

### **Reflection Statement**

The purpose of my Major Work, *Qualia*, is to use the form of performance poetry to express the complexities of one woman's life. Anxiety, illness, disenchantment and the pressure to conform to capitalist values are challenges experienced by women in Westernised societies. *Qualia* gives voice to such women.

Researching the phenomenon of qualia<sup>1</sup> was key to developing my concept. Qualia is the term used to denote that perception is a subjective experience. Although it can be applied to many physical experiences, colour<sup>2</sup> is most often referenced. For example, exactly what shade of blue the sky is to each of us is slightly different; brighter, darker, duller or lighter. This subjective experience of the same phenomenon is qualia, a branch of philosophy that touches on personal psychology and fascinates me. In *Qualia*, I attempt to capture the subjective experiences of a woman's life and her search for identity, referencing the nuances of colour. Canary represents childhood, beige is used for adolescence, gold symbolises middle age and mustard describes old age.

The choice of yellow was influenced by research into Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. When expanding his theory of the "Collective Unconscious", that we share an innate experience of the unconscious mind, he claimed that certain colours represent emotions or subconscious desires<sup>3</sup>. According to Jung, yellow is symbolic of intuition, the aspect of the psyche I most associate with the inexpressible subtleties of subjective experience and personal identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/qualia/>, last updated 20/8/2015

<sup>2</sup> "Quining Qualia", D. Dennett, Oxford University Press, 1998

<sup>3</sup> "Mandala Symbolism", C. Jung, Princeton: Princeton University, 1972

Examining the writings of Virginia Woolf<sup>4</sup>, Sylvia Plath<sup>5</sup>, Maya Angelou<sup>6</sup> and Margaret Atwood<sup>7</sup> helped me to write the voice of my persona at various stages of her life. Exploring the work of Elizabeth Barrett Browning educated me on a woman's use of the sonnet form<sup>9</sup>.

It became apparent that performance poetry would allow a more expressive realisation of my attempt to portray the subtleties of personal experience. I was greatly influenced by Suli Breaks<sup>10</sup>, a prominent English spoken word poet. Studying his inspiring work allowed me to better understand the structure and techniques of the form. I also attended the Word in Hand poetry slam and open mic night in Glebe<sup>11</sup> to experience the form in a specifically Australian context firsthand.

The intended forum for my Major Work is an event such as the Women of the World Poetry Slam<sup>12</sup>, which perfectly encompasses my audience demographic. Women and non-gender conforming individuals are invited to perform poetry about what it is like to be female in our society; the good, the bad and the ugly.

The English Extension 1 elective Language and Gender directly inspired *Qualia*, as I seek to express a female voice. Most influential was Woolf's *Orlando*, as it investigates the complexities of human life and how we are shaped by our past. The

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<sup>4</sup> "The Waves", V. Woolf, Hogarth Press, 1931

<sup>5</sup> "The Bell Jar", S. Plath, Heinemann, 1963

<sup>6</sup> "On Aging", M. Angelou, Random House, 1978

<sup>7</sup> "The Blind Assassin", M. Atwood, McClelland and Stewart, 2000

<sup>8</sup> "The Door", M. Atwood, Virago Press, 2007

<sup>9</sup> "Grief", E. B. Browning, 1844

<sup>10</sup> "Why I Hate School But Love Education", S. Breaks, 2012

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.wordinhand.org/>, 4/8/2016 3:57pm, last updated 2015

<sup>12</sup> <http://poetryslam.com/2016-women-of-the-world-poetry-slam/> 12/8/2016 3:14pm, last updated 2015

study of T.S. Eliot in Advanced English influenced my medium. *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*<sup>13</sup>, where a persona attempts to express subjective experience and questions of aging, time and the loss of one's ability to communicate with others, impacted particularly on "Mustard". Also relevant is identity, a concept investigated in the Area of Study: Discovery. In *The Motorcycle Diaries*,<sup>14</sup> Che Guevara undergoes a psychological process of discovery, as my persona does. The tragedy of my suite is that we never see the persona truly understand herself. Instead, she is a naïve youth, an apathetic teen, a depressed adult clinging to materialism and, tragically, a sufferer of Alzheimer's disease who loses herself almost entirely.

To convey the curious, carefree naivety of a young girl in "Canary", stream of consciousness is used, borrowing from Woolf's "The Waves"<sup>15</sup>. The disruption of this naivety is emphasised through a stanza of regular rhythm and rhyme when the persona experiences fear and anxiety. It is here that I introduce my key motif, the wolf, an iconic symbol of danger. In, "Something heavy on my chest/ Something's coming, I can't rest." The simple rhyme creates a tone of youthfulness, sustained throughout the poem through a strong use of repetition, alliteration and onomatopoeia. The qualia of joyful and ignorant bliss that I am attempting to express contrasts the other poems as the persona grows up and faces struggles that the young are oblivious to. My performance of this poem is evenly paced, the tone light.

As inspiration for the adolescent "Beige", as well as being influenced by Plath<sup>16</sup>, I looked to pop culture. The dark and brooding lyrics of Lorde<sup>17</sup> capture the

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<sup>13</sup> "The Love Song of Alfred Prufrock", T. S. Eliot, Volume 6, Issue 3 of Poetry, a magazine of verse, 1915

<sup>14</sup> "The Motorcycle Diaries: Notes on a Latin American Journey", E. C. Guevara, Ocean Press, 2003

<sup>15</sup> "The Waves", V. Woolf, Hogarth Press, 1931

<sup>16</sup> "The Bell Jar", S. Plath, Heinemann, 1963

experience of teenagers as they grow up and inevitably leave the safe and secure worlds created for them by their parents. Stylistically, I was also influenced by Fairytales for Wilde Girls<sup>18</sup> by Alysse Near. An example of these stylistic choices is in the lines, “I’m reaching to revel in the rebel rush of risk/ The big bad wolf is a forest silhouette, /velvet black against a washed out sky.” Here, the rapid alliteration creates an anxious tone through a fast and frenetic pace, the motif of the wolf developing into a dangerous and seductive image. The experience of adolescence is expressed through fractured free verse. A lack of regular rhythm and rhyme suggests the persona’s confusion and lack of a coherent sense of self, such as in “My cracking voice stumbles over cracking lips/ My chest constricting, nails chipped.” In the final lines, “Something beautiful/ Something old.../ Something glinting gold” the repetition of the indefinite pronoun “something” reveals the persona’s longing for meaning, purpose and value. The allusion to the idiom regarding brides emphasises the persona’s desire to enter the adult world and reveals the narrow gender roles available to her. The choice of performing with an unsteady, distressed tone of voice was imperative to communicating the qualia associated with the persona at this age.

In “Gold”, the persona’s conformity to rigid social structures is represented through the strict meter and rhyme of the sonnet form. Her response to her adolescent struggle with identity has been to distract herself with consumerism and conform to the beauty requirements of the gender binary. The cumulative listing of brands throughout the poem is inspired by Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*<sup>19</sup>, expressing the postmodern obsession with capitalism as a means of crafting a sense

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<sup>17</sup> “*The Love Club EP*” Lorde, (2013), “*Pure Heroine*”, Lorde, 2013

<sup>18</sup> “*Fairytales For Wilde Girls*”, A. Near, Random House, 2013

<sup>19</sup> “*American Psycho*”, B. Easton Ellis, Vintage Books New York, 1991

of personal identity. In, “Avoiding my own gaze, I make my way/ Mask on my face and out into the fray.” the metaphor of the persona’s make-up being a “mask”, necessary for her to leave her house, highlights her need to conform to materialism and the demands of the male gaze, which is symbolised by the wolf and his foreboding “teeth that bite”. She has created a false and fragile sense of security for herself. I perform this poem with clipped rigidity, control and evenness, emotion only creeping into my tone at key points, such as the mention of the persona’s child.

The final poem of the suite explores what happens to the persona when she faces the untreatable tragedy that is Alzheimer's disease. To convincingly express the persona’s subjectivity in “Mustard”, research into this disease was vital<sup>20</sup>. The persona, who has spent her life searching for meaning and identity, is left without coherent thought, with only immediate sensation and the qualia of her personal experience and memories. The lack of stanza structure in this poem conveys the lack of cohesion and stability in the persona's mind, such as in the line, “A cardigan for a... A grandchild? A husband?” The pause created by ellipsis and the rhetorical questions demonstrate the persona’s confusion. The performance of “Mustard” features pauses, breaks and sharp changes in pace and volume to express the persona’s erratic behaviour as a result of her deteriorating mind.

The process of developing this performance has been challenging and rewarding. I have made many changes, such as my decision to omit music after experimenting with Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons”<sup>21</sup> in order to focus on the pure expressiveness of voice and language. Ultimately, I feel I have portrayed a unique, personal experience of

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<sup>20</sup> “*Alzheimer’s Disease*”, M. T. Brill, Benchmark Books, 2005

<sup>21</sup> “*The Four Seasons*”, A. Vivaldi, 1723

being a woman. I have come as close to capturing the ephemeral nature of qualia as I can.

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Audio:

- “*The Love Club EP*” Lorde, (2013), “*Pure Heroine*”, Lorde, 2013
- “*The Four Seasons*”, A. Vivaldi, 1723

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