

HSC Extension 2 English

Reflection Statement

Title: An elusive truth, the surrealist jolt

Category: Print Medium (Short Story)

[1] Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. New York: Harper, 1962. Print

[2] Baudrillard, Jean. *Fragments: Cool Memories III*, 1990-1995. Print

[3] Barthes, Roland. *The Death of the Author*. Minerva: Minerva, 1977. Print. Page 2

An elusive truth, the surrealist jolt is an inquisitive, introspective short story that challenges the conventions of traditional literature and modernism through its fragmented and abstract narrative style. This forms the basis of a postmodern literary work that responds to an increasingly polemic world saturated in identification and the pursuit of a holistic, verified understanding of cultural artefacts. It therefore becomes an enquiry into the nature of truth and authorship in a postmodern environment.

In explicitly eschewing the values of conventional fiction, the Major Work aims to forge connections between literary theory and the reality it observes. My overall intention was highly influenced by Martin Heidegger's hermeneutical philosophy¹ that values the conversion of a responder's abstract interpretation of literary theory into a holistic understanding of its relationship with reality.

The work engages explicitly with the responder to facilitate their understanding of the mechanics of a postmodern story, and catalyse new understandings about the nature of truth and authorship. In this way, the participation of the audience in the Major Work allows for the development of a response individual to any one reader, fostering the postmodern multiplicity of meaning that the work espouses.

My Major Work fuses a realistic narrative with a surreal, poetic voice in order to immerse the reader in a world in which abstract realities are made more tangible. A linear plot documents a character's investigation into the meaning behind Dalí's final painting *The Swallow's Tail*. This is paralleled by a surreal recount of 'a creature' being materialised imperfectly on a painter's canvas. Through the Narrator's frequent reference to the truth she seeks as 'elusive' and a 'creature', the italicised narrative takes metaphoric proportions. The creature, or

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‘elusive being’, thus represents the truth, origins and meaning of the painting. Its brazen yet unrealistic entrance into the concrete narrative allows me to explore the hypothetical and often misunderstood nature of truth, what Jean Baudrillard defined as ‘truth does not exist’².

In synthesising two distinct voices, that of my unnamed Narrator, and that of the abstract third-person description, the idea of a palpable truth in art is challenged. The Narrator’s investigation leads to a questioning of whether Dalí actually painted *The Swallows Tail*, a concept that is paralleled by the use of synecdoche and the visual technique of a blurred face in the italicised narrative. The Narrator, too, remains unnamed so as to emphatically deny her the greatest source of identification, suggesting it is not important in a postmodern world. This echoes Roland Barthes’ ‘The Death of the Author’ theory in which he describes literature as ‘the trap where all identity is lost’³. The parallel voices oscillate within the narrative until the painter figure and Narrator resign themselves to the incomplete transposition of truth. Thus, as Heidegger posits, I present my responder with a reality in which truth cannot materialise but instead exists in a realm beyond tangibility.

My investigation into the work of Italo Calvino, namely his short story ‘A King Listens’ and novel *If on a winter’s night a traveller*, formed the basis of my self-reflexive engagement with the reader, ‘you see, dear reader, I too’. This allowed me to communicate complicated literary theory and techniques to my audience. Calvino’s novel also influenced my ability to amalgamate postmodern techniques – a questioning of authorship, narrative deconstruction and authorial intrusion – with a concrete justification for these measures through a somewhat linear narrative. The framework for the traditional storyline emerged from Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story ‘A Temporary Matter’ and Alice Munro’s ‘The Moons of Jupiter’, however the limitations I discovered within this form led me to pursue a violation of conventional

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structures. Analysis of Edgar Allen Poe's short story 'The Tell-Tale Heart' enabled me to utilise punctuation and grammatical structures to create both an abstract voice, and controlled confusion, 'breaking, ruining, destroying. Leaving behind it, a catastrophe. Waiting before it, a catastrophe', whilst simultaneously evoking curiosity and understanding.

My Major Work preoccupies itself with surrealist art in both its investigation into Salvador Dalí, the leader of this movement, and hyper-real narrative techniques – the voice of the italicised narrative, collision of the two narratives and metaphor of 'the creature'. Haruki Murakami's surrealist short story 'Town of Cats' influenced my ability to maintain the values of the artistic movement within a literary framework. Dominic Smith's novel *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos* sparked my idea to utilise a physical painting as a mechanism by which abstract truths could be revealed. Pre-existing mystery surrounding the veracity of Salvador Dalí's painting *The Swallow's Tail* offered me a literal base upon which I could question authorship as a general concept, whilst the interpretive nature of his surrealist artworks grounds the reader in a visual representation of the abstract notion of truth. The painting also stands as the most controversial of his career, therefore inspiring the same curiosity within the responder that I evoke in the Narrator. The BBC documentary 'Modern Masters: Dalí' allowed the character of Salvador Dalí to emerge authentically within the work, bringing to life his role as a surrealist painter in a postmodern world. Further, my Extension 1 study of 'After the Bomb' introduced me to the power of art as a means to explore universal truths through Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *An Artist of the Floating World*. Further, the surrealist poetry of Sylvia Plath in her anthology 'Ariel' influenced my understanding, and later adoption, of the hyper-real poetic voice due to its representation of a postmodern reality.

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A significant technical feature in my Major Work is its role as a visual piece, thus blurring the distinction between textual forms and forging my own intersection of literary theory and artistic pieces. The visual alignment of the text explicitly delineates the separate voices, and represents the collision of two entities. Further, the short story, which is centred around a surrealist work, culminates in a visual deconstruction of language. This parallels the inherent difficulty, impossibility in fact, in understanding *The Swallow's Tail* with a visual inability to understand the words of the text. Thus, my Major Work exists as a short story embedded within a surrealist artwork.

The authorial intrusion that ensues is inherently influenced by John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in its adoption of a self-reflexive, personal voice, 'I, candidate 28376596', that engages explicitly with literary conventions and postmodern theory, 'a truth that is unattainable'. Thus, Barthes' notions of the role of the author and Baudrillard's theories of truth influenced the explicit investigation of whether it is within an author's control to present a version of the truth he so desires, and in doing so, reject laws of existence. The surreal visitation of Salvador Dalí in the linear narrative echoes the artistic concept of a 'surrealist jolt', referring to the pursuit of a connection between reality and the unconscious mind triggered by a piece of art, further deepening the identity of my Major Work as a visual piece, and questioning the exclusivity of this concept to art. The centred lineation, and hyper-real collision of the abstract and the concrete ruptures the responder's understanding of truth, and allows them to arrive at new conclusions, specifically that 'the truth is elusive'. Thus, I entitled the Major Work *An elusive truth, the surrealist jolt*.

The meta-fictional references to myself as a student in both the authorial intrusion and comedic appropriation of the Extension 2 course requirements allow for engagement with a student

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audience. Frustrations and criticisms of the art world position the text to be appealing to those within or highly interested in the artistic scene, however, in its investigation into the relationships between literary theory, art and broader society, the work demands engagement from those studying philosophy, literature or cultural studies. As my unnamed Narrator has a feminine voice, the Major Work is likely to appeal to a female audience. I envisage my major Work would be published in a literary journal such as *Overland* for its creative qualities, and progressive discussion of the literary field.

Through extensive independent investigation, inspired by my studies of the English Advanced and Extension 1 courses, I have been able to develop a detailed understanding of the relationships between society and the philosophical theory that underpins it. My interest in cultural texts has been deepened and challenged in my personal questioning of the nature of existence and the role of literary and artistic texts in representing and commenting on these realities. The meta-textual elements of my story invite my reader to engage with and understand this process. I am proud of my Major Work and the unique response I have formed to the postmodern world in which I live. However, it is at this point that I, like every good postmodern author, now relinquish *An elusive truth, the surrealist jolt* into your hands to find your own meaning.

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