

From Ritual to Romance and Beyond - An Exegesis

MCW

2016

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My thesis, *The Sense of an Ending and Other Postmodern Tragedies*, is a collection of literary short stories based on classic tragedies. Together the stories are an intertextual web which explore literary postmodernism and the role of fiction in postmodernity. It is accompanied by the exegesis, *From Ritual to Romance and Beyond*, which frames the creative work and draws attention to the texts which have inspired each short story.

These collected short stories draw inspiration from poems, novels and plays including: *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot, *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, William Shakespeare's versions of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*, *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, *The Satyricon* by Petronius and *On Chesil Beach* by Ian McEwan.

Jeffrey Hart's book *Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe* and Frank Kermode's lectures which he gave at Bryn Mawr College in 1965 and are collected in the book *The Sense of an Ending* also contribute creatively and critically to both the stories and the exegesis. Specific attention is paid to the themes of originality in postmodernity, tragedy in postmodernity and literary postmodernism.

Introduction

It was with a sense of an ending that I charged myself with the task of writing a short story collection based on classic tragedies. I was propelled by the words of the academic Jeffrey Hart who wrote passionately of a “conversation” between works of fiction (13) and of “retracing one of the greatest adventures in the history of mankind” (11). He was certain that some stories were more important because they formed part of a great narrative and he promised that these stories had the “power to make us more intelligent for a while, and perhaps better, than we would ordinarily be” (12).

While I was aware of the teleological issues of a singular great narrative, I was attracted to the idea of allegory and the echoes of stories, repeating over generations, and I wanted to join the conversation Hart wrote of, to know the adventure. So, I planned to not only study some of these connected stories, but audaciously to add my own contribution, for I wanted the feeling of “apprenticeship” which could only come through action (Wilde & Keats & Smith qtd. in Popova).

My method would be the excavation of tragedy by way of the short story. Among other things, I wondered if there was a place for serious allegory in postmodernity or if its time had passed? I wondered if postmodernism was an end unto itself; a creative apocalypse that rendered originality obsolete? I wondered if, despite Hart’s assurances, I would discover only that there were just seven basic plots (Booker) or a single harassed cat, doomed like Sisyphus, clambering up a tree by thirds (Snyder)? For the path I had chosen was not without risk. The unifying theme of humanity contained within the great narrative is out of step with the emphasis on difference and individualism in postmodernity. Post-Renaissance, tragedy has been declared by some Absurd, existential tragedy an impossibility, and a few even going

as far as to decry none other than Shakespeare's *King Lear* as a farce (Kermode 27). What is more, in postmodernity, imitation is a tool that more often than not, indicates a distrust of grand narratives. So to use this narrative technique is to risk pastiche and to render ironic that which one finds inspirational. The short story too, is as far from epic as you can get; a modern genre that is attuned to the miniature.

Yet, psycholinguists argue that “the short story, not the word, phrase or sentence, [is] the most basic unit of human expression” (Iftekharrudin et al. vii), and both tragedy and short stories demand unity of effect. So perhaps, I thought, it would be possible to gain some understanding of what makes a story enduring, by dissection and replication of not all, but some of its parts; to pick a part a story strand by strand until I found a thread that would carry me back through time and then return, to tell it again in a postmodern way. Perhaps I would be a better writer as a result.

The Sense of an Ending and Other Postmodern Tragedies is the product of my pursuit of these threads. Along with a great many related works, I have studied and paid particular homage to: *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot, *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, William Shakespeare's versions of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*, *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, *The Satyricon* by Petronius and *On Chesil Beach* by Ian McEwan.

The Waste Land and Issues Relating to Originality in Postmodernity

In the first three stories: *The Waste Land*, *The Anatomy Lesson* and *Vinegar* different creative approaches have been applied in an attempt to critique and overcome issues relating to originality in postmodern literature. In each, the protagonist struggles with authorship within their postmodern context. In each, the creative approach is informed by the work of literature the short story attempts to allegorize. The collection begins with *The Waste Land*, which is based on T.S. Eliot's poem of the same name, because at the centre of most conversations concerning originality is the question of where it begins and ends. Eliot himself, is quoted to say "immature poets imitate, mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different" (*The Sacred Wood*).

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Despite the fact that the poem, *The Waste Land* was written almost one hundred years ago, Eliot suggests a "crisis of resources" by repetitious form and rhythm. The poem self-echoes, "treading in its own footprints" (Perry 104); it asserts the scarcity and elemental nature of material available by repeating the nouns: rock, water, road and mountains (Perry 100). Although considered seminal in terms of modernism, the poem's intertextuality seems prescient in terms of the postmodern aesthetic. But the reiterative quality is not ironic or parodic. Eliot's echoes and his sampling are like Wagnerian Leitmotifs. Ultimately he means to recognise these echoes as links in a chain, parts of an older conversation. James Joyce published *Ulysses* in the same year as Eliot published *The Waste Land* and in Eliot's review of Joyce's opus he wrote, "In using myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity...Mr Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue

after him” (Eliot qtd. in Perry 60). In the short story and also in the collection to come, echoes such as these both bring shape and meaning to the text.

The plot of the short story *The Waste Land* speaks to this theme. The protagonist, Tom is the least talented member of a band that he founded. He has written one hit song but struggles to write another that is significantly different and the band breaks-up due to his professional jealousy. The reader knows Tom will begin again, because in postmodernity we are familiar with this cycle and he is surrounded by words that remind us of his dilemma. We too are faced with a barrage of communication that emphasizes the need to be unique yet seemingly faced with a crisis of resources.

The story intends to remind us that in postmodernity, appropriation is rife, denial and acrimony common, that originality is no longer just a matter of creativity, it is also financial, but also - that we should not lose heart. The remnants of texts surround us and it may seem more difficult than ever to join the conversation that they are part of, but “there are ways out” (Bukowski). In *The Waste Land*, fragments of songs and poems reach back mythically and thematically. They fray into a multitude of threads. Ian Anderson’s *Aqualung* is Waste Land-esque with its grand religious themes and critique of urbanisation of nature. “Stairway to Heaven’s” inception in Wales and debt to Lewis Spence’s *Magic Arts in Celtic Britain* recalls Eliot’s debt to Jessie L. Weston’s, *From Ritual to Romance*. Patti Smith features Arthur Rimbaud, whose poem *Ophelie*, riffs on Shakespeare.

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In the short story *Vinegar*, the unnamed female protagonist struggles to master the prescriptive forms that promise romance, yet the confines of genre only serve to seal her fate.

Despite her desires, she is trapped by the threadbare fictive construction of generic romantic love. Her situation is inspired by Shakespeare's retelling of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Already in 1599, *Romeo and Juliet* was well worn territory identified as part of a mythic tradition of passion and death named by Wagner as "Liebestod" (Levenson 2). The plot and characters pre-existed most successfully, and relatively recently, in no less than two separate sources: Luigi Da Porto's 1530 *Novella* and Matteo Bandello's *Novelle* 1554 (Levenson pp 4-5). Already, in the sixteenth century, Shakespeare saw the irony of generic love. So in Shakespeare's version of *Romeo and Juliet*, by design, he took to task the idea of courtly love and remixed the story with books on the etiquette of duelling such as "Sir William Segar's *The Book of Honor and Armes* (1590), Giacomo di Grassi's *His True Arte of Defence* (1594), and Vincentio Saviolo's *Practise* (1595)" (Levenson 36) to tragic effect. Romeo's parodic couplets are symbolic of Shakespeare's views; they are distasteful to the discriminatory Juliet, "You kiss by th' book" (1:4: 224; 198), she tells him.

Vinegar joins a conversation about plot and genre conventions, which ironically portray Juliet's virginal circumstance and the star-crossed lovers' tragic passion as ideal and produce cookie-cutter literary products. 'Love' becomes an allegory for creative prescription via genre and stereotypes. In *Vinegar* there is no book on duelling, but it is clear, the Internet and Hollywood provide more than enough instruction; they serve to define who is desirable and they tell us how to love. In *Vinegar* it is not an accident that love's language is not native to the protagonist and that her potential lover's name refuses lyric form. The rhyme scheme echoes Shakespeare's. It moves between couplets and free verse, both prescribing and stymieing the protagonist's efforts to find love. Remnants of an "auditory imagination" (Perry 36) are excavated and replicated to demonstrate that romantic love in postmodernity looks as absurd and unobtainable as the courtly love that Shakespeare used rhyme to mock. It

is not to say that plot replication has no place in the creation of fiction, or that generic conventions do not have a place, but instead it suggests, that alone, perhaps, they are creative dead ends, not places where true love or creativity can survive or be expressed.

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In *The Anatomy Lesson* conversations about appropriation, genre and plot are set aside and semiotics become the focus. This time, the implications of textual interpretation are allegorised through form and theme. The short story features a transgender woman, Lisa who is also a lesbian. It is based on the novel *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov.

Nabokov's novel is a cynical yet serious critique of perspective and responsibility using language as a tool to manipulate the reader's sympathies. The protagonist Humbert Humbert is a paedophile, and Dolores, the object of Humbert's affections, becomes the "nymphet" Lolita. Nabokov uses the first person to layer irony into his text for he knows his readers are likely proponents of the manners and values he chooses to satirize. He puns and creates anagrams. He uses intertextuality to lay a trap. He lures the informed and intelligent reader into performing the act of his protagonist's arrogance. Here the responsibility for the erotic violence of the text lies between the text and its readers, disguised by wordplay and humour.

In *The Anatomy Lesson*, the assignment of gender is where the potential for textual violence resides. Ultimately neither the protagonist Lisa nor the writer retains the right to assign her gender as textual interpretation remains with the reader. Taking cues from Nabokov, narrative point of view is used purposefully. The use of third person subjective and repeated thematic language which riffs on perspective, means to draw attention the role of the reader in meaning production. Lisa is Dutch. Lisa is a divorcee. Lisa is an architect. Lisa is a

football fan. Lisa is gay. Lisa is transsexual. Signs and symbols contribute to our understanding of who Lisa is. Lisa identifies as a woman and she also desires to be “read” as one. The act of reading her as “other” is necessarily violent as it is a sexual assault.

The intention of *The Anatomy Lesson*, is to show that language alone is insufficient in the case of a complex issue such as gender. A writer can arrange a ‘Mise En Scene’ but it is the readers who create meaning from the text. Each reader brings their own experience and systems for decoding symbols and signs.

In a wider context, the story is part of a conversation about how postmodern readings encourage re-interpretation of fiction, and how that is potentially problematic for its creator. Writers in postmodernity, create in a climate that emphasizes the fact that texts exist outside of time and off the page. They write knowing that the texts they produce are, and will be, subject to interpretation which will bring new perspectives and meanings.

In *The Object Stares Back*, James Elkins discusses the nature of seeing. Elkins describes the act of seeing as “entangled in the passions – jealousy, violence, possessiveness; and it is soaked in affect – in pleasure and displeasure, and in pain. [He writes] ultimately seeing alters the thing that is seen and transforms the seer. Seeing is metamorphosis, not mechanism” (pp 11-12). In postmodernity the writer must be aware that their readers “see” in this way and therefore they must be ready to cede control once their text is in the wider world. The must understand that their fiction is already part of ongoing conversations and be ready to accept multiple readings.

The Fine Print and Issues relating to Tragedy in Postmodernity

The three stories which make up the middle of the collection: *The Fine Print*, *The Mall* and *Waiting for God* form part of a conversation about the possibility of tragedy in postmodernity. As in the first three stories, the creative approach is informed by the work of literature the short story attempts to allegorize. *The Fine Print* was inspired by Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*, *The Mall* by F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and *Waiting for God* by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The concept of progress is shown to be fundamentally linked to tragedy and is central to all three short stories.

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The short story *Waiting for God* examines the path to progress; specifically, creativity as a path to enlightenment and the terms by which enlightenment is granted. By following Mary Shelley's lead, the result is a short story which challenges the idea of a singular creative force. In *Waiting for God*, a young chef, Lawrence, comes to tragically understand that in striving to be god-like he has prevented himself from understanding what true creativity relies upon, which is an understanding of what it is to be human. Both *Waiting for God* and Shelley's *Frankenstein* draw a comparison between divine creation and man's fall as it relates to the sin of hubris and both stories do this referentially. Shelley alludes to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, as well as referring to her monster, biblically as "Adam" (2: 2: 98). In *Waiting for God* amongst the culinary terminology, gadgetry and excess, the words of the Bible are ever present reminders of the protagonist's transgressions and aspirations to the divine. The menu Lawrence creates for his restaurant 'The Garden' is specifically an allegory of the six days of creation and Eve's eating of the apple.

However, it has been suggested that in Shelley did not mean *Frankenstein* to be a story that warns against knowledge in a moral sense, but rather that she was allegorizing her own creativity within her referential text, (that is: she that dared to “create” a composite “beast”, drawing inspiration from the ideas of others and gained enlightenment from that process at a cost (Cantor)) and this is thread that *Waiting for God* pursues. True to the Romantic roots of Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, in *Waiting for God*, Lawrence eventually finds freedom removed from the physical sphere, but it is in his isolation too, that he is also made aware of his humanity and he is reminded that his ability to create comes as part of a creative chain; delivering an Aristotelian moment of anagnorisis in the final scene.

In postmodernity, Shelley’s straddling of two positions is replicated with neither spiritual or scientific enlightenment preferred. The imagery in *Waiting for God* means to recall the cosmic vision of the Bhagavad Gita which is part of the Rigveda, (possibly the oldest religious manuscript still in use), from which many stories have been derived. The light is the light of knowledge which illuminates the possibility of multiple creators and stories, and also the continuity of creation. The tragedy is that Lawrence has rejected collective knowledge by emphasising his genius.

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In the short story *The Mall*, lack of progress (rather than the cost of progress) becomes the tragic theme. Here the universe is represented as cyclic. Myths of empire and decadence are examined relative to the 1920s and the 1970s and the present day. The literary critic, Frank Kermode’s theory of “the middest” (8) is to the fore.

Kermode writes in *The Sense of an Ending*, “tragedy may be thought of as the successor to apocalypse...tragedy assumes figurations of the apocalypse, of death and

judgement, heaven and hell; but the world goes forward in the hands of exhausted survivors” (82); he is of the view that we always in transition, moving towards an ending which never comes. And so, *The Mall* begins in the middle. It is set at the end of an era and the start of another. Its protagonist Nick is moving through the Midwest. It is the end of Jimmy Carter’s presidency and there is an energy crisis. The Cold War is escalating. The withdrawal of troops from Vietnam is fresh in the American Psyche. Yet materially America is on the cusp of an era of rampant consumerism which will overshadow everything. The mall, which lurks on the outskirts of Fairfield, is symbolic of change. There is a sense that this is the end of a better America, but in reality, the questions the short story hopes to engage with are: what is being left behind? And what lies ahead?

When Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby*, which the short story *The Mall* is inspired by, it would seem that he was suggesting, like Kermode, a failure to move forward; a cycle that means, despite promises to the contrary, we are repeatedly “borne back ceaselessly into the past” (168). In *The Mall*, Fitzgerald’s lyric style and language are replicated to announce the parallels with mythical excess of the 1920s and mythic status of American Life in the 1970s, despite the historical realities of each era for much of the population. In the character of Jay Gatsby, Fitzgerald suggested ‘The American Dream’ of progressiveness was a myth, but the focus in *The Mall* is on the narrator as it is his eye that builds the mythic world.

The narrator in *The Mall* (Nick), like Fitzgerald’s narrator, is passive. Ultimately, it his unwillingness to see himself as an agent for change which perpetuates the social barriers that underpin the class divide. In both stories, the narrator is a surrogate for the reader. In *The Mall*, Nick refuses to see the fictive quality of his surroundings; he views the town and people of Fairfield through a romantic lens: James Mullen is presented as a good man but unlucky and people like the Adams are seen as “chosen” (89). Nick is unable to return to the

idyllic Midwest because his memories of it are representative of an America which never existed. “Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change” Kermode prophetically writes (39). In *The Mall*, the seasons mark the passing of time, but seasons are tragically cyclic too. Nick exists in a waste land as “people in the waste land...exist in this self-enclosed obliviousness” (43 Perry). In postmodernity, the tragic irony is, that there will be no anagnorisis if we insist on reporting the same mythic histories again and again.

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The Fine Print picks up the thread of mythic progress and applies it to the feminist cause. It means to draw attention to gender inequality as it relates to postmodernity. The existential tragedy of modernity becomes the existential tragedy particular to women in postmodernity. It is inspired by Arthur Miller’s play *Death of a Salesman* and it is his characterisation of women that is inspected relative to today.

Miller writes in his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" (1949), “It is time, I think, that we who are without kings, took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possibly lead in our time-the heart and spirit of the average man”. Engaging with *Death of a Salesman* and the literary response to it, one might infer that women perhaps are excluded from the right to tragic status. Charlene Fix provides these exemplars in her article titled “*The Lost Father in Death of a Salesman*”:

Miller offers us paradox: Ben’s success is predicated on error, then plunder, rhyming nicely with the contradiction between Willy’s anger at the builders “for cutting those [elms] down” and his regret over not logging with Ben in Alaska. Finally, no matter what the question, Ben has one smug non sequitur answer: “when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. . . . And by God I was rich.” Willy thinks Ben has something to teach, and his premise isn’t entirely wrong: fathers, including father surrogates, teach.

Willy's felt obligation to instruct his sons in a viable ethos is made desperate by his confusion. When Linda tells them, "attention must finally be paid to such a person," suggesting the tragic ramifications of Willy's struggle, Biff and Hap hardly need to be reminded to pay attention to their father...

So in spite of having skilful [sic] hands and a spirit bent toward adventure, Willy's father, with his restlessness and wanderlust, suggests an alienated prototype of Biff, who gets "lost. In the greatest country in the world," prefiguring, in his abandonment of wife and sons in Dakota to blaze a trail and invite civilization and its trappings to follow in his wake, Biff's conflict between Willy's need for him in Brooklyn and freedom out West....

Furthermore, because Willy's father abandoned him when he was so young, Willy reaches manhood feeling, as do his counterparts in myth and literature, that he must find his father in order to know himself and clarify his vocation. The search for the father involves simultaneously moving forward in life and backward toward roots and the past. Classical mythology as well as American literature are replete with such searches, and they often involve irony and paradox: Phaethon seeks proof that his father is the sun yet is destroyed by that proof; Theseus seeks his father, Aegeus, but the old man sees a black sail, thinks his son has died, and so throws himself into the sea; Horus' father Osiris is locked in a coffin later sealed inside a tree trunk, echoed in Willy's own father's disappearance into Alaskan timberland; Oedipus searches for Laius' murderer and gets a surprise about paternity; and in American literature we have Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and Kerouac's *On the Road*, among others, all involving missing or corrupted fathers...

In *The Fine Print*, Miller's tragic hero, Willy Loman and his son, Biff are replaced with Anne and her daughter, Lily. 'The American Dream' which Miller characterises as mythic and superficial, becomes 'The Feminist Dream'.

The Fine Print not only intends to make clear that society has met the demand for gender equality only tentatively post modernity, but it also hopes to provide deeper insight into the character of Linda Loman by creating parallels between the two stories. Both Linda and Anne are married to men that are unfaithful. Both maintain solidarity with their husbands in spite of their husbands' actions. Despite being set over fifty years apart, in both instances

there is a sense that woman's social status is intrinsically linked to their marital status, which in turn has financial ramifications. In this way, both Linda and Anne have faced the same 'choice' and answered it in the same way. "To keep a man, you have to make an effort", Anne tells her daughter succinctly and tragically in *The Fine Print* (71).

The Sense of an Ending and Issues relating to Literary Postmodernism

Susan Rubin Suleiman, professor of comparative literature at Harvard, has defined postmodernist fiction as "...a hyperselfconscious mode of writing that insistently points to literary and cultural antecedents or intertexts, and *thematically*...a kind of fiction that reflects implicitly or explicitly, on the historical present in its relation to the past and possible future" (qtd. in Pykett 53). In the final three short stories: *Eggs*, *More matter, with less art* and *The Sense of an Ending*, different creative approaches have been applied in an attempt to contribute to a conversation about literary postmodernism. In each story, fictional threads mean to provide, not only layers of intertextual meaning, but avenues for the reader to travel back and forward in time.

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The short story in the collection which is directly inspired by the oldest text is *Eggs*. It draws inspiration from *The Satyricon* by Petronius which is likely to have been written in the first century AD (Walsh xiii). Like *The Satyricon*, *Eggs* is a tragic satire. In it, satire is used to explore the future by moving through the present into the past.

The scene is set as in the chapter "Dinner at Trimalchio's" (Petronius 6:21-66), where the gross behaviour of a wealthy and influential host is both witnessed and discussed by his

dinner guests. The hope is that readers will make the connection between the Fall of Rome and the present state of American politics. However, *Eggs*, as it relates to the collection, also means for readers to follow intertextual threads that connect it to a wider tragic web.

Picking up the ancient thread that leads back to Petronius, finds another thread that leads to F. Scott Fitzgerald (One title considered for *The Great Gatsby* was *Trimalchio in West Egg* (Leader)). In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald's protagonist's "career as Trimalchio" (Fitzgerald 106) draws attention to the amoral excess of both eras. That this intertextual reference resonates today in *Eggs*, finds a parallel too with the Fitzgerald inspired short story *The Mall* and asks the wider question: how much have we progressed?

In another example, from *Eggs* we can also travel via Petronius to T.S. Eliot; for Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* draws inspiration from *The Satyricon* too. Along with other intertextual references, Eliot chooses the image of the Sibyl at Cumae presented by Petronius for the poem's epigraph (Walsh xx-xxi):

*"And as for the Sibyl, I once saw with my own eyes at Cumae suspended in a bottle,
and when the boys asked her, 'Sibyl, what is your wish?', she would reply, 'I want to
die'"* (Petronius 48:39).

In concert with these authors, I infer that the Sibyl's dismay is a lack of understanding that the business of story-telling is a serious one; that the Sibyl wants to die because her telling of the fates is futile, so she has given up hope. As a writer, I am left to wonder, is it that her words scatter as leaves in the wind that Eliot empathizes with? Or is it that he must pick the remnants up and reassemble them to no avail? In *Eggs*, the Treasurer does not speak up with tragic results.

In the short story, *More matter, with less art*, once more it is the serious art of satire that spans time. The intertextual threads that connect the short story to Shakespeare's version of *Hamlet*, not only mean to draw attention to the rarefied eminence that the play and the character hold in contemporary society, but they also mean to highlight the fact that in contemporizing *Hamlet*, one is treading over well-worn ground.

Marjorie Garber, in her book *Shakespeare and Modern Culture* writes, "Shakespeare is already not only modern but postmodern: a simulacrum, a replicant, a montage, a bricolage. A collection of found objects, repurposed as art". She makes the case that there are two Shakespeares: the writer and the reference, but that "perceptually and conceptually [these Shakespeares are] the same from the viewpoint of any modern observer". This is the conversation that *More Matter, with less art* joins. This conversation considers identifying Shakespeare as a literary postmodernist who is both of and ahead of time; who applied "a hyperselfconscious mode of writing that [continues to insistently point] to literary and cultural antecedents or intertexts, and *thematically*... [produced] a kind of fiction that reflects implicitly or explicitly, on the historical present in its relation to the past and possible future..." (Suleiman qtd. in Pykett 53).

In this vein *More matter, with less art*, presents Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as read as a multiplicity of intertexts:

- The first is as a successive intertext which appeals, as Shakespeare's version of *Hamlet* did, to an audience by referencing an existing text from pop culture. This is *Hamlet* in the form of Disney's film, *The Lion King*; the image of *Ophelia* as depicted by Waterhouse; Hamlet: the IKEA desk, an economic and populist design.

- The next is Hamlet's 'Shakespeare' as T.S. Eliot presents it; ripe for appropriation to elevate the ordinary: "o o o o that Shakespeherian Rag -- /It's so elegant/ So intelligent" (*The Waste Land*, 2:128-130; 354), quotable and symbolic; fodder for speeches, wordplay and floral bouquets. The wedding guests in *More matter, with less art*, exclaim with self-reflexive irony, "How clever and appropriate to quote the bard" (143).
- Finally, there is within *More matter, with less art*, the thread of tragedy, which reaches back further to Aristotle, to provide a familiar context to write about contemporary issues in a way that transcends time. In *More matter, with less art*, this is the indolence and elitism of the upper class which denies the opportunity for advancement for all; the fact that "Reformation is unlikely" (142). In the Elizabethan context, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, provides a stage to discuss new versions of The Bible which were symptomatic of power struggles within the Church for control over the 'Word' of God. For all his navel gazing, it is significant that Hamlet acts as a Catholic, not progressively.

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It is by design that final short story in the collection is not only science-fiction, but also a metafictional attempt to allegorize my writing journey this year. *The Sense of an Ending* was inspired by Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*, but it also means to capitalise on the intertextual conversations that take place in the previous stories. As in Ian McEwan's novel, time provides the thematic substance. Crucially, the story borrows its title from Frank Kermode's collected lectures on literary theory and reflects his assertions that "Our stories must recognise mere successiveness but not be merely successive..." (58); he warns, "if the past is

forgotten we sink quickly into myth, into stereotype. We have to employ our knowledge of the fictive” (124).

Kermode’s lectures took place in 1965, but Kermode determines that time is immaterial. He concerns himself with the purpose of story-telling not with the stories themselves. For this reason, his lectures not only speak of the past but are also relevant in the present, which was then the future. “...fictions, if successful make sense of the here and now” (39) he insists, because that is their purpose. He argues that *concordance* governs how we make sense of the world, that our need for an ending informs our perpetual fictions and in this way they are both connected to one another and timeless.

Kermode builds his arguments to span theology and science. He contrasts and connects the eschatological past with the existential present. The fictions of holy apocalypse become the fictions of quantum science. He speaks on the cusp of postmodernity.

Kermode is aware that there is no history, only histories; a multiplicity of singular realities. It is fictions not histories, Kermode tells us, that retain their power because they are self-conscious in their construction. *The Sense of an Ending* (the short story), desires to make this connection between science and histories and fictions too. It draws attention via intertextual reference to Werner Heisenberg’s recent principal of complementarity as an example of where the line is blurred. Heisenberg acknowledges the similarity between the disciplines “the style arises out of the interplay between the world and ourselves...both science and art form in the course of the centuries a human language by which we can speak of the more remote parts of reality” (Heisenberg qtd. in Kermode 61). In the short story Professor Heisenberg is certain of uncertainty, but believes the general public will panic if the truth of it is revealed (147).

The Sense of an Ending is the story of a beginning and an end but also a middle too. It means to say that despite being set in the future, and written in the present, this is an old story made new. For here are Adam and Eve, here are star crossed lovers, here are Lancelot and Guinevere; here is Genesis, here is Promethean consequence, here is the Bhagavad Gita. Here is the dust of empires formed and destroyed, the grains of sand that the Cumaean Sibyl holds in her hand; here is an indigo stain against the darkening shingle; a single figure on an endless strand.

Postscript

The act of writing fiction could be seen as fundamentally tragic in postmodernity if we were to assume that all the stories had been used up, or were limited to some highly organised plots. However, Eliot's poem, Miller and Shakespeare's plays, Fitzgerald and McEwan's novels, and Nabokov and Petronius' satires remind us that there are opportunities for a "music of ideas" (I.A. Richards qtd. in Perry 8). By exploring a web of fiction, I have seen how stories intersect and provide ways to travel back and forward in time. It is clear to me that intertextuality, rather than being an exclusively postmodern tool, has always provided a way for ideas to be developed, that satire, parody and irony rather than being postmodern forms, are as ancient as writing itself, and because "the innocent eye sees nothing" (Kermode 144), fiction provides repositories for knowledge that might be censored or controlled.

By interacting with classic tragedies, I have determined that the act of writing fiction (in any form) is a hopeful act. I believe that in times where truth-telling is found to be spurious, fiction has the unique potential to carry the truth forward. Fiction provides opportunities to reiterate knowledge which might otherwise be lost, in new languages that speak to new audiences. Fiction provides the opportunity for discourse with the past. Fragments of stories, however thinly scattered are always wormholes to those seeking adventure. The real tragedy in postmodernity is the premium placed on difference rather than similarity. The critique of 'sameness' or an egotistical drive for 'originality', undermines the purpose of fiction and pits writers against each other. Politically motivated critiques that reject the great narrative Hart describes, ignore the human reason for stories, and fail to understand that this narrative is only 'great' due to the richness of opportunity it provides for discourse with other narratives, past, present and future. In this way, fiction writers have always been keepers of the grail. T.S. Eliot's biographer Lyndall Gordon wrote that "to lose

what is not a waste land is the very condition of being in a wasteland” (qtd. in Hart, vi). This year I have written my way into this knowledge.

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