**Narrative Creation and the Pedagogical Process**

**Narrative Reflection – The Mother’s Perspective**

I watched my husband as he talked gently to our Gary. He was a strong man; something I had come to terms with within the past year more than I ever had. He had a solid constitution; I knew that when I married him. The long, damp Motton winters made certain that anyone who lived there acquired some level of hardness. You would never make it through otherwise. The events that consumed our family over the past 12 months had taken a toll on all of us, my husband, Gary, and me. It was one of those life circumstances that takes you by surprise and slaps you across the face, as if to remind you that life is not meant to be easy.

We had been getting along fine before that. Gary and our sweet Danny were doing well in school. They were learning well to take up the farm chores. Husband would split the duties between the two boys and they faithfully completed them on the weekends with the promise of going fishing later in the evening. Husband had been teaching the boys to fish and he had recently given Gary his first bamboo rod and creel. Danny got his a few years earlier. Husband had a way of determining when his boys were prepared to take on new skills. He gifted them the tools to move on to their next stage of boyhood: a right of passage, a signal that he respected and loved his boys with all his might. I felt for my husband. He saw things a father should never have to see in his life. I felt things a mother should never have to feel.

I remember that day. He walked towards the house just moaning and hollering. My brain could not make sense of what I was seeing. I remember thinking how attractive he looked with his shirt off as he carried an unrecognizable bundle in his arms. I could tell that the bundle was heavy, but there was something more that weighed upon him as he stumbled towards the house through the west field. His muscles deliberated. They were negotiating husband’s difficult and nonsensical task. He still looked like my strong husband. Though he was shouting words I did not know. They seemed foreign coming out of his mouth. The tone was not familiar to me. I had never heard the sounds husband was making. I saw sweet 8-year-old Danny standing in front of him in the field. He was excited to see his father return, but I could tell he was as confused as I was at the sounds coming out of his mouth. As he got closer I noticed his shirt covering the bundle. I would have mistaken it for a large pile of wood, save for the boy-sized shoes poking out from under the cover. Then I saw tears.

*My boy! Oh, look at my boy! Jesus, look at my boy!* No wonder the words were unfamiliar, husband never took the Lord’s name in vain. Especially in front of his boys. I continued to look out the window. I had been kneading dough; I didn’t realize that I had over kneaded it now, making it too tight for bread. At once, my body gave out. My brain began to connect the dots and it was as if a piece my body had fallen out. I could no longer hold myself up. I could no longer see. I fell to the ground. The dough was ruined. My Danny had passed away.

I remember little of what happened for the next few days. A mother should never have to bury her child. Danny was off by himself fishing and a bee bit him. That was as much as I could make of what had happened. I remained in bed for the next 3 days. I got up here and there. Gary made me a cup of tea. Husband took care of the details for Danny’s body. *God love him.* At times when I sat up in bed I let out a howl. A deep guttural howl. I barely recognized the voice that was coming out. It did not sound like mine. It sounded like a distant stranger. The howls didn’t make things better. They were all I could do to keep myself from drowning myself in the bathtub. I knew I couldn’t do that to husband or to sweet Gary. But no mother should ever have to bury her child.

I would like to say that things improved over time, but I don’t think that there is any coming back from losing a child. The pain was so deep. It felt like a portion of my body had been cut from me and that the wound was left exposed to bleed out into the world. The howling stopped after a while, which was good because I know it scared Danny. He started to have nightmares. They sent him home from school because he had become fearful of bugs on the playground. He was what kept me going. Eventually I managed to get back to baking bread. Wearing my pretty dresses. But these were all cover-ups. Like the shirt my husband had placed over dear Danny to hide his swollen face from me. That’s what I mean about his strength. He sacrificed his dignity for my well being. He knew that I would have never come back from seeing Danny like that.

After some time I was able to make it back to church. It was nice to see some neighbors, but I could tell they were staring at us with pity. I could not stand being pitied. It engrained the grief. Mama Sweet came up to me after service one day. She had the audacity to tell me that Danny died of being stung by a bee. She even offered proof. She told me that her favorite uncle had died of the same. A bee had stung him and he died. Her story jogged a memory in me that I wanted to suppress. I remember my mother telling me to be sure to stay away from bees. Apparently our family had some kind of aversion to bee stings that extended beyond a normal reaction. Mother had warned me to avoid bees at all costs. A bee had killed her brother, and her great uncle. It was an affliction that impacted the men in the family the most. My mother had an affinity for the dramatic. She often told stories that were well beyond the realm of possibility. I never heeded her warning. I did not avoid bees in the least. I suppose I had been lucky that I had never encountered one…

I pushed this memory down. Way down. Admitting that I had been responsible for my son’s death in some way was beyond my realm of understanding.

Please see the complimentary Instagram Profile under the username @kingintheblacksuit or Danny’s Mama

**Pedagogical Reflection**

 After reading Stephen King’s *The Man in the Black Suit*, I am certain that this is a text that I would teach to a high school class. The story deals with a variety of themes, which would be engaging to explore with students. Although the nature of the content of the story is relatively frightening, it is a good example of the way in which narrative can evoke emotion in its readers. Similarly, the text provides a strong example of creative writing, which could be used in the classroom format to discuss narrative techniques. King is a master of accessible story telling. This story would likely be of interest to students in an advanced English class, perhaps one specifically dealing with creative writing. The interesting thing about King’s writing is that it is easy to mimic. It is often said that in order to become a good writer it is necessary to practice by mimicking the authors you enjoy reading. This story provides a valuable opportunity for students to engage with a simple short story and to use it as a template through which to develop their own writing. The initial narrative response provided in this assignment was an example of the way in which a teacher might use this text to teach students how to do creative writing. One Pedagogical approach writing may be to ask students to write the story from another character’s perspective. The original story is written from Gary, the second son’s perspective when he is an old man. Asking students to write from the mother, father, or even Danny’s perspective is a way to have them engages in a creative process while using King’s writing as a template. The story also offers students an opportunity to explore the horror-writing genre, a genre, which is not always explored within the realm of traditional English literature. A story like this would pair well with earlier literary works such as Frankenstein or Dracula. Students may engage in a compare and contrast exercise of the differences between classical horror writing and more contemporary works like King’s.

 A second important aspect of King’s work is that he uses several thematic, linguistic and narrative devices throughout the short work. For example, the themes of religion, guilt, family, good vs. evil, the existential questions of humanity, gender, mental health, and aging are all explored within King’s story. Throughout his works, King is strong in his use of linguistic devices, which help to enhance the narrative. One of the examples of King’s use of metaphor in the story is “what you write down sometimes leaves you forever, like old photographs left in the bright sun, fading to nothing but white” (King 45). This sentence serves to emphasize the fact that Gary is aging. As Gary is getting older, his credibility comes into question. Both when he is young and as he is older, the story he tells does not seem plausible. Perhaps the man he imagined in the woods is a result of the trauma he experienced when he lost his brother at such a young age? Maybe the story he tells as an old man is the result of an onset of dementia. These types of metaphors are sprinkled throughout the story. A task, which asks students to uncover the various literary devices throughout the work and attach them to the themes in the story, would be a helpful exercise for students in a beginner English class. Such an exercise would allow them to develop a sense of the variety of literary devices while also coming to understand how these devices are used to reinforce theme within literature. Narrative devices would also have a similar impact for students. There are many narrative devices which King uses throughout this work. For example, he makes use of foreshadowing throughout the story, consistently suggesting that there is something readers should come to expect. Readers are left in suspense and as the story plods on, they are eager to know what terrifying experience the young boy, Gary will experience. As noted, this story will best be used for students at the high school level. Grade 10 to 11 would be a good time frame to introduce this story as it is somewhat heavy while evoking strong and challenging emotions. This story is versatile in that it could be used with a beginner or lower level English class or a creative writing class with a stronger sense of the English language. The accessibility of the text allows for a variety of pedagogical approaches, which may be appropriate for a diverse set of learners.

 As noted this text would be used well in compliment to earlier horror genres. As horror is not a typical unit covered in traditional curriculums it may be of interest to students to have access to some different material. While engaging in the initial assignment there were some challenges. Writing from the mother’s perspective was engaging as it allowed me to explore a different component of the story. The second part of the assignment (multi-modal) was somewhat difficult as I was unable to decide how to approach it. Eventually I was able to come to the conclusion that using technology in a way that is familiar to students may be the most appropriate approach while also being a way to further engage students in taking on an alternative perspective. After writing a narrative from another character’s perspective, students will be asked to create an Instagram, Facebook or other social media platform account which reflects the character’s story. By narrowing down the structure of the assignment, the required components became clearer and the process became easier. In this sense, creating an outline for students and providing specific instructions and expectations is important. Students may become overwhelmed at having too many options so creating some parameters while also allowing for flexibility is essential for this type of assignment.

Truthfully, there were times when I wanted to quit this assignment. Initially I found it very overwhelming to be creative and to decide which multi-modal format I hoped to use to complete this assignment. I kept reading the instructions over several times and underlying the expectations in order to come to some conclusion around the approach I hoped to take. After reading the word *narrative* several times in the instructions I was able to make a link between story telling and the current application of social media to function in such a way. Telling stories is one of the ways in which contemporary media functions for young people. They create online personas through their Instagram accounts and they chronicle their experiences on Facebook and other platforms so as to document their lives. Once I made the link between narrative story telling and social media, the project came together. Initially I had intended to create an Instagram profile for Gary by including some of the narrative imagery, which was repeated throughout the story. However, when I began to write from the mother’s perspective I recognized that it was important to connect the narrative I was writing with the story I would tell through social media. Fortunately, once I had narrowed down the parameters of the project I managed to become more creative with the process. This is a helpful learning as a teacher as it is possible that students may manage to be more creative if they have specific parameters within which to develop a strong narrative and engage in a creative process. By providing students with strong guidelines and support if needed it is possible that they will learn while also stretching their creative muscles.

**References**

King, S. (2002). *The man in the black suit*. New York: Simon & Schuster.