



Ashley Anderson

Playing with the Essay: Cognitive Pattern Play in Ander Monson and Susan Sontag

In his “Essay as Hack,” Ander Monson writes, “I fear for the essay, friends, and its bad reputation. It feels white and dull, dusty, old” (9). Despite Monson’s initial fears about the essay as a form, we still continue to attempt to breathe new life into a mode of expression that dates back centuries. Even though Monson describes several ways in which the essay is a hack, a “creative activity,” a “system,” he perhaps describes the essay best as “a kind of problem solving,” one in which our brain’s learning processes may explain why we keep returning to the essay form again and again (10). We define a form through the structural patterns that are repeatedly used in works that are representative of that style of writing, as well as the changes that have been made to these structural patterns over time. These patterns are also picked up in the minds of those reading these works and then reemployed in the writing of those readers. As writers and as readers, we also continue to play with the boundaries of the essay form, pushing and twisting them to see what we can continue to define as “essay” and what lies beyond it in creative, academic, and cognitive senses.

To provide some context, it is important to also understand how the human brain learns information in relation to art, which would also include literature. The premise of Brian Boyd’s book *On the Origin of Stories* is that, as humans have evolved, we have come to rely on certain strategies in order to learn and continually engage with our environments. Some of these strategies are refinements of survival instincts, while others are a result of evolutionary processes that have allowed the human race to continue existing. One of these strategies, pattern play, is a driving force behind why humans have a nearly addictive relationship to fiction, or to art in general, because the human brain best receives and processes information in the form of patterns. Boyd writes, “We crave patterns because they can tell us so much...

Only humans have the curiosity to seek out pattern in the open-ended way that once lead our ancestors to see constellations in the skies, then to infer first the revolution of the Earth from the motion of the stars and planets, then the expansion of the universe, then possibilities beyond our patch of our multiverse” (89). Essentially, patterns and the playful activity that the human mind creates with the sequential organization of information is what allows us to draw conclusions and piece together how things work, whether they are the universe, a group of people, or a story. In the case of literature, a reader will establish pattern play structures after repeatedly engaging in texts that follow similar patterns —if A, then B, if B, then C, etc., and then classify these patterns with other patterns in order to categorize different styles of written words as examples of specific forms and genres. These patterns are also what pulls the essay form—academic, lyric, personal, narrative, or otherwise— into this camp, as something defined as art; there are conventions of the essay form and the nonfiction genre, gradations of conventions, and an ambiguity of expression that allows for us to dabble in expression and interact with our environment.

Boyd also argues that this process of pattern play and its relationship to art only works because we find the results pleasurable and satisfying; in other words, our brains like art and artistic forms because it makes us feel good. He writes, “Art becomes impulsive because it arouses pleasure, and it arouses pleasure because, like play, it fine-tunes our systems” (95). Boyd also explains that this is why we find art as therapeutic, and why some people find “high art,” that which is very abstract and confusing, completely useless. The satisfaction we receive from completing the pattern and achieving the result is what drives humans to keep consuming and creating art. The pleasure we receive from our brains completing these neurological patterns is also what contributes to a genre or style of expression enduring the test of time; the essay form has endured throughout time because the form has given us not only the pleasure of fulfilling patterns—which, in the case of the creative essay, would be a focus on true-to-life events, personal reflection, and testifying to some kind of greater human understanding —but also created new

patterns that engaged us with the thoughts of others. Thus, the break in expected essay patterns offered by writers such as Ander Monson and Susan Sontag tests the flexibility of not only the essay form, but also the flexibility of our learning processes as their works have found their way onto nonfiction reading lists in a variety of classroom settings and into anthologies.

Writing an essay, as Monson notes, seems to be the equivalent of a seemingly everyday person being able to cast a spell or create a magic potion, some unexpected superpower that is not available to everyone. In reality, the essay form is not what it seems, especially for composition students, and as Monson constructs “Essay as Hack,” the perception of what an essay should be can actually be beneficial to essay writers who want to break out of the genre and form conventions—a narrative arc, a situation and story, or even speaking to some sense of greater human understanding—and push the established boundaries. Essays such as those written by Monson and Sontag are meant to trigger a different set of pattern play strategies in the reader’s mind, which, in reading, requires being creative in approaching the idea of writing an essay, and even possibly subverting the structure from the inside.

Ander Monson, in “Essay as Hack,” approaches the essay form in a way that most readers would approach a personal essay, establishing the pattern play. If one were to juxtapose Monson’s essay with an essay that reinforces the established patterns of a classical essay, such as Walter Benjamin’s “Unpacking My Library,” the differences and the disruptions in pattern play are particularly obvious. Originally appearing in *The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre*, an anthology edited by Sean Prentiss and Joe Wilkins, Monson’s essay uses his past attempts at hacking, describing his experiences as having “lived the life of accessing networks, exploring PBX systems and phone lines...For gaining illegal access to credit cards, to databases of hundreds of thousands of credit cards,” (11) to write about the essay form. Monson uses hacking to attempt to create a hack to the essay genre, to a certain degree of success. He writes:

A sign: a sigh was my response to the essay when I discovered it. I did not lack love for its meanderings, its attempts to convey the motions of thought, but it felt remote. Isolated. Writ in stone and handed down. Unapproachable. The production of years of pristine thinking and immersion journalism. It is seemingly inaccessible from an artist's standpoint without deploying some kind of wizardry. (9-10)

Because of the ways in which academic essays are presented in the composition classroom, often our first experiences with an essay, it seems that creating an essay is a feat of mystical prowess, that a writer must somehow know something about the writing process and the world in which they live and that an elite few people with superhuman powers have the ability to even access.

The structure of Monson's essay is a hack to a hack; not only is he presenting a "creative solution" to shaking up the traditional form of the essay on a broad scale, but he also creates a hack within the piece's structure to still trigger this pattern play that our minds need. On a holistic level, Monson does not present his essay in a traditional, linear style. His essay is presented in fragments, all centered around the idea of what an essay is or is not, disrupting the typical pattern of what we think these essays may look like. It looks like a smattering of thoughts with a little bit of academic context, due to Monson's inclusion of definitions and quotations from other sources, filed under some section headings. He further complicates the page by not only playing with the formatting of the essay, but also in creating a series of smaller narrative arcs that are self-contained within each section. Being curious about a complex structure may be on a more relatable level for a reader, and solving puzzles may be more relatable as well, but the questionably criminal act of breaking security boundaries in order to satisfy one's curiosity is arguably one of the turning points of the essay.

He writes, "Even this essay —especially this essay —is a hack. Given the idea *an essay is a hack* I have been trying to find ways to make it work, to wave my hands, trace my thoughts, produce language, produce magic" (19). By mirroring the appearance of an essay that could be taught in any writing

classroom with his use of traditional paragraphs, section headings, etc., Monson found what is a hack to the hack that is the essay: give a reader something that looks like what they may want in an essay, and then break the form from within the very structure that has previously lacked the magic that Monson wanted.

The commentary in Monson's piece is spread out over seven smaller pieces, each with their own title and structure. Some sections, like the one serving as the introduction, do not logically lead anywhere, breaking the pattern play structure that suggests something that begins with a narrative arc must see some kind of resolution. Monson ends his introductory section by writing, "This is one trajectory" but, in contradiction to what our minds have been trained to understand what the pattern of an essay should look like, does not traditionally explain what other trajectories may look like. Instead, Monson presents a new trajectory to the essay form that mirrors what we would expect —section headings, paragraphs, etc. —and uses them to his advantage. By looking like a more traditional essay on the page, Monson is able to invite readers into his piece on the premise that this *looks* like an essay, but once the reader starts engaging with Monson's thoughts and writing, he leads readers down separate trajectories that do not follow the ones previously laid by canonical essays that have been repeatedly anthologized and presented in composition classrooms.

For example, in the section "Essay as Interruption," Monson presents what looks like an essay. He has an introduction, in which he hooks the reader and then brings in his topic, writing, "The essay, like a poem, acts as a fermata. It processes ideas, images, texts, or objects at its own speed" (16). Then, instead of processing his ideas at his own speed, Monson frequently uses paragraph breaks and white space to interrupt himself and explore different ideas. At one point, Monson moves from talking about how he likes the constraints of form to, after some white space, to talking about how his new word processing program makes him nostalgic (19). After Monson ponders his nostalgia, he then moves to a discussion of hacks.

Ultimately, Monson structures his essay in a way that is “pansexual” (15) by writing in a style that straddles many forms and genres, and allows readers, particularly those readers who are also students, to define the piece’s form based on whatever sense the reader makes out of Monson’s words. For a reader who has read quite extensively, the process of making sense could come easily, since the patterns on which our minds play have already been established and used time and again for the same purpose with different pieces of writing. For a reader who has not read extensively or who is unfamiliar with the many contemporary definitions of the essay form, Monson’s hack could be a complete failure because these pattern play structures in the reader’s mind are not built to achieve that status of “making sense” that Monson has built into his essay.

There is an argument to be made that Monson is not truly hacking the essay, but instead is presenting already established patterns from other ways in which writers write and readers read. The structure, with its subject headings separating blocks of texts, could be a collection of micro essays strung together under one common theme. Essay collections are typically organized with some kind of title or subject heading, followed by text set in some kind of slightly different type face. The same can be said for chapters in a book; the same patterns are employed by writers and absorbed by readers to follow the narrative arc of a segmented work. Because of this, readers would willingly subscribe to the idea that this organization of words on a series of pages is a legitimate representation of an established pattern of writing an essay, and further buy into it because the writer has deemed this piece as an “essay.” Early on, Monson’s statements can be interpreted in a way that allows readers to determine the success of his hacking of the essay. In the section “Introduction to the Hack,” Monson writes:

I hesitate to try to ascribe a particular motivation to my actions in retrospect. The brain reconfigures memory, reorders events, rests them among other events to form narrative, causality: it creates sense. The mind tells itself stories about what happens to it. So me saying that I did X because of Y rests on thousands of assumptions about who or what

I think I am, how I thought of myself then — transmuted into how I think about myself now. (11)

Monson uses his understanding of what writers, scholars, and critics have defined as the boundaries of each genre to demonstrate how our minds work when we read collections of written words. Our minds find patterns in the way words are structured on the page, and according to Monson, uses these patterns Boyd has described to make sense. What Monson has done could be described as a hack, or could be viewed as writing in a way that plays to the strengths of the minds of the essay's readers.

Susan Sontag, in her essay “Unguided Tour,” employs a style that, like Monson’s work, looks nothing like the traditional essay structure. “Unguided Tour” details a trip that a couple takes in hopes that they can repair a broken relationship, but whether or not the relationship is mended in some way is not shared with the reader. Instead, Sontag moves throughout the essay by describing how the two partners are usually in contrast with one another and, in some ways, have become different people because of the breaking apart of their relationship.

Originally published in Sontag’s collection *I, Etcetera* in 1978, “Unguided Tour” has been reprinted and anthologized many times over, appearing in publications like *The New Yorker* and John D’Agata’s *The Next American Essay*. As someone who has written fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and literary criticism —just a few genres in which Sontag published extensively during her lifetime —Sontag, like Ander Monson, had an understanding of genre conventions and how readers can interpret a piece. In fact, when searching for *I, Etcetera*, the collection is often described as a collection of short stories, with booksellers making a blanket statement that the pieces included in the book are all fiction. Where Monson has hacked his way through the genre expectations, Sontag uses the many facets of the nonfiction genre —personal essay, memoir, literary journalism, etc. —in one piece to tell her story.

On one side, Sontag has used what looks like the traditional form of the narrative essay. There are sentences and paragraphs, and the language reads like a traditional narrative. This is not a science essay, a newspaper article, or a comic book. When looking at the style of the essay, the appearance and organization of words on the page, Sontag's essay follows the cognitive pattern we have established, over time, for an essay. Once a reader begins to really read the piece, however, it is obvious that Sontag's narrator is weaving a confusing narrative that mirrors the confusion of the relationship between the narrator and fellow traveler. The contrast in Sontag's essay is the contrast between expectation and reality: the expectation that this piece will read like a traditional essay because it looks like a traditional essay, and the reality that this really is a structurally complex, "unguided" narrative of a broken relationship.

Sontag, however, has made one important move with "Unguided Tour" that allows a reader's pattern play mechanisms to kick in and make this essay easier to interpret. The collection in which "Unguided Tour" was originally published is listed among major booksellers, such as Amazon and Barnes & Noble, as a collection of short fiction pieces. While this could have been for marketing purposes starting in the late 1970s and continuing to this day, this strategy also automatically triggers certain patterns in the mind of the reader, which will influence how the reader is going to interpret and understand this piece of writing. By some authority higher than the reader proclaiming "Unguided Tour" as possibly being "fiction," this causes the reader to automatically use pre-established patterns that the mind has designated as "fiction." Suddenly, Sontag's lines become pieces of dialogue missing punctuation, and the reader—as Monson commented in "Essay as Hack"—fills in the blanks to create a narrative structure that makes sense to the reader.

At first glance without regard to content, Sontag's piece looks more like a newspaper article, with quite a few short, one-sentence paragraphs. The pattern a reader may visualize does not necessarily match the cognitive patterns established for "essay," triggering instead cognitive patterns for "newspaper article," "travelogue," or maybe even "list," but not necessarily "essay." Readers' perceptions are influenced by

conceived genre and form conventions, but also by the patterns readers' minds have associated with the "essay." Generally, our minds have been wired and taught to expect substantive paragraphs, not short lines of text. In the case of the creative essay form, we expect a clearly defined narrator and point of view, not an unguided tour into the interior mind or minds of a couple who are unsure of the current state of their relationship to one another. Sontag opens the essay:

I took a trip to see the beautiful things. Change of scenery. Change of heart.
And do you know?
What?
They're still there.
Ah, but they won't be there for long.
I know. That's why I went. To say good-bye. Whenever I travel, it's always to
say good-bye. (29)

Sontag's opening raises questions for the reader. Is all of this in the narrator's head, or is the narrator talking to someone? If there is more than one person, why does this not look like regular dialogue? Why is the narrator saying good-bye on the first page of the essay? Some of these questions are answered later in the essay, even if the answer is not immediately clear. The first reading, however, does not conform to our conventional understanding of what an essay, or even a story, looks and feels like. The reader is not oriented as to whether or not this is an internal or external narrative. The quotation marks distinguishing speech from narration are missing. Even the title, "Unguided Tour," suggests a murkiness, a movement through the piece that will wander, twist, and turn.

Like Monson, however, Sontag leaves a hint that she is playing with form, and that the cognitive patterns we associate with an essay are hidden within the framework that she has created for this piece. In the penultimate section of the essay, Sontag writes:

This spot. On this spot they massacred three hundred students.

I'd better go with you. You'll have to bargain.

I'm starting to like the food. You get used to it after a while. Don't you?

In the oldest paintings there is a complete absence of chiaroscuro. (38)

There is a series of contrasts in this brief passage, leading up to Sontag's hint about her experiment in form. The first is the reference to the massacred students. Normally, we do not think of students, who are considered the brightness of humanity's future, as being overshadowed by their murder. The second line is a contrast between desire and ability. Someone has expressed a desire to leave, even though it is not present on the page, but the source of the dialogue does not believe in the other's ability to manage on their own.

The final contrast, the reference to chiaroscuro, is Sontag's hint that she is playing with form, just like Monson hinted at hacking his boredom with traditional essay form in "Essay as Hack." "Chiaroscuro" is an Italian term "used to describe the effects of light and dark in a work of art, particularly when they are strongly contrasting" (Clarke & Clarke). Sontag has written an essay, but within the broad spectrum of what we consider an essay, Sontag has directly juxtaposed two intentions as a writer: the desire to convey a story, one in which the narrator and partner are taking a trip in an attempt to repair a broken relationship, and the desire to convey the experience without being restricted to the traditional form of the narrative essay.

In the case of Sontag's work, the reader originally had no control in determining whether or not the structure of "Unguided Tour" worked as an essay, because readers were told that the piece was not an essay. Unlike Monson, who left his success as a writer/hacker up to the reader, Sontag took control of this cognitive process as part of what was likely a marketing strategy. Several decades later, however, readers can still debate how "Unguided Tour" contradicts the pattern play schemes that have been previously established. In terms of the ways in which readers read, Sontag's essay can still be interpreted and discussed in a way that follows these pattern play structures, but that twist of originally calling "Unguided

'Tour' and *I, Etcetera* works of fiction can cause resistance from the minds of readers. The pattern plays for "essay" and "fiction" create two different results for readers, and it may take repeated discussion and inquiry in order to change how readers perceive Sontag's work.

If scholars consider what Boyd has justified through his study of cognition, it is possible that writing which pushes the boundaries of the essay form could eventually reach canonical status, but it will take a significant amount of time to get to that point. It is also possible that, as more and more writers experiment with the essay form, that we see a new essay form emerge and, like fiction and poetry, create a great number of different canons beyond the teaching canon of the composition classroom and seminal works in the form as a whole. This progress will rely heavily on the acceptance of new and different patterns by readers; if writers and scholars can convince readers that the patterns they see when reading an essay are representative of the form, then the reading public may be more accepting of the ways in which writers are attempting to change the ways in which readers think. Until then, the pattern play mechanisms of readers will lead to two different interpretations of works of nonfiction: the one that readers employ when reading for enjoyment or for creative purposes, and the one that composition students will employ when reading assigned works that teach them to write in the college classroom.

Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter. "Unpacking My Library." Trans. Harry Zohn. *The Art of the Personal Essay*. Ed. Phillip Lopate. New York: Random House, 1994. 362-375. Print.
- Boyd, Brian. "The Art of Literature and The Science of Literature: The Delight We Get From Detecting Patterns in Books, And In Life, Can Be Measured And Understood." *The American Scholar* 77.2 (2008): 118-127. Web. *Literary Reference Center*.
- On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009. Print.
- Clarke, Michael and Deborah Clarke. "Chiaroscuro." *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms*. 2nd ed. Web.
- Monson, Ander. "Essay as Hack." *The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre: An Anthology of Explorations in Creative Nonfiction*. Ed. Sean Prentiss and Joe Wilkins. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014. 9-22. Print.
- Sontag, Susan. "Unguided Tour." *The Next American Essay*. Ed. John D'Agata. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2003. 29-39. Print.
- Shields, David. *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010. E-book.