

## **REFLECTION STATEMENT**

The purpose of my short story, “To Make Quiet Things Heard”, is to urge readers to consider the way in which suppression of grief leads to alienation from the self. It is addressed to those interested in narratives which focus on characters’ interiority in order to represent universal human experiences. Through such a focus, my narrative would ideally urge readers to reflect on human behaviour within the experience of grief, of which I find the personal, internal impact significantly more interesting than the often conspicuous external impact.

My Major Work highlights this through an amalgamation of vignettes offering insight into an individual’s experience of grief juxtaposed with phantasmagorical sequences on a train, which represents desire to escape grief. The train’s seclusion and timelessness echoes the private nature of the interior landscape and its ubiquitous significance. Charles Hartman’s *New Literary History Journal* article “Cognitive Metaphor”, which explores the extended metaphor’s ability to reframe meaning for deeper audience interest and understanding, allowed me to sustain this extended metaphor by teaching me to incorporate subtle details relating to it throughout my story. Malcom eventually disembarks to face reality, the train door equated to the door of the mental dungeon in which Malcom has imprisoned his grieving inner self by feigning well-being.

My narrative is set in postmodern Britain in response to Pat Jalland’s historical study *A History of Loss and Grief in England* (2010), which discusses the British notion of suppressing grief as a result of widely normalised societal paradigms owing to the prevalence of death during WW1. “To Make Quiet Things Heard” reflects this through British landmarks, brands and diction. In the English Advanced course, our exploration of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), with Britain mourning the loss of lives following WW1, Septimus’ grief, and Mrs Dalloway grieving her lost youth, allowed me an insight into the complexity of collective and individual grief following war as well as experimental literary representations of the mind through free indirect discourse.

My work is built around constructivist grief theory, which posits that the shattering of the self is linked to the loss of a meaningful worldview,<sup>1</sup> indicating that finding meaning in the inevitable experience of bereavement is central to the reconstruction of the self. In “The Loss

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<sup>1</sup>Gillies, James, and Robert A. Neimeyer. 2006. "Loss, Grief, And The Search For Significance: Toward A Model Of Meaning Reconstruction In Bereavement". *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 19 (1): 31-65.

of Depth”, a short story within Julian Barnes’ 2013 triptych “Levels of Life”, his statement “There are pills to make us forget [grief]...but no pills to cure it”<sup>2</sup> provided the initial inspiration for my plot, as I decided to focus on the idea that attempting to suppress grief only prolongs it: while Malcom forgets his wife’s death, its effects are pervasive.

My understanding of the relationship between concept and form has evolved through my research into the short story’s ability to create a compressed yet powerful emotional encounter with a human experience. In *The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction* (1994), Charles May suggests that short stories allow for focus on the self “in relation to eternal rather than temporal reality,”<sup>3</sup> which is reflected in my work as Malcom contemplates complex ideas of selfhood in grief, framed by constant rhetorical questions. May explores the short story’s capacity to portray “an intense awareness of human loneliness”,<sup>4</sup> which is manifested in my work – as it takes place solely in Malcom’s mind, prioritizing thought over action – through endless phrases like “there was nothing”<sup>5</sup> and “Nobody was there”.<sup>6</sup> These demonstrate profound psychological emptiness as Malcom learns to face his inner self.

Malcom’s attempts and failures to define grief as he recognises that it cannot be understood simply by “[looking] it up in a dictionary”,<sup>7</sup> extend Barnes’ endeavours to describe grief in “The Loss of Depth”. His exploration developed my understanding of grief’s ineffability, forming a vital part of my narrative, which resolves not in transcendence, but acceptance about the existence of enigmatic things within the human condition. In English Extension 1, our study of Katherine Mansfield’s use of almost-epiphany largely influenced this, as Malcom consistently resists self-realisation until the end, which provides a limited epiphany as he accepts that “there [is] no explanation”,<sup>8</sup> reflecting the inscrutable nature of grief. Within her examinations of the self, Mansfield explores characters’ fragmentation between their true selves and performed roles. This is reflected in Malcom’s recurring tendency to ignore his grief by smiling and refusing to discuss it, as well as in his inability to admit his grief even to himself, as he tells his own thoughts to “*shut up.*”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Barnes, Julian. 2013. *Levels of Life*. Knopf.

<sup>3</sup> May, Charles. 1994. "The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction". Ohio University.

<sup>4</sup> May, "The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction".

<sup>5</sup> To Make Quiet Things Heard, pg. 21

<sup>6</sup> To Make Quiet Things Heard, pg. 6

<sup>7</sup> To Make Quiet Things Heard, pg. 15

<sup>8</sup> To Make Quiet Things Heard, pg. 22

<sup>9</sup> To Make Quiet Things Heard, pg. 16

Yiyun Li's 2018 short story, "When We Were Happy We Had Other Names", provides insight into a series of sentiments within the narrator's life after her child's death, such as wondering whether there is any point in decorating the house. I decided to juxtapose the train sequence, represented by 'here', with such ordinary but evocative fragments of Malcom's experience of grief, represented by 'there', which reflects his desire to emotionally distance himself from this experience. My title reflects the importance of making these "quiet things"<sup>10</sup> – like spilt milk reminding Malcom of his inability to prevent such mistakes as well as the fact that he is now alone and must do the work for two – as well as the 'quiet' inner self, heard, by recognising their importance. In Li's story, such moments lead to a loss of faith in the world: "The world...offered little evidence that it would ever be new again."<sup>11</sup> This is heavily reflected in my work, as when Malcom thinks, "*There's no need to see anything anymore.*"<sup>12</sup>

I chose to feature parallel plot lines in my narrative as they mimic the recall of memory, which timelessly interrupts consciousness especially after traumatic incidents. My transitioning structure demonstrates that reflection on experience allows for a renewed sense of understanding. Katherine Hayles' essay *Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* (1990) highlighted the effectiveness of non-linear short stories, as they reflect the fact that humans understand life in a nonlinear way, "[letting] readers piece together events"<sup>13</sup> as Malcom does. Hayles' essay inspired me to use motifs as linking devices to allow readers to make connections through time, such as heat representing Malcom's stifled consciousness and his turning to the window before each transition representing the act of turning inwards.

This postmodern fragmentation mirrors Malcom's life, which has been disrupted by his wife's death, and his consequent disruption of identity, emphasized by the breakdown of words such as "s q u e e z e d".<sup>14</sup> Through such thematisation of thought, I wanted to stylistically experiment with representations of the mind, and create pauses urging the reader to consider grief's isolating impact on the self.

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<sup>10</sup> To Make Quiet Things Heard, pg. 16

<sup>11</sup> Li, Yiyun. 2018. *When We Were Happy We Had Other Names*. The New Yorker.

<sup>12</sup> To Make Quiet Things Heard, pg. 9

<sup>13</sup> Hayles, Katherine. 1990. "Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science". Cornell University.

<sup>14</sup> To Make Quiet Things Heard, pg. 6

Research which enhanced my conceptual understanding of grief, allowing me to represent it realistically by avoiding clichés, included personal stories in the magazine *Grief Diaries*, TED Talks such as *The Adventure of Grief*, in which Dr. Warbuton says, “block your experience of that abyss, and you block access to the depths of who you are”<sup>15</sup> and extensive research into grief philosophies, which allowed me insight into historical understandings of grief. My readings of further short stories like “Misery” by Anton Chekov (1886), which piqued my curiosity about grief’s need to be heard, significantly informed my focus on grief as a literary concept, helping me present it in a more interesting fashion.

Throughout this course, I have improved at determining my preferred approaches to the creative process, such as editing my work in sections rather than all at once, and presenting it to an audience for feedback, after which I removed the majority of Emma’s dialogue on the train as my peers felt that too much of it was superficial, as I wanted to emphasise the fact that coming to terms with grief is an inner process. I also strengthened Malcom’s characterisation following feedback by developing a clearer voice through mature diction, calm reactions and mentioning interests such as the TV show ‘Friends’, in order to flesh out a consistent personality to which readers can better connect.

Due to my target audience and the metaphysical nature of my story, I believe it could appear in the Tupelo Press Writing Contest, which features submissions offering profound insight into the human condition. I would also hope for it to appear in journals such as *Voiceworks*, which publishes short stories written by Australians under 25, as this creates a literary space specifically catering to young authors.

My personal experience of grief underpins a critical part of my Major Work, but my Major Work also enriched my own knowledge in allowing me to recognise that sometimes experience teaches us the wrong things – reflected in Malcom’s sense of futility in the face of his loss, examined throughout the narrative as in “that his hair still grew, that the third floorboard from the stairs still creaked in protest of footsteps; these continued functions seemed r i d i c u l o u s; like lecturing to an empty classroom”<sup>16</sup> – but that it’s possible to unlearn them. Through the development of this work, I have gained a genuine appreciation

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<sup>15</sup> Warbuton, Geoff. 2019. *The Adventure of Grief*. Video. TED Talk.

<sup>16</sup> To Make Quiet Things Heard, pg. 5

for the creative process as both a frustrating and marvellous thing, and pride in my ability to develop a meaningful artistic investigation into the human condition.