Perfection

For my final project I decided to research perfectionism, I wanted to find out whether or not it's good or healthy to be a perfectionist. I recently became aware of how prevalent this mind set was in my life, and I want to discern what that meant for me. The visual aspect of my project, I wanted to paint the emotions I feel as a perfectionist: Envy, Sorrow, Anguish, and Shame.

For two of the five paintings, I used mixed mediums: oil, acrylic, and charcoal for Sorrow, and oil, and charcoal for Anguish. I tried to be as deliberate as possible when it came to color choice and the emotion that is evoked when looked at. For the traditional portrait on the bottom, I did the usual approach by drawing/tracing out what I wanted to paint, and then painting it with caution.

For the others, I allowed myself to let go of my perfectionistic tendencies and head straight for the canvas with no specific plan in mind. Going into my project I had intended to simply represent my emotions through the painting, but later I thought it would be interesting to challenge myself and attempt to create abstract portraits that embody my emotions instead.

I would hope that my piece allows for the viewer to connect on a deeper level with themselves and reflect on their own emotional experience. Doing this project has allowed me to realize how much of my life was affected by perfectionistic tendencies and insecurities. For a majority of my life, I have allowed my fear of failure to impede my growth and prevent me from trying new things. I hope that in sharing this I can reiterate the fact that true success cannot happen without failure.

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Perfectionism

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Most tend to define a perfectionist as someone who's overly confident, and has no fear of failure. They assume that perfectionists have a natural talent for anything that they do, and that they look down at people who don't perform as well as them. This is a common misconception about perfectionists, and how they differ from other people. Experts describe perfectionism as "a combination of excessively high personal standards and overly critical self-evaluations." While those in its grip desire success, they are most focused on avoiding failure, which contributes to a negative approach to success of any kind . External validation serves no purpose for perfectionists either; any form of affection or praise that perfectionists receive are conditional on performance in their eyes. Perfection, of course, is an abstraction, an impossibility, and therefore it is something that perfectionists shouldn't strive for, because they'll never reach it.

The structure that most schools have in this country condition children to believe that their worth, potential, or intelligence can be measured by the numbers and letters that they get for their work. This system had a big impact on how I see myself today. Throughout the majority of my academic career, I have had this incessant feeling that I wasn't doing enough, that wasn't living up to my potential. Perfectionist ideals are encouraged not only in our schools, but in the media as well. Public figures and pop culture dictate what we should and should not accept socially, and of ourselves. These standards are put out into the world, and are accepted without question. People then recognize that they do not meet said standards and conclude that there is something wrong with them when in reality, there is something wrong our social standards. The influence that society has on our cultural view of success and beauty is something that we should be afraid of. With the structure of our schools and what is shown in the

media, younger generations feel that they have no other choice but to compare and meet the unrealistic standards presented to them. White washing and lack of body positivity and representation in TV shows and Movies are just a few examples of how dangerous it is to grow up in our perfectionist society

Perfectionism creates or amplifies all sorts of mental health issues. Being a perfectionist signals a problematic relationship with the self. "It's not a way of thinking, it's a way of being in the world" as Paul Hewitt, Director of Mental Health at York University puts it. At its most basic level, it's about the scrutinization and correction of the self, no matter the cost, and this urge rarely comes from a healthy place: "All components and dimensions of perfectionism ultimately involve attempts to perfect an imperfect self." A 2009 study tracked 450 older Canadians over six and half years, and found that people with higher scores on perfectionism were more likely to die prematurely. Perfectionism can potentially lead to chronic illness, like irritable bowel disease, fibromyalgia, and - heart disease and traumatic brain injury. Additionally, according to a BBC article, *The Dangerous Downsides of Perfectionism,* perfectionism has shown to cause greater symptoms of anxiety, depression and insomnia. Perfectionists do a lot of what Martin M. Antony, PhD, Department of Psychology at Ryerson University refers to in one of his presentations as "emotional preoccupation coping," which is when one laments about what's wrong, and rehashes what could have been otherwise. Yale psychologist Sidney Blatt found perfectionism leads to self-critical depression, and multiple studies have found links between perfectionism and attempted or completed suicide. *According to Medical News Today* over 50% of people who died by suicide were described by their loved ones as "perfectionists." Additionally, more than 70% of young people who died by suicide were in the habit of creating "exceedingly high" expectations of themselves.

Our society is truly to blame for these high expectations that we are subject to. In our country's attempt to create a homogeneous culture, certain social standards are placed and reinforces in our media. There are standards that must be met for every facet of our journey; socioeconomic status, behavior, body type, race etc. Even in school we are expected to have above average test scores, and 4.0 GPAs. It is now even harder to escape these social pressures, due to social media's impact on what we consume on a daily basis. With recent technological and social media advances of the past, the "constant checker" has emerged. A constant checker is a person who has developed a habit of constantly, almost obsessively, checking their emails, texts, and social media accounts. This profile is congruent with 43% of U.S. individuals. Additionally, 42% of constant checkers worry about the effect of social media on their physical and mental health, compared with 27 percent of non-constant checkers.

Poor mental health, and suicide originate from the harsh internal dialogue that a majority of perfectionists have, in which their "inner critic" constantly tells them that they're not good enough, no matter what they do or how hard they try. Not only is having such a constant inner voice draining and exhausting, -, on top of that, perfectionists often criticize themselves for the fact that they are being self-critical, or feel that their constant efforts are, in themselves, further proof of their irredeemable imperfection. According to the psychological studies done by Paul Hewitt and his colleague -, Gordon Flett, these harmful consequences of perfectionism are a result of one of three specific "categories" of perfectionism.

ORDER I

      "Socially-Prescribed Perfectionism" takes place when an individual feels immense pressure from society to improve themselves to maintain some form of relevance. Whether it be in the eyes of strangers, or those of loved ones, socially- prescribed perfectionists feel that all forms of external recognition and affection are contingent on their performance. "I think the reason for that is that socially prescribed perfectionism has an element of pressure combined with a sense of helplessness and hopelessness," states Flett. Socially prescribed perfectionists tend to feel that "the better I do, the better I'm expected to do." A quote from Gordon Flett and Paul Hewitt's book: *Perfectionism: Theory, Research, and Therapy*.

      I feel as though I suffer the most from this kind of perfectionism, as I find that I am constantly comparing myself to others and seeing my disparities as flaws that must be changed. Though I am aware of this bad habit, I have been unable to make significant change. There has never been a time in my life when I felt like I was enough for anyone including myself, and because of that, I rarely ever feel completely comfortable or happy in any social setting. I can't pinpoint exactly when this started for me, but I have a specific memory going back to camp when I was maybe eight years old. As I was about to jump in the pool, a counselor walked up to me and asked, "Wouldn't you want to take your shirt off first?" and I remember not knowing how to respond. There was no way for me at that age to communicate that I had already become self conscious about my body and that my wearing a T-shirt was the only way that I would allow myself to swim. My body image issues didn't just develop on their own. They originated from many encounters I've had with my friends and family. Growing up, I would see kids bullied or neglected by their peers just because they were bigger, and as I saw it happen to more and more people, I became terrified that I'd be next. One day, when I was still in Elementary School, my

mom decided it was best that she take me to get my blood work done. All of a sudden, I was being told by a doctor that my cholesterol and A1C levels were elevated. It wasn't long after that I was labeled as prediabetic. Those trips to the doctor soon became a regular thing, and each time I lost a piece of my self respect, and my dignity. I have vivid memories of a doctor looking down at me and telling me where I was on the Body Mass Index, and where I should be. My parents saw nothing wrong with this, and they would nod with somber agreement when I was finally told that I was obese. That was a pivotal moment in my life. I never saw myself the same way again. To this day, I still feel uncomfortable with what I see when I look in the mirror, and it has had a very huge affect on my confidence and self esteem. In retrospect, I can understand the fact that what my parents did was from a place of genuine concern and good intent, but it is disturbing for me to now realize how badly certain societal standards have been ingrained in so many institutions in this country. When my blood sugar and cholesterol levels went back down to healthy levels, I assumed that I would no longer have to go to that doctor, but it became clear to me that my health wasn't the only concern, it was the way that I looked.

ORDER II

"Self- Oriented Perfectionism." This is very similar to socially-prescribed perfectionism, in the sense that they both involve a person feeling like they are not good enough, and that they must correct themselves in order to be happy. A disparity between the two is in the different ways in which these forms of perfectionism are triggered. As stated before, socially-prescribed perfectionism occurs when someone compares themselves to societal standards. Self-oriented perfectionism, on the other hand, occurs when someone has certain unrealistic expectations of themself.

In my mind, not only must I do well, I must supersede and outshine my peers in whatever I'm participating. Unfortunately for me, that very rarely happens. I have this irrational expectation of myself to do well in things that I may have not done before, or spent a lot of prior time doing. This bad habit of mine affects me most when I participate in sports and visual art. When I was younger, my mom had signed me up for a number of different physical activities and sports. I remember getting excited for my soccer games and basketball games, and jumping up and down after splitting a wooden block in Taekwondo. I recall being genuinely happy and excited to be a part of a team without the anxiety of wanting to succeed and being recognized for it. I noticed significant change in my relationship with sports when I had joined the Boys Varsity Volleyball team in High School. The social structure of the team was based off of skill level, performance, and preexisting external relationships. I noticed that even within one team can be severe social fragmentation. This was very concerning to me as I had joined with the intention of making new friends and bettering myself as a potential athlete. But because I didn't just walk in with a natural talent for that sport, I was overlooked and ignored. Wanting to prove to the team and myself that I have something to offer, I pushed myself in spite of my injuries to become better so that I can be appreciated. I wanted validation so badly that I would occasionally go beyond my physical limits in pursuit of something I didn't actually need. Eventually I did get better, and my teammates began to notice too, but I was still nowhere near the best player, and I was all too aware of that. Even when I had improved in the sport, I still felt unsatisfied and empty.

My constant use of perfectionism to achieve some form of recognition is a behavioral tendency that I still cannot pinpoint the origin of. To do that I feel that I must first recognize my need to be recognized and then discern the origin of that. There were many points throughout my

life where I felt overlooked and underappreciated by my parents, teachers, and peers. I remember trying to avoid that feeling by striving to be the perfect friend, perfect student, and perfect child. Whenever I was given a sign that I wasn't doing a perfect job in any of those categories, I chastised myself, and dedicate so much time thinking about what I could've done better. This did not improve my performance. Still today I spend so much time focusing on the past, that I'm unable to fully be in the present. As a result, I become distant as my internal conflict worsens, along with my ability to complete tasks and take care of my responsibilities. This then creates a destructive cycle that is almost impossible for me to fully step out of.

ORDER III

Those who suffer from other-oriented perfectionism have the tendency to demand perfection from friends, family, co-workers and others. It can prove detrimental for any relationships one might have. "If you require your spouse to be perfect, and you're critical of that spouse, you can tell right away that there's going to be relationship problems," says Hewitt.

Shortly after I was hospitalized, I had to go to a children's rehabilitation center by the name of Blythedale. I was told that some complications arose with my ankle and how it was healing. The doctors said that they needed to break it and reset it again. I ended up staying there for about four months. I was not very happy about this at all, because once again I felt I was being lied to. I was told, up until then by my doctors and my parents, that I'd be able to go home in about a week. I had begun to not believe anything I was told, because I didn't want to be disappointed again. I was angry.

My parents and I arrived in a small ambulance in front of what looked like a funhouse. It was a fairly large building with large arches and vexing bright colors. On the front of the

building was written the name of the hospital with the silhouette of a little boy jumping up to reach a shooting star. "Pretty smart of them to put an able bodied child in their logo to remind everyone inside of their inabilities," I remember thinking. As my dad pushed me inside, my eyes burned as they were met with even more insulting bright colors. I felt like I was part of a joke. My parents knew that I wasn't happy. I was about to be left here. In my mind, I was being abandoned. It was almost as if the colors found joy in my pain.

It wasn't long before I found myself harboring hate and anger for Blythedale, my doctors, and the people who crashed into us, the ones that got to go back home to their families. There was so much darkness in my heart. I didn't think I would be able to walk again; I couldn't feel my toes. I couldn't recognize my leg. Atrophy, skin grafts, cuts, and casts. I couldn't recognize myself either. There were circles around my eyes, my hair was overgrown, and my skin had gone pale from lack of sunlight. I felt like I was a ghost; I felt like I was going to be forgotten. My friends came to visit quite often, but those visits only reminded me that there was a world outside of Blythedale, and that it continued to function without me. The way I saw it, I was nonessential.

This is only a part of my experience but I feel that this moment in its totality was the only time in my life where things I thought I knew were questioned. I became nihilistic. When I was in the hospital, some of the doctors treated me with a severe lack of empathy and compassion. They saw patients like me every day, and to them, I was just a small moment in their day. It was hard for me to digest this information at first, to find out that I was just one of many patients, all who are suffering in some way. My experience no longer seemed as severe or idiosyncratic as it once did in my head. I was made aware of the harsh indifference of the universe at such a young age, a time where I had no healthy way of processing. Thankfully I know now that my ordeal is not negated by someone else's and that I am much stronger having survived, and that there is

meaning in life. Throughout this experience, I would say that I had demonstrated more than one kind of perfectionistic behavior, but I wanted to focus on a time where I could only see the world from my point of view, thus having certain unrealistic expectations of my situation, my care takers, and my parents.

CONCLUSION

Perfectionism has without a doubt made an overall negative impact on my life, but If I'm being honest, I don't know if I would be in the same place had I not maintained unrealistic standards for myself. Though I've rarely ever felt satisfied with my work, I recognize the fact that my academic career and achievements have proven that I am a consistent and overall competent student. If had not been a perfectionist up until now, It is a very strong possibility that I would not be doing as well as I am. Looking back at my academic and artistic careers, perfectionism has been the only constant source of motivation that has allowed me to continue maneuvering the many obstacles I've faced in my life. It seems that I have conflated being praised and validated with being successful, and because of that I have been unable to appreciate my own achievements and be happy with myself. To end perfectionistic tendencies, I must first understand that in my mind there should not be a correlation to myself worth and my performance. My accomplishments or lack thereof do not dictate who I am. It is important for me to remember that what I do in life should be in the pursuit of my own happiness, and not to impress others. I've always known that my way of living was an unhealthy one, and I've always known what needs to be done to change it, but I never have, for fear of who I might be If I wasn't scared of failure. I'm scared that if I stop hating myself, then I'll become someone worth hating.

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