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Stuck Behind the Glass: A Self Analysis of Writing

As I sat in my 102 Honors class listening to my professor give instructions regarding our next essay, a play analysis, a smile slowly scaled across my face. I knew there were three plays I was allowed to choose from, but I only heard one title: The Glass Menagerie. In my head I thought “Bingo!” I read this play in high school and had already written a detailed essay so my initial though was the assignment was complete, and I would not have to do any work. After looking over the full prompt and rereading my sophomore English essay from Saint Ursula, I realized some editing was needed, but still it was far better than writing an entirely different five page paper. As I began editing to mold my “new” essay into a discussion regarding plausible themes seen throughout the book, I realized how weak my paper was. The topic was dull, the sentences simple, and there was no sparkle to my thesis.

David Bartholomae states that students have “to invent the university for the occasion [and] learn to speak our (the audience’s) language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community” (Bartholomae 23). In some ways, my paper accomplished a few verbs on that long list. I wrote my paper simply to satisfy the professor and the prompt. I did not attempt to break boundaries of the genre in order to make a point, I only wrote for the grade. My constant focus on writing a structured essay that fit perfectly between constricted lines involving topic sentences, map points, examples, and analysis caused my essay to lose the personal touch of the author. My opinions were not strongly expressed and after rereading my work, I was not proud of the piece I had created. However, the essay fit the mold of constricted expression so I turned it in and received my A. However, now I think about the potential of my essay and have realized I only scratched the surface last winter term. My paper could have stressed the internal battles of each character without the restricted guidelines that were pounded into my brain throughout four years of high school, but I needed to look beyond my past years of English instruction and break into a new era, the University.

The class I wrote this essay for, English 102 Honors, was my second collegiate English class. I had completed 101 and received an A for my first term and was ready to work for my second in the winter. So far, I had gotten by writing each of my essays with the same structure I learned in high school, the five-paragraph essay including an instruction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion. Further, each individual paragraph was structured sentence by sentence, forcing the author to attempt to fit meaningful expression into guidelines that left a narrow space for creativity. Since this method had always worked in high school and even in my first college English course, I did not see a need to change my writing process. From the introduction paragraph, one could see my five-paragraph essay take form. My three map points could be easily spotted as they read, “First, the mother, Amanda Wingfield refuses to accept her life in its current state because she is stuck reminiscing in the past. Next, Tom, the son and main provider in his home sees no future with his family and hence is constantly trying to escape. Lastly, Laura, the disabled daughter, lives her life through her most prized collection of glass animals because she is too afraid to embrace a better life.” I was thinking it’s as simple as one, two, three. My map points were laid out and I could have the next three body paragraphs follow each other in the same fashion, lightly expanded on each topic introduced by the corresponding map point. Additionally, my professor stressed the importance of including all components of his prompts into our work. I always concluded the easiest way to do that was to structure my essay correctly so all I had to do was fill in the blanks with relevant information to a new prompt. Therefore, I knew the essay needed to satisfy my professor because after all, he was giving me the grade and that is what I cared about. However, my professor was not the only person I should have considered when I was writing my paper. Since the point of the essay was to analyze a play, specifically in my case The Glass Menagerie, I should have kept in mind those who enjoy reading plays. I could have created a piece that others who have read Tennessee William’s work would have appreciated; who would have been interested to read my opinion about the messages within the text. My thoughts could have sparked new ideas regarding the character’s roles instead of those we discussed in class and therefore assumed they were the only possibilities.

Further, the fact that my paper was recycled from an essay I wrote three years earlier severely limited new potential for expression of ideas. In English, a subject I have never considered myself to be particular strong in, my goal was always to simply complete the assignment based on a rubric in order to get a solid grade, rather than explore the conventions of writing a compelling piece. I write my papers as fast as I can, following a rigid structure, filling in information related to my paper, and then revising it a few times. I have always been “satisfied” with my papers when I turned them in because they were completed. My satisfaction never comes from my own belief that my paper was a good representation of my thoughts, but from the appreciation that the essay was a completed assignment and therefore I would not have to look at it again. This idea is evident in the way I completed my play analysis. I chose to write my analysis on The Glass Menagerie for no other reason than my completed sophomore essay. Next, I used my old essay and reformed my sentences so the information followed the guidelines of the 102 prompt. I needed to analyze the text as a whole and formulate plausible themes the author may have been trying to convey through the characters actions. The themes I discussed were formulated from the opinions I formed about the characters three years earlier even though I was three years older with more experience analyzing literary works. I most likely would have had different thoughts than I did then, but since I did not even take the time to reread the play, how could I?

Throughout the process of self-analysis, I realized I was stuck behind a glass wall. I could see all the necessary elements I needed to incorporate into my paper, but I also felt trapped, unable to personalize my essay. Similar to the main character in the play, Laura, who traps herself in an obsession with tiny glass animals and is afraid to break into a more fearless way of living, I was afraid to break out the structured conventions of a five-paragraph essay. Additionally, I could not break away from the possibility of not receiving an A because I wanted to run free with the structure of my own piece. Therefore, I decided to recycle a paper that had gotten me a good grade in the past because I felt as if would work to my advantage in regards to my grade, and it did. Throughout my English 102 Honors course, my essays grades continually improved and I received an A on each of them. However, I cannot help but think my professor’s thoughts my have differed if he knew my paper was being used for the second time. Although my essay follows the guidelines and provides insight to the character’s thoughts and references specific passages from the text, I feel as if I left out the passion a writer should have for his or her work. I should have been excited to write about the play and therefore truly read through the text in detail so I could uncover specific themes myself instead of those recycled from the past and or reiterated during my 102 class. I found it hard to piece all the roles of the different characters together because I had not discovered those connections myself, or at least at the time I was writing the paper. Overall, I need to expand creativity and invent my own language that speaks to the audience with my own voice. I need to find a passion within my words in order to shatter the glass I feel encased in and break free into my own style of the genre.

Works Cited

Bartholomae, David. “Inventing the University.” Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook. Ed.

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