

Eulogy to My Childhood

1<sup>st</sup> Place 2021 Robert Stuckey Essay Contest

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I sat alongside my classmates, wide-eyed and attentive, as our preschool teacher moved velcro figurines across a felt-covered easel to her narration of “Three Billy Goats Gruff.” We were curious and eager, mesmerized as the story was animated by the scene before us. When the reenactment was complete, our teacher let us try out the velcro board for ourselves, allowing us to portray the story how our imaginations had crafted it. We matched the small billy goat from the story to the smallest of the velcro figurines, exercising our newfound comprehension of language. This was my very first literary experience and the moment that my love for reading was born.

After preschool, I began reading independently. I dove into the adventures of *The Magic Treehouse* series and the enchanting universe of *Harry Potter*. My imagination ignited when I opened a book, time and reality melting away as the pages consumed me. Literature allowed me to escape from the world where I was being manipulated and verbally abused by my father, and the days I was forced to spend with him passed with more ease when I had a great book to keep me company. Brave narrators convinced me to fight for my dreams, and strong-willed characters kept me safe. When the real world was too painful to bear, I fled to the pages of a new one.

Everything I went through as a child -- my relationship with my father and my early development of severe anxiety and depression -- forced me to become emotionally intelligent at an age younger than most. As I matured, my taste and interpretation of literature matured

with me. I began reading novels with deeper meanings and darker concepts and experimented with new writing styles. After breaking free from my father, I had to adjust to his absence and allow the process of healing to run its course. Through this journey, I found comfort in journaling. I kept a leather-bound notebook on my bedside table, and when I was trapped below a tidal wave of emotions and thoughts, I poured them out with pen and paper until I could finally breathe again. I quickly came to realize that there was no force on Earth more powerful than words.

I was first challenged to observe language intellectually in my freshman year Honors English class when reading *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. It was my first taste of great writing, and I was hooked from the first page. In many ways, it reminded me of my childhood. Like Frankenstein, my father has a narcissistic personality; therefore, I found it easy to relate to the creature's frustration. My favorite quote from *Frankenstein* portrays Victor's narcissism by disguising it with love, "I read and re-read her letter, and some softened feelings stole into my heart, and dared to whisper paradisiacal dreams of love and joy; but the apple was already eaten, and the angel's arm bared to drive me from all hope. Yet I would die to make her happy," (139). Rather than feeling concern for Elizabeth's safety, Frankenstein worries about how deeply she would mourn him if he were to die. His tendency to center his concern around his own well being prevented him from being able to truly love.

As English classes became more advanced, we focused more and more on literary studies. Our teacher assigned us novels such as *1984*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Jane Eyre*. I was immersed in literature from every corner of the world and a diverse collection of time periods, and my ability to interpret language rapidly flourished. One novel, in particular, *Dracula*,

included rich layers of paranormal thrill interlaced with underlying themes and valuable life lessons about friendship and humanity. *Dracula* paints an ongoing war; filled with battles, loss, and love, the novel tells a story of how difficult it can be to drown out darkness when the light is quickly dimming. While there is one of Dracula and six characters determined to defeat him, numbers become less significant as emotional pain weakens the team of vampire hunters. As *Dracula* progresses, however, this group of individuals finds a way to channel love, faith, and intellect to defeat evil. Johnathan is motivated by his love for Mina, Van Helsing by his hope for the greater good, and the other men by their passionate infatuation with Lucy. These all-consuming emotions are their greatest weapon against Dracula because it highlights their humanity and weakens the vile creature they are facing. *Dracula* is a monumental novel not just for Bram Stoker's brilliant writing, but also because the concept was truly unique and bled with creativity in the period that it was written. It tells a story of channeling love for power and the death and rebirth of hope, and although it may be outdated, its message can be useful to anyone who is battling their own demons.

While fantasy and adventure are sure to capture my attention, historical pieces with vulnerable characters captivate me for different reasons. *Night* by Elie Wiesel, a World War II novel, is a narrative-style retelling of the author's experiences at Auschwitz. Like most stories from Holocaust survivors, Elie conveys the abuse and degradation he and his father endured, but he also addresses the psychological and moral effects of his experiences. One particularly heartbreaking result of his pain was his gradual loss of faith. Before arriving at Auschwitz, Elie practiced his religion regularly and craved to expand his knowledge of Judaism and God. Yet after spending time at the camp, Elie felt his faith slipping away. He believed that if there truly

was a God who loved him, he would not have ended up at the camp in the first place. Although Elie survived the holocaust itself, he did not survive the Nazis' efforts in persuading the Jewish community to abandon their faith. *Night* was not just a true story about the Holocaust; it was a way for Elie to acknowledge his wounds and make progress in healing. Through his writing, he broke down his trauma and rebuilt it into an artistic array of emotions that could be felt by millions.

Along with our literary analyses, my English class studied current events and wrote opinion pieces on social justice issues. Our stances were inspired positively by the education we had received, and the novels we studied forced us into the shoes of individuals in situations that our privileges protected us from. *Unbroken* by Laura Hillenbrand gave us a unique perspective on the events of World War II: a veteran's experiences as a prisoner of war, and how he survived his PTSD by devoting his energy to religion. *To Kill a Mockingbird* taught us that while some aspects of racism have diminished over the years, others have not changed at all. Whether they be fiction or first-hand accounts, 100 pages or 500, these writers wielded their words into newfound empathy, passion, and awareness within every reader.

At the end of this semester, my childhood will come to a bittersweet conclusion. I will close my storybook of adventure and open the next volume of my life. Unfamiliar and exciting, this new chronicle of mine will be full of exploration, independence, and dreams coming true. While going to college may seem perfectly mundane, to me, knowledge is an adventure. Devoting my time to the things I am passionate about is my equivalent of slaying a dragon and saving the kingdom. Life is not a fairytale, and once in a while I expect to feel heartbreak, frustration and doubt, but I am confident that in troubling times I can always turn to literature

for comfort. My world is about to grow in unexpected ways, and I am putting one foot in front of the other with a book in my arms and my imagination dying to be set free.