

Example Essay 1:

Introduction: Maxine Hong Kingston's book, *The Woman Warrior*, portrays the difficulty of navigating life and finding purpose while growing up between two starkly contrasting cultures. Along the way, Kingston gives examples of several coping techniques that she and other immigrants use in order to take back the power and control in their lives while still trying to figure out how they fit in as a Chinese-American. Names are used repeatedly as one such technique among the Chinese emigrants and their American-born children alike. From Kingston's story, we learn that names are culturally viewed as defining a person or being, and are therefore a mechanism for exerting power over others, as shown through the use of names for making beings less intimidating, labeling others as outsiders, and ultimately punishing others.

Body Paragraph: Purposefully forgetting names can be used as a means for punishing others by stripping them of their identity and existence. When telling the story of her aunt's disownment from her family, Kingston says that "I have not asked for details nor said my aunt's name; I do not know it" (18). Kingston's aunt was obviously named at some point (probably at birth), and since she was born and lived in China, we can safely assume that her name was even a Chinese one, which is viewed as more important than American or other cultural names. She had an identity and a future. So in order to enact the highest level of punishment over her, her own family stripped her of that name, therefore stripping her of her identity and destiny as well. Kingston explains this when she states that "there is more to the silence: they want me to participate in her punishment" (18). While the other examples in the book show the namer simply positioning themselves as better or more in control than the named, this example shows the epitome of exerting power over others through the use of names. The other examples may replace the original name of the person or being that is given the name, and in doing so may redefine their identity and future in a new (and generally less desirable) way, but they still leave the named or renamed person or being with some kind of identity and destiny. In taking away the no name woman's name once and for all, rather than simply replacing it, the no name woman's family are exerting the most power they possess over her by erasing her name altogether. Because she has no name, she is nothing.

Conclusion: Overall, Chinese culture is portrayed as placing a special significance on names and the action of naming: names are a means whereby the namer can define and limit someone's identity and potential, and as such become a device for exercising dominance and power over others. Whether this device is used as a coping mechanism to explain the

unexplainable, label others as outsiders, or ultimately punish someone in the worst possible way, the namer is always asserting their dominance in the situation in order to regain or maintain some lost sense of control in their own lives. It's no wonder then why a tool for exerting power such as naming would be so prevalent in Kingston's book: while trying to figure out her own identity and destiny in the midst of two powerful countries and cultures, Kingston falls back on her Chinese cultural ideas for finding and asserting her own power and dominance in order to be who she really wants to be, instead of who she is expected to be.

Example Essay 2:

Introduction: History is often created through a process of piecing together small fragments and narratives of the past until one final story is created and believed to be total truth and fact. In Percival Everett's *Watershed*, Everett copies this idea by giving the novel a fragmented and complicated lack of structure: he includes random flashbacks to characters' pasts, as well as inserts from real historical documents and treaties. Doing so mixes historical events with fiction in order to point out the possibility of "fiction" in widely accepted history today. "History" as it is most commonly known was written by those powerful enough to have a voice, meaning it rarely includes other "sides" of the truth, such as minorities' stories and experiences. Throughout his novel *Watershed*, Everett asserts that history can never be completely truthful or factual because it is a human construct, and therefore will always fall prey to human biases, beliefs, and perceptions. He does this through his portrayal of the history and experiences of the main character, an African American named Robert.

Body Paragraph: Being the narrator, Robert tells the story via his memories, which portrays the biased and flawed nature of human memory in creating and retelling "history." From the very beginning, Robert insists:

I am the only one who can properly and accurately reproduce [this story]. There is no one else in whom I place sufficient trust to attempt a fair representation of the events—not that the events related would be anything less than factual, but that those chosen for exhibition would not cover the canvas with the stain or underpainting of truth—and of course truth necessarily exists only as perception and its subsequent recitation alters it. (Everett 2)

By essentially stating that only he can share his version of this story, Robert is emphasizing the fact that different people's memories of the same event can change from person to person: each individual's perceptions alter and emphasize different pieces of the story, which creates an entirely new narrative. These are the individuals' truths, and each of the individuals believe their truths to be the "full truth," but that doesn't mean any of them are actually the full truth. This idea stems from the fact that human memory isn't perfect, so humans often try to make

sense of the things they do remember, and doing so means filling in their mental blanks with unreliable guesswork. Likewise, memory is also biased because it is founded off of our initial perception, rather than pure fact. Each side of history's story could be seen as "good" or "bad," depending on which side the person experiencing it was on, so even someone who lived through an event can not be counted on for pure, factual truth; Robert seems to understand this reasoning, which is why he insists only he can provide the correct "stain or underpainting of truth," which he has gained through his own previous experiences.

Conclusion: Because history is, by nature, "not open to our observation" (Walsh 54), historians must try their best to create a story and explanation from whatever remaining evidence of the past they can find. However, Robert's way of retelling his past implies that with such a situation, and as human beings, it is nearly impossible for a historian—or any human being (including Robert himself)—to ever accurately find or create the full truth. Robert's narrative rejects the idea of one single, grand narrative that explains history as a whole, and instead emphasizes the several similar perspectives and "truths" that intersect and diverge at times (such as white American history and minorities' American history), but together make up what is the closest to the full truth as humans can achieve. Therefore individual histories, and especially less-heard minorities' stories like Robert's, are crucial for understanding what really took place in the past, as well as understanding the flawed nature of thinking in strict dualities of "truth" versus "falsity" or "fact" versus "opinion."

Example 3:

Introduction: Both Oscar Wilde's novella *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Christina Rossetti's poem "Goblin Market" tell a story of someone giving in to their selfish desires, yet the two stories end in dramatically different ways. Such contrasting endings to two otherwise similar stories presents the question: how do these two stories, even with their respective endings, both portray the entrapment caused by excess and self-indulgence? During the Victorian Era in Britain when these pieces were written, decadence had become a very popular idea in both art and literature. The movement centralized on an idea of artificiality and excess and often included negative traits such as perversion and self-disgust. However, through both *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "Goblin Market," it is evident that excess and self-indulgence are morally wrong and bad for humans because they trap the person mentally, which often leads to other negative thoughts, and giving in to those thoughts creates a never-ending obsession of greed and selfishness that becomes nearly inescapable and even deadly once someone is trapped in it.

Body Paragraph: Indulging in excess is unhealthy because it becomes all-encompassing and leads to other negative actions and emotions. In the stories, both main characters Laura and Dorian Gray make a choice to forgo the average, natural rules of their lives in order to indulge in their personal desires: Laura wishes to taste the sweetness of the forbidden fruits from the goblin men at the market, and Dorian wishes to remain youthful and beautiful forever. After indulging on the forbidden goblin fruit, the desire to continue to indulge on the sweetness of the fruit was quickly the only thing that Laura could think about, and she lost all motivation for doing her daily chores and anything good and productive:

She no more swept the house

Tended the fowls or cows,

Fetches honey, kneaded cakes of wheat,

Brought water from the brook:

But sat down listless in the chimney nook. (Rossetti 293-297)

By giving in and partaking of the goblins' "forbidden fruit," Laura lost all of her self-discipline and could no longer motivate herself to do even the simple things that would be beneficial to her, such as eating and drinking. Likewise, after Dorian realized that his wish came true and the painting of him aged and became uglier with each act of evil instead of Dorian himself doing so, "He hated to be separated from the picture that was such a part of his life, and he was also afraid that during his absence some one might gain access to the room, in spite of the elaborate bolts and bars that he had caused to be placed upon the door" (Wilde 144). Instead of simply appreciating the magical wish he had been granted and living a good life without showing any aging, Dorian became evil and obsessive and felt like he had to constantly be protecting his portrait. He was completely engulfed by his selfishness, wanting only to cover up the awful things he had done and the unnatural gift he had been given since he had no desire to change any of his actions or lifestyle choices. Although their specific indulgences were for different things, both Laura and Dorian gained an excess in their desires, which then led both characters to a state of depression and loneliness, and even skepticism and suspicion for Dorian. These examples prove that giving in to selfish and unnecessary desires for excess rids humans of self-discipline and makes their excessive desires become a ruler over their lives that keeps them focused solely on continuing to indulge; excess doesn't lead to happiness, only a desire for more excess.

Conclusion: Overall, both *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "Goblin Market" portray how indulging in excessive amounts of anything traps the mind in a constant need for more, but only ever offers more loneliness and want as a result. This mindset becomes toxic and nearly inescapable, and while "Goblin Market" portrays the only way to escape such a downward spiral, we see in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* what happens to a person when they choose to let that greed completely take over their mind. Such an idea of the toxicity of self-indulgence and

decadence is still extremely relevant, especially in today's world, where excess is available everywhere and even encouraged in marketing and industry. However, just as these stories caution, self-indulgence in excess never leads to happiness, and it often leads instead to more negative emotions, such as depression, hatred, and loneliness. Everything in life should be had in moderation rather than excess because as soon as something is had in excess nothing will ever be enough again.