

**Prufrock Cafe**

*Reflection Statement*

Composed in omniscient third-person narration, my realist short story *Prufrock Café* documents the prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory practices towards older people, old age and the aging process. Its purpose as a social commentary is to expose the implicit ageism pervasive in contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> Century Australia to an intended audience of young adults, who are unaware of their subliminal prejudice of older people. These attitudes perpetuate ageist stereotypes and the subsequent marginalisation of the “young old” and “the fourth age”<sup>1</sup> from broader society. The satirical critique of interactions amongst the staff and elderly clientele of the microcosmic “Prufrock Café” provokes analysis and re-evaluation of the reader’s individual interactions and relationships with older people and consequently, seeks to promote the improvement of intergenerational communication.

Extensive and continual investigative research and re-evaluation have charted the progression and evolution of *Prufrock Café* since its initial proposal. My preliminary purpose began as an exploration of existentialism in old age, inspired by the Absurdist theatrical works of Jean Genet, Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett throughout post-war 1950’s, as well as The Great World’s<sup>2</sup> analogous navigation of Digger’s aging self, following military service in World War II. In the determination of a present-day historical setting, the piece’s focus shifted from its postulation of an aging individual’s internalised struggles. Understanding Communication and Aging<sup>3</sup> introduced the contemporary sociological concerns of gerontology; addressing the

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<sup>1</sup> Defined by P.B. Baltes (1997) as having a chronological age of 80 years or more. Harwood, Jake (2007). *Understanding Communication and Aging*. New York: Sage Publications, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> Malouf, David (1990). *The Great World*. Sydney: Pac Macmillan Publishers Australia.

<sup>3</sup> Harwood, Jake (2007). *Understanding Communication and Aging*. New York: Sage Publications, Inc.

ways societal changes affect the situation of older people, and societal transition towards “a more peripheral position for older adults in society”<sup>4</sup>.

Social Gerontology<sup>5</sup> extended this hypothesis, identifying entertainment media as a cultural impetus for the homogenised representation of older people. Elderly characters of prime-time television, such as Groening’s Abe Simpson<sup>6</sup> and Hubert J. Farnsworth<sup>7</sup> serve solely as comic relief “depicted as narrow-minded, in poor health, foundering financially, sexually dissatisfied and unable to make decisions”<sup>8</sup>. This informed my choice of young adults as the piece’s intended audience to challenge the media’s inculcation of ageist conjecture, symbolically represented through the “golden oldies playlist on repeat”<sup>9</sup>.

The piece’s self-realisation as a social commentary evolved through investigation into the effectiveness of rhetorical allegory in achieving my objective of social enlightenment. Lord of the Flies<sup>10</sup> microsomal island setting inspired the re-evaluation of “Prufrock Café” as a metaphorical vehicle for manifesting my purpose through its symbolic representation of broader Australian society. Comparative analysis of literary and historical criticisms A Room of One’s Own<sup>11</sup> and Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?<sup>12</sup> in Module A of the Advanced course introduced the conflict of shattering false illusion for societal edification as the inherent purpose of a

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> World War II veteran and “grampa” of Bart, Lisa and Maggie Simpson in Matt Groening’s American animated sitcom, *The Simpsons* (Airing 1989-2013 by Foxtel Broadcasting company), known for long, rambling, often incoherent stories and general incompetence.

<sup>7</sup> 160-year-old ‘mad scientist’ in the animated science fiction sitcom, *Futurama* (1999-2013 by Foxtel Broadcasting Company) that is extremely prone to age-related forgetfulness and fits of temper.

<sup>8</sup> Brossoie, Nancy (2012). *Social Gerontology*. Virginia: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, LLC.

<sup>9</sup> *Prufrock Café* (Page 4).

<sup>10</sup> Goldstone, William (1954). *Lord of the Flies*. London: Faber and Faber.

<sup>11</sup> Woolf, Virginia (1929). *A Room of One’s Own*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co.

<sup>12</sup> Albee, Edward (1962). *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* New York: Penguin Books Ltd.

social commentary. Their corrective insights address the metanarrative of questioning conformity and lack of individual morality, inspiring my consideration of *Prufrock Café*'s universal themes that forge its "incandescence"<sup>13</sup> throughout "...the monotony of life. The monopoly of life"<sup>14</sup>, as a cultural artefact of 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia.

Albee references an array of well-known contemporary texts in order to deepen his didactic response, inspiring my own employment of intertextuality and cultural allegories to mock the attitudes that their works sanction, such as "The Feary of Evolution"<sup>15</sup> and Carroll's 'absolute rule'<sup>16</sup>. The characterisation of ex-chauffeur Ronald, and "Prufrock's" café setting itself, alludes to and references The Love Song of Alfred Prufrock<sup>17</sup> and life "measured out... in coffee spoons"<sup>18</sup>. The allegory of coffee spoons is further extended as a recurring motif accompanying introspective incandescence of contemporary ageism, culminating whilst "wiping the teaspoons"<sup>19</sup>.

Lord of the Flies<sup>20</sup> and socio-political commentary Animal Farm<sup>21</sup> reiterated the genre's constructive entertainment value through satirical caricature, in Jack's Chief entitlement "because I'm chapter chorister and... can sing C sharp"<sup>22</sup> and Orwell's exaggerated personification of the allegorical 'pigs' to expose the superficiality of societal values. This inspired my ironic stereotyping of waiter Caspian to imply the illusory nature of his values with relation to aging and older people, extended through

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<sup>13</sup> Woolf, Virginia (1929). *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co.

<sup>14</sup> *Prufrock Café* (Page 5).

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* (Page 17).

<sup>16</sup> "...jam tomorrow and jam yesterday- but never jam to-day." Carroll, Lewis (1871). *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*. London: Macmillan.

<sup>17</sup> Eliot, T. S. (1920). *Prufrock and Other Observations*. New York: A. A. Knopf.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Prufrock Café* (Page 6).

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Orwell, George (1945). *Animal Farm*. London: Secker and Warburg.

<sup>22</sup> Goldstone, William (1954). *Lord of the Flies*. London: Faber and Faber.

manipulation of jargonistic, allusions to popular culture. “Flappy Bird on the iPhone” and “Voldemort’s return to massacre all the Muggles”<sup>23</sup> provoke my intended young adult audience’s reflection on their recognised cultural context and societal values, juxtaposed with the ‘dying’ culture of older people and “The Boomtown Rats”<sup>24</sup>.

My piece explores the silences in communication and knowledge that proliferate in contemporary ageism, despite continual interactions and exposure to the reality of older people. Characters of contrasting generations “...talk in silence. The unspoken conversations louder than their voices”<sup>25</sup>, a concept imparted by the Navigating the Global: Extension English text, Lost in Translation<sup>26</sup>. Waitress Inès’ language barrier evokes metaphorical significance in representing holistic communication difficulties, paralleling the meaning lost in Tokyo’s hybridisation of contemporary Western and traditional Oriental culture.

Do not go gentle into that good night<sup>27</sup> allusions elevate Dolly’s sun-downing experience to the ubiquitous ‘final countdown’ towards death, as “Life’s sentence culminates in life sentence, the final coup de grâce”<sup>28</sup> of simply “sleeping, waking, morning, evening.”<sup>29</sup> My piece concludes ambiguously in silence, manipulating Endgame’s<sup>30</sup> Absurdist performance conventions of extended pauses to accurately represent that as an evolving sociological issue, there isn’t a definitive resolution to societal ageism. This equivocal post-modernism serves to confront my audience and

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid* (Page 26).

<sup>24</sup> *ibid* (Page 14).

<sup>25</sup> *Prufrock Café* (Page 16).

<sup>26</sup> *Lost in Translation* (videorecording). (2003). America: Focus Features.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas, Dylan (1952). *In Country Sleep: And Other Poems*. United States: New Directions.

<sup>28</sup> *Prufrock Café* (Page 10).

<sup>29</sup> Beckett, Samuel. (Writer). (3<sup>rd</sup> April 1957). *Endgame* [Play]. London, England: Royal Court Theatre.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*.

manifest my purpose of generating young adults' analysis and re-evaluation of the elderly.

*Prufrock Café* has undergone dramatic transformation in textual form from its original structure as an anthology of interconnected short stories to one amalgamated short story. The Turning<sup>31</sup> served as a blueprint for its preliminary anthological structure through its integrality of individually cohesive stories in a collective focus on life's various 'turnings'. Introduction to Davis's poignantly subversive The Collected Stories<sup>32</sup> incited my intention to compose in flash fiction form, prompting rigorous research into the structural differentiation between flash fiction, vignettes and 'slice of life' writing and explicating the form's simplified narrative elements; thus, its limitations in addressing multi-faceted concepts of diverse perspectives, such as social gerontology.

My pre-eminent challenge of the preliminary drafts was to distinguish a distinctive purpose and unified concept amongst all flash stories. Succeeding discussion with teachers, the stories were reanimated as chapters of a single short story; however, despite *Prufrock Café*'s transition of textual form, investigation into post-modern literature maintains enduring relevance in composing a contemporary piece with textual integrity. Extracts from Orlando<sup>33</sup> and The Coming of Age<sup>34</sup> in epigraphs and the use of aphorisms as chapter titles, "the times are changing, but the wind in still"<sup>35</sup>,

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<sup>31</sup> Winton, Tim (2005). *The Turning*. Sydney: Picador.

<sup>32</sup> Davis, Lydia (2009). *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*. Sydney: Penguin Books.

<sup>33</sup> Woolf, Virginia (1928). *Orlando: A Biography*. London: Hogarth Press.

<sup>34</sup> De Beauvoir, Simone (1970). *The Coming of Age*. Indiana: Warner Books.

<sup>35</sup> *Prufrock Café* (Page 26).

serve to present the “distilled essence”<sup>36</sup> of the story and thus, illustrate the piece’s purpose to its intended young adult audience.

The challenge of sustaining authentic characterisation in first-person narrative voice has hindered the communication of *Prufrock Café*’s purpose since its proposal stage, particularly from an elderly male perspective. *Cloudstreet*<sup>37</sup> proved revelatory in its effectiveness of juxtaposing character perspectives through third-person omniscient narration. Whilst furthering one overall plot progression, Winton’s isolation of character micro narratives, or “petits récits,”<sup>38</sup> in distinct chapters inspired *Prufrock Café*’s metamorphosis into third-person narrative voice.

Presenting a perceptive analysis of contemporary ageism that synthesises its extensive sociological dilemmas has only been apprehended by sustained, prodigious independent investigation throughout the composition process. *Prufrock Café*’s endeavour to produce a re-evaluation of individual interactions and relationships with older people amongst my intended audience has dualistically provoked an awareness of my own subconscious discrimination; thus, I hope that young adults similar to my own age elicit an analogously impactful response.

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<sup>36</sup> Popek, S. (2013). *Flashes of Brilliance*. [online] Available at: <http://www.writing-world.com/fiction/popek.shtml> [Accessed: 31 Oct 2013].

<sup>37</sup> Winton, Tim (1991). *Cloudstreet*. Melbourne: McPhee Gribble.

<sup>38</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François (1979). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit.