

**ON A WING AND A**  
**PRAYER**

Reflection Statement

The concept behind ‘On a Wing and a Prayer’ sprang from the intrigue I felt on my reading of W.B Yeats’ Poem, “Long- Legged Fly”<sup>16</sup>, in which three historio-mythical moments are captured at the point of stasis that would lead to momentous events in man’s history. It was this profound realisation, that during moments of such enormity in which we cannot comprehend the magnitude of existence, we as humans may be thrust into a state of escape through inertia. This passivity, a “quietism of despair”<sup>17</sup>, may prove detrimental to an individual’s happiness if not overcome. It was this understanding that informed my empathy for Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, as he struggled with the Existential dilemma of “To be, or not to be.”

The target audience for my major work is women with children of their own, who are able to imagine the horror of losing a child to war. However, I hope that my story resonates with audiences of a wider demographic, due to its treatment of the universal experiences of growing up, dealing with grief and overcoming adversity. If I were to have my major work published, I would want it to be considered for the Australian magazine, *Womankind*, which would attract readers who would expect experimentation and innovation in the way that writers manipulate the short story form. *Womankind* also offers a platform specifically for the female voice, which has been fundamental to my aim from the very inception of my writing.

Influenced by the Year 11 Advanced Area of Study, *Identity*, my purpose in creating my short story was to explore how the human propensity for personal evolution is impacted by the life experiences which shape our identity. I have achieved this purpose through the construction of a character who ruminates upon both childhood and adult experiences where

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<sup>16</sup> YEATS, William Butler, 1954 , “The Long- Legged Fly”

<sup>17</sup> SARTRE, Jean-Paul, 1946, “Existentialism is a Humanism”

the dichotomy between responsibilities and individual will become apparent.

Through my construction of a first- person female character voice I aim to challenge the silencing of the female perspective in a patriarchal society (such as in the time of the Vietnam War), where decisions about life, death and individual choice were made in the impersonal arena of male politics. I developed knowledge of this way of thinking through the ‘After the Bomb’ rubric in the Extension One course, in particular, through my study of the resistant voice of Sylvia Plath, who challenged the social constructs which defined the silent role of women during the Cold War era.

Inspired by Evie Wyld’s ‘All the Birds, Singing’<sup>18</sup>, I decided to structure my narrative with alternating sections, switching between the settings of late 1940s/ early 1950s Sydney and an airport in Darwin, 1972. Through the alternating sections which I threaded together with the interweaving motif of silence, I intended to convey the idea that throughout our lives we may reach a point of stagnation; unable to evolve as a person because we act in the same way as we have in the past, and encounter disappointments which mirror those from years ago. In this way, I aim to make my readers question what it is which holds us back from happiness- what have we sacrificed out of a sense of duty to others which contradicted our individual will? For this reason, I chose to insert second- person episodes of narration, which I had seen used to great effect in Ruby Quirk’s 2013 exemplar story, “Esse/Sein/Est”<sup>19</sup>. My inspiration for these sections once again came from Yeats’ “Long- Legged Fly”. Through my use of water and nature imagery, I aimed to allegorically foreshadow the event which would occur next in my protagonist’s life. From the direct reference to the reader as “you”, I wished to place the reader within the situation where they also felt that same sense of impotency as my protagonist did when we are caught up in the forces of life beyond our control.

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<sup>18</sup> WYLD, Evie, 2013, “All the Birds, Singing”

<sup>19</sup> QUIRK, Ruby, 2013, “Esse/Sein/Est”

In an attempt to represent the obsolete nature of outdated practices within religious traditions, I have included extracts of Latin psalms and church hymns, which were used during Catholic Mass before the introduction of Vatican II. After interviewing some teachers who had attended Catholic schools during this era, I became aware of how ignorant their generation was towards the meaning imbued in Latin prayers. Through the use of internal monologue, I have further emphasized the way in which religious moral principles were indoctrinated upon adherent's minds through the implementation of moments of 'meditative reflection', or prayer, which my protagonist enters into during times of duress. My inclusion of moments of internal monologue was also intended to create a balance between pathos and humour in my writing, a quality evident in the works of Tim Winton- in particular, his series of short stories, 'The Turning',<sup>20</sup> whereby characters ironically muse about crises occurring in their lives.

I began my research path with the aim of creating a piece about the changing nature of religious paradigms in 1960s Australia. After reading 'A Historical Overview of Australian Religious Sectarianism Accompanied by a Survey of Factors Contributing to its Dissolution'<sup>21</sup> by Stephen Blyth, I wrote a draft piece concerning a Catholic/ Protestant wedding and the controversy surrounding it in 1960s Australia. However, my writing sounded unauthentic, and I knew I needed to develop a more legitimate character voice. I believed that this time period and focus on sectarianism in Australia was a unique strand to explore, and so I decided to retain partially this theme, however I would not consider this the principal focus of my major work- I would instead focus on an individual's struggle to achieve happiness whilst adhering to constraining constructs of society and faith.

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<sup>20</sup> WINTON, Tim, 2005, "The Turning"

<sup>21</sup> BLYTH, Stephen, 2012

I watched the 1991 ABC miniseries, 'Brides of Christ',<sup>22</sup> which dramatized the lives of schoolgirls and nuns in a Sydney convent from late 1950s- early 1970s. The rigid structure of worship the Catholic nuns undertook and the stringent expectations on lay people to conform to Vatican doctrine (on issues of sex before marriage and birth control, for example) seemed to stifle the individuals in a way which compromised their personal will. This seemed like a fascinating setting to explore, and yet I still liked my previous idea of referencing Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War.

It was then that I remembered having read Bruce Dawe's poem, 'Homecoming'.<sup>23</sup> Upon re-reading I decided that I would write about the fallen soldiers being repatriated after the war that divided the nation in the early 1970s, with a Catholic mother struggling to honour her deceased son's request to be interned without a religious a funeral service. However, following my reading of Yeats' "Long- Legged Fly", I was so fascinated by the image of "Caeser...in the tent/ Where the maps are spread/ His eyes fixed upon nothing/ A hand under his head," that I decided to broaden my focus to consider the universal human response to loss: our initial inability to comprehend the extent of our grief, and our ultimate realisation of the need to move on.

My title, 'On a Wing and a Prayer,' was inspired by the 1972 song, "Coming in on a Wing and a Prayer,"<sup>24</sup> which was written about a WWII warplane that had incurred a broken wing and struggled to return to base. As well as the literal relevance to the plane in my story, this title alludes to the allegory of the long-legged fly contained in my second-person narrative vignettes. The 'Prayer' prefigures the emphasis on religious paradigms which I have included

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<sup>22</sup> WALLACE, Stephen, ABC, 1991 "Brides of Christ"

<sup>23</sup> DAWE, Bruce, 1968, "Homecoming"

<sup>24</sup> ADAMSON, MCHUGH, 1972, "Coming in on a Wing and a Prayer"

throughout my short story. Finally, 'on a wing and a prayer' is an idiom which denotes something having only a slight chance of success, and thus reflects the sense of hopelessness felt by my protagonist as she fears that her son will never 'come home' to her.

The Extension Two English Course has provided an opportunity for me to extend the 'wings' of my writing ability and embark upon a learning journey through which I have discovered much about the rich and fertile ground of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Australian history. My independent research and continued study of Advanced and Extension 1 English has assisted me in realising the creative potential I hoped to achieve in my writing. The most rewarding aspect of my 'Major Work journey' however, has been my newfound appreciation of the process involved in the creation of texts and the realisation that the selection of every idea, word choice and image represents the author's painstaking process in realising an artistic vision.