Fascism and You

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I am a junior English major and a Philosophy minor. During my education at the University of Kentucky, I have been on the Dean’s List three semesters and have received a College of Arts and Sciences scholarship. I have been a member of Chi Omega sorority for the past three years, during which time I have held a variety of offices including Panhellenic Delegate and Alumnae Relations Chair. Actively participating in the Greek system has greatly contributed to my experience at UK.

"Fascism and You" is a piece that explores both my academic and social interests. It is a critique of Greek life, academia, and popular culture, but mainly it is a comic evaluation of my attempt to excel in each of these areas. This personal reflection compares two stereotypical characters, a sorority woman and her alternative, anti-sorority, classmate, to illustrate the trivial standards college students set for one another. As one of the few English majors in sorority circle, I find that the pressures to succeed as a serious student of the arts and as a well-rounded, social Greek member conflict in a variety of ways. In "Fascism and You," I am able to laugh at both realms in light of my own shortcomings. The piece concludes with a desperate effort to prove my self-importance during which I realize that the paradigms illustrated in the previous scenes are false, but that I cannot defeat them.

After I graduate from UK, I plan to further my education by working toward a doctorate of literature or a master of writing. Creative non-fiction, my true passion, helps people to see the world through light-hearted, critical eyes. This piece is a first step in what I hope will be a lifetime of observing, researching, and writing. Composing this critique of campus life has made me more aware of my surroundings in preparation for further essays and articles concerning broader issues, which I hope to publish someday. My mentor, Eric Reece, encouraged me to honestly express my experiences in this piece and in future pursuits.

Mentor: Erik Reece, Lecturer, English Department

Critical self-awareness is not something that comes easily to young people or young writers. One day, sitting in class, Caroline McCoy spotted a button on another student’s backpack that read: "Fuck your fascist standards of beauty." Caroline knew the message was directed at her. But rather than respond with indignation, in "Fascism and You" she takes the reader on a hilarious journey through the superficial assumptions we make about other people, along with the inevitable pratfalls that come with trying to establish one’s own identity. Because satire is one of the most sophisticated and most difficult genres of writing, it is only more mature writers who do it well. Caroline is a rare exception. "Fascism and You" is a wonderfully comic send-up of slackers, punk-rockers, sororities, and Catholic girls’ schools. No one escapes unscathed or unexamined, including — most importantly — the writer herself.

Fascism and You

My “welcome back to another semester of pseudo-intellectual, liberal arts majors” sign was pink this year with bold faced, comic sans type. It was in the form of a button and read, “Fuck your fascist standards of beauty.”

The wearer of this personal greeting card sits in front of me in not one, but two of my classes. Only I am this lucky to have chosen the same completely unrelated and obscure courses as this bizarre individual. Her long, stringy hair assaults me daily like a dead dog in the road, as do her black "mess with me and you’ll find my heel in your face" boots. The first time her potato sack coat scratches my left arm as she storms into her desk, this personal space invader ignores my quiet hello and lets her button voice its own pre-recorded reply, “Fuck your fascist standards of beauty.”

My initial reaction to the button is far from complacent and, according to my over psycho-analyzed mother, would require multiple sets of deep breaths and “yes” phrases. I cannot help myself; my emotions run wild.

Fascist, what is that supposed to mean? As I read and re-read the shoddy lettering, I can feel my democratic blood start to boil. How dare she offend me like this? This tattooed, pierced member of the “we’re different and superior because we wear black eye liner as lipstick” club has gone one step too far. I want to lean over my desk and whisper in her ear, “I’m sorry that I like to brush my hair, donate rather than purchase at Goodwill, and have fewer than fifteen holes in my body,” but I don’t. Some Dr. Phil phantom must be curbing my temper.

I trade my disgruntlement for outrage upon realizing that not only is this remark directed specifically toward hair-spray goddesses like me, but I also do not know what the word fascist means. Suddenly this is not only an attack on my personal space, but on my intelligence as well. I am an English major, a lover of language, a keen observer, a reader of the dictionary for fun, and this over-kill Green Day fan is stabbing me with a malicious unknown vocabulary word. I think this is foul and must be combated with a fierce defense force.

In the days that follow, the first of many in this never ending semester, I make sure to wear
every sorority tee-shirt I own, including the "If you didn't get drafted, you got shafted" bid day tee that I am usually too polite and humane to put on, even underneath a jacket. I have no sympathy in this war. I feel it is one I must fight for well-mannered, attractive people everywhere.

Simultaneously, I secretly search for the definition of the word fascist. I cannot ask anyone, for that would require admitting that I don't understand the term to begin with. I hear the G I Joe motto in the back of my mind, "Soon you will know, and knowing is half the battle." It is my mantra, my "walk tall and carry a big stick" if you will.

I am a soldier of the country club. Armed with my Vera Bradley tote and Northface fleece, I am my own everlasting army. I plot my plan of attack: "Operation Enduring Arrogance." My first move will be to trudge across the street, dodging cars lane by lane as only experienced jaywalkers can, and maneuver through the hoards of enemy soldiers trying to halt my mission with trivial "hello, how are you?" Upon reaching my destination, DFV, the Definitive Vessel of Knowledge, known to civilians as "the library," I will narrow my target and reach my ultimate objective, the OED, the Oxford English Dictionary. No regular, college pocket-book dictionary will do for this mission. It requires extensive expertise not only of definition, but also of Latin origin, historical context, and past usage. The OED is my only chance for survival.

Unfortunately, it is past midnight when I concoct this strategy. I am already in my pajamas and too lazy to venture across campus. I settle for some basic Internet searching instead. It takes little effort and no weapons of mass destruction to navigate my way to a political organization home page containing, among other things, a thorough explanation of fascism.

When my roommates ask what could possibly be keeping me up past my usual bedtime, I tell them I have an important essay to write: eight pages at least and requiring detailed research. I decide it is more noble to be considered a slacker than someone who doesn't know what the word fascist means. I imagine I am immersed in an unrelenting creative fury. I must utilize my mania to its fullest potential or risk loosing forever the genius unraveling on the screen before me. I often indulge in this fascination, especially around my fashion-merchandising major roommates who carefully stack their Cosmopolitan and Vogues next my New Yorkers and Norton Anthologies. They marvel at my drive and, though they have never read a word of my writing, they tell everyone how talented I am and bring their business writing exercises to my room for editing. My brilliance is astonishing, even to me.

In the darkness while my fellow sleeping beauties, who also occupy room four of my harmony-desolate sorority house, dream of Michael Star skirts and Sevens jeans, I read about fascism.

Because it is late and I am only pretending to be involved in some sort of innovative fervor, my discovery generates a mere seventh grade "duh." Apparently, the pink button and stringy hair led my quest down a more complicated path than necessary. I could have easily guessed what the phrase implied by using the context of the dim-witted sentence. Perhaps I shouldn't have been allowed to skip English 101.

According to the academic source, "Fascism and You" (complete with links to other sites such as "Communism For Dummies," and "What George W Would Look Like as a Woman"), fascism is "the separation and persecution or denial of equality to a specific segment of the population based upon superficial qualities or belief systems."

Obviously. And I am the persecutor and the tattooed, pierced girl is the persecuted, and the superficial qualities for persecution are the "standards of beauty."

When it's all said and done, I am disappointed that I have not uncovered some revolutionary thought or movement that I am utterly opposed to. In fact, in my fatigue I find myself almost agreeing with the button. The button, now embodying its own ability to reason and speak, is not so offensive. She is merely expressing her own belief and, although it is directed specifically at preppy, private school, Jetta drivers like me, I cannot blame her for choosing this particular phrase to mark her pink plastic façade.

This is not the first time I have been confronted with my identity in such a direct way and it will not be the last. Although I usually wait until several weeks of class have passed to sport my assortment of Greek lettered attire, my fellow scholastic hopefuls and professors immediately sentence me to life in insincere, flowery, happy-face prison anyway. I have to claw my way out of this pigeonhole slowly, proving my aptitude through brown-nosed participation and hard work. In the end, I regain the respect my designer jeans cost me in the classroom. In this delicate balance of carefully rumpled Goodwill blouses and BeBe halter-tops, I walk a thin line.

I dream that night that I am back in high school in a polyester plaid skirt four inches above the knee and a white blouse tucked into the soffie shorts underneath. I am in my bedroom again, getting ready for school and my mom has her teacher face on, complete with pointed finger and furrowed brow. She is demanding an explanation for another pink conviction, this time in the form of a sticker on my vanity mirror.

My closest friends have decided my analytical essays and poems do not express the appropriate amount of sarcasm or criticism to define me as a true language devotee and aspiring English major. In response, to save the reputation of the "smart one" in the group, the cultured thespian, the National Honor Society member, they come to the conclusion that my inability to utter certain genetic terms found in fourth grade Family Life books is unacceptable. They must help me overcome this disability with my own self-help manual. Soon I will be able to say, shout even, sexual terminology with confidence out car windows and across lunch-room tables to their amusement.

As I wearily begin to put my face on, my mother begins the high-pitched, guilt-inoculating wail only a
mother can express, “I can’t believe you did this! Who are you? Not the girl I raised, obviously.” What follows is the all too familiar “I’ve read about this” face that I avoid like white before Easter, if at all possible. Sitting down on my bed, she begins her lament. “Caroline Elizabeth, do you understand what this sticker means?”

I read the sparkling, obnoxious sticker on my mirror that reads, “Vaginas Are Cool.” I think this is a statement of my independent, new-found womanhood and pre-college rally-for-revolution zeal. I really have no clue what the sticker implies, except that my friends will go to great lengths to embarrass me.

“This sticker is for lesbians,” she states. “Lesbians? What are you talking about? Katie and Candice thought it would be funny.” Realizing that these bright pink stickers are for gay women who like... and must want to advocate... I reply, “Shit, Mom, why didn’t you tell me? I didn’t know!”

When I wake up, the smell of Goof-off and discomfort of adhesive under my nails seems real and it takes me a moment to thank God I am no longer friends with those people or under their outlandish influence. Now I succumb to worthier deities, in ancient Homeric spirit, “The Few, the Proud, the Greek” of fraternity and sorority row. At least their attempt at making me comfortable with my sexuality (ergo my superiority) comes in another language, appropriate for any car window, sweatshirt, pencil, pillowcase, frame, notepad, beer mug, bottle opener, charm bracelet, towel, bitch bag, or shot glass.

In class the next day, after a series of breaths that coincide with backward counting from ten to zero, I brace myself for the button. Although I should be used to seeing it by now, I’m not. Although I know what it means, and accept my fate as its prime target, its presence in my line of vision is more than I can handle at times. I am above this, I think. I am comfortable with my vocabulary skills and Mac makeup. I believe in freedom of speech and that different is good. I need no special-forces or rangers to fight this battle. It is a ground war in which, ultimately, there are no casualties, minus a slightly damaged ego and self-image.

To end it, my final act is one of maturity and peacekeeping codes. Armed with my wit and cleverness alone, I have arrived in Philosophy of Japanese Culture early. As usual, my buttoned friend is there too, doing the cross-word puzzle aloud to ensure that everyone nearby is immediately made aware of her shamelessness and obscurity. Luckily, I am her only listener. I see my window of opportunity and take it.

“What’s the girl’s name who played on that one show with Jared Leto?”

Is she talking to me? I am confused. “Oh, I need a drink of water.” She must be talking to the button. When she has left the room with a defiant huff, and I am alone, I nonchalantly reach down and remove the button from her bag. Holding its cold metal clasp in my hand, its voice speaks louder, with a high pitched harsh tone that makes me cringe more so than before. I am afraid its pin will prick me, and I hold it carefully with both hands around the edges to avoid getting hurt. I read it once more,””Fuck your fascist standards of beauty.”

“Well f— you, too,” I whisper. I have little time; I must act quickly. With my forefinger underneath the pin and my left hand grasped tightly around the plastic, I take a deep breath and pull. I pull some more. I pull harder with frustration-driven force. It will not break! My moment of glory has no climatic pop. I start to panic. I will be discovered any minute now. How will I explain this to her? To another classmate? To my professor? This is too much. I am not a coward, not a failure; I am a noble, level-headed person who isn’t bothered by something as trivial as a button. I decide on an alternate method of attack. It is dramatic and brave. Future country-clubbers line fraternity and sorority row and stand in gratitude for this defiant act.

I switch seats.