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Accusative Voice in Sarah Resnick's "H." (2019-2020)

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“Accusative Voice in Sarah Resnick’s ‘H.’ ”

Taylor Esposito (analysis example)

Questions to Consider For Discussion and Reflection

Addiction is a difficult and timely topic. Sarah Resnick’s essay, “H.,” which appeared in *The Best American Essays, 2017*, is both a personal exploration of familial drug addiction and an extensively researched presentation of alternative treatments built around harm reduction. Likewise, Taylor Esposito utilizes both personal experience and literary analysis to reveal where the essay derives its unique power. As you read Esposito’s essay, consider:

- How does Esposito’s use of her own voice and experience benefit her analysis? What drawbacks might attend the use of such a personal/informal style in a scholarly analysis? How might you blend elements of “formal” and “informal” voice to create a dynamic and meaningful exploration of your own object of analysis?
- In addition to the personal connection that the writer has to the topic at hand, the heart of this essay is essentially a grammatical analysis—that is, a close look at narrative voice and the use of the accusative case. How does this close look at the language of the essay benefit Esposito’s analysis? How might you focus a simple textual analysis around close attention to patterns of language?

Accusative Voice in Sarah Resnick’s “H.” by Taylor Esposito

I naturally gravitate towards the topic of addiction because I dedicated my high school years to community service and substance abuse awareness and prevention in the form of clubs, coalitions, and conferences. I even sat on a Senator Art Linares’ Heroin and Opioid Addiction Crisis Panel as a student representative and met with Congressman Joe Courtney about the same topic. I am familiar with the addiction conversation. “H.” by Sarah Resnick was perhaps the most confusing and compelling essay that I have read in *The Best American Essays* anthology to date.

To start off, Resnick’s decision to use the second-person/accusative voice was extremely effective. I had absolutely no idea who she was talking to, but I get why she did it. In class, we talked about how risky it is to use that perspective, because it can come off as abrasive. I think that was the point. Addiction is such a heavy and large topic that if you don’t take a stance, you’re just another person talking about how addiction sucks. I think a lot of people tune out when they hear “addiction” because they’re desensitized to it. They don’t want to talk about it, yet there is such an unspoken stigma behind it that it makes important to discuss all that much more. By using the accusatory voice, Resnick forces the reader to listen. It forces them to confront the realities of addiction as if they were their own, even if they aren’t necessarily relatable to every reader. She also uses the accusatory voice to call attention to the stigma that surrounds addiction. It makes the reader acknowledge that the addict is a real person, not just a random person shooting up on the street. It isn’t the stereotypical picture that you have in your head.

In this essay, Resnick encounters the way addicts are treated and viewed. She talks a lot about how addicts are treated like animals, when it's not that simple in reality. When she visits the Insite injection facility, an addict named Donovan says to her, "Addiction isn't nine to five...it happens, and you don't even really see it coming" (220). This statement highlights the fact that anyone can struggle from addiction. They can't run away from it, they can't clock out, they can't wash it down with alcohol. It is always there. Later, following the same idea, Resnick makes the point of changing the word "addict" to "drug abuser." She said, "The alternatives can be awkward on the page, in a sentence, but it is more important not to reduce a person to this one aspect of her life, not to ascribe all the negative valences carried by these words" (228). With this, she is trying to call attention to the fact that these are real people. The first step is re-humanizing addicts.

Frequently in this essay, Resnick interjects statistics and news articles as she encounters them over the years. She highlights how some are shocking, while others are overlooked and misrepresent the information in order to fit the media narrative for what addiction is. She inserts these news snippets in the middle of talking to her uncle (the "you" being addressed with the accusative voice). One sentence you're focused on their trip to the movies and the next you're reading all of the news articles about Phillip Seymour Hoffman's death by overdose. This is a very effective literary tool because, again, it forces the reader to pay attention because it throws you off. On page 213, (relatively early in the article), she mentions that writing down statistics helps her to make sense of them. She is making the reader encounter these things along with her, which is what gives the essay its weight.

Resnick's situation is not an easy one. She feels trapped in a life of resentment and stress, as she constantly tries to balance her uncle's health with her own. Yes the essay is written to come off as almost apathetic. She just recounts events and statistics. She doesn't have to tell us how awful her situation is, because we're paying attention. She makes us pay attention by including us in the story. Whatever she encounters, we do too. And that is a pretty powerful way to get your point across. Especially coming from someone who, like me, has spent the last 4 years of my life trying different ways to get people to pay attention to the message I'm trying to send. This is an effective way to do it.

References

Resnick, Sarah. "H." *The Best American Essays, 2017*. Ed. Leslie Jamison. New York, Houghton Mifflin, 2017.