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ENG 110-B

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### Victim Versus Survivor

Adopting another person's perspective is often a challenge. To provide insight, it has become popular to use literacy narratives as a tool to look into the individual's concept of self and others. For most, literacy is liberation and a guiding force. But perhaps for some, literacy did not guide them. Literacy narratives are placed into categories, to better organize the different perspectives a writer may take on the project. Kara Poe Alexander takes on the brunt of this categorization in her piece, "Success, Victims, and Prodigies." Alexander even goes further, describing the implications of the categories on the writer's concept of themselves and others. Out of the many categories of these "little narratives" noted by Alexander, those that take on the victim role seem to be the cause for most debate. Victim narratives are the parts of the writer's perspective in which the writer seeks to blame anything but their own actions for their literary difficulties. "In victim narratives, students wrote about negative school-based literary experiences that stigmatized and marked them" (Alexander 617). What is important to note, and is something that Alexander perhaps does not emphasize enough, is that these narrative sections cast the blame outwards to the external world. This victim identity is further described in an article by Bronwyn Williams, "Heroes, Rebels, and Victims." In his paper, Williams includes terminology that may further confuse the general public. To investigate, I examined several literacy narratives from the *Rising Cairn* archive that were labeled by the general public (my English class) as containing a victim narrative. Based on the discrepancies in general public reporting as compared to Alexander's definition, I believe that the victim narrative is often overindulged. So, to impede further

misidentification, I later developed subcategories to better communicate key components of victim little narratives.

Victim narratives are a common category of little narrative, they typically involve a destructive literacy event. Alexander describes the stereotypical victim narrative as, “including being misread by poor or insensitive teachers, having a “masterpiece” ruined by a teacher’s notorious red ink, or being forced to write research papers and read books for critique rather than pleasure” (617). Each circumstance shares one thing in common: the direction of the blame. Victim writers view their literacy challenges as coming from external factors, and are not consequences of their own behaviors. It saves them from judgement and blame, while also forcing the writer to believe that the problems may be unchangeable. One of the problems in identifying victim narratives, besides the different perception from each reader of the narrative, is the assumption that every destructive event must have a victim. True victim narratives involve blaming external forces, and holding this unhealthy resentment even in adulthood. If the writer does not blame external forces, which sometimes may involve blaming internal mechanisms or not assigning blame at all, they are not a victim- they are a survivor.

Alexander’s definition of victim little narratives is often misused. Although it is common, there are still many cases in which the appropriate external blame model is not used. Even some of the examples in Williams’ paper do not solely apply to victim narratives. According to Williams, victims “often [write] about themselves as being invisible or used metaphors about being unclean or outcast from the world of literacy” (344). This is not necessarily a victim, as an outcast does not always externalize blame, especially if the writer views himself as unclean. In such a scenario, Alexander would disagree with Williams’ claims. Since I agree with Alexander’s definition, I

believe Williams was too quick to label narratives under the victim title. However, as I found out in my investigation, Williams was not the only one to misunderstand.

Several catalogued literacy narratives from the *Rising Cairn* database were examined to observe how accurately they fit the description provided by Alexander and Williams. In narratives such as Evan Dodge's literacy narrative, "The Rollercoaster," or in Alexis Criss's narrative titled, "Burdo's Lesson," the narrators find external sources to project their blame. In Criss' narrative, she describes the destructive sponsor experience, in which she "felt like her [teacher's] learning standards made it harder for [her] to learn because [her teacher] was so frank about what she critiqued" (3). Criss felt as if the teacher's high standards were the cause of her difficulty with the class. Dodge, in a similar manner, believes that his disinterest and decrease and academic achievement stems from when Frank said that he would turn into a Ditch Digger and amount to nothing.

In both cases, it is clear that the writer does not take responsibility and blames external forces for negative feelings toward literacy. Alexander would claim these contain victim little narrative, as did the class data, and I would agree. This would make the writings an example of true victim little narratives, as the common perception of the class matches the overall definition of the narrative. Criss and Dodge both display true victim narratives. However, Criss uses the negative experience to improve, indicating that there is still variety within the general victim category.

Due to the frequency of victim narratives, it is easy to be misled by the story and incorrectly assume the category. When compounding data, it is important to be accurate, and so these false narratives are an issue. In a narrative by Daria Letcher, titled "Education," she describes vaguely

losing interest in books, but never blames it on the reading involved in her education. Instead, she blames it on herself, and her feelings of inadequacy. Even when her teacher says that she should give up, Letcher does not cast any external blame. Letcher's "teacher "said "You are not good at writing and shouldn't even try anymore." At that moment [Letcher] truly believed that [she] wasn't good at it and went home to tell [her] mom" (3). Despite Letcher also having a destructive sponsorship moment, she internalizes the blame and chooses to view the problem as being a part of her own abilities. This would contradict Alexander's definition, yet the class data shows that the average person perceives the narrative as a victim narrative. In that sense, I would label the narrative as a false victim narrative, as it deceived someone into believing it was a victim narrative. Clearly, however, there is much miscommunication about the application of victim narratives. Perhaps Alexander and William's definitions of victim narratives must be broken down and categorized to prevent future misidentification.

To aid accurate comprehension of victim narratives, I created subcategories of more specific patterns. The first pattern observed described authentic versus non-authentic identity. The authentic identity is one that displays external blame towards something that is not a person, whereas the non-authentic victim narrative is directed towards another person. Authentic writings tend to lack the appearance of a faulty narrative, because it is about their own dislike of the subject and not the misperception of another person. Authenticity can be observed in Danielle Usko's literacy narrative, "I Hate Reading." The narrative is focused around Usko's dislike towards boring books in school. Usko said that the books from school were a part of "the reading that [she] HATED. [she] did not like to read books that did not interest [her]" (1). She clearly blamed external forces, but they were not based on other people and so it is authentic.

To the opposite effect, the non-authentic victim narrative is directed towards a sponsor or other person of interest. These writings are typically biased, and contain a faulty narration based on the writer's misunderstanding and full reflection of the event. Faulty narratives involve the possible memory errors and over exaggeration of events within a narrative. Non-authenticity was seen in Evan Dodge's narrative, "The Rollercoaster," when Dodge describes how one teacher ruined all of his confidence in writing with one criticism. Dodge "was hurt. [Frank] took it too far. [Dodge] then lost a lot of confidence in [his] academics as a whole" (3). Dodge is clearly a non-authentic victim, as he is not correctly reflecting, making a faulty narration of the event. With proper reflective abilities, Dodge would understand that papers require extensive criticisms to improve. Yet, Dodge cannot comprehend this as a non-authentic victim.

Aside from the blame pattern, another pattern was observed within the class data set. The new pattern was split into two subcategories, entity and incremental. An entity narrative writer views their problems as a part of their identity. Whereas incremental narratives, the writer views their victimization as a problem that they can work on. The entity perspective can be seen in Danielle Usko's narrative, "I Hate Reading," when she explains the impact of literacy on her later life after the victimizing event. She describes assignments as being harder due to her procrastination. Apparently, assignments "took a lot of [her] time because [she] procrastinated. [she] was a big procrastinator in high school" (Usko 2). Instead of viewing her procrastination tendencies as a challenge to overcome in her identity, she accepts it as a fact. These writers take every challenge to heart, and tend to have more difficulty succeeding.

Alternatively, the incremental writer views their victimization as a challenge. Although the individuals still do not possess the reflective abilities needed to not blame an outside source, they

still may work to avoid further punishment rather than dully accepting their fate. They may even thank their teacher in the end, like Alexis Criss in her narrative, “Burdo’s Lesson.” Criss believed that her behavior could be changed, and this makes her an incremental learner. In the end, Criss’ work paid off, and she was successful.

Although victim narratives are only one part of a literacy narrative, there are still many implications that it can provide about the author. It is this connection between the retelling of the story, and the provided insight into the writer that so many are fascinated by. The *Raising Cairn* archive isolates the samples, while people like Alexander and Williams use such tools to investigate. Alexander draws many conclusions based on her categorical little narratives. And while I don’t disagree with the connections, I believe the definition of each subject must be fundamentally understood. According to my investigation, the definition suggested by Alexander is prone to misidentification. Hopefully the more precise subcategory classifications will deter future misidentifications. However, in the end it should be noted that literacy narratives are just a snapshot to a larger picture, and should not be used to determine success or other dangerous characteristics.

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