

ENGL1101

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Rise Against: Speaking Out Against War

The punk rock band, Rise Against, was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1999. Their first album, *The Unraveling*, was released in 2001 (*Keep Music Alive*). The band has since produced four albums (*Rise Against: Official Site*). Current band members, Tim McIlrath performing vocals, Joe Principe at bass guitar and vocals, Brandon Barnes on drums, and Zach Blair on lead guitar, follow a liberal, political ideology, according to a profile by Ryan Cooper. They have been a part of Punk Voter, and they endorse PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, which follows the same political ideologies (Cooper). Many of their songs are about standing up to the injustices occurring in the world. Their latest album, *Appeal to Reason*, tackles issues like corporate America, the declining environment, and the war in Iraq. Lead singer, Tim McIlrath, explains that the members of Rise Against want to use their punk rock music as “a vehicle for change and awareness” (“An Interview”). Rise Against has successfully employed its music and music videos as tools to raise awareness about issues in contemporary society, specifically instances of torture that have taken place during the war in Iraq.

The music video for “Hero of War,” a song from their latest album, *Appeal to Reason*, embodies a spirit of enlightenment, revealing to the audience the emotional effects of war on a soldier who has first-hand experience on the battlefield. “Hero of War” was written to “remind people of these events while they’re happening,” says McIlrath, and he uses Abu Ghraib, a prison in Iraq, as an example of one of “these events” (“Interview: Rise Against”). The music video opens with a shot of McIlrath playing an acoustic guitar, sitting in a plastic chair against the backdrop of a playground. The playground is deserted, empty of youth; there are no children laughing, playing, or running around. The melancholy setting portrays the loss of innocence by a young man forced to grow up fast. The camera returns to this scene several times throughout the video to emphasize that war takes away youthfulness. The shots then begin to alternate amongst several scenes, each portraying the same man as a soldier with a young woman and through night-vision lenses. As the main character of the video, the young man represents the tale of a man brave enough to leave his home and family because of his love for his country. Soldiers on patrol represent the usual day-to-day life when first arriving in the war, doing basic duties like keeping guard. The soldier becomes more involved in combat, which leads to scenes of him and another soldier torturing a prisoner-of-war by waterboarding. While waterboarding is not specifically mentioned in the song, the scene overlaps the verse, “They took off his clothes, they pissed in his hands / I told them to stop, but then I joined in / We beat him with guns and batons / Not just once, but again and again.” The verse implies that the “him” in these lyrics and the man being tortured in the video represents the Iraqi detainees who suffered at the hands of a few American soldiers at Abu Ghraib, spotlighting these events as McIlrath intended.

Before he left for the war, the young soldier was full of love and happiness. He had to leave his sweetheart behind. He painfully, but proudly explained that he had a duty to fight for his country, and he promised to return to her. As he transitions into the military, the soldier clings to his sweetheart's photograph. The young woman represents the happiness and innocence of his former life and provides hope of one day returning to normalcy. The war begins to wear on the soldier, and he eventually finds himself consumed and beaten by temptation to partake in the torture of the prisoner.

When the young man is shown through night-vision lenses, he throws his body around and yanks at his hair, and his face is contorted in anguish. He sobs and beats his fists against the mirror and floor. His memory flashes back prior to the war, to a time that was happy for him. He has returned home, but he is in a deep depression. The agony caused by the torture he witnessed and administered has put him into darkness. At the end of the video, he emerges from this horrible darkness with white paint smeared across his face. His ghostly image is an externalization of the deadness he feels inside, the result of the internal conflict with which he has been struggling.

The story depicted in the music video is based on events that occurred at Abu Ghraib. According to Seymour Hersh, before it became a United States Military prison, Abu Ghraib was under the control of Saddam Hussein and was characterized by “torture, weekly executions, and vile living conditions.” The prison received a desperately needed upgrade, including bathrooms, a medical center, and a good overall cleaning in order to accommodate prisoners-of-war humanely. Unfortunately, these improvements did not keep prisoners from illegal abuses. Six suspects, all members of the United States Army, faced charges including conspiracy, cruelty toward prisoners, maltreatment, assault, and indecent acts. During the hearing in the case of Staff Sergeant Ivan L. Frederick II, witnesses told of instances where prisoners were seen being forced to masturbate one another and left naked in isolation cells without water, a toilet, or ventilation for several days. Sergeant Frederick claimed that he had questioned the maltreatment of prisoners but was told by higher powers not to worry about it. One man who had seen prisoners thrown into a pile by another Army soldier when he delivered them to the prison testified that he had reported the action to his superiors assuming that they would take care of the problem (Hersh).

Military Intelligence implied that these abuses were acceptable by congratulating the suspects for a good job of loosening up prisoners for interrogation by unethical methods such as depriving them of sleep. They needed information from the detainees and had no qualms about forcing them to perform acts that, in essence, stripped them of their humanity. General Janis Karpinski, who was placed in charge of Abu Ghraib, had a difficult time finding fault with the situation. When graphic photographs were released and horrified the public, society finally realized that a change was necessary (Hersh). The outcry against them motivated the reform of military prison practices and demanded oversight to prevent these events from occurring again.

The underlying theme of men returning home who have been tortured by their experiences is present in the music video. According to Brett Schwartz, “Twenty percent of [soldiers who have served in Iraq or Afghanistan] are experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and/or depression from the exposure to combat” (8). In November 2007, it was reported that every week, 120 veterans committed suicide, resulting in 6,256 veteran suicides in 2005. “Veterans between the ages of twenty and twenty-four were the demographic most likely to commit suicide,” a rate three times greater than the rate of civilian suicides in the same age category (B. Schwartz 8). Rise Against has been influenced to spread awareness about these alarming statistics and the severe mental effects that war has on soldiers. Tim McIlrath takes a moment before live performances of “Hero of War” to share these facts with the audience. Instead of just reminding people about what happened in Abu Ghraib, he wants people to know that there are men and women who have put their lives at stake for this country, but have come home scarred by their experiences. These soldiers are waging an internal war with PTSD and the constant reminders of the horrors of these experiences.

Despite the efforts to raise awareness, Rise Against has been accused of not supporting the men and women of the military. The band has always been vocally opposed to the war, but they have never been against the troops fighting in the war. In early October 2009, Florida radio station WPBZ (Buzz

103.1) tried to convince its listeners that Rise Against was actually against all things military. In their online blog, the band clarified that Buzz's animosity came after Rise Against backed out of performing in the station's annual music festival. This decision was made after the band found out that the show was going to be sponsored by the United States Army's Recruitment Department. Since the band has been openly opposed to some of the tactics used by the department to recruit new members, they felt that it would be hypocritical to hold a performance supporting ideals with which they did not agree. Rise Against has performed at multiple military bases for the troops and has allowed troops and their families to attend other performances for free as a show of their support for the soldiers (L. Schwartz).

The content of Rise Against's music has been affected by the problematic events of modern society. The war in Iraq is one of the most significant of these events. This war is surrounded by controversy, and the band wants to bring this issue to their audience's attention. The band is reaching out to a current generation of listeners who are young and feel disenfranchised. They want their listeners to be informed about what is happening in the world and then encourage them to stand up and speak out if they are concerned with all of the problems. Rise Against's songs recommend action be taken while also preserving some of the cultural feelings towards issues, so that future generations may look back and understand what was going on in society during that time.

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