

Reflection Statement

A compilation of distinctly gendered voices, my Extension 2 Major Work reveals the changing role, voice and reception of the female writer, chronicling contextual gender issues and feminist aims. Fundamentally, the series of speeches would be appropriate for an external audience interested in the historical relationship between gender and literature, such as the Gender Studies course at Cambridge University.

First introduced to feminist theory in the Preliminary Extension English course, my interest in the concept of ‘distinctly gendered’ voices was furthered by the HSC English Extension ‘Gendered Writing’ elective, which proved a valuable starting point for initial research. In particular, Virginia Woolf’s Orlando¹ inspired the foundation of my Major Work; as I emulate its broad-based, historiographical style, which enables a contrast of different historical contexts. Additionally, the speech form facilitates a balance between conceptual depth and engagement, as the integration of authentic historical contexts not only expounds upon foundational concepts of identity, gender, creativity and literature, but further creates an immersive experience for the intended audience. The tripartite structure was inspired by the triptych style of Daldry’s film The Hours² studied in Advanced Module A; allowing me to incorporate multiple, conflicting perspectives,

¹ Woolf, V (1995) Orlando: A Biography, Wordsworth Editions

² Daldry, S (2002) The Hours, Scott Rudin Productions

lending nuance to my argument and revealing the historical evolution of language and gender attitudes.

Cambridge University's ceremonial presentation of the Chancellor's Gold Medal award serves as an authentic platform which I have fictionalised to unite the three speeches.

Grounding my Major Work in historical time frames was facilitated by extensive research into history, feminist theory, linguistics, psychology and philosophy. And whilst this research proved invaluable, it was the crafting of a realistic voice which fundamentally enabled the creation of a sustained composition authentic to the Speech form. Indeed, through familiarisation with the speech medium – specifically, Margaret Atwood's 'Spotty-Handed Villainesses'³, Nora Ephron's Wellesley graduates address⁴ and previous, exemplary speeches from the course⁵⁶ – I realised the importance of a provocative and distinct tone in shaping purpose.

First Speaker – Marian Evans

As the opening speaker at the 1863 Chancellor's Gold Medal ceremony, Marian Evans addresses a male-dominated assembly of Cambridge students and professors, encouraging them to embrace genderless writing and reader. Utilizing Robert Browning's 'Caliban

³ Atwood, M (1994) Spotty Handed Villainesses

⁴ Ephron, N (1962) "Graduate Address at Wellesley"

⁵ Bartha, C (2006) Young Writers Showcase 6, Board of Studies

⁶ Lappan, M (2010) Young Writers Showcase 10, Board of Studies

Upon Setebos⁷ within the speech is not only historically relevant but allows for parallels in themes of identity, change and voice, exhibited through the protagonist Caliban.

Adoption of a formal, modest tone and refined British accent – aided through applying audio effects (de-esser multiband compression) – reflects the conservative nature of Evans’ context. The omission of personal pronouns enables her to distance herself from her male audience, further echoing gender and class divides of 1860’s British society. The addition of audio samples⁸ to suggest a shocked and disgruntled crowd augments the tension between speaker and audience, with Evans’ hostile reception symbolising a larger, contextual resistance to female displays of authority. Thereby, Evans appeals to her male counterparts through self-deprecation – “I admit I am no expert...” – and a complimentary tone – “the unbridled talents and passions... within this assembly” – allowing her message of change to be accepted by such an audience. Evans’ conformist tactics assert her argument: by initially devaluing her presence – positioning ‘George Eliot’ as far superior to her as a “nameless, faceless woman” – and only later revealing that she contrived George Eliot, her pseudonym, the audience is challenged to deconstruct the dominant image of a successful writer as exclusively male.

Reading Silas Marner⁹ and Middlemarch¹⁰ informed the structure of the speech, as I emulated Evans’ propensity to centralise construction of character, before “frequently

⁷ Browning, R (1864) “Caliban Upon Setebos” Dramatis Personae, London, Chapman and Hall

⁸ Licenced Creative Commons (*See Addendum*)

⁹ Elliot, G (2004), Silas Marner, Penguin Books

¹⁰ Elliot, G/Ashton, R (2003), Middlemarch, Penguin Books

[breaking] into the action to philosophize or cast judgment”¹¹. Indeed, the speech begins with a critical analysis of Browning’s literary achievements before key character Caliban is appropriated as both a symbol of changing Victorian society – “in... Caliban’s soliloquy I hear the echoes of our society” – and a parallel to Evans’ own burgeoning feminist attitudes – “is it not Caliban who feels similarly?” Through her analogous representation of Caliban, Evans uses the celebrated, male voice to validate an argument that would otherwise stem solely from a seemingly radical female. Indeed, Evans estranges herself from “female political organisations” and “emerging suffragette sects” which her audience would reject, confining her gender rhetoric to a literary sphere. And although Evans distances herself from emerging feminist theory, an examination of subsequent speeches in my Major Work positions her as reflective of the feminist aims within her context – to destabilise institutions of female repression through ‘integration of women with men at all levels’.¹²

Second Speaker – Sylvia Plath

In her speech, Plath demands that women’s voices be recognised as distinct and integral to both literature and broader society. Reflecting the changes in context, Plath is positioned

¹¹ Cohen, P.M. (2006), “Why Read George Eliot?” The American Scholar, The American Scholar, Web. Viewed 13 July 2015

¹² Oakley, A (1981), Subject Women, Pantheon

as award recipient, signalling an elevated female role which is further reinforced in the changed internal audience demographic.

Studying Plath and her poetry collection Ariel¹³ in the Extension English course, gave me an appreciation for the power of Plath's voice – not only in her Cold War context, but also as a figure of the feminist movement. Reading her semi-autobiographical novella The Bell Jar¹⁴, and The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath¹⁵, listening to interviews and reading Ted Hughes' Birthday Letters¹⁶ informed key choices of structure, form and register. By embedding poetic phrasing, through use of iambic pentameter and analogies – “women have been the dizzy-spinning axis, always reconfigured”, Plath's poetic identity is anchored throughout the speech. Moreover, conforming to fictional conventions, Plath begins by describing the “Tuesday night” when the poem ‘Words’ was written. Even whilst her mind is “filled with success”, there is the pressing reminder of the domestic sphere which marked Plath's life, context and works. Throughout the speech, Plath deconstructs the seemingly mutually-exclusive nature of ‘success’ and ‘femininity’ by promoting the complexity and integrity of the female voice.

While Evans intertextually draws on the revered male voice of Browning to authenticate her argument, Plath references ‘Words’, *Mademoiselle* magazine and Evans' speech, conveying the emerging acceptance of the female, literary role, reinforced through her

¹³ Plath, S (2015), Ariel, Faber & Faber Poetry

¹⁴ Plath, S (2013), The Bell Jar, Faber & Faber

¹⁵ Kukil, K.V/Plath, S (2000), The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950 – 1962, Anchor Books

¹⁶ Hughes, T (2002), Birthday Letters, Faber & Faber Poetry

blatantly sarcastic and bitter tone. Plath attacks her audience in startling metaphors – “ovaries into shrivelled prunes” – as well as using Trans-Atlantic accent and intonation patterns to create a sense of irony and unapologetic self-awareness. This waning concern for convention is highlighted as Plath derides Evans’ “carefully worded” speech. She evaluates how Evans manipulates language to “tip-toe around the conservative views of her listeners”, dryly adding that she does “not possess the decorum of a Victorian Lady”. Plath thereby introduces an idea which is furthered in the third speaker; that language is a conscious and subconscious reflection of both composer and context.

Third Speaker – Meena Dalhousie

A decade of intense natural disasters and previous, global cyber-war informs my third speaker’s pursuit to construct a new literary canon which champions a distinct female identity. The speculative context enabled me to imagine future possibilities for women; in merging the voices of the previous speakers I was able to reflect the dynamic nature of gender and circularity of history. The choice of a non-canonical name for this character, alongside her position as Chancellor of Cambridge University envisages significant successes for a broad spectrum of women.

The digitalised nature of Dalhousie’s speculative context, coupled with her scientific background, influenced a precise and direct writing style. Furthermore, the series of short questions which penetrate the opening of the speech, “How do we function? How do we achieve?” epitomises the speaker’s authority. The ironic transition of an overly-digitalised society on the verge of apocalypse, to classical ways of thinking – reflected through the

renaissance of canonical literature and language – is achieved through the blend of colloquial and formal registers.

The challenges faced in the composition of this speech were largely structural; I found it difficult to centralise the gender argument as clearly as the previous two speeches due to the speculative context. Unexpectedly, this was resolved by my study of Advanced Module C ‘People and Politics’, which exposed the increasingly politicised nature of gender in a contemporary world. Whilst Evans’ gender-focus is confined strictly to a literary sphere and Plath’s broadened focus encircles the social experiences of women, Dalhousie articulates the evolution of gender inherent to global concerns; environmental, scientific, civil and educational.

The unity of the three speeches has been ensured in each stage of composition, culminating at the close of Dalhousie’s speech, when the Major Work is meta-fictionally realised as a recorded body of work. Applying a light reverb effect to mixed vocal tracks enabled the conception of cohesive, authentic recordings and aided the integrity of the Work.

Informed by my English and English Extension studies in both the Preliminary and HSC course, I was able to craft a Major Work which presents – thematically, stylistically and meta-fictionally – the connection between a composer’s gender and their text. As this connection is rejected, championed, and re-evaluated through the speeches, feminist aims and the female role are portrayed as contextual, complex and dynamic. As a process of

extensive research and continual drafting, I have found the Extension 2 course to be both conceptually challenging, yet greatly rewarding in developing my English skills.