

Reflection Statement

My suite of poems traces the progression of feminist ideology through the voices of five female subjects depicted in paintings from the 17th - 21st centuries. It is my intention to explore multi-faceted socio-cultural paradigms and gender politics within each era to give my subject's a voice, thereby making them the 'subject' rather than the 'object' of the suite. Conceptually, my work extends upon the post-modern notion of the authority of 'meaning lying within the responder', by presenting the voice of each woman from the 17th - 20th centuries as interpreted through the 21st century *Geisha*, consequently creating a 'post-modern' dialogue between past and present.

I chose paintings of young women which would highlight the universality of experience for my young adult audience (age 16-30), both male and female, who have an interest in history, art, gender politics and poetry. The *Geisha*'s exploration of the art book is a device employed to resonate with my intended audience to encourage an interactive and interrogative process, whereby the shaping of meaning lies within the responder and varying interpretations of 'truth' are considered equally valid. Through my suite, I position my audience to reflect about past struggles in order to develop a greater sense of self and place. As such, I envisage publication of my suite in journals such as the 'H.O.W' Journal, a creative, New York Art and Literature magazine, whose readership embraces relatable fusions of art, history and poetry.

Through an exploration of changing socio-cultural, religious and philosophical paradigms, my Major Work links to my Extension 1 module: 'Texts and Ways of Thinking'. I also explored the concepts of 'Navigating the Global' through the "ideas, language forms and features" prevalent in each of my poems, reflecting various contextual values and cultural perspectives on the role of women. The 'Geisha' exploration of four centuries of feminist

progression is indicative of the global culture's impetus towards blurring "traditional concepts and boundaries of time and space". My suite also extends upon contextual study which is the basis of the English Advanced course.

My passion for art, history and literature has informed my research into the depiction of women in art through the 'male gaze', most notably Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) and art and media theorist John Berger's 'Ways of Seeing' (1972). By revealing the women's voices, personhood and struggles beyond the 'male gaze', I have reflected the degree of feminist awareness and progress prevalent in each era. My research into women's daily lives and struggles has also led me to reflect on feminist progress to date, asking: has there been a sizeable paradigmatic shift, or is the millennial woman merely a hybrid of her forebears?

The language, metre, voice, rhetorical devices and lineation techniques in my poems reflect the values and attitudes of each of the historical contexts which I have researched. In my poem 'Young Girl in a Purple Dress', the extended metaphor of chrome and metal reflects the worldview of a young, newly emancipated woman in the 'machine' age. The extended metaphors of the "bee" (17th century) and the "rose" (18th century) highlight inherent feminine associations with fertility, life and reproduction characteristic of these periods. The 17th century persona's comparison of herself to a "worker bee" denotes the lack of feminist awareness and progress in this era, with the 'maidservant' content to serve and be 'part of the hive' rather than demonstrating a desire for autonomy beyond it.

I subverted these traditional notions of femininity in order to reflect evolving concepts of what constitutes the 'feminine' through further extending this metaphor in the 19th century poem. The persona's likening of herself to a dependent 'wick' with a "flame" of protest burning within, reveals her sense of restriction within contemporary patriarchal structures.

The persona's defiant tone: "I will return and fight" alludes to the rise of Feminist movements of the time such as the Suffragettes. Hence, my research into the historical context shaped my form and language choices.

I chose to employ a 'poetic cycle' in my suite, taking inspiration from the work of Erica Jong and Belinda Subraman. This structure emphasises the motif of time, and highlights women's progressions in tone and feminist awareness. In 'Young Girl in a Purple Dress', the persona's reflection: "loathing flowers, petals weak" alludes to a characteristic rejection of obvious femininity complicit within the era's quest for equal rights. However, the 21st century persona's belief that women are able to "wear armour" and "sting" whilst also unfurling "petals" reveals that an enabling of multi-dimensionality within the feminine has been both realised and embraced.

The poems in the cycle are also linked through recurring motifs such as: garments, colours, light, reflections, confinement, religion and nature. These motifs reflect emotional symbiosis an interconnectedness of the expectations placed upon the women in question. I further created a sense of cohesion by ensuring that each poem had a cyclical structure, whereby each woman's stream of thoughts begins as she wakes and ends wherever she is situated in the painting. Another unifying technique is a 'societal voice' which is juxtaposed against each persona's interior monologue and emphasises the broader expectations of each era.

The repetition of "small" throughout the suite further emphasises the progression from passivity to self-assertion within each character's story and is also employed as a means to link the poems. This is also shown through the contrast between the 17th century woman's description of herself as "small and aproned", with the 19th century persona's declaration that she may be "small" but remains "wild" and "free". Each woman's expression of a progressively dissatisfied attitude to patriarchal structures celebrates how far women have

come, whilst simultaneously warning against inertia or regression, or as ‘Geisha’ describes:
“old lessons are lost...the cycle revolves...the past repeats”.

Similarly, growing awareness is further emphasised by the shift from a ‘passive voice’ in the earlier poems to an ‘active voice’ in the latter.

For example, ‘Maidservant at the Window’ (17th century):

“For I am a worker bee,

a servant.

My wings belong to my master”

and

“Blank canvas face, plastered...

my fate sealed”

(‘Bad News’, 18th century).

However, within ‘In Contemplation’: 19th century, the woman’s tone becomes more assertive and self-determined:

“I will return and fight.

Beautiful and free”

and

“I am my protector...

Unbreakable...”

(‘Young Girl in a Purple Dress’: 20th century).

My use of ‘active voice’ in these later poems is emblematic of burgeoning feminist awareness at the time and women’s greater involvement and confidence within the public sphere.

My poetry has been influenced by Modernist Poet Sylvia Plath’s confessional works such as ‘Tulips’ with its free flowing imagery and exploration of female anger, sorrow and ambivalence. Her uncensored expressions of female emotion have inspired me to express my personas’ emotions using a ‘stream of consciousness’ technique. Similarly, I was influenced by the conventions established by female Modernist poet Marianne Moore’s ‘free verse’ through my use of the “stanza as the unit of composition, rather than the line”. The free verse structure mimics the natural rhythm of speech and therefore serves to convey complex thought processes in a language more relatable to my intended audience. Moore’s focus on rhythm, musicality and movement in poems such as ‘Roses Only’ are aspects which I have emulated in my own work:

“Cigarette in hand,

I exhale.

Flickered ash.

Rebel flame.”

(‘Young Girl in a Purple Dress’: 20th century).

Gwen Harwood’s lyricism, particularly her focus on patterned phrases and sounds has also influenced my work. These rhythm and sound patterns and my use of non-metrical lines establishes an ‘organic’ flow of thoughts, accentuating the suite’s purpose as a ‘counter response’ to the artificiality of 21st century society.

“The sun melts.

Swirls of raspberry and pumpkin

interlaced with heavenly bronze.”

(‘Maid servant at the Window’: 17th Century).

As with Harwood, the work of Romantic, lyrical poets such as Dickinson, Blake and Rossetti were major inspirations for the imagery and motif facilitation in my work. My eclectic fusion of poetic forms of the Modernist era, along with Romantic imagery, demonstrates both an inter-disciplinary capability and a ‘post-modern’ perspective on history and culture.

Moreover, the 20th century woman’s prediction of “steps to come” foreshadows the widely known pop-culturally celebrated sexual revolution and ‘Women’s Lib’ movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which have informed numerous perceptions surrounding the politics of gender. Avoiding the cliché of bra burning and protest marches, the Geisha’s millennial view surveys the century of feminist effort which preceded it.

Overall, the challenge of composing a poetic cycle and tying together multi-faceted concepts from a range of historical contexts was an exercise which gave me a greater appreciation of the ‘art’ of the poetic form as platform for socio-historic commentary. The Geisha’s assertion: “we women string...we women burn” while being “soft and gentle” emphasises a broader, millennial concept of ‘femininity’ to my audience. I hope that through my suite, the mutuality of experience felt amongst young women over time, empowers them to continue advocating for women’s rights and freedom in the face of ongoing inequities.