

## **Reflection Statement: *Commentary on a Nymphette***

*“Do what only a true artist can do ... pounce upon the forgotten butterfly of revelation ... but, for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“All they want to do/ is tie the poem to a chair with rope/ and torture a confession out of it.”<sup>2</sup>*

My Major Work *Commentary on a Nymphette* is a suite of poetry and critical commentary. The suite is written by an omniscient poet about a girl and her father, a Professor. The poems are anonymously delivered to poetry specialist and editor Professor D. Dudley’s office for review and critique. As he adds critical and personal annotations it is implied that he is unknowingly analysing poetry depicting himself and his daughter. Throughout my work I play on differing critical approaches and the dynamic relationship between the literary text and the critic by including both poetry and editorial comments, revealing that Professor Dudley is more intimate with the poetry than he knows. The suite and annotations also work in conjunction to explore my ‘secondary’ themes of artistic analysis, father daughter relationships and feminism by interweaving the contrasting forms of magical realist poetry and critical or ‘academic’ commentary. The development of my work has been influenced by my research, the varied forms of my poems, my changing critical perspective, and my personal literary inspirations.

Extensive research into criticism of literature that depicts my ‘secondary’ themes has significantly developed the intention of my major work. This research helped me to connect the themes within my poetry, and their interpretation through critical approaches such as feminist readings and New Criticism, which by ‘cutting itself off from all discourse except the poetic, increasingly isolated literary criticism from all other concerns.’<sup>3</sup> Many audiences of literature impose meaning on it, but hesitate to value their instinctive and private personal reactions, and value instead the view of critics

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<sup>1</sup> V. Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011, Foreword, p. 28-29

<sup>2</sup> B. Collins, *Introduction to Poetry*, from *The Apple that Astonished Paris*. University of Arkansas Press, 1988

<sup>3</sup> C. Belsey, *Critical Practice*, Routledge, 1980, p.20

or theorists who identify intertextuality or contextual references for the unacquainted reader. I want to enable my audience to read either my poetry or analysis on its own, or the full suite and commentary together. By leaving it to them to decide what the true art is: the poetry in its purest form, the meaning of the poetry as altered by Professor Dudley's commentary, or the commentary itself; I have allowed an open literary and personal interpretation. It is through this postmodern structural choice; in which I emphasise the ironic position of the critic and editor, Professor Dudley, overlooking a suite written about his life, that I encourage a wider audience than merely readers familiar with poetry or literary criticism. My investigation into critical theories, form, themes and literature has directed this choice. I have attempted to draw an audience of both the powerful 'critics and poets' I critique in the suite, and the powerless 'fathers and daughters' whose stories have been misinterpreted by literature and its critics.

The most consistently evolving aspect of my major work has been the form of my poetry. Vladimir Nabokov's work has inspired me to explore the postmodern paradigm and magical realist structure, and even to streamline the way I produced my poetry. This method has been used to produce *Vignettes for a 1970s School Boy*, a selection of haikus which I rearranged on cards to produce a euphonious structure, as Nabokov did. Reading Jack Kerouac's poetry has taught me that a combination of 'feminine' and 'masculine' images is essential to 'balance' a haiku, a technique I have employed in the simile 'boys present like proud, jellified sweets'. My exploration of the dichotomy of masculinity and femininity is also evident in the overall structure and variety of form within my suite. One half of the suite is dominated by the poem *Kookaburra*, which depicts the shared qualities of the disenchanted Professor and an untamed bird, yet features a sentimental free verse style. Contrastingly, while a later poem, *The Apiary*, features a trite rhyme scheme of closed couplets, its feminist themes and overriding tragedy prove it to be the antithesis of Dudley's earlier masculine intrusions, and is even the catalyst for his 'realisation'.

Nabokov's writing has influenced the progression of Professor Dudley's criticism in my work, and helped me to question whether commentary is essential to truly understand poetry, or whether it is visually and thematically intrusive. In *Pale Fire*<sup>4</sup>, by Nabokov, the trope of an 'unreliable narrator' is twisted, as critic Kinbote believes he is the only person able to decipher his colleague's final poem. Like Dudley, Kinbote represents a postmodern 'unreliable critic', believing that all art 'has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and his surroundings' but that this is 'a reality that only his notes can provide'<sup>5</sup>. As Professor Dudley is an esteemed literary critic and unaware of his connection to the poetry, his commentary is intended as pure analysis, but as he begins to identify significantly with the 'fictional' poetry, the footnotes become increasingly figurative, personal and defensive. *Lolita*, another work of Nabokov's, challenges the scholarship of the reader by including intertextual references that require a prior understanding. This text also questions the necessity of the critic by using slang and a personally confronting narration, thus valuing a universal or personal response as much as a critical one, as I attempt to achieve through my own work. The approach of New Criticism has led me to analyse poetry first as a self-contained, self-referential object, and later to factor in the contextual and personal history of the author into my analysis. I found it most difficult to write lucid, interesting poetry without referencing character names, as to do so would eliminate Dudley's ignorance of his involvement in the poetry suite. This has been an issue of textual integrity that I have had to overcome by finding interesting general names like 'nymph' and 'sweetheart' to refer to my characters. However, as my aim is that by reading my poetry with and without commentary, the meaning and thematic execution of my poetry will change with each reading, overcoming this challenge has added greater richness to Professor Dudley's commentary.

The thematic structure of my work has been derived from my literary and personal inspirations, including confessional poetry and 20th century literature. *Pale Fire* inspired me to incite open-ended responses, theories and interpretations of the identity and role of both the Poet and Professor

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<sup>4</sup> Nabokov, V. and McCarthy, M. (1991). *Pale Fire*. 1st ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

<sup>5</sup> Nabokov, op. cit., p. 28

Dudley through my use of an omniscient narrator and a biased critic. As David Orr writes of Kinbote in *Pale Fire*, the critic's commentary becomes 'increasingly less about the lines than his own tattered psychology'<sup>6</sup>. This progression is shown as Dudley's perspective shifts from the impersonal perspective of the critic, citing alliterative academic studies like the 'Fatty Father's Study', to the personal perspective of the father, melancholically reflecting on his 'Nymph's' childhood. Character driven poetry suites by Margaret Atwood and Gwen Harwood<sup>7</sup> influenced me to structure my poetry by character and not thematically, and let the development and representation of Dudley and his daughter guide the themes. Gwen Harwood's *Dr Eisenbart* series is a character driven suite about a successful professor who struggles with women, and was one of my original influences for the similar dichotomy represented in Dudley's personality. *Lolita* has inspired my use of 'Nymph' and 'Nymphette', as both an intertextual reference and an echoic reference to the otherwise nameless, delicate daughter. I was also influenced by the literary inspirations for these texts, including *Annabel Lee* by Edgar Allen Poe, and the gothic and proto-feminist *Jane Eyre*, which I have studied in English Advanced. This research affirmed that themes of feminism, passion and familial gender relations transcend context, class, and gender; inciting a passionate reaction in both the average reader and the critic aware of context, theory, and prior criticism. These works also feature humour and absurd or gothic elements even when oppression and brutality abounds. As Carl L. Proffer states, *Lolita* is 'comic, with various grotesqueries, and sometimes beautiful'<sup>8</sup>, a balance which has inspired the hyperrealistic lines in my poem *In Bloom*, like 'the school dog is licking blood from her toe'.

My aim was to explore the relationship between the poem and the critic, and the daughter and father, in a poetic form. Poetry is an artistically concentrated form, so was an appropriate form for

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<sup>6</sup> Orr, D. (2012). *Flying On in The Reflected Sky*. The New York Times: Sunday Book Review. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/22/books/review/vladimir-nabokovs-selected-poems-and-pale-fire.html>. Viewed on 15th February 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Atwood, M. and Pachter, C. (1997). *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. 1st ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin; Harwood, G. (1975). *Selected poems*. 1st ed. Sydney: Angus & Robertson.

<sup>8</sup> Proffer, C.E. (1968). *Keys to Lolita*. Indiana: Indiana University Press. p. 130.

me to explore postmodern ideas of art as an object to be criticised, while still maintaining a narrative. My research inspired me to write consistently, yet my style was challenged and varied, resulting in my feministic references and use of ‘Nabokovian cards’ to edit my poetry. My independent investigation into novels such as *Pale Fire* and poetic suites aided my exploration of my major theme of the relationship between the author and the critic. Similarly, my research of confessional poetry and literature encouraged my secondary themes of passion, restraint, father daughter relationships and feminism. My work emphasises that the audience’s initial, personal reaction is just as legitimate as the critic’s, shown by the dichotomy of Dudley’s literary criticism and personal reactions. I have achieved a sophisticated Major Work by utilising my themes and structure to work as a ‘veil for the enduring mystery’<sup>9</sup> of both the Poet and the Critic, and the Daughter and the Father, which my poetry ‘simultaneously mocks and pays tribute to’<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Rosenbaum, R. (1999). *The Novel of the Century: Nabokov's Pale Fire*. [online] New York Observer. Available at: <http://observer.com/1999/12/the-novel-of-the-century-nabokovs-pale-fire/> [Accessed 16 May. 2014].

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

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