

A rhetorical analysis: the passive non- identity



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In Tobias Wolff's memoir *This Boy's Life*, Wolff recounts a life of secretive rebellion under the rule of his abusive stepfather and submissive, peace-making mother. Tobias lives, from the beginning, in two worlds. The world of passivity and submissiveness around authoritative adults and the world of activity within himself and around his peers. Though they exist in balance in the beginning of Tobias's life, his infantilizing, disempowering relationship with Dwight drives him to external passivity and, eventually, a similar lack of control within his own mind. Tobias comes to believe that his own inaction is inescapable and creates an identity, or rather lack of identity, around what he is not or cannot be. Ultimately, leaving him without a self at all. Wolff's use of increasingly vague, passive language to describe his external interactions, and later internal thoughts, demonstrates the fated nature of his choices and, therefore, his inability to cultivate his own identity.

Tobias uses passive voice and other linguistic elements to convey inaction whilst around domineering adults. So, as his contact with Dwight intensifies, so too does his passivity until he eventually internalizes this voice and creates a non-identity. Early on in Tobias's life, he demonstrates a passivity around powerful adults that is otherwise sparing in his language. As he speaks to Roy — who has power over him in a physical sense and in terms of his identity — Tobias leaves out the quotations around only his own words, effectively removing himself from the conversation (43). Though Tobias may be able to speak the words he believes Roy wants to hear, he cannot actively communicate his true feelings. This inaction establishes a foundational thread of passivity in Tobias's identity. Yet, at the same time, when Tobias is by himself or with his peers, his language remains vividly active and

dominating, showing that he reserves this passivity for powerful adults. However, when Dwight enters Toby's life, his use of passive language increases rapidly, as Dwight takes control of Toby's choices, actions, and identity. Where Tobias's mother " couldn't control" him, Dwight "[makes] a study of him," relegating Tobias to a direct object that " is controlled" by the subject Dwight (73, 108). His stepfather insults his character, asserts dominance over him, and " fixes...his [abundance of] free time," inserting his dominance into every aspect to Tobias's life (109). As Dwight takes over Tobias's external world, he begins to internalize his stepfather's disparaging comments. Believing that " he [is] a liar...he [is] a theif," because Dwight says so, Tobias loses control of even his own thoughts (76, 147). Passively, Tobias fights none of this, having " come to believe this [is] all fated, that [he is] bound," to inaction and, in believing this, he creates a cycle (119): failing to take control of even his own language drives him to believe that he has no control and believing that he has no control makes him fail to try and take control. By deciding that his passivity is fate, Tobias makes it his identity.

However, cultivating an identity around inaction and lack of control, ultimately, is not an identity at all and leaves only ambivalence, demonstrated by Wolf's repetition of the noun clause " who I was." Wolf reflects upon the escapist fantasies of his teenage years and interprets these personas as effects of " not knowing who [he] was," but he still uses a noun clause — demonstrating how, even after adulthood consideration, his boyhood identity remains undefined, never fully-formed (41). Tobias's lack of identity — and his complementary use of " who I was," — persists and grows as he ages and begins to forms personality around his " opposition to

[Dwight]" (148). Using apophasis to define himself around a negative, he negates himself, leaving him without an identity at all. Later, as Tobias settles into his life with Dwight, he realizes that "everyone,"- meaning the noninteractive, disparate community of Concrete - knows "who [he is]" (147). Yet, using a noun clause, Tobias himself fails to give a definition to "who [he is]," aligning his understanding of himself with that of strangers who identify him only by his existence, only the mere fact that "he is." Furthermore, stating that "[he is] also a thief," Tobias only concretely identifies himself using Dwight's words, which are based on facts Tobias himself admits are inconsequential, demonstrating how Tobias is still powerless to craft his own selfhood (147). As the culmination of Dwight's abuse occurs on the eve of Tobias's escape, Tobias realizes he's "forgotten who [he is]" (245). However, simply by using the phrase, Tobias proves he has never really known his identity past an acknowledgment of his own existence; and so, in the midst of Dwight's pain, as he "forgets" the last remnants of his already- fragmented self, he ultimately loses his very "being" (245). Disempowered by Dwight and forced to define himself around passive inaction, Tobias fails to form a concrete identity at all, leaving him with only vague ambivalent noun clauses to describe himself.

In Tobias Wolff's memoir *This Boy's Life*, Wolff broaches subjects of abuse, escapism, and identity, showing how intertwined they truly are. Tobias, foundationally, lives within a duality: external passivity and internal activity. Yet as Dwight takes advantage of that passivity, determining for Tobias who he is and who he should become, that internal, imaginative activity is lost. Ultimately, Dwight's abuse, dismissiveness, and domination, gives power to

his disparaging and confusing words — seeping into Tobias's concept of selfhood and taking away his control within his own mind.