

WOMEN'S STUDIES CELEBRATION
Women's History Month 2005

NOMINATION: Papers and projects done in completion of course work for Spring, Summer and Fall 2004 eligible for nomination. Students do not need to be enrolled Fall 2004 or Spring 2005 to be eligible.
(Students are encouraged to identify works they would like nominated and approach their professor to initiate the process.)

Instructor Dr. Jenny Shaddock Dept. English
Course Number and Name English 210 Intro to Texts Semester completed Fall 2004
Title of Nominated Work It's Electric: Fragments of My Life as an
Epileptic

CATEGORY: **Sampson:**
 Undergraduate Research Paper ☒ **See** _____
 Undergraduate Project ☐ **Olson** _____
 Graduate ☐ **Kessler** _____
 ☐ **Turell** _____
 ☐ **Belter** _____

STUDENT INFORMATION:

Name Amanda Schaefer
Email Schaefer Year/Major Sophomore
Local Address 4808 Kappus Dr, Apt 2
Eau Claire, WI
Local Phone 838-8938

****WHY DO YOU, THE INSTRUCTOR, RECOMMEND THIS AS AN EXEMPLARY STUDENT PAPER/PROJECT? (Attach a separate sheet.)**

As the nominating instructor, please notify the student and ask them to turn in the paper, or attach to your nomination form.

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Awards are sponsored by the UW-Eau Claire Foundation, Helen X. Sampson Fund, and by private individuals. Research involving human subjects must conform to the guidelines given by the Institutional Research Board. Contact Research Services, 836-3405, with questions.

Submission deadline is February 11, 2005.

To: Judges for Women's Studies Celebration

From: Jenny Shaddock, English

Re: RECOMMENDATION FOR AMANDA SCHAEFER'S "IT'S ELECTRIC:
FRAGMENTS OF MY LIFE AS AN EPILEPTIC"

I nominate this piece with great enthusiasm for the project and admiration for its author. Amanda Schaefer wrote an exceptional autobiographical piece, "It's Electric: Fragments of My Life as an Epileptic," for our gateway course for English majors, Introduction to Texts.

What makes it so exceptional? I have attached the assignment, which as you can see, is not asking for a traditional autobiography. Rather it asks students to try to address their subject identity in a postmodern world, a world where their identities are often split among many overlapping and competing group identities. It also challenges students to embody in writing the concept that "we do not speak language; it speaks us"—the idea that our identities are constructed and represented through a variety of social texts (written, visual, oral, etc.). Thus students had to find textual sources that helped, alongside their own voice, to define and represent their subject identities. The assignment asks students to work within this experimental, fragmented model, but also to provide the reader some coherency through narrative tension and metaphor—a challenging assignment.

Amanda uses the "charged" metaphor of electricity to provide her readers with a visceral sense of the *experience* of an epileptic attack. Structurally, her metaphor provides a coherent thread to the entire piece. More importantly, on a conceptual level, her metaphor helps readers understand the physiology of the brain—the rogue currents that trigger seizures. In this sense the piece is educative, creating empathy and understanding for those challenged by epilepsy.

But it is also a powerful, stunning piece of writing in its own right. I found the energy that builds in the essay through Amanda's careful choice of provocative quotes, concrete, descriptive language and lyrical rhythmic repetitions quite compelling. It's a piece that can be read and re-read, with new meaning extracted each time.

Finally this piece is a celebration of two women—the one with epilepsy and the one who teaches her to "*sing* the body electric." Amanda learns from her teacher not to deny her epilepsy, but to embrace it—to transform it from a debilitating disorder to a vibrant current that can be harnessed and used. This is truly a classic heroic story of adversity overcome by insight, determination and self-expression.

Mystory Assignment

“We do not speak language; it speaks us.”
Scholes 243

For our final assignment in the course, write a “mystory.” Since we live in a time when our identities are fragmented across an abundance of textual identifications (remember Brummett’s use of the term *postmodern condition*, p. 23), a traditionally ordered autobiography cannot capture the textured, overlapping and conflicted nature of our fragmented identity in the twenty-first century. To write a mystory, mine your own “image repertoire” and intertextual references (these references could be drawn from a work of literature or any other kinds of texts with which you identify like music, cinema, television, family narratives, etc.) to create a fragmented representational version of yourself. The general theme of the essay will be one of the following: “A Student’s Discourse: Fragments”; “A Life Traveler’s Discourse: Fragments”; or “A Young Adult’s Discourse: Fragments.”

The arrival at a “recognition” of your identity as textually defined is at the heart of this assignment. By the time you write this assignment, our class will have worked with the various meanings inherent in “identifications”: 1) to identify as in to classify (naming and organizing our experience); 2) to identify with—to empathize or sympathize with, to connect to, something outside yourself; and finally, 3) the ultimate identification, *identity* (defined for our purposes, as set of texts that construct the self). These definitions all may apply to this essay.

Structurally speaking, mystories are fragmented narratives, and narratives are usually organized around conflicts or problems. The character desires something that obstacles and opponents prevent him or her from obtaining (e.g., Roland Barthes desires love, N. Scott Momaday desires connection to his Indian culture and identity in a white world, Rachel Blau de Plessis desires to be fully human as a woman academic in a traditionally male-defined profession). So, your mystory will need such a conflict or problem.

The overall text, fragmented as it will be, should work as a metaphor that represents you as student, young adult, or life traveler. The piece should strive to produce an overarching image of the mood or state of mind that colors your experience as student, young adult, or life traveler. For example, one narrative of young adulthood that could be told using a metaphor is the writer who describes living at home as a young adult as analogous to being a replicant in *Blade Runner*. The narrative conflict is clear—the

young adult longs for the freedom to define his or her own identity. The overarching metaphor is the writer's comparison of the young adult to a robot manipulated by others. One point of writing the mystory is that *in the research process* you find or "recognize" a condition that is true about yourself.

You may want to consider using Barthes, N. Scott Momaday, Rachel Blau de Plessis or any of the other models provided in the "Texts and Research: the Mystory" section of Scholes to help you conceptualize an approach to this assignment.

In order to assess this assignment, I will be looking for the following:

1. full engagement in the assignment (the essay is not a coherent, linear narrative, but rather plays with the postmodern concept of fragmented narrative) and the metaphoric representation of self to create the mystory
2. a narrative problem or desire
3. an overall metaphor that the text evokes
4. knowledge and use of Song of Solomon as one intertext
5. creative use of other defining intertexts
6. critical evaluation of the self
7. use of fresh language, avoidance of cliches
8. 5-7 pages

TENTATIVE DATE DUE: THURSDAY, DECEMBER 9
PAPERS MUST BE SUBMITTED ON TIME
NO EXCEPTIONS MADE

It's Electric

Fragments of My Life as an Epileptic

**Amanda Schaefer
English 210
Dr. Shaddock
12.9.04**

**"I sing the body electric."
--Walt Whitman**

And then again, anybody whose mouth is cut crossways is given to lying, unconsciously as well as knowingly. So pay my few scattering remarks no mind...I know only my part.

-- Zora Neale Hurston, Dust Tracks on a Road, 192

No matter what my Mom does in her life, she's not going to hell when she dies. She tells me that she's already been there---nine months pregnant, Wichita, Kansas, mid-August. The memories I have of Kansas are not my own. I was only two when we moved. I've had to borrow memories from my mom. She was born there, but grew up in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. She never really liked Kansas around the time I was born—too hot, too sticky, too flat. Yellow. I always think yellow when I think of Kansas in August. Wheat fields, heat. I was born to the sound of cicadas buzzing like live wires in the trees. Or not. I certainly can't be trusted with these things. My mouth's cut crossways.

I sing the body electric.

**And when you're in the dark,
And you want to see
You need, uh....Electricity Electricity!**

-- Bob Dorough, "Schoolhouse Rock"

Cap'n Crunch and Schoolhouse Rock on a Saturday morning. Katie had the blue feetie pajamas, I had the pink ones. As I tongued the cuts on the roof of my mouth (Cap'n Crunch is *dangerous*) and watch the electricity montage, I think of dad. They're singing about my dad.

How did it feel, Dad, when the current paralyzed you, sticking you to the floor? What did it *feel* like?

"I hadn't slept all night, and the base needed power. I was so groggy that I forgot to flip it off before I <insert technical jargon I'll never understand>.

Someone had to knock me off before I got electrocuted."

Wow dad. I can't even imagine.

Wait a few years. Sleep deprivation leads to electric current for more than one generation of Schaefer.

I sing the body electric.

Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through the air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed through me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant. I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done.

-- Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar, p. 143

If Kansas is yellow, my seizures are blue.

----It's ok, dad. I just dropped my fork. Your eyes are scaring me. Is this the way you looked when you saw Uncle Ray seize? Uncle Tim? I can't control my arms now. I'm so tired. Why'd you wake me up, mom? I'm getting dizzy. Dad, what's going-----

I sing the body electric.

She calls it her inheritance. You can't get from one side of the room to the other without cracking your head on it.

---Toni Morrison, Song of Solomon, p. 163

Electricity is my inheritance. Grampa, Wild Bill. He would climb a utility pole in the in a storm to fix something that had gone wrong. While he was up there, something crossed, something touched, something went wrong, the back of his shoulder was blown out by a rogue current. Grampa, how did it feel? Grampa, what's going---

I sing the body electric.

I'm sorry I got the white gurney dirty. I don't remember walking outside with no shoes. I don't remember anything.

The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars.

-- Jack Kerouac, On the Road

"You look like the type."

I didn't honestly think he was saying I was the Jack Kerouac type—likening my abundance of extra electricity to an abundance of spirit, creativity and charisma. But I was surprised at the scornful laugh. I had honestly not thought there was a

“type.” I realized that he was implying a stereotype—wearing a helmet, that stigma of mental disability. Retarded, to use his word for it.

I can’t drive like other kids at my high school. I have to be excused from class to take medication. My grades are good, though. But what if that’s not enough? What if I can’t do the things I want because of these rogue currents in my brain?

I sing the body electric.

She chewed things. As a baby, as a very young girl, she kept things in her mouth.

--Toni Morrison, Song of Solomon, p. 30

I had become defensive after that. I wanted to make my epilepsy something for other people to be scared of, not just me. If I act tough about it, it makes it harder for them to make fun of me.

“I have an oral fixation.”

“Oh reeeeealy.”

“Yeah. Thumb sucker. It’s why I smoke.”

“Girls only tell guys they have oral fixations for one reason.”

“Yeah? Well, I got to tell you, I have epilepsy. Anything you put in my mouth I’m liable to bite off.”

“Jesus. I should have known from you haircut you were a man-hater. Dyke.”

The static crackled as he brushed past me.

I sing the body electric.

Listening to him, I decided that I must be an English teacher and lean over my desk and discourse on the eighteenth-century poets and explain the roots of the modern novel.

--Zora Neale Hurston, Dust Tracks on a Road, p. 120

Well, it was actually a woman. She helped me realize that what I want to do is teach English, to teach literature.

What if I can't?

you look like the type

What if I have a seizure during class?

look like the type

What if my brain is fried?

look like the type

What if my medication makes me unable?

look like the type

what

look

if

like

I'm

the

too

type

electric?

She says, "You're epileptic? Me too, when I was younger," and smiles.

I'm electric/epileptic/electric/epileptic/alive/able/capable

I sing the body electric.

paranoia no problem

**claustrophobia no problem
growing up on Brooklyn streets no problem
growing up in Tibet no problem
growing up in Chicano Texas no problem
bellydancing certainly no problem
figuring it all out no problem
giving it all up no problem
giving it all away no problem
devouring everything in sight no problem
--Diane DiPrima, "No Problem Party Poem"**

medication for the rest of my life no problem
associate's degree no problem
potential birth defects no problem
bachelor's degree no problem
sleep deprivation-triggered seizures no problem
grad school no problem
dizziness no problem
ph.d no problem
epilepsy no problem

*** * ***

I don't have many seizures anymore. But the electricity still makes itself known. Black out. Not like fainting, not like being drunk or high. More like being pushed off a cliff and fully accepting impending oblivion, but then being wrenched back to consciousness by someone's hand wrapped hard around my heart. Just my brain doing something I didn't tell it to do, and then rethinking the decision.

I'll harness my electricity.

I sing the body electric. I *sing* the body *electric*.

After all, the only reason for life or a story is 'What Happened Next?'

-- Jack Kerouac, Desolation Angels, p238