

Reflection Statement

My intent in composing the Major Work for the English Extension Two course emerged as a result of my struggle with the state of mankind in the present-day and the possibility of future generations for redemption, and explores both ideas through a 'literary passage of time.' My concerns are reflected in an allegorical short story that employs canonical figures universal to the Abrahamic faiths in order to highlight the ubiquitous issues expounded upon within *Paradise Lost?* and thus communicate to the reader my beliefs.

The purpose of my Major Work is to entertain and stimulate discussion as to whether salvation is a universal right of humanity. Having been brought up in a devout community in which the notion of redemption is discriminatory, I feel that open debate and discussion can facilitate an open-minded view of the world. As my short story stipulates, if Lucifer can achieve salvation, then what foundation does the hatred that is so often the hallmark of religious fundamentalists against other races, religions, and human beings have?

It is this question that determines my short story's audience. I am writing for a broad audience as the short story is a social critique, but particularly for supposedly 'religious' individuals who encourage and promote enmity towards others, as in the case of Sunni-Shiite infighting between Muslims and the long-standing hostility between Protestant and Roman Catholic Irishmen.

I decided upon the title *Paradise Lost?* as it provides insight into the nature of the story by drawing parallels with John Milton's epic poem of the same name. Moreover, the question mark symbolises issues explored within the short story that the reader themselves must form an opinion on, and then answer the question: is paradise lost?

Conceptually, my short story follows Lucifer's journey as he seeks to reclaim his position as an angel of God. Meanwhile, Lilith, a prominent figure of Jewish folklore, attempts to derail the devil's mission. Lilith's history is delineated in *The Alphabet of Ben Sira* as the 'Original Eve', "While God created Adam, who was alone, He said, 'It is not good for man to be alone' (Genesis 2:18). He also created a woman, from the earth, as He had created Adam himself, and called her Lilith." In an attempt to universalise my portrayal of Lucifer, I utilised a physical description in line with Islamic beliefs, but provided the character with a prominently Christian history.

I struggled with the task of portraying God as my own inherent faith dictated that I should not. To familiarise myself with these characters, I poured over certain sections of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which aided me in fleshing out the character of God as a distant, yet omnipresent figure. Moreover, I consulted with Father Peter Thornton from the Citywest Community Church, and members of various other faiths to ascertain whether my portrayal was offensive, and made alterations to accommodate these views. I ultimately decided to portray Lucifer through a role reversal of what is commonly represented in religion. Therefore, my reader can sympathise with him and seriously question the fundamental moral changes he undergoes.

My study of Module A: Comparative Study of Contexts and Texts for Advanced English¹ exposed me to both Romantic and Modernist ways of thinking through an analysis of William Wordsworth's poetry and David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*. Once having embarked on the English Extension 1 elective, Romanticism, I discovered that there existed a darker side to the movement in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. This sparked my independent investigation and led me to the library of the University of Newcastle, where the essay *Introduction: Romanticism and the Gothic Tradition* by G.R. Thompson expanded my understanding of Dark Romanticism as evoking "an image of the lonely, isolated self, pressing

¹ I studied the 2008 HSC course as an accelerant in year eleven.

onward despite all obstacles while either indulging or struggling with an internal evil, the very conflict a source of energy.”

This knowledge formed the seed for my concept, which through continued investigation was expanded and developed. Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher* was pivotal in informing me as to how a short story that adopts the story-within-a-story narrative structure can incorporate the inner story into the framework of the outer. In many other cases, the inner story is simply a recount offered in the outer story, as in the case of *The Descent into the Maelstrom*. To avoid this, I weaved my knowledge of Romanticism throughout the outer, and Modernism throughout the inner story to create a cohesive whole. I feel my Major Work is an extension of my knowledge from Advanced English as I attempt to enjoin two distinct ideologies into the one product, as opposed to distinct manifestations.

The outer story deals with Lucifer’s physical journey and is the only part of the story in which God appears manifested in nature, which is both harsh and mysterious. This fuses the Romantic notion of pantheism with the Dark Romantic idea that nature is dark, decaying and mystifying. Romanticism further pervades the outer story in the natural landscapes, the ideal of redemption, and the imagination, “First I saw the staircase, illuminated in the black, which when I attempted to board, disintegrated into sand that was then whisked away by the wind.”²

I had decided at the time that the ‘inner story’ would concern humanity. However, I had not entirely crafted this concept before I had read Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Birth Mark*, a short story that examines obsession with human perfection. In the story, Aylmer attempts to rid his wife of a birthmark that renders her imperfect. However, it was this very birth mark through “which an angelic spirit kept itself in union with a mortal frame.” In the inner story, humanity has created a

² From page 8 of the Major Work.

drug that guarantees immortality and leads to the breakdown of society, which is allegorical in its own right. This drug is much like the blemish on Georgiana's face, as death is the bond between God and mankind, and humanity attempts ultimately to sever it. Also inspired by Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, my portrayal of the future lacks any natural element, and due to my depiction of God as manifested in nature, lacks a divine presence, establishing the impossibility of spiritual salvation.

I selected the short story medium, as it is the most malleable of the available mediums; it is not limited in the way that poetry, drama and films are and can be constantly manipulated to achieve my purpose. Furthermore, the short story medium is one that appeals to me personally as I hope to publish some original short stories in Australian literary journals such as USU's *Hermes* in the future, and wished to explore it and its conventions in the opportunity provided.

Through my investigation, I discovered that it was Poe's landmark essay, *The Philosophy of Composition*, which set the stage for the short story medium. Poe stressed the concept of totality, and attempting to achieve this 'unity of impression' within my story was quite difficult, and called for the discarding of many scenes, minor characters, and a focus on the one concept. In addition to this, throughout my readings, I found that many short stories, such as Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*, Hawthorne's *The Minister's Black Veil* and Virginia Woolf's *A Haunted House*, focus on one or a maximum of two characters. My initial drafts were comprised of an 'ensemble' cast and this information necessitated the redrafting of my short story.

In reading Woolf's *The New Dress*, James Joyce's *The Dead*, as well as T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, I realised that the majority of fiction commonly produced today such as Stephen King's *The Dark Tower*, feature characteristics of modern literature. Therefore, in an attempt not to isolate my reader, I employed various conventions of Modernism to implement my concepts, such as temporal distortion and quotation. The open-ended conclusion invites the reader to question whether God,

manifested in nature, has taken Lucifer's life, and whether he has attained salvation. If my audience can accept this, then I will have achieved my purpose in altering their ways of thinking.

At the completion of the Major Work, I realised that my attempts to reconcile Romanticism and Modernism had created a product that could be characterised as postmodern, though this was not my original intention. I say this because in hindsight, the pastiche of various movements and the recreation of Biblical stories are in and of themselves, postmodern. Since postmodernism represents a complete lack of faith in mankind, I find that my work has naturally evolved into a postmodern style quite pertinent to my concept. The 'literary passage of time,' from Romanticism to Postmodernism, that I have employed to illustrate my concepts, has indeed, enabled me to achieve my purpose.

I realise that without the independent investigation, which formed such a large part of my Major Work, I could not have developed the ideas, concepts, nor executed them as well as I believe I have. The English Extension Two course has not only allowed my writing skills to flourish, but has also taught me that the writing process is incomplete without the affiliated research. I have thoroughly enjoyed the experience of investigating my concepts and composing my own short story that, in my opinion, has confirmed what I always believed was the saving grace of literature – that through our words, we are able to change the world around us.