

Lost Blurs: A Screenplay Exploring Child Neglect

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at exploring child neglect cases and to raise awareness about it. Child neglect is the failure to provide for the shelter, safety, supervision, and nutritional needs of the child. Child neglect is an underrated topic because it can be difficult to determine whether a parent is neglecting his/her child due to its unintentional nature. This paper explores what child neglect is, the possible effect of it such as disorganized attachment disorder, and ways to recover from said disorder. This paper uses the Attachment Theory by John Bowlby and the finding of the research is in the form of a screenplay. The screenplay uses tragicomedy as its genre, telling a story about a boy, Benny, who was neglected by his father as a child and now suffers from disorganized attachment disorder. Throughout his journey, he tries to recover from it by building trustful relationships and face his father about his neglected past.

Keywords: child neglect; disorganized attachment disorder; screenplay; tragicomedy

INTRODUCTION

Child neglect is a serious case that can be overlooked by most parents because the line between what is considered neglect and what is not tends to be vague. Neglect is also not the same as abuse, because abuse is more often than not an intentional act. According to Melissa Conrad Stöppler, a U.S. board-certified anatomic pathologist, child neglect is the failure to provide for the shelter, safety, supervision, and nutritional needs of the child. Stöppler also mentioned that child neglect can include physical neglect, educational neglect, or emotional neglect (Stöppler, 2021).

According to Kimberly Holland, a freelance health, travel, and lifestyle writer and editor, whose article had been medically reviewed by Timothy J. Legg, Ph.D., Psy.D., M.S.N., M.P.A., M.Sc., A.P.R.N., emotional neglect is not the same as abuse. Abuse is often intentional; it's a purposeful choice to act in a way that is harmful (Holland, 2021). While emotional neglect can be an intentional disregard for a child's feelings, it can also be failure to act or notice a child's emotional needs. Parents who emotionally neglect their children may still provide care and necessities. They just miss out on or mishandle this one key area of support. One example of emotional neglect is a child who tells their parent they're sad about a friend at school. The parent brushes it off as a childhood game instead of listening and helping the child cope. The form that I will use for this creative work is screenplay. According to Alyssa Maio, a screenwriter & author at StudioBinder, a screenplay is a written work for a film, television show, or other moving media, that expresses the movement, actions and dialogue of characters. Screenplays, or scripts, are the blueprint for the movie. A screenplay is written in a specific format to distinguish between characters, action lines, and dialogue (Maio, 2019).

The advantage of a screenplay over other forms such as short stories and novels is that a screenplay can be used to visually characterize characters so that filmmakers can strive to recreate their style, appearance, or feel. It also tells the story and includes all of the film's action and dialogue for each character, even their emotions. (Nashville Film Institute, n.d.)

The genre that I choose for this creative work is Tragicomedy. It is used in fictional works, containing both tragedy and comedy. Mostly, the characters in tragicomedy are exaggerated, and sometimes there might be a happy ending after a series of unfortunate events. It is incorporated with jokes throughout the story, just to lighten the tone (LiteraryDevices Editors, n.d.).

In this creative work, I want to address how being neglected as a child by his father makes Benny suffer from disorganized attachment disorder, how his disorder affects his social life in Fordville, and how he recovers from his disorder. To address those problems more specifically, I want to show how after being neglected by his father as a child, Benny develops a disorganized attachment disorder, then by having that disorder he has problems socializing with others as well as opening up to others as he lives his high school days, and that by forming a coherent narrative as well as through the help of other people around him, Benny finally recovers from disorganized attachment disorder.

This screenplay is intended for the general public, but specifically for parents and young people around 15 – 20 years old. When people read or watch this screenplay, they might be able to relate this screenplay to their family history. Young people may learn to understand and recover from their disorganized attachment, meanwhile parents might learn to treat their children better to prevent disorganized attachment from developing. After watching or reading this screenplay, both parents and young people may understand that to create a good relationship between parent and child, it takes a collaborative effort.

In addition, this creative work may reveal the hidden intention of parents only wanting the best for their children. They want their children to be strong, independent, and mature, but sometimes they forget that at an early age those things do not always matter more compared to a parent's love and care. By revealing such things, parents might think about how they spend their time at home with their children so that they do not neglect their children whether on purpose or unintentionally.

For my theoretical framework, I will be using the Attachment Theory by John Bowlby. John Bowlby was a British psychologist and psychoanalyst who believed that early childhood attachments played a critical role in later development and mental functioning of children (Cherry, 2020). Bowlby observed delinquent children in the 1930s and he found that those children had trouble forming a good relationship with others. He looked into the children's background and noticed that many of them endured disruptions in their home lives at an early age. Bowlby concluded that the early emotional bond established between a parent and their child is key to healthy development. As a result, challenges to that bond could have consequences that impact a child throughout their lifetime (Vinney, 2019).

According to Dr. Lisa Firestone, the Director of Research and Education at The Glendon Association, there is an Interview form created by Mary Ainsworth called "The Adult Attachment Interview Protocol" which contains general questions regarding adults and their childhood (Firestone, n.d.). The interview serves to find out whether a person's childhood may have a significant impact on their adult lives. Using this interview form, researchers found that individuals with a disorganized attachment often cannot make sense of their experiences. However, Dr. Lisa Firestone also mentioned that there are ways to recover from disorganized attachment and its effects (Firestone, n.d.). She says that there is still hope for people with disorganized attachment and that is through earning a secure attachment. People with disorganized attachment can try to earn a secure attachment by making sense of their story and forming a coherent narrative. According to Sarah R. Moore, a certified Master Parenting Trainer, a coherent narrative is how we make sense of the stories we've created for ourselves about the events that have transpired in our lives (Moore, 2021). By trying to form a coherent

narrative, it can help people understand how their childhood experiences are still affecting them in their lives today (Firestone, n.d.). Firestone mentioned that through this process, they can find healthier ways to deal with unresolved trauma and loss by facing and feeling the full pain of their experiences, but hiding from their past or trying to bury their emotions does not work, as painful feelings will be triggered in moments of stress (Firestone, n.d.).

The method that I use to create my screenplay is by incorporating the results of my research, my personal experiences, and observations to create my characters and dialogue. I try to create a main character that can feel personal, but also relatable to other people. That way, whenever I am writing a dialogue for my main character, I can look back on some of my own experiences and reflect them onto my character. The relationships between my characters are also inspired by my experiences like me and my father or with my friends. Using this method, I can create a grounded conversation between my characters and make their dialogue believable. For the settings, I do not have a specific method for creating it. I was inspired by western buildings, houses, and streets; therefore, I am making my settings based on those.

CONCEPTS OF THE CREATIVE WORK

My creative work's genre is Tragicomedy, where tragedy is accompanied with bits of comedy in the story. I will show these aspects of my genre in my creative work by showing the main character's flaws through flashbacks of the protagonist's past experience and infusing comedy in the main character's interaction with people who are close with the protagonist. The tragic part will be shown by the protagonist's struggle to remember which of his memories are true, while the comedic part will be implemented through jokes and the protagonist's awkward behaviour throughout the story. These aspects work together in telling the story of my protagonist and his struggle to overcome his disorganized attachment disorder.

Flashback is a moment in which the narrative flashes back in time from the present day to some point in the near or distant past. It's a scene that took place in the past but is inserted into the present narrative in order to advance the story, characters and theme (Script Reader Pro, 2020).

I am also inspired by Noah Baumbach's style of writing movies. His movies always feel grounded in reality and contain tragicomedy elements to make the audience feel something for the characters but maintain humorous tones in some parts. According to Jason Hellerman, a writer on nofilmschool.com, Noah Baumbach is known for his razor wit, sharp characters, and scintillating dialogue (Hellerman, 2019). Hellerman thinks that there are three keys to Noah Baumbach's success, and those are crosstalks, overt emotions, and guarded characters (Hellerman, 2019).

In this section, I am going to talk about the genre codes and conventions of the tragicomedy genre. The characteristics of tragicomedy below were taken from an article by Literary Devices' website titled "Tragicomedy – Definition and Examples of Tragicomedy" (LiteraryDevices Editors, n.d.).

Story Elements	Conventions of Tragicomedy	Conventions of My Creative Work

Characters	The characters in Tragicomedy often have tragic experiences in their lives, but there are comedic moments also. Tragicomedy represents the unpredictability and the duality of our real lives. In a tragicomedy, there is the possibility of a happy ending after a series of unfortunate events.	In my creative work, the characters will have their flaws and tragic experiences, but they will also experience funny moments. In my creative work, the main character will suffer from his own condition, but he will be able to overcome it in the end with the support from the people around him. His suffering will represent the tragic elements, while the people around him will provide the comedy aspect of the genre.
Setting	Tragicomedy can often be placed in almost any kind of setting. This means that as long as the story represents the sad and happy moments in life, it does not always matter where the story takes place.	In my screenplay, the setting will be in a fictional town called Fordville.
Events	Tragicomedy often deals with real life problems, but twisting it so that no matter how tough the problem is, the overall tone is a bit lighter because of the comedy bits.	I will be putting the main character in a tough situation against himself since he is trying to overcome his past and disorganized attachment problem. However, throughout his journey he will meet people that will help him and cheer him up, thus this is where the comedy aspect will be placed mostly. For example, there will be a scene where Jack is trying to encourage Benny to talk to a girl, but Benny is nervous so he starts talking to himself about what to say or what to do, when suddenly a girl approaches Benny and everything goes out of the window.
Time	Tragicomedy can be placed in any moment in time, but most commonly used in present times to speak about the current topics of the world.	I will be using a period of time before the coronavirus outbreak happens, around the year 2016. It is still quite recent, therefore making my topic relevant, but it will be set where everyone can go outside without worrying.

Benny's mother, Martha, died in a car accident when Benny was 8 years old. Since then his father, Frank, has been neglecting Benny emotionally, albeit unintentionally. 8 years later, Benny is just starting his high school life and hopes to meet new people. His awkward personality and ordinary appearance do not help with his goal, though. He struggles to make meaningful conversations and likes to stutter when he is nervous. His desperation to belong will soon lead him to the wrong crowd of people and because of that he gets into trouble a lot. Some teachers are worried about him, so he is called to the principal's office. However, when asked about his past, Benny struggles to answer. He tries to remember his past but he cannot figure out which is true. He eventually meets a boy who will be his best friend and he feels comfortable being friends with him. The boy's name is Jack and he is the friendliest and funniest person that

Benny has ever met. Eventually, with the help of Jack and the people around him, Benny is finally able to overcome his problem.

CONCLUSION

This creative work was created with the goal to show people the importance of a child's emotional need and what could happen if those needs are neglected by their caregivers. My creative work was told from a neglected child's point-of-view who was diagnosed with disorganized attachment disorder because he was emotionally neglected as a child by his father. Therefore, my three main characters represent people who were also neglected by their parents as a child, their friends who want to help them, and parents who want to rebuild connection with their children.

In my story, I showed the signs of disorganized attachment disorder and its solutions by adapting the Attachment Theory that I used for this creative work, specifically the disorganized attachment pattern. For Benny, his disorganized attachment disorder was caused by his emotionally neglected past. I showed the signs of a person suffering from disorganized attachment disorder by giving him an awkward personality as well as the inability to speak normally so that he would have a hard time getting his points across in a conversation. For Jane, I showed the ways how someone might recover from disorganized attachment disorder by giving Jane a cheerful personality but very understanding, patient, and kind towards other people. Throughout the story, Jane is always trying to help Benny because the self-recovery process of disorganized attachment disorder requires Benny to build a strong and trusting relationship. Meanwhile for Frank, I showed how parents might rebuild their relationship with their children by making him realize his mistakes and trying to confront Benny about his problems. Likewise, I made Benny confront Frank in the end about his neglected past and accept it so that Benny could move on because another part of the self-recovery process is to let the patient confront his/her past slowly.

Throughout my process in writing this creative work, I have learned many more things about screenplay writing and child neglect. In my background, I stated that the reason I choose the topic of child neglect is to try and prevent it from happening even further. After researching more about child neglect, I became aware that it is difficult to determine whether a child is being neglected in a household or not. Even though child neglect is usually unintentional, the effects that it causes to the neglected child are real and long-lasting. I personally resonate with this topic because of my similar past experience with it, so this topic gave me a moment to think about myself and slowly accept it.

The hardest part of this process was finding the right theory for my story. I already had an idea for a story, but finding the right theory to fit the topic about child neglect was harder than I thought. Even after two weeks of attending my design class, I did not have a solid theory to use yet. However, in the end I stumbled across John Bowlby's attachment theory and thought that I could use that. After that, writing the actual screenplay itself was not as hard as it would have been if I did not find the right theory yet.

During my writing process, I got a lot of helpful feedback from my thesis advisor. Without those comments, I would have been lost and confused about what to write for my creative work. There was a time where I had to stay in my room, away from my computer because I caught COVID-19 and there were days where I could not think of anything to write for my screenplay. He told me that I was quite behind other students, but he motivated me and told me that I could do it. Seeing him put his trust in me kept me motivated to work on my creative writing.

For others who wish to write about the same topic and genre as me, I have a few suggestions regarding this matter. For the topic, if others want to write about child neglect, I suggest that they do a lot of research regarding child neglect cases or surveys. I also suggest they read about the differences between child neglect and child abuse. Child neglect is a rare topic compared to child abuse, so the specific theory for this topic is hard to find. It is essential to keep in mind that child neglect cases are also hard to determine because of the unintentional nature of a neglect. Regarding the disorganized attachment disorder, they should keep in mind that it is a possible effect of child neglect, so not all children who were neglected by their parents end up suffering from disorganized attachment disorder.

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