Louisa May Alcott: “The Death of a Soldier”

Inquire: Narrative Essays

Overview

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.

Big Question: Was Louisa May Alcott’s “The Death of a Soldier” a successful example of a narrative essay?

Watch: Louisa May Alcott and the Narrative Essay

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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?
Read: The Death of a Soldier

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*.

The following passage is taken from a chapter in *Hospital Sketches* that itself was later published on its own as a narrative essay and came to be known as “The Death of a Soldier.” In this section, Alcott’s self-insert character, Tribulation Periwinkle, comforts a wounded soldier shortly before his death.

After that night, an hour of each evening that remained to him was devoted to his ease or pleasure. He could not talk much, for breath was precious, and he spoke in whispers; but from occasional conversations, I gleaned scraps of private history which only added to the affection and respect I felt for him. Once he asked me to write a letter, and as I settled pen and paper, I said, with an irrepressible glimmer of feminine curiosity, "Shall it be addressed to wife, or mother, John?"

"Neither, ma'am; I've got no wife, and will write to mother myself when I get better. Did you think I was married because of this?" he asked, touching a plain ring he wore, and often turned thoughtfully on his finger when he lay alone.

"Partly that, but more from a settled sort of look you have; a look which young men seldom get until they marry."

"I didn't know that; but I'm not so very young, ma'am, thirty in May, and have been what you might call settled this ten years; for mother's a widow, I'm the oldest child she has, and it wouldn't do for me to marry until Lizzy has a home of her own, and Laurie's learned his trade; for we're not rich, and I must be father to the children and husband to the dear old woman, if I can."

"No doubt but you are both, John; yet how came you to go to war, if you felt so? Wasn't enlisting as bad as marrying?"

"No, ma'am, not as I see it, for one is helping my neighbor, the other pleasing myself. I went because I couldn't help it. I didn't want the glory or the pay; I wanted the right thing done, and people kept saying the men who were in earnest ought to fight. I was in earnest, the Lord knows! but I held off as long as I could, not knowing which was my duty; mother saw the case, gave me her ring to keep me steady, and said 'Go:' so I went."

A short story and a simple one, but the man and the mother were portrayed better than pages of fine writing could have done it.

"Do you ever regret that you came, when you lie here suffering so much?"

"Never, ma'am; I haven't helped a great deal, but I've shown I was willing to give my life, and perhaps I've got to; but I don't blame anybody, and if it was to do over again, I'd do it. I'm a little sorry I wasn't wounded in front; it looks cowardly to be hit in the back, but I obeyed orders, and it don't matter in the end, I know."
Poor John! it did not matter now, except that a shot in the front might have spared the long agony in store for him. He seemed to read the thought that troubled me, as he spoke so hopefully when there was no hope, for he suddenly added:

"This is my first battle; do they think it's going to be my last?"

"I'm afraid they do, John."

It was the hardest question I had ever been called upon to answer; doubly hard with those clear eyes fixed on mine, forcing a truthful answer by their own truth. He seemed a little startled at first, pondered over the fateful fact for a moment, then shook his head, with a glance at the broad chest and muscular limbs stretched out before him:

"I'm not afraid, but it's difficult to believe all at once. I'm so strong it don't seem possible for such a little wound to kill me."

Merry Mercutio's dying words glanced through my memory as he spoke: "'Tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door, but 'tis enough." And John would have said the same could he have seen the ominous black holes between his shoulders; he never had; and, seeing the ghastly sights about him, could not believe his own wound more fatal than these, for all the suffering it caused him.

"Shall I write to your mother, now?" I asked, thinking that these sudden tidings might change all plans and purposes; but they did not; for the man received the order of the Divine Commander to march with the same unquestioning obedience with which the soldier had received that of the human one, doubtless remembering that the first led him to life, and the last to death.

"No, ma'am; to Laurie just the same; he'll break it to her best, and I'll add a line to her myself when you get done."

So I wrote the letter which he dictated, finding it better than any I had sent; for, though here and there a little ungrammatical or inelegant, each sentence came to me briefly worded, but most expressive; full of excellent counsel to the boy, tenderly bequeathing "mother and Lizzie" to his care, and bidding him goodbye in words the sadder for their simplicity. He added a few lines, with steady hand, and, as I sealed it, said, with a patient sort of sigh, "I hope the answer will come in time for me to see it;" then, turning away his face, laid the flowers against his lips, as if to hide some quiver of emotion at the thought of such a sudden sundering of all the dear home ties.

**Reflect: What If?**

**Poll**

If you were an author, which would you prefer to write?

- short stories
- short memoirs
- narrative essays
- novels
Expand: “The Death of a Soldier” as a Narrative Essay

The role of women in the American Civil War, while limited by the cultural prejudices of the time, was still vital. In Alcott’s case, she was called to serve as a field nurse to wounded soldiers. As stated previously, like the rest of the stories in Hospital Sketches, “The Death of a Soldier” is based on Alcott's letters home during her experience, although she revised and fictionalized them before they were published. This fictionalization is perhaps what lead to “The Death of a Soldier” becoming a narrative essay, meaning that the focus on theme and character is more prominently emphasized here than it was in her original letter.

As a narrative essay, “The Death of a Soldier” is primarily focused on the role of Alcott’s character in trying to comfort a dying man and the emotional weight this act carries. Nurse Periwinkle’s attempts to comfort John, the soldier, are driven by compassion, the virtue of which Periwinkle comes to embody through the course of the whole narrative.

In the section used in this lesson, Alcott works to humanize the soldier for her reader by having him discuss his family and reasons for joining the military. Allowing the reader to understand his background and motivations engages the reader’s empathy and renders the inherent struggles of the life of a soldier in an emotional way.

Alongside this, we are given Periwinkle’s sympathetic thought on John, so the reader is primed by the narrator to feel affected by John’s suffering and imminent death. When Periwinkle is finally able to tell John that he is, in fact, dying, even though we have already been informed of this earlier in the narrative, the weight of the news being delivered to John after we have learned more about him is increased greatly, and the impact of his impending death is more fully exemplified.

From all this, Alcott achieves her goal of showing her audience the very personal and painful side of death in war, and the way it affects not only those on the battlefield, but the people attempting to help save the wounded and dying as well.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Civil War Nurses
- An essay about the history of volunteer nurses during the Civil War including vivid descriptions of the hardships involved
- http://www.historynet.com/civil-war-nurses

Narrative Essays
- More information about narrative essays
- https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/685/04/

Louisa May Alcott
- A short piece about Alcott, including a description of her service as a nurse in the war
- https://www.civilwarwomenblog.com/louisa-may-alcott/
Lesson Glossary

None

Check Your Knowledge

1. “The Death of a Soldier” is based on...
   A. Alcott’s letters home during her experience fighting in the Civil War.
   B. Alcott’s letters home during her experience as a field nurse.
   C. Alcott’s letters home during her experience as a factory worker.
   D. Alcott’s letters home during her experience as a military cook.

2. Alcott revised her letters to make them as true as possible before they were published.
   A. True
   B. False

3. “The Death of a Soldier” was taken from a chapter in Hospital Sketches.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:
1. B  2. B  3. A

Citations

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