English 12

Descriptive Writing: A Close Reading & A First Draft Name:

Read A. Davidson’s descriptive text written from the perspective of a burn victim as he faces a standard procedure in the recovery process called “debridement.” **As you read, highlight and annotate the following:**

* examples of sensory imagery; for each, annotate the particular sense to which it appeals
* examples of poetic (sound) and figurative language devices; for each, annotate the effect the device on you as the reader

The burn unit is often the most distant wing of a hospital, because burn victims are so susceptible to infection that they must be kept away from other patients. More important, perhaps, is that the placement minimizes the chance of visitors stumbling across a Kentucky Fried Human. The debridement room, I could not help but notice, was in the farthest room of this farthest wing. By the time my session was finished, I realized this was so other burn patients couldn’t hear the screams.

The orderly laid me out on a slanted steel table where war water, with medical agents added to balance my body chemistry, flowed across the slick surface. Dr. Edwards removed my bandages to expose the bloody pulp of my body. They echoed with flat thuds as she dropped them into a metal bucket. As she watched me, there was disgust in the down-turned edges of her mouth and unhappiness in her fingertips. The water flowing over me swirled pink. Then dark pink, light red, dark red. The murky water eddied around the little chunks of my flesh that looked like fish entrails on a cutting board.

All this was a prelude to the main event.

Debridement is the ripping apart of a person, the cutting away of as much as can possibly be endured. Technically, it is removal of dead or contaminated tissue from a wound so that healthy skin may grow in its place. The word itself comes intact from the French noun *debridement*, which literally means “unbridling.” The etymology is easy to construct: the removal of contaminated tissue from the body—the removal of constricting matter—evokes the image of taking the bridle off a horse, as the bridle itself is a constriction. The debrided person shall be set free of the contaminant, as it were.

So much of my skin was damaged that removing the putrefying tissue meant more or less scrubbing way everything. My blood squirted up onto Dr. Edwards, leaving streams of red across her gowned chest, as she used a razorlike apparatus to take the dermis off my body, not unlike the way a vegetable peeler removes the skin from food.

Dr. Edwards made long…swooping passes over my back. I could hear the blade as it slid along my body, disengaging the skin. The only way she’d know that she’d reached the good tissue was to actually slice into it. If I screamed in pain, she had burrowed deeply enough to find functioning nerve endings. As Blake wrote in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough.”

[She] deposited the thin sheets of my flesh in the same metal bucket that held my dirty bandages. It was like seeing myself disappear, the flags of my existence being blown away a millimeter at a time. The pain, mixed with the morphine, caused the most interesting images to flash through my mind: Senator Joe McCarthy bellowing “Better dead than red”; a carpenter assembling the crosses upon which the crucified would be nailed; dissection in biology class, with eighth-grade scalpels cutting into frog stomachs.

Once I was fully debrided, the exposed sites needed to be covered with grafts, be they cadaver or pig. It never mattered much, because my body rejected them all. This was expected, as the grafts were never meant to be permanent; they were mostly to prevent infection.

During my stay in the hospital, I was skinned alive over and over. In many ways debridement is more overwhelming than the original burning because, whereas the [fire] came as a surprise, I always knew when a debridement was scheduled. I would lie in the skeleton’s belly and dread each future sweep of the knife, previewing it a hundred times in my imagination for each actual occurrence.

The dispensing of morphine was self-regulated—to “empower” me, they said—and I worked that button furiously. But there was a goddam block on the overall amount so I couldn’t overdose myself: so much for empowerment.

Questions

1. Review the examples of sensory images that you’ve noted. Does the author utilize all senses equally or is there an emphasis on a particular sense (or senses)? What does the sensory imagery contribute to this text?
2. Review the poetic (sound) devices that you’ve noted. Which sound device most captures your attention? Why?
3. Review the figurative language devices that you’ve noted. In your opinion, what is the most powerful image? Why?

Descriptive Writing: A First Draft Assignment

Read the information on guidelines for descriptive writing at the Purdue OWL link: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/685/03/>

Note: Descriptive writing is more commonly an important aspect of a written text, rather than a stand-alone genre. As stated on the Purdue OWL site, “the goal…is to paint an image that is vivid and moving in the mind of the reader,” (see Guidelines).

**Topic: A Significant Moment­­**

In a 250-word paragraph or essay, capture a significant moment in your life (to date). Stay focused on the particular moment; “paint a picture” of that moment using description including sensory imagery, poetic (sound) and figurative language. The first draft will receive comments and feedback prior to a final submission that will be assessed using the English 12 *Scoring Guide for Composition*.

**Brainstorming & Organization**

Use this space to plan your ideas before drafting.

Descriptive Writing

The descriptive essay is a genre of essay that asks the student to describe something—object, person, place, experience, emotion, situation, etc. This genre encourages the student’s ability to create a written account of a particular experience. What is more, this genre allows for a great deal of artistic freedom (the goal of which is to paint an image that is vivid and moving in the mind of the reader).

One might benefit from keeping in mind this simple maxim: If the reader is unable to clearly form an impression of the thing that you are describing, try, try again!

Here are some guidelines for writing a descriptive essay.

Take time to brainstorm

If your instructor asks you to describe your favorite food, make sure that you jot down some ideas before you begin describing it. For instance, if you choose pizza, you might start by writing down a few words: sauce, cheese, crust, pepperoni, sausage, spices, hot, melted, etc. Once you have written down some words, you can begin by compiling descriptive lists for each one.

Use clear and concise language.

This means that words are chosen carefully, particularly for their relevancy in relation to that which you are intending to describe.

Choose vivid language.

Why use horse when you can choose stallion? Why not use tempestuous instead of violent? Or why not miserly in place of cheap? Such choices form a firmer image in the mind of the reader and often times offer nuanced meanings that serve better one’s purpose.

Use your senses!

Remember, if you are describing something, you need to be appealing to the senses of the reader. Explain how the thing smelled, felt, sounded, tasted, or looked. Embellish the moment with senses.

What were you thinking?!

If you can describe emotions or feelings related to your topic, you will connect with the reader on a deeper level. Many have felt crushing loss in their lives, or ecstatic joy, or mild complacency. Tap into this emotional reservoir in order to achieve your full descriptive potential.

Leave the reader with a clear impression.

One of your goals is to evoke a strong sense of familiarity and appreciation in the reader. If your reader can walk away from the essay craving the very pizza you just described, you are on your way to writing effective descriptive essays.

Be organized!

It is easy to fall into an incoherent rambling of emotions and senses when writing a descriptive essay. However, you must strive to present an organized and logical description if the reader is to come away from the essay with a cogent sense of what it is you are attempting to describe.