An academic essay modeling
the goals of the ESL and Writing Program of Indiana University South Bend

We learn by writing and writing demonstrates learning. This is why professors in all fields of study expect students to become skillful academic writers able to employ conventions and to draw readers through a line of reasoning to a thesis or argument. Use this model to notice and practice:

1. Fundamental conventions as described in the right column.
2. The target skills for the writing placement test.
3. The goals for first-year writers. Note that in W130: Principles of Composition, most assigned essays must be longer than this model and effectively demonstrate the conventions both shown here and taught in class.

Writer’s name
Course title
Instructor’s name
Submission date

Life Story: Shaped by Culture but Rewritable by Intention

Most believe that life’s story cannot be predicted, that its events are written only as they are lived. Surprisingly, in “Living Backwards” psychiatrist Arnold M. Ludwig proposes just the opposite, that the essence of life’s story is pre-written by culture, family, gender, time and place, just as the blueprint for a building is a drawn before the building is constructed. He argues that as people learn their stories they “come to live out in their imaginations many of the experiences they later seek” (294). Ludwig does not think this is a destiny, however; he also claims that culturally imbued life stories can be rewritten. When one becomes aware of the blueprint version of life, they become...
able to alter it. In “I Will Be My Own Hero” Kristen Hughes describes her experience with rewriting an aspect of her life story. She recalls the life she imagined for herself when she was young as a powerful hero like those in the art, stories, and people in her culture. She became aware, however, that the kind of power these heroes wielded was cruel and came to hate it. With this new awareness she was able to design for herself the kind of power she wanted to wield and in so doing found a “new hero in [her]self to follow” (54). This essay explores Hughes’ experience in light of Ludwig’s ideas to show that although we are born into a cultural view of the world and life story, awareness of these life-shaping forces enables us to make choices and so design our own stories.

Culture and family draft a story for our lives before we are born. We learn it by observing how others live and what they value as reflected in the language, art, religion, and traditions of our culture. Ludwig described this process as being taught to “prefer” the story established for us by the circumstances of our birth. “As with fiction, original plots are rare. … [We] tend to be drawn to conventional, ready-made plots because those are what [our] parents, teachers, and society trained [us] to prefer” (299). Hughes learned at a young age to prefer her culture’s dominant model for heroism and power, one destructive and indifferent to those destroyed. She learned it in part from the art and myths of her culture. She was awed by Guernica, a painting by Picasso of a bull that destroyed a village yet stood “expressionless” amidst of the dead. She had a “hungry heart” to be adventurous like Ulysses, the soldier in the epic Greek story, who in Tennyson’s later poetic version “drunk delight of battle” (50). She lived backwards, “drawn to [a] conventional, ready-made plot” (Ludwig 299) in that she knew only the cruel model for heroism and so adopted it without question.

Hughes innocently adopted her culture’s cruel ways of wielding power, but when she
experienced this cruelty first-hand, she felt an inner dissonance or conflict of ideas that triggered new awareness, a search for alternatives, and finally a rewriting of this aspect of her life story. It is dissonance that wakes us up. Ludwig claims that to become aware enough to alter our story we must “consciously experience progressive change in […] life” (294). That’s not enough. Realizing that life changes may inform us that we are living out a pre-written story, but experiencing dissonance with that story gives us striking insights that enable us to rewrite it. Hughes’ experiences with destructive power enhanced her insight and influenced her to evaluate her model for heroism and power and rewrite it. She saw abuses of power when her friend Tammy’s father broke Tammy’s mother’s bones. She experienced abuses of power when her father treated her with indifference year after year. She experimented with abusing power herself by drowning baby gerbils. In all cases, she felt terrible and realized there is nothing admirable about deliberate cruelty. She understood the victims of cruelty. “I have […] seen the aftermath of violence … [and] the tough indifference [of those who caused it] has wounded me” (52). These wounds prompted Hughes to evaluate her culture’s dominant model of heroism and reject it. She was no longer living backwards; she became aware of the life story she had been born into and made choices to rewrite it.

Once she became disillusioned with the cruel model of heroism, Hughes says she looked within herself for alternatives. She said, “I am finding a new Hero in myself to follow. […] No matter how hungry her heart, indifference will not suit her” (54). She may have looked within herself for a new model, but it seems she looked again to her culture for alternative models, making sure that the one she chose did not conflict with her desired ways to relate to others. This time she deliberately chose as her heroic model the nonviolent use of power that is taught by her culture.
through the lives and achievements of such heroes as Martin Luther King, Jr., the American civil rights leader, and Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian revolutionary leader. Although Gandhi was not Western, he is considered a hero here. The dominant models for heroism in Hughes’ culture initially selected her, but dissonance made her aware—woke her up—enabling her to select her own models.

Awareness is essential to the true revision of a life blueprint. Ludwig says we “function as a biographer, shaping and revising the material [we are] responsibility for, to make […] life more meaningful and improve the quality of the story” (303). To do this we must first become aware of a problem. When Hughes experienced cruel power, she experienced inner dissonance between her wish to be an adventuring hero and the kindhearted person she wanted to be. “I still yearn to live a life that seems an answer to my own desires. But I can’t be indifferent to those around me” (53). Hughes is brave because she resisted the dominant heroic model of her culture, the cold-blooded warrior, in favor of an alternative, the leader who is strong but not cruel. Hughes’ experience illustrates Ludwig’s claims that although we tend to live backwards, repeating the cultural story we are born into, we nevertheless have considerable power to rewrite that story for ourselves. Knowing this makes us responsible for choosing and living worthy life stories.

Works Cited