
From the Instructor

Danyang Li's "Justice for the Mother" presents a strong example of the final essay for WR 097, an argument-based analysis of a theme identified in the novel *Montana 1948*. This is the first full-length work that students at this level are expected to discuss in terms of both content and stylistics, and the challenge is both linguistic and cultural: the story is set in post-World War II Montana, with the idiosyncrasies of small-town America predictably foreign to ESL students.

Danyang manages to enter the world of the characters at that time, unravel the subtle interactions caused by a moral dilemma, and discover universal messages that give validity to her argument. The good balance between plot summary and nuanced analysis is a major achievement, along with a near-native-like command of the language in its idiomatic phrasing.

— Maria Zlateva

WR 097: English Grammar and Composition

From the Writer

My paper, “Justice for the Mother,” was an essay that centered around one of the main characters in the novel *Montana 1948*, written by Larry Watson. In my essay, I started with my thesis statement and a brief introduction of the book.

For me, one of the novel’s most intriguing perspectives was the portrayal of David’s mother, Gail. She is not only a unique character in the story who fights for justice without hesitation, but also she has a drastic change in her beliefs—from “justice fighter” to her role as a mother. Throughout the process of writing this paper, I found myself really like the character I was writing about because I found so many similarities between the character Gail and myself. Thinking from the position of Gail, I could easily understand why Gail made all the choices, and I certainly believed I would act the same way given a similar situation.

However, writing this essay was not easy for me. I experienced a lot of problems when I first began this paper. One of the main issues I had was the structure of the essay. I was not sure about how much I should write on each section of my essay, and whether I should focus more on the summary of the novel. I asked both my professor and the tutor in the writing center, and they helped me greatly. Another problem I had to face was the conclusion. I did not know how to end the essay, but luckily my professor gave me a lot of advice.

I am really glad that I got the chance to write an essay about such an interesting character and a wonderful novel. However, writing this essay was definitely not an easy task. I had to overcome a lot of difficulties but with the help from my professor and the tutors in the writing center, I was able to produce this well-rounded essay.

— Danyang Li

DANYANG LI

Prize Essay Winner

JUSTICE FOR THE MOTHER

Larry Watson, in *Montana 1948*, presents a story of a family that tries to choose between saving their reputation and preserving morality. Watson makes an intriguing claim that practicing justice can be hard because of the different roles each individual has to accept. This difficulty is evident in Watson's portrayal of Gail, who is the mother in the family and always encourages positive behavior. Though Gail courageously advocates for justice, as the story develops, she surrenders in the end due to the increasing pressure that is threatening her family. In my perspective, this unexpected change in Gail demonstrates that her role of being a mother outweighs her desire of doing justice.

Montana 1948 is a story told by a fictional character David Hayden, a twelve-year-old boy who lives with his family in a small town of Montana where David's father, Wesley, works as the sheriff. The conflict explodes when their Indian maid Marie suddenly gets ill but refuses to see Doctor Frank, who is Wesley's brother. Gail, Wesley's wife, shockingly discovers Frank frequently molests and even rapes Indian girls. Subsequently, Marie is murdered by Frank, according to David, and Wesley falls into a dilemma between justice and family. At this stage, Gail supports justice and wants punishment for Frank. However, Wesley's father Julian, the former sheriff, regards Frank's crime as insignificant and demands that Wesley should leave his brother alone. The story goes to a peak when Wesley locks Frank in his basement and Julian stealthily tries to save Frank by threatening violence. An invisible war begins in the Haydens' backyard. Despite her earlier position, Gail surrenders and asks to free Frank to restore peace in her family. Finally, Wesley realizes his duty and enforces justice. However,

the story ends up with Frank's suicide in the basement and everything is concealed after his death.

From the perspective of characterization, Gail is able to encourage justice in the first parts of the story because of her desire to do right. In her point of view, everyone has the responsibility to do and to uphold justice. When Gail first hears the crime which Frank commits (Watson 37), she is shocked and responds with a tremendous amount of anger towards Wesley, for he tries to avoid confronting the reality. Although Gail does not have the power to give punishment, her persistence on doing justice becomes a tremendous pressure on Wesley's decision. When Wesley comes to an agreement with Frank to "cut things out" (75), Gail urges, "Sins—crimes—are not supposed to go unpunished" (76), and this belief arouses Wesley to act impartially in the end.

With regards to Gail's family role, Gail surrenders to the crime in the end due to her anxiety about the potential violence that could threaten her family's safety. During the gunshot incident in scene three, Gail's desire to protect her family overcomes her clumsiness and enables her to audaciously pull the trigger (130). However, regardless of the bravery she shows, Gail still is the mother in her family. Her priority is, and always will be to keep her family safe. Therefore, when Gail realizes later that her "only" solution to keep her family safe is to abandon justice, she finally breaks down and shouts "Let him [Frank] go. Let him do whatever he wants to do to whomever he wants. I don't care anymore. I just want my house back. I want my family safe" (137). At this point, the burden that Gail has to bear becomes too much for her to carry—guarding family safety, fighting for justice, and being the role model of David—she simply cannot act all of these roles at the same time. Thus, as a mother, she has to choose what is the most important for her, that is, the safety of her family.

Theoretically speaking, I believe there is no right or wrong in how Gail acts. Gail accepts her different roles in various cases—either do justice or preserve her family. As a female myself, I can understand why Gail does not choose justice in the end. It is by no means to say that we are weaker than men, but we have our own perspective of what we ought to value. I cannot imagine any mother under any circumstances would not want her child and her family to be safe, even if it means to give up her dignity and morality. Traditionally, in 1948, women are still a vulnerable group, but as

a female, Gail values justice more than any of the male characters in the story. Therefore, it is ironic to see the constant comparison between Gail, who starts as a strong hearted justice fighter, and Wesley, who has a strong power in his position to preserve justice, but at first, chooses to indulge his brother Frank's crime. Gail's unforeseen change in this story implies that her sense of justice dominates if her family is not threatened, but her family values take precedence over justice when her family is in danger. Essentially, Gail's intrinsic values force her to be true to the mother role.

WORKS CITED

Watson, Larry. *Montana, 1948*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 1993. Print.

DANYANG LI is a sophomore majoring in Business Administration and Management in the school of management (SMG). She is from the great city of Hangzhou, China. And she would like to partially dedicate the publication of this paper to her wonderful first-semester writing professor Maria Zlateva. Professor Zlateva was extremely helpful to her and helped greatly with her grammatical weaknesses.