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Capturing Trauma in “Walls”

The short story “Walls” by Tod Goldberg is a mere 8.5 pages long yet does a phenomenal job of eliciting intense emotions like longing, pain, and confusion that are clearly founded on the trauma of abandonment. In a written format, these emotions are heightened by the shortness of the story because of how much action is crammed into those pages, making the narrator’s prose feel chaotic and twinged with suffering. However, if adapted into a film version, I believe “Walls” could maintain the same chaotic drama that takes the reader on an emotional journey while additionally providing a background for the narrator, the mother, and the father that the audience is not exposed to in the written version. This can be done through an analysis of the narrator’s voice, the structure of the story as a whole, and by preserving the natural drama and raw intensity of Goldberg’s story.

Tod Goldberg’s story is a complex and stark narrative intended to showcase the growing pains of family life that become a parasitic part of adulthood. From a cursory reading, “Walls” appears to be the story of an adult looking through a nostalgic lens of the trauma that occurred during his or her childhood that still deeply affects them. However, upon a more thorough analysis, it is clear that there are multiple layers of trauma revealed by not only the narrator but also through the roles of the mother and father that can only be comprehended by the reader because the narrator seems to be blinded by their own contempt. For example, the narrator

speaks severely about their mother with no regard for why she behaves how she does. In a very telling passage, the narrator states,

Or, and this was rare, but it happened because we were young and angry and when your parents have divorced and all you have to show for it is a mother who has suddenly decided that she'd like to fuck as many men as possible, and a father who it turns out was gay but you wouldn't know that until long after he was dead (1)

Here, the narrator unloads their point of view in a way that is clear they still resent their mother for the trauma she caused them by bringing home men. This is reflected by the long run-on sentence as well as the use of the word "and" frequently which makes the narrator's voice feel anxious and rushed. However, an audience can view this passage differently because of the revelation of the gay father. This key information demonstrates the possibility of not only the narrator's unhappiness but the mother and father's traumatic experiences as well. Perhaps the mother found out her husband was gay long before the children and used sex in an attempt to heal or that the father had to hide his sexuality, causing him a perpetual sense of self-loathing and guilt, making him feel as if leaving were his only way out. Although the audience could never confirm the merit of these speculations due to the limitations of the narrative structure, they can appreciate and sympathize with the layers of unhappiness that the narrator is unable to see.

Not only does the limited scope of the narration demonstrate the narrator's distress and anger, but the structural role of time enhances these themes as well. The narrator frequently states phrases like "we remember" and "we remember you". The repetition of these words provokes a sense of longing for the past and a way for the narrator to convince themselves of who their father was, returning again to the importance of memory. The narrator also jumps in

time to describe some of the men their mother dated while they were growing up, showing the lasting effects of this period of time in their life. The narrator is not just traumatized by the abandonment of their father but also by the thought of replacing him. In this scene, the narrator says, “Dan didn’t particularly care for the fact that we didn’t call him Dad. He asked us if we loved him. We said no. He asked us why not. We told him we didn’t even know him. (59) This statement is laced with some irony as the narrator does not seem to even know her real father who is essentially as much a stranger as Dan. Additionally, the conversation about love is simply glossed over which reflects the lack of love that the narrator feels in the story and seems to imply that they are preserving that love for a father who is never coming back. Love has become an unattainable feeling associated with abandonment rather than happiness that even time could not heal.

Although the themes of time and remembering are reflected throughout the whole of the story, their roles become especially poignant in the story’s conclusion. As the narrator fantasizes about meeting their forgotten father in their adult years, they say, “You’ll be older, too, because there isn’t a way for memory to freeze the body like it freezes trauma in place.” (62) Essentially, the narrator realizes that they are forever shackled to the traumas of their childhood even though their father may not be. In addition, there is an eerie sense of calm associated with the narrator’s voice, as if time did not heal their trauma but sadly it taught them to simply come to terms with their situation as unsatisfactory as it may be.

“Walls” is certainly the opposite of a neat linear story which I believe would work to its advantage when translating its contents to film. I want to retain as much of the original events of the story as possible while also finding a creative way to approach the chaotic chronology of

events. The lapses in time tell as much of a story as the words do, allowing certain creative liberties that may be impossible with a story that has a more traditional arc. My vision for this film would toy with mood-provoking elements and subtle impactful details such as multiple points of view, lighting, color, and camera transitions. These elements will help retain the drama and pain that the original story has while also allowing me to express my own artistry that will enhance the written version. Due to Goldberg's tendency to bounce from event to event for dramatic effect in his writing, it is going to require a unique solution to manufacture a film that encompasses such a vast amount of time. To make this transition seamless, I would utilize chapters, flashbacks, and time jumps to give the film a structure that still feels chaotic but is easier to follow. An example of this would be to open with the final scene of the story and then work backward so that we can establish who our protagonist is and how they've come to be in the position they are in. This would exhibit the character's desires and provide valuable insight into the ways they have dealt with the issues of a broken family.

As I have mentioned previously, "Walls" is a traumatic story with layers of narrative distress. Therefore, I believe limiting the point of view to only the narrator would be a mistake. Instead, breaking the film into chapters or parts from the point of view of the mother, father, the narrator, and the narrator's sibling would untangle the narrative bias and allow for a more impactful representation of the anxieties that accompany a troubled family life. A film that does this well is *The Last Duel* directed by Ridley Scott. By breaking the film into repetitive sections, the audience can work through each character's biases to develop their own sequence of events. This format would work well for Goldberg's story because it is ambiguous by nature. We can presume that the mother cheated on her husband, the husband is gay, the husband abandons his

children, and the mother becomes incapable of existing without male companionship at her children's emotional expense. However, the story reads like a laundry list of events with very little transitional context which allows the film version to maintain some ambiguity for the audience to blur the lines between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. A format such as this would ask the audience to question the circumstances under which they are willing to forgive morally questionable actions.

Not only would the use of chapters and flashbacks allow the audience to interpret reality from alternating points of view, but it would be a tremendous tool for various lighting techniques and color schemes that would reflect characterization and setting. For instance, the story takes place in the 1970s and 1980s so having bright, saturated colors would allow the period to be easily interpreted. Moreover, utilizing bright colors would supply contrasting colors with more meaning. In an article titled "Color Theory in Film: A Video Producer's Guide" by A. Rothstein he states,

Opposite colors on the color wheel represent conflict, like purple and yellow, blue and orange, or red and green. These colors offer high contrast in the film's representation of characters and themes. Examples of words that define complementary colors include dueling opposition, embattled, and tense.

Implementing a complementary color pallet for each of the points of view like the one Rothstein describes here, would subtly show the audience who is angry, who is hurt, and who is cowardling. For example, in a chapter from the narrator's point of view, they would be wearing green to highlight their youth and impressionable age while their mother would be immersed in red to demonstrate how the narrator views her as lustful and extreme. However, when the same scene is

set in the mother's point of view, they would switch color schemes so that we can get a sense of how the mother sees herself as more innocent than her child has let the audience believe. The symbolic use of color is a critical aspect of the adaptation of "Walls" because it speaks for the story when words fail to convey the character's fears and desires.

Another essential component of this adaptation would be its sound. In the original story Goldberg writes, "We listened to The Knack and Gordon Lightfoot and Journey and REO Speedwagon and The Thompson Twins and Shaun Cassidy and Blondie" (60) Here, Goldberg has already provided the foundations of a Tarantino-esque soundtrack which would also adhere to the original bones of his story. Music is clearly a coping mechanism for the narrator that initiates some of the only fond memories of companionship found within the story hence its importance. In many ways "Walls" is a coming of age story for not only the narrator and their sibling, but also for the father who is faced with his sexuality and the mother who is learning to be on her own with children. If used correctly, each chapter of the film would contain songs that capture the character's personality and emotions so that the audience can feel more immersed in their thoughts.

One scene that would capture each of these elements perfectly would be the moment the narrator's father abandons his family. This scene would be the chapter that the narrator, the sibling, the mother, and the father, each interpret differently. The first point of view would begin with our narrator. We would first cut to the title, "Chapter 1: June 13, 1970, 9:30 pm" in front of the narrator's dimly lit family home where screaming can be heard from the outside. We would cut again to the source of the screaming in a split-screen where our narrator has her ear pressed to the wall while her parents are fighting from the other side. She would be surrounded by the

color green including her pajamas, her lampshade, and her walls. On the other side of the wall, her parent's room is illuminated by a red hue symbolizing the hostility. The narrator remains silent as the camera is zoomed in on her face. She can only hear what is happening in the adjoining room but the audience can see and hear what is occurring. On the left side of the screen, Sally is crying, holding a letter, and the father is screaming at her asking “How many others?” which are responded to with sobs. The father storms out and comes into our narrator's room where they now share the screen and his burnt orange clothing juxtaposes the green. He stops and stares at her as the camera slowly zooms in and says, “I’m sorry, I tried for you kids, but your mother... she’s crazy. Everyone’s got a limit and I’ve hit mine. You’ll get it one day”. Behind him, glass shatters and breaks the zoom. As he hurries out of the way, the camera becomes blurred as the narrator tries to catch her father before he leaves.

Although this scene will be repeated three more times from different perspectives, the narrator’s version of events will be the longest at around 5 minutes. Her perspective will be purposefully limited through camera blocking, muffled noises, and physical walls because she is only overhearing the conversation instead of witnessing it. This limited view will be useful to showcase how each character perceives the climactic abandonment differently and the audience is immersed as a witness who is given access to each perspective. Moreover, the format of the scene described stays true to the title of the story. The ambiguous title “Walls” allows us to question if the walls are physical or metaphorical and here they are both. Having a title so open to interpretation, means the walls of the house are something different to everyone including the audience who is a voyeur peering into the fourth wall, unable to pause time to get the story straight.

Overall, Tod Goldberg's "Walls" is a narrative masterpiece that exposes the trauma of a child who is a victim of abandonment, neglect, and a broken family. Simultaneously, "Walls" also demonstrates how trauma is multi-layered and creates a domino effect of distress that could be made more clear if translated to film. Through the visually creative lenses of color, format, sound, and characterization, Goldberg's story could immerse the audience into a world consumed by difficult choices that blur the borders of right and wrong ultimately challenging the audience to consider life from different perspectives.

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