A Man for Our Season

Reflection Statement
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Our enduring fascination with history stems from our ability to see our own concerns reflected in it, and something about the Tudor Period has captivated our interest and imagination for the past four hundred years. The purpose of my Major Work is to explore how one character from this time, Thomas Cromwell, has been re-imagined to allow a 21st century audience to see themselves, their ideals and their desires, reflected in the mirror that is history. It makes reflections of its own on society’s judgement of character and the past in the relation to the present, challenges the reader to question cemented assumptions about seemingly well-known and understood characters, and explores the reinvention of the historical novel. The intended audience of this piece are the contemporary readers of an imaginary journal (The Old Yorker) published in England, and specialising in an analysis of culture, arts and politics, (similar to the New Yorker). By following and taking inspiration from the style of articles found in magazines such as The New Yorker and The New York Review of Books, both in my research and writing, I aspired for my audience to be within this interest group. I would hope to engage both academic and mainstream readers through the highly accessible, persuasive, analytical and critical features of this genre.

Beginning with the broad concept of studying how Cromwell’s character has been depicted in a number of texts over time, my concept evolved into a close study of Hilary Mantel’s award winning novels Wolf Hall and Bring Up the Bodies, as a reaction to Robert Bolt’s A Man for All Seasons. As my initial number of texts fell from twenty to only two, so my form moved from that of a literary essay to an extended book review, a genre I was initially unfamiliar with, but found highly engaging. This change was influenced largely by the research process, as due to the currency of Mantel’s work, I found fewer literary essays available than the plethora of book reviews that were. A number of older texts, including Shakespeare’s Henry VIII and Bolt’s A Man for All Seasons had a broader scope of critical work surrounding them, but my interest in and simple enjoyment of Mantel’s books drew me to the slightly less formal and technical style of the extended book review. In accordance with this shift, my mentor suggested I consider the genre in my final format, publishing my final draft as if it were to appear in a literary magazine.

Independent research and investigation has played a crucial role in the development of my work, particularly in its initial stages. Acknowledging that just as each historian’s viewpoint is coloured depending on the moral tale they wish to convey, and that this translates into literature, I began my reading at a purely historical level. This, as well as allowing me to familiarise myself with the character I was soon to be immersed in, demonstrated Hilary Mantel’s skill in the genre of historical fiction. One historical example that truly exemplified literary comparisons I make in my work were biographies containing conflicting perspectives of Cromwell, John Schofield’s The Rise and Fall of Thomas Cromwell: Henry VIII’s Most Faithful Servant and Robert Hutchinson’s The Rise and Fall of Thomas Cromwell: Henry VIII’s Most Notorious Minister. My reading surrounding G.R. Elton also supported Mantel’s
influences and intentions for her own representation. Through his works *The Tudor Revolution in Government* and *Reform and Renewal, Thomas Cromwell and the Common Weal* I delved into his controversial arguments that Cromwell was in fact a farseeing modern statesman, who transformed the English Government into a structure that could survive royal incompetence and enact reform through constitution rather than fiat. This progressed England from the Middle Ages into the modern period without the bloodshed and descent into absolutism that occurred in much of the rest of Europe, something that could only be achieved by a highly skilled and insightful statesman. Mantel found Elton’s argument persuasive, clearly reflected in her writings.

My research then moved towards a close analysis of my chosen texts, which involved both personal analysis and reading critical works surrounding the texts. This stage played a large role in physically shaping and refining the scope and concept of my work, as I discovered the availability of material for analysis for each of the texts. I saw Robert Bolt’s *A Man for All Seasons* and Mantel’s works to be the richest, as well as the most polarised depictions, influencing my decision to use these in the more final stages of writing. Articles such as *A Man for All Seasons: An Historians Demur* and Stephen Greenblatt’s *How it must have been* shaped my ideas in comparing the two texts, and offered interesting social and cultural insights. The individual analysis I undertook posed a challenge, both because of the volume of the task and this being the first time I had undertaken an individual research project of this style, but it was one that encouraged me to develop my skills as a receptor and writer of literature.

As my project developed its more specific focus, so could my research, and as such I focused more closely not only on Mantel’s writings, but also the literary aspects of constructing historical fiction within the stylistic concerns of postmodernism. Berlatsky’s *The Real, the True and the Told: Postmodern Historical Narrative and the Ethics of Representation* was of particular relevance. This research supplemented my knowledge and understanding of the interaction between history and fiction, and how historical fiction is constructed.

As my research progressed, a number of connections were revealed between my project and the Advanced English course. Much of Hamlet’s religious and political context revolves around the conflict between Catholic and Protestant beliefs, and the official change between the two in England is attributed to Cromwell. My critical study of Hamlet allowed me to reflect on the outcomes of the situation in which Cromwell found himself, understand our modern reception of that situation and consider how this representation translates into interpretations of Cromwell’s character in literature. The ‘Conflicting Perspectives’ module required a firm understanding of how an author presents their view or opinion, in particular a radical or controversial belief, with the greatest possibility of persuading the receptor of its validity. This aided me in my consideration and interpretation of the images of Mantel’s and Bolt’s Cromwell’s in conflict with one another. The ‘Texts in Time’ module allowed me to explore the ways in which contextual values and events shape the creation of a text, as well as its reception by both contemporaries and current readers. This was crucial to my study of Mantel’s reactive writing against Bolt, and enabled me to understand how Mantel’s interpretation appealed to the 21st century reader.
The evolution of my Major Work has certainly been satisfying to experience, and in undertaking the project I have been compelled to develop my writing and analytical skills in a way previously foreign to me, offering me a more holistic understanding of myself as a composer. My interest initially stemmed from my dual interest in history and literature, with the Tudor Age being my favoured historical period, and historical fiction one of my preferred genres. This base level of interest motivated me to challenge myself in my work. I have also come to develop an appreciation of collaborative work, as my close work with my mentor proved to be an invaluable source of assistance and direction. I believe I am naturally more inclined to favour individual work, but by not only allowing my work to be subjected to an alternate perspective, but also acknowledging and undertaking the suggestions made by this perspective, I have developed a greater sense of self certainty in my writing, and believe *A Man for Our Season* is all the more cohesive and engaging for it.
Bibliography


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