

Maddie Gibson

Final portfolio

4/26/17

If you put a human being in a situation involving a drastic change or conflict, they usually come out completely changed by the end. Though this was not the case when my story's evil protagonist heard his life-changing news, after studying abroad I notice many changes in the protagonist of the story that is my life. Studying abroad has changed me in a variety of ways, both personal and academic. I am now more patient and true to what I believe. These changes go hand-in-hand with my evolution as a creative writer.

Before coming to Spain, I had never had to do any type of creative writing. Though I can write essays and research papers, I was clueless when it came to telling a story in a way that people would want to read. I was excited that some of my classmates were talented at writing, because I knew the benefit of constructive criticism, especially coming from people with experience. I knew that I had a lot to learn, and I loved hearing their suggestions! I tend to get impatient with revisions, but I realized that I enjoy revising creative writing more than essays, because there truly are no limits. It was the case for most of my poems that the final form was nothing like the original, because I was open-minded to what my subconscious wanted to say. I just had to be patient and wait for the appropriate state of mind to write what I truly wanted to convey.

At the beginning of the semester, I had the idea that all poetry has to be about either starry nights and romance or the opposite: sadness, rejection, and war. However, as the semester went on, I came to realize that my more logical, scientific tone can be applied to creative writing. It resulted in

several works that present serious insights into human feelings in a humorous, dryly sarcastic way. I think this realization is actually quite symbolic, because on a personal level I learned to stay true to myself, which carried into my writing. I now know that I don't have to change my personality to write good poems or short fiction. I love science and sarcasm, and there's no reason not to include those in my writing as well.

I believe that my best piece is my short story, "The Day of X." It contains a nice balance of insights into human emotion and my sarcastic sense of humor. I chose to present the story in an almost childish, black-and-white way, but the more you look under the surface, the more meanings you can extract relating to love, personal priorities, and problem solving. Personally, I am quite partial to Dr. Sinister, who is simultaneously the smartest and dumbest man in the world. I modeled him after some people I've met in the course of my life, but it still baffles me how he has no regard for anyone besides himself and his research. I want him to have a fundamental change and learn to love, but something inside me tells me that it will never happen to him.

If I find myself in a class involving creative writing in the future, I like the idea of expanding Dr. Sinister's story. I have never felt a relationship with a character I've created until now, and I think it'd be interesting to see what happens in his psyche when his evil son is born! I have never been this invested in something I have written; it's a completely new feeling to me. I am grateful to have taken this class that has caused me to care about my own writing and view it for what it truly is: mine.

Walking Down Carrer de Roger de Llúria with my Host Mom Cris on a Hot Sunday in the Middle of April

On our way to the store, I see two women sitting with emptied mugs, their glazed eyes glued to phones, as laughing teenagers nearby receive glares from the old man in the tailored trenchcoat.

Around the corner, I witness the young handyman with greasy hair catcall the girl with the perfect face, perfect outfit. Anyone but him, any destination but here.

Here, where the drunken man sleeps in the midday sun and sweats through his suit, and a feeble old lady clings to a child for strength.

Deliberate steps, they miss honking cars by centimeters, barely beat by the girl on crutches and her boyfriend.

No, Cris says, as we return. *El novio* holds his girlfriend's purse and provides an arm for extra support, much like the boy does for his *abuela*.

The sun celebrates with the homeless *veterano*, exhausted from his interview with his future *jefe* in the vintage coat. Shiny curls and sleek makeup, *la mujer de negocios* does not notice the comments of the stranger; she is too excited about meeting her *amigas* for coffee and conversation.

## The A to Z's of Studying Abroad in Spain

**Alhambra.** The famous palace of the longest Muslim kingdom to survive in Spain. The ominous palace sits on a hill overlooking Granada. Though the outside is a little intimidating, the inside is full of beautiful flowers and mudejár style architecture. Afterwards, you can go grab a drink at a bar and get a tapa for free!

**Bikinis.** It seems simple, just a toasted ham and cheese sandwich. However, ham is like a religion in Spain, so I guarantee it will be the best grilled cheese you've ever had. (Be sure to ask for jamón ibérico!)

**Café con leche.** Between traveling and late nights with friends, sometimes you need a caffeine jolt in the morning. It's also my go-to drink for studying, celebration, or comfort. I'm fairly confident that café con leche is actually heaven in the form of a hot drink.

**Dalí.** Somehow, this famous artist/actor/sculptor was discussed in every single class I took this semester. Name any form of art, and Salvador Dalí has probably created it, and excelled. His life is intertwined with other famous figures, like Federico Garcia Lorca. If you plan to be in Spain for long, learning about Dalí and visiting his museum in Figueras is a must!

**El Putxet.** These might be my two favorite words that I hear in Barcelona. I live in the neighborhood Sarria Sant Gervasi, and El Putxet is my metro stop. Whenever I hear those words, I know that I am close to my loving host mom and a hot meal! If you're visiting Barcelona and want a unique view of the city, you can visit los Jardines del Putxet, just a short walk from the metro station. This neighborhood park is filled with beautiful flowers, and there are never very many people there, which is sometimes hard to find in Barcelona. From the quiet hill, you can see tourist attractions like the Torre Agbar, Mount Tibidabo, and the Sagrada Familia, and if you're lucky you'll see some butterflies in the bushes!

**Flamenco.** A dance and music style authentic to Spain. This type of art originated in the gypsy community in Andalusia, and the rhythmic dancing, quick feet, and passionate singing is captivating. In a day and age where music is mass-produced and sometimes forced, flamenco provides a refreshing, spontaneous expression of pure emotion. If you find yourself in Granada looking for a good show, I recommend seeing a show in the Gitano (gypsy) neighborhood, Sacromonte. Most shows include a drink in the ticket price, and if you're lucky, you'll get to dance, too!

**Guggenheim.** If you love modern art, check out this museum in Bilbao! Schedule a few hours of the day to contemplate all of the abstract paintings, and be sure to get a picture with the flower sculpture of a dog on your way out.

**Hospitality.** If you hate extreme friendliness and generosity, don't come to Spain! I have to argue with my host mom to stop giving me food each night! I have travelled to various places in Europe, but the employees in Spanish hostels are always the most helpful with answering questions and giving food recommendations!

**Iglesias.** Spain has a long history in regards to religion. From polytheism to Catholicism to Islam, you can usually find examples of each of these religions in whichever city you visit. It is fascinating to look at the different types of architecture that correspond to these eras, and most are free to enter. My favorite church that I've seen in Europe is probably Barcelona's Santa Maria del Mar. The gothic church

represents a period of splendor in Barcelona, and though currently in the middle of the city, it used to be very close to the water's edge!

Jordi, the patron saint of Catalonia. A festival is held in his honor each year on April 23. Many legends surround Jordi, a Christian martyr. In the most popular legend, Jordi kills the evil dragon to save the king's daughter, and a rose grows out of the pool of the dragon's blood. He then gives the rose to the princess. Today's tradition comes from this somewhat-gruesome legend: on Saint Jordi Day, men give their significant other roses, and women give their significant other a book. (Don't worry, if you're single, you can buy gifts for yourself!)

Kilometros. This goes for anywhere in Europe, but Spain uses the metric system for measurement. If you have to stop and ask for directions, their answer will be in kilometers, so brush up on your conversion factors before coming (or download a conversion app).

L'Eixample. This *barrio* of Barcelona is the first example of urban planning in the city. Unlike the Gothic Quarter, with its winding streets and dead ends, L'Eixample has a simple grid layout. If you want to interact with local college students, check out the bars in this area at night!

Montserrat. If you are staying in Barcelona and are looking for some greenery, take a trip to this mountain an hour away for some hiking! There is also a beautiful monastery and good restaurants at the top!

Nata. The first time I heard this word, I mistook it for *nada*, but the two are quite different. Nata, loosely translated to "cream" is the base for many gelato flavors in Spain, and can also be ordered plain. It sounds kind of gross, but it is sweet, light and fluffy- heavy vanilla ice cream pales in comparison!

Olympic village. Spend a morning at Montjuic in Barcelona to see where the 1992 Olympics were held. This mountain, once the location of Franco's executions, is now a thriving, vibrant area. Sporting events are still held in the Olympic stadiums, as well as concerts and special events. If you have time, visit the Miró Foundation on the way down the mountain to release your inner child and admire the artist's work.

Patatas bravas. Contrary to some people's stereotypes, Spain doesn't have much in the way of spicy food. I love spicy food and tomatoes, and this dish satisfies both of those cravings! The dish consists of fried potatoes with a tangy tomato garlic sauce on top. If you like the garlic but don't care for tomato, try just ordering alioli, a spicy mayonnaise, with your *patatas* instead!

Quality time. In Spain, life slows down, and relationships take precedence. Meals may last two to three hours, because after the food is gone the group will often stay for conversation. This after-dinner conversation, called *sobremesa*, gives you an opportunity to talk about your day, politics, religion, sports- anything! My host mom eats later than us, but she sits at the table with us because the quality time is such an important part of each day.

Rioja. This is a region of Spain known for its wineries. If you are a wine fanatic, sign up for a tour- wine not?

Sagrada Familia. Gaudi's famous modernist creation, still under construction. Though it is always crawling with people, it is definitely worth your time. I recommend getting an audioguide or a tour so

you can hear about all of the symbolism in the architecture as well as the controversial future of the building.

Tibidabo. This mountain is the highest point in Barcelona and is home to the famous church, Temple of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, that has the giant statue of Christ overlooking the city. There is something for everyone on Tibidabo: adventurers can hike to the top, history lovers can admire the church's architecture and learn about its history, and thrill seekers can buy tickets to the amusement park.

Urquinaona. This metro stop lets you off at la Via Laietana in Barcelona, home to many of my top restaurants in Barcelona. Whatever you are craving: Mexican food, crepes, tapas, paella, you will surely find it in this area.

Valencia. This city, at the southern tip of Catalonia, is unique because of its juxtaposition. Visit the Cathedral, home to the chalice that Jesus used at the Last Supper, amble around the Gothic quarter, and follow it with a trip to the futuristic City of Arts and Sciences to see some cool museums.

War. Though not the happiest word on this list, it is important to know about Spain's wars, particularly the Civil War, to understand its culture. The majority of the country felt strongly oppressed from the Franco regime that ended in 1975, and the after effects (intense Catalan/Basque pride, transformation of city spaces, political views, and more) are still present today. Do some research to avoid making insensitive comments to locals!

Xenophobia (noun): the dislike of or prejudice against people from other countries. I thought that I would escape this by coming to Europe, but every country is guilty of this to some extent. It's helpful to remember that not all Americans are fat and loud, and not all Spaniards are late and lazy.

Yogurt. Whether you are visiting Spain for a short time or staying for an extended time with a host family, you will realize that food is healthier. One of the most popular desserts is yogurt, but if you look hard enough you can usually find a sweeter treat as well!

Zapatos. Regardless of where you decide to travel in Spain, be prepared to do a lot of walking! When I first got to Barcelona, my sneakers were like new, but now the tread is worn down and they have holes at the toes. This one pair of shoes walked me to class, trod the narrow side streets of Barcelona, and traveled with me on weekend trips. Like me, these shoes have now been around the world!

## Solitude

Does anyone see the words on the door?

“The Crew,” it says,

but the neighborhood is deserted

save me and the Skittles wrapper.

On two legs he stands

admiring the view from the Besalú bridge,

lost in reverie of days gone by:

the dog understands life.

An old man watches

the sun rise over Montjuic.

It brings new life in shades of pink,

the color stolen from his now pallid skin.

## Quarantine

I complete the trek  
to the top of my street,  
so steep that a determined marble  
could roll from the summit  
all the way to the sea.

I watch as an ambitious Dachshund yips  
and chases a flock of pigeons  
that double him in size.  
Young and hopeful,  
his owner and I exchange smiles.  
Happiness is contagious, it seems.  
Today will be the day that we, too,  
chase big dreams.

I turn the corner and pass a grumpy old man  
with a child's temper, who kicks a pebble  
and storms away from a confused employee  
who did not have the newspaper he requested.  
I offer a smile in hopes of spreading my joy,  
but the customer scowls and mutters under his breath.

How I wish that I could devise a formula  
to infect him with my glorious disease.  
Happiness is contagious, they say.  
But some people must be immune.

## The Day of X

“Good morning Dr. Sinister. You have a call on line 3.”

The evil scientist rolled his eyes as he capped his test tube and placed it gently in the incubator, adjusting the temperature knob with precision.

“Didn’t I tell you not to take calls in the morning?” he loudly replied to the intercom. “I have to leave soon for my meeting with Dr. Fear, as you should already know. Have them leave me a message, and I’ll get back to them later.”

Though Clara was one of Dr. Sly’s brightest interns, her lack of common sense was horrifying. She didn’t seem to grasp the concept of time, and was fond of exchanging pleasantries every time they came into contact, both of which grated on the doctor’s nerves. In the Sinister lab, everything had to be on a tight schedule, with no exceptions. He hadn’t become the world’s most evil researcher by being spontaneous or lax.

“Excuse me Doctor, but it’s Dr. Sly calling, and she says that it’s important.”

How strange. His wife, also in the evil profession, knew how much it irked him to be interrupted at work. Why was she calling? Especially today, of all days? Dr. Sinister could not afford to have his attention diverted; too much was at stake. Just last week, he had finally devised a formula that worked. Chemical X, he had named it. The odorless, colorless reagent caused short-term memory loss of approximately 2 days upon inhalation. If his presentation today was effective and Dr. Fear was willing to increase funding to perfect the chemical, the Evil Alliance would be able to take over the world within the year.

Dr. Sinister took off his mask and washed his hands to take his wife’s call. Despite the mild annoyance, the scientist was powerless under his wife’s control. It was less that he was enamored of her

and more that she terrified him. Dr. Sly was the world's best evil saleswoman, and would be sitting on the Evil Alliance committee today as a representative of the Evil Business Sector . She could manipulate anyone into abiding by her wishes, whether it be potential clients, evil colleagues, or her romantic prospects. Dr. Sly had taken a fancy to Dr. Sinister back in 2012, and hadn't let him out of her control since. He had no intentions beyond a one-night stand, but to her, they made the perfect evil couple, though she knew he felt nothing deeper. The infatuated Dr. Sly kept Dr. Sinister trapped in the relationship, convinced that she could force him to care for her. He didn't dare try to leave her, for he knew she would deliberately turn the Alliance against him if he did. Without their funds, all of his evil innovations would be lost.

Dr. Sinister put the phone on speaker and resumed transferring test tubes to the incubator as Dr. Sly's sickly-sweet voice echoed in the concrete room.

"Hello honey. I know you've missed me, and I cannot wait to see you at the meeting."

"Yes, love," he choked out the disgusting term of endearment, "But I really should be focusing on preparing my--"

"Should I wear my pinstripe pantsuit, or the navy skirt? I know this is a professional occasion, but I can't be too boring."

"I don't know. Listen, I need to prepare for--"

"I have the shopping list for the grocery store tomorrow. Bread, milk, razors, soap. Need anything?"

Dr. Sinister began to get impatient. "I have to go. We can talk later after--"

"Wait! Don't go yet! I have exciting news! You won't believe it; I barely do myself! I had an appointment with the evil physician today, and he told me that I'm pregnant."

The test tube slipped from the doctor's hands and smashed to pieces on the ground. He tried to call out for help, but couldn't form a coherent sentence. The world faded to black.

---

"I'm here for the meeting with Dr. Fear."

Dr. Sinister had just arrived at the front desk of his esteemed colleague's office. It was kind of weird; he had somehow forgotten that this presentation was today. Clara had had to come downstairs to remind him, and he was nearly late. Now that he thought of it, he really couldn't remember anything from the past couple of days. Dr. Sinister blamed his forgetfulness on lack of sleep due to staying in the lab until the wee hours of morning for the past month working on Chemical X. Soon enough, he would be able to relax. He just had to give an effective presentation. Dr. Sinister smoothed the wrinkles of his suit and waited to be taken to the meeting room.

Dr. Sly was seated at the far end of the table next to Mrs. Foul, the evil teacher. The two women were deep in conversation, laughing over some matter he didn't care to understand. Dr. Sinister witnessed Mrs. Foul pass a ginger candy to his wife. Now that he looked, Dr. Sly did appear to be a bit pale. He hoped she wasn't ill. If it was contagious and he contracted it, his entire work week would have to be altered.

"Would everyone please take their seats? It's time to begin." Dr. Fear's booming voice resonated in the small conference room. "Dr. Sinister, please begin by presenting your abstract."

Dr. Sinister cleared his throat. "Chemical X is a recently synthesized chemical that causes short term memory loss upon inhalation. For years, other evil scientists have tried to perfect it, and last week, I finally was able to refine the formula to ensure its nontoxicity. If we contaminate the water supply of Doomville with Chemical X, everyone in the city will be at our mercy. We will have a two day window to do anything we want without anyone remembering anything. A military coup, a democratic election

with fraudulent voters, anything! That can be decided later. If we launch similar operations in cities worldwide, we can install an evil president in every single country, and the world will be ours.”

“Continue,” said Dr. Fear.

Dr. Sinister gave a detailed analysis of Chemical X’s side effects, profit margins, and expected cost. When he finished, the room was silent. Everyone was staring at him. He wiped the sweat off his brow, awaiting their response, any response. Had he showered today? He couldn’t remember. His wife had been staring at him the whole time; maybe that’s why. Finally, after five minutes of silence, Dr. Fear spoke up.

“Thank you Dr. Sinister. Frankly, I think we are all speechless. Opinions? Comments?”

“No, Doctor, it’ll be more than sufficient for our plan,” said Mrs. Foul. Doctor Diabolical, Mr. Mean, and Nurse Woe nodded their heads in agreement. Dr. Sly unwrapped another ginger candy and smiled, giving her husband a congratulatory wink.

“Alright. All in favor of granting 1,000,000 dollars to Sinister Laboratories, please-”

The buzzing of Dr. Fear’s cell phone interrupted him. He whispered hastily to the voice on the other end of the line and sighed loudly before hanging up. “I am sorry to cut you short, Dr. Sinister, but it’s almost two and it’s my turn to pick up James from school. We will vote at our meeting next Tuesday. Thank you everyone, and see you then.” Dr. Fear left the room.

After the others had gone, Dr. Sly approached her husband slowly, smiling but with some indecipherable look in her eyes. “They loved it! How about we go out for some dessert? I’d say we have a lot to celebrate, wouldn’t you?” The evil saleswoman kissed her husband on the cheek. Dr. Sinister agreed, and they got inside Dr. Sly’s car to go to her favorite Italian restaurant on Oak Avenue.

Dr. Sinister sat in the passenger seat and let out a frustrated sigh as his wife pulled out of the parking lot. "It's a shame Dr. Fear had to end the meeting to pick up his brat. I wanted to discuss our future plans for Chemical X more thoroughly. I must say, I've seen too many men be turned into a mushy pile of hugs and kittens on account of one of those tiny creatures. A true shame. Loss of potential. I spent so much time perfecting the formula, and my time was cut too short today."

Dr. Sly did not respond to her husband's remark. They were stopped at a school crossing. She stared blankly at the group of preschool-aged children crossing the road.

"Look at that one, picking his nose. Don't they teach the little fools proper hygiene? And another, coughing with her mouth open. Disgusting creatures! They make a living secreting various bodily fluids from every orifice. I do not envy their parents, though they brought it upon themselves. And just imagine one in a laboratory! No depth perception! If given the chance, they'd knock over all of my experiments with one swipe of a tiny uncoordinated arm! Well, assuming they hadn't already attempted to drink from an Erlenmeyer flask. At least a spill could be salvaged - if they swallowed my solutions, I'd never be able to recover the chemicals!"

Dr. Sinister turned at the sound of his wife's tears and knew he had made an error. In five years of marriage, he had never seen her cry. Though he didn't love her, he always made sure to keep her happy out of fear of her reaction should she be unsatisfied. He had never seen her emotional and out of control like this- it was really quite unnerving. Was his research at risk? What had he done?

Dr. Sly pulled the car over on the side of the road and sobbed, "I guess I was still hoping that you'd love me. I know you've never felt the same for me, but for some reason I hoped the baby would change things."

"The baby? I don't understand what you're saying."

The evil saleswoman gripped the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white. She took a few moments to compose herself, and when she began to speak again, the monotonous tone was even more frightening than her tears.

“Our baby. Or mine, since you want no part in this. All you had to do was love me, Doctor. But, it’s time for me to accept the truth, and for you to realize that you’ve made a big, big mistake. Trust me, you’ll regret treating me like this. I will ruin you. Just get out- I don’t want to see you anymore.”

Dr. Sinister stepped out of the car, mind reeling at the idea that his wife was apparently pregnant. He stood on the sidewalk in a daze and watched his wife’s car speed away.

Once his body remembered how to walk again, Dr. Sinister began to move with no clear direction in mind. He passed countless restaurants with happy couples sitting in leather chairs basking in candlelight. Dr. Sly loved to take him out to fancy restaurants, and he hated being forced to dress up and appear affectionate in public. He could hardly believe that his wife had left him on the side of the road like that; despite his lack of interest, she had never stopped trying to earn his love all this time. Part of him was almost relieved to be away from her manipulation, but he would stay with her for all eternity and accompany her to a thousand romantic dinners rather than lose his research funding. And kids? Though Dr. Sinister was young once, he had never gotten along with people his age. At the age of thirteen, he was already working on secret projects for the Evil Alliance, while his classmates talked about cooties and video games. Children are beings of lesser intelligence, which does not fit the schedule of the world’s genius evil researcher. Well, he’d just have to get used to the fact that in a few short months he would have a child of his own. Though incredibly inconvenient, he would have to endure it to get what he wanted.

Eventually, he found himself at Sinister Laboratory. The sun had set, Clara and the other interns had left, and the building was filled with quiet. He walked downstairs to his workspace, where he could

always find solace. He perceived the familiar smell of ammonia as his fingers grazed the stainless steel tables, perhaps for the last time, he thought. After all, Dr. Sly wasn't one to delay plans. Dr. Sinister sulked to his office and let his body drop onto his monogrammed black leather chair. He reclined his head and closed his eyes, trying to find some sense of reason, some way to escape his wife's wrath. Upon opening his eyes, he noticed a note on his desk.

"The alarms went off shortly after you left, and we detected a Chemical X spill by the incubator. Luckily, everyone happened to be wearing masks at the time of discovery, so no one was affected. We cleaned it according to protocol, so everything is safe. Just wanted to let you know. Thanks, Clara."

It all became clear to Dr. Sinister after reading the note. If he wanted to continue with his research, there was only one possible course of action...

After he knew the evil woman would be asleep, he crept into Dr. Sly's bedroom and waved the open test tube in front of her nostrils...

The next morning, Dr. Sly woke up next to her husband, who was sleeping peacefully with a laboratory mask still on. Weird, she thought. He's usually not so forgetful. She shrugged it off, blaming it on his recent stress involving his chemical, and began to get dressed. She heard her husband stir. When she turned, he was laying in bed, staring at her as if he wanted to tell her something.

"Good morning, dear," he said as he stood. He kissed his wife's cheek and walked out the door.

Chameleonic Coffee: musings of the son of an evil scientist

When the cold air bites my face and numbs my fingers and my puffy snowsuit fails to shield me,

I waddle into Joe Sippers seeking you for heat.

After hours of staring at diagrams trying to memorize cellular respiration,

I seek you for energy; maybe my tired cells aren't respiring properly.

You provide confidence despite my continually failed attempts to speak to the cute girl from first period,

solace when, despite my stubbornness, my mom is right yet again,

and celebrate with me on the rare occasions that I meet my father's evil expectations.

Every time I see you, you look a bit different, but I know you're the same.

Unlike me, you are not scolded for your imperfections that deviate from the norm.

Someone will appreciate you, whether you are iced, steaming hot, too dark, or too light.

Your value lies in your actions.

Sometimes I wonder if you would rather be sweet.

Just because your relatives are bitter does not imply that you, too,

want to make children cringe and rush for ice cream or candy

to rid the terrible taste from their mouths.

But what you don't know is that you have it made. Just add some cream

and a shot of caramel, and you can be a macchiato or a cappuccino.

If you want to become a latte, that's okay with me, too.

Each time we meet it gives me hope, because

maybe with a little sugar,

I, too, can someday be what people desire.

