

**The portrayal of secondary character's effect on the development of the main character in
James Frey's "A Million Little Pieces"**

Subject: International Baccalaureate English B Extended Essay

Category 3

Research Question: How does Frey portray the effect of the secondary characters on the development of the main character in "A Million Little Pieces"?

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Introduction

The world isn't a happy place. There are issues in our world that many authors were too scared to address for a long time. Lately, with the world opening up to serious issues such as addiction, books are trying to represent them as well. Many may be trying to profit off of the issues, yet there are people like James Frey who actually went through the grit.

James Frey, the author of "A Million Little Pieces" (published in 2003), is known for surviving his war with drugs and Frey, as I will be referring to him throughout this essay, tells the readers about the journey of him achieving sobriety in the novel "A Million Little Pieces".

The novel when first released was a hit, putting itself into the list of Oprah's Book Club. Frey, even showed up on Oprah's show to discuss his battle with addiction and people praised Frey because of his courageous act to not hide behind a tinted glass, however, there was a slight issue that came up when the magazine "The Smoking Gun" published an article with the name "A Million Little Lies" which allegedly exposed Frey for fabricating his backstory.

In the article, it is revealed that after searching and digging they found out that most of the things Frey told were either fabricated or straight up lies, as they put it "*Police reports, court records, interviews with law enforcement personnel, and other sources have put the lie to many key sections of Frey's book*". Later in this article it is told that Frey made up stories and made-up parts for himself in stories such as the train accident and that the "truth" can't be confirmed since all the characters involved are either dead, lost or in jail.

It is a disappointment that his story may not be true, however, one can't deny the literary aspect of the novel. In the field of literature, this novel is a success. Frey uses language and literary devices to convey the progress of James through his relationships. The most important three being with Lily, with Leonard and with James himself using the theme of self-reliance. In

this essay, Frey's usage of relationships and literary devices to convey the journey of sobriety of James will be discussed.

James's Relationship with Lily

Frey portrays the progress of James through his relationship with Lily by making her a love interest; using short, to the point sentences and adjectives and making him replace drugs with love.

The character, Lilly, is introduced from the beginning of James's journey. She was the second person to get through to him, after his brother, who was the only person in the beginning of the book that was able to touch James without him revolting. The brother, who James has known for years, is in the same basket as Lilly, a drug addicted ex-prostitute he met a few days ago. The purpose of them being in the same place was a way for Frey to convey that someone you barely know can be the family you never knew you needed. James's brother can touch him; however, this touch isn't the same as Lily. His brother is a wall to rely on while Lily is a source of comfort. Frey defines the brother like an abutment:

"He sits with me in the backseat and he holds my hand and it helps because I'm scared." (pg.7)

Holding one's hand is a source of non-spoken support. Frey uses conjunction to connect the sentences while in Lilly's description the sentences are short and to the point. This is because his brother and James have a connection while he just met Lilly and the connection is simple.

"She holds out her hand.

I'm Lilly.

I take it. It's soft and warm.

I'm James.

I don't want to let go, but I do." (pg.22)

Usage of simple language and concrete adjectives like “*soft*” and “*warm*” are to convey how James feels a certain foreignness, since he has only the physical knowledge on her to rely on, but also a sense of comfort.

Time of Lily’s introduction was around the same time as James starts talking about “*the Girl with the Arctic Eyes*”. This is to point out how contrast both women are to each other. Even though they both have blue eyes, which is their only common quality, even that differs them from each other.

Frey describes Lilly’s eyes as “*water*” (p.376) while he describes the other girl’s eyes as “*arctic*” (p.376). Arctic has a frozen environment, so this is a symbolism of how the Arctic girl is frozen in place in James’s past while Lilly is here now, mobile and full of life just like water. This contrast is also addressed in other ways such as Lilly having a name while the other girl remains anonymous or how Lilly is described in detail while the reader knows so little about the “*Arctic Girl*” (p.376). This indicates that Lilly is reality while the other girl is just a memory.

An important example for James showing vulnerability took place while Lilly was comforting James out in the yard and he broke down crying. In some other way, Lilly was the source of his motivation to set his life right because with this James realize that all this time, he thought he was destroying other people’s lives while the only thing he was destroying was his own.

“It is more, open, deeper, full, simpler, true. It is more. True.” (pg. 252)

In this scene, we can sum up that simple language is used to convey how simple it is with Lilly. Here, a simple language is used with minimum words needed for a sentence such as “*...True.*”.

Lilly is a replacement addiction for James. She satiates “the Fury”, a feeling of deep anger that James named. Even though it is another addiction, it cannot be weighed the same as being addicted to drugs. This addiction is love. As we later get to see when Lilly escapes and relapses, James is given a choice between saving Lilly or relapsing with her when the need to save Lilly overcomes the need for drugs. He hugs Lilly harder to get the thought of relapse away from him. She is the only distraction he has and that works for him, so they help each other.

“I feel the pipe and the bag against my chest. I feel them fall away, hear them hit the floor. I think about picking them up the urge is so fucking strong I hold on to her. I hold on until it goes away. Hold on.” (pg. 422)

The repetition of “*hold on*” indicates the strength of the urge to use the drugs on Lilly. Frey also uses many adjectives to convey that James is feeling on edge. While being stressed and on edge people analyze their surroundings more. From the little sounds to the feeling of the objects. “*I feel them fall away, hear them hit the floor.*” James uses Lilly to get back off the edge.

Sometimes people need to be with someone they can relate to. To understand one another we have to have some kind of a common past experience. What Frey is trying to reference here with Lilly and James’s relationship is exactly that. Frey makes the reader think they make each other feel full. It is the same with Lilly, too. James is feeling an emptiness that drugs provided for him and hugging Lilly fills that void. They are like puzzle pieces that complete the picture Frey intended to create.

Lilly makes him suppress his urge to relapse, nonetheless, they are not on the same stage of recovery and while James is set on staying at the clinic for full recovery, Lilly is thinking about how she can’t live without him. This is also another addiction that James replaces. The

concept of being needed. Since in all of his life he didn't let anyone get close, he was not needed by anyone, nevertheless when Lilly is this dependent on him, he strives more to survive and Lily, again becomes the main source of motivation.

"I like that she is smitten with me" (pg.301)

This may seem like a good replacement however the recovery center would disagree. They justify the staff's ban to see opposite gender and/ or even date them. The study in the recovery center "Sierra by the Sea" suggests that if they start dating too soon, this may cause another addiction called "*the love addiction*". It is evident that Lilly and James both have this addiction and they check nearly every box for possible symptoms.

"Being too desperate or clingy and thinking they can't live without the other person, trying to fix the other person, or expecting to be fixed, (...)" Sierra by the Sea, Dating in early recovery. (2019, September 12).

So even though the staff was right and they did catch another addiction, it can't be denied that James was able to be sober because of Lily. Lily was the pull back to reality, a very powerful source of motivation since James was trying to fix her and a rock that James could depend on because he knew she would never leave him. They find the solution within each other.

"Freedom. However, we can find it.

And you think one of those forms could be each other." (pg. 253)

Frey uses the relationship between Lily and James as a tool to help James through recovery. The quote "*Love is an addiction like any other.*" is at play here with James replacing his need for drugs with his need for love from the love interest Lily. Frey conveys this change through adjectives, using short sentences when in doubt or when things are just simple and not

complicated with Lily although Frey uses long and complicated sentences in some places when creating the other characters as later will be discussed.

James's Relationship with Leonard

Frey uses James's relationship with Leonard to convey how a friend can help you more than you might know. Some may think that trusting people will only end up with you being hurt, and although that might be the case, a friend can help you stay on track, can accompany you through your hardships and so on. So, Frey conveys this through the character Leonard by using many psychological concepts that are true for real life addicts, along with the language features such as metaphors, short and simple sentences, many proper nouns when James is scared while using long sentences when he is hesitating or feeling vulnerable and so on.

For an anti-social addict with crippling trust issues such as James, it is a big step to let someone be friends with him. After a while of pushing everyone away, afraid that he is going to hurt them; Leonard was the first friend he had in a while.

James isolating himself socially is not a unique symptom but a rather common one among addiction patients. Psychology Today suggests that another reason for addicts to abandon friends was because they reminded them of their previous lives and cutting people off was to convince themselves they were fine and happy now.

“Long term friends who predated our increasingly heavy use present a threat or challenge to us; they know us and what we used to be like.” - Addiction and friendship. (Psychology Today 2014,

February 14).

With Leonard coming to the story James begins a new part of recovery: making friends.

Since they did not know each other for a long time, James doesn't have to be reminded of the past but can look at the future. In a way Frey intends to use Leonard as a way to make James face the future and rely on others more.

Leonard was also the turning point for James because he forced James to stay in the Clinic for another twenty-four hours after James tried to leave to kill himself because he lost hope and after he decided to stay to get better. There is a time in every addict's life that they think they will die anyway so why not now and in their own terms. This is the rock bottom and if you hit it and go back, you will be stronger than ever. James going to kill himself and returning was a metaphor used by Frey. Frey intended to convey how James went to kill himself and actually did it. He killed his old self, the weak James who was too scared of the future and he became the new James thanks to Leonard.

“... you're here till you get better.

I can't promise that's gonna happen.

Promise that you'll try.

(...)

I'll stay here for twenty-four hours. If I feel the same way I feel now, I'm gone.” (pg. 128)

Frey uses simple and short sentences in this scene. When we see a stressed individual needing help there is a little amount of time to come up with the words to calm them down and it can't be too complicated that its confusing. The simple word used here is to convey how Leonard is trying to calm James down and take him off the edge.

Again, with Leonard, he finally let himself open up to someone and this was the same scenario with Lily, and although they both made him open up, their places in James's life were

different. Lilly was a love obsession while Leonard was a friend James could depend on without having an obsession with.

“... you can’t walk back into that Clinic and try?”

No

Why?

I’ve tried before. I can’t do it.

Why?

It’s too hard.” (pg. 127)

Here James opens up to Leonard about his struggles of achieving sobriety. Because of Leonard’s persistence, and even though James was annoyed, James let himself be vulnerable which proves the point that this case is different than Lily’s. Frey’s usage of simple words suggests that James is trying to show his cards without revealing too much. James is afraid to show himself too much because he is afraid that Leonard will take advantage of it so he uses short and simple sentences.

However, James doesn’t have to worry about Leonard leaving either because when Leonard’s recovery program was over, he asked James to be his son. This created a bond between them and they could rely on each other.

“You want me to be your Son?”

He nods.

Yes.

You sure about that, Leonard? I’m kind of fucked up.

I know what your problems are, Kid. Believe me. But if I had a Son, I would want him to be like you.

I smile.” (pg. 463)

The word son was written as a proper noun and this was to convey the places, they both hold in their lives. The son and the father relationship. The way that James’s sentences are long and Leonard’s are to the point suggest how James hesitates to believe that someone actually wants him as a son and how Leonard is so sure about his decision. Leonard is so sure of himself that he cuts his explanations and makes them simple.

Also, the fact that Leonard knew what James’s problems were and still wanted a son like him meant that he wasn’t judging James like other people and was proud of him.

Fathers are role models and people that determine your way of life. According to the doctors in *Pediatric Associates of Franklin* “Boys will seek approval from their fathers from a very young age. As human beings, we grow up by imitating the behavior of those around us; that’s how we learn to function in the world.” and because James saw Leonard leaving the Clinic after he achieved sobriety, this led to him becoming sober too because of the need to impress the father-figure. It can be seen that James already has a father but Leonard was the father-figure James needed because he became a role model, and James was able to relate to him and follow in his footsteps.

Frey uses Leonard as a source of motivation, a parental figure that is understanding and who helps James with going through the recovery process and come out of it a winner. To convey Leonard as a strong written character Frey uses metaphors, short and simple sentences while also adding long and complicated sentences to the mix. He also adds the psychological aspect of addicts having a good parental figure in their life and how it helps the addicts with surviving the addiction.

Self-Reliance

One can only get through a tough situation if they trust. Trust others, but most importantly themselves. Frey relies on the theme self-reliance to achieve salvation from the addiction. He uses this theme along with the language features similar to other characters', such as simple language to complicated, short sentences to long, and adjectives to adverbs. However, these similar language features are used differently for every character which will be discussed in the conclusion but for this part James's relationship with himself, how it helped him achieve salvation and how did Frey convey will be discussed.

From the beginning, James can be seen putting on a mask of "the tough guy" to avoid any display of vulnerability. The scene where the fly attendant is trying to help him while he is injured, is an example for James using the mask. Whilst having many injuries, he tries to act fine to avoid the attendant's "sorry gaze" and "pity".

"Let me find a Doctor.

I'll be fine. Just get me out of here." (pg.2)

Frey uses simple language to show that James is trying to cut the attendant off to make her unable to learn about him. Showing any kind of weakness means having a blind-spot where the enemy can hurt you. That's why fear of vulnerability is a common thing people experience. This can come from multiple places such as trauma, fear of rejection or cultural expectations according to Willow Counseling. *"Any traumatic event can impact how safe you feel with others. Trauma inherently makes the world feel somewhat (or very) dangerous- it's hard to trust that you can be yourself if you've been hurt."* In James's case, this fear comes from his traumatic past which Frey conveyed through James's experience with the Arctic Eyed girl and her abandoning James.

As the story progresses, he allows himself to open up to people and Frey shows this through his choice of words. In the beginning of the book James's sentences are limited and basic sentences with no more than two verbs because James is trying to answer the question without revealing too much. The best example for this would be his first interview with his Unit Recovery Counselor, Ken.

"Do you black out?"

Yes.

How often?

Every day.

How long has this been happening?

Four years or five years." (pg.34)

As the story goes on, it can be seen that James's sentences get more and more complex.

"I responded by declaring War on them and their Town and by fighting that War with everything inside of me." (pg. 95)

"The Gates are open and thirteen years of addiction, violence, Hell and their accompaniments are manifesting themselves in dense tears and heavy sobs and a shortness of breath and a profound sense of loss." (pg. 204)

As can be seen from the references as the page number gets bigger the sentences get more complex. He was opening up to the readers in page 95 about his past and in page 204 he was talking to Lilly and finally cracked and cried in her arms. These describe James's show of vulnerability & Frey used these moments as an opportunity to convey the progress of James through usage of language.

As James becomes more vulnerable, he starts to have more friends and is not alone on his journey of sobriety. Addicts normally distance themselves from their friends and family to not drag them along with that's why it is understandable that James had close to no friends. Once James realized that what he was doing was not hurting others but himself, he started to open up more. He got over his fear of hurting others because in a place like the Clinic people are already hurt. Realizing that James starts to call them friends.

"Lecture ends and I say goodbye to my friends." (pg. 192)

This was the first time he admitted that they were friends and the language in this scene suggests normality in a place like a rehabilitation center. Friends make addicts feel normal and this makes them stop alienizing themselves. A thing James did often in the beginning of the book.

The phrase "*I am an Alcoholic and I am a Drug Addict and I am a Criminal.*" would help him isolate himself from the rest because he felt like he didn't belong. Nevertheless, as the story goes forward, James starts adding onto his identity. He becomes a friend, a son, a lover... He feels wanted in the society and no longer tries to identify himself with these three words which were coming up in every two pages in the beginning and toward the end we rarely, if not, never see it. Frey's intentions for using repetition so often in the beginning was to show how James keeps having to remind himself of how he is a nobody and later starts to identify as something more.

James had many excuses he could use to blame his addiction to such as a childhood ear infection or his grandfather being an addict but he chose not to do it because doing it may not result in a permanent sobriety and he knew that. "*Accepting personal responsibility for the recovery process is one of the signs that a person is truly ready to begin healing.*" according to

the Kimberly Center. It is not that James was blaming others before but he didn't put his sense of self-responsibility to good use. He was so insecure and frightened like an animal who was trying to run away from the predator, in this case being "*the Fury*", he relied on himself. Now that he has people to trust, it much easier for him to put this quality of his to good use.

Frey efficiently uses the theme of self-reliance as a mean of salvation for the main character James. He uses this theme and supports it with simple or complicated language, short to long sentences, and adjectives to adverbs which is why the reader can notice Frey's usage of the theme.

Conclusion

Frey uses language feature such as simple language in every character mentioned but he is not repeating himself, he is using the features to convey different things. For example, Frey uses simple language with Lily to express the simplicity and comfort James feels when around her while using this feature in Leonard to express discomfort, hesitation and fears.

Frey also made sure to embed psychology into his novel to support his points since in an addict's life it is important to show their psychological aspect to make the readers understand better. Whether or not Frey was lying and whether it was his actual experience or not; it can be said that not every author can smoothly insert another area of knowledge such as psychology into their work like Frey did.

To sum it all up, Frey used many language features such as length and complexity of the sentence through the characters Lily, Leonard and James himself to convey to the reader how one's relationship can help them overcome their struggles in life. The author of the novel "Frey" whilst being a complex and controversial man, is undeniably a great author who plays with the language and molds it according to his tastes and needs. Frey mixing literature with psychology

and real life is really admirable and the way he supports his points with the help of language proves that he really is a worthy author.

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