

Secretive Writing

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Abstract

Secretive writing is a writing activity that I participate in that contains rhetorical and social elements. These elements create an atmosphere for many internal and external changes that can occur within the minds of those who participate in such an activity. In this paper I investigate the connection that my writing activity has to literacy and how literacy is not limited to education, trade, or commerce.

I have come to learn that thoughts don't need to be shared in order for a person to grow or to change someone's perspective on the world around them. Sometimes, secrecy is exactly what shapes a person; the sole idea of hiding something. Other times, the pain of being unable to share such secrecy can be what drives a person to share it in a safe way. Being someone who cares far too deeply about others, I always find myself carrying other people's troubles on my shoulders and refusing to deal with my own. This heavy weight often damaged my mental health. To cope with all the sensitive information in my head, I took to writing down all the secrets I have been told and that I myself have kept. My writing activity is secretive writing, recording the secrets I have in my head and coding them. It has impacted the way I deal with all the information in my head, providing me an outlet, and it made me realize how writing can be very therapeutic and de-stressing in a way that other activities will never be for me.

With a kind face and a gentle heart, 15-year-old me had already been through a lot. Not getting into details, these experiences shaped her to have a desperate need to help others the only way she could; by listening to them. She didn't realize that people who need an ear to talk to have a selfish tendency to gossip more than vent. She heard everything, and said nothing. The overwhelming weight of what her young ears heard started to distress her. She began writing a simple diary, but one autumn night she read through it and realized every page was no

longer filled with her own thoughts, but filled with the secrets she had been told. Despite this realization, her anxieties *had* lessened, the weight on her shoulders *had* lifted, and she could breathe again. Five years later and I'm still writing, both secrets that have been told to me, and secrets that I, as a 20-year-old living with strict parents, must keep. However, it's not that simple.

The average person may see this as keeping a diary; or simply journaling, but it's much deeper than that. I hardly write about what happened on a certain day or how I feel about what happened to someone at work. When I write, I don't scribble down "so-and-so told me she was gay today, her mother disapproved and hit her." I express a simple line in different ways. That's why I call it secretive writing. Here's an example:

R O Y G B I V

The summer autumn hair
On an Orange County queen
Sunshine smile so fair
Others envy colored sheen
Lives with blue tainted cheeks
Violent words from mother's teeth
Rainbows fear violet dreams

Analysis:

Each line correlates to a color of the rainbow and some element of the secret:

Line 1: *Red*—The girl that this is based on has red hair, she told me the first half of her secret in summer and in autumn she told me the rest. She came out, then she told me about her mother's abuse towards her. She came out to her mom in between those seasons.

Line 2: *Orange*—She lived in Orange County in California and moved here in to the Orange County school district in Florida. She may not have had much of a problem if she lived in California, since its residents tend to be widely accepting of homosexuality while here in Florida they aren't.

Line 3: *Yellow*—She had a beautiful smile, always laughing and bright as the yellow sun. Her skin was fair despite her living in such a sunny place.

Line 4: *Green*—Everyone was jealous of her. She was beautiful and people assumed her life was perfect. She was the typical girl next door.

Line 5: *Blue*—The color of tears that stain her cheeks when she cries herself to sleep.

Line 6: *Indigo*—I thought of the Eastern Indigo snake that can sometimes be found in Florida. It's not venomous and it's colubrid (very long). The phrase "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me" came to mind because Jenny would always tell me that the violent words her mother said were harmless and didn't affect her. But living with a snake still incites fear.

Writing down what someone tells me would not have sufficed in being therapeutic. I wouldn't have felt any better by just writing down a secret. The act of having to kind of "code" what I'm writing down requires focus and this need to concentrate distracts me from everything going on around me. It also allows me to participate in such practice without fear of someone stumbling upon the book and reading something they shouldn't, which is a genuine fear I have since I live with meddlesome parents. This has also helped me realize that writing is something I enjoy doing and that I may actually be good at it. I had never seen myself as an artistic person, I don't know how to draw; I can't play an instrument. I can't sing, but I *can* write something other than an essay. This forced me to think about how the writing activity I stumbled upon has formed me as a person who is stronger than the 15-year-old girl who started it all.

Secretive writing isn't a daily activity for me anymore. It was for the girl in high school. Nearly every day she would write down something her friends told her and craft a new masterpiece from said secrets. She typically wrote

during the night when the rest of her family was fast asleep and no one could hear the scrawl of her pen or the sniffles as she cried. She worked alone, and so do I. Something so delicate can't be shared or collaborated. Behind a locked door, buried under her sheets, her lack of confidence forced her into hiding. I, on the other hand, will sometimes do it in the middle of the day on the living room couch while my parents and younger brother watch Netflix two feet away. I keep the use of technology to a minimum; it's very distracting and writing with a pen on the rustic tan paper of my leather-bound journal makes my secretive writing feel mysterious and personal. Upgrading from the old college ruled spiral notebook the teen girl had keeps me more involved in the activity and makes it more enjoyable. Aside from adding to the therapeutic element, it also made me think about how everything has a deeper meaning, even the color and material of a journal.

In order to have a better understanding of how secretive writing has a deeper meaning than its shallow use, I asked myself how it has changed my perspective on writing itself. In *Literacy*, David Barton writes "... the original impetus for developing writing appears to have been trade and commerce ..." (117). When I read that, I was a little shocked. I had always thought that the first use of literacy would be education. Secretive writing seems to have absolutely nothing to do with communication, but I soon realized that my writing *is* a form of communication. By writing down all of my thoughts, I'm communicating what others communicated to me to a piece of paper. I'm changing spoken words into something only I can understand, and the writing itself holds a potential communication. It's also my own written language. The same way cave drawings exist as a form of communication that only cave people can understand, my writing is my own form of communication since it must be translated. Just like communication, secretive writing is both imposed and self-generated (Barton). Because most of the secrets are communicated to me, the ideas and inspiration for my writing are imposed onto me by others. Their words can impose ideas in many ways; through the language they use, the verbiage, tone, desperation, and of course the content itself.

Lately, my writing has been self-generated since some of the secrets in the journal are my own. For example, I have had to keep my sexual preferences, being pansexual, a secret from my parent's due to their religious and slightly homophobic personality. I've tried explaining to them what being pansexual is all about in hopes they'd understand. I explained to them that being pansexual means I don't classify my attraction towards someone based on their gender, gender preference, sexual preference, or identity but simply by factors that are non-

inclusive of those things. I even tried writing the conversation I'd eventually have to have with my parents down and my mind gets stuck in the negative. My choice to keep this a secret is my own because of all these factors, and what I wrote in my journal about it is self-generated as well.

I wrote a short story called *Tilling the Land* using a writing technique called juggling. I learned of this technique in a book called *Making Shapely Fiction* by Jerome Stern. Juggling is "when you have your character do one thing and think about something else" (Stern 2000). When I read this line, I fell in love with it because that's exactly what I do with my secretive writing; write one thing while thinking about secrets. Another line that I found interesting was "not only do you create tension, you create character. Juggling means the way you go back and forth between action and thought to create immediacy, tension, and character" (Stern 2000). The tension and immediacy is something I always feel when I write. I have to write down my ideas fast before I forget and I feel tension beforehand. This has become my favorite style of writing, and I would not have known of the technique had it not been for the invocation of my secretive writing to further research ways to write. In *Tilling the Land*, I came to write some personal feelings and express the dizziness I feel because of the need to hide.

Tilling the Land

Picking up the heavy hoe Lilith walks in a straight line, muscles contracting with every step and thrust of the hoe, all her efforts spent on tilling the land before her father arrives. Over her head, down on the ground, pulling back, and one step back; she repeats this again and again as the sun beats down on her. Straight lines are good, they're necessary; they keep the vegetables in order, and make them easier to pick. Straight women are good, they're necessary; they keep tradition in order, and they're easier to marry off. Behind her is a root sticking straight out. She missteps and trips onto the ground, hoe ruining the straight line before her. Eyes wide she looks around to make sure no one is watching and she covers the slant line with dirt, scrambling to get up and continue her work. Covering this up is easy, no one will be able to see this flaw, and the vegetables won't change their course of growth. Covering this up is easy, no one will know the truth, and she'll marry a great man to stop the course of change. The roosters crow incessantly in the background and Lilith groans with frustration, checking her shadow for the time. She hates those cocks; but the cocks are

needed, they help the hens reproduce, and they're good enough for other farmer's daughters so why not her? As her neighbor approaches her, prize winning cockerel in hand, asking her to take his son out for tonight's square dance she replies with a smile, "No thanks, I'm going with my cat," and watches the neighbor's daughter peak from behind the windmill, cowboy boots and red lipstick on.

Analysis:

To begin, I named the character Lilith after Adam's first wife before Eve in Jewish mythology. She left Adam because she refused to be beneath him and she was cast out of the Garden of Eden. As a short story about homosexuality, I related the character to someone who has been cast out because she is not what humanity imagined her to be. Because Lilith is representational of myself and other homosexual or pansexual females, I wanted her to be independent and sexually free. Thus the homage to Lilith who, despite all those against her, had relations with the arch angel Samuel after she had become a demon. A forbidden love. The back and forth between tilling the land and thinking about who she must be to please others are alternating, but I tried to write it in a way that they seemed to be happening simultaneously, which is what the story shape "juggling" is all about. It's also something that goes on in the minds of many members of the LGBT community. They have to juggle life and the fears in their minds. The need to hoe in a straight line correlated to her need to walk in a straight line in her life and her sexuality. Rooster is representative of males, their need to show off and be loud but also their importance and beauty as the cockerel in the story is a prize-winning chicken. The cat is representative of a female, agile, gentle, yet fierce.

There is a social basis to writing, as mentioned in *Literacy*. Barton says that "The very act of reading or writing takes on a social meaning: it can be an act of defiance, or an act of solidarity, an act of comforting..." (Barton 46). Secretive writing is an act of defiance on my part because I am defying the common urges of sharing secrets with people and instead sharing them with my journal. I am also defying the norms of journaling by coding what I write so it's not easily understood. It is an act of comforting for me and for those who have told me their secrets. It ensures their secrets are kept safe and it comforts my disrupted state of mind by getting the thoughts out in a safe way. In the same chapter, Barton talks about how literacy has a history and how it is "bound up with changes in people's lives," (Barton 48). When the demands of life change, as the demands in the teen's life changed when her mental health was compromised, it can promote a person to write

more or less. It pushed her to write more, almost daily. The change in her life was a new set of friends. She had to change everything: her perspective of other people, how many people she trusted, her relationships with others, how she felt about herself, and so much more. She was forced to push herself to the edge and just before she jumped, she realized that all she really needed to do was write more.

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For a very long time, I struggled with the value of life. I always intended to be an advocate for life since at a very young age I lost a friend to suicide. I never really believed that she had a hard life since she never really complained about it. One day she was just gone. Until I dealt with it myself, I didn't realize how perfect someone's life always seems on the outside. It's a universal secret, one that everyone knows yet no one seems to want to be brave enough to talk about it. This drove me to write *Primary Colors* with the topic of suicide in mind. I wrote this based on a story type I learned in a creative writing class called "Decision." It's a short story that ends in a decision without any action taking place and it was introduced by Damon Knight. I thought it was appropriate because often times people who have suicidal thoughts make a decision rather than immediately taking action. It's never just a split-second thought, never simply an action. There's almost always a plan behind it. The character in the short story isn't a real person, just a girl struggling with a secret that I think many people struggle with and making a decision based on a failed experience.

Primary Colors

Sitting up in her chair, she brings her hand up to her head and grips a chunk of her hair as her throat releases a deep painful groan. Her head throbs violently as she stands up on wobbly legs. Like wet spaghetti, she falls to the ground, unable to be straight. She feels her body sink into the soft carpet like Jell-O forming into a mold. A less than significant bead digs into her back, the sensation more annoying than painful in comparison to what she was feeling. She reaches under herself to find a pill, half capsuled white and the other half capsuled red.

Her mother walks in and the pill finds its way into the cozy warmth under the carpet. The empty bottle that was filled with 30+ of the pill's friends sits empty and hidden conveniently under the bed. She smiles almost comically

at the girl lying on her back.

"Did you drink too much last night Lamia?" Her mother asks amused as she watches her daughter grip her head in pain. Lamia stands up quickly and runs to the bathroom, throwing herself onto the toilet and emptying the contents of her stomach. Undigested capsules come flying out, decorating the murky water like Christmas lights on a foggy night.

She's reminded of the first time the thought popped into her mind, the beauty of blue and yellow beads scattered on her 15 years young palm. She looks into the toilet and nods her head in agreement.

'Guess it won't work if the colors are primary,' She thinks as she looks at the bright green sleeping pills posed by the bathroom sink.

Analysis:

Lamia is the name of a character I wrote in a novel I was working on. The character in the novel is strong, independent, and lives in a fantasy world with dragons, castles, wizards, and magical powers. I wanted the character in this "Decision" story to represent her after the magic faded away. I wanted her mother to be clueless, as most mothers are, and create a slight comic relief for a quite serious topic. I wrote about her attempts using pills that were primary colors because they were her primary attempts. Statistically, people's first attempts at suicide don't work. Whenever someone is found dead after killing themselves they often find out that it wasn't their first time trying to end their lives. I used a light tone on the story and refused to use trigger words since I often times back read my own entries and I didn't want to make myself feel anything that could be trigger. It helped me realize that I am my own audience and tone is everything. I lightened it up by making her "agree with her toilet," comparing her body to Jell-O, and mentioning Christmas Lights.

"Writing is out there; it exists along with other social artifacts of culture" (Barton 45), and I think that its existence is futile if no one uses it. I spend a lot of time reading articles about spreading awareness because I find it ironic how people try to raise awareness on a topic that in person they may not be willing to discuss comfortably. The black and white of different topics is almost never seen in shades of grey.

I understand the world in colors, she understood the world in black and white. People are either good or they're bad. People either care about you or they don't. The world is either out to get you or you're not worth

enough for the world to draw its attention to you. Writing provides you with a perspective on the world around you and the way you handle writing can form your perspectives. After I started my secretive writing, I began seeing the world differently. Tears weren't simply from sadness, I discovered the existence of crocodile tears. Smiles didn't always mean happiness, I discovered the existence of a mask. A secret wasn't always negative, it could have a positive light. I discovered the idea of a middle ground. Here's how I discovered that.

In my entry *The Broken Girl's Mask*, I write about when my past friend told me about her abortion. I hadn't titled it until after I wrote it, I never title my entries before they're started or completed. This is because some things aren't as clear as they seem. I was almost sure I'd have an entry dedicated to abortion and the loss of my friend's child. But I didn't. I wrote about the smile she wore afterwards. The one she flaunted while her eyes were eternally wet. It was a concept I had believed was only displayed by my own self. I believed that only I wore an eternal mask and that my smiles were the only ingenuine ones. When I realized that the entire world wore masks, it was thanks to the literacy of my writing, the ecological view of it.

The Broken Girl's Mask

Sidewalk painted as grey as the mood in the air
The smile on her face just doesn't seem fair
Trudging alongside the rainy winter knight
Sword in her hand, inside she's lost the fight
Knight seems so long after such a loss
Hiding behind her mask of moss
Broken girl's mask fades into the fog
Being forced to smile, leaves her throat clogged.

Analysis:

In the moment where my friend told me her secret about having an abortion, we were walking down the street to our bus stop on a rainy day. It was around 6am and it was dark out. Although it was in the morning, the mood was so bleak and grey that it felt like night. I didn't misspell night as knight, that was intentional. After telling me her secret I saw her as a knight, but not with shining armor. Her armor was rainy/winter. She was drenched in rain that morning and her soul was cold as winter after her loss. By the time we got to the bus stop her internal mood remained the same but she had a smile on, like holding a sword to appear strong. I said that her mask was made of moss because she kept looking at the ground that was covered with moss as if she wanted to

hide in it. The fog is the smoke that comes out of the back of a bus when it begins to drive away. Her smile faded once she was on the bus and no one could see her.

An interest I discovered when thinking about secretive writing as a literacy activity was the history that may connect to the activity. I had once read about how homosexual lovers during times of extreme homophobia would write letters to each other and code their words so that only their significant other would understand that it's a love letter rather than a normal one. Instead of saying "I miss you" they would use a code such as "The cherry blossoms have decayed since we parted" for example, and I never realized that I do the same thing. There were also times of war when government secrets would be coded to prevent others from understanding its content. This still happens today and although those codes are more elaborate than my own, the concept is still very similar.

When I think about the importance of my secretive writing, I think about the fact that "people bring their cultural knowledge to an activity" (Barton 36). In my culture, I am forced to be secluded. The culture I was raised in, being Hispanic and religious, is based on guarding females and protecting them as if they can't protect themselves. Hiding them from the outside world because the perception that there is danger at every turn was the norm. At the age of 22, I have a curfew of 10pm only because my job lasts till then. On weekdays, its 9pm. I don't have many friends because they drop me when they realize I can't participate in the activities they do. This culture relates to my secretive writing because the secrets I have to keep in a culture like this are a heavy burden. I have, once or twice, snuck out when my parents were out late or when they were on a trip together and that's one secret that I have to keep. A discovery that came about after writing about the burden of my culture was that I didn't want this life for my children. I respect my religion and my heritage but I realized that I don't want anyone else to feel as trapped as I do and I discovered that only after writing about it.

My secretive writing has incited many discoveries in my life; discovering who I am and who others are. I used to be a fragile girl, lost in the world that others told me I had to be a part of. I was constantly dragged down by the dependency of my relationships. I felt lonely if I wasn't with someone for longer than 10 minutes. Having busy parents and absent siblings who locked themselves in their rooms added to my desperation to belong somewhere. This may have been why I stayed in the toxic relationships I made. The loneliness would creep up slowly, hauntingly, and would drown me till I couldn't breathe. When I began my secretive writing, I had someone. That someone just happened to be a something. Words became my best

friend, my shoulder to cry on, my muse. It became the part of me that I was missing, that I kept trying to fill with people that I shouldn't have. I discovered that you don't need a human body to bring you warmth and substance. I discovered that warmth and substance came from within and I just had to find a way to put it down on paper. "People read and write in order to do other things; to achieve other ends" (Barton 47). This quote from *Literacy* struck me in a way that also helped my path to discovery. I had a thing to do; I had to achieve other ends. I had to discover what made me different from others around me; I had to achieve a perspective on life that didn't force me to depend on people for my own happiness. Through secretive writing, I was able to accomplish those goals.

I find it fascinating that literacy can come in so many different forms and can create such diversity in people's perspectives of the world around them. While simply writing about people's secrets was enough to ease the little girl's anxiety, initiating a new form of writing into her life made a world of a difference. It calmed the storm within her, eventually weaned her off her dependence on antidepressants, and broadened her perspective on the world. It made her realize that the world around her isn't black and white and that shades of grey are both comfortable and dangerous places. It helped her read people better and helped her develop a new skill that she still uses years later. In 2017, I won't quit on my secretive writing and now that I can examine it under the microscope of literacy, I can expand my perceptions of what I do. Writing involves more than just scribbling words onto a piece of paper. Writing is an art form, a form of communication and, personally, for me, it's a form of therapy. It involves deep thought and has a social basis that even I, someone who doesn't share her work, can understand and appreciate. An understanding of writing, even a vague one, can provoke deep thought and a desire to learn more, just as it did with me when I began researching new ways to code these secrets. Writing to me, is discovery. Knowing now that writing has taught me so much about the world I live in and the world I perceive, I have a newfound appreciation for it.

Works Cited

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