

REFLECTION STATEMENT

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We let ourselves see writing as a window into meaning, a compass of sorts. It is much the same for mathematics; holding a mirror to the fissures of our earth, the clean lines that are carved so deeply into the framework of our lives. *Zero* is a dissection of these primitive pursuits, deconstructing the ways we cope with the arbitrary. It is a short story that melds together poetic elements and postmodern qualities with prose to encompass the grand liberty of accepting an indefinable existence. My narrative aims to engage my audience in a comforting departure from tethered stability, ushering them into a threshold that didactically illuminates the beauty of this world's cyclical transience. I was driven by the dissipating state of 2020 to construct a rhetoric that provided solace not simply in a time of irrationality, but rather in spite of it.

Zero was crafted for those who take interest in philosophical and literary discourse as it is predicated upon the theories of my precursors. More broadly, I target those who frequently grapple with an uncertain existence. This group of people do not necessarily fall under an erudite background, making it necessary for me to create a piece that is accessible to the general public, striking a tone that connects with my readers above all else. Therefore, I envision *Zero* to be published in a literary journal such as Meanjin, allowing me to reach my audience at a wider level.

The conceptual impetus of my short story was Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), an essay which postulated that "*the struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart.*" It propelled me to construct a narrative that would emancipate the individual from a lifetime tethered to the search for meaning. I conveyed this concept through the liberation of my two protagonists, culminating in the final lines where the authorial voice affirms Camus' musings: "*we have not been given anything at all ... / how shall we spend those calculated seconds?*" Camus' use of a Greek myth as a narrative microcosm for his overarching concept allowed me to connect with his substance at a deeper level, ultimately inspiring me to opt for the short story form as it would allow me to better reach my own audience.

My decision to manipulate the short story form was further spurred by John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), which equipped metafiction as a method of illustrating the elusiveness of an all-encompassing narrative. From this short story, I was able to mould the form, warping and breaking the conventions of a traditional short story through the inclusion of mathematics, line breaks and

diagrams, visually seen by the unit circle, sine graph and “*at the alcove between heaven and earth / Charlie stands at the perimeter of something boundless.*” This slow decay of such a classical, rigid form mirrors the liberty that ensues after accepting an absence of meaning.

My independent investigation into the poststructural paradigm formed the basis of *Zero*. Borges requests a revision of the system of language in his short story, *The Library of Babel* (1941), through “*do you understand my language?*” This spurred my investigation into Jacques Derrida’s “*there is nothing outside the text,*” which imposed an inherent disconnect in the system of language. Strands of his theory and Borges’ short story are evident in my own work as “*writing can never create meaning.*” This discourse acted as the shell for my exploration of mathematics, whereby I expose how the mathematical pursuit of meaning is also founded upon a flawed system. I champion this concept through Natalie’s narrative as she discovers that “*there is no absolute physics to life. There is no formula.*”

Drawing upon this discussion, the collision of mathematics and literature in *Zero* was attributed to Ted Chiang’s short story *Division by Zero* (2002). Chiang’s use of mathematical variables as subheadings for his narrative illuminated mathematics as an outlet of connection as the uniform composition is disrupted by equating the variables. In a similar fashion, I collate my protagonists’ narratives under a singular authorial voice whilst isolating focalisation through disparate subheadings such as “*ONE*” and “*I.*” These headings allowed me to draw distinct parallels between my protagonists, thereby exploring how the literary and mathematical pursuit of meaning work in tandem. Furthermore, I was inspired by *Division by Zero* to adopt a mathematical motif. Just as his protagonist disproves mathematical axioms, Natalie’s desire to cling onto mathematics as a method of meaning is undercut by its inconsistency. I contrive a limit motif that is central to the characterisation of both my protagonists to create a final sense of emancipation in “*Charlie stands at the perimeter of something boundless*” and “[*calculus*] *is also the study of change, of the infinitesimal...*”

Han Kang’s *The Fruit of my Woman* (1997) was central to the craft of *Zero*’s tone. The lyrical eloquence of this short story is one I attempt to sustain in my own prose, constructing a narrative that mirrors Kang’s “*this isn’t living ... it only looks like it.*” A renewal of the feminine voice is

depicted by the direct interjection of the female perspective in the short story as the protagonist speaks, *“I doubt that I will bloom again in this world.”* Inspired by Kang, I originally intended to insert the female voice through the use of first-person in Natalie’s narrative. However, this creative decision restricted my lexical field and metaphorical expression, spurring my decision to opt for third-person in its entirety. The female voice is instead represented by the poetic voice that prefaces each section. This decision was shaped by Amy Tan’s *Joy Luck Club* (1989), whose precursory voice acted as the insertion of personal input into the narrative whilst dually establishing the proceeding tone. I speak directly to my readers in a similar voice, italicised and bound within two lines to supplement the limit motif, especially so in the closing lines of *Zero* whereby this voice is absolved of bounds to indicate the liberation of the personal in literature. This is further supplemented by the cyclical structure of *Zero*, straying from the masculine 3-acts, and a setting that mirrors the cyclical nature of existence, dually paying homage to femininity: the Ferris wheel, lunar cycles, water, time and *Zero*. It was Kang’s short story and Tan’s novel that propelled me to follow a literary style that imbues importance in emotional connection, a style that is central to the execution of my concept.

My investigation into postmodernism was spurred by Module A’s *Mrs Dalloway*. Woolf’s feminine mode of expression within the modernist movement led me to delve further into the literary paradigms that proceeded after her. Her revolutionary use of memory-induced narrative is directly evident in my own work as my timelines blur together in *“he sees through the glass of his mother ... holds it tenderly in his palms. Then he shatters it.”* I aim to support Woolf’s feminine, expressive style in a more contemporary movement, imbuing our words with charged connections. *Zero* is also a product of studying *Waiting for Godot* in the English Extension 1 course. Samuel Beckett’s dissection of the ways we construct meaning in our lives modelled my own exploration of existence. The recurring *“for reasons unknown”* and *“in spite of”* methodically deconstruct any form of the ‘definite.’ This spurred the development of my own concept, paralleling the deconstruction of language to uphold meaning for a writer with the abolishment of mathematics as a method of understanding the world. My characters experience liberation when departing from these spheres as formulas for meaning, expressed by *“there is newborn beauty that exists in the unknown.”* Through his unconventional form and persistent paradoxes such as *“let’s go. [They do not move],”* Beckett explicates how reality cannot be artistically depicted since language is

unstable, making art inherently self-referential. This idea is prominent in *Zero*: we do not construct work to create meaning for ourselves but rather to enjoy existence. Beckett evokes this idea through Pozzo's "*is that not enough for you?*" which inspired my own "*we have not been given anything at all, really.*"

Writing *Zero*, with all its influence over me, has only affirmed that it is impossible to derive meaning from literature, or mathematics, or anything else for that matter. We can only use those spheres to reveal the true beauty that exists in a meaningless lifetime. Doing so is impossible without a personal attachment to our own words. The Extension 2 English course has taught me that writing is like learning how to speak, tasting the sound of our own words, holding a voice that carries both emotional cogency and contrived intent. This is a voice I endlessly crafted in the construction of my Major Work, a voice that dually reveals the truth and stares it boldly in the face. As beings that are acutely aware of our own fragility, we are not just wired to survive; we know intimately what it means to live and what it means to suffer and what it means to die. In the face of that cosmic slight, we shall spend our calculated seconds alive.