

A Portrait

Note: The following structural choices including font, spacing and margins have been intentional and are a fundamental aspect of representing the author's thesis

Reflection Statement

“Think you're escaping and run into yourself. Longest way round is the shortest way home.” J. Joyce

Literary and sociological masculinities of the past seem mere abstractions today. The traditional fabric of male character and personality in Australia, emerging from the “bush ethos... an inherent, even belligerent masculinity”¹, has experienced a marked decline in the “new forms of personal autonomy... isolation and social fragmentation”² of the postmodern Zeitgeist. There is something to be lost here. Can we mediate the gulf between the idiomatic stoicism of Australian masculinity, and the fluid individuality of the 21st century male who finds himself departing from such a heritage and toward an idea of *self*?

As with all writing, both experiences and imagination inspired the work; in particular, my banal memories of boyhood, my admiration for the ethos, hardships and agrarian heritage of my father and grandfather, and the influentially tacit relations I share with them. The work is a portraiture of consonant images of Australian masculinity, both now and in the past, their continuity threaded by the notion of ‘silence’. Silence defines the values, dynamics and psychology underlying archetypes of masculinity in Australia generally, and in my own life. Silence, in the tradition of man, shapes the way the continuum of Australian male generations define their identities and relate to one another; “each man finds himself at the centre of a receding series of contexts... bound by the situation he has inherited”.³

It is to this male demographic the work is addressed, with the point of clarifying the degree to which this audience recognises, accepts or rejects the cultural mores governing their collective and individual experiences. This exploration of masculine identity is also of personal cathartic value; I examine how my antecedents have influenced my own identity and, eventually, find the “shortest way home”, to who I am as an inheritor of male tradition in current society.

In finding the origin of my forefathers’ ethos, I researched the history of Australian myths concerning dry, laconic and stoic manhood. This informed my focus on the literary ‘everyman’, as so finely and tersely wrought

¹ Quirk, K., *The Colonial Goldfields: Visions and Revisions*,

² Miller, Daniel, et al. *How the World Changed Social Media*. 1st ed., vol. 1, London, UCL Press, 2016. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1g69z35.

³ Miller, J.H., *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1970

by such Australian writers as Henry Lawson⁴ and Aeneas Gunn⁵. Furthermore, sociological research revealed the stoic “working-class ethos”⁶ at the crux of such myths, and its relevance to the work’s intergenerational ensemble. Can the posterity of mythologised male generations bear the onus of a past ethos in the modern era, and is it their responsibility to do so?

Channelling Seamus Heaney’s *Digging*, the work employs archetypal, taciturn characterisation in the apotheosis of the ‘father’ and ‘grandfather’ as images of a venerated stoic past and of Australian masculine culture. That the “working-class ethos... expressed itself in a realist aesthetic”⁷ was of major consequence to the realist mode of expression used to evoke the terse interactions of the masculine family unit. Consequently, investigations into Modernist realism were founded on readings of Ernest Hemingway⁸ and James Joyce⁹, whose analogous focus on the ‘Everyman’ and a ‘scrupulously mean’ economy and exactness of language and tone (“The boy uttered a squeal of pain as the stick cut his thigh.”¹⁰) have been adopted as a realist aesthetic that emulates the working-class habitus and evokes the reticence of masculine identity. This is the lens through which stoic masculinity is defined and relations determined; “Father gently lifted him from the sea and laid him to rest on it.”¹¹ Through ‘silence’ and terse interaction, values and stoic traditions are conveyed and inherited.

It is this intergenerational dynamic of inheritance that the work reflects on and responds to. The character triptych serves as a microcosm of intergenerational continuities and deviations in habitus, values and ethos, posing questions of self-identity to various strata of males within Australian society, whose sense of self is mediated by a consciousness of the cultural past and their position within the postmodern present. This dual-consciousness is represented mainly through the Bildungsroman diegesis in the psychological development of ‘the boy’. The diegesis was of vital import to the choice of the short story form, whose flexibility and breadth of language and structural devices realised the equally psychic and experiential nature of masculine maturation, and allows the work to be contemporised in other forms such as radio and filmic forums, with a view to engaging

⁴ Lawson, H., *A Camp-fire Yarn: Henry Lawson Complete Works 1885-1900*, Lansdowne, Griffin Press Limited, 1984

⁵ Gunn, A., *Australia, We of the Never-Never*, Random House Australia, 2008

⁶ Charlesworth, Simon J., *A Phenomenology of Working-Class Experience*, Cambridge University Press, 2000

⁷ Lane, Jeremy F., *Pierre Bourdieu: A Critical Introduction*, Pluto Press, 2000

⁸ Hemingway, E., *Great Britain, The Old Man and the Sea*, Vintage Publishing, March 1999

⁹ Joyce, J., *Dubliners*, England, Penguin Books Ltd., 2000

¹⁰ Joyce, J., *Dubliners*, p. 94, 2000

¹¹A Portrait, pp.6

a present-day Australian audience. In its original form, I aspire for the work to be included in an Australian anthology of prose for its cultural value in contributing to visions of a changing, postmodern Australian masculinity that follows in the path of modern Australian writers such as Tim Winton¹² and Christos Tsiolkas¹³.

Concerning form, the episodic narratological scaffolding is divided into a quadriptych inspired by John Steinbeck's novella *The Red Pony*¹⁴, with each section featuring a separate 'climate' of masculine development and relative literary conventions. Chapter titles such as '*Of Times Forgotten*' define the nascent period of masculinity; the narrative voice of the section is characterised by intradiegetic narration ("Had he slept at all? The night, how fast it went away")¹⁵ and a stream-of-consciousness style¹⁶ that utilises seamless, sensory imagery ("Faded grey eyes... Veils of clouds, ship-sails and the distant call of seagulls")¹⁷ as a reflection of the converging reality of thought and experience in the psychic liberty of an inchoate self. As the psychological stringencies of masculine tradition deepens in '*Of Passage and Place*'¹⁸, the stream-of-consciousness progresses into fragmentary, psychoanalytic imagery of distance from the stoic habitus of antecedents. I drew from the provocative, pared aesthetic of Sylvia Plath¹⁹ studied in Extension 1, as in psychic renditions of the "grey colossus"²⁰ of fathomless paternal influence within the protagonist's life, and the yearning for personal autonomy "in the distances of tor and the substanceless blue."²¹

Developing my voice and lyricism to craft redolent vignettes of Australian cultural heritage within the short story form was guided by readings of the literary 'synaesthesia' of Seamus Heaney ("the squelch and slap of soggy peat")²², which influenced the work's textural and sensory language and stylistic run-on sentences to evoke a viscous and undulating tone.

¹² Winton, T., *Cloudstreet*, Victoria, McPhee Gribble, 1993

¹³ Tsiolkas, C., *Barracuda*, Melbourne, Allen & Unwin, 2013

¹⁴ Steinbeck, J., *The Red Pony*, United States, Penguin Books Ltd., 1993

¹⁵ A Portrait, pp. 3

¹⁶ Woronzoff, Alexander, "Andrej Belyj's "Peterburg", James Joyce's "Ulysses", and the Stream-Of-Consciousness Method", *Russian Language Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 107 (Fall 1976), pp. 101-107, American Councils for International Education

¹⁷ A Portrait, pp. 5

¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 6

¹⁹ Plath, S., *Ariel*, Great Britain, Faber and Faber, 2015

²⁰ A Portrait, pp. 11

²¹ Ibid, pp. 11

²² Heaney, S., 'Digging', *Death of a Naturalist*, Faber and Faber, February 2016

“Yours is a white streak of life, a pale theatre... white-blue distances.”²³

Consonantly, the seamless vignettes impart the ‘sway’ of prosaic life in influential interactions between the figures, illustrating the motif of ‘silence’ that culminates in inarticulacy following the protagonist’s failure to secure the ‘farm’ (“Blood of parturition... pour of cattle”)²⁴, an act symbolic of a grander inability to bear an exalted stoic ethos.

“His father’s strong hands shook [him]... He couldn’t say a thing.”²⁵

The third section of the work offers retrospective gazes into the ‘silence’ of Australian masculinity, delving into emblematic visions of Australian agrarian culture that elucidate the origin and intergenerational transmission of masculine customs through reflections on a past stoic ethos in ‘*Greenhouse*’²⁶, and background stories in the vignettes of ‘*Father’s Song*’²⁷, which limn experiences of familial dysfunction and ‘silence’. Finally, the transition from third person omniscient to first person perspective in ‘*Dust*’²⁸ signifies ‘individuation’, as informed by enquiry into the psychology of identity²⁹, where “the groups... dissolve and the individual reappears”³⁰ in parallel with postmodern individualism and the parting from cultural history. Additionally, my use of structural epigraphs establishes the theme of each vignette, such as a recognition of the inability to serve the ethos of a preceding generation (“I’ve no spade to follow men like them”)³¹, and reflecting the polyphony of masculine values and wisdoms that mediate male identity and perspective. Drawing from the literary canon and stoic philosophers such as Marcus Aurelius³², they also reflect a paternal dynamic in the work’s development; my literary antecedents guide me in the same way modern man is defined by the ethos of preceding generations.

²³ A Portrait, pp. 12

²⁴ Ibid, pp. 11

²⁵ Ibid, pp. 11

²⁶ Ibid, pp. 13

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 14

²⁸ Ibid, pp. 16

²⁹ Ross, Edward. A, Individuation, American Journal of Sociology, p. 469, The University of Chicago Press, 1920

³⁰ Ibid, pp. 1

³¹ Heaney, S. *Death of a Naturalist*, Faber and Faber, February 2016

³² Aurelius, M., *Meditations*,

As inspired by the Advanced English module Representing People and Landscapes, I conducted historical inquiry into the junction between Australian masculinity and landscape, popularised as a “harsh, masculine, dissolute existence associated with the bush ethos”³³. Depictions of the Australian agrarian landscape were influenced by the impressionist aesthetic of the Heidelberg school³⁴, with a focus on the “hard southern light”³⁵ of the Australian land, evoked by artists such as Frederick McCubbin³⁶ and Arthur Streeton³⁷. Tropes of light and space (“The pale sun... let its delicate light on the shore”)³⁸ mould states of male consciousness, evoking psychic stability within an innocuous milieu dominated by the pervading light and bareness of the Australian landscape. Furthermore, landscape tropes such as ‘the sea’ and fauna serve to develop masculinity within the intergenerational framework, as the protagonist observes, finds commune with and responds to these stimuli without paternal oversight.

Ultimately, throughout the major work writing process, I have learned that we honour those who came before us and understand ourselves in writing. We retell with our child’s eye the images of great men, resolute and unrelenting in the toils of the past, and we absorb what we may from them. Though we are not our fathers, and though their time is gone, it will not be forgotten.

³³ Lawson, R., *Towards Demythologizing the "Australian Legend": Turner's Frontier Thesis and the Australian Experience*, Journal of Social History, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Summer, 1980), pp. 5, Oxford University Press

³⁴ Galbally, Ann. “The Heidelberg School. Melbourne.” The Burlington Magazine, vol. 128, no. 995, 1986, pp. 176–177. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/882419.

³⁵ Rosenthal, Michael. “Australian Impressionism. Melbourne.” The Burlington Magazine, vol. 149, no. 1251, 2007, pp. 440–442. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20074892.

³⁶ McCubbin, F., *Down on His Luck*, Oil on canvas, 1889, Art Gallery of Western Australia Perth

³⁷ Streeton, A., *Golden Summer, Eaglemont*, Oil on canvas, 1889, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

³⁸ A Portrait, pp. 6

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