

Death of a Talesman

(Or, A Tragical-Parody in Four Acts)

Reflection Statement

A writer only begins a book. A reader finishes it.

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My intention in writing “Death of a Talesman” is to parody the literary conventions of genres, especially those of spy, crime, gothic and science fiction that involve misogynistic stereotypes. Since my purpose is to satirise genre literature while affirming the integrity and creativity of the writing process, I structured the work as a pastiche of introductory pages that parody iconic texts. The corresponding humour and postmodernism is revealed by the title pun on Arthur Miller’s play *Death of a Salesman* and absurdist literature/drama, subtitled: “A Tragical-Parody in Four Acts” because, like Jane Austen’s intended reader, mine is one who has “a great deal of ingenuity” to discern literary allusions and the parodic intention. Therefore, I wrote for publication in the academic journal *Southerly*, where scholarly articles and creative fiction provide “a link between the academy and the garret,” since its readership appreciates experimental stories.

Epigraphs from Kafka and Fitzgerald reflect my experience that writing is creative yet difficult; an author who cannot write is a “monster,” with no outlet for his/her various competing inner voices. To show the ambiguity of the writer’s role as both Creator and voice within the story, I presented a self-aware narrator/protagonist’s fraught relationship with his writer, the Creator, in an internal monologue positioned between fragments of generic chapters. Structurally, I was inspired by the generic intertextuality of the series of different chapter beginnings in the Extension 1 Textual Dynamics novel *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*. The narrator/protagonist cannot progress in the plot due to the Creator’s writer’s block, and I used allusions to the monster from Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to convey his/her frustration at being in “main character purgatory,” and explore the relationship of creator to created. The disempowerment of the narrator/protagonist under the Creator’s control is also revealed by the

change in genres as the Creator seeks inspiration through multiple versions, conveyed by numbered “Drafts.” Correspondingly, his thwarted Man-Booker literary prize ambitions are symbolised by Marlon Brando’s iconic lament from the film *On the Waterfront*: “I could have been a contender!” I foregrounded the difficulties in writing by the narrator/protagonist’s critique that “my useless Creator is incapable of sustaining a fruitful plotline,” while acting as Greek chorus throughout. These italicised interjections break the fourth wall in his/her frustration at yet again “going to die on this page,” introducing self-reflexivity within the writing.

I regard my own difficulties as universal challenges when writing fiction, therefore I used the generic name John/Jack/Jane and alternated gender so the narrator/protagonist typifies Everyman – or Everywriter. Here I found Linda Hutcheon’s definition of postmodernism as “pastiche and parody” valuable by incorporating pastiche through these name changes and parody of specific genres and texts. Spy fiction’s John Bond relates to Ian Fleming’s James Bond; the crime section’s Miss Ogyny (a pun on misogyny) invokes Agatha Christie’s Miss Jane Marple; science fiction’s Dr JX110011 parallels The Controller from *Brave New World*; Gothic/horror’s Jack/Juliette invokes Stephen King’s *The Shining* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*; and the self-aware narrator, Jack, is the typical hero of fairystory/folktale. The self-reflexivity in Preliminary Course topic Postmodernism and Hutcheon’s approach also influenced my intention to make a “self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement.”

Since postmodernism has always intrigued me, I challenged the short story as a realist representation or “slice of life” by satirising traditional approaches of “sting in the tail” and unity of plot leading to closure, such as those of O. Henry in “The Gift of the Magi” and Guy deMaupassant’s “The Diamond Necklace.” Overall, my project’s fragmentation subverts closure by being the literary equivalent of a tetrptych (series of four paintings), but inspired

by Christie's story, "The Tuesday Night Club," I especially wanted the crime section to resist "the old wheeze of introducing a new character at the end" and the typical drawing-room-revelation by the omniscient detective. My allusion to *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* subverts reader's assumptions about plot and narrative conventions and invokes Todorov's topology of detective-fiction's claim that "the search for truth, not its revelation – the quest for the treasure rather than the treasure itself" is important. I incorporated his metaphor of crime-fiction as quest and "a jigsaw-puzzle" through my writing having "the most contrived of all plots." Similarly, I subverted the tradition of *pictura poesis* (painting a realist picture in words) in literary discourse and allusion because the short story, according to Valerie Shaw, "its own conventions, of art's capacity to...express complexities through metaphor, symbol and implication." So the metaphor of a coffee cup labelled "I Turn Coffee Into Novels" with the allusion that his "coffee was still hot" invokes the ending of *Where The Wild Things Are* and the child/created character's autonomy in defiance of the parent/creator's power, like the narrator as Frankenstein's monster.

I wanted this idea of the created-being resisting the authority of the Creator to link the chapter fragments, so I connected the cautionary tale of the misuse of science in *Frankenstein* with a parody of the HSC English Advanced text *Brave New World* in the science-fiction section. Both are embedded in popular culture and will be familiar to my intended reader, especially the latter's satirical view of science. Like this allusion, Juliette's reference to "giving me a voice" in the gothic section depends on a knowledgeable reader who can connect a "feminist postcolonial author" with *Jane Eyre* and its appropriation, Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. I have therefore included the reader in the writing process as a literary detective, and provided visual clues about the change of voice from italicised narrator to non-italicised Creator through the change of font, and embedded sections of writing to create the postmodern pastiche. The visual metaphor that inspired my structure is the Escher lithograph of "Drawing

Hands” since it similarly invites the reader to discern the real author of the story, like Johnson’s epigraph, whether it is the narrator/protagonist, the Creator/writer or the reader.

To explore conventions, I structured the story as a series of iconic scenes with intertextual allusions and puns. In a parody of the spy casino scene, the third person omniscient narrative is focalised through the protagonist’s perspective of a stereotypical British demeanour and patriarchal Bond, involving misogynist similes like a capsule being “as small as a mother-in-law’s heart.” The nuclear missile named Bigglesboy satirises the atomic bomb “Little Boy,” the *Boys Own* adventure hero Biggles, and the parodic Bond-villain’s cat, Bigglesworth, in the Austen Powers films. The bungling associated with twentieth-century television series *Get Smart* and *The A-Team* introduces humour in “he loved it when a plan came together, but hated it when he missed it by that much.” However, a contrasting ominous note and irony invokes *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* when the protagonist mistakes his contact.

Furthering my ironic intention, I exaggerated stylistic characteristics like the semi-scientific jargon appropriated by science fiction in the warning that “we don’t want any accidents with the oviculatum-spermatozoam.” The narrator/protagonist mentions speculation to invoke speculative fiction and its two-dimensional stereotypes, symbolised by the anonymous assistant, Dr Uhm, showing early science fiction’s misogyny, with its menial, sexualised and objectified, or non-existent female characters. Miss Ogyny and the gothic/horror’s invocation of *Jane Eyre*, madwoman in the attic and Henry James’s “The Turn of the Screw” also relate to patriarchal ideas of female hysteria. I found Judith Butler’s contention that “gender relations and the punitive production of gender identities are oppressive” to be especially valuable here. The gothic section’s opening scene parodies Hitchcock’s film *Psycho* and Stephen King’s novel *The Shining*, and Jack obsessively writing “Jack of all trades, master of none” reveals his inability to master even one genre while satirising King’s crazed character’s “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.” I lapsed

into a play script with the figure appearing from “stage left” to reveal the exaggerated and dramatic nature of horror writing, while the present tense imparts its immediacy and suspense.

In writing and researching this project, I learned that constructing fiction is a collaborative process between writer, text and reader. Just as the narrator/protagonist sympathises with the Creator, realising the difficulties of innovative and engaging writing, I developed profound respect for authors since I found that E.M. Forster’s instruction “only connect” was difficult to master. Finding ways to relate to the audience and include my reading from HSC courses, related texts and research proved a challenge. But just as I wrote for Austen’s ideal reader, so I hope I fulfilled her claim that fiction is “work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed” and “conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language.” Additionally, I realised the security and opportunity for creativity even within sometimes frustrating restrictions imposed by an external agency and set of literary conventions. The ironic final words acknowledge my difficulty in finding an individual voice within convention-ridden genres, but I found canonical texts provide a model to emulate, not copy: the project is “a far, far better thing I do than I have ever done.”

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