

## Essay for My Son

### Grades

7+

### Author

Robert Schilling Schick

### Illustrator

Allison Strauss



### Author Bio

In early 2008, Mr. Schick experienced the traumatic birth and subsequent death of his son Silas. This event forever altered his outlook on life, yet gave him a deeper understanding of what it means to be human. Mr. Schick is a marine ecologist, and lives in Scotland with his wife and daughter.

### Illustrator Bio

Allison Strauss grew up among writers, and is particularly fond of projects that meld poetry and prose with visual art. Allison thanks the Ryman Arts Foundation, Ragan Art Academy, The Armory Center for the Arts, Peter Fetterman Gallery and the Pasadena Waldorf School for nourishing her as a young artist. She went on to earn her degree in art from Colorado College where she drew cartoons for the school paper. Since returning to her native Los Angeles, Allison has enjoyed seasonal positions with Hill Nadell Literary Agency, *The Los Angeles Review Of Books*, *Slake* and Vroman's Bookstore. She's usually carrying either a sketchbook or a novel. Her work can be viewed at <http://allisonstraussart.com>.

### Summary

This memoir piece is about the tragic death of Mr. and Mrs. Schick's son at birth and Mr. Schick's struggle to cope with the loss.

## Common Core Anchor Standards Addressed

### Writing Anchor Standards-Text Types and Purposes

- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

### Research for Building and Presenting Knowledge

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

## READING Standards

### Key Ideas and Details

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text
- Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.
- Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

### Craft and Structure

- Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.
- Analyze how differences in the points of view of the characters and the audience or reader (e.g., created through the use of dramatic irony) create such effects as suspense or humor.

### Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

## Academic Vocabulary to Explore

*(See vocabulary approach in Appendix A of CCSS.)*

### Tier Two

Bait and switch  
Aneurysm  
Circulatory system  
Sterile  
Psychological  
Bloated  
Dilaudid  
Wax poetic  
Indulgence  
Ultrasound  
Diagnostic  
Precipitated  
Agonizing  
Rathole  
Passersby  
Perpetually  
Glimpse  
Riven  
Neonatologist  
Console  
Stoic  
Prevaricate  
Indelibly  
Resident (as in medical student)

## Complementary Poems to Introduce BEFORE Reading the Text

### Reluctance

*by Robert Frost*

Out through the fields and the woods  
And over the walls I have wended;  
I have climbed the hills of view  
And looked at the world, and descended;  
I have come by the highway home,  
And lo, it is ended.  
The leaves are all dead on the ground,  
Save those that the oak is keeping  
To ravel them one by one  
And let them go scraping and creeping  
Out over the crusted snow,  
When others are sleeping.  
And the dead leaves lie huddled and still,  
No longer blown hither and thither;  
The last lone aster is gone;  
The flowers of the witch hazel wither;  
The heart is still aching to seek,  
But the feet question "Whither?"  
Ah, when to the heart of man  
Was it ever less than a treason  
To go with the drift of things,  
To yield with a grace to reason,  
And bow and accept the end  
Of a love or a season?

### **The Sick Rose**

*by William Blake*

O Rose, thou art sick!  
The invisible worm  
That flies in the night,  
In the howling storm,  
Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy:  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.

### **Warm-up Questions**

*(To introduce the story, should be used as a quick write or a journal/reflection piece.)*

1. Have you ever experienced the death of a person or animal that you cared about?
2. How did you / do you cope with the experience? If you haven't personally experienced this, write about a death you heard about that touched you.
3. Have you ever kept your feelings to yourself because you felt like other people wouldn't understand or didn't want to hear about them? Did you ever get a chance to share those feelings with someone who cared? How did it feel to share them?
4. Have you ever said the wrong thing to someone when you were trying to make them feel better? What happened?

## **Main Idea for Study**

We can't presume to understand another person's story until we've walked in their shoes.

## **Possible Themes for Study**

- No one is immune to tragedy.
- Dealing with loss.
- Feeling alone though surrounded by others.

## **Focus Questions**

1. Why does the death of a child sometimes seem worse than other deaths?
2. Why does the author feel like he can't talk to other people about his grief?

*(The focus questions can be used for a Socratic Seminar and/or a writing assignment.)*

## **Comprehension Questions**

1. What was the medical problem that caused the tragedy?
2. What does the resident do during the ultrasound?
3. How many sponges are used to stop the bleeding?
4. Why is the grandmother's reaction at the baby's funeral considered unusual?
5. What does the author wish people would say regarding his son's death?
6. What was the name of the author's son?

## Text-dependent Questions

These questions may be used for Response to Literature writing pieces. They should not be used as comprehension questions.

1. Define the nature of tragedy and the tragic elements within *Essay for My Son*.
2. Why is it that the author, though he has experienced great tragedy, still wants to understand the nature of the medical situation that almost cost the life of his wife and took the life of their son? Read the author's biography. Does his profession give you a clue to his motivations?
3. Can anyone be blamed for the tragic nature of the events in *Essay for My Son*?
4. What does the author mean when he says that he "wouldn't be that guy"? How has he changed from the person he was before he lost his son? How does he think he's different in the eyes of others since his loss?

## Types of Writing – Exercises & Activities

### Narrative

Have you ever felt like you've been judged by people who made incorrect or unfair assumptions about you, what you were thinking, and what you were feeling?

Write a short story about that experience.

Now, think back... have you ever judged someone—how they behaved, how they reacted, or how they were acting—and found that your judgement was unfair or uninformed?

Write a second short story about this experience.

### Descriptive

Explore your feelings through description. Think of a situation from your past that provoked an intense emotion in you—joy, grief, anger, contentment, fear. Describe your anecdote in detail. Now, describe your emotion in detail. Use literary devices including metaphor, simile, and analogy to help describe your emotion.

### Expository/Analytic

1. Write about a loss that you have experienced in our life. Compare and contrast this loss to that experienced by the author in *Essay for My Son*.
2. Read the poem *Reluctance* by Robert Frost. What is narrator describing in the poem? What feelings? Use text from the poem to illustrate your analysis. Could the narrator in the poem relate to the narrator in *Essay for My Son*? Why? How so?
3. Read the poem *The Sick Rose* by William Blake. Analyze the symbolism in this poem. Who or what is the rose? The worm? What does the poem mean? In *Essay for My Son*, who or what is the “rose” and who or what is the “worm”?

## Possible Instructional Approaches

### Activity

Teach your class how to make rubbings with paper and crayons. Ask students to visit a local cemetery and each make a gravestone rubbing. Students should conduct research to see what they can learn about the life and death of the person buried under the stone. Ask students to write an essay about that person’s life and give an oral presentation about what they learned along with their rubbing in class.

### Field Trip

Take your class on a guided tour of the local hospital. In advance of the trip, talk about how to act and speak respectfully in a hospital environment. Ask the doctor or nurse guiding the tour to talk about the types of situations with patients and families that staff face on a regular basis and how they work to be respectful, empathetic, and help patients deal with difficult times.

Have students write in their journals about their experience at the hospital. What stories from their guide struck them on the deepest levels? Why?