

# A response paper, make the topic creative

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Prof's Escaping the Melodrama, Avoiding Under ment Susan Reverby has made her as an historian who takes overly simplistic tales, such as the Tuskegee experiments in which black men were un or undertreated for late-stage syphilis, without their knowledge, while being told that they were being treated as fully as possible. Her work has attempted to undermine the melodrama of the events while getting at the true history of what has happened. Her primary method of doing this is humanizing all people involved, showing each of them as fully developed human being with their own lives, passions, interests, and agency, while attempting to break down the victim-monster narrative that had been developed. Her challenge, however, is to do so without seeming to minimize the horror of what happened at Tuskegee.

One of the most important aspects of her research is the focus on actually interviewing and interacting, to the degree possible, with people involved with the experiments. She does this to reduce the melodrama involved with the reporting and understanding of these events. In a lecture at Loyola University, she powerfully explains the why this is important. Melodrama, she says, is a story in which the characters " aren't important" - they are an afterthought used to " fill in the gaps," while in a drama, the characters are central (Reverby Lecture 2012). Historians, she says, should write drama. The problem with melodrama is that it reduces everyone involved to set pieces. In a historical context, this obstructs retellings of the true history, but possibly more importantly, it makes the melodramatic experience seem exceptional, and obfuscates its connection to societal constructs of oppression. She rejects the idea that melodrama is all that could be had of an experience such as this. She powerfully states her aim in the opening of <https://assignbuster.com/a-response-paper-make-the-topic-creative/>

her work, *Examining Tuskegee*, where she asserts that “ there are truths here [in Tuskegee] - facts that fit the evidence better than do others” (Reverby 9).

One such fact, for instance, patients eventually did get treatments - just not enough of them. It turned from a story of non-treatment to “ under treatment” (Reverby 117). Why is this important? Under-treatment of othered people, she argues, is incredibly normative. It happens all the time. Thus, by treating the Tuskegee experiments as some sort of horrific monstrosity, the commonality of aspects of what happened there are lost, so the focus is on the exceptional horrific problem than the very common, barely less horrific one. Furthermore, melodramatic treatment of the Tuskegee narrative robs many of those involved from agency. When the black men are treated as hapless victims, it in fact reinforces oppressive views of black people. By recognizing that some of them “ could and did escape” the experiments (Reverby 83), Reverby forcefully refutes the image of the helpless black victim that so many otherwise well meaning whites have used to further push down black people. Her challenge, of course, is to write this true history, which will necessarily be less horrific (in sensationalist ways, at least) than the melodramatic narrative, without seeming to be trying to soften the horror at what actually occurred.

Reverby’s work is the pinnacle of scholarship. She recognizes her own positionality, and tries, as much as possible, to treat all of the participants in the story she writes as fully fledged humans, to recognize how such horrific events could come to pass. Thus, by putting truth above showmanship, she hopes to get at the actual events of historical tragedies such as the Tuskegee experiments, undermining and deconstructing the melodrama that

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surrounds such events, and treating its participants as real humans rather than hapless victims or evil monsters. This does not reduce the vitriolic distaste she shows for perpetrators of such evil experiments - it makes the vitriol more reasonable, however.

#### Works Cited

Reverby, Susan. Examining Tuskegee. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2009.