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Sydney Wells
Butler University

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Response to “The Assassination of John Lennon as Depicted by the Madame Tussaud Wax Museum, Niagara Falls, Ontario, 1987”

Sydney Wells

In my eighth-grade Spanish class, the teacher put on the movie *Selena* to share her story with the class. Once the movie finished and we had learned of Selena’s murderer, Yolanda, there was a communal sense of hatred and a desire for her to rot in prison. The difference in the two pieces of art comes from how the people within it are framed. In the film about Selena, her real-life family had input on how the story was told and consequently the performances throughout the movie were a contrast to how the wax museum figures are being described. The film does a really nice job of placing the victims in the situation above Yolanda by including her greed-driven motivation for killing Selena and delivering that sense of justice at the end when they show her in prison.

In the poem by David Wojahn, “The Assassination of John Lennon as Depicted by the Madame Tussaud Wax Museum, Niagara Falls, Ontario, 1987,” he presents a piece which on the surface shares a graphic description of the John Lennon wax statue that depicts his 1980 assassination, as well as the statues of both his killer and his wife at the event. Looking deeper into the poem, there is a definite critique on how the art is used to recreate this tragedy. The poem transforms into a reflection of how “we”, as a society, are often dehumanizing towards celebrities and desensitized to our treatment of them, even in death.

Wojahn is also very deliberate in his word selection, as he emphasizes the artificiality of the entire exhibit throughout the poem. From the first stanza, he separates the reality of the event from the wax statue depiction by describing the statue’s materials as, “Smuggled human hair from Mexico/Falls radiant around the waxy O.” By doing this, he immediately distinguishes that despite the detail put into the representation of the event, that does not mean that it is authentic. Throughout the poem, he reinforces this idea that nothing in the display is real by using words such as “mimic” and “fake”, and using material words such as, “latex” and “plastic”, to remind the audience that just because something is lifelike does not mean that it is/was real life. Similar to this situation, is how our society views the various media that we consume. When we watch movies or read books, we temporarily suspend our reality in exchange for the one being portrayed, and for a few hours that is what we exist within. In many instances, it becomes difficult to distinguish between the characters and the people that portray them. This ties into the motivation behind John David Chapman’s motive behind killing Lennon, as he was seen with and justified his killing with Salinger’s novel *Catcher in the Rye*. This inability to see the world without the lens of the media that surrounds us leads to delusions and a loss of connection as people form closer

relationships to fictional characters than the real people that surround them daily.

In the second stanza, Wojahn compares the figure of Yoko Ono and the girl who was photographed grieving her dead boyfriend in a picture taken from the Kent State massacre. Wojahn describes the photo as the one, “Where the girl can’t shriek her boyfriend alive, her arms/ Windmilling Ohio sky.” This seems like a comment on the way that these tragedies are often portrayed by the media and the victims are exploited in order to make a good story. The other possible criticism being that it is a comment on the idea that the fame that John achieved in his life is followed by the price tag of an endless exploitation. This exploitation extends onto the people who were connected to John and leaves them under constant scrutiny from the public. Yoko is no longer seen as a grieving widow as much as she is seen as the statue that was there when John died, and that image is all that is remembered, like that of the girl at Kent State. This dehumanization of victims from events like these are troubling considering the amount of trauma that probably resulted from the incidents. It also seems like it would prevent someone, like Yoko, to move on from the ordeal thanks to exhibits like this, that immortalize the event.

The next stanza details Lennon’s statue that lays on the ground surrounded by fake blood. The detail that the artists put into the statue to make it as accurate as it could be to John’s last moments is quite bizarre when put into words. Wojahn mentions that the statue’s chest rises to “mimic death-throes,” and that “We push a button/To renew the scream. /The chest starts up again.” It is a depraved use of art to not just recreate the event, but to make it where at the push of a button the entire scenario can be replayed, allowing for people to watch a vivid reenactment of his final agonizing moments as many times as they would like. Even the detail of breaking his glasses before placing them onto the sidewalk setting seems almost unnecessary. The accuracy of the more miniscule details makes it all the more morbid as a whole. It is also mentioned that *Imagine* plays behind the scene, a song about unity and peace. This detail is seemingly paradoxical to the scene that the artists have created as it is a permanent piece to remember and glorify the violence that was committed against Lennon.

I think that the paragraph on Wojahn’s word choice is incredibly applicable when talking about his description of the Lennon statue. In terms of how the figure is described he makes the decision to dissect every element of the exhibit, from the glasses being “broken on the plastic sidewalk” to calling the piece in his chest “a pump” (rather than a heart) it is apparent that he is making this distinction between reality and fantasy. This barrier is difficult to understand, because most people will not recognize the wax figure depiction as being the actual body of John Lennon. The barrier is the comprehension that this depiction has many creative liberties that have been

taken in order to create a visually compelling piece and that it is not an exact portrayal of the scene. The decision to even recreate the scene of his death makes it seem that this commemoration is more of a tribute to Lennon's death rather than Lennon's legacy.

Following the description of Lennon's wax figure, the attention is shifted onto his executioner who is said to have a permanent scowl. Chapman's stance is described as having, "...his arms outstretched, /His pistol barrel spiraling fake smoke." In terms of the positioning of the statues, Chapman stands above Lennon who is down on the bloodied floor. Chapman is also basked in a red light from an emergency vehicle, hence signifying his final few moments of freedom. This kind of art, both symbolically and in reality, keeps Chapman above Lennon. In terms of the notoriety received to both men, it seemingly perpetuates the idea that part of the reason why Lennon continues to be a well-known artist is because of his brutal slaying. Lennon's legacy is not being preserved as a musician, but instead is being belittled and placing his murder above all of his other accomplishments. The notion of commemorating one's killer into a piece of art and doing so in a way that the event becomes an attraction for the masses to visit and enjoy. The general rule-of-thumb, in my opinion, is that people who kill people do not get wax sculptures. Ultimately, it comes back to: do not paint killers in a way that immortalizes them and places them in a perpetual state of power over their victims.

Contrasting this to Yolanda's portrayal in *Selena*, there is a definite imbalance between the portrayal of the victims in the wax figures compared to that of the criminal. Placing a figure of the murderer committing the crime, his final minutes of freedom, compared to placing the victim bleeding out on the floor, his final moments of life comes across as a disrespectful representation of the event. It is a gross depiction of a murder and seems to revere Chapman for his accomplishment of committing the murder.

When looking at interviews with Wojahn this reflection seems to be his intention. In one interview, Wojahn mentions that the poets that he read "taught [him] how important it is for a poem to try to navigate between the micro and the macro, the private life of the individual and a public reckoning with history and politics." This comes across throughout the poem as he takes a widely known event involving a celebrity's death and makes us, as the audience, question how our society regards those we endow with fame.

Wojahn creates a sense of urgency throughout the poem by emphasizing the grotesque nature of the display and by ending the poem with the acknowledgment of the button that restarts the mechanics. The final stanza states that "We push a button/To renew the scream. /The chest starts up again." This finale to the poem creates a sense of dread that leaves the reader questioning "how long will this go on?" An almost purgatory-like existence for the lifeless statues to endure, but also for the victims who did

not die that day. Lennon's family and friends are continuously put into a spotlight where they are unable to escape his murder, a cycle that seems never-ending, when the button is pushed, they must reminisce on John's life and their time spent with him. In an interview, Wojahn says that "[t]aking that emotional urgency and finding a way to link it to larger issues of politics and culture and history is also important." This poem puts our celebrity culture under a microscope and examines how our behavior can impact the lives of those we look up to, even after they pass on. At what point does the line get crossed between a celebrity's private life and their life as seen through what they share with the public? Do fans have the right to gain more insight on the lives of whatever celebrity they support as a payment for their devotion? Is death the point where people should release their claims on the private life of a celebrity or is the everlasting gaze of the public the burden that celebrities endure for their fame?