
An Imaginary Garden With Real Toads: College Admission Essay Sample

"Art is man's constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him."

--Attributed to Chinua Achebe, Nigerian novelist and poet

I'd like to beg to differ with Mr. Achebe. Art is not always man's effort to create a different reality – or at least, it shouldn't be. The best art isn't an escape like a fairy tale or a beach novel. I think the best art makes us grapple with what we are – forcing us to come to terms with our imperfection as a species, as a nation, as an individual.

I can't help but think of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which exemplifies the kind of art I love best. Ellison's novel, though written in a sort of surreal, experimental style to reflect the jazz music of the period, seeks to portray the black experience in pre-civil rights America with harsh realism. The unnamed narrator of the novel suffers from a kind of invisibility—society's failure to recognize his humanity—for which the novel is named. He suffers extreme and grotesque violence at the hands of white authority figures. In a deeply disturbing scene, he and a group of other young black men are pitted against one another and forced to battle in a kind of cage fight for the entertainment of rich, white spectators. His namelessness is meant to symbolize his anonymity at the hands of his white oppressors, and at the same time the universality of his experience as a black man in America.

Ellison does not sugarcoat his novel with feel-good idealism. Ellison forces the contemporary reader to reflect on his own prejudices and injustices in his society – hopefully inspiring a positive change. This is what makes Ellison's work so effective.

Likewise, artist Robert Rauschenberg challenges our assumptions about sex and private space in my favorite work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. His piece, *Bed*, is a well-worn quilt, pillow, and sheet splashed violently with paint of angry colors. The worn-in quilt suggests a much-loved, intimate, private space. But the paint, unnaturally and forcefully splattered, jolts us out of Rauschenberg's serene homespace into a cold and unfamiliar place. To me, this stark juxtaposition suggests the scene of a rape—the ultimate violation of one's privacy and tranquility. Rauschenberg forces us to grapple with sex and violence—a very real problem that still exists in America.

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Books like *Invisible Man* and art like Rauschenberg's "Bed" help us to reflect, as a society, on what we once were, what we are now, and what we will be. They're created to help us remember, not forget. If we do forget and get lost in that dreamworld we create for ourselves to escape, we will never effect change in our imperfect world.

I much prefer this statement by Marianne Moore to Achebe's quote: "Poetry is the art of creating imaginary gardens with real toads." In other words, art does not craftily avoid the distasteful aspects of the human experience. In a beautiful way, it poses the problem to the viewer, the reader, or the listener. It's our job to acknowledge that problem and effect a solution.

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