

# Narrative Sample Essay 1: Reflections On the Atlantic Shore

The Writing Center at North Park University (Internal Version)  
-2005

NOTE: You should see colored comment boxes on the side of the essay. If these do not appear, go to the **toolbar**, click **view** and then **comment**.

The best way to read commentary on essays is to begin at the end, because the last comment seeks to sum up the most important strengths and weaknesses of the paper. It gives you a perspective from which to read the more specific comments in the margins.

**[Author's] Disclaimer:** More than any other assignment of this kind in my academic career I have poured myself into this one. Because of the intimate nature of spirituality and the stated purpose of Dialogue, I found it necessary to depart from the constraints of the prompt. As I examine myself, I come to an understanding about how to understand God and humanity. Thus, this paper is a product of self-reflection and a valuable step in the direction of taking responsibility for my own education and the value of my voice.

## Reflections on the Atlantic Shore

The first time my mother saw me was along the sandy shore of the Atlantic. She had lost one child and would lose another in the year to come. To calm herself she imagined waves lapping at the sand in autumn breeze. A little girl came toward her, with eyes bright and clear like patches of sky behind clouds. Two years later I was born a punctual child, on my due date, screaming and pink.

The 139<sup>th</sup> Psalm says that God “knit me together in my mother’s womb,” but my mother believes that God knew me even before. Funny how I, the closest person to myself, can know so little about the matter. It’s as if there are two separate versions of me: one known to God, and one shaped by the people in my life. My people self radiates from compliments and insults, ideals and stereotypes. I lost my first grade best friend to better friends, ones who played TV tag while I picked green paint off the park bench. A year later, my first pair of glasses accompanied the advent of my love for reading and consequent praise for schoolwork. I loved the fall, when school began and the season of

cmartin 6/28/09 2:12 PM

**Comment:** Good for you. Most “prompts” you see are offered *as* prompts to get you launched—so you’re doing exactly the right thing to treat this one as a diving board *into* a deep pool rather than as a racing lane through it. Finding a topic you care about is the first key to good writing—it’s easier to polish passionate thinking than to infuse genuine passion into polished prose that hasn’t got a living mind and heart behind it.

cmartin 6/28/09 2:12 PM

**Comment:** You’re beginning with an arresting moment, using description well to paint the scene for your readers. I want to know more. It would help to understand just a bit more clearly what went on here. Did your mom “see” you in a vision, or in her imagination?

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:12 PM

**Comment:** Nice word choice—not a common descriptor. It’s intriguing that you’re beginning your autobiography even earlier than Augustine began his.

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:12 PM

**Comment:** Could you sharpen the idea here? You’re saying something important which is also unexpected, and I’m not following entirely what you’re conveying. Just a quick, explicit remark explaining before *what* would do the trick.

cmartin 6/28/09 2:12 PM

**Comment:** What matter? I can see that you’re working at achieving a colloquial, personal voice, and you’re definitely achieving that. Watch out for clichés, though; they can dilute meaning or make it fuzzy if they’re not used deliberately and well.

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:12 PM

**Comment:** Do you mean, “originates” or “comes from?”

swimsuits became a faint aftertaste of a memory. Memories, some of which stick more than others, harden around me like a fragile cocoon. I have become the gray ridges and bumps that surround me, the very thing I am not.

My identity is jumbled, but God who knows me has known me for as long as I have been myself. Since before words cluttered my space, before all I could see were images reflected in a dirty mirror, God has known me. “From such a mind (of God) nothing of the past would be hidden, nor anything of what remaining ages have in store...” (Augustine, 245). I have shouted gossip and whispered love; I have quenched thirst with solid food and numbed pain with mindless shows. Am I a real person? Or do I shift faces like an actor in a Greek play? Among tall grass in winter colors, I wait to be with myself. Wait for everything else to pass away and see what is left.

I stop listening. “I used to love people on the basis of human judgment, not your judgment, my God, in whom no one is deceived” (Augustine, 65). Away fall the thoughtless versions of who I am; soft words that built strong walls. I didn’t pass the swim test in seventh grade, I won a medal for writing a book in eighth, my friends mostly love me but not always enough to say it. Pieces of my given identity clump together, the stronghold of my soul. “If you are what you do...and you do poorly, what then?” (Lamott, 142). I imagine that my friends and strangers file my actions; she did this and sentherefore she is this. It is my own tragic method of simplifying.

Nothing here is simple. I evolved into judging by what I see; is she as pretty as I am, is he as smart? My eyes are not fit to see the truth, or my lips to ask the right questions. “No one ‘knows what is going on in a person except the human spirit which is within’ (1 Cor. 2:11),” (Augustine, 180). It is impossible to know another as God does,

cmartin 6/28/09 2:12 PM  
**Comment:** This paragraph offers tantalizing fragments, and I can piece them together in a mosaic, sort of. I get kind of lost in the paragraph, though—how did I get from the topic sentence you’ve presented—that God knew you before you were even in your mother’s womb—to the gray ridges and bumps? I can understand that you want readers to undergo a jumbled feeling—you want your style to recreate the meaning you’re talking about—but you can’t jumble us for too long, or we’ll just be confused about what you’re trying to tell us.

cmartin 6/28/09 2:12 PM  
**Comment:** Another terrific metaphor. Do you mean it to imply jumble, or have you shifted a bit to suggest camouflage?

cmartin 6/28/09 2:12 PM  
**Comment:** This section is lyric and creative; now bring in the considerable analytical ability you’re letting readers glimpse to help us understand your provocative metaphors (and especially the paradoxes). What was the dirty mirror, for instance? Or how do you quench thirst with solid food? You’re obviously imitating Augustine’s use of paradox to write the inexpressible; keep working on making your meaning clearer.

cmartin 6/28/09 2:12 PM  
**Comment:** To what?

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:12 PM  
**Comment:** Nice contrast.

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:12 PM  
**Comment:** All of these specifics are great, and they help readers to glimpse the concrete meanings behind your metaphors. This passage comes across, though, as a list. Can you analyze and explain the significance of these bits? Once more, I’m floating around in a paragraph which doesn’t offer me the anchor of a firm topic sentence, so I’m unable to get oriented in it.

to think that I can sum up my friends and enemies in two-second sound bytes, 'she's too smart for her own good,' or 'he's too pretty to be smart.' How little I know about myself, how little about my closest friends. "They wish to learn about my inner self, where they cannot be penetrated with eye or ear or mind," (Augustine, 181). In my friends I see glimpses of the person I do not wish to be, and the person I would give everything to become. Like seeing in a broken mirror, I see both others and myself but cannot approach reality.

Full-length mirrors line the stairwells of my building. I peer into them often and scrutinize whatever version of me appears on the glass. On some days, I carry the image, tucked away in my back pocket, withdrawn at shallow moments of stillness. "To stay young, to save the world, break the mirror," (Lamott, 169). My true self tortures my soul. I believe one thing and do another. My heart is corrupt in its dealings with the world. "Where should my heart flee to in escaping from my heart?" (Augustine, 60). To look at myself through other people's eyes and through my own is to see that I do not want to live with myself. I do not want to be who I am. There is who I am and who I want to be and neither one will let the other win. What strength have I to break the mirror when it is those images which give me strength?

Strength must come from another place. Strength must come from the only one who knows what strength really is. I wish to say that those images in the mirror are not my true self, but in lies would be more truth I do not want. If merit is to be a part of me, so must sin, the corruption of God's perfect image. Yet, there is hope. "God loves us exactly the way we are, and God loves us too much to let us stay like this," (Lamott,

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:12 PM

**Comment:** More listing?

135). In change, there is hope that I might one day learn to know myself as God knows me.

To hear you (God) speaking about oneself is to know oneself,” (Agustine, 180). In my mother’s story of my birth, I heard God speaking of me. You were planned Emily, and you are valuable to me. I have known you, and I know you, and I will know you for the rest of eternity. Through the sickness of my soul, God knows me. In my knowledge of God’s knowledge, I see who God is. He is a God who intimately knows His creation. God knows every hidden place, every scar, and every beautiful part of me.

On blistering days, playing with little children, painting a run-down house, my image solidifies on moving waters I never see. In those moments I am more myself than I have been in my whole life, and I know just that I am. “And he (God) has gone from our sight that we should ‘return to our heart’ (Isa. 46:8) and find him there,” (Augustine, 64).

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:12 PM

**Comment:** This does not explain your identity.

cmartin 6/28/09 2:12 PM

**Comment:** I really like the poetic complication of this image of your image (!). An image you never see, and an image which solidifies on a fluid surface—that’s a remarkable double-paradox.

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:12 PM

**Comment:** You’ve crafted a moving and thought-provoking personal essay, centered with passionate imagination and personal investment on a topic which is extremely difficult to get a grasp on. You’ve crafted a fragmented, often paradoxical style to recreate for readers something of your own sense of fragmentation—a pretty sophisticated strategy of style. And you’ve used a chain of related metaphors in the last half of the paper (mirrors, reflected images) to create some continuity in your reflections. Moreover, this piece is permeated by (and generates in readers) a combination of love and truthfulness which justly places it in continuity with Augustine and Lamott.

Now, it’s also the case that, because your paragraphs winding around so much, and because you don’t offer many occasional anchors of concrete information, your readers can wind up feeling aimless-- which may be where you want them, assuming the above goal is correct. But your confident words create confusion because readers may feel like they have missed your point.

Please don’t take these comments as disparagement of what you’ve achieved; that stands firm, without apology or need for apology. The remarks simply intend to reflect back to you what is or isn’t coming across to readers. I *wouldn’t* suggest that you reconnect all of the fragments here—they serve a shrewd stylistic choice. But an occasional deft link to a clearer indicator of the line of your reasoning would help readers, and perhaps yourself, to realizations which emerge from the fragments.

This commentary and advice can only be offered to a writer already working well beyond the norm of Dialogue 1 demands, and it can only be needed by writing which reaches so high. This piece of your writing is one of the finest examples I’ve ever seen of the sort of whole-person integration Dialogue aspires to inspire. Thanks for letting me read it.