



BIS3203

WORLD LITERATURE

ASSIGNMENT 2

ISSUES AND THEMES FOUND IN MR. VOICE WRITTEN BY JESS WALTER

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	TITLE	PAGE
	COVER PAGE.....	1
	TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	2
1.0	DETAILS OF <i>MR.VOICE</i>	3
2.0	REASONS ON CHOOSING <i>MR. VOICE</i>	3 - 4
3.0	ISSUES AND THEMES FOUND IN <i>MR.VOICE</i>	4 - 7
	REFERENCES.....	7

1.0 DETAILS OF MR. VOICE

The title of the selected work is *Mr. Voice* written by Jess Walter. A little bit of trivia on Jess Walter, he was born in Spokane, Washington and currently lives there with his family. Most of his story usually revolves around that childhood home town of his. Jess Walter is an American award winning writer, famously known for his books titled *Beautiful Ruins* and *We Live in Water*. He is also known as the winner of Edgar Allan Poe award. *Mr. Voice* was part of the 2015 edition of *The Best American Short Stories*. Not to mention that this short story was first published in an American literary magazine called *Tin House* in the fall, 2014. *Mr. Voice* is his first-person short story that he has written. The link to the short story is https://public.wsu.edu/~bryanfry/Walter_MrVoice.pdf

2.0 REASONS ON CHOOSING MR. VOICE

“Sometimes your life changes in big, dramatic ways, as though you’ve been cast in a play you don’t remember auditioning for.”

I feel the need to start my reasons of choosing this short story with that one line from the short story written by Jess Walter entitled *Mr. Voice*. I have a few reasons as to why I have decided to go with *Mr. Voice*. First and foremost, I think the plot of the story develops at a quick pace, given that it causes me, the reader to fail to stop myself from continue reading the story. As the story goes, I realise that *Mr. Voice* is more than just a flashback from the narrator. It has taught me many things that are adaptable in my life.

At the very beginning of the story, the author starts with one simple sentence which is ‘MOTHER WAS A STUNNER.’ The sentence was simple yet all the words in the sentence are written in capital letters. In my opinion, the way the author starts the story amazes me. It is just one simple sentence but that one particular line hooks me instantly when I read it. The main reason why I think it is related to sexual harassment, an issue that many have started paying attention. I feel that the society needs to be educated on how damaging sexual harassment is to the victims of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment could happen to anyone and anywhere. Sometimes, the prey could be your friends or even among your family members. This is why I think it is crucial for me to choose this story as it also talks about sexual assault and giving consent. We have heard in social media how people are holding awareness

campaign such as Me Too movement to let the victims know that they are not alone in fighting this issue. Being a victim of sexual harassment could lead to severe trust issues and if this matter is taken lightly then there is a possibility for the harassers to act even worse than what has been happening of late.

3.0 ISSUES AND THEMES FOUND IN *MR. VOICE*

As I was reading this, I came to realization that one of the issues of this story is **the concept of giving consent and sexual harassment**. Consent is vital. Yes, the word itself sounds simple but the meaning can sometimes be very hard to digest depending on the individual. Everyone needs to learn the concept of giving consent. Each and every one of us should learn to understand that no means no and as a human being, we need to realize that what we think we want is not something that we really desire. In the story, Tanya gets harassed by Brian's friend, Clay when she was home alone. When Tanya refuses to be kissed by Clay, she tries to push his chest so that she could get away from him but Clay thinks otherwise. The line *"Don't tell me you don't want it. The way you look?"* clearly shows that Clay does not think about Tanya's feelings and assume that they both have a mutual feeling on what he is doing to her. We should be fully aware that the victim will never invite anyone to sexually harass them. Clay thinks that what he does is okay even when he clearly knows that Tanya is still underage. His behavior portrays a potential of a sexual harasser. Based on this story, it is clear that sexual harasser could be someone that you know. This individual will pry into the victim and when there is a chance he will take action. This means that people need to be aware of who they are dealing with and to always stay alert with their surroundings.

Often the image that comes into our mind whenever we hear the term sexual harassment is women getting attacked when walking alone in the middle of the night. Of course, this is not the only thing that can be classified as part of sexual harassment. Anyone can be a victim of sexual harassment regardless of the gender or age. Many times people who get sexually harassed refuse to admit that they are victim of sexual harassment because they are embarrassed of it or sometimes they do not realize that they are being harassed by irresponsible individuals. The only reason why these individuals are still walking around is because some people applaud one's vulgarity thinking that it makes them look cool when it is not.

The line “...and that’s when a clear thought formed, I do NOT want this, ...” shows how Tanya knows that she does not accept Clay’s way of touching her aggressively. She might be young but she knows that what Clay’s action could lead her into danger. She knows that she does not wish to be treated and touched by the person who is trying to assault her. This is an important aspect of giving consent, learning how to accept or reject something because you are given control and power to do so. As in Tanya’s case, as she was still young at that time, there was not much she could do to protect herself but she was lucky because her stepfather came to the rescue.

Another issue that surfaces in this short story is **family members are not always your spitting image**. Back then I would ask myself questions such as “is a child’s behavior a reflection to his parents?”. Reading this story makes me realise that behaviours is indeed something that cannot be inherited from our parents. How well a child develops and behaves is always linked to the parents. It is common for people to blame the parents when their children are not well behaved. This issue does not seem to fade away even after so many years. It seems like the society truly believes the saying that goes like father like son. In this context, the people around Tanya believe that Tanya’s life will turn out just like her mother.

I cannot deny the fact that most of us always have this perception where we tend to think that if the parents are good then they would surely be able to bring up their children perfectly good too. Of course, that perception cannot always be true. This brings back to the story in which Tanya’s fate is always considered as things that would likely happen to her because of her mother. The lines “*They clucked and disapproved and said, “Linda never had her shit together.” They stared at me and said, “It’s crazy how much you look like her,” and “You’re the spittin’ image,” as if this meant I was destined for trouble too.*” This indicts that just because one is related by blood it means they will have the same traits as well when we are well informed that this is not the case. This notion has been going for so long that it has created a new generation of people who judge themselves and other people by how their children do.

Exploiting looks to get ahead is also another issue that I can find in *Mr. Voice*. The media has signaled our mind into looking up to beautiful people. We have always have this conception that what is beautiful is good. I sometimes cannot fathom the fact how being beautiful could be both a blessing and also a curse to someone. That being said, many people use their good looks to their full advantage by using that as a camouflage to deceive people. It is undeniable

that appearances can be deceptive, at least that is the case for Tanya's mother. Tanya's mother is described as a stunner in this story. Men are attracted to her mainly because of her looks and being her, she knows what she possesses and she that to her advantage. That is how she manages to live a good life while raising her daughter, Tanya.

The line *"This is something you won't understand for a while, but your looks are like a bank account. You can save up your whole life for something, but at some point, you'll have to spend the money."* enunciates that Tanya's mother thinks that she can gain something for herself using her looks. She knows her attractiveness will spellbind any man that she desires and she becomes successful in doing so as she marries one of the richest men in town which is Mr. Voice. Tanya's mother always gives advice to Tanya and at some point in her life, she learns that how her mother acts around men is something that she should do in order to attract the attention from them.

Last but not least, the issue that I have found after reading Mr. Voice is the **responsibility of the parents**. Having blood relation does not always mean you can be part of the family. It is not always about sharing the same blood but it is bigger than that. This reminds me of one quote from Richard Bach which is the *bond that links your true family is not one of blood, but of respect and joy in each other's life*. The role of a father is not being portrayed by Tanya's real father but Mr. Voice or Claude, as what Tanya refers him as is the one who pictures how a father should act like. Tanya's mother hides the fact about her real father from her, not until her real father, Allen tells her the truth after her mother's death.

Claude is the father figure in Tanya's life. Tanya grew up without a father figure in her life until she was nine. Then her mother gets married to Claude Almond, or famously known as Mr. Voice. Tanya's mother decides to settle down with Claude who seems goofy and has odd manner because deep down inside she knows that Claude has the good qualities to be a good father to Tanya despite of his status and she is right for thinking that way. However, she does not show the right qualities of a mother to Tanya and this is proven based on how Tanya narrates the story. In this story, Tanya mostly talks about her mother's looks and how she always goes out with different men and how her problems are always revolved around men.

After her mother runs off with Allen, Claude takes care of Tanya just like his own daughter. He takes responsibility on Tanya despite knowing that she is not blood related to him. He teaches her on how to say no and how dangerous can it be to get involved with men, especially

adults. He also gives information on sex education to Tanya who is growing up to be a teenager by explaining to her about the basics of female reproduction and human sexuality.

One main theme of Mr. Voice is **learning to have your own stand**. The struggle of finding your own identity especially when you are growing up always gets in the way due to judgement from others. Unfortunately, it gets even worse when you start getting compared to someone else, mainly your family members. The people around Tanya always seem to compare her with her mother just because they think she looks like her. It has come to a point when the words get to her and she thinks she will turn out like what people said about her, turning into her mother. This is the part where she gets it wrong. Fortunately, she has a figure in her life that leads her out from that perception. Her stepfather, Claude tells her that she looks and acts nothing like her mother. This assurance is enough to make her realise that she herself should decide what is best for her. Tanya should be the only person in the whole world who can define herself. She should not get the words to get to her because people do not have the right to force her to do things for them. Keeping that in mind, as an individual, you must own yourself by identifying your own core values in life. You do not have to do things just because you are told those are what you are required to do.

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