

REFLECTION STATEMENT:

LUNGS

‘Lungs’: Reflection Statement

Mortality is a fundamental element of the human experience. At the heart of our existence, there is a paradoxical relationship between the omnipresent threat of death and our perception of life – one cannot exist without the other and, despite the innate human fear of facing our own ephemerality, the inevitability of death is integral in shaping the human psyche. This universal human phenomenon is the concept at the core of my short story *Lungs*, through which I aimed to explore the inherent role that death plays in shaping the lens through which an individual views and appreciates the world around them.

The concept behind my major work began to take shape after reading an article by Jeff Mason on his blog *Talking Philosophy*; I was fascinated by the idea that “*the concept of death is absolutely without any object whatsoever*” and that, as humans, we can consider death only metaphorically. This idea that death can be such an innate force in the human experience - “*Living towards death in time gives one’s life a direction and framework...*” - as well as one of the few things that completely transcends the human sphere of understanding inspired me to examine its place in contemporary society and how human beings, creatures governed by a will to rationalise, interact with such an innately intangible phenomenon. This concept immediately led me to the short story medium. For such a subjective theme, I knew that I needed a creative medium to fully convey my ideas.

My approach to this concept was also guided by my study of Gwen Harwood’s poetry in the Advanced English course. Harwood’s poignant, thought-provoking exploration of human mortality provided a model for my own conceptual development. In particular, the poem *The Sharpness Of Death* greatly inspired my own approach to the issue; I was inspired by

Harwood's simple and poignant acknowledgement of the innately illogical nature of death from within the human sphere: "*You're in the hands of philosophers / who cut themselves, and bleed, / and know that knives are sharp, / but prove with complex logic / there's no such thing as sharpness.*" Other of her poems that proved especially inspirational included *The Violets, Father and Child* – which I go as far as to explicitly reference in the end of my story - and *Clair de Lune*. Harwood's evocative and sensitive rendering of the nature of death provided a model for something I considered to be an integral feature of my work, as I think much of the conceptual strength of my piece stems from evoking a subjective and personal response with the reader.

'Gwen Harwood was right about that damn owl. Death is messy and painful. It slowly eats away at us, until we are eventually consumed. But right now I am here, encased in this cold womb, and above me the world is a shimmering tapestry of light that shatters onto the surface in a thousand silver shards.'

The style of my short story has developed significantly since the beginning of the course. I had originally planned to explore the concept of death within a societal context through an examination of social standards surrounding the taboo of death; however, as my work developed, I quickly found myself narrowing my exploration of death to a more intimate, introspective scale: the personal ramifications of death for the *individual*; particularly for notions of identity, relationships and emotional connectivity and the challenges posed by an inability to resign ourselves to the permanence of our mortality. I naturally adopted the use of first person, which I found proved invaluable in developing an evocative and relatable narrative voice. I began focusing on the development of a single, highly developed character that could imbue my work with a degree of emotional and psychological depth that could allow my concept to be fully realized. These changes were in no small part inspired by my wide reading of a range of novels focusing on the concept of mortality: A.S King's *Please*

Ignore Vera Dietz, Charlotte Wood's *The Children* and Craig Silvey's *Jasper Jones* proved invaluable in guiding the development of my narrative style and voice. In addition, stories such as Wood's *Nanoparticles* from *10 Short Stories You Must Read in 2011* helped me to come to grips with the short story medium and use it most effectively.

A significant aspect of my major work is the development of motifs. Throughout my story, I have consciously tried to sustain a motif of breathing and lungs; the inclusion of which gave my project its title. Inspired largely by the song *Youth* by Daughter ('*Shadows settle on the place you left, / Our minds struggle with the emptiness... Cause most of us are heaving through corrupted lungs*') and also our study of Tim Winton's *Breath* in the Preliminary extension course, the construction of this motif became essential in providing my project with a sense of continuity and a defined tone and atmosphere. I found the motif not only acted as thematic with the main complication, – a drowning – but also proved invaluable in providing conceptual strength. The simple action of our lungs is a symbol of life and vitality; imagery associated with this allowed me to explore notions of mortality and the innate fear of death – "*The air is heavy and viscid: I can't seem to pull enough into my lungs*" – as well as the protagonist's eventual re-embracing of her own vitality: "*I take a deep gulp of oxygen, pulling it into my lungs until they are swollen and straining, dizzy with the ecstasy of the swim...*"

As well as providing inspiration for my lungs motif, Tim Winton's *Breath* as well as another of his stories, *The Water Was Dark And Went Forever Down* (also studied in the Preliminary 'National Voice' topic), also inspired me to develop a distinct Australian voice within my story. Winton's renowned rendering of Australian culture inspired me to focus on integrating Australian culture into my story – specifically, the water-loving culture at the heart of many Australian childhoods, including my own. I developed this through the use of a distinctively

Australian setting as well as a motif of water and swimming, which eventually provides the channel through which the protagonist is able to re-embrace her own vitality:

'I pull my consciousness into the burn of my muscles, focusing every fibre of my being on the ache of my lungs, the slow, blooming heat in my limbs, until the only element of my existence is the velvety, leaden heaviness of the water as I throttle it out behind me in great, pillowy waves.'

I further developed this cultural voice through the inclusion of comical titles at the beginning of each chronological period of the story, many of which reference Australian colloquial terms and cultural phenomenon's ('Smoko's', 'Pokies' and 'R U OK' Day). I found the inclusion of these titles not only created a more authentic voice, but also provided some irony and humour that juxtaposes nicely with the serious tone of the piece.

The development of this cultural voice has also helped me to narrow my intended audience. My story is aimed at young Australians – adolescents in their late teens to early twenties, who I believe can most readily identify with the characters and cultural voice within my story. As such, I could imagine my story to be appropriate for a publication such as *Voiceworks*, an Australian literary magazine aimed at under twenty-five's.

The creation of my major work has been a truly liberating experience. The Extension 2 course has granted me a level of creative freedom I had yet to experience prior to the HSC course. The creation of *Lungs* has allowed me to develop my own literary voice and style, and has allowed me to develop the ability to explore a single concept with a profoundly new level of depth. *Lungs* is a piece I am sure I will treasure as a valuable stage of evolution in my creative ability, and one that has given me invaluable inspiration for my future goals.