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In this article, the writer shows us how poetry can bring people together by ‘interrogating and articulating our shared feelings, fears and insecurities’. She explains how Amanda Gorman’s powerful poem was the highlight of the 2020 inauguration and ‘stole the show’. The success of her performance lies in the fact that it did not hide from the ‘harsh truths’ and articulated the need Americans had to find ‘light in the never-ending shade’. Her poem recognised that the country was deeply divided and still suffering from the aftermath of ‘a deadly pandemic, stark political divisions and domestic terrorism’. By addressing these issues head on in her spoken word poem ‘The Hill We Climb’, she captured the mood of the nation and held a mirror up to society.

The article also revealed to me how poetry has a place outside of ‘the tiresome homework suffered through at school’. Amanda Gorman, ‘a skinny Black girl, descended from slaves’, said that poetry enabled her ‘to get my voice on the page.’ We learn how poems do not need to be ‘oblique or formally difficult’ in order to be considered art. Her message is portrayed through language that is ‘clear-eyed and direct, tightly crafted and accessible.’ She showed us that ‘poetry is a space for everyone’ and opened it up ‘to people who may have hitherto felt excluded from it.’

Her spoken word poem acknowledges and pays homage to ‘a long history of Black art forms’. She reveals how poetry has the power to be revolutionary and political and gives a voice to those who have been marginalised and oppressed. We are told how spoken-word poetry stems from the ‘Black Arts and Black Power movement of the 1960s’. The writer says that although Gorman’s work may not be as radical as her predecessors, she uses the form in a similar way in order to raise awareness and deliver uncomfortable messages.

(ii)

I wholeheartedly agree that there should be a diverse range of youthful voices represented in public debate. Government policies and initiatives regarding issues such as healthcare, the environment or education, are issues that affect all of us, as we all share the same space and are impacted by the decisions that are made. Ireland does not consist only of white middle-class, middle-aged men and women, but judging by our politicians and public figures, it does. In fact, young people, more than any other demographic, will be reaping the benefits, or suffering the consequences for many years, of the decisions made now on their behalf.

It makes no sense whatsoever to have a public debate on environmental policies and exclude young people. We are the ones who will be on this planet the longest, and the ones who keenly feel the urgency for action. It is so frustrating to have only a few Green TDs in the Dáil who are fighting for environmental friendly policies, when for most young people, this is the defining issue of our age.

As well as that, not a day goes by that I do not see comments by Cis men and women, usually in their forties or older, on my social feed, who are debating the existence of trans men and women/boys and girls. It infuriates me to think that decisions that will affect the lives of my friends and their mental health and well-being, will be decided by people who neither know a trans person nor have any empathy for their situation. Young trans voices are the most important ones to hear when making key decisions about their healthcare.

You cannot make life-changing decisions for anyone, without consulting with and listening to the people whose lives will be transformed, for good or for bad, by these policies.

(iii)

Meadhbh McGrath paints a very clear picture of the life and works of Amanda Gorman in her article ‘Poet. Fashion icon. Future president?’. It is evident from her use of superlatives, her admiring tone and her use of descriptive and informative language that she sees the poet as an inspirational and powerful young woman.

In her opening paragraph, McGrath portrays Gorman as a source of light and warmth on a ‘chilly inauguration day in January’. She uses bright and positive adjectives to describe her clothing, telling us she was dressed in a ‘sunshine yellow coat and scarlet satin headband’. The bright colours reinforce her message that we need to ‘find light in this never-ending shade.’ The writer’s own admiration for Gorman is clear as she reminds us that her speech was ‘mesmerising’ and ‘stole the show’. From the outset, we are given a very positive and persuasive portrayal of the poet as someone who is making a difference and is worthy of our attention.

McGrath’s admiration, perhaps even awe, of the poet is reflected in her article and she further persuades us of the poet’s importance and value by comparing her to and referencing other well-known and revered people. We are told that her future presidential bid has already been endorsed by Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama, and this lends authority to the writer’s own opinion. She is connected to many successful businesses and enterprises such as Vogue, Amazon and even the Met Gala, which she co-hosted with Timothée Chalamet and Billie Eilish, two of the most influential young artists. By inviting comparison with these well-respected figures, the poet is elevated in our esteem.

McGrath employs the language of information to give us an understanding of Gorman’s life and the inspiration for her work. She tells us that she ‘was diagnosed with an auditory processing disorder as a child which resulted in a speech impediment’. In the same paragraph she uses words from Gorman’s ‘The Hill We Climb’ to describe how she, ‘a skinny Black girl, descended from slaves’ was ‘raised by a single mother’. McGrath makes clear to us that the poet has overcome many obstacles in her life, and this demands our admiration. The writer’s style never becomes didactic and she allows the reader to come to their own conclusions with her subtly persuasive language. We marvel at a young girl, who despite a speech impediment, began writing ‘to get {her} voice on the page.’

McGrath's laudatory tone is evident throughout the article as she recounts her many accomplishments. The poet's list of achievements are breath-taking and the writer's use of modifier phrases such as 'Not only', 'Also', 'In the same year', makes clear that there is no end to her talents. She is the youngest ever poet laureate, the first ever poet to appear at the Superbowl and she founded a non-profit organisation called One Pen one Page, to name but a few. However McGrath makes clear that Gorman has not become derailed by her success. She shows her humility and indeed her tenacity, through the inclusion of quotations from the poet laureate herself. She tells us that she wanted her words to help 'envision a way in which our country can still come together and heal'. Her integrity and nobility is evident in her words and these again paints a very positive picture of the poet.

Hey to all LC students, past, present and future,

A far cry from my usual content, but I feel compelled to write this letter. I love poetry. I can't be, pardon the pun, more poetic than that. I usually post about fashion, make up and occasionally the secret life of pugs, but they are just different ways of expressing my creativity and expressing, in a sense, artistry. And there is no art form more complete, beautiful and life-affirming than poetry. So to get to the point, why this impassioned plea about the value and relevance of poetry and the importance of its place on the LC English curriculum? Well, there has been a lot of talk lately about making the poetry element of the course optional. I guess some of you are jumping with joy at this prospect, but before you set light to your Plath notes, I'd love you to read the rest of my letter and maybe, just maybe, I'll convince you that there might be some merit to poetry after all.

I wasn't always a poetry fan, quite the opposite really. Like a lot of you, I thought it was a necessary evil and something that had to be endured if you wanted to get enough points for college. It wasn't until the start of fifth year that it began to make sense and my love affair began. I was struggling to understand Hopkins' 'The Windhover' and had an essay due the next day, so I reluctantly asked my college going sister for help. In a moment of rare charity to her annoying younger sister, she sat down with me and gave me some advice. It was simple really. She told me to listen to the words. And then, it happened, I understood. Words that were incomprehensible to me, moments early, made sense, and I could see and hear that 'dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon' in the air before he swooped down for his prey. After that, poetry made sense for me, well most of the time, and it also helped me make sense of my life and gave me a privileged insight into the lives of others.

I really understand why some students rail against the compulsory nature of poetry and resent the fact that they are forced to regurgitate notes about some dude who died two hundred years ago. Thankfully though, the poetry on the course today is more diverse than it was in years gone by, and not all the poets we study are heteronormative dead men. Saying that, there is something to learn from everyone's life experience, dead or alive, straight or gay, and the Leaving Certificate throws opens a world of emotions and culture through all of its poets. The poignancy of Kavanagh's 'A Christmas Childhood' stands proudly with Sylvia Plath's heart-breaking 'Child' as a moving evocation of the innocence and sadness of youth. Don't get me wrong, there is room for improvement and more poets of colour and contemporary voices need to be heard, but to make it optional rather than to increase the choice of poets, is to deny a generation of students the opportunity to hear their experiences reflected in verse.

Students need poetry in their lives. The leaving certificate is gruelling and so too is being a teenager. Poems have the ability to make us feel less alone. It helps to know that there is someone else out there who too has experienced depression, unrequited love or maybe just the joy of a first kiss. These emotions are universal, but all too often we keep them to ourselves as we fear others won't understand. Poetry is catharsis, free therapy and a portal wherein we can explore the world. Sure, some of the poems we study deal with experiences that might not have entered our lives yet, such as the death of a loved one or the breakup of a relationship, but those will most likely be in our future. And when those hard times come, we will remember our school days, and reach for the words of Heaney or Rich to comfort us and remind us that we are not alone.

So there you have it fellow students, I have pinned my colours to the mast. I strongly believe that poetry should continue to be a compulsory part of the Leaving Certificate curriculum. I think our lives are richer because of it and its removal would be a huge loss. I would love you to let me know what your thoughts are, so please post any comments you have below and let's get this conversation started.

Yours in poetry,

Grace

(i)

In the extract, we learn from both Gatti and Okri, how music is a powerful force in our lives. Gatti tells us that music ‘can alter the architecture of our minds’ and how they become ‘faithful companions’ that last a lifetime. Okri makes a similar point and he too realises that music has the power to ‘become part of the décor and mood of a life’. In fact, Okri contends that he no longer needs to listen to Miles Davis’ ‘Kind of Blue’ to realise its hold over him, as ‘it is always playing somewhere inside me, in a constant spirit loop’. Both authors explore how music is an integral part of their lives.

Okri also reveals how music can help mould our lives and direct us on our journey in life. He describes how at seventeen years of age and having somewhat of an existential crisis, Miles Davis’ music ‘passed into the silence of the mind’ and guided him, ‘through the turns and revelations of life’, to where he is now. We learn that it helps him in his own creative endeavours and while writing his novel ‘The Famished Road’, ‘Kind of Blue’ always brought him ‘back home.’

We are also shown how music has the power to transport you back to a certain time and place. It contains and distils memories and the best music, like Miles Davis’ record, is a ‘moment of recollection’. Okri agrees that this ‘tender lament’ is a ‘urban song of praise’ and ‘a wild choral hymn’, but most importantly, it is Miles Davis recalling ‘a time when he was back in the South and heard music floating over the house late in the night.’

(ii)

Music has magical powers and the ability to transcend time and place. Whenever I hear The Cranberries' 'Dreams', I am immediately transported to my Granny's kitchen in Limerick in 2018, as the smell of freshly baked scones and Delores O'Riordan's voice are woven together in my memory. I was thirteen, maybe fourteen at the time, and I can remember my mam and her three sisters crying, singing and at times dancing, as they recalled why this brilliant artist and her plaintive songs meant so much to them. The singer had died that day, and although I only heard her music on car journeys down to my Granny's, I know that her songs and lilting voice will remind of my mam and her sisters forever.

Don't get me wrong, I love books and films, and have very fond memories of being read Roald Dahl's 'The Witches', or David Walliams 'Gangster Granny' by my dad, inspiring a love of books that I hope will last a lifetime. I am deeply passionate about reading, as I am about films, and some definitely stay with you for a long time. However, nothing ignites my soul like music. I remember the first time I heard Billie Eilish's 'Bad Guy' and I felt like here was someone whose irreverence and energy spoke out loud to me. All the teenage angst, frustration and creativity that I longed to explore, was reflected in the words and rhythm of her music, in a way BTS and the music my friends and I were listening to then, never did.

I love the music that I was brought up on, the music I discovered on my own and the music that I am yet to hear. It is part of my life, part of my journey and I don't think my world would be as rich or meaningful without it.

(iii)

It is no surprise to learn that Ben Okri is an award winning novelist. He writes with a poet's eye and expresses emotions and ideas with a lyricism and honesty that helps the reader understand the importance and brilliance of Miles Davis's record. He uses beautiful metaphors and similes to show how music can sometimes become 'woven into' our lives 'like clouds in the sky, or trees along a road'. The verb woven and nature imagery fills the text with colours, blues, greens and white, and it seems as though we are looking at a painting or tapestry.

His recollection of the first time 'Kind of Blue' made 'itself real in {his} life', is written with beautiful honesty and clarity. His anecdote brings alive the atmosphere of that 'rainy morning in Lagos', when 'the music passed into the silence of the mind'. He writes with an elegant simplicity to show how although nothing remarkable happened that day, he had just been sitting in his house and thinking 'all that morning while it rained', the decision he made 'led, through the turns and revelations of life, to where I am now, and where I will be tomorrow.'

He mentions the rain for the third time, and the repetition transports us to that day in Lagos in the 1970s. "The day there was Miles and Mozart and the rain and the smells and muted sounds of the ghetto where we had temporarily found ourselves'. The use of anaphora with the repetition of the word 'and', engages the reader and also gives a dreamlike feel to the sentence and the memory. He also uses spiritual language to show how Davis' music become intertwined with his own soul. His music passed into the 'sonic space' and now is in 'a constant spirit loop'.

He again uses sensuous language to explain to the reader why 'Kind of Blue' 'is considered one of the greatest albums ever recorded'. He extols the virtues of the record using abstract nouns and emotive language that truly engage the reader. He tells us that it is not just 'a wild choral hymn for the lost souls that need soothing' and the sibilant 's' sounds and religious imagery highlight its importance both to Okri and to music. The lyricism of the metaphor that describes the album as a 'heartfelt cool breeze on the hot skins of those who walked the narrow paths of the cities' is pure poetry and appeals to the senses.

His language is rich throughout and never more poignant than when he describes the sorrow and calm 'in the trumpet glissandos' that 'pierces the bones'. Through the lyricism of his writing, Okri convinces us not just of his own love for the album but that it is indisputably 'the perfect distillation of a spirit, a time and a genius.'

Hi, I'm Ella Fraser and I am delighted to have been invited on 'The Music Playing in Me' to discuss the songs and albums that helped shape me, sparked my creativity and consoled me through hard times. Eighteen years of age and there is a song for each one of those, for my first romance, my sad days, my bad days and everything in between. Music has informed my life and provided me with a soundtrack that never discriminates - there's hard rock, cheesy pop and the occasional trad ballad. I am really looking forward to whiling away the afternoon with you talking about and listening to 'the music playing in me.'

I am going back to well before I was born for my first choice and that's Fleetwood Mac's 'Rumours'. I honestly cannot remember a time where I could not sing along, not always in tune, to Stevie Nick's lilting voice in 'Dreams'. That song, along with 'Go Your Own Way', 'Songbird' and 'You Make Loving Fun', is my childhood. Every car journey, summer holiday with my cousins and Friday pizza night, those songs were belting out and they are pure sunshine to me. They connect me with my younger self, with my mum and step-dad, and remind me of how lucky I was to have the upbringing I did, and a mother with great musical taste. In 2015, my step-dad surprised me with tickets to their concert in The Three Arena. It was my first ever gig, and it felt like a whole new world had just opened up to me. I was only twelve, and definitely the youngest person there, but to see your heroes live singing the songs of your childhood, was truly magical. So here you go, I'm going to put the needle down on my first track now, and may it transport you somewhere wonderful.

I hope you enjoyed listening to that but now I am going to fast forward a few decades for my next artist. It is hard for me to explain how important Taylor Swift's music has been on my life. Her unapologetic pop anthems like 'Shake it Off', 'We are Never Ever Getting Back Together' and 'Bad Blood', help me wash any bad day off as I dance around my room with Tay Tay's rocking tunes blaring. Taylor's music -we are, in case you were wondering, on first name terms – is not escapist bubble-gum and her tunes navigate growing up, falling in love and heartbreak. She is also not afraid to get political and one of my favourite songs is 'You Need to Calm Down'. She dismisses all the haters, the homophobes and the internet trolls who try to pit female artists against one another, with the pithy words in the title. She reminds us that 'we've all got crowns' and that the only life worth living is a life where you can be your authentic fabulous self. Taylor is an ally and uses her voice for others and that is why I invite you to sit back and listen to three and half minutes of pop brilliance.

Welcome back, hope you're still with me, and enjoying listening to the music that makes up the soundtrack to my life. I am going to stay with Taylor for my next track, one song was never going to be enough to truly explain her influence on me and the role her music plays in my life. 'Lover', I think, is one of the best songs ever written. A bold statement I know, but I can back it up. 2019, just before Covid hit, and I fell in love, head over hills in love, 'obsessing over every text and emoji' love. I was sure I was the only person in the world who ever felt that way, and then I started listening to that beautiful song over and over again. How did Taylor know? Had she read my diary, stolen my thoughts? I wanted to be with this person 'forever and ever', and the song evoked every butterfly in my stomach, every flutter of excitement when they walked in the room. The relationship didn't last, and the song then became my healing, as I listened to it on repeat and cried. It doesn't make me sad anymore, but it does make me wish for a future that consists of the kind of love that Taylor describes in 'Lover'.

Alright my music family, that beautiful song brings me to the end of the first half. I'll be back shortly with some more tunes from Bruno Mars, Blur and The Beatles, quite the eclectic mix, as I delve further into the music that has made up my life.

(i)

In this extract from Hugo Hamilton's novel 'The Pages' we learn how books have the power to disrupt, to challenge authority and instil both hatred and love in people's hearts.

Joseph Roth's novel *Rebellion* acts as the narrator in this text, one of the few novels that escapes the Nazi book burning in 1933. As he watches the other books from the library burning on the fire, we sense the utter waste as 'these human thought roads' are turned into 'worthless heat'. It is clear that the narrator believes that these books teach us about our humanity and the wanton destruction that is fuelled by hatred and ignorance, is shown as this 'bonfire of life stories' is turned into 'a ghostly recital of absurd phrases.'

Furthermore, we are given an insight into the ideological power of books. For the students in Berlin in 1933, these 'unwanted books', written by Jewish men and women or anyone who opposed the Nazi regime, were to be destroyed for their immorality. The students 'had an air of triumph' as they railed against 'filth in literature, against sexual freedom, capitalism' and 'Jewish dominance, as they called it.' The students had no respect for the books, and treated them with contempt, tearing them from the library shelves 'like bad teeth'. Hamilton shows through his narrative the power of books and the strong emotions they can instil in people.

Conversely, we see how books can take a hold in our hearts and some people go to great lengths to protect them. Roth's '*Rebellion*', and our narrator in this extract, returns to Berlin years later with the granddaughter of his one-time saviour. The safety of his journey back home to Germany, contrasts with the secretive mode of his departure. Lena Knecht, stores him safely in her hand luggage, to bring him home. She cares for him, the way her grandfather's lecturer David Gluckstein did too, by entrusting him to one 'of his trusted students' for safe-keeping. Lena's grandfather risked a lot for the sake of this book, but 'he set in motion a quiet wave of resistance' that changed the 'course of people's lives.'

It is clear from this extract that books have a tremendous power and the ability to evoke a variety of emotions in their readers and their detractors.

(ii)

Many of the greatest writers and thinkers in our world have been subject to censorship. Perhaps it is because the purpose of art is to hold a mirror up to society, and often that same society is not comfortable with the reflection it sees staring back at them. We don't need to look to the book burnings in Nazi Germany in order to see how dissenting ideas and voices of protest are denounced if they go against the prevailing morality of the time.

You'd never think that James Joyce, one of our most fêted writers, had to leave Ireland in order to fulfil his creative destiny. There was no space in a Catholic, conservative country for an author who was not afraid to expose the darkness that lay beneath the surface. Although his masterpiece 'Ulysses' was not officially censored by the state, he was effectively exiled or 'cancelled' for daring to speak about sexuality, abuse and alcoholism, issues that ravaged that nation but were meant to be kept hidden.

'Ulysses' was published a hundred years ago but things do not seem to have gotten any better. In fact, it is fair to say that 'censorship' and indeed 'cancel culture', has stifled debate and therefore understanding. You only have to look at the library in Cork to see the disastrous consequences that come when one group of people try to silence another. It was forced to shut down due to safety concerns, after an anti-LGBTQI+ protest group mounted a banner across the entrance without permission.

The idea that we cancel or censor voices that we do not agree with is entirely problematic. We need to listen to one another's viewpoints if we are ever to progress as a society. However, there is a difference between respectful debate and vitriol, and those who spout hate and violate another's right to safety and freedom of expression, have to face the consequences, even if that is 'cancellation'.

(iii)

The narrative voice in Hugo Hamilton's novel 'The Pages' is a stroke of genius. The personification of the book 'Rebellion' and its role as our narrator, is effective as it intensifies the drama and helps show the reader the devastating consequences of this 'bonfire of life stories.' The extract opens with our narrator 'Rebellion', safely ensconced in Lena Knecht's 'hand luggage'. The book is presented as precious, someone we need to protect. Consequently, as the non-linear narrative goes back to Berlin in 1933, we fear for 'Rebellion's safety and the safety of all those 'unwanted books' that were on the endangered list.

Having forged a connection with the narrator and the reader, Hamilton then uses vivid imagery and sensuous language to describe the book burning. The violence of the scene is made more harrowing as we realise the narrator has to watch while his friends, the other books, are set alight. Their stories are 'turned into worthless heat', and the prose from their texts becomes 'a ghostly recital of absurd phrases'. The language gives a nightmarish feel to the text, and we are transported to a dystopian world, where great works of literature 'dissolve into vapours in one long silent scream of pity'. The piercing sound of the scream, reminds the reader that these are not just pieces of paper that are burning, but the consciousness of a people.

If 'Rebellion' is the protagonist in this extract, then the students are the antagonists and Hamilton brings them to life in terrifying detail. Not one of the students burning the books is named, but they are portrayed as a hysterical mob, who revel in their act of violence. We are told they had 'an air of triumph' and are delighted to 'take part in a glorious act of self-vandalism'. The mob mentality of the students is also reflected in the characterisation of the onlookers. They too take on a demonic appearance as the books burn. 'Their eyes turned jet black'. Their lips were green'. They inhaled the 'pungent paper smoke' that smelt like 'burning hair'. The graphic details disturb our senses and faithfully evoke the horror of that evening.

In the last paragraph of the extract, the tone shifts and we are presented with Joseph Goebbels' interpretation of the 'cleansing action'. Goebbels' clinical language and indifference to the wanton destruction is juxtaposed with the violence and horror of the previous paragraph. 'He said it was the end of Jewish supremacy in literature. He spoke about the will of the people.' His callous and cruel words are chilling and highlight the barbarity of the book burning.

Hamilton's use of characterisation, narrative voice, vivid imagery and contrast are effective in creating a dramatic and disturbing account of the book burning of 1933.

Heinrich Heine –‘those who burn books will in the end burn people’

It is with a heavy heart and profound sadness that I am writing this editorial today. Yesterday, May 12 2033, thousands congregated outside Capitol buildings in Washington DC, to watch and cheer as the words, stories and ideas of our greatest writers and thinkers went up in flames. America is, no longer, the land of the free. This great beacon of democracy, where people fled in their droves to escape the violence of war, deprivation and poverty, has now become a land that is ruled by fear and intimidation. It is no longer a safe place for the LGBTQI+ community, for our Jewish and Muslim citizens or for anyone who doesn't adhere to a rigid and oppressive interpretation of Christianity. We are burning books now and I am desperately afraid of what this means for the future of our country.

A hundred years ago, in Bebelplatz, Berlin, Nazi students burned the burnt the works of dozens of independent authors, philosophers and academics. Some eighty years later, I stood on that same square and looked down at “The Empty Library, a deeply moving memorial to the ideas that were so shamelessly set alight that day. Underneath the ground a series of bookshelves, enough to hold the 20,000 books that were burned, lie empty. It chilled me to my bones and I remember thinking how lucky I was to be born in a time and place where this would never happen. But here we are.

Those empty shelves reminded me, and all of its visitors before and since, of how harmful and dangerous it is to try and rid the world of independent thought. If you take away our ability to dissent, to share our voices or our lived experience, then you take away our freedom. It really is as simple as that. By telling people what they are allowed and not allowed to think or feel, you are refusing them their humanity, their individuality. We know from our history, that when we stop seeing each other as humans, we are capable of unimaginable horrors. It is no coincidence therefore, that above the ‘Empty Library’, on a plaque on the wall, there is a quote by a famous German writer warning us that “where they burn books, they will also burn people.”

There is no place in any democracy for this kind of fanaticism and zealotry. It threatens the safety and freedom of its citizens and undermines the first amendment. We have to take a stand. We have no choice now. I urge all of our readers to make their voices heard. Write to your politicians, protest outside government buildings and make sure that every law maker in this country knows that we will not stand by and watch our democracy crumble. America is not, and never will be, a country that burns books.

Sweat beads down my face despite the cold metal of the suffocating ventilation shaft pressing against my body. Every breath must be controlled, shallow and quiet, each exhale measured to avoid giving away my position. Dust clings to my clothes, making the air thick and hard to breathe, but the fear below keeps me frozen in place.

The sound of heavy boots echoes through the library. The Nazi supporters are searching, their voices harsh, barking commands in a language that fills the space with dread. Shelves of books loom below like silent witnesses, as men pace between them, rage plastered across their faces. They flick through books, then slam them shut, searching for the same thing I am.

That's the only similarity I have with them.

A cough rises in my throat, desperate to be suppressed. I bite down hard, eyes wide with terror. The thin metal of the vent creaks slightly as I shift my weight, and for a heart-stopping second, one of the men looks up. My heart thrashes against my chest, pounding so hard it feels like it might give me away. I hold my breath, the world going still.

After a moment, the man looks away and continues his search.

Every second feels like an eternity, trapped in this steel box of silence and fear, with only a few feet of space between life and death. A loud bang from the hallway next door echoes through the library, summoning the supported that loom below me. Dozens of heavy footsteps rush out of the room, leaving my heart beat as the only noise heard above the sweet silence.

I sigh a breath of relief when the metal groans again and the vent buckles below my weight before it bursts open. It's a short drop, but it feels endless—a blur of fear and disorientation. The impact is sharp and unforgiving. I hit the floor hard, gasping as the air is knocked from my lungs. Pain radiates through my body, sharp and blinding. For a moment, everything is still, the world spinning as I lie crumpled on the cold floor.

Books scatter from the nearby shelves, dislodged by the impact. My body feels heavy, as if every limb is filled with lead. The nearby shout of an order followed by a stampede of footsteps in my directions causes my adrenaline to spike, numbing my pain for a moment, long enough to heave myself up and duck behind a nearby shelf.

I peek through a creak in the bookshelf to spot six or seven nazi supporters burst through the door. One crouches down to experience the now broken vent that lays where I fell as dust falls like silent ash around them.

The leaders cold eyes narrow and raises his hand.

"Find him",

He hisses through gritted teeth. On command, the men begin to disperse around the room. One of them pauses near the very end of the row, just feet away, and I bites down on my lip to keep from breathing too loudly.

Books shift slightly as the tall, muscular figure taps the shelf, looking for any sign of life. I tuck myself deeper into the corner, pulling my knees close, making myself as small as possible. Sweat drips down my forehead, my body trembling from a mix of fear and pain.

A flashlight beam cuts through the rows of books, grazing over my hiding spot but just missing me. The light illuminates dust motes in the air, casting long shadows, but the darkness remains my ally for now. The figure grunts and moves on, leaving me trapped in a suffocating silence once more.

Footsteps echo through the aisles, knocking over chairs and pulling down books as they search. Every second feels like an eternity, and I dare my feet to shuffle further down the aisle. Staying low, I press my damp back against a shelf and peek around the corner.

The coast is clear, and I creep toward a familiar shelf, and reach my hand behind the books that line the front of the shelf. My fingers clasp around a hidden novel, retrieving it from its hiding space tucked deep within the shadows.

Intricate lettering spells out the word 'Rebellion' on the tattered front cover. I tuck the denounced novel in the safety of my jacket and begin plotting my escape.

I waits until the terrifying footsteps retreat, and the moment I sense a lull in the search, I make my move. Every muscle protests as I rise to a crouch, the pain from the fall still pulsing through my limbs, but fear drives me forward. Slowly, silently, I begin to creep through the aisles each step deliberate and cautious.

The towering shelves cast deep shadows, providing cover, but also creating a maze of uncertainty. The supporters are still nearby, their boots clomping on the wooden floor, but the aisles muffle some of the sound. I creep from shadow to shadow, staying low, eyes constantly scanning the room for any sign of movement. My breath comes in quiet, shallow gasps, each step carefully placed to avoid the creak of the floorboards beneath me.

A flashlight beam sweeps across a nearby row, and I freezes, pressing myself against the shelf. The light dances past, missing me by inches. My pulse quickens, but I stay motionless, waiting for the beam to fade before continuing.

The library seems impossibly vast, the exit farther away with every step. The weight of every book, every shelf, presses down on me, the silence thick and oppressive.

I have to keep moving.

I inch forward, every sense heightened. My palms brush the spines of books as I crawl between the shelves, using them to steady my balance. The air feels tight with tension, as if the entire room is holding its breath alongside me.

Voices drift closer again. Two men argue quietly, their voices clipped and angry. I duck behind a row of chairs, waiting for them to pass. My body is trembling from a mix of pain, adrenaline, and exhaustion, but I can't stop now.

The exit is so close.

I can see the back door at the far end of the library now, a faint sliver of hope, barely visible through the maze of shelves. It feels like a mirage—impossibly far, but just within reach. I pause, eyes locked on the door, calculating the remaining distance.

There's no time for mistakes.

With one last glance back at the nazi supporters, I make my move. I slink toward the exit, quicker now, darting between shelves and low tables, keeping low. The door inches closer with every painful step.

They can almost taste freedom, when a hand grips my shoulder tightly, forcing a shriek of pain from the depths of my chest.

“Where do you think you're going?”

Fashion is our way of telling the world about ourselves without having to speak.

The twenty-first century has fostered an era of dynamic fashion trends which are more dominant in society than ever before. Fashion is no longer seen merely as a means of warmth and protection for our bodies, but rather, the essence of identity, values and beliefs. In accordance with the Sunday Gazette's leading headline this week stating that "companies report rapid surge in sales as society begins to reopen," this article will explore our preoccupation with fashion and the version of ourselves that we emanate through our fashion choices.

Fashion is often thought of as a frivolous or superficial phenomenon. However, this notion is far from the truth! Fashion can serve as an outlet for creativity, an unrestricted medium through which we can express our authenticity. How many other opportunities do we get in our lives where we possess the capacity to make our own decisions without any limitation? Whether it is the government obligating us to socially distance, our teachers or bosses ordering us to complete assignments or our parents restricting our screen time, these expectations from authorities' figures can make us feel as though we are being restricted in all aspects of our lives. It is for this reason that I believe we, as a society, sense such a strong gravitational pull towards fashion. Deviating from what is considered to be "the norm" enables us to engineer a unique, original version of ourselves. It is an art, a deep form of expression which provides scope for self actualisation and discovery. It allows us to embrace our individuality, presenting to the world, our proudest, most honest version of ourselves.

Fashion can be perceived as a means of unification in our society. As human beings, we are naturally drawn to the new and the novel, a feeling of change and perhaps, progress. A sense of belonging and feeling included in something recognisable is of utmost importance to us and there is no more obvious way to achieve this objective than through partaking in the latest fashion trends. Wearing a pair of shoes or outfit resembling that of one endorsed by a popular influencer can fill us with pleasure and exude confidence. However, keeping up to date with what is currently considered "fashionable" can have detrimental consequences if we do this for the wrong reasons. Conforming to what is deemed "fashionable" with the sole intention of avoiding being ostracised by peers for wearing anything alternative is commonplace in society today. Feeling that we must adopt an insincere facade simply to mask our true selves can imply that we have yet to reach a state of self-fulfilment.

The commendable capability of fashion to communicate some of our deeply held beliefs and values entices us to engage with it. The beauty and sense of fashion mesmerises so many of us as it enables us to non-verbally express our personal values. Sustainability enthusiasts, for example, are prime utilisers of this power. By identifying a fashionable garment such as an oversized T-shirt and customising it to coincide with their beliefs can outwardly and non-verbally express their care for the planet. This can be achieved by investing only in sustainably produced fashion items, or more directly, by wearing clothing or accessories containing promotional messages or hyperbolic images of our world degenerating.

Similarly, there is an essential harmony between fashion and our religious values. Through fashion, we are presented with the opportunity to develop our own style, celebrating and reflecting our spirituality. We may, for example, choose to wear a pair of earrings resembling the shape of the Christian cross, or a hat with the Star of David embroidered onto it. By doing so, we can simultaneously carry our beliefs with us at all times and share with those around us, our dearest, most meaningful beliefs. While faith is not something that should be hijacked for the sake of fashion, its capacity, if embraced correctly, can share with the world our religious beliefs.

Our fashion choices send powerful signals to our peers, projecting the image of ourselves that we want to convey and the way in which we want to be perceived. Yet how many of us truly understand the psychology of how others interpret these and how this impression might differ to the one that we believe we are conveying to them? 'Expensive fashion taste' has become increasingly desirable in our society today. Many of us have been brainwashed into believing that wearing anything other than designer branded clothing is socially unacceptable, an excellent exemplification of how irrational society can be. While some of us consider it a reward for all of our hard work, others engage in this for one ill-intended purpose which is to convey an image of wealth. Although we may not realise it, purchasing designer branded items for the sole purpose of trying to build a perception of admirable economic well-being among others is often derived from insecurity and accentuates our weaknesses. We are letting the opinions of others prevail and stunting our growth as individuals.

Furthermore, our fixation on luxurious, fashionable items can underscore our inconsiderate attitudes towards those who are of lower socioeconomic status. Nowadays, whether we wear a pair of tracksuit bottoms or a simple T-shirt, often it is no longer an anonymous piece of comfort clothing, but rather an opportunity to show how up-to-date we are with what is currently in fashion and consequently, how much we can afford to spend. High fashion spending habits have engulfed and redefined the mainstay items of low fashion and in doing so, heightened the sartorial divide between the upper and lower class. They expose our insensitivity to the less fortunate and suggest that we may need to reflect on and re-align our priorities.

You needn't be a fashionista nor a Paris Fashion Week regular to be aware of the all-encompassing role fashion plays in the twenty-first century. It is a language which tells a story about the person who embraces it. The fashion industry stimulates society, presenting us with an opportunity to pioneer our own identity and show the world who we really are. However, it can also give rise to overwhelming pressures to conform as instigate feelings of exclusivity which uncovers society's crueller side

We as a human race can undoubtedly be described as social beings, consequently we all are, for better or for worse, influenced by voices other than our own. This has become unarguably even more prevalent in our fast-paced, industrialized, social media infested modern-day society. This can only be due to the overwhelmingly popular idea that everyone must voice their opinions at all times whether it be via a snappy tweet or by engaging in a disruptive protest or even posting a critical review online about a certain eatery that didn't cater to your every need. This new 'social norm' greatly contrasts previous centuries where phrases such as 'children should be seen and not heard' and 'don't question the teachings of the church,' were heard all too often. The powerful voice that shaped the population during that era was predominantly the catholic church in Ireland. However, that is definitely not the case anymore, our influential voices have shifted from the teachings of the church to the plethora of voices we have conditioning us in modern day society.

One of these powerful voices that would immediately spring to the mind of any crazed Harry Styles fan or avid Kardashian lover would be the strong wealthy voices of celebrities. Laden down with money, awards and status, celebrities also have the power to persuade society in a multitude of ways. To name an example, the latest trend set by nepotism baby Hailey Bieber are these fabulous opaque glittery nails. Only two days after she unveiled her new nails, the same exact ones were worn by the masses. Is there anything overwhelmingly special about these nails, or are they made popular through the influence of celebrity voices? I will let you decide dear reader. Opinions and suggestions influence our style, choice of restaurant, what shoes we wear and what is classed as 'trendy'. Our famous singers, popstars and DJ's influence music daily by releasing new music and dominating top charts. These people can be role models, inspirations and idols that young kids look up to and adore, as such they have a prominent prestige over the next generation. As a civilization by following, admiring and creating their popularity we have given celebrities wealth, fame and a prominent role in our society. Businesses and companies see this and utilize it to their advantage by paying for celebrity endorsement and promotion.

As the well-known saying goes 'with great power comes great responsibility,' this is a saying that I think to be true. The influence of the wealthy upper class that grips our nation isn't necessarily always positive. These celebrities have a considerable responsibility, their words and actions have an influence on a young impressionable generation. The phrase 'nothing tastes as good as skinny feels' that was coined by supermodel Kate Moss nicknamed 'Cocaine Kate' isn't exactly a beneficial idea to be implanting in the heads of the many adolescents who idolize her. This concept of the beautiful skinny model alters society's views on attractiveness. This pressure of 'stick thin beauty' promoted by celebrities can put an immense strain on the self-esteem of teenagers. I vividly remember as a twelve-year-old impressionable naive young girl flipping through 'Hello magazine' and reverently staring at the pages which showcased toned skinny models alongside articles describing how you can diet to achieve their picture perfect, airbrushed bodies 'the perfect bodies' according to the influential media. These societal beauty standards which stem from the powerful voices of celebrities can have a strong negative impact on a person's wellbeing and perception of themselves.

Not a single person can fault me if I brazenly state that technology and social media have taken over our lives. Celebrities have more prestige than ever before in our modern world due to the most compelling, dominant voice that society has ever dealt with, social media and technology. Some say that we have become slaves to the phones we created, I wouldn't disagree with this statement in the slightest. Technology is the most prominent force in the majority of people's lives. Ask yourself when the last time was that you went a day without your phone? If you are similar to me a date will evade you, I cannot recall a single day that I have not checked, opened and used my mobile phone in the past five years! We have developed into less social beings because of it. As a human race we are designed to be social creatures. However, take a step onto a luas bus or train and observe how antisocial we can really be. Headphones in ears, neck craning downwards staring at the little rectangular device embedded into a hand is the daily image of nearly anyone on any form of public transport. The actions are almost robotic, and the sight has an eerie feel to it when you truly step back and recognize the influence these small devices have over us. Our attention spans have been seriously altered due to social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Sixty second videos with an algorithm that is designed to assure that you keep scrolling has greatly affected all our attention spans. How many times have you taken a break from homework or a chore to go on your phone only to end up getting lost scrolling for hours through the plethora of meaningless Instagram photos, memes, twitter comments, funny cat videos and so much more. It is a minefield one simple swipe, and you are sucked into the never-ending cycle of scrolling.

Political parties and political ideologies have also gained more voice and influence through social media. The greatest most absurd example is Donald Trump, the previous president of America who took to Twitter and Facebook to spread all of his radical right-wing views, evoke anger and hatred in his subjects and instigating riots and hate speech. Politics in general is a powerful voice that has, for thousands of years, been very influential on society. Different political parties have various policies and policy positions. Overall, they persuade the consolidation of democratic political regimes. We as a democratic country in Ireland vote them in and they play a decisive role in making laws, greatly influencing the way society is governed. Now, more than ever in this fanatical society, people's political views have a great power over their lives. Take a look at the extremists in America who completely contradict themselves by being 'anti-abortion' but at the same time also 'anti-gun control' and pro death penalty. The powerful voice of political ideologies sways their beliefs so strongly that they are too blind to see that they are disproving their own beliefs. God forbid an unborn fetus is aborted but it is acceptable to turn a blind eye to the young kids that are getting brutally shot in school shootings because to own a gun is a 'constitutional right.' Their political beliefs are so flawed but because of the strong influence they have morality seems to be overlooked.

A more recent impromptu influence on society in comparison to the deep-rooted power of political ideologies is the Covid-19 Pandemic. It was a very strange unforeseen powerful voice that influenced society in many ways that we could never have suspected. Never have we felt so vulnerable, our everyday habits and everyday workings in the world were changed in a matter of weeks. We converted from attending school daily to learning online, from working in offices to working from home, from breathing in fresh air to breathing through the restrictive material of masks and most significantly we went from feeling strong and healthy as a society to feeling scared and significantly more mortal. The outbreak of a deadly virus and the many adjustments that accompanied it greatly influenced us all. We became noticeably even more dependent on technology than ever before due to our inability to be within two meters of one another. Whether it be zoom to conduct meetings, facetime to see friends or Netflix to help entertain us as the same isolated, monotone days passed by. There is no denying that technology was more prominent in everyday life than ever before. We were also encouraged to be less tactile, even now as we are moving further and further away from the threat of the virus, I still notice that hugging and handshakes are not as common as they once were. Lastly, the pandemic's greatest influence on society is greatly seen in the immense feeling of uncertainty and powerlessness, we now feel more vulnerable as a civilization. For so long we believed or felt as though we were untouchable, we have all been somewhat shaken by this new shift in realization that we are not indestructible.

Overall, there are plenty of voices all around us every day influencing us in one way or another. They vary from century to century depending on the economic state of society, the advances made in technology and just generally what is prominent, fashionable or strongly impactful at the time such as the unforeseen covid pandemic. No matter how confident and self-assured you are as a person there will always be outer factors and voices that will subconsciously or consciously influence your daily life. Even something as simple as the top you picked to wear this morning was actually Influenced by celebrity fashion trends, large fashion companies, designers and much more. Powerful voices will always be influential on everyone in society and society as a whole. Malala Yousafzai quotes 'when the whole world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful.' A powerful voice in society could one day be mine or yours if we have the courage to speak out and voice our opinions.

My finger traces the frayed edges of the dusty vinyl cover, the exposed cardboard fluff of each tear tickling my skin. I examine the intricately drawn raven that dominated the cover, black as ink, its feathers rendered in harsh, jagged strokes that seem to flicker and shift under the dim light. Its beak is parted ever so slightly, as though it might speak, but the silence is thick, hanging in the air like a forgotten secret. My eyes wander curiously to the title, scrawled in faded gold lettering that curls around the bird's talons, the letters cracked and worn.

'The Last Song'.

As I slide the record from its weathered case, a faint cackle like brittle leaves fills the air. I notice its once shiny surface has been dulled by a layer of dust, so I gently blow on the surface, sending a puff of dust spiralling into the dim light. It swirls lazily before vanishing, leaving behind an earthy taste in the air, a mix of old paper, musty wood, and the ghost of forgotten years.

I creep down the hallway, passing the cardboard boxes stuffed with paintings my grandfather meticulously crafted before he was cursed with arthritis, the vibrant oil paints diminished to murky, grey shades.

I clasp the rusty doorknob and enter my grandfather's music room. The nostalgic scent of aging wood and worn leather infiltrated my nostrils like soldiers on a battlefield, filling my lungs with the perfume of my childhood. The room feels frozen in time, suspended in a quiet reverence. Dust hangs in the air like delicate cobwebs, caught in the fading afternoon light that filters through half-drawn curtains.

My feet wander to the turntable, sitting proudly on a vintage wooden stand in the corner of the room, the needle resting gently on its arm, still poised as though ready to play its next record. A tangle of wires snakes across the floor, connecting to an old amplifier with knobs worn smooth by years of use. One of the dials is stuck on my grandfather's favourite station, long gone static now.

Despite the amount of time I spent trapped in this room, being forced by my stubborn grandfather to listen to records with him, 'The Last Song' evades the clutches of my memory.

Gently, I place the mystery vinyl in its player and initiate the needles slow descent.

As dreary notes dance around the room, I mosey over to the shelves that sag under the weight of old vinyl records, CDs, and cassette tapes. I flick through a collection of records, their spines cracked and faded, the titles barely legible beneath layers of dust. Some of the vinyl sleeves are yellowed with time, others bent at the corners from years of handling.

The music is interrupted when the vinyl jumps and my vision is blinded by a bright, white light.

My hands race to rub my eyes, but before I can open them, the perfume of wet grass and gunpowder greets my nostrils. Adrenaline begins to race through my veins and I force my eyes open. A heavy rifle sits in my lap as I crouch in the mud.

I can just about make out the music of distant gunfire and shouted orders over the deafening thud of my heart against the inside of my chest.

Too petrified to move, my eyes dart to a man head to toe in camouflage, although its barely visible under the concoction of blood and mud smeared all over him. He clasps the silver cross that hangs from his neck in his scabbed hands and murmurs something low.

His whispers get louder until I can just about hear the notes of a familiar, drab song.

With the bang of a nearby grenade my vision explodes into bursts of white lights and I'm brought back to the familiarity of the spinning music room.

A sharp pain strikes my head, starting at the temples, a pounding throb that pulses in rhythm with each cursed note of the song.

My sight still blurry, I stagger towards the sound of music. As I near the wretched vinyl player, a fold in the worn carpet grabs by foot, and throws me into a nearby shelf, lined with delicately handcrafted war planes, that soon accompany me on the itchy carpet.

My head spinning, I desperately attempt to rebalance myself, but ghostly bursts of brightness like sudden cracks of lightning in a clear night sky—unexpected and sharp, steal my sight.

In contrast to last time, the first thing I hear is a symphony of suffering—groans, the beeping of monitors, and the hurried whispers of medics scrambling from bed to bed. As soon as I sit up, a mind numbing pain that spreads from my right abdomen forces a helpless cry from the depths of my lungs.

I still on the cot, not daring to move, the sterile white sheets stark against the deep red stain spreading from my bandaged side. My chest rose and fell in shallow, uneven breaths, each one a battle in itself. My uniform hung in tatters—blood-soaked, torn, and smeared with dirt and ash. The metallic scent of blood clung to the air, mixing with the sharp tang of antiseptics, creating a pungent reminder of the fragility of life in the chaos of war.

Next to me, the low hum of machinery that once pulsed in rhythm with the subdued murmurs of the wounded, grew to a rapid, alarming pattern, that beat even faster than my pounding heart. Through my gradually blurring sight, I could just about make out a scurry of nurses rushing to my aid, their faces plastered with distress, streaked with grime and sweat.

The distant melody from the player slowly grew, drowning out the worried mutters and frightening beeps, until blinding fireworks, once again, dart across my vision like shooting stars, too quick to follow, too elusive to hold onto.

Im welcomed back to the spinning room by a tidal wave, crashing relentlessly against the walls of my skull. With no time to hesitate, I begin my desperate crawl towards the cursed vinyl, each step in rhythm with the

pulses that felt like a hammer blows, pounding deeper, reverberating from my temples to the base of my neck, making it impossible to think of anything but the agony.

The melody slows, and I can tell the song is approaching the finish line. My nails scratch the wooden table the player rests tauntingly on, using what little strength I have left to heave myself up.

I can reach it.

A sense of relief washes over me. I extend my twitching hand toward the needle, but the final note beats me to the finish, and the room entered a new state of stillness.

The silence was so thick it seemed to have weight, pressing in from all sides, heavy and oppressive. It wasn't the absence of sound but rather the presence of something more—an unnatural stillness that hummed just beneath the surface, making the air feel electric. Every breath felt too loud, every heartbeat echoed in the chest like a drum in an empty hall.

A tear escaped my eye, and the tiny lightning storms infiltrate the corners of my perception.

Then, darkness.