Susan B. Anthony: “On Women’s Right to Vote”

Video Transcript

Although they are often equated to short stories or short memoirs, narrative essays are perhaps best defined as being a story about a point-of-view, where the idea that the author intends the reader to understand is communicated through character and theme, rather than thesis and evidence. In this way, narrative essays are often driven by empathy. Louisa May Alcott’s “The Death of a Soldier” uses empathy to give the reader a glimpse into the difficulties of war and the way both soldiers and the people who help them are affected by death.

Though she is best known for her semi-autobiographical novel Little Women, Louisa May Alcott was a prolific writer and social activist throughout her life. During the American Civil War, Alcott served as a nurse for six weeks until she contracted a fever and had to leave for the sake of her health. During this time, she wrote letters home about her experiences, which would later be revised into the story collection Hospital Sketches. An excerpt from the fourth chapter of Hospital Sketches would later be published as “The Death of a Soldier,” which focuses on the caregiver/patient relationship that forms between Alcott’s main character, Tribulation Periwinkle, and John, a dying soldier.

While Alcott’s initial goal in writing the story may not have been to formalize a point-of-view, as a narrative, the story strongly evokes themes of personal sacrifice, duty, and altruism, which build on each other to give the reader a particular idea of what Alcott felt about the war and her place in it as a nurse. As the nurse comes to relate to the soldier, and thus as we the audience are able to empathize with him, the reader is also able to understand her struggle to tell him that he is going to die.

What examples of narrative essay have you encountered in the past? How did you feel these essays were different from short stories?