Television as a Catalyst

Although television is often criticised as a mindless, exploitive form of entertainment, it was this medium which enabled me to make an important discovery. Television brought me James Dean.

The "discovery" of James Dean may seem trivial on the surface. I mean, he was a fine actor and his movies were entertaining, but how could they affect a viewer's life so deeply? After all, the reality of the silver screen and the reality of life seldom meet. What do movies such as rebel without a Cause and east of Eden have to do with the viewer? In my case, plenty.

I can still vividly picture the first time I saw Dean. It was a dirty, gray winter's day, a Sunday, I believe. I was moping around the house in the state of depression that so often characterised my early adolescence. I was feeling lonely and dejected, and I needed something to occupy me, to take my mind off my melancholy. Although I was not a heavy television viewer, being one of those who criticise the lack of substance on T.V., I turned the set on in desperation. Just as I feared, there was Orlando Wilson fly-fishing in glorious technicolor. I started to flip through the other channels in boredom, but when I hit Channel 11, I stopped. There was a young man sprawled in a chair, howling like a police siren. It was the first scene from Rebel Without A Cause.

My mother, who was folding laundry in the living room where I was, said something about that being James Dean, someone from her youth. I had heard about this guy in songs and literature, and curious, I started to watch him. It was the beginning of a devoted following.

I identified with Jimmy throughout the film. Even though my life wasn't anything like the movie, my emotions were like those Dean expressed. I kept feeling that he knew how I felt, that he wasn't playing a role, he was communicating with me. This man who was dead ten years before I was born had a tremendous effect on my life.

I started to look for his movies on television. I bought a book about his life. I bought posters, photos, and even a red jacket, and as I collected memorabilia, my attitude towards my life and myself changed. I watched his films and said to myself, "This man knows; he cares. I'm not the first person to feel these feelings." I learned that the important thing was that I accept myself, not that I ask others to accept me. The change was amazing, and very positive.

Of course, one could say that James Dean had the affect on me, not television, and that would be true. But television is the medium that delivered this catalyst to me. If not for T.V., I may never have discovered Dean, and my life would be different for that loss. Therefore I realise that television can affect one's life dramatically, and that it can be a positive medium. I owe a part of my self to T.V.

Commentary

- The writer establishes her focus in the first paragraph: "Television brought me James dean."
- The essay is clearly organized into paragraphs describing the writer's discovery of James Dean, her immediate reaction to rebel Without A Cause, and the subsequent effect of Dean's "image" on her life. Details are arranged in chronological order, as a narrative, but they are no less focused for that. The writer has chosen to discuss an extended example to support her thesis rather than a number of separate examples.
- Although the writer might have developed her discussion in greater detail, perhaps describing a specific situation in which she was able to "accept herself" after Dean's example, she does include specific information to back up her general statements. For example, she is specific about Dean's influence: "I bought a book about his life. I bought posters, photos, and even a red jacket." And she effectively controls her material throughout the essay, eventually summarizing Dean's influence and elaborating the thesis: "I learned that the important thing was
that I accept myself, not that I ask others to accept me. The change was amazing, and very positive."

- The personal, familiar tone is appropriate for the subject. The style as excellent. The writer uses signal words effectively (“After all,” “Of course,” “Therefore”). Sentence patterns are effectively varied: “Although I was not a heavy television viewer, being one of those who criticize the lack of substance on T. V., I turned the set on in desperation. The writer’s idiomatic “voice” emerges at certain points to good effect, as in the second paragraph, where she is piquing the readers’ interest before she describes her first encounter with James Dean on T. V.: “What do movies such as “Rebel Without a Cause” and “East of Eden” have to do with the viewer? In my case, plenty.” In the third paragraph, she risks some humor: “Just as I feared, there was Orlando Wilson fly-fishing in glorious technicolor.”

- The writer seems expertly aware of her readers, not only in the way she deliberately unfolds her story but in the way she is able to acknowledge and incorporate the readers’ views, as in the last paragraph: “Of course, one could say that James Dean had the affect [sic] on me, not television, and that would be true. But television is the medium that delivered this catalyst to me.”

- Except for a couple of mistakes in punctuation and spelling, the sample is technically correct.