

Reflection Statement

Any re-evaluation of the past informs the present, and it is this idea that inspired my short story on Australian politics and feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. My Major Work, 'The Sight of Women Talking', was written with the aim of looking back on the achievements of women and the dynamic political landscape of the Whitlam era. Writing from a contemporary viewpoint where many people are disillusioned with modern politics and the feminist movement is attacked externally and divided internally, my work explores how the private intersects with the political. I aim to engage my audience in a retrospective contemplation of the changing role of women.

'The Sight of Women Talking' is intended to be read as a weaving together of different cultural threads and political perspectives in order to create a narrative fabric of a tumultuous part of Australian history. Studying texts in the English Advanced module 'Representing People and Politics' enhanced my comprehension of the inherently political nature of our existence; however, perhaps paradoxically, this increased my interest in a kind of cultural cringe that translates into many Australians finding our political history uninteresting when compared to the U.S and the U.K. In response to this, I tried to capture the energy and excitement of Australian politics in the 1970s and 1980s, an energy and excitement that is located in my main character Kitty, who embodies the Women's Liberation Movement through her foray into the male-dominated fields of law and politics. However, Molly Antopol's story 'The Old World', which explores the impact of larger events in Eastern Europe on an individual's experience of the world, made me realise the necessity of expressing the centrality of the individual within society. I also focus on Kitty's personal and family life, drawing together the many threads of the lives around her to weave together an image of a diverse Australia.

In order to reinforce this idea of individual strands making up the fabric of a story, I used thread and embroidery imagery throughout my work. The use of an underpinning image structure was influenced by Doris Lessing's short story 'Through the Tunnel', where throughout the story the tunnel serves as a symbol for both coming of age and Jerry's self-reflection. In 'The Sight of Women Talking', this is exemplified by the simile: "I wind my way down to the train station, weaving through the crowds like a bright red embroidery thread" (2) and the symbolic contrasting of the stitches on Aoife's wedding dress: "My stitches are wonky and uneven compared to the delicate florals that have burst from the other needles" (17), both examples highlighting the integral role thread imagery plays within my piece.

The structure of my work is intended to reflect its historical setting and creates a chronological reflection of the time period. However, in the more personal aspects of Kitty's story, my use of a linear narrative interspersed by reflections on the past was inspired by the structure of Alice Munro's story 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain'. Lorrie Moore's story 'Debarking', with its darker and more experimental style, sharpened my ability to detail the oppressive experiences of many women. However, this was not an overarching style I wished to pursue, and I chose instead a more optimistic and reflective tone, something that was developed through reading Georgia Blain's 'Intelligence Quotient' and 'The 'Other Side of the River'. These stories demonstrated to me how a reflective and quietly insightful tone could create a powerfully personal view of the political events occurring in my story, something that is evident when Kitty reflects on the impact of Gough Whitlam's sacking; "the law...was now the sliver of a doorway we could no longer be bothered to squeeze through" (21).

The aspect of my short story I most enjoyed crafting was the exploration of Kitty's relationship with her sister, Aoife. Originally, I did not intend for the sisters to represent different paths and lives for women in this time period; however, Marion Halligan's story 'Wedlock' gave me the impetus to represent these paths through contrasting their lives: "My sister's future crystallizes into christening gowns and Women's Weekly recipes, while my own blurs and shifts." (17) This portrayal was influenced by Alice Munro's short story cycle The Lives of Girls and Women, as it gave me insight into how to capture female relationships: it is the intimacy of sisters, and the contingent idea of the necessity of female support, that I instilled in their relationship. I represented this through how essential Aoife is to Kitty's understanding of the nuances of women's oppression during this time: "I look at her thin face, newly-formed crow's feet branded next to her twenty-four-year-old eyes, at her hands tired from bleaching collar stains... Too tired, too tired, her face says." (22). It is this portrayal of the relationships of women that led me to envisage that my audience would be mainly Australian women who are interested in feminist literature and politics, and who would engage in spaces such as feminartsy.com or publications such as 'Womankind' magazine.

Another important aspect of 'The Sight of Women Talking' is my creation of a strong sense of place. This was inspired by own experiences in Sydney and Michelle de Kretser's atmospheric novella Springtime which was instrumental in developing images of Sydney's Inner West. This is exemplified in the use of lush and layered language: "crepe myrtles and tiled stairs and rosemary bushes as hedges" (16). The construction of setting was further enhanced by understanding how Jhumpa Lahiri's story 'Once in a Lifetime' opens with rich descriptions and immediately captures context. This style drove my attempts to create a realistic portrayal of Sydney in the 1970s and 1980s.

Championing underprivileged and minority voices is an idea that has become increasingly interesting to me throughout my Stage 6 English studies. ‘Modernism and Post-Modernism’ in Preliminary English Extension first sparked my interest in marginalised voices, and when exploring aspects of my HSC course ‘After the Bomb’ through a post-colonial lens, I developed a stronger sense of how I could use formerly subjugated voices to shed light on the present. To this end, in ‘The Sight of Women Talking’ I’ve given depth, backstory and voice to the feminists of the 1970s and 1980s. Furthermore, Plath’s poetry in ‘After the Bomb’ developed my appreciation of the difficulty women faced when asserting themselves in a patriarchal society. This is revealed most significantly in the scene which focuses on the discussion of the no-fault divorce law: “I note down the article and amendment number and shut out the white noise leaking from the mouths of the Nietzsche boys in the front row” (19). My portrayal of Kitty as externally silenced while retaining an internal rejection of patriarchal authority demonstrates the difficulty of personal and political expression for women in this time.

My focus on the personal within the political was further inspired by how David Malouf’s story ‘The Only Speaker of His Tongue’ details the political and historical subjugation of Indigenous Australians and the obliteration of a language. The impact of historical events on personal and cultural knowledge is located in the relationship between a Nordic lexicographer and an unnamed Indigenous man who is the sole carrier of an erased language. To achieve this intertwining of the personal and the political, and further authenticate my historical setting, I included excerpts from Gough Whitlam’s election speech, interposing them with reactions of university students: “‘*Education is the key to equality of opportunity.*’ Marianne smiles and widens her eyes, and I can see what she’s thinking...” (10). The personal within the political is further expressed in ‘The Sight of Women Talking’ through my continuing use of first person and present tense, although the piece spans three decades. I chose to maintain this tense throughout my piece in order to

present a fresh, immediate and powerful account of the political and social landscape, whilst preserving the intertwining of personal reflection, family history and social change.

Another inspiration for ‘The Sight of Women Talking’ was Germaine Greer’s The Female Eunuch: this book and its phrase “the sight of women talking...”, as well Greer herself are referenced throughout my work. Through images of women talking together – “women leaning in close, who know each other like a Sunday hymn, who trade recipes and secrets while their husbands are out” (26) – I aim to reflect the idea of social and political change coming from the sharing of knowledge and experiences between women.

I am immeasurably grateful for the experience I’ve had in writing ‘The Sight of Women Talking’. I have gained a newfound appreciation for the achievements and sacrifices of women who have come before me, and a renewed enthusiasm for Australian politics and its ability to be dynamic and inspiring. Through experiencing first-hand the exhausting process of developing, journaling, drafting, re-drafting and polishing a story, I emerge from Extension 2 in awe of writers and their ability to create worlds with words. The process of writing this story has been challenging but it has only fuelled my love of writing and creative expression.