

REFLECTION STATEMENT

My major work examines the experience of time and death in literature through the lens of Einstein's theory of relativity. I arrived at this area of study through my examination of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), David Foster Wallace's 'Good Old Neon' (2004) and Tobias Wolff's 'Bullet in the Brain' (1995) in which narrator credibility and representations of time are altered to affect the text's meaning. The parallels between the treatment of time as something to be escaped in Faulkner's novel and the modern short stories, presented me with a need to investigate relativity's possibility as a lens through which to examine the texts. In order to examine the structural elements of the texts, I sought a critical framework. Genette's theory of narratology offered the framework I required to evaluate the methods by which the concept of the individual frame of reference is explored in each text. Subsequently, my critical response became an investigation of the extent to which relativity in the texts affected their structure and narrative in light of Genette's theory.

My initial research focussed upon the impact that scientific discoveries have had on culture and art. Reading encyclopaedias of artistic movements such as *Gardner's Art through the Ages* reaffirmed a clear link between science and art as it highlighted the relationship between the philosophies of art and science in particular eras, such as during the Romantic, Enlightenment and Modern eras. Prior to commencing my major work, I had an understanding of the scientific implications of relativity but was unaware of its potential relevance to literature. My interest in relativity as a literary device grew as I researched early modernist literature such as *The Sound and the Fury* which directly interacts with Einstein's theory throughout Quentin's section and using symbols such as the streetcar. I also explored

Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* in which Einsteinian concepts such as 4-dimensional space-time and time dilation are explored. Catherine Burgass' 'A Brief History of the Postmodern Plot' guided me in my investigation of modern applications of relativity in literature.

Having attained this foundational understanding, I began searching for potential texts. I discovered *The Sound and the Fury* as it was mentioned in many critical essays concerning relativity such as Julie Johnson's 'The Theory of Relativity in Modern Literature: an Overview and The Sound and the Fury.' Due to its groundbreaking manipulation of temporality, *The Sound and the Fury* was a clear choice for the main text to be explored in my essay. My knowledge of modernism, informed by my comparative study of Lang's *Metropolis* and Orwell's *1984* in Module A: Comparative Study of Texts and Context of English Advanced, greatly assisted my understanding of *The Sound and the Fury* as both a modernist text and a text that engages with scientific discoveries of its era. Perrin Lowrey's article 'Concepts of time in The Sound and the Fury' articulated how Faulkner's warping of time in his novel contributes to textual meaning and the development of his character's traits. This inspired my search for further texts in which time warping was central.

My study of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (as part of 'After the Bomb' in English Extension 1) in which time's uncertain passing is a fundamental concern of the characters, informed my knowledge of time's role in narratives and its relationship to language. My desire to use 'Good Old Neon' stemmed from a fascination with the challenges posed by Neal's mode of narration and the inclusion of the footnote in which Neal speaks after death. Like Beckett and Faulkner, Wallace is concerned with the shortcomings of language and the futility of existence within a defined temporality. This led me to my next area of research being how time dilation, a key facet of relativity, operates in these texts and the imaginative parallels

that could be drawn between physical time dilation and the delaying of time in texts. I chose 'Bullet in the Brain' because it pushed the idea of time dilation to an extreme by suggesting that death can be delayed indefinitely through thought. It also offered a further perspective on relativity and time dilation as it focussed entirely on the moment of death itself.

My decision to focus on death arose from my consideration of the texts' main concerns. In the aforementioned 'Concepts of Time in *The Sound and the Fury*', Lowrey describes Quentin's experience of time as the cause of his want to commit suicide. In 'Good Old Neon', the protagonist also commits suicide and in 'Bullet in the Brain' the protagonist is murdered. It became apparent that impending death prompted much of the characters' reflections on time and attempts to avoid or escape it. I was also intrigued with the potentiality of evading death that is inherent in the theory of relativity's physical implications.

My final area of conceptual investigation was to find a critical framework. I discovered that Genette's theories on narratology were particularly suitable to my texts and his enunciation of the relationship between narrative retelling and narrative events, through the concepts of frequency, order and duration, was integral to my understanding of the texts' treatment of time. The best source for understanding narratological theory was Genette's *Narrative Discourse* in which a vocabulary to explain structural elements of text is developed. These critical concepts both quantified and supported my arguments on relativity as a structural device.

I chose to write a critical response as the form of my major work because this was the most effective instrument for the analysis which I desired to undertake. Despite having initially

explored essays with informal register, my final decision to utilise a formal tone was determined by the strongly academic content of my response, particularly in my application of science-related theory. Much of my analysis was about structure and thus a formal register allowed me to incorporate technical terms such as those of Genette. I was influenced in this respect by initial essays I read on Faulkner such as Stone's 'Polyphony and the Atomic Age: Bakhtin's Assimilation of an Einstein Universe' and Ursula Heise's 'Between technophobia and utopia: Science and postmodern literature', which highlighted that the complex subject matter mandated an academic approach. Furthermore, because the intended purpose of my response was investigative, I chose to write in the third person form. This had been the standard form for essays I had written during my study of other English courses and thus I felt comfortable with this style. As my investigation into form progressed, I decided to structure my essay into sections in order to maintain audience interest and allow a clear progression of ideas. The first two sections represent the two main impacts I perceived relativity to have in terms of the structure of texts. The final section explores a realm after death, highlighting the commonalities between the texts in the connections between relativity and death.

My intended purpose, that is the examination of Einstein's theory of relativity as it relates to Faulkner, Wallace and Wolff's narratives, has clearly been shaped by the aforementioned areas of investigation in science and art. This has in turn, influenced my target audience. The intellectually challenging nature of Einsteinian theory led me to define my intended audience as an academic one, particularly those interested in the application of scientific theories to the arts or experimentation with conventional modes of time and narration. Previous explorations of *The Sound and the Fury* have focussed on time and relativity, while 'Good Old Neon' and 'Bullet in the Brain' are often analysed in terms of memory and language. Therefore, my

application of Einsteinian theory to the two contemporary texts has originality and in comparing Faulkner to the contemporary texts, new meaning is given to his depiction of time. The relevance of my work lies in the fact that it explores the post-relativity world in which the empirical nature of science is more easily reconciled with the subjectivity of art. I would seek to publish my work in a literary publication such as *The Journal of Modern Literature* or *The American Journal of Science and Arts* to attract the academic readership I am targeting.

Autonomous investigation has played an integral role in the Major Work process as logged in my progress journal. It has furthered my conceptual development on numerous fronts as well as inspired the form of my essay. Given the complexity of my choice of topic, referring back to my journal was vital in allowing me to build a gradual understanding of the texts and to make connections between the texts that informed my thesis. I have found that the English Extension 2 course and the creation of my major work, whilst challenging at times, has been an extremely enjoyable exercise as I have been able to explore relativity, an intellectual passion of mine, through a literary lens: a perspective I had not previously considered.