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<div align="center">Victim Versus Survivor</div>

Literacy narratives are assigned to provide insight into the individual's reflective abilities and the sense of self-worth and entitlement. Literary ability is important to any further fields of education, and are necessary for most aspects of communication. For most, literacy is liberation, literacy is a guiding force. For some, however, literacy did not guide them. Literacy narratives are placed into categories, to tie together the common ideas and perspectives that students take to represent themselves and their experiences with others. Kara Poe Alexander takes on the brunt of this categorization burden in her piece, *Success, Victims, and Prodigies: "Master" and "Little" Cultural Narratives in the Literacy Narrative Genre.* Out of the many noted little narratives noted by Alexander, the narratives that take on the victim role will be analyzed. Victim narratives are the section of the writer's perspective in which the writer seeks to blame any and all outside forces in order to entertain the delusion that their actions had no bearing whatsoever on their difficulties. "In victim narratives, students wrote about negative school-based literary experiences that stigmatized and marked them" (Alexander 617). What is important to note, and is something that Alexander perhaps does not emphasize enough before providing examples, is that these narrative sections cast the blame outwards. This victim identity is further described in a piece by Bronwyn Williams, *Heroes, Rebels, and Victims: Student Identities in Literacy Narratives*. I agree with Alexander in that the victim little narrative does involve writings of stigmatization, however, I believe that the narrative is often overindulged. Williams, I believe, overindulges victims in her paper, and I disagree with some of her claims. I also believe that victim narratives follow their own particular

patterns that should be noted when making claims about the background of the students writing the papers.

Victim narratives are a fairly common category of little narrative, and they typically involve the destructive intent of a sponsor (at least according to the writer's own perspective of the event). Alexander describes the stereotypical victim narrative "including being misread by poor or insensitive teachers, having a "masterpiece" ruined by a teacher's notorious red ink, or being forced to write research papers and read books for critique rather than pleasure" (617). All such stereotypes share one thing in common: the direction of the blame. Victim narratives view their challenges as externally driven, and thus are not of consequence to any of their own behaviors. It saves them from judgement and blame, while also forcing the writer to believe that the problems may be unchangeable. One of the problems in identifying victim narratives, besides the different perception from each reader of the narrative, is the thoughtless assumption that every problematic event must have a victim. True victim narratives involve blaming outward forces, holding unhealthy resentment as an overwhelming force. If the writer does not blame any outward forces, which sometimes may involve blaming internal mechanisms or not assigning blame at all, they are not a victim- they are a survivor.

To describe true victim narratives, victim narratives that were perceived as victim that accurately fit the blaming mechanism, several *Rising Cairn* database examples were examined for key victim moments. In Evan Dodge's literacy narrative, *The Rollercoaster,* he obviously blames any external force that he can find for his disinterest in literacy. In the beginning, he blames his brother for ignoring his reading aloud of a book. "When it came down to the day, [his] little brother didn't pay attention to [his] reading so [Dodge] stopped halfway through and didn't finish the

book… It really negatively affected [him] for reasons [Dodge] cannot explain" (Dodge 1). Later

on, he blames a high school English teacher that he calls Frank. Dodge believes that his disinterest

and decrease and academic achievement stems from when Frank said that he would turn into a

Ditch Digger and amount to nothing (Frank probably just thinks he's funny). Dodge "was hurt.

[Frank] took it too far. [Dodge] then lost a lot confidence in my academics as a whole" (Dodge 3).

In both cases, it is clear that the writer does not take responsibility and blames other people entirely

for his feelings toward literacy. Alexander would classify the narrative as a containing a victim little

narrative, as did a member of my English class, and I would agree. This would make the writing a

true victim little narrative, as the common perception of the class matches the overall definition of

the narrative.

In a similar literacy narrative written by Alexis Criss, another tale of a destructive sponsor,

Burdo's Lesson describes how the sponsorship was destructive but helpful in the end. Criss

describes a teacher named Mrs. Burdo, a tough English teacher, and how Criss felt that she

deserved better. Criss "feel[s] as though [Mrs. Burdo] should've just told [the students what to do]

if she wanted [the students] to truly do well in her class" (Criss 3). Although Criss describes the

benefits of the sponsorship on her literacy ability later in the paper, she still projects her blame

outwards to the actions of her English teacher. Criss takes on the victim role by suggesting how the

teacher could have done better, and how the teacher was obviously in the wrong for her

non-perfect grades. Criss "felt like her learning standards made it harder for [her] to learn because

[Mrs. Burdo] was so frank about what she critiqued" (Criss 3). Criss and Dodge both display true

victim narratives, fitting the description of Alexander, with the agreement of the general perception

(the class data). However, Criss uses the negative experience to improve, indicating that there is still variety within the general victim category.

Due to the frequency of victim narratives, it is easy to be mislead by the story and incorrectly assume the category. When compounding data, it is important to be accurate, and so these false narratives are an issue. In the narrative by Daria Letcher, *Education*, she describes the pressure built up from her family history being denied education. Letcher vaguely loses interests in books, but never blames it on the reading or writing involved in her education. Instead, she blames it on herself and her feelings of inadequacy. "This is when [Letcher] started to not like writing because nothing was ever good enough and [she] felt like if [she] could not please her [mother] then [she] definitely could not please [her] teachers" (Letcher 2). Letcher feels like a disappointment, but never places the blame for her feelings of inadequacy on anyone else. Even when her teacher says that she should give up, Letcher does not cast any external blame. The teacher "said "You are not good at writing and shouldn't even try anymore." At that moment [Letcher] truly believed that [she] wasn't good at it and went home to tell [her] mom" (Letcher 3). Despite Letcher also having a destructive sponsorship moment, she internalizes the blame and chooses to view the problem as being a part of her own abilities. This would contradict the definition of Alexander that I agree with, yet the class data shows that the average person perceives the narrative as a victim narrative. In that sense, I would label the narrative as a false victim narrative, as it deceived someone into believing it was a victim narrative.

It is quite easy to misinterpret the direction of blame, which is why further categorization and research may be necessary to create more accurate data. In my own writing, *The First Sentence*, I was shocked to find it labeled as a containing a victim narrative. There was definitely a

negative sponsorship, however I had emphasized that the blame was not on the sponsor. "Although [the teacher] pointed out the issue, I didn't blame my teacher. I blamed myself" (Asmus 2). The blame was clearly internal, and yet there was a dissonance between the perception by the average person (class data), and the definition produced by Alexander that I agree with. In this case, my own writing would be considered a false narrative, due to the fact that the average person must have been mislead by the main conflict of the story. Clearly, however, there is much miscommunication about the application of victim narratives. Even Williams examples that do not solely apply to victim narratives. According to Williams, victims "often [write] about themselves as being invisible or used metaphors about being unclean or outcast from the world of literacy" (344). This is not necessarily a victim, and actually bends more towards the outsider viewpoint that internalizes blame. Perhaps Alexander's own definition of victim narratives must be broken down and categorized to prevent future misidentification.

The implications of victim narratives, to the extreme that Alexander describes, may not apply to every victim narrative. Alexander describes the victim narrative writers as being privileged and entitled students. "To adopt the victim role may be the product of entitlement where, from [the writer's] privileged socioeconomic place, [the writer] sees it as a natural right to critique schooling and pedagogical approaches" (Alexander 618). While this certainly applies to an observed portion of the victim little narratives, there is contradicting evidence.

To further categorize and understand victim narratives, I split the writings into more specific patterns that I observed. The first pattern observed was the authentic versus non-authentic identity. The authentic identity is one that displays outward blame towards something that is not another person, such as reading or writing itself. These writings tend to lack the delusion, because it is

about their own dislike of the subject and not the misperception of another person. This can be observed in Danielle Usko's literacy narrative, *I Hate Reading*. The narrative contains many little victim narratives, but is focused around Usko's dislike towards boring books. "That was the reading that [she] HATED. [she] did not like to read books that did not interest [her]" (Usko 1). She clearly blamed external forces, however, it is believable and authentic that she just didn't enjoy reading books.

To the opposite effect, the non-authentic victim narrative is directed towards another person. These writings are typically biased, and slightly delusioned based on the writer's misunderstanding and full reflection of the event. This was seen in Evan Dodge's narrative, *The Rollercoaster*, when Dodge describes how one teacher ruined all of his confidence in writing with one paper criticism. "He tore my essay apart and there was nothing positive, only negative. That's when my writing confidence went down the drain" (Dodge 3). This is clearly a non-authentic victim, as he is not correctly reflecting on the event. With proper reflective abilities, Dodge would understand that papers require extensive criticisms to improve. Strangely enough, the teacher at the school with a degree in teaching may actually know what he is doing. Yet, Dodge cannot comprehend this as a non-authentic victim.

Another pattern noticed throughout the many true victim narratives, was the tendency to either see oneself as an entity or incremental learner. An entity learner views their problems as a part of their identity, something that will not change. These learners take every challenge to heart, and tend to have more difficulty succeeding. This was seen in Danielle Usko's narrative, *I Hate Reading*, when she explains the impact of literacy on her later life after the victimizing event. She describes assignments as being harder due to her nature to procrastinate. Apparently, assignments

"took a lot of my time because [she] procrastinated. [she] was a big procrastinator in high school" (Usko 2). Instead of viewing her procrastination tendencies as a challenge to overcome in her identity, she accepts it as a fact and expects the rest of the world to work around her. In total, Usko's work would be an authentic entity narrative.

Alternatively, there is the incremental learner, the individual that views their victimization as a problem that they can work to make better. Although the individuals still do not possess the reflective abilities needed to not blame an outside source, they still may work to avoid further punishment rather than dully accepting their fate. They may even thank their teacher in the end, like Alexis Criss did in her narrative, *Burdo's Lesson*. Criss comes to terms with Burdo being an apparently awful person (non-authentic), and then states that "after this moment, [she] was driven by my own desire to do better; [she] wanted to succeed" (Criss 3). Criss believed that her behavior could be changed, and this makes her an incremental learner. At the end, she was successful in that endeavor. In total, Criss' narrative would be a non-authentic incremental learner. Whether or not there is a link between the two new patterns themselves has not been observed as of yet.

Victim narratives are just one part of the larger picture that makes up a narrative, yet the patterns can identify so many characteristics of the writer themselves. These are the connections that *Rising Cairn* is trying to look at, so accurate information is a top priority. Alexander's definition of victim narratives is successful from my perspective, but must get confused by the general public based on the many misidentified victim narratives. Hopefully the more precise classification will deter future misidentifications. As for victim narratives themselves, it must be considered that the blaming and learning patterns do not determine complete success. Remember that those that wrote the narratives are most likely college-age, fresh from adolescence. The

adolescent egocentrism may still be fresh and may interfere with their ability to properly reflect on the experiences. In the end, literacy narratives are just a snapshot to a larger picture, and should not be used to determine success or other dangerous characteristics.

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