

Project 1: ABC Story - “Titanic”

ABC stories are a part of Deaf Literature. The stories are performed by a Deaf person in ASL using the letters of the alphabet in order from A-Z without repeating letters, changing the order, or skipping. These stories also do not include signs, only the alphabet's hand shapes. These stories can be of anything; fairy tales, actual events, personal experiences, day-to-day activities, routines, or even something made up. The purpose of the story isn't the actual story it's the use of sign language.

The ABC Story “Titanic” - performed by Patrick Fischer - tells the story of the Titanic, starting in the past and ending in modern days. The story starts in the past before the ship leaves port. “A” shows the ship waiting to be boarded. Fischer’s arms are upright symbolizing the iconic smokestacks or funnels used on the Titanic to expel steam and smoke. He stays perfectly still showing how there is no movement yet, and everyone is still waiting to be let aboard. “B” indicates the gangplank being lowered. Fischer keeps his movement slow showing how it took a while to be fully lowered. As soon as the plank is all the way lowered Fischer’s expression and body language change. He is switching into the character of a deckhand. Fischer uses the “c” handshape to show him picking up and carrying someone’s luggage. He carries one on his shoulder and another under his arm. His facial expression changes to show that he is working, but he is still happy and gives a nod and tight-lipped smile “when he sees someone.” As he is walking along the crew member seems happy with his job. Then Fischer switches again. “D” is used to indicate people boarding the ship which leads directly into “e” as the gangplank is brought back up. Following that, “f” shows the ship starting to pull away and go out to sea. Fischer opens his hand into the “f” handshape really slowly to show the release of a valve (or

whatever it actually is that makes the boat start to move) and how the ship moves very slowly at first. He also wiggles his fingers and puffs up his cheeks just a little bit to show the wind caused by the ships' movement. "G" shows the coast getting smaller and smaller the further away the ship gets, and "h" indicates the rocking movement of the ship in the water. Since the ocean is not just flat water, the boat rocks from side to side as it hits the waves. Here Fischer switches character again. "I" and "j" show a passenger enjoying a cup of tea. Fischer's demeanor changed to show the change in character. His eyebrows raised showing the passenger was happy and enjoyed the company he was with. The way Fischer held himself also denoted that the passenger might have been from high society or used to a more "prim and proper" way of living. "K" shows a male passenger fixing his bowtie. Fischer's facial expression shows that the male passenger was being talked to and he was actively paying attention. The other person asked him a question and Fischer's expression changed just slightly to indicate that he said yes. Fischer used the "l" hand shape to show two things. The first was the male passenger holding something. The second showed a female passenger situating the male's hands on her waist. Fischer shows the switch between male and female characters through his body language and facial expressions. When he presented as the male passenger he had his eyes more open, and his chest was puffed out more. Whereas when he was playing the female passenger he squinted his eyes a little, pulled his lips into a tight smile, tilted his head up slightly, and wiggled his hips slightly. Fischer switches to "m" to show the female passenger spreading out her arms in the iconic Jack and Rose bow-of-the-ship Titanic scene. Fischer's female character looks down, and his facial expressions change to show the character's excitement at seeing the dolphins - shown using the letter "n." Fischer changes character once again after showing the dolphins. His stance became stiff, and his expression turned serious. The "o" is used to show a pair of binoculars used by this character to

check their surroundings. This character is most likely the captain or a scout. Fischer's expression changes to fear and it looks like he is screaming when his character sees something in the ocean. "P" shows him calling everyone inside. Fischer's facial expressions show how terrified his character is. "Q" shows someone being thrown or jumping overboard and landing in the water. Fischer uses the "r" handshape to depict the handheld spokes on the wheel, and the "s" shows the captain grabbing them trying to steer the ship away from the iceberg. Fischer has his teeth bared, his eyes closed and his brows pinched to show how hard his character is working on trying to miss the iceberg. "T" shows the iceberg scraping against the ship's hull, and passengers holding on for dear life. Fischer's expression shows that the passengers are scared. Fischer then uses "u" to depict the front of the ship and "v" to show the hole the iceberg forms. "V" is also used to show the ship taking in water from the hole. "W" shows the water still coming in and how it is rising. "X" shows the ship coming to a full stop and then tipping backward as it has taken on too much water. It also shows how once it has tipped backward the front of the ship breaks off and falls back into the water sinking flat.

After "x" there is a pause and change in time from the past to the modern day. Fischer changes clothes here to represent this change in time. In parts A-X he had been wearing an older sailor-looking outfit with what looked like a captain's hat. After the switch, he wore just a plain t-shirt and no hat. Something else that showed the change was how at the beginning the video was shown in black and white, but after the change in time, it was shown in color.

To finish the story Fischer uses "y" to show an underwater remote-controlled device being deployed. Fischer shows the device moving through the water. Based on Fischer's facial expressions it can be inferred that the device has a camera that the person controlling the device is looking through. Fischer then switched to show the person operating the device. His hands are

still in the “y” shape depicting the controls. Fischer’s facial expressions show how focused and concentrated the operator is on this task. “Z” is used to show the operator scanning the monitor that shows the footage from the camera. Lastly, Fischer’s facial expressions show excitement as the device operator found what they were searching for.

The purpose of this ABC story was to show the versatility of ASL. Fischer was able to tell the story of what happened on and to the Titanic with relative ease and never having to actually use signs to describe anything. He was also able to switch between characters and show the actions of the ship without having to say that that was what he was doing. His facial expressions and body language conveyed enough information to know when he was switching characters and gave a rough idea of who the new character was.

This story, more specifically the video of the story would be considered Deaf literature. Something is considered Deaf literature if it shows Deaf identity, fights oppression, shows or plays with language, or shows culture. The other important factor in it being literature is preservation. ABC stories fall under Deaf literature because they showcase language. American Sign Language is special because of its versatility. Sign language allows for someone to show multiple things at the same time. You can depict two people, two different actions, dialogue, and others at the same time. This is shown in this ABC story at the end when Fischer shows “y” and “z”. When Fischer uses “z” to track what the operator is looking at on the monitor, he also maintains the use of the “y” handshape in his other hand to show that he is still operating the remote-control device. This isn’t something that English is capable of. In English you can say he is controlling the remote-control vehicle while focusing on the monitor but it doesn’t show it at the same time. It’s one piece of information or action at then a second.

Sign language is also able to communicate emotions better than English can describe them. This is shown in the story in multiple spots, but particularly in the woman's excitement over seeing the dolphins and in the passenger's terror at the iceberg and the ship going down. Someone could say that they are excited or that that person looks excited, but you don't know with English like you do when you see it in ASL. The use of facial expressions and body language in ASL also makes it easy to switch roles and characters when telling a story. This once again is shown in the video several times but is most notable during the iconic Jack and Rose Titanic scene where the male passenger is holding the female passenger at the front of the ship against the rails with her arms out in the air. Again in English switching roles isn't as smoothly done. In English you have to draw attention to who is saying or doing what. You also use the terms he and she to indicate the character.

Also, something that is unique to sign language is that when telling a story your audience may not understand all the little details included in your story, but they are still able to understand the story. When you tell a story in English if you don't understand the words you won't be able to understand the story. However, with ASL since it is a visual language you don't have to understand every little part to understand the meaning. For this video there are a couple aspects that could have been interpreted differently depending on the person and how familiar they are with ASL. For example "F". "F" could have been interpreted as fish underwater. Fischer wiggles his fingers in a way that could show the fish swimming. He also has his lips pressed together and his cheeks slightly puffed which could be showing him underwater. However this detail change doesn't actually significantly change the story. A viewer would still be able to understand that this is a story about the Titanic.

ABC stories are important aspects of Deaf culture because of their showcase of language. The Deaf community started making ABC stories to help Deaf children remember all the letters and the order of the alphabet. Hearing children were taught the alphabet and how to remember it and the order with the help of a song, but since this wouldn't help Deaf children they had to find another way to remember. The stories help Deaf children remember the letters and their order because of the rule that the stories had to go from A-Z without skipping or repeating letters. This meant the children didn't have to try to force themselves to memorize 26 different symbols in a specific order.

Preservation is an important aspect in determining if something can be considered literature. If there is no way to preserve it, it can't be considered literature. Another thing important to literature is that someone who does not fall under the category of that literature can not write that literature. In the same way a white person can not write African American Literature, a hearing person can not write Deaf Literature. ABC stories for example cannot be considered Deaf literature if a video is not made recording the performance of the story and it is not performed by a Deaf person. The stories would still be an important part of Deaf culture, and they would still be prevalent at Deaf festivals and within the Deaf community, they just wouldn't be literature.