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The Journey of Grief Campaign: An Analysis of Qui Nguyen's play; She Kills Monsters

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Play Analysis
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She Kills Monsters

At first glance, *She Kills Monsters* sounds and looks like something that was written to be a fun show that doesn't require much acknowledgement, but after reading through it I can confidently say that this show proved my first assumptions all wrong. *She Kills Monsters* is the perfect exploration through relationships and grief. This play is about the Story of Agnes Evans and her journey through processing the sudden and tragic death of her sister, Tilly. Agnes and Tilly are complete polar opposites and because of that Agnes never really took the time to get to know her sister until now. Agnes discovers a DND, Dungeons and Dragons, game Tilly created and through the help of Tilly's friend Chuck, and others. She begins to play the game in hopes that it reconnects her, and assists her in accepting her deceased sister. Through my analysis of this show I was able to break it down into chunks to further understand how the plot revealed the idea of grief, and how the characters, and their language, further pushed this theme.

Plot: Action Analysis

External and Internal Events

- **A1S0)** Narrator reveals Tilly has died
 - Narrator reveals the drive behind Agnes's desperate journey
- **A1S1)** Agnes decides to play Tilly's DND game
 - Agnes desperately wants to participate in Tilly's past
- **A1S2)** Agnes encounters Tilly's character
 - Agnes is desperate to connect with Tilly
- **A1S3)** Tilly discovers that Orcus traded her soul
 - Orcus added to Agnes and Tilly's desperation
- **A1S4)** Agnes announces she's playing DND to Vera

- Vera is desperate for Agnes to move on
- **A1S5)** Agnes and the crew depart to retrieve Tillys soul
 - Tilly is desperate to retrieve her soul
- **A1S6)** Tilly Encounters and defeats Farrah
 - Tilly is desperate to keep moving forward
- **A1S7)** Miles meets Chuck
 - Miles desperately hopes his assumptions are wrong
- **A1S8)** Tilly encounters the Succubi
 - Agnes desperately wants to defend Tilly
- **A1S9)** Agnes encounters the real life Lilith
 - Agnes is desperate to get an answer out of Lilith
- **A1S10)** Tillys gifts Agnes a letter
 - Chuck witnesses Agnes desperation for her sister
- **A1S11)** Vera reveals to Miles that Agnes is playing DND
 - Miles is desperate to understand what Agnes is doing
- **A1S12)** Agnes defeats the Miles monster
 - Agnes desperately yearns for a win
- **A1S13)** Agnes encounters the real life Succubi
 - Agnes desperately wishes them away
- **A1S14)** Agnes departs from the game
 - Agnes can handle how big her desperation has become
- **A1S15)** Agnes meets all of Tillys friends
 - Chuck is desperate for Agnes to connect
- **A1S16)** Agnes arrives at Tiamat and frees Tillys soul
 - Agnes finds healing for her desperate needs

Review the facts:

- Who: Agnes, her boyfriend, her friend, her sister Tilly and Tillys friends.
- What: Agnes and others embark on a journey playing Tillys DND campaign
- Where: Athens, Ohio
- When: The 1990's
- Why: Tilly passed away before Agnes could connect to her
- How: Tilly died in a car crash
- For What Purpose: So Agnes can reconnect with her sister and properly grieve her death

Seed: Desperation; Throughout the show all the characters reveal a sense of desperation. Each character is desperately looking for self realization, distractions, solutions and many more things.

Three Main Climaxes:

- Beginning; Agnes commits to playing Tillys DND game
- Middle: Agnes discovers who Tilly was
- End: Agnes completes the game and says goodbye to Tilly

Super-Objective:

Agnes's last attempt to reconnect with her sister

Through-Action:

Agnes deciding to play Tillys DND game and enter her world

Counter-Action:

Agnes's own uncontrollable emotions conflict with her overall goal

Theme: Grief

Through my analysis I was able to get a deeper look at their overall meaning for this show and how writer Qui Nguyen manifested that through the play. As I previously stated, it's easy to look at the show from first glance and see it as nothing more than a fun, sentimental story revolving around a game of DND, but through this analysis we can see it's clearly much more. This show was packed full of events, but being able to break down these events was helpful in understanding the big driving moments instead of getting lost in the more inconsequential parts. Then by discovering that the seed of the show was desperation, it was helpful in understanding what was driving all these motives and emotions. What appeared to be Agnes just playing a silly game was actually her doing all she could to desperately make-up for the time she lost with Tilly. Finding the seed helped connect everything together.

Character: Score Of The Role (Agnes)

External and Internal Events

- **A1S1)** Agnes decides to play Tillys DND game
 - Agnes desperately wants to participate in Tillys past
- **A1S2)** Agnes encounters Tillys character
 - Agnes is desperate to connect with Tilly
- **A1S3)** Agnes observes Orcus and Tillys interaction I
 - Orcus added to Agnes and Tillys desperation
- **A1S4)** Agnes announces she's playing DND to Vera
 - Vera is desperate for Agnes to move on
- **A1S5)** Agnes and the crew depart to retrieve Tillys soul
 - Agnes and Tilly desperately search for her soul
- **A1S6)** Agnes observes Tillys powers
 - Agnes desperately tries to participate
- **A1S7)** Agnes enters the room and Miles departs
 - Agnes is too desperate to start the game to care
- **A1S8)** Agnes witnesses Tilly encounter the Succubi
 - Agnes desperately wants to defend Tilly
- **A1S9)** Agnes encounters the real life Lilith
 - Agnes is desperate to get an answer out of Lilith
- **A1S10)** Tillys gifts Agnes a letter
 - Chuck witnesses Agnes desperation for her sister
- **A1S11)** Agnes defeats the Miles monster
 - Agnes desperately wins the challenge
- **A1S12)** Agnes encounters the real life Succubi
 - Agnes desperately wishes them away
- **A1S13)** Agnes departs from the game
 - Agnes can handle how big her desperation has become
- **A1S14)** Agnes meets all of Tillys friends
 - Chuck is desperate for Agnes to connect
- **A1S15)** Agnes arrives at Tiamat and frees Tillys soul
 - Agnes finds healing for her desperate needs

Review of The Facts:

- Who: Agnes
- What: Playing the game to understand who her sister was
- Where: Athens Ohio, in Tillys bedroom
- When: 1990's, less than a year after Tillys death
- Why: She feels a disconnect from her sister
- How: By immersing herself into Tilly's world
- For What Reason: Agnes wants to get to know her sister as much as she can since she already missed out on Tillys highschool experience as a fun,nerdy girl who runs her own DND campaign.

Super-Objective:

Agnes's last attempt to desperately reconnect with her sister

Through-Action:

Agnes deciding to play Tillys DND game and enter her world

Counter-Action:

Agnes's own uncontrollable emotions conflict with her overall goal to desperately know her sister

Three Major Climaxes

- Beginning; Agnes commits to playing Tillys DND game
- Middle: Agnes discovers who Tilly was
- End: Agnes completes the game and says goodbye to Tilly

Since most of the story revolves around Agnes and her emotional journey it's important to break down her analysis within the whole show. Agnes is the main lead and protagonist of the play and the one who drives every moment. We know from our action analysis that the show is centered around the idea of grief, and Agnes is the one who brings that to life. Looking into her super-objective and through-action, the audience is able to comprehend that Agnes isn't just playing her sister's games for fun, but because she feels like she's missing a piece of her. Agnes was never really close with Tilly and

now that she's gone all she has are the materials she left behind, so that's why she dives head first into Tilly's DND game. Of course, what's a play without some conflict, and that's where it gets interesting. In most plays it would be the antagonist or opposite character, but in this show the counter-action is Agnes herself. Agnes is going through a rough grieving process and with that comes big emotional blocks. Sometimes she gets so enraged she quits or in such denial she pushes people away, and because of these spiraling emotions she tends to be her own obstacle in the way of her goal.

Theme:

After reading through the play and doing an in-depth analysis I have come to the conclusion that the theme of the show is the journey through grief. Throughout the show there are countless ways the theme is revealed, but the top three main ones are the parallelism within the characters, the repetition of battles, and the symbolism of Tilly's whole DND campaign.

In Tilly's DND world there are many characters within the game that directly reflect people in her actual life. Through the use of parallelism, the author reveals that the characters Lilith, Kaliope, and Orcus are just the fantasy version of Tilly's friends Lilith, Kelly, and Ronnie, and the Succubus characters are her real life bullies Gabbi and Tina. Agnes is first introduced to these characters as their DND alter-ego's, so she isn't aware that they were real people until the end, let alone that they are big parts of Tilly's life. In Script Analysis For Actors, Directors and Designers, James Thomas would say that this "Parallelism matches characters with other characters to reinforce connecting ideas...(pg.147)." Having these characters as fantasy versions and real versions is a

perfect representation of someone accepting their grief and loss. Agnes' first encounters with Tillys true friends being fantasy creatures results in a sense of denial and confusion, just like grief leaves us, but in the end when they are revealed as real people, the grief veil comes off and Agnes is able to understand and accept it more.

Within the campaign Agnes and the team are faced with constant battles that they must take on, and that sometimes results in success or failure. These physical battles are a constant repetition because it mirrors the battles that grief throws at you. Towards the beginning and middle of the show Agnes is put up against battles and tends to lose them or get beat up pretty badly, but it isn't until the end that Agnes slays a giant dragon by herself and frees Tilly. The constant rough battles represent Agnes's confusion, heartbreak, and loss but the final fight displays that Agnes has finally accepted what has happened and is taking matters into her own hands to finally free herself from the overwhelming heartache. The theme of grief is revealed through the use of repetition of the constant battles being displayed throughout the show.

Throughout all these adventures and battles Agnes and the team encounters they all are leading up to one goal; to free Tilly's soul. In the DND campaign her soul is quite literal, but it's clear that in Agnes's real life Tillys soul is a symbol of accepting that grief. Thomas describes how a symbol "stands for something else " (Thomas, pg. 141) , so the theme is revealed through the symbolism of Tilly's lost soul in the game representing Agnes' denial, which is a big stepping stone in the process of grief. Tillys soul is captured, and hides away so Agnes is the one to take on the journey and find it and free her. This whole process is really just a symbol for Tillys soul (life) being taken too soon and because Agnes is in denial that she believes it is just hidden somewhere

and that she can find it. In the game Agnes does set free Tilly's soul but in reality Agnes then learns that Tilly's lost soul is just a part of the game and the only real way to give herself, and Tilly, some relief is to let it go and move on.

The unique parallelism, repetition, and symbolism manifested throughout the show emphasized the main theme of grief.

Language:

After my analysis on the plot and characters, I went on to do some research about the dialogue. The language that's used with certain characters and between certain characters is important in revealing many key points to the plot. The two specific examples of language that stood out to me were the formality difference between Vera and Tilly and the short length of the Evil Succubus lines.

In the show, Vera is a high-school counselor and Tilly was a simple student who attended said high-school, so you would think Vera was very professional and pretentious while Tilly would be rebellious, and possibly inappropriate. These two assumptions couldn't be more wrong. Through the use of informal and formal dialogue it is revealed to use the dynamics and personalities of the characters. Even though Vera is the adult she uses extremely informal language while Tilly uses formal language. Vera is heard saying things such as "At worst, that shit will kill you. In the least, it will get your shit itchy.(Nguyen,pg.24)" while Tilly is caught saying things such as "The journey before us is too perilous and the prize too personal for me to expect you to risk your lives.(Nguyen, pg.31)" Vera uses shorter sentences, and everyday words that everyone would know, even if they're a bit inappropriate, and Tilly stretches out her sentences

and uses more professional and bigger words. I think this is super interesting because it combats those stereotypes and emphasizes to us just how different and odd Tilly was seen in school compared to her surroundings. This drastic difference in dialogue can also signify the contrast between Tilly's DND world where everything is proper and perfect, while in reality, the real world is harsher and unexpected. This is because formal words display a sense of professionalism and high authority while informal words show casualness and lack of maturity.

The two biggest enemies in this story are the Succubuses that attack Tilly and her team, or also known as Evil Gabbi and Evil Tina. What's a very unique choice on the writer's part is that even though these are the biggest evils in Tilly's life, they speak in short and concise sentences. In Script Analysis For Actors, Directors and Designers, James Thomas describes that short sentences "...tend to convey speed, impatience, anger, and urgency." (Thomas, pg.165) This reveals to us that the evil succubuses are straight to the point in ruining Tilly's self esteem. Whenever they speak it's typically only a few words and always about putting down Tilly. For example, Evil Gabbi simply says to Tilly "Not so fast, nerd. (Nguyen, pg.67)" This short sentence reflects that the succubuses want to get straight to the point of hurting Tilly, they don't want to waste precious time that could be used to taunt her. These short sentences also reveal a certain anger within them that's not only directed towards Tilly, but could be argued that it's something bubbling deep within them. This short dialogue amongst the girls reveals to us just how evil they are.

Application:

As an actor, it's extremely important to not only dissect the characters, but the play as a whole to grasp a greater understanding of the show message. I think every aspect that goes into play analysis is important to apply to my acting, but two in particular that resonate with me the most are discovering the internal events, and the theme, especially if I were to take on the role of Agnes.

When it comes to internal events, this is seen as the underlying driving force to each action or motive that is made, so this is extremely important to character building. For example, in scene one it starts off by displaying that externally Agnes is simply trying to play Tilly's DND game, but we know that internally she's desperately trying to find ways to reconnect with Tilly. So, because of this underlying information as an actor I would make sure to play into more of the sentiments of wanting to play and maybe add in some impatient, antsy behavior to signify that this is more than a game to me.

The theme of this play is incredibly important when it comes to playing Agnes because she's the manifestation of it. In this show it's clear that the main theme is grief and the process of working through it, and this is very vital to display in Agnes's journey. The entire game of DND is a symbol for Agnes' journey and battles with grief, and if I didn't play or acknowledge that theme to some extent the entire message would get lost. So, in sections of the play where Agnes storms off or quits the game I would make sure to play it as a sense of overwhelmingness or even hints of heartbreak to show that she's in the process of grief instead of just a stereotypical anger. Playing more to the theme can add depth to the character and plot, and assist the audience in getting a better idea of what the bigger picture is.

Citation

Thomas, J.M. (2009). *Script Analysis For Actors, Directors, and Designers (Sixth Edition)*. Elsevier/Focal Press.

Nguyen, Qui. *She Kills Monsters*. Samuel French, 2016.