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Essay 4

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## **Mourning through Art**

When tragedy strikes, the last thing that comes to mind is beauty. Creating art after a tragedy is something artists struggle with for fear of negative interpretation. Black as a primary color represents art's overall mood; usually mourning, fear, sadness or other negative emotions. When tragedy occurs, there is a void of any color or brightness. Artists purposely use dark colors to set the mood for pieces intended to evoke certain emotions from the viewers. Both Christopher Niemann and Art Spiegelman, artists for The New Yorker, used black as their main color when depicting the September 11 attacks and tsunami in Japan on the September 24, 2001 and March 28, 2011 covers of The New Yorker.

How can art be created after something as ugly as September 11<sup>th</sup>? Despite such a tragedy, the cover art for the following week's New Yorker had to be made. The September 24, 2001 issue of The New Yorker's cover is a black on black image of the Twin Towers and this color scheme was the right artistic choice because of the current feelings of mourning and loss. When the World Trade Center was attacked almost ten years ago, it was as if the world had stopped, as if we were all frozen in a dark cloud of sadness and confusion. Nothing was beautiful about the attacks of 9/11 but life goes on and so did the distribution of The New Yorker. The cover art depicted the feelings of those effected by the attacks, especially residents of New York City, because the black on black picture of the Trade Center leaves room for the variety of confused, dark emotions felt. When addressing the country the evening of September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush stated, "The pictures of airplanes flying into buildings, fires

burning, huge structures collapsing, have filled us with disbelief, terrible sadness and a quiet, unyielding anger.” The clouds of smoke together with the massive amounts of debris that lingered over and around ground zero is what I see in the lighter shade of black, where the pitch-black towers lead me to think of the pain and suffering the victims and America as a whole felt that devastating morning. The darker black of the towers can also be interpreted as the spirits of those who died that day. The black imprint these attacks left on our hearts from mourning the thousands of lost lives are represented by the black towers, as if standing forever in spirit. The simplicity of this cover is just what citizens of The United States needed to see in time of chaos in the days following September 11<sup>th</sup>. Images of falling towers, the destroyed pentagon or helpless victims being dragged from the rubble haunted American homes. Every news station had coverage on ground zero or other 9/11 stories that filled us with deep sadness. For those who read The New Yorker every week, this image portrayed the silence and mourning felt by those affected. The calm, dark image represents how even though the World Trade Center has fallen, we as a country have not. The spirit of America still stands strong, just like the ghostly image of the towers on the cover. Like Bush said in his address, “Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shatter steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve.” Even though every American could not get physically involved by helping victims, giving blood or cleaning up, and not everyone lost a direct friend or family member, all felt the effects of the terrorist attacks that day. Whether all citizens of The United States were affected by the attacks or not, the darkness of this piece represents America’s shaken exterior while at the same time shows strength in a nation whose soul cannot be torn down.

After the devastating tsunami in Japan, the March 28, 2011 cover of *The New Yorker* displays an image of a cherry blossom tree with pink flowers shaped like biohazard symbols on its branches. The image of the cherry blossom tree is on a black background titled “Dark Spring” and illustrated by Christopher Niemann. Like the artist for the September 24, 2001 cover of *The New Yorker* struggled with creating art after tragedy, so did Niemann. It is a great responsibility to create art after a devastating event because it must be done in a way that can be respected and understood by the viewers, but at the same time, able to be interpreted in different ways. In regards to his “Dark Spring”, Niemann said: “The quiet beauty of plum blossoms mixed with the radiation symbol would make an eerie and appropriate metaphor for the threat of a nuclear catastrophe.” The pitch-black background is representative of the many deaths that occurred from the natural disaster and symbolizes the mourning of those losses. When interpreting this image, the contrasting themes of nature come to mind. Nature’s destructive quality is shown in the black of the image where its beauty shines through in the pink blossoms. Creating the image of the blossoms in the shape of biohazard symbols is significant because of the nuclear disaster that came out of the tsunami in Japan. Even though the attractive pink blossoms depict something ugly, they represent something very unique to the many lives that were lost. These trees only blossom for two weeks a year during the months of March and April. When the blossoms appear, the Japanese have parties under the trees and celebrate life. Their time under the blossoms is spent reflecting on the miniscule amount of time we have on this earth and how each moment is precious and beautiful. Using the image of cherry blossoms on the cover art is significant because of this reference to how short, valuable and fragile life is. The cherry blossom in Japanese culture represents the Samurai who goes off to war knowing that it is honorable to die in battle. Because of this, a Samurai can die at any time just as the cherry

blossoms can disappear at any time. This disappearing of blossoms refers to how life is fleeting and must be cherished.

In both pieces of art there is a contrast of color. This contrast can be representative of the hope, love and compassion that follow bad situations. Without pain and suffering, the world could not appreciate compassion or the value of what it means to be in relation with others. This contrast in color, the bright pink blossoms in the Japan issue and the lighter shade of black in the 9/11 issue, illustrates that even after the worst catastrophe, it is human nature to help those who suffer. After the 9/11 attacks, Americans felt not just sadness, but also nationalism that led to a bond between strangers. The shade of grey can represent the distant goal of seeking justice against those who attacked our country for the Americans who lost their lives that day in 2001. Ten years later, that shade of grey can be interpreted as the capture and killing of Osama Bin Laden, a day marked as a celebration of that justice we as a country have fought so hard for. The phone calls made by those in the World Trade Center or on the planes on 9/11 were calls expressing love. When the tsunami so abruptly crashed the shores of Japan, people around the world realized how precious life is and rushed to Japan's aid. This love is depicted peeking through as the lighter shade of black or the bright pink in both pieces.

Art imitates life at its best and worst moments throughout history. The New Yorker is a weekly magazine that displays on its cover images reflecting the news, cultural phenomenon, or art that reflects the articles inside. Interpreting art means to look deeper into a painting and attempt to understand what the artist wants us to see. The New Yorker cover is art imitating life at its best in the September 11, 2001 and March 28, 2011 issues with black as the primary color representing tragedy combined with the lighter colors hinting at some glimpse of hope. Even though darkness overpowers human emotion when tragedy strikes thinking that all is evil in the

world, it is pertinent to remember that the world is also filled with love. In both pieces, black encompasses the majority of the page while whatever lighter colors appear are either small, or in the background, although not insignificant. Hope is apparent in both of these pieces regardless of the overwhelming tone of mourning and sadness. Taking tragedy combined with human emotion and converting it into art is something Art Spiegelman and Christopher Niemann accomplish with their cover art. After interpreting these pieces, it is clear that regardless of how much suffering we go through as human beings, there is peace in knowing that love triumphs tragedy whether it is obvious or not.