English Language Arts, Grade 10, “Henrietta’s Dance”

Scoring Set

Prompt: Prior to writing the task, have students watch the following video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsDkAwjiT1Q#t=294.

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks begins with the following quotation from Elie Wiesel from The Nazi Doctors and the Nuremberg Code: “We must not see any person as an abstraction. Instead, we must see in every person a universe with its own secrets, with its own treasures, with its own sources of anguish, and with some measure of triumph.”

Compare and contrast the way Rebecca Skloot tells Henrietta’s story with how others in the scientific community or media have portrayed Henrietta and her situation. Skloot’s version is found in “Henrietta’s Dance,” the prologue from The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, and both interviews (“Henrietta Lacks’ ‘Immortal’ Cells” and “A New Chapter in the Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks”). What details are emphasized in various accounts? (RI.9-10.7) Evaluate the effectiveness of Skloot’s style in portraying Henrietta’s story as being as much about the people as it is about the science. (RI.9-10.3, RI.9-10.4, RI.9-10.6, L.9-10.5a-b)

Remember the process:

- Read the text(s) and prompt.
- Locate the appropriate rubric and review the descriptions of each construct (e.g., Content, Style).
- Determine High, Medium, or Low based on which best describes the features of the student writing.
- Locate evidence for the score and write annotations using language from the rubric.
- Meet as a group to review your scores and try to reach consensus.
- Create a group scoring sheet with an agreed upon score (High, Medium, Low) and annotations.
Elie Wiesel, author of *Night*, once talked about not seeing each person as an abstraction. Each person has a story to be told and for one to understand what makes them who they are, one needs to know their story. Henrietta Lacks was a mother of five children who had cervical cancer. Her doctors took tissue and the cells from the tissue are still alive today. While the author, Rebecca Skloot, uses imagery to describe the humanity of Henrietta, the scientific community uses facts to discuss the clinical and ethical aspect of Henrietta’s case.

Assuredly, Rebecca Skloot humanizes Henrietta. This is evidenced by, “Her light brown skin is smooth, her eyes still young and playful, oblivious to the tumor growing inside her, a tumor that would leave her five children motherless and change the future of medicine.” Skloot uses imagery here to describe Henrietta, displaying to the reader who Henrietta is, and describing what kind of impact the tumor will have on her family.

On the other hand, the scientific community disregarded the human aspect of Henrietta Lacks. This is proven by, “Several considerations mitigate against the claim that patients such as Lacks or DF should be offered financial compensation for use of their residual clinical tissue. First although it is true that the patients have contributed “raw materials” necessary for development of the cell line, it is the investigators, not the patients, whose intellectual contributions lead to the creation of value.” The scientific community uses facts here to describe the ethical and clinical aspect of Henrietta’s case, allowing readers to see and understand why the Lacks family never received compensation for the tissue.

Rebecca Skloot’s use of imagery and flashbacks make her approach very effective. Her use of connotative diction and details allow the reader to really connect with and understand Henrietta and her life. This is proven by, “They didn’t go on a honeymoon because there was too much work to do, and no money for travel. By winter, the United States was at war and tobacco companies were supplying free cigarettes to soldiers, so the market was booming. But as large farms flourished, the small ones struggled. Henrietta and Day were lucky if they sold enough tobacco each season to feed the family and plant the next crop.” This shows Henrietta’s normal life and part of her story.

While the scientific community focused solely on the clinical and ethical aspect of Henrietta, Rebecca Skloot focused on Henrietta’s story and the legacy
she left behind, which made her approach very effective. Rebecca’s approach was effective because she didn’t look at Henrietta as an abstraction. She viewed Henrietta as someone with a story to share; who’s story was uniquely her own.
In a book he wrote Elie Weisel talks about not seeing people as “abstractions” but rather as his or her own “universe.” This means people shouldn’t be seen as undefined masses, but everyone should be seen as their own world. Henrietta Lacks was a woman who died of cervical cancer in the 1950’s and her cells were taken from her and her family was never compensated. While Rebecca Skloot uses figurative language, imagery, and pathos to describe the human side of Henrietta’s story, the scientific community uses facts, figures and logos to tell the legal side of her story.

Skloot treats Henrietta’s story humanely with figurative language and imagery. For instance, when Skloot wrote, “Her eyes still you playful,” this shows who Henrietta was rather than what she was. It also shows that Henrietta is much more than her cells, she was a person with a story to be heard.

On the other hand the scientific community treats Henrietta’s story very inhumanely with legality and figures. This is shown in the article “Paying Patients of Their tissue, it said “the line currently sells for as much as $10,000.” This shows that the scientific community sees Henrietta as a number or even as a dollar sign rather than a human being.

Therefore Skloot’s approach is very effective even more so than the scientific community’s. Skloot’s approach is effective because she uses imagery in her writing when she said “Her lips panted red,” this helps you see who Henrietta was as person. It shows that her story goes deeper than than the numbers and that her story should be told.

In conclusion Skloot approaches Henrietta’s story with a humane touch and scientific community approaches the story inhumanely with facts and figures, but Skloot’s approach was more effective because of the strategies she uses.
No doubt, Rebecca Skloot uses emotional detail to tell the story. This is evidenced by “surrounded by family, everyone smiling, arms around each other, eyes bright and excited, except Deborah.” Skloot uses imagery to describe the Lacks family. For example, Skloot uses words like excited and bright to make words like smiling, and eyes standout.

It is true that Rebecca Skloot uses figurative language in the story. This is evidenced by “he Lacks challenged everything. I knew about faith, science, journalism, and race.” Skloot uses figurative language because she utilizes words such as challenged, race, and faith.

No doubt Sklott’s approach was very effective. Her approach was effective because she uses different words to make them standout. A device Skloot used was figurative language. For example, Skloot uses words like challenged, bright, and excited to utilize and show emotional detail in the words.

In final consideration, Skloot uses good devices and has an effective approach on the story of Henrietta Lacks.
In a book Elie Wiesel wrote, he talks about not seeing any one person as an “abstraction.” Which means that we must see one person as an individual, rather than a whole. Henrietta Lack’s was a black women who died from cervical cancer and the doctors took her cells without her consent while author, Rebecca Skloot, uses imagery and pathos to provide mental pictures and feelings for Henrietta Lacks, the scientific community uses clinical language to give the medical side of HeLa cells.

In Skloot’s book she used a lot of imagery and pathos to help explain how things are and look and makes you connect. For example, Skloot says, “Her light brown skin is smooth, her eyes still young and playful, oblivious to the tumor growing inside of her.” Skloot uses imagery and pathos in this quote to prove and also show how she appears to people and how she is about to lose everything without recognizing she has cancer. These devices help readers feel like they could really be in this situation.

The scientific community uses logos and clinical language to show the research by using statistics. For instance, Skloot uses other medical data to describe the importance of HeLa cells to help with other cases like hers. An example from the community research would be “...worrying that giving property rights to patients would ‘hinder research by restricting access to raw materials’ and might ‘destroy the economic incentive to conduct important medical research.

In conclusion Skloot uses more emotional things and approaches Henrietta’s story in a way you can relate while the scientific community mostly uses facts and statistics.
Elie Wiesel once said “we must not see any person as an abstraction.” What Wiesel might be trying to tell people is that they can’t base someone off of their appearance, way they are, or how they act. This could encourage individuals as something special, even with their faults. This helps the issue at hand with the case of Henrietta Lacks. Lacks was born in Roanake, Virginia on August 1, 1920. At the age of thirty-one, Lacks died from a fatal case of cervical cancer. The doctors who operated on her toke samples of her tumor, turning it into a money-making cell line. However, the family wasn’t told this, and received no compensation. To make it worse, years after Lacks had died no one bothered to tell the world who she was, the woman behind the cell line. Rebecca Skloot, one of the only authors to write about Lacks history, helps us gain insight on this woman. While Skloot uses the human side of Henrietta Lacks to show she was an actual human being, the scientific community uses factual evidence to try and reason their approach was reasonable.

In her book, Skloot shows people that Henrietta Lacks was indeed a human being, not just a face to a line of cells. She tells readers about there youth, marriage, family, and many other things. “She look straight into the camera and smiles, hands on help . . . lips painted deep red.” By using this quote, Skloot can show readers a more physical side of Lacks. This helps also to imagine who “HeLa” really is. Skloot also uses the quote, “her light brown skin is smooth, her eyes still young and playful, oblivious to the tumor growing inside her . . .”, to further show Lack’s qualities, and show that she contracted something humans can get. Skloot, therefore, shows Lacks wasn’t another face in history, but a being with a humanly contracted disease, that ultimately killed her.

However, the scientific community gives information to readers that they handled the situation perfectly. The science behind this use was that no one really knew who was behind this line, so they couldn’t credit the person. It was unfair in articles that Lacks wasn’t acknowledge, since the live was hers. It was also injustice that the family never received compensation for the cell line. “For many, it seems an injustice that the Lacks family never received any financial benefits from the HeLa line . . .”. this shows how it was completely unfair it was to her family to not receive anything. The authors also state that “. . . thought Hopkins had screwed up . . .” that they agreed it was not right to leave the family hanging. Therefore, the scientific community is wanting to try and help the Lacks family.
Overall, Skloot was very successful in telling the world about Henrietta Lacks. The way she approached this sad situation proved beneficial to many. Just by explaining Lacks’s back story helped her image as an individual. It helps readers to be able to “get to know” her as a person, since no one really knew about her until this book was released. Using many flashbacks in passages, Skloot helps readers understand her on an emotional level. It is helpful Skloot included the scientific parts in the story so you can see all the good the line has done. Furthermore, by combining personal and scientific passages, Skloot helps readers to be able to grasp the effect HeLa has caused.

Overall, with the new knowledge of Henrietta Lacks, inputs from the scientific community, and benefits of Skloot’s writing approach, it is now easier for people to learn and understand the woman behind the cell line of HeLa.