.¹⁰ Its look could only be described as “Manhattan,” which became popular in the early 1980s with its bright colors and statement pieces. The band caught the attention of Camille Barbone, manager of the

⁵ Massimiliano Stramaglia and Tommaso Farina, “James Dean, Paul Simon, and Madonna. Rebels with Social Causes,” *Education Sciences & Society*, no. 2 (2024): 448.

⁶ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 45.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁸ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 59.

⁹ JJ Skolnik, “How Madonna Made Herself,” Public Broadcasting Service, March 29, 2024, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/how-madonna-made-herself/31922/>.

¹⁰ Troy Brownfield, “By the Numbers: Madonna Debuted 40 Years Ago,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, July 31, 2023, <https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2023/07/by-the-numbers-madonna-debuted-40-years-ago/>.

record label Gotham Sound. She signed Madonna shortly after, saying that she had a “star in-the-making” mentality. At this time, Madonna embraced a punk rock look. At the behest of Barbone, she toned down her sexuality and image, because Barbone feared she would become a sex object, desired by men not for her music but for her body. This had already happened to other female artists, like Pat Benatar, with her single “Hit Me with Your Best Shot.” Benatar lost authority and had her image reduced to a sexual object because of the sexual innuendo concealed in the song.¹¹ Madonna only listened to Barbone’s advice for a short while. She had little interest in rock, and it continued to diminish as she rediscovered her love of danceable music in clubs and DJ booths across New York. She knew that she wanted to incorporate danceable beats into her sound. Eventually, disagreements about her sound and image would cause her to split from Barbone and Gotham Sound in order to have more creative agency.¹²

While Madonna looked for a new label, she performed in dance clubs across the city. In one of these dance clubs, Danceteria, she caught the attention of Michael Rosenblatt of Sire Records, a subsidiary of Warner Records. Finally, after signing with Sire, she produced her first single, “Everybody,” in 1982.¹³ It was an instant hit, partially due to the marketing that left Madonna’s race obscure to the listener. Because of the uniqueness of her sound, Sire was unsure whether to market to black or white audiences. Ultimately, the company decided not to put Madonna on the cover of the single, so a more diverse audience would give her a chance. “Everybody” contained catchy disco-like beats that were easy to dance to, compared to the less danceable rock ballads of the time. “Everybody” quickly hit number one on the dance charts, and Madonna’s popularity skyrocketed drastically.¹⁴

Madonna first emerged with her debut album *Madonna* on July 27, 1983, but it performed poorly.¹⁵ The only song that did well was “Holiday” because it was a popular dance hit in clubs. Still, Madonna refused to give up. With her producer, Mary Lambert, she released a music video for the song “Borderline,” which also appeared on her debut album. For the video, Lambert used a unique technique that combined both black and white and colored film, adding more contrast between scenes. The video attracted a new television program called MTV. Once the “Borderline” music video aired on the network in March of 1984, the song skyrocketed in the charts. *Borderline* became Madonna’s first Top 10 Billboard single.¹⁶

In “Borderline,” Madonna embraced a sexual, eclectic look. She over-accessorized, excessively layered, and angered many, especially Christians, by wearing a crucifix in her ear and a revealing

¹¹ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 89.

¹² Skolnik, “How Madonna Made Herself.”

¹³ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 105.

¹⁴ Ciccone, *Life with My Sister Madonna*, 71.

¹⁵ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 131.

¹⁶ Brownfield, “By the Numbers.”

outfit. Throughout her career, Madonna rejected religious norms and experimented with religious symbols and imagery. This opposition could be an act of rebellion against her strict Catholic upbringing, which restricted her freedoms as a child and young adult. Still, she was never completely against religion, and she even prayed for the health and safety of her crew before performances.¹⁷ Despite the controversy, girls across the United States scrambled to copy Madonna's look. It was fresh, different, and to many, empowering. It was with these sentiments that Madonna created herself, and which continued to build her reputation and influence her image throughout her career. Moreover, despite its apparent "gaudiness," girls could at least wear it out of the house. The look was considered less extreme in comparison to some other female artists, like Annie Lennox of *Eurythmics*.¹⁸ In a later *New York Times* article, "Madonna and Her Clones," a reporter described her look as "street urchin," which "emphasizes a low neckline and, often, a bare midriff, lace tights, anklets, thrift-shop jewelry, fingerless lace gloves [...] flower-print tight pants, a gold crucifix, Merry Widow black lace bras, chiffon strips as hair bows and jeweled belts. A tumble of disheveled curls tops it all off."¹⁹

After her MTV appearance, which spread her name and her image across the US, Madonna officially got her "big break." She quickly started working on new music. Through a contact at Warner, Madonna was introduced to Billy Steinburg, writer of her next big hit, "Like a Virgin." Steinburg never expected an artist would dare produce the song and air it on the radio, but Madonna loved it. She premiered "Like a Virgin" on MTV during the Video Music Awards on September 14, 1984.²⁰ During this performance, as she was descending a set of stairs, she accidentally lost her heel. Madonna decided to pretend this wardrobe malfunction was an original part of the act. Instead of simply picking up the shoe, she rolled around gyrated, and appeared to perform other sexual acts on the stage, all while revealing her undergarments.²¹ Up until that point, such behavior was unheard of, especially on national television. Had the act been planned, MTV would not have let it air on television because it directly challenged "respectable femininity." Yet, Madonna had already attracted a sizable fanbase. They were not put off by her performance in the slightest. "Like a Virgin" topped the charts at number one for a consecutive six weeks.²² When Madonna released the full *Like a Virgin* album on November 12, 1984, her fans adored it. Madonna was officially secured in her fame.

¹⁷ Ciccone, *Life with My Sister Madonna*, 11.

¹⁸ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 141.

¹⁹ "Madonna and Her Clones," *New York Times*, June 7, 1985, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/06/07/style/madonna-and-her-clones>.

²⁰ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 155.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 156.

²² Keith Caulfield, "Madonna's 40 Biggest Billboard Hits," *Billboard*, August 16, 2024, <https://www.billboard.com/lists/madonnas-40-biggest-billboard-hits>.

Madonna plowed ahead and continued to work on new music and projects. She wanted to make a music video for “Material Girl,” which appeared on *Like a Virgin*, by replicating Marilyn Monroe’s “Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend” look. Her replication of Marilyn’s image is a pastiche (a similar likeness that is not a parody) and another example of one of her many faces. Madonna’s interpretation of a “material girl,” however, was a parody.²³ The song contained lines like “If they don't give me proper credit I just walk away” or “Cause the boy with the cold hard cash is always Mister Right.”²⁴ Many girls listening to the song understood that it was poking fun at the way society views women, specifically stereotypes that they overconsume and date only for money. But, the press criticized Madonna for supposedly regressing feminism. Regardless, “Material Girl” labeled Madonna as the “new Marilyn,” a title which she happily embraced.²⁵

Madonna’s whole pop star image can essentially be perceived as a pastiche, as represented in her Marilyn portrayal. Pastiche is a foundation of postmodernism that draws on popular elements and patterns.²⁶ Madonna’s likeness to Marilyn Monroe in “Material Girl” is an example of a pastiche, or an homage. A parody, on the other hand, is a satirical replication to poke fun at an original work or concept. Madonna embraced many pastiches throughout her career in the image she presented, and also parodied certain social norms and institutions simultaneously. Many scholars believe that it was Madonna’s complex image that propelled her to popularity and kept her there, more than her challenge of societal norms and male power.²⁷

With her newfound fame, Madonna embarked on an ambitious North American tour from April 10 to June 11, 1985, with twenty-seven stops in just two months.²⁸ While she had toured on smaller scales on the East Coast, she had never undertaken a tour of this size. Warner and her team worried it was too much for her to handle. Would people even buy tickets? These fears were quickly dispelled, because Madonna sold out every single venue. After the first few shows, her team began rebooking in large arenas. According to *People Magazine*, New York’s Radio City Music Hall, which has a maximum capacity of 5,800, sold out all three shows after only 30 minutes of ticket sales.²⁹ The main attendees of her shows were teenage girls and young women. To them, Madonna was empowering. She used sexual jokes and imagery alluding topics that girls were not supposed to know about, even though they very clearly did. She did not treat them like children or seek to shelter them in the same way that society did. She was a means of sexual

²³ Ramona Curry, “Madonna from Marilyn to Marlene - Pastiche and/or Parody?” *Journal of Film and Video* 42, no. 2 (1990): 18.

²⁴ Madonna, “Material Girl,” by Peter Brown and Robert Rans, Track 1 on *Like a Virgin* (Warner Records Inc., 1984), Spotify app.

²⁵ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 165.

²⁶ Curry, “Madonna from Marilyn to Marlene,” 15.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁸ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 178.

²⁹ “Hollywood Sizzle,” *People Magazine*, May 13, 1985, accessed through <https://madonnaunderground.com/madonna-live/world-tours/the-virgin-tour-1985/>.

liberation. Men, however, did not understand Madonna's appeal. Her act was coy and intentionally sexual, but not in an attempt to appeal to the male gaze.³⁰ Some analysts believe that men were also "put off" by Madonna's music and image because it was so enhanced with special effects like makeup, clothing, even audio manipulation. Because it was artificial, it lacked credibility.³¹ This is another reason why Madonna's main following consisted primarily of girls and young women. They were more likely to embrace her image and her sound.

When Madonna was not touring, she was working on new music or bolstering her acting career. In 1986, she worked on *Shanghai Surprise* in China. Her popularity brought her a new set of problems, particularly with paparazzi and the press. Madonna had to bolster her "I don't care attitude."³² She had already faced hardship the year prior when nude photographs that she posed for in the early 80s for money (before her big break) were leaked. During *Shanghai Surprise*, news leaked that her driver had hit a paparazzi cameraman with the car. It's likely that reports of the incident were grossly overexaggerated. According to her brother, Chris, the cameraman was on the hood of the car trying to snap a picture when he fell. The other cameraman surrounding the car told him to stay on the ground so they could frame the incident for a good story.³³

Shanghai Surprise flopped and did not do well in the box office. While Madonna would attempt to act a few more times, her talent remained in music and in her concert performances. After she returned to the United States, she worked on music for her next album, *True Blue*. For *True Blue*, Madonna wanted to recreate the sounds of earlier girl groups like the Shirelles or Ronettes.³⁴ "Like a Virgin" was a story about glory and ecstasy of sex, while Madonna's first *True Blue* single, "Papa Don't Preach," was about its consequences. "Papa Don't Preach," tells the story of a young girl who became pregnant and pleads with her father to trust her decisions about her baby and her lover. In the song, Madonna sings, "But I've made up my mind, I'm keeping my baby."³⁵ These lyrics, while subtle, confront the topic of abortion, which was still very much a taboo in the 1980s. As with most controversies, Madonna did not shy away from such topics.

For *True Blue*, Madonna donned a short, masculine hairstyle on the album cover. In her "La Isla Bonita" music video, she begins by slicking back her hair and dressing in a simple white slip. Once she reaches the chorus, her image transitions and reveals her in a deep red dress that resembles

³⁰ Stan Hawkins, "Dragging out Camp: Narrative Agendas in Madonna's Musical Production," in *Madonna's Drowned Worlds: New Approaches to her Cultural Transformations, 1983-2003*, eds. Santiago Fouz-Hernández and Freya Jarman-Ivens (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), 11.

³¹ Jacqueline Warwick, "Midnight Ramblers and Material Girls: Gender and Stardom in Rock and Pop," *The Sage Handbook of Popular Music* (October 2014), 340.

³² Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 191.

³³ Ciccone, *Life with My Sister Madonna*, 133.

³⁴ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 204.

³⁵ Madonna, "Papa Don't Preach," by Madonna and Brian Elliot, Track 1 on *True Blue* (Warner Records Inc., 1986), Spotify app.

flamenco attire, as well as bright red lipstick and a large hair ribbon. In the span of a few minutes, Madonna reveals the duality of her persona. Her acting also provides evidence to support this duality. With her white slip and plain hair, Madonna seems closed-off and forlorn, while in her red dress, she dances with passion and takes up space.³⁶ Madonna continues to experiment with the spectrum of gendered presentation throughout her performances today.

In March of 1989, Madonna released what is probably known as her best album of all time, *Like a Prayer*.³⁷ Madonna wanted the first EP, “Like a Prayer” to sound like a girl with a close relationship to God, although subtle innuendos hinted that it pertained to something far different. The song demonstrated the possibility of being able to experience both religious and sexual ecstasy. In the song, Madonna parodies certain social institutions, particularly the patriarchy, bourgeois Christianity, and white supremacy. Jesus is even portrayed as a black man, and Madonna, donning a tight black dress and crucifix necklace, is portrayed having an intimate relationship with him.³⁸ Some critics remarked that while her lyrics were suggestive, they didn’t feature any explicit language or obvious imagery.³⁹ Still, the popular soda company, Pepsi, which had partnered with Madonna for a commercial, pulled it from the air after the music video’s release because they didn’t want to be associated with the controversy it would garner.⁴⁰

A year later, Madonna debuted her new single, “Vogue” on MTV. For her live television appearance, she dressed as French queen Marie Antoinette. In a busty corset, powdered wig, and full skirt, Madonna and her envoy of drag queens did “strike a pose,” as repeated in her lyrics.⁴¹ Arguably one of her most iconic appearances, Madonna’s pastiche of Marie Antoinette demonstrates her ability to take an important historical figure, as she did with Marilyn Monroe, and remold that figure to her likeness. It was obvious to her audience that Madonna’s “Vogue” performance was a portrayal of Marie Antoinette. By using such a prominent historical figure’s likeness, Madonna doesn’t have to create something new because it already exists and is already an element of popular culture. In “Vogue,” Madonna channels Rococo elements to appear as Marie, but she’s added a new element to the performance, like “voguing,” which originated from

³⁶ Madonna, “Madonna - La Isla Bonita (Official Video),” YouTube video, Oct 26, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zpzdgmqlHOQ>.

³⁷ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 257.

³⁸ Madonna, “Madonna - Like a Prayer (Official Video),” Youtube video, October 26, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79fzeNUqQbQ>.

³⁹ J.D. Considine, “Like a Prayer,” *Rolling Stone*, April 6, 1989, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/like-a-prayer-248995/>.

⁴⁰ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 280.

⁴¹ Madonna, “Madonna - Vogue (Live at the MTV Awards 1990) [Official Video]” Youtube video, November 17, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lTaXtWWR16A>.

queer black and Hispanic ballroom culture in Harlem.⁴² She once again demonstrated how she borrows performance elements from various cultural and queer identities to enhance her work.

In 1992, Madonna would once again remake herself, only this time, into a seductive dominatrix for her fifth studio album, *Erotica*. Many music critics praised *Erotica* as one of Madonna's most adventurous albums. The album touched on societal taboos, including AIDS and homosexuality. A *New York Times* article, in response to the album, said "Madonna has finally crossed a line that may alienate her less-committed fans and rile more than ever the sensibilities of would-be public censors." While Madonna's previous works were sexual, they did not contain graphic imagery like *Erotica*. Madonna even said about sex, "almost anything goes," and she echoed this sentiment in *Erotica* with "androgyny, homo eroticism, dressing up, and mild games of dominance and submission" as expressed by the *Times*. To further shock the world, Madonna simultaneously released her own book, titled *Sex* with the *Erotica* album. In the book, Madonna becomes "Dita," the sexy dominatrix and bisexual alter ego that is pictured on the cover of her *Erotica* album. In a series of letters and nude photographs, Dita details how she teaches sex and recounts the tales of her sexual exploits.⁴³

In *Sex*, Madonna blurs gender lines and challenges heteronormativity. The imagery and writing reveals Dita's attraction to her friend, Ingrid. Dita and Ingrid also have a sexual relationship with the same man. The book features several images of Dita (Madonna) in sexual acts with both men and women. Themes of androgyny are also present, with many photographs of seemingly feminine men or masculine women. Madonna not only wanted to challenge sexual taboos, but she also wanted the reader to question which of these fantasies were Dita, and which were Madonna. In the beginning of the book, Madonna wrote in the preface, "This book and real persons and events is not only purely coincidental, it's ridiculous. Nothing in this book is true. I made it all up."⁴⁴ Madonna may have suggested that the book's content is fictional in this opening segment, yet she referenced aspects of her not-so-fictional life throughout her storytelling. For example, she mentioned her move to New York and her studies at the Alvin Ailey School, which were real parts of her journey.⁴⁵ By bringing in real life accounts to her fictitious narrative, Madonna was being intentionally coy and vague. Aloofness, especially about sex, has long been part of her appeal.

Madonna's plan to release her *Erotica* album in tandem with her book, *Sex*, displays her duality. While *Erotica* appeared to be her most sexual album, closer inspection of her lyrics reveals the

⁴² "A Brief History of Voguing," Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/brief-history-voguing>.

⁴³ Stephen Holden, "RECORDINGS VIEW; Selling Sex and (Oh, Yes) a Record," *New York Times*, October 18, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/18/arts/recordings-view-selling-sex-and-oh-yes-a-record>.

⁴⁴ Madonna, *Sex* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

opposite by highlighting the contrast between Madonna's imagery in her *Erotica* videos with her lyricism. Many scholars, like Michael Dango, argue Madonna's *Erotica* was seemingly the least sexual of all her albums. Dango underscores several complex dualities of Madonna's character. He says, "She is a Madonna, but also a whore—which means a businesswoman. She is white, but also, somehow, ethnically ambiguous—a global superstar claimed by Japan as much as England or the United States. She is dance, but also pop. Subcultural, but mainstream."⁴⁶ Here, Dango highlights more than Madonna's sexual identity, but also her apparent contrasting ethnic, religious, musical, and cultural identities. In terms of her sexuality, which fuels much of her fame and controversy, Dango explains that Madonna is able to "turn off" the whore.⁴⁷ Because she is a business woman, she can suppress or expose Madonna, the whore, whenever she pleases for her own personal gains, whether they be money, fans, or publicity. *Erotica* was about community formation in light of the AIDS crisis and intimate connection. Sex was about just that, sex. Madonna was able to use the whore to incite controversy, which was exactly what she wanted.

In addition to the "whore" complex that Madonna embodied in *Erotica*, she also used sexual religious themes, as seen in her previous work, "Like a Prayer." In an interview with *Newsweek*, Madonna explained how her Catholic upbringing influenced her musical career. She said, "When I was growing up, there were certain things people did for penance; I know people that slept on coat hangers or knelt on uncooked rice on the floor, and prayed for hours. And for me as a child, I think somehow things got really mixed up. There was some ecstasy involved in that."⁴⁸ She had similar sentiments about "Like a Prayer" just years prior, where she expressed that ecstasy can arise from religion and sex, and that the line between the two isn't as stable as we've been led to believe. For others with a structured, rigid home life, or perhaps Catholics who were deconstructing, Madonna's music was freeing. Her sexual agency garnered support from young women, her AIDS activism drew support from the queer community, and her challenge of religious structure attracted those who resonated with the experiences in her upbringing. These examples portray the massive and diverse fanbase that Madonna was able to attract because of her duality. Madonna's ambition in the studio made sure that these fans were always anticipating the release of a new project.

While Madonna planned to stop touring, longing for more stability and time to rest, she could not resist the call to the stage. In September of 1993, she once again took her team on the road for *The Girlie Show* tour to showcase her *Erotica* album. While considered more tame than her previous work, her diverse cast of women were still radical a show of "girl power."⁴⁹ For this tour,

⁴⁶ Michael Dango, *Madonna's Erotica* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 16.

⁴⁷ Dango, *Madonna's Erotica*, 93.

⁴⁸ "Talking With Madonna: The Unbridled Truth," *Newsweek*, July 1, 2010, <https://www.newsweek.com/talking-madonna-unbridled-truth-197018>.

⁴⁹ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 406.

Madonna expanded her route to include places she had either rarely or never performed before, such as Turkey, Israel, Australia, Argentina, and Brazil. Her reasoning for this change from previous tour routes was that she didn't care for "preaching to the converted."⁵⁰ In other words, she wanted to perform in places where she thought she'd face more hostility. Madonna's willingness to put herself in front of "enemies" demonstrates that a huge part of her persona revolves around challenging norms and fielding responsive criticism. She takes pride in not being accepted, because it means she has work to do, to "convert" others across the world.

The following year, in mid-March, Madonna appeared on the *Late Show with David Letterman*. During the show, she gifted David Letterman a pair of underwear, claiming that they were worn.⁵¹ She also cussed repeatedly. The audience became repeatedly more uncomfortable throughout the segment, with some even booing her and yelling for her to leave. Letterman and Madonna went blow for blow, back and forth. Madonna recalled afterward that she felt like a victim. She had faced years of scrutiny and mistreatment by the media, and her *Letterman* appearance represents the culmination of this treatment. As explained by biographer Mary Gabriel, the scene resembled "man versus female monster." Letterman was going blow for blow with Madonna, yet she became the "villain." The audience unproportionately supported Letterman in his defense of his "manhood" while Madonna's rebuttals were met with disdain.⁵² This example of Madonna on the *Late Show with David Letterman* shows that the pop star was not immune to the harsh words of critics. Her reaction on the show proves that such commentary wore her down, yet she refused to change her image to fit societal standards of a "respectable" woman or celebrity. Arguably, Madonna's strength in fielding criticisms builds her up to be a sort of champion, one who refused to back down. While critics clearly contributed to her success by increasing her publicity, Madonna's own responses to the media, even if not intentional, gained her even more fame. Her followers saw her as a role model. Despite adversity, she continued to be an activist and share the messages she wanted to.

In October of 1994, Madonna released her sixth studio album, *Bedtime Stories*. While some praised her, even claiming the album confirmed Madonna was far from finished with her music career, most tracks were not popular in the charts. Critics said she had taken too big of a step back from *Erotica*. *Bedtime Stories* was too tame in comparison to her previous works.⁵³ Despite the criticism, one single from the album, "Take a Bow," charted for seven weeks and became her longest running hit on the Billboard Hot 100.⁵⁴ Around this time, Madonna began to question what

⁵⁰ Ibid., 407.

⁵¹ Letterman, "Madonna's Infamous F-Bomb Interview," YouTube, March 31, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMQWR2v9opQ>.

⁵² Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 425.

⁵³ Ibid., 434.

⁵⁴ Joe Lynch, "Madonna's Biggest Moments: A Timeline," Billboard, March 9, 2015, <https://www.billboard.com/photos/madonna-timeline-gallery-6494570/1-madonna-milestones-1-billboard-450/>

would come next in her career. In her own words, “There’s nothing more!...I worked it out of my system.”⁵⁵ Despite whatever Madonna had “worked out of her system,” there was much to come. She started to consider her relationships, motherhood, and the creativity of her projects.

Madonna was particularly interested in an upcoming film adaptation of the Broadway musical, *Evita*. She personally sent director Alan Parker a letter and a copy of her music video for “Take a Bow.” Parker deemed Madonna an excellent fit for the role of Evita, saying that “no one could play Evita as well as [Madonna] could, and she said that she would sing, dance, and act her heart out.”⁵⁶ Madonna had long interacted with Latin American culture, evident in her previous works, like “La Isla Bonita.” At the time of *Evita*’s production, she was also dating Cuban-American, Carlos Leon, and she became very close with his family during many trips to Miami. While Madonna was no stranger to acting, *Evita* was her first introduction to musical theater. The “real-life” Evita, Maria Eva Duarte de Perón, was an Argentinian activist and politician who advocated strongly for women’s rights, including the right to contraceptives and to divorce.⁵⁷ A CNN reporter asked Madonna if she had the same abilities to unite and entice people. Madonna replied that they both were “driven by a lot of the same things” and felt it was important “to help people stand up for their rights.”⁵⁸ For Madonna to play Eva, she wasn’t changing her stance on the activist persona she had curated for over a decade, but her expression of Eva would be different from the “raunchy,” sexy persona she had worn nearly since her debut.

Evita required more than simple endurance. Madonna began vocal training three months before recording. Through practice and coaching, she was able to expand her register as required for her role as Eva. The film would contain no spoken dialogue, only singing. The crew recorded for four months, accumulating over four hundred recording hours. Parker remarked that Madonna sang her role better than even her Broadway predecessors, such as Patti LuPone and Elaine Paige.⁵⁹ In order to record one of *Evita*’s most important scenes, in which Eva sings “Don’t Cry for Me Argentina,” the crew needed access to the Casa Rosada, the official government building and presidential office of Argentina. The president, Carlos Menem, had previously condemned Madonna’s role as Eva Perón, more specifically, he believed she could never fill it. He even said that Madonna was, “no big deal” and that he “didn’t find her attractive.”⁶⁰ Still, after much persuasion, he agreed to meet with Madonna on a small, remote island, away from the eyes of

⁵⁵ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 435.

⁵⁶ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 442.

⁵⁷ “Maria Eva Peron,” Iowa State University Archives of Women’s Political Communication, <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/directory/eva-peron/>.

⁵⁸ Jim Moret, “Madonna Sings of Life as ‘Evita,’” CNN, December 17, 1996, <https://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/9612/17/madonna/index.html>.

⁵⁹ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 451.

⁶⁰ “Madonna Is No ‘Big Deal,’ Argentine President Says,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 15, 1996, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/1996/10/15/madonna-is-no-big-deal-argentine-president-says/>.

the press. For the interview, Madonna embodied Eva Perón, donning the traditional 1940s garb and doing her hair and makeup to match. Menem was stunned, and after a follow-up meeting a few weeks later, he agreed to let the crew shoot Madonna's scene from the balcony of the Casa Rosada.⁶¹

Madonna's tactic in securing Menem's support by completely transforming herself into Eva shows how she used her shapeshifting abilities for industry gain. Before arriving for her meeting, Menem understood Madonna to be too provocative, too scandalous, too lewd. He was expecting to meet with Madonna, the pop star, whom he believed would never do Eva the justice she deserved. Madonna's charisma and her talents of persuasion, along with her embodiment of Eva, won Menem over. This victory exemplifies how Madonna could use her skills for her own gain. Just as she won over the hearts of millions of fans by being able to change her persona, she did the same with Menem to ensure the success of *Evita*.

Getting Menem's approval was only the first obstacle of filming. Madonna discovered shortly after filming in Buenos Aires that she was pregnant. Pregnancy for many business women could often mean the end of a career. For Madonna, it could jeopardize everything, but instead of panicking, she took her pregnancy in full stride. In her personal diary, she wrote "The only thing that matters [is] growing inside me."⁶² Despite the fact that the pregnancy could interfere with both *Evita* and the rest of her musical career, Madonna was excited for motherhood. Conversely, society was skeptical of Madonna as a mother, two concepts that seemingly could not mesh. Not only was single motherhood still rare, but Madonna was not seeking marriage, only dual parenthood with her child's father, Carlos Leon. The only "respectable" single-mother at the time was a widow. Madonna also rejected traditional forms of femininity, being "the whore" and an independent self-made star. To many, the possibility of motherhood seemed to directly oppose Madonna's essential being.

Despite fears that her pregnancy would impact filming, shooting wrapped up with little hindrance at the end of May, 1996. Madonna gave birth to her daughter, Lourdes on October 14th.⁶³ Fans speculated that motherhood would force Madonna into retirement, or at least an extended maternity leave, but she had other plans. *Evita* received Golden Globe awards on January 19, 1997 for "Best Motion Picture" and "Best Original Song." Madonna won "Best Actress" for her role as Eva. She also requested to sing "You Must Love Me," the same piece that won "Best Original Song" for the Oscar Awards on March 24th, despite *Evita* being snubbed of nominations

⁶¹ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 459.

⁶² Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 458.

⁶³ Irene Lacher and Eric Malnic, "Madonna Gives Birth to Daughter," *Los Angeles Times*, October 15, 1996, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-10-15-me-54133-story.html>.

in major film categories.⁶⁴ Ready to get back to work on her true passion, music, Madonna fully closed the *Evita* chapter.

Even between projects, albums, and movies, Madonna was teetering at a precipice. The decade of the 90s is considered the height of the American culture wars, wherein progressive activists attempted to incite political change, but orthodox traditionalists resisted in an effort to preserve their values.⁶⁵ Queer rights, abortion, and gun control were leading topics of debate. American politics became extremely polarized. Additionally, celebrity coverage and monitoring increased during this time. From 1996-1997, Madonna offered her support to actor Ellen DeGeneres, who had been forced to “come out” due to intense scrutinization. Some even took to calling her Ellen “Degenerate.”⁶⁶ Despite the fact that the two had never met, Madonna and Ellen bonded over being women in the spotlight. Madonna encouraged Ellen not to seek validation, but let go of things she couldn’t control. Ellen says Madonna’s advice led her to officially reveal her sexuality. While this choice cost Ellen her show, the act of proudly proclaiming her sexuality forever altered the entertainment industry amid the height of the culture wars. Ellen would not be the last celebrity that Madonna offered her support to. Just as Madonna was taking on a nurturing role as a mother, she also became a guide for younger stars who had not yet experienced the harsh realities of the entertainment industry.

Later that same year, following the death of Princess Diana, another prominent figure who had been “ripped apart” by tabloids, Madonna chose to commemorate the late royal during her MTV Video Music Awards segment. She targeted the audience, rather than the tabloids, calling everyone to “change their negative behaviors.”⁶⁷ It was their hunger for gossip and a good story that supported the tabloids. At the same time, Madonna was still reeling from the death of her friend, Gianni Versace, who had been murdered that summer by gunman Andrew Cunanan. The press had used Versace’s death to support their negative ideas of homosexuality. Versace was a proud gay man with a long-term partner of fifteen years at the time of his death. The press reported that his death was an outcome of his life of decadence and overindulgence, and his homosexual lifestyle.⁶⁸

By June of 1997, Madonna was back in the studio putting together her next album, *Ray of Light*, which was released the following year. Some critics argue that *Ray of Light* was Madonna’s most drastic change, a change which derived from motherhood. Instead of confining herself to

⁶⁴ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 464.

⁶⁵ Irene Taviss Thomson, *Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2010), 3.

⁶⁶ Jesse Green, “Come Out. Come Down. Come Back. Being Ellen.,” *New York Times*, August 19, 2001, National edition, sec. 6, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/08/19/magazine/come-out-come-down-come-back-being-ellen.html>.

⁶⁷ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 477.

⁶⁸ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 467.

traditional notions of motherhood, Madonna challenges those inherent traits, as she had done with societal expectations since the beginning of her career. In the music video for the opening track, “Substitute for Love,” Madonna is shown running through dense crowds of fans and paparazzi, then at a party. The whole time, she’s looking for something. As she sings the words, “And now I find I’ve changed my ways, this is my religion,” she picks up a small child and looks into the camera.⁶⁹ Clearly, Madonna is telling us that this is her new self: a mother. At the time, fans were fearful that this new Madonna might overshadow her old risk-taker self, but reviewer Barry Waters reassured fans that Madonna “still pushes buttons.” There’s plenty of evidence in *Ray of Light* to prove this Madonna is still present, including her embodiment of Indian culture—chanting Sanskrit, referencing karma, and citing mystics—something modern critics have condemned. Regardless, *Ray of Light* is clear evidence that motherhood did not harm Madonna’s career; in fact, it had the opposite effect. The “mother” became another persona in Madonna’s arsenal.

The year 2000 brought two new projects for Madonna—the obvious release of her eighth studio album, *Music*, but also a move across the Atlantic to England with her partner, Guy Ritchie.⁷⁰ For the production of *Music*, Madonna employed an entirely European production crew. However, she ironically decided to take on perhaps the most American persona of all: a cowgirl. Madonna reemphasized messages in her earlier works, but from a more contemporary perspective. For example, in “What It Feels Like for a Girl,” Madonna once again challenges sexism and the oppression of the patriarchy, but after twenty years in the industry. The track opens with the lyrics, “Girls can wear jeans and cut their hair short / Wear shirts and boots, ‘cause it’s okay to be a boy / But for a boy to look like a girl is degrading / ‘Cause you think that being a girl is degrading.”⁷¹ Madonna goes on to describe the pain that girls face, but often have to hide in order to “be a little less,” as she sings. *Music* is proof that Madonna is still the girl that debuted with “Everybody” in 1982, despite her shifting personas. The message has stayed the same for two decades, even though Madonna and her sound have matured.

The Queen of Pop is a title well earned by Madonna. Throughout her career, she has released fourteen studio albums and collaborated with various artists. It’s estimated that she has grossed over \$1.2 billion, and has a current net worth of \$850 million.⁷² She has had twelve number one top hits, thirty-eight top ten hits, and a total of fifty-eight songs chart on Billboard’s *Top 100*.⁷³ Arguably, no other female pop artist has had such a large following or remained relevant for as

⁶⁹ Maura Conley, “The Madonna/Lourdes Complex,” in *How to Sell A Gendered Fantasy*, edited by Matthew Salzano (Stony Brook Academic Commons, May 2025), 105.

⁷⁰ Gabriel, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, 497.

⁷¹ Madonna, “What It Feels Like for a Girl,” by Madonna and Guy Sigsworth, Track 8 on *Music* (Warner Record Inc., 2000), Spotify app.

⁷² “Forbes Profile: Madonna,” *Forbes*, May 28, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/profile/madonna/>.

⁷³ “Chart History: Madonna,” *Billboard*, <https://www.billboard.com/artist/madonna/chart-history/hsi/>.

long as she has, despite her influence on future generations of female pop artists like Britney Spears, the Spice Girls, and even more contemporary artists like Taylor Swift and Sabrina Carpenter, who embrace more sexual looks and even go through “eras.” Many artists have a stable “image” associated with them. However, when people picture Madonna, it is likely that everyone sees something different. Madonna doesn’t want us to picture one physical look. Someone might see Madonna as Marilyn, while another imagines Madonna as Marie Antionette. Maybe they even see Madonna holding a baby, being a mother. Ultimately, Madonna doesn’t have a concrete “look.” Evidence from her tours, songs, and music videos shows Madonna gained and maintained popularity because her ability to challenge traditional feminine gender roles and continuously remake her image, which allowed her to stay relevant through changing trends and movements. Who will she be next? Only time will tell what Madonna has in store.

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