

An Abusive Marriage

This paper was written some years ago by a student in one of my classes. The writing is extremely good: clear, well-organized, with effective quotes and examples. The analysis is the best I can remember. I don't agree with all of it, but I am certainly impressed by the complexity of her thinking (and who knows, she may be right.) This is as good as it gets. (Please note that all potentially identifying information in this piece has been changed to ensure confidentiality.)

Life Story Analysis: Beth	My Comments
<p><u>A snapshot of childhood and moving out</u></p> <p>Beth was the youngest of three children whose father was a carpenter and whose mother ran a small clothing store. They grew up in a small North Carolina town – so small, in fact, that it didn't even have a stoplight. “It was such a shock,” she said about moving away, “to see a McDonald's. I was in <i>the big city</i>,” she added with self-deprecating humor. She grew up in a tight-knit Protestant community where everybody knew each other and your neighbor's children were like your own.</p> <p>There wasn't much to do in that small town, but the kids managed to keep themselves busy. Beth recalled spending summers at the lake and winters sledding off her roof. “There was a big snow bank to the side of the house,” she said. “It rose so high, we could jump and sled right off the roof into it without getting hurt. So that's what we did.”</p> <p>Her father used to yell at her and her siblings for this, but her father's yelling never scared her. In fact, she and her siblings thought it was funny. “We were a very noisy family,” she said. “It was when things were <i>quiet</i> that you knew something was wrong.”</p> <p>As much as she loved her hometown, Beth secretly dreamed of seeing her name in lights. Music was an integral part of her childhood – not just listening to it, but also creating it. She was an avid pianist, and she began singing harmonic arrangements with her siblings at just three years of age. By the time she was a teenager, she was ready for the lead, but her parents were anything but ready to see their youngest daughter aim for fame.</p> <p>The first time I brought it up to them, they said they were disappointed that all I'd want out of life was to be liked.</p>	<p>A very brief quote that makes the point. It also conveys, in a few words, something of Beth's personality: she sounds smart, funny, and self-deprecating.</p> <p>A critical incident—perhaps a turning point in Beth's life—described briefly in Beth's own words.</p>

That really hurt. It was more than just being liked, but they didn't understand. They told me I'd be spending the rest of my life trying to make sure everyone liked me, because that's what being a professional musician is all about. So I withdrew; I felt ashamed. I didn't bring it up again for three years, but I thought about it the entire time. When we started talking about colleges, I told my mother I wanted to study music. She got very quiet.

To complicate matters further, the music school of her dreams offered her a scholarship. The college being in an expensive city, however, her parents told her they didn't have the money to support her living there. They encouraged her to attend a smaller college in her home state, which she did, she said, with only a little resentment.

"It's not like singing was the *only* thing I wanted to do in life," she said, "so I decided to go with the next best thing." Beth became a business major.

College life, first love, marriage

Beth loved the college life. She joined a sorority on campus, made many social friends and several very close friends, but she may have been closest to her professors. Eager to learn and unsatisfied with simple lectures, she would often meet her professors outside of class to discuss the subject matter of her courses and anything else that was on their minds. She especially enjoyed the company of her professors, because she felt more capable of interacting on the same level with them. As much as she loved her friends, she often felt as though she had to "bring herself down a peg" to be around them. She attended all the big parties on campus, but often found herself to be the only sober person. She loved the parties and hanging out with her friends, but the night life often left her desiring more intellectual stimulation.

In the daytime, she began meeting Paul, her advisor and professor in one of her classes, for lunch in the cafeteria several times a week. Paul was both a father figure when she was away from her true father, and a friend with whom she could speak openly. "He was my best friend," she said. In fact, he was the best man at her wedding a couple of years after she left school. (more on the wedding and the marriage later).

In her third semester, Beth decided to take a course in business law, where she met a student named Peter. Peter wanted to be a New York City police officer, but Beth no longer wanted to move away from North Carolina. She knew that this fact doomed their relationship from the start, but she didn't want to think about it at the time. "It was never something we really

This brief summary of Beth's childhood shows us what we need to know: a small-town girl with unusual talent and ambition, constrained by limited financial resources and her parents' expectations. The author doesn't say this in so many words, but we get the point.

The author summarizes the main point and provides a few illustrations: Beth is smarter & more ambitious than most of her classmates. This continues the theme, which we have already heard, that she could be more than her circumstances allow her to be. Note, however, that the author does not make this point explicitly—maybe it would be better if she did.

Something seems to have changed: Beth no longer sounds quite as ambitious. The author points this out, but does not discuss it at any length.

talked about,” she said. “I mean, he told me pretty early on, then we just pretended it wasn’t going to happen.”

Beth’s relationship with Peter was something of a surprise to her friends, who had always envisioned her with someone as outgoing as she was. Peter wasn’t exactly shy, but as he always said, he preferred to “bask in her glow,” as he put it, rather than take the spotlight for himself. She recalled the first time she brought him home to meet her family:

I remember that first Sunday dinner, we were all arguing and shouting and laughing across the table like we had always done, and Peter was just smiling. My sister asked him, ‘well, aren’t you going to say anything?’ He said, ‘I’m just enjoying the show.’ That was classic. That instant, he was accepted into the family.

After dating for about a year, they were certain that they would get married. They hadn’t set a date – in fact, he hadn’t technically proposed to her yet – but they told their friends that they would get married eventually, and even referred to themselves as husband and wife.

Unfortunately, the “honeymoon” wouldn’t last long. After another year, Peter graduated from college. They could no longer ignore the fact that he was moving away. “I think one part of him hoped I would move to New York with him,” she observed, “and the other part hoped I would ask him to stay.”

A month before graduation, he told her he would be moving to New York at the end of the summer. She couldn’t recall what she had said to him, but she remembered his response:

He said he had told me before that he was going to leave. He just said it so bluntly, like he was trying to shut me down. He had never been so insensitive before. Honestly, I don’t know what I was thinking. Maybe it was repression, but I had forgotten that he was leaving. But he was right; he had told me two years ago that he had been leaving. So I just said ‘You’re right. Good luck in New York.’

She wanted more than anything to ask him not to go, but she knew she couldn’t live with the guilt of standing between him and his dream. Beyond that, however, she had hoped that she mattered enough to him that he would decide to stay on his own.

She hoped he would stay, but she knew he wouldn’t. He asked to discuss it more with her, but she refused, saying that he had made his decision a long time ago and she had no right to

A nice quote, though it does not really add much to our understanding of the story.

This quote is more interesting, because it introduces and illustrates something important and puzzling about Beth: a stubborn and impulsive streak in her behavior. We will hear more about this as her story goes along.

These details add to our impression of her: through her stubbornness and extreme behavior; she made a bad

get in the way. After that day, she stopped returning his calls, stopped eating at the cafeteria where they might cross paths, and didn't acknowledge him when they did pass by each other on campus. "I handled it completely wrong," she said, "but at the same time, he didn't really push to see me again. If he had come to my dorm room, I know I would have answered. In the end, I wasn't worth the effort." Peter moved away one week after graduation, and the two never spoke again.

Moving On

After Peter moved away, Beth couldn't bear to remain in North Carolina. Her friends suggested that she move to New York and reconnect with Peter, but she said it would be too humiliating after he was able to leave her so easily. With one year left in college, she dropped out and abruptly moved to Amherst, Massachusetts. She planned on going back to college at some point, but she knew that she was too depressed after her breakup with Peter to make decent grades. She got a job as a waitress, where she quickly became an invaluable asset and a part of the family. She saw this as her "mindless" period. "I just needed to *not think* for a while," she said. "I worked, I hung out with my friends, and I went tanning. Those were the things I liked to do. I needed to detox after Peter." Within three months, the managers allowed her to effectively "run the floor," i.e.: take charge of the restaurant, when they were unavailable to do so. After six months, she was trained to work behind the bar, a surefire sign that she was on her way up to management.

Shortly after Beth had been trained for the bar, a new busser named Jeff was hired. Jeff was something like Peter in that he was quiet and friendly, but Jeff was more shy. In many ways, he was Beth's antithesis, and the antithesis of her family as a whole. This connection, however, seemed to be lost on Beth, who made no contrast between Jeff and her family until much later, when describing things she later hated about him (more on this later).

Jeff was two years younger than Beth, and was working his way through college to earn a degree in computer science. He was also the youngest of three children, all boys. Beth told me that Jeff's father abused his mother and ran a very strict, stoic household. Unfortunately, she said, he revealed very little to her about his childhood beyond these generic assessments. Even with this very sketchy portrait of his youth, one can see that Beth was just as unusual to him as he was to her.

Jeff was reluctant to make friends at the restaurant, but he and Beth made an instant connection. They were often cut from work at the same time, so they would go out for a burger or coffee after work.

situation worse. The author does not comment on this here—but she will, at the end of the paper. These details provide the evidence for the analysis to come.

This is a puzzling period in Beth's life. A bright, ambitious woman drops out of college and takes a job far below her ability. Beth herself offers a minimal explanation, and the author does not comment further.

Here, the author does call our attention to something that Beth herself does not seem to notice.

I think part of the reason I fell in love with him was because he took my mind off of Peter. I had moved forward after breaking up with Peter, but I never really moved on. He lingered in the backdrop of my mind constantly. With Jeff, though, I really did forget about Peter. That alone meant he was special.

Beth admitted, regretfully, that his shyness attracted her in ways that might not have been healthy. “It’s sexy when you can draw somebody out of a shell,” she said. “Like you are just *that good*, that you can knock the walls down. I think I got caught up in that a little.”

About six months after they met, they were engaged to be married. I asked her whether or not she thought the marriage was, in part, a form of unconscious aggression toward Peter. She said, “Absolutely. And not even entirely unconscious – I didn’t want to think about it, but there were plenty of times I looked at that ring and thought, ‘Fuck you, Peter.’ ”

Eventually, however, reality began to set in for Beth. One week before the wedding was to take place, she began to doubt whether or not she should marry Jeff. He had a tendency to criticize her and make little comments that might put her down. For instance, he used to tell her that he didn’t like blond hair (Beth is a natural blond). She tended to turn such things into a game. In this case, she responded by bleaching her hair to make herself “even more blond.” This cat-and-mouse game was fun at the beginning, but as the reality of marriage began to sink in, she wondered whether or not his criticism would become more serious after they were married.

When she tried to talk to her friends about her doubts, they told her that she was just getting typical cold feet before a wedding. One friend even said, “How can you even *think* about cancelling now, after everything’s all set? You should have done this sooner, if you were going to do it.”

Beth married Jeff according to schedule. As mentioned earlier, Paul was the best man at the wedding. In fact, most of the guests were Beth’s friends, who Jeff either didn’t know or knew through Beth.

They had a small ceremony on the beach, which was delayed for a short time because of a rain storm. When the rain had finally settled, she was ready to begin the ceremony, but Jeff wanted to wait just a few minutes longer. Once they saw a rainbow emerge from the clouds, he was ready to get married. It was this kind of romanticism early in their relationship, she said, that she had fallen in love with.

The author was clearly interpreting what she heard as she was doing the interview. Here, she provides evidence that her interpretation was right: It was confirmed by Beth.

Marriage, children, disillusionment

“The wedding was beautiful,” Beth said. “The *marriage* was hell.”

The first year or so of their marriage was fairly pleasant, though Beth was beginning to grow weary of Jeff’s criticisms. He complained when she vacuumed the floors and didn’t align the vacuum lines properly. He complained when she stocked the cabinets, and didn’t make sure that the labels on cans and jars were facing front. She was annoyed, but she tried to accommodate him. Still, these moments weren’t the norm (yet), and they were not extreme enough for her to consider divorce yet.

The first time Beth thought about divorce was about six months into the marriage. He had had a bad day at work, and began criticizing everything she did. His nitpicking culminated at dinner, when she served burgers and forgot to buy his favorite steak sauce as a condiment. He “flew off the handle, telling me how I never do even the littlest things for him, how I don’t care about what he wants... Shit like that. I told him to get off his fucking self-pity trip. He flipped the plate off the table and it broke on the floor, then he stormed out of the apartment without a word.” She contacted an attorney, and set up an appointment for three days later; however, she discovered within that time that she was pregnant.

Beth was ambivalent at the realization that she was pregnant. She was thrilled at the prospect of being a mother – it was her greatest dream in life – but she knew that it would forever tie her to Jeff in one form or another. She had just decided she didn’t want to do that. Nonetheless, she embraced the birth of her daughter, Kirsten. “It was the most incredible moment of my life,” she said, “when they placed her in my arms. Suddenly I felt like, as long as she was okay, my purpose in life was fulfilled. What I mean is, all that mattered was that she grew up happy and healthy, knowing she was loved dearly.” Jeff wanted her to stay at home to raise their daughter. She thought at the time that it was a good idea – she was determined to give her child the attention she, herself, lacked from her working mother.

Two years after Kirsten was born, Jeff told Beth that he planned to move the family to Delaware, where he grew up, to be near his family. She was opposed to the idea, because he hadn’t lived in Delaware in years, she had never been to Delaware and had no friends there, and she had many friends in Amherst. She felt that her friends provided more than enough social support to help, but Jeff’s mind was made up. “I’m going to Delaware,” he said. “Are you coming with me?”

A one line quote introduces and summarizes the next section. Notice that this quote not only tells us the facts, it lets us hear something distinct in Beth’s voice: She sounds smart, self-deprecating, and humorous. Compare what she said at the start, about realizing she was in the big city when she saw a McDonald’s.

Throughout this section the author describes a series of small incidents. Although none of them is all that extreme, we get a clear picture of a marriage that is coming apart.

“I wasn’t prepared to be on my own,” Beth said. “I didn’t have any money, we had a child together... I wish I’d have said no, but I didn’t think I could make it alone. I had to provide for my daughter.” They lived in Delaware for two years, and never saw his family. They moved several more times, their last address being back in Massachusetts.

Beth described the next 14 years of her life like “dumping a box of pictures on the floor – a lot of random snapshots with no sensical (sic) order.” She said that Jeff became physically abusive as well as increasingly abusive psychologically; however, she chose not to go into much detail about the abuse. She gave three “categories” to describe his behavior throughout the marriage: 1) he was physically abusive to her, 2) he continually belittled her and attacked her self-esteem, and 3) he tried to turn their daughter against her. I asked for more information on these categories of abuse. She said that she didn’t want to go into detail on the first category, but did show me a scar on her side from a compound fracture in her rib. For the second category, she elusively referred me back to her earlier examples (although she said it got much worse and much more frequent as time went on). She did, however, go into a little bit more detail on the third category. She said that he contradicted her in parenting, usually to permit things that Beth had specifically forbidden. After Beth would forbid Kirsten from eating dessert before dinner, for example, Jeff would tell Kirsten that “Mommy’s got a stick up her butt. Go on, have a cupcake.” When he and Beth would fight, he would tell Kirsten that “Mommy’s being a bitch,” and he blamed Beth for “provoking him” when he beat her.

People always ask me why I stayed for 17 years. Where was I supposed to go? What was I going to do with Beth? I had talked to lawyers about it, and it would have been worse if I had left. He would have had unsupervised visitation with her. I couldn’t let that happen. At least being in the house, I could do damage control.

Beth waited until Kirsten turned 16 to divorce Jeff, because at 16, the courts would no longer mandate visitation. Two weeks after Kirsten turned 16, Beth filed for divorce and moved with her daughter into a small apartment of her own. Beth said that Kirsten jokes about it as “the best birthday present they ever gave me.” Beth explained that Kirsten knew about the abuse. Ever since she was 12 years old, Kirsten looked forward to the time when her parents would finally separate (actually, according to Beth, Kirsten looked at it like “the time when he would finally go away”) and the fighting in her house would end.

This part of Beth’s story is less satisfying. It is a period of 14 years, summarized in just a line or two. This lack of detail does not seem to be the fault of the author; instead, it seems that Beth was reluctant to go into detail. The author does the best she can, with minimal detail, explaining how the marriage grew worse, and why Beth nevertheless stayed with it. The author does a nice job of explaining which things Beth would—and would not—discuss. Even though there are few details, there are enough for us to get the picture.

This is a very good quote. It explains something important: why Beth stayed in a terrible marriage for so long. It also lets us hear Beth’s voice. We hear both her frustration and her toughness. She does not come across as merely a passive victim, but as someone making a deliberate choice.

The Final Chapter: Starting over

Unlike their marriage, Peter and Beth's divorce was fairly amicable. In fact, the two wrote up their own divorce decree, with the help of counsel, and submitted it to the court jointly without any legal battles to sort through. Beth took a smaller alimony payment in one lump sum up front, rather than a larger sum over time, to ensure that she would have the means to move away. She moved to Derry, New Hampshire, largely because she had never lived in New Hampshire before. Shortly thereafter, she found a job as a cashier at a grocery store. She had considered returning to restaurant work, but said that "after you've been through 17 years of hell, you want something a little lower-stress." Just like with her last job, she quickly became an integral part of the store's family, and within a year, was promoted to customer service representative (CSR), a lower-level manager in the checkout department.

Her new job was invaluable in helping her rebuild her confidence after her divorce.

People there would smile at me and say 'hi' to me for no reason. Before long, they were treating me like one of the crew, not an outsider. I'll never forget the day when I got off of work, and Katy asked me when I was working next. I thought maybe she needed a shift covered, so I told her what I was working. She just smiled and said, "See you Peterorrow, then." I couldn't believe that she just wanted to know because she just liked working with me.

Further, her job is paying for her to finish her last year of college. She said that she thinks a degree will help her to move farther up the corporate ladder. She is currently angling for a position as a Customer Service Manager (CSM), the manager of the checkout department. She says she is "really excited to finally be finishing that darned degree."

Unfortunately, not everything is going so well in her life. Her relationship with her daughter is growing increasingly complicated. Until about a year after the divorce, they had been very close. When Kirsten turned 17, however Beth began to notice changes in her daughter's behavior. Kirsten had begun to show interest in boys at a level she hadn't before. Over the next few months, she had told her mother about several boys she wanted to date, but Beth didn't approve of any of them. "Given the household she came from," Beth observed, "she doesn't really have the capacity to make a wise decision about guys. She's not always going to be attracted to them for the right reason. And of course, they're not going to be attracted to her for the right reasons, either, if you know what I mean. I just didn't

In the next few paragraphs we get a sense of how Beth rebuilt her life. We get the impression of a resilient, talented woman, doing an impressive job and getting promoted. The author conveys these ideas through a nice mixture of summarizing statements and quotes.

This quote lets us see how much damage the marriage did to her self-esteem—and how her new life is repairing some of that damage.

This next section, on Beth's difficulty with her teenage daughter Kirsten, is described in considerably more detail. However, the author simply describes events; she does not really say much about how we might understand them. This sort of detailed description without much discussion could be a problem. However, the author offers much more of an interpretation in the Discussion section—that way of organizing things is fine.

want her making the same mistakes I made.”

Suddenly, Beth stopped hearing about boys altogether from Kirsten. She asked occasionally, because she had a feeling that Kirsten was hiding something, but Kirsten insisted that all of her male friends were just friends, and she simply had no dating prospects at the time. About six months after the last time Kirsten mentioned a boy to Beth, Beth discovered that Kirsten had been in a relationship with a classmate for four months. She said, “I used to trust her enough that I wouldn’t go through her room or her phone or anything like that, but I knew something was up.” One day, Kirsten forgot to take her cell phone with her when she left the room, so Beth looked through Kirsten’s texts and found a series of erotic text messages with the last boy she had ever told her mother about. When she pressed her daughter for an explanation, Kirsten shouted that she couldn’t live under her Beth’s impossible standards, and she was going to like boys no matter what her mother thought of it. Beth said that the disrespect with which Kirsten spoke to her was even worse than the initial offense. Beth immediately took Kirsten’s cell phone away, grounded her, and forbade her from using her laptop in any private location (to prevent her from communicating with the boy through e-mail or instant messaging).

Kirsten resented her mother’s discipline, but even the strictest parental supervision at home couldn’t prevent Kirsten from talking to her boyfriend at school. At first, Kirsten begged her mother to let her see the boy, but as time went on, she decided that her mother’s approval wasn’t necessary. She and her boyfriend decided to go to the same college in Massachusetts so that they could be together without parental supervision. Kirsten returned home for winter and spring breaks the first semester, but Beth said that Kirsten seemed like a stranger in the house. Since leaving for college, she had dyed her blonde hair black, gotten a nose piercing, and tattooed her boyfriend’s name on her lower back. “She looked like an entirely different person,” Beth said. Over the summer, Kirsten and her boyfriend got an apartment in Massachusetts. Kirsten still visits home frequently and calls or texts her mother every day, but her boyfriend has left his family entirely.

It nearly killed me at first. I literally believed my heart couldn’t take the stress and the pain and the *anger*. It still hurts me to see her taking the path she’s taking... But I did my best. Now all I can do is just love her and be there for her when she needs me. I dig my nails into my palms and hold my tongue a lot. I have to let her make her own decision. I can’t do that anymore, nor should I. She was always the type who made the right decision in the end. I’m just hoping she’s not at the end yet.

Needless to say, Beth was devastated by her daughter's move, and very lonely living alone. She began spending most of her free time around a coworker named Chuck. Before long, rumors were circulating throughout the store that the two were romantically involved. At first, the rumors were not true, though Chuck made no bones about the fact that he had a crush on her. "He never pushed it," she said, "but when somebody asked him if we were an item, he'd laugh and say 'I wish!'" She delighted in his flirting, and often flirted with him, but she told him that she didn't want anything more than a friendship.

"It's not that there's anything wrong with him. Really, he's a great guy. Funny, spontaneous, interesting... I feel like we're on the same page in life, and it's great to have someone like that at this point in my life. That doesn't mean we have to sleep together. He's a great friend, that's all."

I asked her if she really felt no chemistry, to which she responded, "Oh, there's definitely chemistry – no doubt about that. That's the great thing about being an adult, though: you aren't a slave to your hormones anymore. Just because you might feel a little attraction to someone doesn't mean you have to make a jerk of yourself."

Final Thoughts

At the end of our interview, I asked Beth to summarize her life at the moment. This is what she said:

I am a 43-year old mother of one beautiful, wonderful, albeit strong-willed and stubborn, child who is in pre-med at UMass (she said this with a playful smile). I'm proud to say I have a bachelor's in business and I work as a CSR at a supermarket where the people (employees) are my second family. I am a three-year survivor of domestic violence, now living in Derry, New Hampshire.

Discussion

Interview format

I conducted the interview in her living room for the most part, although the interview lasted longer than I had expected, so I found myself helping her prepare dinner while we spoke, and she invited me to stay for did. Interestingly enough, the most intimate details emerged while we ate.

Before we began the interview, I informed Beth about the purpose, nature, and design of the interview. I told her that we would divide her life experiences into several "chapters." It was fairly easy to gather information from her, because we were

This brief quote seems an odd way to end the story. However, the importance of this quote will become apparent shortly. The author intends to return to this quote in the Discussion, where it will become evidence for a central idea in her interpretation.

Nice way to give the informant the last word. It helps, of course, that this informant is so articulate.

already close and I knew quite a bit about her past. She tended to start her answers with a preparatory phrase to remind me of a story, then ask, “did you want the details?” If I had time, I would say yes. If I didn’t, and I didn’t think I would use the story in this paper, I would tell her I had plenty of the information in my memory and move on to another discussion.

Impressions of her life and recurring themes

In spite of her outgoing, strong-willed and determined attitude on the outside, Beth is a fragile soul who is driven by a need for acceptance. Although she didn’t go into detail about her childhood (after all, we had intended to start the story around high school) her parents’ reaction to her dream of performing suggests that they were rather controlling, which may have left her with the feeling that their love was conditional. As we learn more about her life, we can see a need for unconditional and sustained love to be proven to her, and we can see how she reacts to the perception of conditional love.

In some cases, Beth will perform to maintain the conditional love of the people around her. For example, she gave up her dream of a singing career to please her parents, and she went through with a wedding she was unsure of to avoid the scorn of her friends. In other cases, however, she reacted rashly. When she felt that Peter didn’t care enough about her to stay in North Carolina, she abruptly cut off contact with him. She needed him to effectively chase her down and prove his love for her, so much so that she was willing to lose him forever for it. When her daughter refused to obey her wishes and stay away from the boy she had been dating, Beth told her that she would have to choose between her mother and her boyfriend, and once Kirsten made her decision, Beth stepped away to let her live with the decision. One can only imagine the fears Beth must carry with her, after the things she lost to a whirlwind romance. On the other hand, Beth may have been perpetuating the mistakes her own parents had made with her. Ironically, the issues her parents had with her love of music are the very same issues Beth had with Kirsten’s potential relationships. Beth may not have stood in the way of her daughter’s career choices, but just like her own parents, she did try to stand in the way of her daughter’s passions. There is a very strong argument to be made that Beth is simply trying to protect her daughter from her daughter’s own weaknesses, but that argument could just as easily be made for Beth’s parents.

Another thing I’ve noticed about Beth is that she was ruled by impulsivity for most of her life: not just inconsequential whimsy, but impulsive decisions that impact her for the rest of her life. Her decision to break up with Peter was essentially recoil from the pain of him moving away. To this day, she

Very nice introduction to the analysis. It would be easy to describe Beth in one-sidedly positive terms: talented woman, resilient survivor, great Mom, thoughtful, insightful, and self-deprecating. The author, however, offers us something far more interesting than this banal appreciation. She is going to show us both Beth’s undoubted strengths, and also the weaknesses that may have contributed to her misfortune.

The author calls our attention to Beth’s rashness, and reminds us of the details that support this estimate. Here, she returns to Beth’s troubles with her daughter Kirsten—and now, she offers us a far more detailed, and skeptical analysis than she did earlier. This is impressive.

Nice comparison.

Beth, we can assume, would not agree with this. However, the author is free to point out things that Beth herself does not recognize, and might dispute.

knows that he would have stayed if she had asked him to. Instead of being honest with him, though, she ran away. This decision cost her the greatest love she had ever known, and set up future life-changing decisions.

Beth's next life-changing decision, to move to Amherst, made her aforementioned choice with Peter even less logical. She didn't want to move to New York with him because she wanted to stay in North Carolina; however, after he moved, she moved to an entirely different location. She didn't realize until after he left that she would be unable, on an emotional level, to live in the place where she had met him, so she felt to create a new, more superficial life without scholastics or deep commitment or any of the things that defined her life in North Carolina. Soon thereafter, she met a man who could take her away from the pain of losing Peter, and she rushed into a marriage with him that would prove to be an extremely costly mistake. Even the act of leaving the marriage, although she had intended to do so for years, was executed impulsively (although, this time, it was probably for the best). She chose to take a smaller settlement than she could have gotten in court in order to quickly "get away from" Jeff.

Her bluntness and rebellion, which are related to impulsivity, probably also helped fuel the fire behind some of the beatings she was subjected to during the marriage. However, one can hardly blame her for the abuse she suffered. The notion that she had no right to stand up for herself because it would contribute to his beatings helps perpetuate the abuse cycle. This is, however, a subject which should be addressed on a broader scale in other literature; it is not the focus of this paper.

Beth did not live a static existence, however. Many aspects of her personality have remained constant throughout her life, but she has also evolved over time. Over time, she seems over have learned to control her impulses for long-term benefit, at least when the long-term benefit is important enough to her. She didn't care to be strategic in her divorce settlement, because money is not of the upper most importance to her; however, she is able to curb her attraction to Chuck for fear of getting involved with another man, and she has learned to hold back when she feels it is necessary in order to preserve her relationship with her daughter.

Her relationship with her daughter was a subject she felt very uncomfortable discussing, but she did describe a specific turning point in their relationship: they were very close as Kirsten grew up; however, their relationship became strained when Kirsten started pursuing relationships with boys. Beth said emphatically, "I don't want her making the same mistakes I made." From the perspective of a teenager/young adult, I wonder

The tough, skeptical analysis continues. I like this section enormously. I think the author is right, and I like the way she supports her analysis by reminding us of the details she has previously described.

This next paragraph makes me a bit uncomfortable. It comes close to blaming Beth for the abuse she suffered. However, it is certainly an interesting idea, and the author presents it carefully. On the whole, I admire her for being willing to discuss something that makes most people very uncomfortable.

This is an interesting discussion of how Beth has changed. (By the way, this is the section that makes use of the last lines in Beth's story: "That's the great thing about being an adult, though: you aren't a slave to your hormones anymore. Just because you might feel a little attraction to someone doesn't mean you have to make a jerk of yourself.")

if Beth's fears became a self-fulfilling prophesy. At first, it seemed, Kirsten was avoiding the boys her mother warned her against, until it became evident that Beth was rejecting every boy her daughter was interested in. Fearing her mother's disapproval, but not wanting to let every potential relationship pass her by, Kirsten began dating behind her mother's back, and the internal conflict turned a simple romance into something of an obsession. Before long, a wedge was driven between mother and daughter, and all it took was one strike from the mallet to break them apart (i.e.: the fight that ensued when Beth discovered Kirsten's secret).

The other interesting relationship after her divorce is with Chuck. It is evident from the way she speaks of him and the very length of her answers to questions about him that she is interested in him romantically; however, she is clearly afraid to act on any romantic impulses after 17 years of abuse. In this relationship, as with her attitude toward her daughter's love life, I noticed a dramatic pendulum swing compared to her earlier behavior around men. Apparently, she has made an effort to become more rational and less impulsive, although her newfound inhibition may be damaging her relationships, as well.

The claim her story makes about her life

As with most life story analyses, Beth's story on paper highlights the negative aspects of her life because they are the most intriguing aspects of her history. In some ways, however, this detailed analysis is much like placing a rose petal under a microscope the big picture may be lovely, but once you begin to examine every molecule, that beautiful object becomes ugly. Now, Beth's life is far from perfect – she is the first to admit that there are at least a dozen people she'd rather be – but it is nowhere near as grim in her mind as it seemed throughout the interview. True, she lost many things up to the age of 39 (when she divorced Peter), but her ability to pick up a new life so quickly and so effectively is a testament to her strength of character. To juggle college, work, and home along with the tumult in her relationship with her daughter was an amazing feat.

Levinson's theory as it relates to Beth

Levinson's theory of adult development was helpful in understanding the adult life cycle; however, its emphasis on the workplace made it difficult to use in Beth's case. Beth's life stages seemed to have been defined more by her relationships than by her career. Additionally, transitions were very haphazard, not occurring within the very narrow age blocks Levinson created. For example, the transition from the Getting Into the Adult World stage to the Settling Down phase occurred closer to 24, when she gave birth to her daughter and resigned

A nice summary to the analysis. It balances an appreciation for how Beth has grown, and some thoughtful skepticism about the price Beth is still paying for having, perhaps, swung too far away from impulsivity toward excessive caution.

This paragraph tells us, in no uncertain terms, that the author admires Beth tremendously. Coming as it does after the careful, skeptical analysis, it seems entirely appropriate.

This is an exceptionally detailed attempt to related Beth's life to a well-known theory of adult development. The author points out all the ways that Beth's life does *not* match the theory, and she explains why. This is great stuff.

herself to marriage for the next 16 years. Her transition into the Becoming One's Own Man phase (or, Becoming One's Own Woman, as the case may be) did rely heavily on her career change from homemaker to supermarket employee; however, her emphasis is clearly on the *relationships* she has built at work rather than the work itself. She seems to have not quite reached the Midlife Transition stage yet.

When reading the Levinson material, I was struck by one line in particular. He wrote, "One reason the Settling Down structures must change is that it is based to some degree on illusions." Early in her life, Beth seemed to hold a naïve, idealistic outlook on life. As pleasant as this may sound, it led her to make decisions that impacted the rest of her life. It led her to marry a man after knowing him only a few months, being swept up in the romance. When the reality set in, she knew she would need to leave eventually (although she did not leave for many years).

Final words

Beth is an interesting study in the "type A romantic" working class female who matured in the 70's and 80's: social, outgoing, and ambitious in the early stages of her life. With a lack of support for her career objectives, she transduces her ambitious energy into passionate romanticism, which, when not balanced with equal parts discretion, can cause her to fall into a destructive relationship. One can look at the pursuant settling down phase in one of the following ways: 1) she loses her ambition or her ambition becomes dormant; or 2) she uses her drive to survive the abusive marriage. When she finally reaches the Becoming One's Own Person stage and leaves the marriage, she continues to approach her goals with passion; however, her goals are on a much smaller scale than they had previously been. In my experiences with women of Beth's generation, this is a fairly common life pattern. Beth's story is important in understanding the mistakes that both the individual and her environment make that lead to abusive marriages.

Very nice way to wrap it up: using a mixture of Levinson's theory, and an unusually perceptive insight into Beth's personality.

Here, the author tries to use this particular life to comment on some more general patterns in American society, at a particular historical moment. I don't know if I am wholly persuaded by this brief discussion—I am dazzled by the attempt.