

reflection statement

Concerned with issues of identity, death and the nature of life, my major work, *esse/sein/est* uses both a fantastical setting and personal retellings of significant historical events to examine universal themes inspired by existentialist thought. Influenced by a variety of sources from the English curriculum, the studies in my other subjects and personal reading, it aims to answer, if in a fanciful way, some of the major questions that occupy us all at some point in our lives. Through study of the *After the Bomb* elective in English Extension 1, I came to understand the existentialist and nihilist paradigms that came about as a result of the senseless destruction of World War Two. The constant questioning of reality and meaning in both assigned and found texts caused me to question in a similar way. This pattern of thought was built upon through the critical study of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in Advanced English, particularly with Hamlet's *O, that this too solid flesh would melt* and *To be or not to be* soliloquies (act 1, scene 2 and act 3, scene 1, respectively). These influences resonated with me personally and caused me to develop an interest in one of the universal and fundamental questions of humanity: what is the meaning of life? If I am one of billions, why should my life matter?

I aimed to answer these questions through the course of my major work. What initially began as a simple exploration of death and anonymity developed into the setting of the Library, which I used to frame my central triptych of *Casus*, *Stille Nacht* and *Shifting*, influenced by Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*. The examination of the importance of the individual through the personification of Death as a narrator in Zusak's book, or rather the physical manifestation of a force as a personality, further pushed me to develop the Library as a quantifiable yet infinite repository of human experience, tended to by librarians and assistants. The librarians and assistants, having the job of caring for the stories, have no stories themselves, instead building their identities through experience and emotion inspired by what they read.

I chose the short story format as I found it best to clearly convey a narrative, and because of the metanarrative I wanted to create, hinting at the implication that my final work may also be a book in the Library. Inspired by Peter Kocan's *The Treatment* and *The Cure*, I decided to explore and experiment with the second person narrative form, something I had been discouraged from doing in the past. This form allowed me to create a protagonist without an identity, and to fully immerse the reader in the world of the Library, allowing them to have similar experiences to the character, to give the eventual conclusion more emotional weight. Through investigation I found short stories in the second person (though they are rare) such as Daniel Orozco's *Orientation*, however unlike Orozco I chose to develop the central character through the story, rather than leaving them as a blank canvas. Through the course of my story the protagonist's identity develops, which is mirrored within the triptych as the individual stories contain decreasing levels of anonymity. This is also the inspiration for the title, which is the verb *to be* in Latin, German and French (though for stylistic reasons I chose to use *est*, "it is", rather than the infinitive *être*) respectively. By using languages other than English and omitting translations I hope to convey a theme of experience and shared humanity transcending language barriers. I also incorporated ongoing themes of music and rhythm, to establish continuity between the stories of the triptych.

The intended audience of my major work is the active reader, preferably with some prior knowledge of World War One and the 9/11 attacks. The intended audience should also be open to challenging stories that subvert expectations of form and voice. Through the

composition process I distributed, and received feedback on, my work, and became interested in reactions to my writing. Because of the complex philosophical ideas explored in my major work, I hope to provoke personal reflection in, and discussion amongst, readers. Thus, rather than in physical form, I envision as a point of publication online literary magazines such as *Composite Minds* (www.compositeminds.com/) or writing communities such as *WritersCafe* (www.writerscafe.org/), which allow a platform for feedback and discussion.

Casus was the first story that I conceived. It was inspired by the images of the “falling people” of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre. I became fascinated with the image of the two people falling from one of the towers holding hands, a fascination that was enhanced by the event’s place as a defining moment of my childhood. With *Casus* I endeavoured to give personality to one of the falling people, yet also maintain anonymity by withholding a quantifiable identity. Inspired by Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (which also deals with the 9/11 attacks) and the works of Kurt Vonnegut (particularly *Breakfast of Champions*), I experimented with form in this story. By jarringly scattering the words narrating the stream of consciousness of the male character across the page I attempted to convey the scattered thought processes surrounding such a tragedy, as well as creating a break between the dreamlike opening and the climax. It also allowed me to overcome the personal difficulty I was having in coherently writing about such a divisive event. I completed the story by placing the two perspectives of the climax into two opposing columns to represent the towers of the World Trade Centre, and to make the link to 9/11 explicit without overtly stating it. The final inclusion of the image that had inspired *Casus* was inspired by Vonnegut’s use of hand drawn images throughout his novel *Breakfast of Champions*.

Stille Nacht was harder to develop, though it follows a more conventional narrative form, examining the Christmas Truce of 1914. Through my investigation, my preconceptions about the event were challenged by first-hand accounts, altering my narrative and writing, for example “*Enemy soldiers shouted to one another from the trenches, joined in singing songs and soon met one another in the middle of no-mans-land to talk, exchange gifts and in some areas to take part in impromptu soccer matches.*” Again I created anonymity through exclusively using personal pronouns, with the names only being introduced towards the end. As I wrote I found that the central character of Peters was partially inspired by Joseph Heller’s Yossarian from his novel *Catch-22*, an assigned text from English Extension 1. I created a sense of numbness and depression with the repeated motif of cold and winter, which I furthered with allusions to medical terminology. The confrontation was inspired by an image I found of a German soldier lighting a cigarette for an English one, while the character of Hans was inspired by Siegfried Sassoon’s *Suicide in the Trenches*.

*In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
With cramps and lice and lack of rum,
He put a bullet through his brain.
No one spoke of him again.*

I attempted to imitate the almost bland, bare style of the second stanza with my closing line, implying Hans’ suicide at the hopelessness of war. I also chose to include German dialogue in this story; I had difficulty deciding whether or not to include a translation, but

eventually left it plain to position the reader's experience to again mirror Peters'. Though the individual words are obscure, the overall message is clear, continuing a theme of meaning transcending language barriers and personal differences.

Shifting, the last piece of the triptych, was also the most difficult to write. I had trouble finding inspiration and reconciling myself to break the theme of the triptych by writing not about a historical event, but a deeply personal one. The inspiration for the story came from my own visit to Paris in 2011 and my personal history as a violinist. At the time I found the city, especially the Metro system, highly inspirational, something I hoped to translate in this piece. The change of pace in this story reflects the growing identity of the Library's protagonist, with the peace of the ending inspiring the climax of the Library's narrative. Jim's deliberate creation of a new identity further provokes the protagonist to question their situation fully. In *Shifting* I aimed to personify the violin, placing its "dialogue" to the right side of the page to contrast the rational thought processes of Jim, a technique again borrowed from *The Book Thief*, in which physical distance on the page is used to create asides by the narrator. The title of this story, *Shifting*, refers to the technique of position shifting on the violin, while also alluding to the personal journey of Jim.

Throughout the writing process, my intention and aim changed, both as a result of my investigation into form and literary features, and through the continual study of Advanced and Extension 1 English. I feel that my major work achieved my purpose, while the journey contributed to my understanding of my own abilities and of literary features. Undertaking English Extension 2 has been a difficult and emotional process for me, but ultimately a rewarding one.