

On Cho's 2nd Act

By Scott Tinley

As both a writer and college writing teacher, I took interest in Virginia Tech student, Sueng-Hui Cho's creative work published online. At first I had to deal with the guilt of "oh, this is the exact thing that the mass killer would've wanted." But placed in the context of trying to decide for myself if the violent content would have warranted enough notice that, had one of my students penned it, I'd be compelled to pass it on to others in the department, Sueng-Hui's work became something beyond a textual analysis. I began to wonder about the larger issues of creative expression on campuses. I wondered if a Cho might've sat in one of my classes.

To begin with, his writing is quite poor, barely acceptable at a beginning high school level. But that's not the point nor is it always the case. On occasion, "edgy" or "guerilla writing" can be quite good, especially when set up against some of the typically banal themes of sex, drugs and unrequited love so pervasive in college creative writing. But Sueng-Hui's work was beyond anything edgy or provocative; it appears as undirected anger in crude and vulgar form. It would be important to not only look at his body of work while enrolled on the campus before making decisions about any potential threat but also his actions. From all reports, the signs were there in several forms for many months.

Some of the VT English professors who had Cho in their classes claim to have tried to speak to him and reported the dark and malicious content to others in the department as well as counseling services and campus police. According to a piece in the April 20th New York Times, several of his professors formed, "what one called a 'task force' to discuss how to handle him, gathering twice on the subject and frequently communicating among themselves." I have no doubt that Cho's professors did an admirable job of trying to convey the seriousness found naked and barren in his text to the appropriate entities. Still, it would not be a grotesque after thought to continually look for signposts in Cho's writing that might've forced further pre-emptive intervention.

What interest me now are the potential ramifications. Will English departments need "word cops" like stealth TSA security agents that travel on airlines? Will students have to submit their work through a filtering software program such as the anti-plagiarism Turn-It-In.com, protocol programs that would spit out a psychological profile of the student and rank them on a numeric scale for "danger to self and society?" The pervasive culture of fear as fueled by the current Bush administration has already had an effect of the production of art in our country. How much good poetry came out of 9-11? When tragedy is commodified as it was, anything else seems trite and opportunistic.

College campuses are one of the last bastions of free and open discourse where people can talk and act across their differences without fear of reprisal. And a creative writing class must emblemize that in its purest form. Still, most writing professors realize that at times their roles morph from textual analysis to psychoanalysis, from a critique of character to a pondering of the author's sanity. Knowing when and how to intervene is a difficult and fluid series of processes.

You cannot simultaneously create and destroy art.

What is crucial though is that student writers, whether real imagined, disturbed or sane, know that someone is listening.

Even in exposure of bad writing, kids need to know that their voices, "however measured or far away" are being heard. I've seen some very disturbing stories and essays come across my desk. And though I have yet to report any of them to department or university authorities, I have always taken the time to ask the student about the motive. We know that at least a few of the Virginia Tech professors also endeavored to engage Sueng-Hui about his work. What we also know is that as university budgets are cut, class sizes are increased and retiring tenured professors are being replaced by less-trained part timers. It takes years of experience to know the difference between *homicidal tendencies* and a student trying to play a bad joke of *shock-them-with this*.

At a minimum, the student writing beyond the edge of anger, macabre and gratuitous violence might first be approached in context of a writer, not as a potential threat. I believe the genealogy of intent is better exposed for further analysis when a student feels that someone

cares about the Big Why of their writing, not just the little what. If you back someone into a corner too quick, they'll come out swinging. The assessment label of "a cry for help," though seemingly sophomoric and overused, turns out to be a good starting point. And the simple definition of insanity is the inability to be heard, to speak and know that the words go away like unread smoke signals.

We may never know the steps taken with Cho Sueng-Hui's now prophetic and violent work. And to in any way excuse or try to explain the malicious act would be a gross disrespect for the victims. But we can certainly use the tragedy to shine a light on the value of the creative processes and the way it might be analyzed for any number of *humanistic*, not academic reasons.

What is fiction but an extension of our life experiences, imaginations, dreams, fears *and* projective actions? Art tells us the inner story of a person's deepest being.

Indeed, who amongst us has not known of the loner, the iconoclastic antisocial, the victimized "other" who returns the favor of exclusion by creating victims in their own demented wake? Sometimes they grow up and find some degree of normality, sometimes they become insanely rich when their software company goes public. And sometimes they just go insane.

The Columbine tragedy brought with it great debate on gun control, teenage anti-depressant medications and Goth culture. But the only legacy of that tragedy is steeped in campus security as if the answer to campus violence is to create higher fences and hired guns in the form of on-campus cops. It waits to be seen what the fall out of Virginia Tech will be. With any luck the discourse will center on students and faculty. Are they over-worked? Are they both given the tools to deal with the vicissitudes of modernity? Are they given a voice that is both heard and understood?

Ursula LeGuin once said that, "only pain is intellectual, evil is interesting. This is the treason of the artist." While writers may be subject to this treason as part of some innate purging inherent to the creative process, we may also have been externally conditioned to think this way, to feel that only real art can shock. Either way, on campuses or on the streets, we should listen to each other's art. And to the artist behind it.

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