

Reflection Statement

Words: 1500

"History is a cyclic poem written by Time upon the memories of man." – Percy Bysshe Shelley

My major work is a collection of poetry, examining the biased and often one-sided nature of history, through the exploration of the many different experiences of a group often neglected in history: Australian women during WWI. The collection is set during the war years (1914-1918) and examines the varied experiences of Australian women across this time period, represented through a series of personas, connected through a shared feminist perspective. My major work aims not only to inform readers of the hardship, strength and courage that women experienced, but also challenge accepted histories which often reflect the patriarchal nature of history.

Through my study of world events including WWI, I gained insight into the way that WWI was the first 'total war', affecting all levels of society, with many Australian women experiencing both the hardships of the homefront and battlefield. Exploration of websites such as the [Journal of the Australian War Memorial](#)¹ exposed me to many memoirs and primary accounts of individuals which helped me build a more detailed understanding of the challenges and sacrifices made by the homefront, these details not only giving my poetry historical accuracy but also authenticity. Memoirs such as those of Jan Bassett² reflecting on the ingenuity of the homefront "women and girls were knitting socks... when they ran out of knitting needles, they made new ones from bicycle spokes" helped establish historical authenticity crucial to poems such as 'Amelia', enhancing the personal details and complexity of personas within the dramatic monologues. Furthermore, primary accounts such as the letters of 'Queenie', a VAD nurse who travelled and worked in Alexandria in 1915 and 1916 have formed the historical foundations of poems such as 'Mildred', in which I seek to

¹ Manuel, J, 1996, 'Australian civilian women's poetic responses to the First World War', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*

² Bassett, J, 1983, *The Home Front: 1914-1918*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, Vic.

capture the images of new landscapes and traumatising experiences which many serving nurses faced.

A personal interest in the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy led me to explore some of her other anthologies, including The World's Wife³, which has significantly inspired my major work's form and content. The use of female personas from periods throughout history (drawing from mythological tales as seen in 'Thetis' as well as from historical figures such as Charles Darwin in 'Mrs Darwin') as well as the strong feminist perspective throughout Duffy's anthologies influenced my research into women's perspectives of history and led me to consider where else in history a patriarchal bias has dominated literary accounts of historical events. I also was inspired by the way Carol Ann Duffy pushes the boundaries of the dramatic monologue form, often including dialogue (as seen in 'Originally'). These stylistic devices inspired me to expand techniques used within my poetry, as seen in the intrusion of dialogue in 'Amelia'. I have found that having a role model such as Carol Ann Duffy has been very beneficial in my conceptualisation and writing processes, as I have had a work on which I can constantly reflect and refocus my own ideas, allowing me to always maintain my vision of my perceived final creation.

From initially exploring the poems of Carol Ann Duffy, I moved to understanding the conceptual underpinning of these works and my envisioned major work, namely feminist theory and the philosophy of history as a man-made structure. Through reading Walter Benjamin's thesis On The Concept of History⁴ and Philosophy of History⁵ by Daniel Little, I came to the conclusion that history plays "a fundamental role in human thought" (Daniel Little), and that it is itself constructed from literature. This revelation played an important part in the conceptualisation of my major work, as I aimed to challenge and subvert the

³ Duffy, C. A, 1999, *The World's Wife: Poems*, London: Macmillan

⁴ Benjamin, W, 1938-1940, *On the Concept of History – selected writings, Volume 4*. The Belknap press of Harvard University Press Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England

⁵ Little, D, 2012, *Philosophy of History*, Winter 2012 Edition

ideas represented within conventional war poetry of the time, such as that by Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, which portray a thoroughly male perspective of WWI. In this way, my choice of the poetic form is crucial, as well as giving me an artistic framework in which to represent the varied experiences of Australian women during WWI. I have gained an understanding of feminist theory and concerns such as the invisibility of women and the encoding of a male worldview within literature, through texts such as Beginning Theory – an Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory⁶, which consolidated the overall feminist perspective and tone of voice in my major work and demonstrated the importance of using language which would subvert the dominant male perspective “there is sexism in language, it enhances the position of males, and males have had control over the production of cultural forms”⁶. This idea is communicated through poems such as ‘Eve’, where women are presented as a dominating and controlling force, manipulating men into enlisting. Feminist theories are further communicated through my poetry in the choice of titles, with each name not only foregrounding the content of the poem through its meaning or connotations, but also emphasising the female point of view. Close study of the novel In the Skin of a Lion by Michael Ondaatje in the English Advanced course also influenced my writing style, as I aimed to utilise a personal voice (as evident in the diary format and intimate tone in ‘Mildred’) and cinematographic style of imagery as Ondaatje does throughout his novel. I was also influenced by the way Ondaatje uses the interweaving of characters in order to convey his ideas, as seen in the way each poem adds to the audience’s understanding of the range of experiences which Australian women shared.

The stylistic techniques within my poetry were inspired by devices used by famous poets such as Sylvia Plath, Robert Browning and Ezra Pound. Browning’s poem ‘My Last Duchess’⁷ informed my understanding of the dramatic monologue form, with its clear exploration of the psychology of the speaker. My study of

⁶ Barry, P, 1995, *Beginning Theory – An introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York

⁷ Browning, R, 1842, ‘My Last Duchess’, *Dramatic Lyrics*

Plath's work in English Extension I introduced me to the powerful nature of tone and stanza structure in poetry. Plath's poem 'The Applicant'⁸ was instrumental in developing my use of an ironic and often sardonic tone, which I employed in my first poem titled 'Eve', concerning the portrayal of women in war propaganda as well as in 'Blanche', which explores the inverted power roles of the 'White Feather Campaign'. An ironic tone allowed me to convey the hidden power of women during this period, presenting certain personas as dominant and formidable. The theory of Imagism developed by Ezra Pound was also highly influential in the construction of my dramatic monologues, as his concept of "catching the character at the precise moment he interests me, usually a moment of song, self-analysis, or sudden understanding or revelation.... Painting my man as I conceive him"⁹ (E. Pound), gave me inspiration in how to develop the personas of each individual poem. For example, the poem 'Penelope' uses imagery associated with washing clothes in order to build her character and reflect the physical and emotional absence of her husband. I also researched the importance of elements within poetry through The Poetry Toolkit – an essential guide to studying poetry¹⁰ by Rhian Williams as well as The Poetry Toolkit – for Readers and Writers by William Harmon¹¹, both of which have been invaluable resources for understanding the basics of poetry as a form. These sources were especially useful in understanding the principles and features of free verse and dramatic monologues as well as the construction of stanzas as structural markers and a way of communicating the natural breaks in speech, giving my dramatic monologues a more convincing tone.

Throughout the process of my independent investigation, I have encountered a few challenges in terms of research, having to rely mostly on primary accounts

⁸ Plath, S, 1965, 'The Applicant', *Ariel*

⁹ Pound, E, 1885 – 1972, *Ezra Pound*, Poetry Foundation

¹⁰ Williams, R, 2013, *The Poetry Toolkit – the essential guide to studying poetry*, Bloomsbury, London and New York

¹¹ Harmon, W, 2002, *The Poetry Toolkit – For Readers and Writers*, Wiley-Blackwell, West- Sussex, UK

for specific historical details, which give my poetry personal insight and credibility. Authenticity in historical detail is also important to my intended readership: readers of Rabbit, a non-fiction online poetry journal. I chose a non-fiction journal for my poetry as it appeals to an academic audience with an assumed knowledge of WWI and historical references within my poetry such as Kitchener's call to arms "We want You" and the iconic phrase "lions led by donkeys", used to describe soldiers in the Battle of the Somme.

The writing process was an important part of my major work, as it highlighted my need for further independent investigation into the specific historical events that underpin individual poems in my Major Work such as the wartime occupations of women on the homefront as well as feminist movements including the suffragettes and the peace campaigns of Vida Goldstein. Online textbooks such as Anzac Portal were useful in these areas.

Overall, my independent investigation has guided and directed my major work at every stage of its creation, from inspiration to the final draft. My initial unfamiliarity with historicity and the dramatic monologue form meant that thorough research has been a crucial part of my major work's development and realisation. The process of creating my Major Work has been thoroughly simulating and enlightening as I explored history through the artistic lens of the poetic form.