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Elsie: A Screenplay

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Elsie: A Screenplay

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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May 2014

Honors Capstone Project in Television, Radio and Film

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Date: 05/06/2014

Abstract

Elsie is a 57 page, one-hour screenplay. A modern adaptation of a true story, Elsie tells the tale of Elsie Whitman, a young housewife unhappy in her marriage and looking for a way out. When her estranged sister arrives, she finally finds the strength to do the unthinkable.

Our story opens with the arrival of Elsie's sister, Marianne, and the departure of her husband, John. Alone in the house together, the sisters relationship grows complex. Marianne begins to see Peter, a young man with a mysterious past. However, when Elsie is wronged by John, she jumps into bed with Peter.

The interweaving plot comes to a close as Elsie and Marianne finally decide to take matters into their own hands. The story explores the theme of women's independence in a modern world. While women's equality has progressed drastically in the last 50 years, major disparities still exist, especially in the way media portrays gender norms.

Elsie seeks to engage in this discussion by portraying strong, modern women in oppressive situations and by deviating from traditional gender portrayals in modern media.

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Executive Summary

Elsie is a one hour screenplay inspired by the true life story of Elsie Whipple, with a modern twist. Elsie Whipple was the daughter of two extremely well established families in 1800s Albany, NY. In spite of the advantages her birth, she found herself trapped in an unhappy marriage.

Her unhappiness led her to infidelity. She had an affair with Jesse Strang, a hired hand on the property. With Strang, she plotted to kill her husband. In spite of her involvement in the events, she was let off on all charges. Jesse Strang was not so fortunate. He confessed, and was ultimately hung in what was to become the last public hanging in Albany, NY.

My script is a modern adaptation of these events. Our story begins as Elsie's husband, John, leaves home on business. An investigator for the State of Massachusetts, he travels to D.C. in order to assist with a federal investigation. Elsie's sister, Marianne, has just arrived. She is forced to move in with her sister and brother-in-law as a result of unemployment and financial troubles post-grad. Her mother and father have both passed away, and she has nowhere else to turn. The sisters' relationship grows complicated as they spend more and more time together.

Marianne meets Peter in town and they begin seeing one another. However, when Elsie is wronged by John, she finds solace in Peter. In discovering that Peter and Elsie have slept together, Marianne is angry. She seeks comfort in the bottom of a bottle. At the local bar, her and Peter get into a fight.

The fight leads to Peter's arrest. At this moment, we learn Peter has a dark past and has been lying to both Marianne and Elsie all long. A turning point in the story, the sisters finally vow to get revenge and take matters into their own hands.

The plot comes to a close as Elsie and Marianne pull off the perfect crime. By deceiving both John and Peter, they manipulate Peter into shooting John. John succumbs to his injuries, while Peter faces jail time for his crimes. Elsie and Marianne, on the other hand, leave town to get away from the events, effectively riding off into the sunset with one another.

The story explores several themes, including gender equality, feminism in film, and what drives individuals to murder. I implemented a variety of common writing techniques in order to convey these themes in my final project.

First and foremost, I engaged in the "discovery" process. This is an integral part of any creative writing piece. The discovery process allows for total immersion within the world of a story. It is important a writer, whether it be a novelist or a screenwriter, spend ample amounts of time within the world of his or her tale. By doing so, they enable themselves to freely write within that world without fear of inconsistencies or over thinking.

Discovery is the part of the writing process where the overall plot, character motivations, setting, and even tone are ultimately developed. Because these elements form the base of any screenplay, the discovery process is tantamount in good storytelling.

A second technique I implemented in writing *Elsie* is the use of previously existing film styles to further emphasize theme. I relied heavily on the conventions of traditional film noir in telling my story. However, I played with the gender roles typically performed within a noir and turned them on their heads. This allowed me to create strong female protagonist and comment on unequal gender roles in society. The use of film noir also allowed me to comment on gender roles in modern cinema.

Film noir is one of the oldest existing film styles, existing nearly as long as the medium of film itself. In my script, the genre acted as a microcosm for the movie industry as a whole. By choosing a style so deeply ingrained in film history, I could pointedly reference movies in general.

The theme of traditional and nontraditional gender roles in film was not the only theme I hoped to portray in my piece. I also sought to explore the human condition, particularly humans' ability and inability to kill one of their own kind. What is it that ultimately pushes us to the limit? To do this, I provided each of my characters with a "breaking point." For *Elsie*, it was John's assumed affair; for *Marianne*, it was Peter's deceit; and for *Peter*, it was his will to protect others.

I was also able to use these breaking points as a major source of character exposition. By placing each character in their respective situations, I conveyed to my audience what meant the most to each. For example, *Elsie* valued her independence above all else; it was the thing she was willing to kill for.

A third major theme I aim to convey in *Elsie* is that of morality. It is important a reader note that I do not seek to pass any sort of judgment upon my

characters. Instead, I choose to best convey what actions they commit and why. I hope that in doing so, I open up the discussion of morality and responsibility within my work.

Additionally, I made a point not to include any characters that were inherently good or right. Therefore, there is no moral compass for an audience to latch on to. Because of this, audience members are forced to act the role themselves. Therefore, in reading or viewing *Elsie*, they must make moral decisions based on the characters' actions.

Overall, the significance of my project is to contribute to the ongoing discussion of gender portrayal in film. It's purpose to interplay with cinema both old and new to convey its underlying themes.

For example, in juxtaposing the traditional style of noir with modern characters, I am able to convey the theme of gender equality in film. Similarly, I use elements murder mysteries and romantic dramas to push my characters to the brink. These elements allow me to explore the concept of murder and man's ability to kill one another.

It is my goal that my techniques and theme successfully comment on systematic inequalities in the film industry. As with my characters, I do not hope to pass overt judgment within the pages of my script. Instead, I hope to bring these issues to light as a means of furthering the discussion.

Acknowledgements

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