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School Shootings and Fairy tales

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Intention and Research

Between the years 2016 and 2020, I was a high school student. Once a semester, at 7:30am, I would be taught how to survive a shooting. My art teacher, as aloof as he was, would present his students with attack strategies and evacuation plans. He proceeded to demonstrate how he planned to hold the door closed with rope tied around the handle and his forearm, assuring us his technique would not fail. As the lesson endured, the threat of a school shooting no longer seemed like a ‘what if’ situation. It seemed as if we were preparing for an inevitable tragedy: a rite of passage for the new generation. Students walked out of that lesson skittish and sullen. We called dibs on which art supplies we’d use to throw at the shooter, one person offering their home as a refuge to regroup. We strategised methods of attack, knowing well most of us would be too cowardly to execute any of our plans. We didn’t want to die — and an active shooter roaming our halls was just another final exam we’d all take eventually. School shootings shouldn’t be imminent. Children shouldn’t have to worry about their teachers dying by gun fire. The good news is that these disasters *are* preventable and can be traced back to numerous social behaviours. The unintentional glorification of school shooters on the news is a relevant issue in modern times which spurs copycat crimes. In order to advocate against this glorification, I engaged in thorough research of the issue and used my research to produce a fairy tale with the intention of disturbing a parent audience and urging them to take action.

The Problem:

On April twentieth, 1999, an ABC news anchor announced that a massacre had taken place in Littleton, Colorado. The broadcast displayed footage of frantic students running from Columbine High School and recalling the horrific details of the tragedy they endured only mo-

ments prior. Eight years later, ABC news broadcasted another tragedy: a mass shooting at Virginia Tech where thirty two victims were fatally shot by a fellow student. Five more years pass and ABC news reports yet another infamous mass school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary, Connecticut where twenty children and six staff members were fatally shot. Since Columbine, ABC news has reported at least fifty mass school shootings in the US. Activists and lawmakers have been frantically searching for answers as to why these tragedies occur so frequently and why an overwhelming rise in shootings occurred in 2018. Numerous shooters have been linked to what is called the Columbine Effect, the term used to describe how the 1999 massacre provoked various copycat crimes and a sinister idolization of the two perpetrators. *Mother Jones* reporters Mark Follman and Becca Andrews claim that seventy two known copycat cases were incited by Columbine with an overall toll of eighty nine fatalities, including fourteen attacks planned for the anniversary of the mass shooting. This kind of glorification of a tragedy is not an external issue but an internal responsibility within journalism. The threat of school shootings has become a national crisis incited by the way these tragedies are depicted by mass media. That said, how can we prevent the glorification of school shootings in news media?

Background:

What can explain the relationship between the increase in copycat crimes and news coverage of mass shootings? A keen awareness of social change in American society is necessary in understanding this shift towards common violence. Adam Lankford, a Criminology professor at the University of Alabama, believes mass shooting trends are the consequence of desires for fame and attention becoming widespread among young generations. Lankford found that fifty one percent of Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty five claimed that fame was

one of their generations most important goals. Jean Twenge, Elise Freeman, and W. Keith Campbell, professors at San Diego State University and the University of Georgia respectfully, concluded that “compared to Boomers, Millennials and GenX’ers viewed goals concerned with money, fame, and image as more important” in a study concerning generational differences in young adult’s life goals (Twenge 1058). Acknowledging that school shooters tend to be under the age of 20, it seems reasonable to conclude that the younger generation’s increasing infatuation with fame and image correlate to the increase of fame motivated shootings in schools. Perhaps most compelling, Lankford discovered Americans becoming “increasingly willing to sacrifice their integrity and values for fame and attention” (Lankford and Silver 41), some even inclined to engage in morally questionable and criminal behaviour to achieve celebrity status. This sort of erratic and dangerous ambition is notable in the behaviour of scandalous youtubers, reality TV stars, and mass shooters. Prior to 2010, explicit evidence of fame-seeking motives was only found in twenty five percent of cases. Since then, that percentage has risen to fifty six (Lankford and Silver 43). Eric Madfis, a criminology and sociology professor at the University of Washington, works with Lankford to discern how media coverage fuels this fatal desire. The two allege that the Columbine shooting received more news coverage than previous presidential elections and even the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Often enough, killers receive “more coverage in dollar value than some of the most famous American celebrities” (Lankford and Midfis 153). Dave Cullen, an American journalist who has covered American mass murders for two decades, explained how “the media [has] to look at [their] own role in this”, saying: “we cover these things, we put them on stage, - - we give them a starring role in this” (Cullen, 2010). No matter how negative, this sort of free publicity, which otherwise would have only been given to wealthy

celebrity figures, not only *rewards* shooters with fame but provides an *incentive* to aspiring perpetrators to achieve higher death tolls.

Lankford and Midfis discovered a trend in news coverage and fatality rate: the more victims, the more likely the incident will be featured in the New York Times. Consequently, the more victims, the longer the report and greater probability of landing on the front page. This sort of coverage only encourages shooters to kill *more* people in the hopes of being more widely recognized. Currently *sixty one* percent of shooting cases included a strategy developed specifically to increase fatalities (Lankford and Silver 43). For instance, the 2016 Townville shooter wrote in an Instagram group chat, “I HAVE TO BEAT [the Sandy Hook shooter]. . . at least 40”, continuing with, “I think I’ll probably most likely kill around 50 or 60. . . if I get lucky maybe 150” (Lankford and Silver 46). Investigations of the Townville shooter’s phone later revealed a search history of ‘deadliest US mass shootings’ and ‘top 10 mass shooters’, articles which glorify and rank tragedies as some sort of sinister competition. The extensive coverage and compilation of these deadly shootings encouraged the Townville shooter to achieve a higher death count in the hopes of ranking first on the list and gaining immense recognition. It has become apparent that by displaying implicit preference in attacks with larger fatalities, reporters provoke deadlier mass shootings.

Not only does the extensive media coverage of school shooters feed into perpetrator desires and encourage higher death tolls, but media broadcasting also supplies inspiration to troubled individuals. Lankford and Midfis found that newspapers gave more attention to the photo of the attacker than the photos of deceased victims. The shooter’s portrait would be large compared to the small mugshots of the victims, drawing attention *away* from those victims and pandering

to the audience's curiosity. The addition of these photographs also feeds into a dangerous obsession. Lankford and Midfifis observe how killers gain a following fueled by their names, photos, and life stories as provided to them by the media. These objects of worship are used to honor perpetrators as "gods, heroes, kindred spirits, and even sex symbols by the people who eventually commit mass killings of their own" (Lankford and Midfifis 155). Media coverage gives narcissistic killers a platform to inspire disturbed individuals to commit copycat shootings, which consequently persuades more killers to act. These shooters want to cement a legacy and the news guarantees to fulfill this desire by offering them the podium. The quantity of cases with direct evidence of copycat behavior has only risen with time. For example, the Columbine shooting has been specifically referenced in 13 cases where plotters planned to exceed the death toll, cementing the Columbine Effect and the legacy of the tragedy. Despite the horrific actions of these followers, it is important to note that their fascination is primarily focused on the perpetrator themselves, not the physical crime. Copycat killers have been observed to mirror the language and appearance of past mass killers, just as fans of a popular celebrity might do. These obsessions are personal.

In spite of this evidence, journalists have yet to implement any sort of change when reporting on mass shootings. Why is this? Lankford and Midfifis dismiss the idea that journalists would intentionally refuse prevention efforts, instead proposing a lack of awareness. In order to properly propose a solution to this crisis, we first must identify the responsibility of the press. In a study on how the media affects public perception on climate responsibility in South Korea, Cha University professor Chang Jeongheon observed how mass media is the most available and often only source of information for the general public. Chang found that mass media played an impor-

tant role in attributing responsibility and largely affected the public's opinion. In a study on the role of the news in politics, Irum Sarwar, Aimen Zafar, and Naureen Riaz, Department of Statistics professors at Lahore Garrison University, concluded that "the popularity of television news channels plays [a] greater role in increasing the interest of people in political affairs". It was deduced that people base their political opinions on what they see on the news and consequently use these opinions to make important voter decisions. If the media can frame the public's opinion on a political candidate and climate change, then the media can certainly frame a mass murderer as a role model to troubled individuals. People are proven to make critical decisions based on the influence of news media, which is why it is so important that news media take responsibility for their platform and take measures against promoting violence. That said, what can be done to prevent copycat shootings?

Solution:

The solution to this perpetual issue requires little from broadcasting companies. News divisions already have limitations in place such as refraining from profanity and forbidding the display of nudity, graphic violence, and sexually explicit material according to the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics. Newscasts don't release information that could potentially jeopardize national security and abstain from publishing the names of sexual assault victims unless given consent. These boundaries do not require much from news anchors and producers and are not viewed as forms of censorship within the press. A similar approach can be applied to school shooting prevention efforts. In order to reduce the probability of copycat shootings, it is important to avoid framing the perpetrator as a role model, rewarding the perpetrator with fame, and portraying the perpetrator as competent in achieving their goals. The FBI's Be-

havioral Analysis Unit claims that “media coverage featuring the offenders' names, photos, and life stories only cements the legacies they seek to achieve”, proposing that “news media should refrain from naming the assailants, from posting their photographs” (Federal Bureau of Investigation 3-4). By withholding the names and photos of the perpetrators, newscasts deny fans of their celebrity figure, making it far more difficult for these individuals to connect personally to the assailant, thus reducing the likelihood of obsession. This exclusion also denies shooters credit, consequently denying them of a legacy. By simply referring to these individuals as ‘shooters’ or ‘perpetrators’ and withholding their photos, broadcasting companies can prevent the glorification of these individuals and diminish their impact on others. Most importantly, these efforts are expected to save many innocent lives and assist in dismantling the cycle of perpetual school shootings in the US.

Conclusion:

On April 20th, 1999, an ABC News anchor began his broadcast of a high school massacre with “Oh no, not again. *Another* high school”. Despite already recognizing this apparent cycle of violence, ABC News made no change to their coverage and would continue to sensationalize school shootings for years to come. The shock exhibited by these anchors soon developed into frustration and exhaustion as these shootings became more and more commonplace. Now, the news has an opportunity to do something about it. In order to prevent copycat school shootings, news producers and anchors *must* abstain from releasing the names and photos of school shooters. Such actions will punish assailants by denying them recognition, consequently avoiding fandom obsession and the diminishing the amount of influence the assailant has on others. This change costs little to nothing but will immeasurably benefit the general population, especially

educators and America's youth. The regular citizen can be apart of the solution as well by dismissing the lure of morbid curiosity and refraining from romanticising killers. The public should instead focus on the victims and condemn perpetrators by simply not paying attention to them. School shootings don't have to be an American stereotype and news networks and their viewers will no doubt be interested in making this happen.

Statement of Intent:

I now understood the multitude of methods broadcasting companies use- deliberately or unintentionally- to glorify school shooters and the solution to this bigger issue. In order to advocate for the prevention of copycat crimes, I decided to undergo the process of developing a fairy tale which would target a parent audience. Fairy tales often have a considerable influence on children and have the capacity to define their childhood. While I originally planned to target a younger audience, it made more sense to target a generation that experienced a childhood defined by fairytales like Snow White and Cinderella. I changed my primary audience to parents with children enrolled or planned to be enrolled in school who have childhood experience with Grimm fairy tales and are open to exposing themselves and others to uncomfortable topics. The hope is that these parents remember how fairytales told to them taught lessons about being kind, forgiveness, the dangers of vanity, and other moral lessons. By recognising this, they will be able to recognise the more disturbing modern lesson present in my fairy tale. The hope is that these parents make a connection to how childhood has changed with students having to be afraid of common violence and that this connection compels these parents to advocate for change. With my audience now older, I was able to implement more disturbing elements to push my message. I elected to tell the tale of a king who makes up fables around a mysterious beast terrorising his

kingdom in order to please the curious peasants and gain their favour. The idea is that this king fears an uprising and feeds the peasants this exciting tale to entertain and distract them. In this way, the king represents broadcasting companies who glorify criminals in order to gain viewers from the curious public. The king's three daughters experience the horrific consequences of this glorification as outlined in my research (the creation of a fandom, copycat killers aiming for higher death tolls, and the motive of fame) and the audience learns not to glorify bad people.

I reread my copy of Grimm's fairy tales to get familiar with the vernacular and structure of these stories. I was particularly challenged by the quick pacing and frank delivery of fairy tales in that I felt I couldn't do a whole lot of "showing", only "telling". I took a risk by following this pattern as it makes my fable not read very well despite it being more realistic to the style. I intended to repeat a set of rhyming dialogue throughout the piece and I did. However, these pieces of dialogue tend to lack flow because I struggled with the rhyme. I also had intended to include three illustrations but simply ran out of time, although I think it worked in my favour as it leaves the imagery of the final punishment up to the imagination. All in all, it was an interesting challenge translating modern ideas to a medieval setting. The fairy tale isn't about school shootings and news media at all but still teaches the same lesson to not glorify bad people by using archetypal characters to represent modern ideas such the king representing the news media and the beast representing a school shooter. I learned how to create parallels and manage my time when undertaking such an extensive project.

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The Beast had a Face and the Beast had a Name



Once upon a time there was a beast. The beast had no face and the beast had no name. The beast was dark and without human shape. A faded curtain of flesh hung where a face ought to be and slender needles protruded from its skin. The beast was cruel and was plagued with a most wicked hunger. At night, when the villagers had tired and gone to sleep, the beast roamed the streets and the children who had not been settled in bed would be snatched and eaten.

Soon did a crowd gather before the king. They cried, "What fool art thou to rest when a beast lurks near? Dost thou not hear the wailing women and mourning men?" The king scowled at this for he feared a revolt would befall him if the people did not calm.

"Worry not," the king assured, "I shall send a hunter to retrieve the beast." At once the hunter rode into the streets and soon encountered the beast who appeared to have been waiting for him at the steps of the old cathedral. The hunter dismissed this as evidence of his own skill and captured the creature, diligently delivering it to the king.

"Oh what a terrible sight," the king cried. "Take this unholy fiend to the dungeons to await execution." The hunter obeyed and the pleased king returned to the restless crowd with the good news. To his dismay, the villagers had not calmed.

"The beast is to be executed. What more do you require?" asked the cowardly king.

"Good king," the villagers exclaimed. "Our homes have been invaded and our families have been crippled. We must know why such misfortune has befallen us. Good king, tell us of the beast."

The king knew nothing of the beast but knew well of fairy tales for the king had three beautiful daughters of whom he diligently protected within the walls of the castle. He had taken

great care in reciting those old fables in the absence of the queen and was sure he could recite another. The king summoned a painter and began his invented tale:

*“Man and beast were once the same,
For the beast had a face
And the beast had a name
Cursed by a hunger he could not erase.
A young fellow he was with skin fair
And eyes as dark as charcoal.
Klaus was the name he beared
Before his hunger he could no more control.”*

The painter presented the finished portrait of the cursed man to the crowd who took great pleasure in seeing the fiend. At once the villagers felt at ease and murmured amongst themselves as they departed the palace. The king released a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding and collapsed on his throne. The king's three daughters, who had been listening to their father's tale, withdrew to their chambers with disturbed minds. The first daughter paused to peer at the portrait of the young man before wistfully retiring to her chambers.

As the clock struck noon, a crowd gathered in the city square to witness the beheading of the beast. To the astoundment of the king, the beast appeared before him as the young man in the portrait. The king knew this was most abnormal but continued with the execution as planned. To his dismay, his first daughter said to him, “Father. If this man is cursed as you say, why condemn him to death?”

“A man he may be,” the king lied. “But a villain he still is.”

“That can not be true, dear father,” the first daughter persisted. “This man is young and unjustly cursed. He means no wrong, you mustn’t kill him!”

“My goodness, how foolish you are! The beast shall be slain!” the king commanded. The executioner approached the beast with a blunt axe in hand. The beast knelt with its spine arched and its face against the stone ground awaiting death. The first daughter took great pity in Klaus and no longer could bear the sight of him crumpled on the ground. She surged forward as the executioner swung his axe, shielding the man she pitied. At once did her head depart her body much to the horror of the king who wept for the death of his daughter. The executioner swung a second time and the beast was slain. With great sadness the king said to the crowd:

*“Man and beast were once the same,
For the beast had a face
And the beast had a name,
Cursed by a hunger he could not erase.
Condemned to death he cursed another
To be punished in his stead.
Twas mine own poor daughter
Of whom now lies before me dead.”*

No sooner had the king retired to his bed chambers than the sorry tale of Klaus the damned and the princess of whom he fooled reached the far borders of the kingdom. The king ordered the scribes to write of the beast, the artists to draw images of the beast, and the jestors to recite the tale in taverns and inns. At once the villagers were all too busy with gossip and chatter

to pay much heed to the king who believed he had done well to fluster the people. But not all were satisfied.

The king's second daughter had a great fondness for her father. Yet a feeble king he was who spent much time pursuing the favours of the villagers who regarded him a fool. Neglect and isolation had long tarnished the mind of the maiden who stood before the painter armed with the executioner's axe. She aimed for the neck and saw how the painter slumped and the head bounced. Satisfied, the second daughter took the head and presented it to the king.

"Dear father," said the maiden. "I have slain the painter. I present to you his head."

"Oh, you godless child!" cried the king. "For what did you commit such evil deeds?"

"The kingdom speaks of the beast and the kingdom speaks of my sister. With red hands, will the kingdom speak of me as well?"

"Cursed child, you shall be punished. All will know of your wickedness," declared the king who called for a messenger to witness his proclamation:

"Man and beast were once the same,

For the beast had a face

And the beast had a name,

Cursed by a hunger he could not erase.

In death he wooed the princess fair

To slaughter and behead

The poor painter left unaware,

Another body among the bloodshed."



The messenger went forth into the kingdom and told the people of the beast and the ruthless princess. Once more, the villagers took great pleasure in conversing about the beast and thought no more of revolution. The king was satisfied and retired to his throne, believing he had done well. But he had yet to vanquish the discord from within the castle.

The third daughter had lost her mind years ago. The foolish king had forbidden the maiden from mingling with the village folk and had kept her hidden in her chambers for much of her life. He called it love but the maiden was starving to be spoken of. She saw how the people spoke of the beast and her sisters and when the servants had retired to their beds, she began to scheme.

“I require an escort to the hall,” the third daughter called to her chambermaids. “Three will do.” The chambermaids obeyed and accompanied the princess. Upon their arrival to the great hall, the third daughter grabbed an axe and beat the maids to death. The third daughter felt satisfied with the red floor and appeared before the king who had been sleeping in his chambers. When he awoke, he saw the red axe and knew at once what had happened.

“Oh, you godless child!” cried the king. “What has possessed you to commit such crimes?”

“Father, are you not proud?” asked the third daughter. “The beast ate children and you paraded his image. My sister beheaded the painter and you delivered her legacy. I have done more and I have done better. Do I not deserve a procession?”

“Stupid child, what lead you to such a conclusion?”

“You, dear father. Have you not done these things?”

All of a sudden, the queen appeared before the king and his daughter.

“My queen! You have returned!” cried the king.

“Indeed I have to the sight of my daughter a murderer,” exclaimed the queen.

“It was the beast! The beast cursed our kin! The beast!”

“You stupid man, it was *you* who told fables of a kindred soul, *you* who gave glory to murderers and beasts!”

“It’s not so! I delivered what was asked of me. I have done no wrong.”

“How foolish you are.

Man and beast were once the same,

For the king gifted honor

And the king gifted fame

To distract from his sins and his slaughter.

May his mouth be empty and dry

And may this message reach his ear:

Do not praise and glorify

Whom you have ought to fear.”

With that, the queen ripped out the king’s tongue and crushed it with her shoe. Much to the king’s dismay, the people had grown tired of fables and gathered at the door with swords and cleavers. In one final attempt to save himself, the king fled to his chambers where he soon bled to death on the floor.