The Silent Scream of a Sister

In H. Briscoe’s short story entitled “The Scream,” the complexities of family dynamics are depicted including the roles families mold for each member through consistent attitudes and behaviors. The events of the story provide an opportunity for examining the workings of a family and the occurrences of manipulation by those considered closest to Anna, namely her mother and sister. Briscoe employs the symbolism in the setting, contrast, conflict resolution, and devices such as flashback to show that regardless of Anna’s individual struggles, their family dynamics remain constant with unchanging roles and enduring patterns.

The setting is a physical representation of the oppressive environment Anna is in within her family. The descriptions of the heat conjure images of war. The sun is personified as it “refus[ed] to move” and “fir[ed] missiles of heat down” (1). Anna is caught in the battle when the heat becomes “unbearable” and pervasive, coming at her from above and also from below as the “rippling waves … bounced off the black concrete paths, and … reflected up and hit” her (1). This heat also inhibits Anna’s ability to enjoy herself. She eats her lunch quickly because “it was too hot to eat properly” (1). The heat is solely her difficulty to struggle against, for soon after eating, Mary and Mum continue their exploration of the theme park, Mary unaffectedly “chattering and pointing at various places she wanted to visit” (1). Mum and Mary’s persistence heedless of the heat forces Anna to resume their previous activities when she’d prefer not to. The
imagery of the heat show how the familial environment causes Anna to struggle, but Mary and Mum are indifferent to Anna’s well-being.

A second disconcerting attribute of the setting to Anna is how unnatural everything is. “In the huge theme park, everything was manufactured—angular, flat surfaces, and shiny polished metal. Signposts painted with bright, smooth paint in colours too painful to look at in the sunlight” (1). Anna further notices her inorganic surroundings as they eat lunch by a man-made lake, “purpose built for the park, a deep hole gauged out of the earth by a machine” (1). These unnatural images reflect the irony of the unnatural state of Anna’s role within their family dynamics. Just as the physical environment of the theme park is unnatural in the broader setting of earthy scenery, Anna’s role in her family does not reflect the natural role of eldest daughter and older sister. A family should foster an environment of contentment, not a jarring eyesore that is hard for a family member to endure. As Anna combats the heat and her unnatural surroundings, the setting becomes a symbol of the oppressive environment of her family.

The contrasts between Anna’s and Mary’s emotions show the true hierarchy within the family, despite the anticipated traditional roles. Anna is the older sibling, but her emotions repeatedly put her in servitude of Mary. Anna’s emotions are pliable and leave her unprotected to manipulation from her family. First, Mum plays on Anna’s emotional vulnerability in order to get Anna to do what she wants. She hints that Mary could “get lost, or hurt or something” (2) if Anna didn’t acquiesce and accompany Mary on the roller coaster. Mum’s treatment of Anna reflects Anna’s natural responsibilities as the eldest sibling. However, she contradicts that bestowal of authority when she further emotionally manipulates Anna by saying, “It’s only a ride, Anna. Surely you can make it onto a ride without feeling ill for once, you’re always afraid of things like that, it’s getting ridiculous” (3). Mum’s statement of humiliation undermines the
authority she previously granted Anna, for mothers who fully trust and appreciate the efforts and responsibilities of their eldest child shouldn’t treat them as a young child by embarrassing them. Anna’s mother exacerbates Anna’s alienation within her family instead of building an atmosphere of accommodation and acceptance. Anna is cast in a role of weakness because her emotions are susceptible to exploitation to procure guilt; therefore, Anna will alter her actions to accommodate Mum’s and Mary’s wishes.

Anna’s sense of duty also puts her at a disadvantage. She wants to be a dutiful daughter and “felt mean refusing to help her mother” (3). Anna agrees to take Mary to the roller coaster out of her sense of duty to Mary as her older sister, and to Mum as her eldest daughter. However, she is taken advantage of because in this case her sense of duty requires her to put her own desires aside. Once again, it is her emotions that enable her family members gain the upper hand, perpetuating the hostile environment for Anna.

A final emotion that conveys Anna’s weakness is her desire for acceptance and admiration. When Anna goes back for the rucksack, “she thought she saw admiration in Mary’s face … but reason told her this was unlikely” (7). Her need for acceptance in her family contributes to her compliance when asked to do things she feels strongly opposed to. Even though she feels Mary’s admiration is “unlikely,” she can’t help herself in trying to gain it. Since her need for acceptance is rejected, Anna is feeble in resisting Mary’s manipulations because Anna desires her admiration, even if it is a hope against hope.

Mary’s lack of emotional susceptibility, on the other hand, causes her to gain power over Anna, even though she is younger. When Mary taunts Anna with the story about the man who died in the plane crash, she shows her ability to mold Anna’s emotions and remain “unsympathetic” (3) to Anna’s plight. A stark indicator of Mary’s emotional control and
therefore her power, comes after Anna has returned from the roller coaster: even when her sister is visibly shaken, Mary “stared solidly back at [Anna], no trace of any emotion on her features” (10). Her “solid” emotional control and manipulation of Anna’s emotions displayed in multiple instances demonstrate the inverted hierarchy of roles within the family.

Mary’s ability to stage emotion also brings her into the position of power. Because of Mary’s tears, Anna accepts the responsibility to go back and look for the lost rucksack, even though “Anna saw … how the blame had gently shifted from Mary’s shoulders to her own. Once again, Mary had twisted everything to make it seem as if it were [Anna’s] fault” (6). She even realizes she has been had, but takes action to find a solution to a problem that she did not create because of Mary’s sudden show of emotion. Mary’s convincing stoicism also gives Mum no reason to question her story, and since Mary reached Mum first, she has the upper hand over Anna. Mary’s ability to not experience emotion and even feign emotions vault her above Anna, whose emotions are easily preyed upon, regardless of the natural familial hierarchy of age order.

The resolving of the conflicts of the story reflects the family dynamics of unchanging roles and patterns. Three conflicts are resolved with Anna shoulderning the responsibility and accommodating her younger sister. First, there is a strong external conflict presented when Mary wants to go on the roller coaster and Anna doesn’t. The conflict is resolved with Anna surrendering her wishes and escorting Mary. An additional conflict arises when the sisters subtly argue over whose responsibility it is that the rucksack is lost. Again, Anna is the one who is left to find the rucksack and therefore accept responsibility, even though it is Mary who had stewardship over the rucksack and was the one who lost it. A final conflict is presented when Anna realizes Mary had played a cruel trick on her in order to get her on the roller coaster that she was terrified of. Because Anna does not address the issue, this internal conflict is not
resolved. This lack of resolution indicates that this is yet another family dynamic that Anna is slave to: Anna is expected to swallow her injuries in order to be the good older sister.

Briscoe’s use of the elements of flashback and ending portray a sense of an eternal circle, the pattern for this family. The flashback illustrates the continual cycle of Mary’s behavior toward Anna. Mary delighted in taunting her sister in the past, she is taunting her in the present setting of the story, and it is assumed by the pattern that Mary will only continue to delight in harassing her sister in the future. The ending and its lack of resolution shows that nothing in the dynamics of the family has changed, even though Anna has just gone through a traumatic ordeal at Mary’s hands. Mum believes Mary’s story and doesn’t understand Anna, Mary succeeds in tricking Anna and doesn’t show any remorse or promise of different actions in the future, and Anna faints instead of addressing the situation she’s been put in. The flashback and the ending point out a cycle that will persist indefinitely as each member of the family fulfills the roles that have become expected of them.

This family’s environment places Anna in a role where she must give up her own wishes in favor of her family’s expectations of her. The symbolism of war within the setting indicates Anna’s struggle against this oppression and that it is Anna who is suffering because of this war-like family environment. Anna’s role as the older, but emotionally weaker sister seems unchanging as portrayed through the flashback and the ending of the story. We cannot foresee any alterations in any family member’s behavior. So Mary will remain above Anna, and Anna will be coerced into reliving this cycle over and over.
Works Cited


I did not consult any outside material in writing this essay.