

Reflection Statement

“What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty!”

Hamlet, Act II Scene II

My Major Work was initially driven by a long-founded interest in the complexity of human psychology. Throughout history, composers have attempted to imaginatively replicate the workings of the mind in art and literature, and, in my writing, I wanted to contribute to this universal ‘ontological inquiry’ of sorts by exploring the various paradigms through which we form our perceptions of the world, such as religion, philosophy and science. These paradigms form the pillars of the Extension 1 ‘*After the Bomb*’ course, which explores the disillusionment of humanity during the Cold War and how that facilitated the rise of postmodernist literature and art. My introduction to postmodernism in this course became integral to the development of my work.

In studying postmodernism, I encountered what literary theorist Barthes terms ‘writerly’²¹, texts – texts in which meaning is not presented by the composer in a linear, narrative fashion, but is rather *inferred* by the reader. In this way, “we gain access to meaning by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one.”²² In adherence to this literary style, I employed self-referential prose in the final passage of my work, ‘*A note to the reader*’, in order to engage the reader in the active pursuit of meaning:

Relish your time here, little one – alone in this absolute silence. It will not last forever.²³

The endearing tone here is designed to contrast with the bitterness of the opening, as a tentative relationship is formed between the narrator and reader – a typical convention of Barthes’ ‘writerly’ texts. Barthes’ influence on my work should also be evident in its

²¹ Barthes, R., *S/Z*, 1970

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Student No. 26555566, *Part of a Day*, 2015

fragmented structure, ambiguity and unreliable narration²⁴, which collectively leave interpretation open and multidimensional. I found these literary devices, although difficult to master, instrumental to my purpose of exploring the complexity of human psychology through a postmodern lens.

As my work evolved, I began to refine my purpose to an exploration of the psychology of death in particular, because it was an avenue through which I could examine the influence of the various paradigms upon my narrator's evolving perceptions. What started off as a general intention to explore the complexity of the human consciousness hence became a closer examination of the mindset of a dying individual, with detailed attention to the influence of different paradigms on his consideration of life and death.

In investigation of concept and form, I came across Isaac Asimov's science fiction short story 'The Last Question' (1956), which addresses questions of life and death by dissolving the barriers between religious, philosophical and scientific paradigms through the motif of the computer as an omniscient being. I was inspired to echo this dissolution in my own work, and so began a series of investigations into the views of different paradigms, beginning with philosophy. Richard Precht's 'Who Am I? And If So, How Many?' (2007) provided me with a summary of how the meaning of life has been considered in various contexts, from Ancient Greece to the postmodern world, and introduced me to many of the philosophers I would later cite in my work, such as Seneca, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Hegel, and Kant, making it a useful platform for my early independent investigation. By narrowing my research to postmodernism, I then encountered Sartre's seminal paper 'Existentialism is a Humanism' (1946), which became influential in my understanding of the relationship between the postmodern religious and philosophical paradigms.

²⁴ Booth, W.C., *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 1961

Ultimately, both Sartre's paper and Precht's book were assistive in forming my thesis: **that, ultimately, life has no fundamental meaning; we choose what belief systems to consign to, we flit freely between them as we wish, and we die without resolution.** The question of the meaning of life is, essentially, unanswerable: but that does not mean we may not explore in great depth its facets.

I then explored how life and death are discussed with regard to the scientific paradigm. In this research, I discovered a series of interviews conducted by Australian television presenter James O'Loughlin, which spanned over the last few months of a cancer patient's life as he came to terms with his diagnosis. The patient's evolving perceptions of death as he moved through the natural stages of grieving²⁵ over the series influenced how I characterised the emotional progression of my narrator, from denial to eventual acceptance, making the series a relevant source. I also examined a study conducted by British psychologist Dr Joel Funk, which reported that over 50% of near death experience victims recounted 'ethereal music'. Like many modern musicians, Richard Strauss attempted to recreate this music in his piece '*Tod und Verklärung*', which I chose to implement as a motif in my Work, as it provided a 'structure' of four movements²⁶ by which I could abide. I assigned each movement to a different stage in my narrator's gradual death, ending with the *Moderato* on p27:

[God's] requiem plays (the *Moderato*²⁷) and a mighty resonance is returned to me from the endless realms of heavenly space^{28, 29}

In form, I played with ideas I was introduced to through Module C of the Advanced course, which examines how representation in texts assists in shaping meaning. In my Preliminary

²⁵ Kübler-Ross, E., *On Death and Dying*, 1969

²⁶ *Largo, Allegro, Meno Mosso, Moderato*

²⁷ Final movement in Strauss's tone poem *Tod und Verklärung* (*Death and Transfiguration*) Opus 24

²⁸ Alexander Von Ritter, from the explanatory poem which accompanies the verses in Strauss's tone poem *Tod und Verklärung* (*Death and Transfiguration*) Opus 24

²⁹ Student No. 26555566, *Part of a Day*, 2015

study of representation I looked at Mark Baker's 'The Fiftieth Gate' (1997), which provides a holistic account of the Holocaust through a bricolage of transcripts, statistic reports, imaginative recreations and poetry. Such experimentation with form is a typical feature of postmodern literature, demonstrated in other notable works such as John Barth's short story 'Lost in the Funhouse' (1968), where prose interweaves with literary extracts, Biblical quotes and diagrams. The malleability of the short story as demonstrated by Barth contributed to my selection of the form, through which I could explore my concept with great depth and versatility. Barth's piece also inspired me to warp the conventions of a traditional story by including mathematics, poetry, diagrams, and various literary extracts. The flexibility of style afforded by the medium was crucial in allowing my experimentation with form, a method I undertook as part of my goal to create a representation of the human consciousness that embodied its full complexity when exploring the psychological process of death.

Another method undertaken to emphasise the complexity of the human consciousness was the use of 'the Library' as an extended metaphor for my narrator's consciousness. My inspiration to do this was founded in investigation of the short story form, where I came across Jorge Luis Borges' postmodern anthology 'Labyrinths' (1968). In this collection, 'The Library of Babel' was of particular interest to me, as it described the existence of an infinite library through which mankind searched endlessly for 'the formula and perfect compendium', or meaning of life. Intrigued by this submission, I aspired to pursue the Library motif in my own work. This endeavour was further assisted by a passage from Michael Ondaatje's postmodern novel 'In the Skin of a Lion' (1987) which imagined the psychological process of dying:

In the days before he died, Small's mind slipped free of its compartments, as if what had kept all his diverse worlds separate had been pulled out of him like a spine³⁰.

³⁰ Ondaatje, M., *In the Skin of a Lion*, 1987

The imagery used here of one's consciousness slipping into disarray influenced the way I approached the motif of the Library in my own work, which I sustained through reference to the Dewey Decimal System (DDC), literature (Shakespeare, Byron, Carroll, Sophocles, Yeats, Dante, and Fitzgerald), mythology (Kharon and the River Styx), scripture (Christianity, Buddhism and Islam), and philosophy (Seneca, Einstein, Nietzsche, Freud, Sartre, Fossett, Heidegger, Hegel, Kant). I also made deliberate use of language that suggested 'books', to extend the library metaphor further: the mother 'crumples like paper'³¹, the church is a 'recurring motif along a timeline of unexpected plot twists and abrupt full-stops'³², and the narrator's 'shadow [fades] like lead pencil on these white walls'³³. Finally, in acknowledgement of how Borges' 'Library of Babel' influenced my work, I used a direct quote from his story in the introductory passage of my piece:

I shut my eyes and find peace in the Library.

((*The Library exists ab aeterno*³⁴))³⁵

Because it is a 'writerly' text, and because of the concerns it explores, my work is directed towards audiences who share my fascination with language, experimental literature, and philosophy. The literary, philosophical, mythological and scriptural references drawn upon throughout my piece look to enhance one's reception of the Work, not inhibit, and for this reason I imagine it would be a piece found as part of an anthology of postmodern fiction akin to Philip Stevick's 'Anti-story: An Anthology of Experimental Fiction' (1971). Readers should be drawn into the story, made part of it through the use of second-person, and should not expect answers (of which my work offers none), but rather, fuel, to the ongoing fire that is their quest to understand life, death, and the human condition.

³¹ Student No. 26555566, *Part of a Day*, 2015

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, *The Library of Babylon* (from 'Labyrinths'), 1962

³⁵ Student No. 26555566, *Part of a Day*, 2015