



## Short Film Script Academy Analysis

Analyst: A. A.

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Genre: Drama

Category: Short Film

The following scores and comments are objectively presented and intended to be illustrative, instructive, and helpful in guiding the writer along a professional path. Scores and comments are in accordance with current professional film and television industry standards.

### **Scores/Comments:**

#### **Concept/Originality: 4**

This appears to be a suspense script about struggle with loss and guilt. Like many short film scripts, it examines an idea and seems busy with surprising or teasing the audience but does not actually manage to implement that idea into a functional story. Thus the script produced is an outline of an idea, with parts about how to use it not yet filled in. What is established is a swift account of a woman remembering a childhood accident followed by a somewhat confusing dissipation of her guilt. No unique angle or conceptual element about the incident, her guilt or her new friendship is presented. The event at the core of the story is memorable but is not sufficiently exploited to whatever is

the desired aim. Additionally, what is presented is executed in a rather straightforward manner with little nuance or abstract metaphorical events that short scripts are known for. The namesake title is mystifying by the end and the script impresses as parts of a feature film rather than a conceptual short script.

### **Structure: 5**

An alternating flashback and present scene format embedded within a fragile three-act layout creates decent anticipation but two things pose major problems here: there is not a fully functional story here – the script is a flashback of a memory with nothing to overcome – and the content is practically bare – there is insufficient background to plot or characters; emotions, moods, reactions, motivations. It seems as if the script were outlined with one main idea – the death of the protagonist’s brother – and left as is, without filling in background, conflict and other parts of the plot. A lot of script space is used to set up the story but delivery of details and hints are minimal, and then the finale – triggered by Joanne’s revelation of the accident as the inciting event – quickly unfolds with weak cohesion (there isn’t much with which to connect).

The alternating structure avoids total mundane territory as Joanne recollects something unpleasant from her childhood and eventually it is revealed. But the earlier flashbacks fail to use scenes to convey meaningful information that would give better insight into Joanne, Joey, their grandparents and their lives before and after the accident. Present-time scenes fail to hit the spot when it comes to delivering hints, nuance and key details about Joanne’s state of mind and feelings about being back at the scene of the accident, her recent life, etc. So when she meets Todd and they quickly set up their relationship, there is little reference to cultivate understanding of her behaviour and actions (which themselves are sparse and one-dimensional; she cries without build-up to her mood, her frame of mind is unknown when she invites Todd for a meal).

All throughout are missed opportunities to include this information and build the story’s depth, but the finale arrives and nothing much is offered to grip viewers regarding

Joanne's struggle. From her viewing of the house to spending her first hours and days there, to meeting and becoming acquainted with Todd – the events and dialogue fail to convey the complexity of what is happening. Her trust of Todd and his feelings about her guilt remain obscure. The story used here appears to better suit a feature length format.

#### **Plot: 4**

Joanne returns to her grandparents' country home where she feels responsible for causing the death of her younger brother, and recounts the episode with the help of a new friend. He convinces her that she is not to blame by telling her that it was up to God. That's it, and it is only a portion of a plot, not the complete thing. The revelation of a mysterious and traumatic childhood event is fantastic foundation to a story. This foundation is unfolded with the help of Todd, a man she just met who then helps her feel better by a simple conversation or two. And the story ends at this point, as if the rest of the plot were either forgotten or cut short for some reason. If this is indeed the end then the plotline is woefully incomplete for a script or other form of story. There is barely anything for Joanne to overcome, her motivations, goals, emotions etc. are vague to non-existent, the antagonism is ill-defined and short-lived with little development and the other elements around her – both character and environment – don't interact with her issue to create a functional story.

Too often in short scripts, an idea for a clever reveal is mistaken as a full plot. This is another example. A revelation of something secretive, disturbing or unusual in a curiosity-provoking manner does not constitute a full idea for a script. Here, Joanne's purchase of her grandparents' property and recollections of an unknown incident of the past suggest great upcoming drama. But when and how Todd helps her to uncover and confront the old trauma, the story immediately stagnates as it simultaneously ends with many questions. He merely tells her that it is up to God to decide who to save and not her. Her guilt dissipates with starkness and frankness that contrast badly against almost the entire script. It is not realistic. It is lengthened a bit by the symbolic release of her

caged fireflies but this falls flat because there's barely anything to which to link the fireflies.

Joanne's flashbacks represent a certain realism of traumatic childhood memories but as explained in *Structure*, they are weak in content and connect poorly with Joanne's current life to do anything. Thus the story is Joanne's revelation that she was involved in her brother's tragic, early death and then feeling better about it in a short time, without fuss or any metaphorical message or abstract analysis or anything else. The plot reads much more like a summary of a story than a story in itself. No angle or introspection or perspective or mood is explored. The momentary curiosity sparked by the wonder of what happened is one part of an unfinished plot. The hasty resolution seems as if ideas ran out or no effort was made on planning a proper ending.

### **Pacing: 6**

Despite the problematic writing style and content, for a drama script the story generally moves along with an appropriately languid rhythm that illustrates to a decent extent the reflection and slowing of time when memories and the past dominate. This should be used as a framework for the entire script but should not be confused with irrelevant filler that imitates essential information (there is a notable presence of this). The writing style both contributes to and hinders the pacing. The focus on the physical environment and ordinary activities that Joanne performs is relevant to the story and conveys a good sense of timing of events that unfold and how they do so. The sun, character expression and stances, firefly movement, kitchen tasks etc. help generate the thoughtful, slow momentum that prepares for something dramatic.

Throughout is the unnecessary focus on things that contribute little or no value to the story plot or world and thus causes a dangerous veering into lag territory, which is easy to do with dramas. The placement of the revelation as outlined *Structure* followed by the lack of a complete plot makes it easy to miss the solid foundational dramatic rhythm, as it reads as if nothing much is happening.

Repetition of Joanne's leg length, the narrative action of her entering the farmhouse for the first time, the description of the real estate "professional" with the "most welcoming smile", the scene of Joanne unpacking and many more – they are awkwardly written and this disturbs the story flow and distracts from its already thin consistency. Finding ways to convey the same thing in more appropriate ways (to suit the desired tone) is one thing that will automatically improve pacing even if nothing else changes. The earlier rhythm is upset at the ending when Joanne quickly gets over her guilt and the story stagnates. But overall, the content is bare and this also reduces the effectivity discussed above. When a full story is fleshed out and planned, the challenge will be retaining the momentum at which the key events occur whilst infusing the script with relevant information.

### **Characters: 5**

A skeleton of potentially meaty characters are presented but not established to a satisfactory level, and impact is stunted. Development is obvious but disconnected and has a believability issue. A major problem is the general lack of dimension to Joanne and Todd that is needed to lend naturalness to their rapid relationship development. An adult suffering decades-long guilt from a childhood incident is certainly a character one expects to produce complex behaviour and emotions. Joanne's overall portrayal is understated (which is perfectly acceptable) and it lends believability and expectation to the role. Just about everything else is problematic; the lack of background details to flesh out her character, the lack of nuance in her behaviour, speech, motivations, the sharp change that constitutes her development at the end. She begins with promise as a lady whose house purchase has a hidden motive. Thereafter her flashbacks don't register any observable change with her. It is when she meets Todd that his down-to-earth company and familiarity with the farm spurs her to mention the incident.

Todd is introduced with great style (far better than Joanne – the description of his farm-wise impression is fantastic) and overall has a more defined presence than Joanne. After

the revelation at lunch he veers out of character, with ‘smiling charmingly’ and ‘giggles’. Then there is the abrupt God reference that is provided as the solution or breakthrough to one. Not much is offered to hint at justification for their behaviour and the speedy turn of their relationship, especially the kissing at the end. They went from friendly but polite interaction to close trustfulness with no hint of a reason. This leads to Joey as a character. Being an innocent is good enough but for script purposes, something else is needed to make him leave an impression.

Think of any film or show where a deceased character has importance, and notice the ways that the person makes a presence. Joey’s appearance at the last major flashback is a good moment but for Joanne’s guilt, something else about him needs to manifest. The opportunities for character building should be looked at carefully (see *Tone* and *Dialogue*). The grandparents could use a more defined presence. With a short film, even brief screen moments can tell a lot about characters and the grandparents are integral to the tragedy.

#### **Dialogue: 4**

Narrative events lead the script until Joanne opens up to Todd. Dialogue before is commonplace and gives no hints, and dialogue after lacks nuance, naturalness and information (owing to bare plot). Individual voice comes and goes with the two main characters, Joanne and Todd. Joanne impresses as wooden and has little narrative action support for both her already lackluster lines and the more meaningful ones. At the beginning Todd has a decent start and does stand out – despite not having anything much to say – but later he sounds like a different person and gives off an unnatural vibe. His messages about spirituality come off a bit like an ad encouraging people to seek grief therapy. That itself is not ‘forbidden’ in script language – indeed, at times it may be necessary – but in this context it sounds unnatural and trite. This is partially due to the lack of appropriate build-up – plot and character-wise. Conversation between them lacks anything interesting except for a watery blink-and-miss-it moment before she easily reveals her brother’s accident. There’s nothing compelling especially when two people

are just beginning to know each other. Lines are bland and proceed with an unnatural lean; they seem deliberately getting to the point where they talk about Joey's death.

In a short script there is little room for wandering, filler lines compared to a feature. When short script dialogue is sparse, every line should contribute something meaningful. Here, only the basics for the backgrounds of Joanne and Todd are provided, and not much is offered to suggest and/or hint of dimension behind them or the primary situation. Their extended, non-essential table talk would work better if it contained additional information to support Joey's death, anything related to it or something that would give the story more dimension. A nice subtlety hovers around the scene where she tells Todd about the incident at the ravine; his reaction (telling her it wasn't her fault) and her response to it (asking why he assumed that) are not well-executed but suggest a rare naturalness and depth that should be kept if the overall dialogue is revised. It illustrates Joanne's reluctance to deal with the tragedy and Todd's perspective of the situation. The issue with it is content and structure but it also needs proper narrative action support; a dramatic story requires this for key dialogue and often, it is also something that isn't just a product of the scene itself, but of the overall script. It is something to keep in mind when revisions are made.

### **Tone: 5**

There's something promising here, with the languid descriptions of the story world and Joanne's recollections creating scenery conducive to potentially great dramatic atmosphere. The sun at various times, simple farmhouse details, kitchen activities, the ravine etc. This needs to be enhanced and polished to eliminate unnecessary and distracting details. Example: Joanne's leg length need not be mentioned anytime she uses them, unless a specific tone is desired where the legs themselves are essential. There's no indication that is the case here. Rather, it seems there is a need to fill space or remind the audience that the character possesses long legs. Once is more than enough and it isn't a good substitute for character layers. The fireflies as a symbolic and practical, natural reference is great but needs better support from the plot and character as it currently

impresses as almost pretentious. In the script, they symbolize Joanne's attachment to something (Joey's death) that she cannot release but she should. The fireflies' release from the glass bottle at the end supposedly symbolizes her release from her guilt and attaining freedom from it. Whilst it is a good dramatic tool and creates solid tone, it does not compensate for the weak plot. It appears as if greater effort were expended on using the fireflies than conveying the effects of Joey's death on Joanne and her friendship with Todd.

The scenery is a great setting for the events and personal confrontation to unfold and the story generally makes use of it but dramatic moments are sparse and shakily executed. There is a dearth of emotions to support the dramatic quality of the plot; key events are handled vaguely. Joanne's revelation lacks narrative indication of her disposition or countenance. There is no indication of Todd's reaction when he discovers that Joanne is the sister of the boy who died, and how/why he is compelled to suggest that they visit the ravine. In a short script that deals with feelings, a rich tone is an essential part of telling the story.

#### **Conflict: 4**

Joanne is troubled about her role in Joey's death, and Todd tells her that it is not her fault. That forms the entire conflicting situation and it is insufficient for a drama or any other film. Where the antagonist is not a person or creature, a concept usually takes the place and it must be well-defined and thoroughly explored, especially in a short script. Joanne's anguish is underwhelming and manifests superficially throughout the story. She certainly does not take very long to overcome it. At the very least, she takes a huge step in the journey towards that and does it with no resistance or trouble or anything else. Whether the antagonism is meant to be the guilt associated with her brother's death or a battle that is closely related to it, it must be implemented within the script; define it and explore or show consequences.

Noticeable here: Joanne's feelings toward the incident are hastily-defined and weakly explored, and the nature of the resolution is not linked to anything meaningful. There are

signs that she is troubled by something but nothing more is revealed until she freely reveals Todd what happened. The only thing given is that she is guilt-ridden – that guilt is manifested by memories (presumably now that she is back on the property) and her crying. Nothing else is suggested so her suffering is quite superficial. Her recollections are a solid start and are on the road to becoming impactful – they need more relevance and enhanced tone.

Being led to the site of the accident by Todd and being told that it was God's doing seem to erase or greatly reduce her guilt. The idea of revisiting the scene to help deal with her trauma is a solid event but its impact is modest as the effects were never properly presented and explored. The tragedy of the incident itself does most of the work by being relatable. As Joey's death is the defining factor for Joanne's purchase and relocation then it must be better defined and examined. The description of his bee attack could use a more pointed depiction as it is the key event that Joanne cannot seem to confront.

#### **Emotional Response/Investment: 5**

The emotions of experiencing the death of a sibling at childhood are strong enough, and when one is personally involved it becomes more intense. The script deals with an issue that will personally touch many and is generally interesting. But the execution here severely hinders good audience bonding. There is a fair sense of sadness surrounding Joanne's situation but the story is quite low impact – the emotions are not well-illustrated and there is nothing much about either main character that is memorable.

#### **Marketplace Potential: 4**

Even as a proof of concept for a feature film, this will have a hard time drawing any viewership. Short scripts need something memorable (for example; visual or plot-wise) and there isn't much here to draw attention. The core subject matter of a sibling's death will hold interest if it is properly examined with a certain angle or fantastic acting and little of that is offered.

### **Final Comments:**

For this story to work as a short film, a different approach to the concept and a better plotted and defined conclusion must be considered. Revision of the elements discussed in the above analysis is strongly suggested. The few characters and lines should convey more meaningful material in order to dramatically illustrate the story. Care should be taken when alternating flashback scenes with contemporary ones; though it is obvious where the scenes end, to avoid confusion and adhere to proper screenplay format, 'END FLASHBACK' or 'PRESENT' should be placed at the end of a flashback scene or at the beginning of the present-time scene (in slug-line/scene heading) respectively. Whatever approach is chosen should possess better cohesion than the current story, and the first step to this is discovering the goal or purpose of the story. The writer seems to have a knack for drama-centric atmosphere and story ideas. With some solid focus and practice, these skills can be utilized to create a well-written and enjoyable screenplay.