

Learning perspective: the memoir genre in "tuesdays with morrie"



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A memoir is typically a written account of a personal experience. It varies from an autobiography in that it usually focuses on a single, monumental period in the author's life. When Mitch Albom penned his touching and insightful memoir, *Tuesdays With Morrie*, he recounted the precious moments that he was able to spend with his college professor, Morrie Schwartz, who was also his former mentor with whom he had lost touch. He characterizes in great detail Morrie's last few months of life as he battled the debilitating and terminal disease ALS. Albom's account of his reactions and the impressions he draws from his time spent with Morrie provide the reader with a clear image of who he is as the narrator. Mitch Albom's use of extreme detail and imagery to promote meaning, his unique writing structure and the in-depth reflections he weaves throughout this story are particularly effective in conveying just how profound a time this was for him, deeming this a legitimate memoir, appropriately centered around a man who impacted him tremendously

Mitch Albom quickly establishes the fact that Morrie is quite ill and approaching death. In fact, within the first line of the memoir he explains, "the last class of my old professor's life took place once a week in his house," alluding to Morrie's impending death (17). A short time later, in chapter two, Albom reveals that Morrie's "death sentence came in the summer of 1994" (20). This introduction is abrupt and unusual. Rather than beginning the story with his childhood or young adult life, Albom chooses to begin at a much later point in his life—the end of his professor's life. Opening the memoir with Morrie's illness is an effective use of the literary technique in *medias res*, as it immediately places the reader in the heart of the story. The

audience's awareness of Morrie's predicament, his fleeting life, allows them to experience the same sense of desperation and urgency Mitch does.

Mitch Albom consistently presents extensive details and strong imagery to the reader, effectively generating sympathy and a deep emotional connection to Morrie, Mitch, and the relationship they share. At the same time, Albom's pervasive use of imagery allows the reader to relate to the severity of the situation. ALS is first presented as a serious disease that progressively worsens over time. This condition is gradual, and Albom's descriptions of it mimic the progression of the disease. Each chapter reveals a new aspect of the disease, an element not previously apparent, creating for the audience the sense of living these challenges right alongside Morrie and providing a true connection to the author's own experience as he observed Morrie's deterioration over time. At the beginning of the memoir, Morrie's struggles are minimal but apparent. He "kept tripping so he purchased a cane. That was the end of his walking free" (23). Later, "he hired his first home care worker (...) that was the end of his privacy" (33). Mitch Albom writes of these trials in order of occurrence. Rather than stating all of the hardships Morrie faced in his life, Albom presents them to the reader as they happen, allowing each challenge to impact the reader's perception of Morrie's degeneration. Albom also uses imagery clarify the condition of ALS to the reader. He explains that "ALS is like a lit candle: it melts your nerves and leaves your body a pile of wax" (24). The familiar action of a candle melting reinforces the brutality of Morrie's disease. Everyone has witnessed a melting candle, but not many have witnessed the effects of ALS. Visually applying this relatable image of "melting" to Morrie's

deteriorating body allows the reader to fully grasp the gravity of his condition.

Mitch Albom often structures his sentences in *Tuesdays With Morrie* so that they emphasize important statements within the memoir. Brief statements at the end of his paragraphs highlight a significant theme. Albom consistently applies this quick writing style throughout the memoir, an effective tool to emphasize meaning. For example, “ He would not wither. He would not be ashamed of dying” (24) its own paragraph entirely. Separating these statements from the rest of the reading emphasize certain messages. This disease will not define Morrie—a central theme throughout the memoir. Later in the book Morrie says, “ not everyone is so lucky” (62) and “ death ends a life, not a relationship” (149), both statements their own paragraphs. Because these statements sum up the message of the entire memoir, it’s crucial that the audience understand the importance of the words. Isolating these phrases from the rest of the writing focuses the reader on the critical points in the writing and allows them to understand these are the very points that resonate with the author himself.

Even though Mitch Albom is the author and narrator of *Tuesdays With Morrie*, it is apparent that for most of the memoir Morrie is the focus. As both the protagonist and main character, it is about Morrie that the audience is most concerned. However, it is important to understand that while readers share the point of view of the author and experience Morrie’s life as it impacted Mitch Albom, it’s through Morrie’s life that the audience learns most about the narrator. Albom’s takeaways and reactions to Morrie’s condition reveal most of who he is. The character development of Mitch prior to his *Tuesdays*
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with Morrie to after his visits is made apparent to the reader through Albom's reflections and commentary. Before, Albom states, "my days were full, yet I remained, much of the time, unsatisfied" (43). It's very clear at the beginning of the memoir that Albom's days consist of routine work. It isn't until he finds himself out of work that he gains clarity as he "was stunned at how easily things went on without [him]" (51). Mitch Albom was in desperate need of perspective; Morrie offered him this perspective. Later in the memoir, as he assimilates Morrie's wisdom, Mitch's growth is evident. He begins to recognize what matters in his life. An example of this breakthrough is when he asks, "learning to pay attention? How important could that be? I know it is more important than almost everything they taught us in college" (121). In the final chapter of the memoir, Mitch's true character is fully revealed. While humbly rubbing his old professor's feet, Mitch states, "[Morrie] had finally made me cry," a statement young Mitch would've never admitted to at the beginning of his journey with Morrie (156). Mitch Albom learned most about himself when visiting with his professor. It's during these meetings that his reflections and reactions are most genuine, in turn exposing the true character of Mitch Albom to the reader. These are the reflections that explain how profoundly he was touched by his mentor, Morrie, and all that he has learned. Because this is such a monumental event in Albom's life, it's fitting that his memoir would be centered around his old professor.

Some readers may argue the opposite—that the memoir is ineffective because it focuses too heavily on a single event in Mitch Albom's life. Albom writes very little of his childhood and personal life. It's fair to argue that

these events should also be included in his autobiography; however, this memoir is not an account of Albom's life experiences, it's an account of the significant lessons and wisdom he has acquired. The memoir's importance centers on the fact that before his Tuesday visits with Morrie, Mitch Albom's life was largely meaningless and repetitive. To dwell on that part of his life would also be largely meaningless and repetitive and thus ineffective since there are no real lessons to draw from. It is sufficient that Albom explains at the beginning of the memoir that he had a successful job, traveled often, and lived a decent life, but it wasn't what he had imagined for himself. So in some ways, Albom's life didn't truly start until he rediscovered his purpose through Morrie. Therefore, it's logical that the memoir begins at this point in his life.

The nostalgic tone of the author throughout the memoir offers the reader a better perspective of who Mitch Albom is. In between each chapter is a short essay in the present tense, about the past. While *Tuesdays With Morrie* is about the last few months of Morrie's life, Albom includes brief excerpts of him and Morrie's relationship in earlier years when Mitch was a student in college. These include the time when Mitch first stepped foot into Morrie's class and when Morrie met Mitch's parents. Providing these brief insights into the past give the reader more context and explains that Albom's relationship with his professor is rooted deeply extending years back into Albom's most developmental years.

The last chapter of the book is arguably the most critical reflection in the memoir because it includes the epiphany of the author. After having

witnessed Morrie's battle with ALS firsthand, it's Albom's takeaway from this <https://assignbuster.com/learning-perspective-the-memoir-genre-in-tuesdays-with-morrie/>

experience that reveals the most about him as the author. At the end of his memoir, Albom writes, “ I look back sometimes at the person I was before (...) I want to talk to that person (...) there is not such a thing as too late in life” (161). Mitch Albom’s memoir isn’t a collection of the things that have happened in his life as many autobiographies are, it’s about the lessons he’s learned through living, the lessons he’s learned from Morrie. In a successful memoir, some representation of growth or character development is conveyed. Albom draws something from every experience he writes about—this gives his story meaning.

Tuesdays With Morrie is an effective memoir because of the writing style and unique storytelling style. While most memoirs only include the opinion of the narrator, Tuesdays With Morrie includes perspectives from both the teacher and student. The reader learns most about the author through the experiences of Morrie Schwartz. Because of the pathos generated, unique point of view, and author’s epiphany, Tuesdays With Morrie effectively leaves a lasting impression on the reader.