

**Dirty Little Secret:
The Voyeuristic and Cathartic Effects of PostSecret**

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COMM 493
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May 1, 2012

ABSTRACT

Nine years ago, Frank Warren was just an ordinary man from Maryland with an idea: to start an “ongoing community art project where people mail in their secrets anonymously on a side of a homemade postcard” (PostSecret). Today, PostSecret is a global socio-psychological movement that affects thousands of lives daily. PostSecret serves as a safe place for those with secrets to be relieved from the burden of suppression and a cathartic source for audiences who gain the courage from the secrets shared to seek freedom from their own omissions.

LEVEL 2

Frank Warren founded Post Secret on January 1, 2005, using the Blogspot blogging domain website. Began as an experiment, the text was delivered to any person who visited the site. Warren posted ten secrets a week and within two years, over 2,500 secrets were sent in to PostSecret (Wikipedia¹). Soon, comments and community sections were added features to the blog, adding even more unique visits to the site every day. Today, twenty secrets are shared each week, with over hundreds of thousands of unique visitors every time.

There are two main rhetors for the text: the thousands of anonymous contributors of the secrets and Frank Warren. Presumably there have been rhetors who have submitted multiple secrets, but this can never be known with absolute certainty due to the anonymous nature of the text. Frank Warren is another rhetor for the text, as he receives the secrets and sorts them. He sends his own sort of message through the arrangement of secrets he decides upon for the blog and books, for example for those with secrets about feeling alone, he groups several similar

¹ Traditionally, Wikipedia would never be used as a legitimate scholarly source. However, it is interesting to consider the connection between the completely user-generated text of PostSecret and the user-generated content source Wikipedia.

secrets along with secrets of hope and recovery from loneliness. This arrangement sends the message of hope and unity to the lonely.

The text can be divided into two categories: secrets that promote catharsis and voyeuristic confessionals. The former is more uplifting and full of regretful past omissions, where the latter is usually about taboo sexual activity, judgments, behaviors or opinions.

In keeping with the Neoartistotelian Rhetorical Analysis paradigm, *Elocucio*, or style, of the text can be seen in a variety of methods enabled by the rhetor. Some secrets are written in different languages; some in code, and some are completely blank, solely relying on the illustration for the message. This lack of clarity on the part of the sender signifies that they are not yet ready for catharsis. They are still holding back from full release of their secret.

Memoria begins to connect the two concepts of voyeurism and catharsis. When the sender submits a secret, they are the only memory keeper, as the receiver reads the secret and most likely forgets it, unless the confession had cathartic effects upon the receiver. Otherwise, the fleeting voyeuristic effect of reading the secret is short-lived.

Pronuntatio examines the methods used to procure final understanding of the argument to audiences. Because Post Secret is such a unique text, the creativity and manipulation of secrets needs to be considered. Secrets have been hand-drawn, typed, illustrated, photographed, coded, or even containing items attached to the post card, for example money or the poppy seeds.

PostSecret reaches a diverse global audience and because of this, the two different reactions of the universal and private levels must be gauged. Because of PostSecret, Frank Warren has been able to support his platform of suicide prevention. Since 2008, he has teamed up with 1-800-suicide and International Suicide Prevention to help those struggling with depression to have someone to talk with. Because of PostSecret's link to suicide prevention help, many wrote to

Warren later and thanked him for inadvertently saving their life. Five PostSecret books containing secrets have also been published.

As for the 60 secrets I am analyzing, the reaction varies. Some are alarming to read, as those tend to be sexually deviant. Other secrets cause me to think and some even gently force me to reevaluate my life, as some of the secrets seem applicable to my life. However, I must remember that I, like everyone else, view the secrets with my own particular lens of life. What may seem abnormal, to me because of my conservative views on sexuality, may indeed be standard. While interpreting the text, I must remember that while although different reactions are common, a relativistic understanding is not helpful to my analysis.

Something to be noted is that most of the information found for this Neo-Aristotelian paradigm was found from Wikipedia, a user-generated content source. Traditionally, Wikipedia would never be used as a legitimate scholarly source. However, it is interesting to consider the connection between the completely user-generated text of PostSecret and the user-generated content source Wikipedia. Several scholarly, peer reviewed articles on PostSecret, including “Intimate Economies: PostSecret and the Affect of Confessions” by Anna Poletti, proved to be useful. This article examines the “continued influence of confession” through the lens of different theories like the knowledge-power formation for autobiographical functioning and the “intimate public.” Poletti holds to the thought-process that confession leads to feelings of relief and truly being known and understood by others.

Likewise, in “Emotional and Interpersonal Consequences of Self-Disclosure in a Lived, Online Interaction” (2011), examines the “strangers on the Internet” phenomenon in regards with self-disclosure. Because typically negative emotions are typically shared during self-disclosure, the emotional burden load of the sharer is lightened, although Bareket-Bojmel and Shahar noted

in their study that no clear physical evidence actually supports the notion that sharing emotions alleviates distress. PostSecret itself supports this query because although in theory the idea of mitigation from distress seems correct, with the anonymity of PostSecret, one can never know for certain if true catharsis is reached. Because self-disclosure plays a vital role in the “formation, maintenance and dissolution of close relationships,” relationships are formed through PostSecret due to the anonymous self-disclosure, albeit one-sided and risk free (2011). “Disclosing online might not involve the increased vulnerability that usually follows self-disclosure of personal information offline” (2011). Readers, especially those from “stigmatized social identity groups” like homosexuals or minorities, create these anonymous and “safe” relationships because the feelings of catharsis, from both negative and positive disclosure, are addictive and contagious (2011).

In “Self-disclosure in computer-mediated communication: The role of self-awareness and visual anonymity” (2001), Adam Joinson of the Open University elaborates on how computer-mediated communication (CMC) relates with anonymity of both others to self and self to others. CMC “discourages awareness of others and encourages ant-normative, aggressive behavior” and thus, social interaction can be more vulnerable and intimate than normal face to face (FTF) relationships (2001). According to the studies presented in this article, higher levels of self-disclosure are in CMC than FTF, resulting in deindividualization due to the visual anonymity of the disclosure and the more salient online identities overwhelming all other voices (2001). While visual anonymity of others to self leads to “heightened self-awareness,” anonymity of self to others allows “one to express one’s true mind, or authentic self, unfettered by concerns of self-presentation” (2001). With PostSecret, the latter form of anonymity is most enabled, leading to

disinhibition and proving that CMC does not equivocate with aggressive, socially irresponsible behavior.

Every Sunday for the past two years, PostSecret has kept me coming back to view new secrets. Some, I have even saved on a folder in my computer and occasionally revisit them to gain inspiration once again from their simple messages. Hope is contagious and that's one reason why PostSecret is so rhetorically interesting. Something about this text brings people back each week and rarely are readers ever one-time visitors.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What compels people to share secrets or read them?
- Why is this blog relevant?

LEVEL 3

The act being done in PostSecret is ultimately the sharing of unshared secrets that were created on personalized post cards and sent anonymously to Frank Warren. The audience acts by reading published secrets through a variety of means: through the blog, five actual books, or the smart phone app, which is no longer available. Receiving catharsis is another main act and arguably the most important effect.

The physical setting for the mailed secrets is at Warren's home, although the agents send the secrets from all across the world. Warren originally dreamt of the concept behind Post Secret while visiting in Paris, France. Another setting for the PostSecret scene is metaphorical, taking place in the mind. This setting applies in particular to readers of PostSecret, as they process and even apply the secrets to their own lives. However, the main setting for Post Secret is cyberspace, the final destination for secrets.

The main character is ultimately the reader of the secrets. Those who see the secrets, even the

original ones created by Frank Warren, then act, creating the thousands of secrets that makes PostSecret the successful movement it is today. Without the readers, there would not be material to publish books or a blogs and would completely end the PostSecret mission. Readers can also play the second role of a voyeur, depending on the motive of the reader. If the agent acts in order to selfishly digest the information shared by the sender, they are being voyeuristic as well.

The agents act by reading the materials and sending in their own secrets. Metaphorically, the agents internalize the message of the secrets and process them mentally, enabling them to send in a physical secret of their own or verbally share with a trusted friend, taking part in the cathartic process.

These agents act out of two separate motivations. The first is a voyeuristic curiosity that motivates readers to continue their interest in secrets posted and in the lives of other agents. The other motivator for agents is the cathartic, “me too” effect. Agents read secrets and relate to those shared, enabling them to release their own similar burden, either through sending a Post Secret or getting local support.

LEVEL 4

Because this text is extremely expansive, with almost a decade’s worth of secrets, the metaphorical analysis of Post Secret will be somewhat broad. Linguistically, the title “Post Secret” can refer to two other important facets of the text. Secrets are sent in on homemade *postcards*. The act of sharing the secrets on the blog is referred to as *posting*.

Likewise, one of the main metaphors of Post Secret can be seen through the concept of the voyeuristic peeping Tom. Traditionally, catharsis brings healing to the sender, while voyeurism strictly involves the receiver. Because Post Secret has now blurred the lines between voyeuristic and cathartic releases, the text must be analyzed with both concepts in mind.

Cathartic-Voyeuristic secrets provide emotional release to the sender and potentially to the receiver, while also containing voyeuristic elements of explicit information. The sender cracks open the door of his or her proverbial closet filled with skeletons, letting the peeping Tom receiver glimpse at true nature of the sender's secret. Voyeuristic secrets are purely meant to entertain or provide shock value. With these, the sender's metaphorical closet door is thrown open and the skeletons are out in the open, fully visible.

Works:

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