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### Escaping Alcohol: Elissa Washuta's Exploration on Student Alcoholism

Elissa Washuta's "Consumption" is a personal essay addressing the problem of student alcoholism in college. As a student Washuta had experienced a lot of hardship in her transition to college life. However, when she was exposed to alcohol, she was able to find solace and escape from harsh reality. As her exposure to alcohol grew, she started down a self-destructive spiral of alcohol abuse that later ended up being a pinnacle portion of her daily routine. Washuta writes this essay to bring light to how grave alcoholism can be to transitioning college freshmen.

Washuta's reflection on her experiences with alcohol abuse is separated into two sections. The first being a pseudo-pamphlet structure mocking the format of pamphlets that colleges would hand to students concerning health problems. The second being a chronicle of her self-destructive experiences and mental state while in her alcoholic slump. Washuta's writing style seems to endeavor to catch readers off guard by defying their expectations, then using that moment to drag them through a honest and enriching journey of her personal experiences. Washuta does this for many of her other pieces, most notably *My Body is a Book of Rules*. As University of Oklahoma Professor Kimberly Wieser states, in *My Body is a Book of Rules* Washuta "subverts...audience expectations," and how by doing so, she takes "the reader on a discomforting, but enlightening and ultimately healing journey through a painful reality." She uses this very same style in the

essay "Consumption." By setting up this distance between author and reader with her imposition of opinions in the first section, then suddenly becoming uncomfortably intimate with the reader, Washuta gives "us a level of authenticity that we actually may be unprepared for, but need" in order to understand where she is coming from (Weiser). Washuta subverts genre conventions and uses a hybrid structure of pseudo-pamphlet and personal essay to impose a profound impact on the audience as they are taken aback from the transition of listed facts and opinions to Washuta recounting how alcohol abuse personally affected her college experience. Washuta's pamphlet section conveys how little college does to help students struggling with alcohol abuse with her sarcastic personification of college as a "friend" or entity that encourages the worst of students' alcoholism. Washuta then catches the audience off guard with her sudden and frank admittance to her sufferance from alcohol abuse in her college years. By suddenly turning the tables on the audience she grabs the audience's attention and forces them to understand her personal experiences and the gravity of how alcohol abuse negatively affected her college life. This sudden but sincere and honest transition lowers Washuta to the level of the audience allowing her to easily connect with and elicit sympathy for the problem from them.

Throughout the pamphlet section of the essay, Washuta constantly repeats the phrase "What can colleges do about binge drinking?" at the beginning of each section. This repeated pattern emulates the structure of pamphlets that colleges might give students when they come into the health center for problems regarding drug abuse (sectioned off responses to certain situations and their respective solutions) but also has a deeper and more overlying purpose. Washuta sarcastically draws attention to how colleges put little to no effort into helping students with their alcoholism with her repeated use of the phrase "What can colleges do about binge drinking?" John

Haiman, an American Linguist and professor at Macalester College, states that when a “sarcast quotes or otherwise repeats” their words they had previously used, it “draws attention to the peculiar inappropriateness” of the given situation. Because Washuta constantly repeats this question, it emphasizes that this problem has many different solutions; However, colleges pursue none of them to alleviate the situation (Haiman 25). Washuta ironically uses this structure to convey the flaws in colleges’ approach to student alcoholism. Throughout the section Washuta sarcastically personifies college, hyperbolizes the student situation, and exaggerates college’s lack of effort in order to discuss three major themes regarding colleges lack of care on the problem of student alcoholism.

Washuta first sarcastically personifies college as a caring entity to convey how, rather than preventing alcohol abuse, colleges encourage and condone student alcoholism. Initially the statement “Colleges can take their turns at DD,” does seem to portray college as a rather caring entity for students; however, the irony is in the fact that colleges should be trying to prevent students from drinking, not making sure they get home safe. A designated driver is the friend who joins in outings to bars, but avoids drinks so that others can rely on them to get them back home safely. By metaphorically stating that college can “take their turn as DD” Washuta sarcastically conveys how college, rather than trying to prevent alcohol abuse, essentially condones student visitation to bars (Washuta). As an entity that “takes turns” at being the designated driver, college is not trying to prevent alcohol abuse, but instead enables these student actions. Furthermore, she says “or better yet, they can let the bars creep up to the edge of campus,” conveying how colleges allow bars to come and surround the campus without doing anything, giving students easy access to these facilities, and making no effort to try and limit student access (Washuta). A subject that

“lets” something happen makes no effort to try and stop it from occurring. Washuta’s choice of diction of “they can let” as opposed to saying something such as “bars tend to” implies that colleges make no effort to try and prevent the construction of bars around the campus. Moreover, colleges make no effort to try and prevent students from developing these destructive habits.

Washuta continues this theme in her second iteration of “What can colleges do about binge drinking?” However, this iteration focuses more on how colleges encourage student alcoholism with a specific focus on how football games and other major events tend to attract alcohol. Washuta states “They can do shots. Shots. Shots; but not until after the game is complete, the stadium emptied, the students hoarse from shouting as one united family *fuck* the other team,” referencing a football game (Washuta). When she says “Shots. Shots. Shots,” Washuta conveys college as a friend joining in on the fun of partying and drinking, as the repeated phrase alludes to the act of attending the party. As at parties a phrase that one could expect to hear would be “Shots! Shots! Shots! Shots!”. Washuta furthers the implication in the paragraph by stating “Colleges would do well to bring a flask or two”(Washuta). With this, she implies that colleges join in on the after-party fun and even encourage these activities by figuratively fueling them by bringing drinks to these after-game events. Rather than helping out students by providing means of avoiding alcohol, colleges endorse the illegal actions of student alcoholism by putting no effort into trying to limit student access to alcoholic events or facilities.

Shortly after, Washuta, with her hyperbolization of how serious college standards are, alludes to how colleges actually cause student alcohol abuse. She accurately conveys how students view these standards and how much pressure it adds for them to always succeed and fit in. For students, alcoholism is a form of escape from all the stresses of the real world. To prevent

alcoholism, Washuta proposes that colleges can plan to more events that practice acceptance and problem resolution like “human sexuality discussion sections actually [involving] copulation.”(Washuta). By addressing problems that students encounter in their time at college, students could destress and feel more accepted at college, which is a major problem that students often face in their transition to college life. She further gets to the prevalent problem of colleges acting as a sort of defining factor in students’ futures. Washuta suggests that colleges should “Eliminate MLA citation style and eliminate that entrance exam” which many students view as “notorious for dashing all hopes of having a job and a house and a child that you can dress up like a little rich person.”(Washuta). With her hyperbolization throughout this statement, Washuta exaggerates but thoroughly evokes how students view these exams and standards with. While “MLA citation style” might not be something that students generally lose sleep over, it still represents all the tedious little rules that add to student stress. Washuta defines alcohol binging as the “Neverland that keeps [students] from becoming the grown-ups who make memories and stitch futures to [students’] feet.”(Washuta). With her use of the word “Neverland,” she alludes to a world where one can escape reality and live a worry-free life. In students’ case, alcohol allows them to deny reality and live in the moment. It allows them to focus on the fun times and not worry about the repercussions of the near future. She then hyperbolizes the situation with “We will vomit every dream into the gutter,” conveying how with each time students vomit from their alcoholism, they learn to accept the cruel reality of the world just a little bit more (Washuta). Because of all the stress and pressure college puts onto students, they seek a form of escapism to help them deal with and temporarily deny reality.

Washuta finally sarcastically exaggerates the amount of effort that colleges put into caring for their students to convey how colleges “attempt” to care about student health, but in truth do little to help the situation. In her fourth iteration she focuses on a situation in which a student is passed out due to overconsumption of alcohol, and how college could ensure the student does not go out to drink more, but instead lets them go. She states how colleges could ensure students do not go out again to drink but instead “Google ‘how not to choke on your own vomit’ or ‘is my friend going to die from alcohol poisoning’” because that would take less effort “and if the search results say it’s okay, colleges can leave her droopy body where it slumps” (Washuta). Washuta sarcastically narrates college’s lack of effort put into ensuring the student’s health with the application of “googling” something. Google allows anyone practically anywhere to find quick surface level information for practically any problem. If colleges were actually concerned with student health, it would do more than take 10 seconds to look up a question and see what google has to say. However, college only looks up two questions and then allows the student to continue to suffer, because Google “said it was ok.” She then brings more sarcasm to the situation with stating that colleges “can shoot her a text in the morning to see whether she’s all right. If she’s not, colleges can say they did their best,” metaphorically referencing how students have access to facilities like health centers that colleges offer, however, none actually go out of the way to really see if every student is alright. Washuta goes on to state “They turned her on her side and everything” and “told her via email one time three years ago that consuming more than four drinks in two hours is considered binge drinking for females,” referencing how colleges inform students of the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse once, but never touch the subject anymore in their

college career (Washuta). Acting so indirect is not a proper way to ensure students health, and so because of that, many students suffer while colleges do not act to help them.

When students transition into university, it can feel like a whole new country, a new “dominion” as Washuta puts it. In transitioning, “[our] leaders urge us to be hungry and thirsty,” because in college, it's about becoming an adult and becoming more self-sufficient. However, not everyone can just hit the ground running and deal with all these new pressures and stresses of the real world so easily (Washuta). Washuta chooses the phrase “urge us to be hungry and thirsty” to hyperbolize but emphasize that no one in college actually cares about you or would go out of their way to help you. Washuta then phrases the question “What can we do?” forcing the audience to think for once about what can be done about the problem of student alcoholism, initiating a style change as soon as she decides to address the audience and the problem directly (Washuta). This phrase closes the gap between author and audience, allowing her to fluidly start speaking about her firsthand experiences and connect with the audience directly.

Washuta transitions the essay from a factual and distant pamphlet into an intimate and brutally honest essay in order to elicit sympathy and understanding from her audience. By revealing all of her shortcomings, Washuta effectively resonates with the audience, better allowing her to convey how real a problem student alcoholism is to transitioning students. Honesty is a key component of the personal essay genre; it allows the author to establish a strong sense of credibility when the reader knows they are not hiding anything. As Philip Lopate, an American film critic and essayist put it, “The spectacle of baring the naked soul is meant to awaken the sympathy of the reader, who is apt to forgive the essayist’s self-absorption in return for the warmth of his or her candor.” And more simply defined in the sentence: “Some vulnerability is

essential to the personal essay.”(Lopate 26). The personal essay connects with the audience without hiding anything, so that the audience is able to learn about the author and their way of thinking. The only way the writer is going to be able to effectively connect with an audience is by being completely honest.

Washuta accomplishes this by completely laying everything on the table for all readers to see. She withholds nothing. We, as the audience, can see every action that she regrets doing from her time in college. Lopate defined “So often the ‘plot’ of the personal essay, it's drama, it's suspense, consists in watching how far the essayist can drop past his or her psychic defenses toward deeper levels of honesty...” and later on “If, however, the essayist stays at the same flat level of self disclosure and understanding throughout, the piece may be pleasantly smooth, but will not awaken that shiver of self recognition.” (Lopate 25-26). Because of this, we are able to connect better with Washuta as a person. At the beginning of the essay she creates a distance from the audience and establishes an authoritative figure as she states her opinions as if they are fact. However, as soon as the style change comes, she instantly drops from her heightened level and becomes more vulnerable and humanized to the audience. Now, as someone who is trying to reform how college approaches alcohol abuse, usually one wouldn't reveal how wild they were in college; However, in this instance, Washuta takes a risk of losing credibility and dropping from the authority she established for herself to further back her argument. She states how she “puked in the train station alone at night, puked on Pennsylvania Avenue, on Wisconsin Avenue, on Rhode Island Avenue.”(Washuta). Any mention of puking from alcohol overuse would instantly throw away any professional credibility someone had in an essay trying to address people about college. Washuta however, completely reveals what she had done while at college and makes no



attempt to censor it, so that we may be able to see what she, as a college student herself, went through in her transition from high school to college student.

Through this risk taking, we are able to see her as a personally affected victim herself. She delves further down her “psychic defense” when she states how she “folded hangovers into [her] weekly routine.”(Washuta). Not only was she an occasionally affected victim, but rather a repeat and consecutively affected victim. As she furthers down her list of obscenities in this paragraph from “I found myself on a couch with my skirt up...”, “I went to the ER for excruciating stomach pain..., ” and so on, we see that alcohol had become essentially a major part of college experience and was negatively affecting her lifestyle (Washuta). However, she does not list these simply to state what she had done, but rather to connect with the audience so she may express her final thoughts on it all. Washuta “said and did things [she regrets] and things [she doesn't] remember.” (Washuta). But however, this wasn’t because “college molded [her] into the teenager who chased caffeine pills with cherry NyQuil,” but rather “college was the place where [she] learned to sidle up to a keg and call [her] despair *community*.” With this statement, she metaphorically names her despair “community,” conveying how she wasn't the only one in college who had hardships, but she was able to bond with others over alcohol and try to escape from harshness of reality they all faced in college. By writing out this long list of everything she regrets she furthers her credibility as a victim, and then ties it all back together with her expression of how college only cultivated her destructive habits by adding to her stress and pressure. This allows us readers to see alcoholism as a true problem to a lost and confused college student as we see the negative affects it had on her, and feel her remorse for all the actions she had done.

Because of this subversion of personal essay conventions she is able to catch the audience off guard as she instantaneously delves further down into her inner thoughts and psyche to reflect on her alcoholic experience. Without this sudden style change she wouldn't have been able to have receive such a strong impact from the audience, but by catching them off guard she seizes the opportunity to capture the audience's sympathy. By her use of hybrid structure, Washuta is able to effectively connect with her audience and convey the severity of student alcoholism; By initially setting up a authoritative distance from the audience and then suddenly descending to the audience's level through the use of vulnerability and honesty, she forces a connection with the audience that elicits their sympathy and understanding for the problem of student alcoholism.

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