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Who Are You?

A middle-aged mother in American suburbia constantly makes lunch for her teenage daughter, but she cannot remember the word for *lunch* and eventually cannot remember her daughter's name. This is a glimpse of the 2007 short film *My Name is Lisa* by director Ben Shelton, who illustrates the tragedy of Alzheimer's disease. Shelton repeatedly uses specific shot types and framing to convey the message that Alzheimer's can affect anyone, and that family members experience all stages of grief, from denial through acceptance, as their loved one succumbs to the illness.

Medium close-ups are used to communicate the message that Alzheimer's can afflict anyone at any time. In the opening scene, Lisa is introduced with a medium close-up from her computer camera, which frames objects found in many homes: furniture, a staircase, pictures on the wall, and a backpack on the floor. Later a wider medium close-up is used to frame Lisa's neighborhood, so the viewer sees things typically found in suburbia: lawns, houses, cars, and trees. The repeated use of medium close-ups and framing of familiar objects allows the viewer to easily identify with the story and realize that this drama could someday be his or her own.

Shot types are also used to show the tragedy of the mother's affliction. The first close-up in the film is of the mom in her car. This close-up alerts the viewer to pay attention to this person who previously seemed only a minor character in a film about a teenager's love of books. The viewer's attention stays with the mom, even in subsequent scenes where her blurred image is

shown in long shots, when she repeats a sentence verbatim about her favorite authors and later arrives downstairs in a daze, dressed in a bathrobe. Thus before the heart-wrenching “my name is Lisa” scene, the progression of the Alzheimer’s disease is clear.

As the mom’s illness progresses, Lisa experiences the stages of grief, and this is made clear with frontality and shot types. The opening medium close-up of Lisa talking to the computer, but really to the audience, immediately allows the viewer to relate to and later empathize with her. This relationship, which is nurtured with repeated frontality and medium close-ups, makes it easier for the viewer to understand that some of Lisa’s words in her video logs apply not to books but to the depth of her emotions in handling her mom’s decline. In the second scene of the film, Lisa says, “I demand an explanation of these shenanigans!” when she is in the midst of confusion in the denial phase of her grief. In the third scene, Lisa expresses her feelings through the pain stage when she says, “Life is (not) just a coloring book...It’s an ugly, unpredictable, very difficult book. It’s hard.” In the sixth scene, the viewer watches a series of jump cuts of Lisa, dressed in black, as she sadly and thoughtfully experiences the depression and loneliness stage of her grief.

Lisa’s stages of grief are also evident through other types of medium close-ups. Three scenes use medium close-up dolly shots of Lisa walking home, which then turn into panning shots that end by framing Lisa’s view of her mom’s car. These shots allow the viewer to continue to empathize with Lisa through the denial and pain stages as her facial expressions show that she wants to avoid the car and thus avoid what is happening to her mom. A medium close-up is again used when Lisa experiences the anger period of her grief, but this shot shows a lot of headroom before the camera slowly zooms into a close-up. The headroom allows Lisa’s physical size to be seen, accentuating that she is a child who is understandably enraged yet must

now trade roles with her mother. After this transition, the viewer comes to terms with the new mother-daughter relationship in a couple of scenes that use medium two-shots to frame Lisa and her mom. In the first of these, Lisa undergoes the reconstruction stage when she makes lunch for her mom and tries to establish rapport. In the last two-shot, the viewer sees Lisa sharing her mom's old favorite pastime of reading and understands that Lisa has shifted to the final acceptance stage of her grief.

In one of the video logs, Lisa says, "The book is better than the movie. It's more imaginative. It gives you a chance to understand the whole story." However, the film *My Name is Lisa* may be better than a book. In a short period of time, Shelton successfully communicates his message that anyone can become a tragic victim of Alzheimer's, and that one's family members are forced to grieve, but can hopefully reach the ultimate acceptance stage, before their loved ones are physically gone.

Works Cited

Shelton, Ben. *My Name is Lisa*. *YouTube*. 6 Nov. 2007, <https://youtu.be/ZiRHyzjb5SI>.