

Dancing With The Shadows – Reflection Statement

“Hold him in your arms. Just so. The soul is quick. Pull him toward you. Kiss him. Quickly.”

*Cormac McCarthy*¹

Since the beginning of mankind’s endeavour to define precisely what makes us, us, we have been struck by an existential crisis: nature or nurture²? Are we subject to predetermined genetic and hereditary factors, or are our identities shaped by other extrinsic, environmental forces? Through my chosen form of the short story, centralised on the complex battleground of emotions that is the father-son relationship, I aim to explore the influence our parents imbue upon us as children, lending to the notion that regardless of whether we like it or not, we are inherently and inextricably influenced by our parents. Furthermore, I aim to explore the formative role of the Australian bush that I believe accumulates to shape a child’s identity, either in conjunction or contention with the influence we bear from our parents. The main character and narrator of “Dancing With The Shadows” is a young boy caught in a struggle for his life, slowly drowning, unseen or heard by those around him. The process of drowning triggers a series of flashbacks in conjunction with the biological stages the body enters during a drowning. These flashbacks exhibit a particular moment in time shared between father and son, each amounting to the final moment of realisation the boy experiences in recognising the impact his upbringing has had in shaping the man he envisions himself to be.

¹ McCarthy, Cormac (2006) *The Road*, United States of America, Alfred A. Knopf, pg. 172

² Yee, Albert H. (1995) *Evolution of the Nature-Nurture Controversy: Response to J. Philippe Rushton*, in *Educational Psychology Review*, Vol. 7, No. 4, pp. 381-390

The success of my major work is heavily reliant on the overarching structure of the story, the drowning process, as a catalyst for experimental writing. Initial research was directed at identifying and delineating the biological stages a drowning victim would experience, from inhalation of water, flooding of the lungs, voluntary and involuntary apnoea, to unconsciousness and ultimately death.³ A conclusive understanding of these stages (used as chapter titles), was vital in maintaining authenticity during the real-time descriptions between each flashback. Grounding the initial research in scientific principles then paved the way for more experimental concepts. Research extended to speculative scientific studies into the function of the brain and the subsequent hallucinatory and ‘out of body’ sensations triggered by near death experiences.⁴ The surge of chemicals the brain releases, and their theorised effect on the temporal lobe⁵ and NMDA receptor⁶, sought to provide scientific explanations to the age-old notion of seeing life flash before your eyes. This scientific research then allowed for a progression into the transcendental nature of literary realms, namely realism and surrealism. Inspired by Tim Winton’s personal view on ‘true realism; the supernatural and the natural accepted as one thing,’⁷ the process of drowning combined with the narrator’s unique position in time and place allowed for the convergence of the realism set forth in the recount of the boy’s flashbacks with the final surreal experience he sees on the brink of death:

³ Ellis, Jeff (2007) *Drowning Prevention: Five Stages to a Drowning*, p. 1

⁴ Fulton, Robert (1985) *The Near-Death Experience: Problems, Prospects, Perspectives (Review)* in *Contemporary Sociology*, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp. 452-453

⁵ Britton, Willoughby B. and Bootzin, Richard R. (2004) *Near-Death Experiences and the Temporal Lobe*, in *Psychological Science*, Vol. 15, No. 4, pp. 254-258

⁶ Jansen, Karl (1989) *Near Death Experience and the NMDA Receptor*, in *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 298, No.6689, p. 1708

⁷ Winton, Tim and Watzke, Beth (1991) *Where Pigs Speak in Tongues and Angels Come and Go: An Interview with Tim Winton*, in *Antipodes*, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 96-98

‘The sun was resting on the shoulders of the mountains and I on my father’s as we left the paddock and started down the road back home.’⁸

‘He feels the water rush by him, yet the other side does not come any closer. His father is there. He is always there, but he does not come near.’⁹

In the pursuit of creating a story that aims to deal with such extreme states of time and place, authenticity became particularly important in attempting to create a narrator who holds the ability to transcend physical experience. In researching the role of ‘*The Narrator as the Hero*’, I learnt the importance of ‘persuading’ the reader to believe in the surreal circumstances of the story and narrator’s voice, ultimately allowing for their own ‘coming to know the self’ in time with the narrator’s personal epiphany¹⁰. Therefore, the shifting POV acts as a stylistic manifestation of the forces and emotions felt by the characters within the story. Based upon Jeanne Delbaere-Garant’s theory on ‘psychic realism... a physical manifestation of what takes place inside the psyche’¹¹, the initial 1st person speaker slowly shifts to an omniscient 3rd person narrator, moving in time with the deepening state of the boy’s drowning, his final ‘out of body’ experience stylistically depicted as the narrator’s voice leaves its character’s body, signified by the repeated use of personal pronouns: ‘He is a boy and he is scared.’¹²

⁸ *Involuntary Apnea*, Major work chapter

⁹ *Unconsciousness*, Major work chapter

¹⁰ Thale, Jerome (1957) *The Narrator as Hero*, in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 69-73

¹¹ Guest, Dorathy G. (2005) *Epiphanies and Magic Moments*, in *Magical Realism and Writing Place: A novel and exegesis*, pp. 196-199

¹² *Unconsciousness*, Major work chapter

Inspired by my own experiences, “Dancing With The Shadows” is driven by the complexities and subtle nuances of the paternal bond – namely the tension between the paternal obligation and the all-encompassing love a father has for his son. My father is my greatest role model, and someone who I am certain has played a major part in shaping the man I am becoming. Growing up in the wake of his success, I have naturally been drawn to both aspire to be like him, and to equally feel a sense of inadequacy in my individual pursuit of his achievements. This has in no means been detrimental to my upbringing or the relationship we share, but solely acts as a determining factor in shaping who I am becoming, constantly questioning my ability to fulfil *his* shoes, or rather, mould my own. This notion not only renders my major work as a very personal reflection, yet also narrows my search for an intended audience. I would like to have my work published as part of the *Sydney Morning Herald’s Good Weekend* supplement, ‘The Two of Us’. Publishing through such a platform would provide the opportunity of combining my fictional prose with a factual account of the relationship I share with my father, giving the reader a unique insight into the background from which the story was born (quite literally).

The Preliminary English Advanced course study of Tim Winton’s ‘*Scission*’, namely Winton’s use of symbols, was a significant stylistic influence on my major work. As the axe represents the final fading connection between father and son in ‘*My Father’s Axe*’¹³, and the lost salmon a reminder of Albie’s father’s imperfections in ‘*A Blow, A Kiss*’¹⁴, I aimed to weave throughout my own work a symbol that encompassed the raw feelings between son and father. Rather than a tactile or visual reminder, the

¹³ Winton, Tim (1986) *My Father’s Axe*, in *Scission*, Australia, Penguin Books

¹⁴ Winton, Tim (1986) *A Blow, A Kiss*, in *Scission*, Australia, Penguin Books

‘symbol’ of this bond in “Dancing With The Shadows” is a recurring smell of the father. Harry’s sense of smell acts as a mediation between his exterior perceptions and inner feelings, a particular smell being indicative of both positive and negative emotions. The recurring smell of ‘coffee and the cab of the old truck’¹⁵ and the physical warmth it imparts, provides an olfactory quality that works to not only remind the boy of his father, but the reader of theirs.

Drawn from my personal experience growing up in the bush, I sought to explore the way in which a landscape can play a major part in the shaping of identity – becoming a ‘life force... with an ability to absorb its inhabitants’¹⁶. The bush and all that it encompasses holds the power to change the way we develop as people, and it was this power that I aimed to exalt in my major work, personifying the landscape in such a way that it could become a shaping hand in the evolution of the boy’s identity, ‘a character in the novel’¹⁷:

‘The storm bellowed and breathed anger...’¹⁸

The landscape is personified as a living, breathing force, its intense power manifested in different forms within each chapter. Evoking both notions of ‘terror’ and ‘beauty’, the Bush becomes reminiscent of Edmund Burke’s ‘Sublime’ as studied in the Extension 1 English course, the influence of the bush being ‘productive of the

¹⁵ *Flood*, Major work chapter

¹⁶ Penn, Sandie (2007) *The Influence of the bush on European-Australian Identity in Australian Children’s Literature*, in *The Looking Glass: New Perspectives on Children’s Literature*, Vol. 11, No. 3

¹⁷ Winton, Tim and Watzke, Beth (1991) *Where Pigs Speak in Tongues and Angels Come and Go: An Interview with Tim Winton*, in *Antipodes*, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 96-98

¹⁸ *Flood*, Major work chapter

strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling'.¹⁹ Furthermore, the empirical knowledge the boy gains through an immersion in the natural landscape of the bush is synonymous with the Romantic belief in nature as a monitory power, a spiritual teacher and purveyor of wisdom. This notion is confounded in his final realisation that his very being has been moulded by life in the Australian bush under the ever-watchful eye of his father:

“I looked at him and saw myself and at once parts became a whole and I knew.”²⁰

As the characters of my story have grown and come to a certain knowledge of self, so too have I in creating “Dancing With The Shadows”. Such a personal story inevitably requires a significant degree of self-reflection, and in shaping my major work, I have not only discovered the depth to which the bond I share with my father extends, but have equally re-affirmed my very intention, to highlight the extent to which we as children are inevitably smaller, bolder images of our parents.

¹⁹ Burke, Edmund (1909-14) *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of “The Sublime and Beautiful”*, as published in *Harvard Classics, Vol. 24, No. 2*

²⁰ *Resuscitation*, Major work chapter