

Merit of English Section

Junior Division

Name of Winner: Chui Cheng Lam

Name of School: Macau Anglican College

Book Title : Vicious

Author : Titan Books

Publisher : V.E. Schwab

Imagine a world with "ExtraOrdinaries" (EOs), people with superhuman powers. In such a reality, one of two outcomes is likely: either a utopian society with "superheroes" rushing to save the day or utter annihilation as unbridled power corrupts absolutely. But of course, this is all fiction—or is it? What would happen if a mere mortal gained godlike abilities? Would they emerge as heroes or villains? What would they choose to do with such unthinkable power?

V.E. Schwab's enthralling novel, "Vicious", explores this tantalizing yet terrifying concept. The story follows two young, ambitious college students, Victor Vale and Eli Cardale, who are extremely fixated on the possibility of creating EOs. Their experiment progresses swiftly at first, with both of them becoming EOs, but soon their friendship frays beyond repair as they delve deeper into the process and are faced with hard moral decisions.

Ironically, while Eli gained powers himself, he comes to see that EOs like him and Victor alike are "demonic" or "unnatural". Believing this, he makes it his life mission to completely rid the world of them, even if it means killing his former friend. This leads Victor to begin his quest for vengeance against Eli. As their conflict escalated, it sparked a big question in my mind: "Who is good and who is bad now?"

What sets “Vicious” apart is its nuanced exploration of morally ambiguous characters. "There were no saints, and there were no sinners. There were only people." Schwab subverts the clearly defined line between heroes and villains and as such the line between good and evil is blurred. The reader is left questioning their own perceptions of good and evil and where their moral ground stands. In the beginning, Victor Vale seems like the archetypal brooding killer, while Eli Cardale appears as a saintly savior. Yet as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that there is more to these complex characters than meets the eye; in fact, we are just barely scratching the surface.

Now, by no means am I trying to justify Victor's unforgivable misdeeds, such as committing murder, but he is not a typical villain. Instead, he is a complicated character with his own set of

goals and principles, his own perception of good and bad.

Similarly, Eli is not just a hero with a heart full of gold; he is a flawed character, something of an anti-hero, with his own internal demons to face. "Eli wanted to save the world... But somewhere along the way, his desire to help the helpless had twisted into a need for power."

The novel also examines the origins of such power and questions whether trauma or coping mechanisms spawn the supernatural. It explores the psyches of the ExtraOrdinary, speculating on what their existence says about humanity. This further provoked two questions in my mind: how many would court death to get a little taste of such power? What does that say about human nature?

“Vicious” has a central idea: that the real world has no obvious heroes or villains. The novel conveys that the "black-and-white" ideology is a fallacy, forcing the reader to face the concept of bending morality when endowed with such unthinkable power. As fundamentally selfish beings, would we use such godlike power for good or succumb to greed? The story suggests the situation is not so straightforward. Like many kids, Eli once saw powers as a means to heroic ends, until corruption crept in, destroying him. “Vicious” powerfully shows such abilities may not automatically bestow goodness: "He wanted to ask her when the world had gotten so small, when people decided there were only two ways things could be, black or white, yes or no, good or bad."

Overall, “Vicious” is a compelling work that challenges notions of good and evil, tackling themes of ethics and alienation in a

mature but understandable way. Its complex characters and time-jumping plot helped me understand how circumstances can affect people and how morality is fluid and not held in place.

While ExtraOrdinaries may be fiction, the story reflects the moral grays of our reality and the dangers of having a black-and-white worldview. It reminds us that judgment should not be rushed, for what seems right or wrong may not always be so. In the end, we must forge our own path while resisting the temptations of power, selfishness and greed, which can irreparably cloud judgment.

"The world isn't split into good and evil people. And there is no absolute good or evil to judge. Just us. Flawed, stupid, fallible humans." Now, dear reader, what would you choose? Utter annihilation or utopian salvation? The choice is yours to make.

