Your Name

Teacher’s Name

Class Code

Due Date

Title:

Subtitle (if wanted)

1. Heading (e.g. Introduction)

Here you would start your paragraph with an indent. Notice the headings and subheadings have no bolding, italics or other adornments.  MLA requires a professionalism and conformity as suggested here. All principal words in a Heading or Subheading should be capitalized.

1. Heading
   1. Subheading (if wanted)

While you are required to use Headings in an essay with Headings, you may also want to divide your headings into topics titled with Subheadings.  Below I will leave the body of another essay so you can see the Headings and Subheadings in action.

While an individual may desire to know himself fully, he accepts that there are several instances wherein conscious knowledge is impossible:  birth and infancy, death, and unconsciousness. Like St. Augustine in *The Confessions*, the individual may look to others to identify the truth of his birth or infancy, “I have learned that babies behave like this from those I have been able to watch, and they without knowing it have taught me more surely what I was like myself than did my nurses who knew me well” (44).  And while this lack of knowledge “irks” St. Augustine (47), it is not unreasonable that he, like all other human beings, accepts this phase of life as consciously unknowable. Identifying self through others creates an irony that an individual is not actually reflecting on himself but is in fact defining another and assuming he is similar.  The individual also reconciles himself to the fact that there is no other possibility. As such, the inclusion of these events is unnecessary and irrelevant. It is only the conscious reflection that conveys the essence of a life.

* 1. How the Reader Deals with Unconsciousness

A reader, too, does not expect the author to attempt to include those events of unconscious existence.  In fact, detailed descriptions of birth or death in a first person narrative either alienate the reader from the protagonist, such as the narration in the film *Sunset Blvd.* (Wilder), or highlight the absurdity of the protagonist’s knowledge of the events, such as the narration in *David Copperfield*.  The obvious absence of the conscious David Copperfield is suspect.  The situation is layered with David’s blatant admission of his ignorance of the events, “I can make no claim, therefore, to have known, at that time, how matters stood; or to have any remembrance, founded on the evidence of my own senses of what follows.  My mother was sitting by the fire...” (Dickens 3). The tone of the admission and then the direct shift to the narration of the story is quite humorous. The reporting of those events is ridiculous; it does not truthfully complete the story of David’s “whole” life, nor does it need to.

Perhaps it is more acceptable to the reader for the author to leave out those sections of life he knows are impossible to recall.  In Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel*, the first person narration ends with Hagar’s death, “I wrest from her the glass, full of water to be had for the taking.  I hold it in my own hands. There. There. And then –˝ (308). The narration stops abruptly, as does Hagar’s life. The final two words of the novel underscore the inherent problem of writing a “whole” life.  It is impossible to say with certainty what happens after “And then –˝ (Laurence 308), and, in fact, the reader is faced with the blank page. But the emptiness does not negate the value of the story before the death.  The reader accepts that while the quest for knowledge of life before or during birth and after death is a noble one, perhaps it is not for “life writing” to address those issues. The reader accepts that it is not necessary to understand or capture a “whole” life to gain meaning from the reflection on that life.  It is not in the completeness of the story that he finds the truth, but in honest portrayal of conscious reflection.

* 1. Omission of Daily Experience

It is not only moments of unconsciousness that plague the completeness of a life story, but also that other omissions must be made.  Rousseau, in *Confessions*, insists that he includes all that makes him a man, “Here is what I have done, what I have thought, what I was” (5).  And yet there is no daily entry for breakfast, lunch or supper. In fact, a book containing a “whole” life would take a whole life to read.  Omissions must be made, but they can only be made by reflecting on the value of experience from the writer’s context. It is only the eldest “I” who can report the significant events of the past that create the eldest “I”.  Only the eldest St. Augustine, with a clear understanding of the purpose for his writing, can place in context the events of his life, “I am, of course, omitting many things, being in a hurry to get to those which more powerfully impel me to praise you...” (90). *His* discretion and intention dictate the volume and detail of his recollections.  The danger lies in the distillation of a life in the extreme. Omission of too many experiences does not strengthen understanding of character, but weakens it.  Egoism or the historical limitations of socially acceptable behaviour further pervert the truth of a life. Omission is necessary, but it may reduce the meaning of a life story to nothing, like a headstone, often a very generous and reductive summary of a life.  The idea that Jane Austen’s life, “A life of usefulness, literature, and religion [that] was not by any means a life of event” (Austen 192) could be reduced to three sentences on her grave marker is absurd; in fact, the second sentence is quite misleading:

The benevolence of her heart,

the sweetness of her temper, and

the extraordinary endowments of her mind

obtained the regard of all who knew her and

the warmest love of her intimate connections.(Tomalin 270)

The reader is to believe that Jane Austen never felt hate or even impatience, never said a cruel word, and never made an enemy.  Logic and a basic understanding of human nature force the reader to reject this simplification of a life. There is the rub. To present a “whole” life, or at least the essence of one, the author must strike a balance between omission and inclusion.  He must also accept the conscious creation of meaning through the juxtaposition of said events of inclusion.

1. Assumptions of the Biographer and Intuition of the Autobiographer

Only through reflection and juxtaposition can the significance of a life be revealed, but this juxtaposition could be deliberate or instinctual.  Rousseau proposes that no one can truly understand an author’s “whole” story except the author, “No one can write a man’s life except himself” (644).  Rousseau presents an interesting problem for the biographer. According to Rousseau, it is impossible for Tomalin to present the “whole” life of Jane Austen.  In fact, Tomalin admits this herself as she suggests things are “very likely” (4) or “safe to assume” (5). Tomalin makes deliberate assumptions based on her juxtaposition of the events of Jane Austen’s life.  But this is no different than the instinctual assumptions Rousseau makes about the juxtaposition of the events of his own life. He suggests that he will include unedited details from his life (Rousseau 5) but as previously noted, omission is necessary to create meaning and limit the “actual size” of a life story.  His own omission and juxtaposition shape the story of his life as Tomalin shapes Austen’s. Rousseau performs the same tasks as Tomalin as a writer, although he does not seem to deliberately acknowledge his choices. Tomalin proposes that Jane Austen’s life takes, “a little decoding” (112), and that is the process for all authors.  It is the decoding that defines the life story. An individual and a reader know that it is impossible to objectively deliver the truth if he must make omissions. Frederick Douglass, for example, wrote several autobiographies. He continually redefined the balance between omission and inclusion. As his audience and he himself evolved, so did his story.  The balance between omission and inclusion must be conscious to accurately convey a truthful life. Therefore, it is not the completeness of a life that is important, not even the objective truth of a life, but merely the relative truth of a life, the essence of a life, that presents a complete understanding of character.

1. Conclusion

As long as the logic of the decoding and the juxtaposition of events make sense to the reader, the omissions that prevent a “whole” life story are irrelevant.  Even though the story of Elaine’s life is gaping with holes from lapses in time, subversions of memory, and states of unconsciousness in *Cat’s Eye*, Elaine’s assertion, “I look into [the cat’s eye marble], and see my life entire” (Atwood 398), strengthens the notion that it is not the completeness of a life that makes meaning.  The reader and the individual are not looking for a “whole” life, but a conscious balance between omission and inclusion. Not only is completeness unnecessary, but omission is completely necessary.  A map, actual size, is absurdly useless.

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