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A Reconnaissance Expedition

If the sun were to explode, you wouldn't even know about it for eight minutes because that's how long it takes for light to travel to us. For eight minutes the world would still be bright and it would still feel warm. —Jonathan Safran Foer

At some point in life, one would encounter the “eight minutes” that he is desperate to hold on to—the last pieces of delightful memories with beloved ones. Realizing that the light is fading away, people often travel back into their past to seize the memories they cherish. Unfortunately, the road to the past is rugged and realities arouse fear and sorrow. Oskar Shell, the protagonist of Stephen Daldry's film “Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close,” also undergoes the same bitter sweet experience. Hoping to prolong his eight minutes with his dead father, Oskar conducts a distinct expedition to look for the traces of his father. His tough journey well depicts how Oskar ultimately overcomes his loss and matures. **Through a variety of literary devices, the movie demonstrates the theme that one has to fight against fears and revisit trauma in order to cope with the trauma.**

“Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close” employs a sophisticated plot that arouses thrills and curiosity. In the introduction of the story, Oskar's intimate relationship with his father is reminisced through the illustration of their “reconnaissance expedition” in search for the “sixth borough” in New York. Following the sweet recollection, Oskar's contrasting fear and distress after suddenly losing his father during 9.11 attacks is vividly portrayed through his gloomy narration and destructive behavior. As the rising action, Oskar discovers a mysterious key labeled *Black* a year later in his father's closet. Convinced that the key

belongs to someone named “Black”, he starts visiting all the people with the name “Black” in New York City, inquiring about the mysterious key. The story is further developed by Oskar’s interaction with an old renter living next door who decides to accompany him. Two figures continue their journey and the story reaches its climax when Oskar miraculously finds the owner of the lock he has longed to find and tells the man about a secret that has tortured him ever since the worst day. After the heart breaking narration in the climax, the story gets to the resolution, in which Oskar finds peace in his heart and finally calls an end to his long expedition. The story as a whole is not entirely chronological since the movie frequently employs flashbacks, especially at scenes when Oskar recollects the memories with his father; however, the whole process of searching for the lock follows the chronological sequence of time.

Equally important, the eminent features of the main characters also play a pivotal role in interpreting the film. To start with, Oskar Shell, the protagonist and narrator of the story, is a fully developed character. He is an early-teenage boy who demonstrates wild and violent behaviors after losing his father. Along with his fear and anxiety over the outside world, his abnormal behaviors explicitly convey the intensity of the shock he received from the unexpected and non-understandable death of his father. His emotions are portrayed through not only his own narration but also his interaction with the other characters. The renter is a salient example these characters. The interesting part is that the renter was rather undeveloped and mysterious at the start, but as the story develops, an irony is revealed that the old renter turns out to be Oskar’s grandfather, who had abandoned his wife and child due to his traumatic experience of losing his parents during World War II. After the truth revealed, the old man’s trauma is paralleled with that of Oskar, and their expedition becomes an implicit remedy for both. In addition, although relatively undeveloped, other characters, such as Oskar’s mother and all the people Oskar visits, all contribute to Oskar’s recovery and

maturing through their interactions with him.

Interestingly, the plot and the characters are interwound so harmoniously that while the film is highly plot-driven, the internal struggles and growth of the main characters are also intensively developed and highlighted. In fact, the plot often overlaps or parallels with the inner conflicts and resolutions of the individuals, especially those of the protagonist. Indeed, the introductory scenes about finding the sixth borough demonstrates Oskar's personal intimacy with his father, and maximizes the contrasting despair when he loses him. The rising action in which the boy starts looking for the lock reveals Oskar's unstable and traumatized mind. Furthermore, while the plot demonstrates the external conflicts such as the physical hardships he confronts in the expeditions, the internal conflicts such as his fear of the outside world and the failure to express his love or to control his anger rise to the surface. In the same fashion, the climax of the story coincides with the climax of the boy's emotions, when he could not help but to express all his mixed feelings as well as his secrets. Finally, as the expedition reaches the end and settles down, Oskar's furious emotions and anxiety are also diffused. The characterization of the renter, as well, is delivered rather slowly throughout the plot that the ones watching the film can speculate more about two main characters' overlapping internal conflicts which ultimately ties to the main theme of trauma and recovery. As a whole, the slow-paced development of the plot renders people to be more engaged in the deep emotions and internal struggles of the main characters.

In addition to the main plot and the character development, the first-person point of view of the protagonist successfully engenders fear and pity from the ones who watch the film. The narrator of the story is Oskar Shell, and by directly listening to the frank expressions of his feelings and his own attitude facing adversity, one can understand more in depth about how he would actually feel about death. The tone of the narration magnifies the effect. The narration is maintained with certain seriousness and gloominess throughout the

film, though the tone rises and descends at times as Oskar feels various mixed emotions such as disappointment, regret, and fear. Indeed, employing the first-person perspective is especially effective in this story since an important purpose of the film is to arouse sympathy and share the emotions by portraying the internal changes of the protagonist. Undeniably, the protagonist seems unreliable at first as he is young and shows numerous abnormal behaviors due to his shock. However, he is in fact the perfect narrator for the story since the film is all about how shocked and irrational Oskar Shell feels and reacts to the society, and his straightforward and blatant narratives directly ties to the major theme about traumas.

Similarly, the distinct setting of the story provides a gloomy and disastrous background that supports the internal confusion and struggle of the protagonist. The story takes place in New York, at the time around 9.11.2001. On the day of the incident, Oskar's father was in the World Trade Center, and inevitably, the tragedy of 9.11 Attacks directly hits the Shells. Along with the Oskar's personal relationship with the incident, loud and paralyzed New York City itself gives a strong impression of an unstable and anxious society, which creates further fear and instability for the main characters. Moreover, the time setting for the story is not confined to the very day of the incident, but rather focused extensively on the span of time after the tragic event. Throughout the spectrum of time, the protagonist's feelings and behaviors fluctuate and alter. Thus, the span of time fully illustrates how the boy heals himself and internally matures as time passes.

Along with the superficial development, a number of prominent symbols and parallelisms further enrich the story. First of all, on the surface, the main plot can be referred to as Oskar's journey in search for a lock that fits his key. In fact, this journey can be interpreted as a representation of the challenge for Oskar to overcome his fear and find peace in his heart by repeating the memories that he had shared with his father. Furthermore, a distinct parallelism exists between Oskar's journey and the very first *reconnaissance*

expedition looking for the sixth borough. In fact, the reconnaissance expedition can be seen as an index that hints Oskar's forthcoming journey in search for the lock. In the same fashion, the ending scene in which Oskar smiles with joy riding the swing that he used to fear leads to the implication that after all, he has overcome his fear and anxiety about his loss and that he was able to look at the world in a whole new perspective. Probably, the sixth borough was the amorphous lock that Oskar has long been trying to open, and the key, it turns out, was the symbol of courage that would let his fears and pain go, no matter how much detours it takes him.

Finally, the title, "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close," as well as the contents, is full of meanings and symbols and acts as both a signifier and a signified. In fact, "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close" is the title of Oskar's hand book that contains photos, records and his personal feelings about all his visits. Interestingly, the book's existence and its title are revealed almost at the very end of the story— at the scene in which Oskar's mother finds the book and reads through it. As one of the best images in the film, the scene allows the ones watching to reflect on all the hardship and struggle Oskar has gone through and to fully empathize with his frank appeals. While this emotional effect is achieved rather forthrightly, several connotations allude to the important main idea of the film. "Extremely loud" indicates the brouhaha caused by the journey and the internal confusion and instability of Oskar. On the other hand, as the consequences have shown, all the answers to his problems were "incredibly close" to him, just as the title depicts: The owner of the lock he was looking for were indeed the first family he visited, and the clue to the sixth borough was just under the swing that he was afraid to get close to. More importantly, the peace he desperately pursued was achieved rather simply through his "reconnaissance expedition."

In conclusion, diverse literary devices in Stephen Daldry's "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close" ultimately establish the theme: the importance confronting and accepting

trauma. The plot, characters, point of view, setting, and symbols working together, render the ones watching the film to empathize with the despair and struggles of Oskar Shell, and at the same time, to be relieved by the ultimate smile on the boy's face. The film insinuates that Oskar, by taking another "reconnaissance expedition," has probably grasped the key to immortalize his eight minutes with his father.