

## Story-making

Today in class my teacher taught us about rhetorical modes. She showed us how we all use patterns of thought that can be identified. Description. Illustration. Classification. Compare and contrast, and some others I can't remember. The one that made the most sense is what she called narrative but what I'm going to call story-making.

We all make stories, she said. Some linguists believe our brains are hardwired for story-making, that it's the fundamental way we make sense of the world and our experience, that it's unique to human beings, as far as we know.

That idea hit me like a ton of bricks. I'd never thought about stories and story-making like that. I'd never thought about *why* people make stories.

She used examples of stories from all over the world that were basically about the same thing, a man/hero and his journey.

It was the coolest thing I've ever experienced in school. I mean I felt as if it was the fourth of July and my brain was shooting off fireworks.

I think my teacher must have noticed something was happening in my head because she looked at me and smiled as if she knew. That was waycool too. I mean I don't think she stopped and smiled directly at anyone else.

Then she asked if there was a story from our childhood that we loved to hear over and over again. Some of the girls in my class said they liked stuff like "The Three Little Pigs" and "Little Red Riding Hood" and junk like "Cinderella" and "Sleeping Beauty." Other kids said *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *The Velveteen Rabbit* and *The Little Prince*. Dr. Seuss and Curious George got a few votes too. I didn't mention the story I always loved to hear. I pretended I didn't have a favorite.

She asked why we liked them. There was a lot of silence after that, then she gave us our assignment.

And I'm telling you she must have been on drugs to dream this one up. She wants us to write a story that might somehow suggest why our favorite story came into being. For example, she says, why did a human being make up a story like Hansel and Gretel? I mean what kind of assignment is this? What is she trying to do here? Who cares why a person writes a story.

She says human beings are just walking-talking story-making machines. So what. That doesn't mean we can all WRITE stories. She says she doesn't expect us to Sherwood Anderson or Flannery O'Connor right off the bat—whoever they are. Then she smiled and said I want you to have fun with this assignment, to get inside your favorite childhood story,

examine every detail, to really think about why a gingerbread house, why does it take place in the woods, to question its reason for being.

I kind of cried out that the assignment is crazy, that it's like questioning existence itself. She just smiled and said sanity is for people without imaginations and that our first draft is due on Friday at the beginning of the period.

A first draft by the end of the week. She really is nuts. Then she told us to read some stories that use different techniques. Well, I read them but I don't understand them. Especially the one by Ernest Hemingway. It's just a bunch of dialog with a few sentences of description. I can't even figure out what they're talking about and sometimes I can't even figure out who's talking. It's just dumb. But it definitely looks a lot easier than writing actual paragraphs and figuring out a plot and all that kind of stuff.

I mean who knows why someone decided to write a story about the birth of Jesus? I don't even know how to think about it. What am I supposed to do here?

Okay, so it's been a whole day and I got out the Bible and actually read the story and made my list of why questions. Why Mary? Why Joseph? Why a virgin? Why the appearance of an angel? Why Bethlehem? Why three wise men from the East? Why? Why? Why? I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. I don't even know if I believe it anyway. Joseph marries a girl he's never "known," finds out she's pregnant, decides to dump her, and then an angel visits him and tells him she's carrying the son of God. Ms. Winterson is right, why do people make up stories like this?

So I've been thinking. I've been thinking about all the elements that make up the birth of Jesus story. I've been thinking about why that Hemingway wrote his story using dialog. I finally figured out what they were talking about too. Well, I had some help figuring it out. It turns out my dad loved Hemingway when he was in college. Funny the things people weren't supposed to talk about or write about. Shame. That's one of the words in the birth of Jesus story. "Unwilling to put her to shame," it says. Today Mary and Joseph would probably appear on Oprah. Talk about shame.

Hey, I think I know what to do. You with me?

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**The Shame of Mary**

*Parents' Night, St. Matthew Catholic School*

Hi Jake.

Hi Toby. This is my mom and dad.

Hi.

Hi Jake.

My mom's talking to the teacher. That's her, over there.

Where's your dad?

I don't have a dad.

Everybody has a dad.

Toby, why don't you show us your desk?

Okay— see ya later Jake.

Later Toby.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mom, Mom, come see the drawing I made. Come on Mom.

Okay, just a minute Jake, let me finish talking with your teacher.

It's okay Maria, we can talk later.

Thank you Sister. Okay, let's go. You know you don't have to pull on my arm, I'm comin'.

This is my drawing Mom.

I see.

There's you and me and God the father.

I see. It's beautiful Jake.

\* \* \* \* \*

Toby, phone. It's your friend Jake.

Hello.

Hi Toby. Can you come over and play? My mom said you can have dinner with us too.

Mom, can I go to Jake's to play and eat dinner? His mom says it's okay.

Can I talk to Jake's mom?

My mom wants to talk to your mom.

Mom, Toby's mom wants to talk to you.

Hi, Mrs. Stewart?

Please, call me Ellen.

Maria. Jake would love it if Toby could come over tonight.

Let me see if his homework is done.

It's done Mom. Please let me go.

Okay. I'd like him to be home by 8:30.

Not a problem. I'll take them for an ice cream before we drop him off.

He'd love that. How about if I bring him by in about 20 minutes?

We'll be here. See you then.

Bye Maria.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now, I want you to behave yourself and offer to help Jake's mom with dinner, okay?

Mom, we'll be busy playing, I won't have time to help.

You can at least clear your plate and help with the dishes, okay?

Okay.

Okay. Here we are. Be good buddy.

Okay, see ya later Mom.

I'll just watch to make sure you get inside safely. Hey, don't I get a hug?

Okay. Bye Mom.

Don't slam the door.

Hi Mrs. Miller.

Hi there Toby.

I thought we'd have tacos for dinner tonight, sound good?

Sure. I like 'em with lots of cheese.

Lots of cheese it is. Jake, Toby's here.

Toby, I'm in my room, come on back.

Go ahead. It's down the hall on the right.

Wow, neat room. My mom doesn't let me put stuff on my walls. Did you draw all these?

Yeah.

Is that the drawing you did for Parents' Night?

Yeah.

Who's that?

God the Father.

Why did you put him in the picture? We were told to draw our family.

He's my father.

But you said you just have a mom. How do you know God's your father?

Because my mom told me.

My mom told me God is a spirit, that he's like the wind. Moms can't marry God and have babies.

Mom says God is love and love is what makes babies.

My mom and dad told me that when a man and a woman have sex they make a baby.

What's sex?

When they sleep together. Does your mom sleep with men?

No. Sometimes the babysitter sleeps over if my mom has to work late.

What about your grandma and grandpa?

I don't have any.

I have a grandpa but my grandma died. Are your grandma and grandpa dead?

I don't know.

I think everybody has grandparents but sometimes they're dead. My grandma died when I was five and my grandpa was very sad. Maybe that's what happened to your dad. Maybe he died and your mom is sad.

No. My mom said that God gave her a baby because she was full of love and would be a good mother.

Oh.

You want to play with my Hot Wheels®?

Yeah.

You boys ready for dinner?

We're playing Hot Wheels® Mom. Can we eat in my bedroom?

Jake, you know the rules. Dinner at the dinner table.

Okay. We'll be there as soon as we finish.

Five minutes, you two. And make sure you wash your hands.

Jake, do you want to say grace tonight?

Okay. Thank you God for this food. Amen.

Amen.

What did you boys do in school today?

We had music day. A lady came in and played the guitar and we sang.

Yeah. She's cool. She made up songs. We'd yell out words and she'd make up a song with the words. It was fun.

Do you like to sing Toby?

Yeah. I liked making up songs today.

Are you in the choir at church?

No, I play on the soccer team. But next year when I'm eight my mom said I can take music lessons.

Do you want to be a musician when you grow up?

No. I want to be in advertising like my mom and dad. My mom and dad work a lot for a company that makes advertisements and stuff. Do you work Mrs. Miller?

My mom works, she works for the president of a big company. Mom, we're done. Can we go play now?

Toby, are you done or do you want another taco?

I'm done. My mom said I'm supposed to help you clear the table.

That's okay. You two go finish your game. After I finish the dishes, how about we go out for an ice cream?

Yeah, Baskin-Robbins. Chocolate-chip mint.

How about you Toby? What's your favorite flavor?

I like chocolate-fudge with sprinkles.

Okay, you two go finish your game. I'll do the dishes and then we'll go for ice cream.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hey buddy, did you have fun tonight?

Yeah.

What did you have for dinner?

Tacos.

Did you help Mrs. Miller with the dishes?

No, she wouldn't let me. She took us out for ice cream.

That was nice of her.

Mom, Jake said God is his father.

He did?

He said God made his mom pregnant with him so he could be born. I told him Jesus is God's only son. He said he's God's son too.

Well, Toby, what do you think?

I think his dad doesn't live with him so he makes up stories, like Grandpa Viktor.

What stories like Grandpa Viktor?

You know, the stories about those numbers on his arm.

No, I don't know. What did Grandpa tell you about the numbers on his arm?

You know.

I forget. Why don't you tell me?

Grandpa said when he was a little boy his parents wrote the numbers on his arm with a magic pen so he would never get lost.

He did? When did he tell you that?

When I was helping him fix my bike last summer. Dad said Grandpa got that number on him during a war. Dad said Grandpa makes up stories about the numbers so he doesn't have to think about the war.

That's right. Sometimes people make up stories so they can forget bad things, things that are too sad or too painful to think about or talk about.

Do you think that's why Jake says God is his dad?

I don't know Toby.

\* \* \* \* \*

Maria? Hi, Ellen Stewart, Toby's mom.

Oh hi, how are you? Jake sure enjoyed having Toby over the other night. It's not always easy adjusting to a new school.

Are you here with Jake? Toby's checking out a few books for a report on endangered animals in Africa. Isn't it amazing the kinds of projects kids are doing in school these days? I don't remember learning about endangered animals when I was in grammar school. Is Jake working on a project?

No, I just stopped in to get a book.

Oh, *The Conspiracy of Silence*. I've never heard of it. Is it fiction?

Unfortunately, no.

What's it about?

Well, I haven't read it yet, but it discusses the trauma caused by incest.

Oh. Not exactly a bedtime story.

No, although bedtime stories probably figure into the discussion.

Hi Mrs. Miller.

Hi Toby.

Is Jake here?

No, just me.

Thanks for having me over the other night. I had a lot of fun.

You're welcome. You'll have to come again soon.

Can I Mom?

How about if Jake comes to our house?

Can he come tonight?

You'll have to ask Mrs. Miller.

Can he Mrs. Miller?

I think that can be arranged. Why don't I ask him when I get home and have him give you a call.

Yeah.

Well, we'd better get going so you can get your homework done buddy. It was nice to finally meet you.

You too.

Bye Jake's mom.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mom, Jake said his mom said he can come over. Can I invite him for dinner?

It's meatloaf tonight. And your dad has to work late.

We're having meatloaf for dinner, wanna come?

Okay. What time?

What time Mom? Can he come now? I'm done with my homework.

I need to make a quick trip to the grocery store, how about 5?

My mom says 5.

Okay. I'll tell my mom.

\* \* \* \*

Maria, hi. So glad Jake likes meatloaf.

Honestly, I don't know if he's ever had it. But he's not a picky eater, thank god.

One thing to be grateful for.

Mom.

Toby's probably in his room. It's at the end of the hall.

Hey, aren't you going to say good-bye.

See ya later Mom.

Have fun. I'm so glad Jake's found a friend. We move around a lot and he tends to keep to himself. And Toby's so polite.

Not always. I keep thinking it's just a phase and he's going to turn into a monster adolescent any moment now.

Well, I think you can relax for a few more years.

I hope so. Do you have any plans for dinner? My husband's working late and there's enough meatloaf for at least three more people.

Ellen, that's so kind of you. But I was really looking forward to having a few hours to myself. I can't tell you what a treat this is.

I understand. Boy, do I understand. Tell you what, since it's Saturday night why don't you let Jake stay a little later, say 9:30. That way you have four whole hours to yourself.

You are a godsend. Thank you.

Jake, honey, I'll see you later.

They're probably absorbed in something by now.



Thanks again, Ellen. Maybe we can have dinner some other night?

That would be nice.

\* \* \* \*

Who's that?

My grandma and grandpa.

They're old.

They're supposed to be old.

Who's that?

My mom and dad when they got married.

My mom has a picture of when she got married.

Oh yeah. I thought you said you don't have a dad.

It's a picture from when she married God. She has a ring on her finger too. It's gold with a heart and two hands touching. She says it reminds her of her spirit. . . spirit something with God.

You can't marry God.

Yes you can. I can show you the picture next time you come over.

You're lying.

I am not.

Yes you are. I didn't see any picture like that in your room.

It's in my mom's room. She keeps it hidden in her treasure box under her bed.

Moms don't have treasure boxes. You're just making it up.

No I'm not.

Yes you are.

Hey, what's going on in here?

Jake's lying Mom.

He is?

No I'm not Mrs. Stewart.

Jake said he has a picture of his mom when she married God.

You do?

Honest Mrs. Stewart. I found it one day when I was playing in my mom's room. I found it in a box under her bed. I'm not supposed to play in her room. If she knew I'd get in trouble. You won't tell her, will you?

Tell you what. How about we keep it a secret and you boys go out in the backyard and play? And no more arguing. Deal?

Okay.

\* \* \* \*

Where've you two been?

My friend Jake came over. We just took him home.

Okay buddy. Time for bed. And don't forget to brush your teeth.

I'll be in to tuck you in a minute big guy.

Okay Dad.

\* \* \* \*

It's nice to be in bed under the covers.

Tough mom day?

What time was it you finally strolled in?

Are you lodging a complaint? You know this happens every time we get a new account.

I'm feeling like a single parent, that's all. Do you think I enjoy spending every spare moment attending to the needs of a seven soon-to-be-eight-year-old boy all by myself?

Yes I do. I think you love it.

Well, you're wrong. I much prefer it when we share the responsibility.

PMS?

Testosterone?

Ouch.

What are you reading anyway?

*Advertising Age.*

Anything I should know?

Not really. Same old stuff, unlike our child's imagination. When I stopped to say good night, he asked one helluva question. Wanted to know if a woman wants to have a baby and she's not married can she make one with God.

He did?

Where did that question come from?

I'd probably say from his friend Jake.

The little boy we met at Parents' Night?

He told Toby that God is his father.

In a biological sense?

I don't think Jake quite understands the facts of procreation.

Then how did he come to believe God is his father?

I think it's the story he's been told or maybe the story he's made up. I'm not sure.

Tonight he told us he found what he believes is a wedding picture of his mom's marriage to God. Sounded more like a picture of a woman who's becoming a nun. I can't be sure.

I guess that's what's called an active imagination.

I finally met Jake's mom today at the library. She was checking out a book.

Uh huh.

It was on the trauma of incest.

Not exactly a bedtime read.

That's what I said. Why do you think she'd read a book like that?

Well, I'm sure there are any number of reasons. Research, she's interested in the subject. She has a friend who's an incest victim.

Maybe. Or maybe she's the incest victim.

Possible.

I was thinking, do you think that's why Jake makes up the story about God being his father?

What do you mean?

Well, you know. Toby said that Jake thinks his father is God. Toby said it's like your dad making up the stories about the numbers the Nazis tattooed on him when he was taken to Auschwitz.

I don't understand what you're implying.

I'm just thinking that maybe she was raped or maybe it was her father. I mean, how do you tell a child who their father is under those kind of circumstances?

How do you explain Auschwitz to your grandchild?

Hold me.

\* \* \* \*

Dear Ms. Winterson,

I don't think you're crazy anymore. This assignment made me think about things I've never thought about before. And I don't know if I did it right, but I have to admit, I did kinda have fun. I especially liked pretending to be other people and trying to imagine how they would speak. The problem is I don't think about stories in the same way anymore. It's really weird. And I can't decide if it's good or bad. But this is the weirdest thing of all, I kinda feel as if I'm a different person, that I've crossed into a world I didn't know existed. Does this make any sense?

Anyway, I just wanted to say that I think you're really cool and that I don't even care about my grade.

Yours truly,

Sarah Caldwell

P.S. Just in case you're wondering. My mom told me about the book on incest. She had to read it for a women's studies class she took in college. Just thought you'd want to know how I knew about that book. Also, I got the story about the grandfather with the Nazi tattoo from my dad. He tells that story a lot and it's not always quite the same, know what I mean?

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