

***White Sheets and Other Particulars***

(A Novel)

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“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgments), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

Danielle M. Duffy

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## **Abstract**

White Sheets and Other Particulars is a novel of a woman recovering from the death of her son and a subsequent suicide attempt. It is written as a tandem narrative, with non-chronological flashbacks between a pre-traumatic past and a post-traumatic present. The exegesis was written in parallel and in dialogue with the novel and explores research themes that influenced the first developmental draft. The overarching theme of my work is the notion of “the brink” – the psychological boundary between sanity, normality and life, on one side, and illness, madness and death on the other. The core of the exegesis explores how to express this boundary, as an interior state of the main character, while maintaining both authenticity and readability, and also how structure – in particular, the movement between timelines – can illuminate her changing psychological condition.

**Authenticity and Readability on the brink:  
Grief and anxiety in a tandem narrative**

**An Exegesis**

***Danielle M. Duffy***



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## Synopsis

*White Sheets and Other Particulars* is a first person fictive memoir of an unnamed woman. The tandem narrative includes two timelines: the present - which runs chronologically and takes place in a stone cottage in a small village in the south of France with her partner, Simon. The second timeline flashes back on non-chronological moments in her past and illustrates a number of psychological traumas, including the death of her parents, her husband Matthew's substance abuse and subsequent incarceration, and the death of Matthew and their young son, Luca in a traffic accident. These experiences then lead to a profound depression, peaks of anxiety attacks and suicidal ideation and ultimately culminate in a failed suicide attempt and her admittance to a psychiatric institution. The present narrative takes place whilst the woman is living abroad with Simon and documents small seemingly insignificant details of her daily life. These particulars are punctuated by the revelations, in the form of flashbacks, of her past, as she is able to recall them. The key conflict is internal and her memories and reflections periodically touch upon painful, compartmentalised portions of her experiences. Such proximity triggers anxieties and other expressions of panic and psychological difficulty. The novel is her mind in the process of searching for a new normal, at least something psychologically sustainable. The healing process, grief, traumas and revelations are reflected in the tandem narrative structure and in the writing - this is indeed the basis for the narrative structure. As her story unfolds and her mental state is illuminated, the reader can determine the trajectory of her story past the last line of text.

## Exordium

This was not the story I had intended to tell. I discovered this character buried in my original thesis narrative. Her job was to illuminate the character of her husband through her experiences of him. Once I heard her voice, tentative yet brave, I was compelled to share her story. I have chosen to write a fictive memoir because it best suits my reflective temperament and my inclination to use creative writing to explore issues of interest to me. *White Sheets and Other Particulars* is not autobiographical but does include key

themes and experiences that have personal resonance with me. I am particularly interested in the narrow brink between uncompromising yet somewhat functional despair and a dysfunctional disturbance. In this novel I am using grief as a narrative device through which depression, PTSD, anxiety, panic and healing are explored. As a rule, the characters in this story are part invention and part discovery - perhaps a composite in some regards, yet I am keenly aware of the presence of people from my past and present reflected in their experiences and sensibilities.

Like many people, my life has included various traumas and grief, and reflection is a natural part of a healing process. But healing does not mean “fixed” or “returned to normal” – it is not like fixing an appliance. With the loss of a parent or a child, one establishes a new normal, or better, a new trajectory – hopefully, a functional trajectory. The structure of the thesis provides a framework within which to drill down into particular profound moments in the character’s life and see the impact of such events on her psychological state. The structure echos the character’s grieving process. I wanted to take the opportunity to play with that line between function and dysfunction and to provide periodic strategies or ‘life-rafts’ that might offer a reprieve from the darkness.

My theoretical motivation mirrors my personal motivation. I want to use the opportunity of this thesis to explore the relationship and intersection points between the interior world of the mind and the exterior world of the page. How does life put words on the page, and does putting words on a page impact life? I am curious to understand how such a creative activity might partake in two-way dialogue with my life? This is analogous to the how this exegesis is in dialogue with my thesis. While I have periodically used journal writing in conjunction with creative writing, I had never before used a research methodology, and I was keen to understand how this worked and how it impacted the writing. These motivations have crystallised into the particular research themes that are addressed in this exegesis.

I first became aware of story as part of my bedtime ritual. From the age of 18 months, my parents, taking alternate nights, told me a tale or two before bed. My mother shared stories of the adventures of “Mother and Baby” as they jetted around the world to exotic locales, encountering hilarious problems and my father made up fabulous tales of “Little Girl Hay,” who lived alone in the woods with her animal friends and was the hero of each episode. I first realised stories could be created when my mother asked me where I thought ‘Mother and Baby’ should go tonight. My mother was a natural storyteller - it was simply her mode of expression. She would tell stories about her childhood, about extended family members, about meeting my father – even the way she shared a recipe had a story element. When I learned how to make Peggy Squares, my mother told me how her great aunt Gladys had attempted to win the heart of a handsome boy by baking these cookies. Her cousin, a few doors down, had the same plan for the same boy.

Although I was introduced to classic literature at a young age, my first love was poetry. My grandmother would spend hours reading me the beautifully crafted offerings from Robert Graves and Frost, Edgar Allen Poe, Milton, Dickinson and others. I think my musical influences were as significant as the books I read. I loved the energy and emotion of the blues – particularly live performances. Reflecting on these influences, I wonder to what extent I bring the best of what I appreciate reading and experiencing into my own work? I think that the writers I have long admired, enjoy economy in exposition and I certainly find myself sharing that preference. I relentlessly exercise restraint in choosing what my characters say and what must remain unsaid, yet deeply felt. Rooted in my appreciation of poetry and music are the rhythms of speech and the pace of revelations between the timelines in the tandem narrative. Anaphora is a poetic technique used to create a rhythmic pattern throughout a written work. It involves the repetition of a word or a phrase at the beginning of consecutive sentences. The use of repetition and rhythm help to create historical breadth in the opening of Charles Dickens’ epic, *A Tale of Two Cities*.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair. (*A Tale of Two Cities*, 1859)

In *White Sheets and Other Particulars*, I have also used anaphora to communicate emotional depth at selected peak moments in the story.

I'm scared that you're scared. I'm scared that you don't know how much I love you. I'm scared because I don't know where you are. I'm scared because I don't know what to do. I'm scared because my mind is quiet. I'm scared that there is no one inside me. I'm scared because there's nothing.

*White Sheets and Other Particulars*

In the above, I used repetition of the words, "I'm scared" to amplify the emotional intensity in a key moment of the story when the character re-experiences visiting the body of her dead child in the morgue.

The overarching theme of my work is the notion of *the brink*. This refers to the boundary or fulcrum on which we humans balance – with sanity, normality and life on one side and illness, madness and death on the other. My process of writing has been concurrent with my increasing understanding of this boundary. The research themes I explored are in the form of two questions which clarify challenges that I needed to address in my thesis. The first research theme is about the psychological condition of my main character. How can I write and develop the protagonist to express her state of being *on the brink* while maintaining both authenticity and readability? To address this question, I investigated a psychoanalytic approach to literature, and in particular, Kristeva's notion of the *abject*. The second research theme investigates structure. How can I use a non-chronological flashback structure to illuminate the nature of *the brink*?

**How can I write and develop this character to express her state of being *on the brink* while maintaining both authenticity and readability?**

**The Brink.** My mission as a writer is to illuminate the complex and chaotic swirl of consciousness that I am imagining for my main character. There is no simple answer to what I mean by *the brink*; it is a compound and abstract concept requiring some analysis. At its simplest conception, the brink is a line between two states – often something approached

from one side, such as “the brink of disaster” or “the brink of madness.” As an idiom, this means one is “about to experience something negative.” (See: [idioMeanings](#), a website) Ultimately, the brink is the boundary between realities. One can move between these realities – crawl slowly between or be blown across. In this section, the brink refers primarily to the changing psychological state of the main character. Kristeva notes a general relationship between literature and such fragile borders:

On close inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its sociohistorical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject. (Kristeva 1982, 107)

The main character (who remains unnamed throughout the novel) is approaching a boundary between life and death, culminating in an attempted suicide. However, since I am playing with her back and forth movement across this boundary, the brink is like a *bridge* connecting the two sides. It is also a *fulcrum* on which the two sides balance. This image resonates with me as it may require only a small force to *tilt the scale*. The brink is the space between the depths of despair, and solid footing either side of it. I include the surface of water, as in a bathtub, as a symbol representing this dichotomy.

In psychoanalytic terms, water symbolises the boundary between the conscious and the unconscious.

Metaphorically, water is the unconscious, and the creature in the water is the life or energy of the unconscious, which has overwhelmed the conscious personality and must be disempowered, overcome and controlled. (Campbell 2011, 180)

My character experiences the tantalising siren song of the unconscious as a release from her relentless reality.

I lie there, under the water, feeling the small, sharp pain that makes me want to cough. I cough and my mouth fills up with water and I swallow some and I lift my head. I feel disappointed. I want to put my head under the water again but I don't.

*White Sheets and Other Particulars*

**Julia Kristeva and the Abject.** In surveys of literary theories and approaches to literary criticism, psychoanalytic thinking is a particularly common feature. Since its arrival with Freud, psychoanalysis has provided a lens through which literature and text in general can be analysed and considered. Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many theorists added to and amended Freud's thinking, including Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. In this section, I summarise Kristeva's notion of the abject and relate her thinking to my approach toward my main character.

As per Freud, Kristeva envisions psycho-sexual stages of development, although these were informed by Lacan's own variations (Dino, 2011) and she modified these further. Most relevant is her idea of a separation stage at 4-8 months that sits between the *chora* stage (0-6 months) which is about chaotic sensory experience, pleasure and enmeshment with the mother, and the *mirror* stage (6-18 months), where the individual recognises itself as a separate being. This separation stage is therefore the boundary between two radically different states of reality. Kristeva associates this stage with the *abject* – the threatened breakdown of meaning caused by the lack of distinction between self and other. (Brontë, 1847 [2010]) This happens when one is confronted with a horror – prototypically, for Kristeva, a corpse. "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life." (Kristeva, 1982, 4)

This has the potential of throwing us across the brink into a state of meaninglessness that is preverbal, as though we have regressed to something like that separation state.

The abject confronts us, on the other hand, and this time within our personal archaeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling" (Kristeva 1982, 13)

Roland Barthes' emotional study of grief after the death of his mother, illustrates the abject as Barthes flails miserably in despair without her. He has been forced to release, quite literally, "the hold of maternal entity" and "asks for nothing but to live in (my) suffering." Eventually, he finds a way to create new order by embodying his own mother.

Around 6 p.m.: the apartment is warm, clean, well-lit, pleasant. I make it that way, energetically, devotedly (enjoying it bitterly): henceforth and forever I am my own mother. (Barthes, 1977)

**Horror and the Corpse.** In my story, the main character is confronted by the horror of the death of her son in a car accident that also killed her estranged husband. This trauma moves her, although not immediately, into a mental stupor where she is not speaking and where there is a sense of meaninglessness. I see this as Kristeva's abject. The character sees the corpse, but instead of reacting viscerally, remains in a calm, almost detached state.

Someone had arranged his hair. They had parted it on the wrong side. He liked his fringe flopping down on the left to the top of his eyebrows. Each morning before school, he stood in front of the mirror flattening his beautiful curls with water and a little mousse. He said he just liked it that way. I loved his curls. He said he would keep his curls on my weekends sometimes as long as we were just staying home. I said he was a cool dude. I gently swept his hair to the other side. It was a little crisp on the tips and I thought they might have used hairspray until I saw pieces of dried blood flake on to the white sheet.

*White Sheets and Other Particulars*

The reader might anticipate a mother's overwrought response to seeing her dead son. The internalisation of that natural horror reaction has hijacked the progression of expected grief and indicates that there may be a complication to her grieving process. Nonetheless, death has infected her life. Her confrontation with the corpse of her son has thrust her back to the boundary between one reality and another. The character has entered the abject state.

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. (Kristeva 1982, 3)

**Authenticity and Readability.** The extreme states I am trying to illustrate have, by my intention, elements of the chaotic and the sublime. The challenge is to give voice to this



woman who is experiencing these states versus writing *about* these states. The states at issue include: anxiety, suicidal ideation, depression, grief and recovery from trauma.

While other solutions to this challenge include various approaches to stream of consciousness writing, I have chosen to approach this from the perspective of *fictive memoir*. That is, I am not writing the output of her mind as it is working, which I believe would be total chaos, but instead, I am writing what she would say if she was asked to keep some record of her thoughts.

This decision allows for a more stylised and readable form of writing, as though the character has a desire to be understood. Importantly, this was not a solution that I devised at the start of the project, however, upon reading Kristeva and discovering the concept of abjection, I felt I now had a model for approaching the character's experience of mental decline. The protagonist in Sylvia Plath's only novel documents her spiral towards the brink of mental illness. This mirrors Plath's own experiences which resulted in her suicide a month after the novel was published. The first reference to the Bell Jar shows her trapped in her own isolated reality.

Wherever I sat — on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok — I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air. (Plath, 1963)

In my approach, the fictive memoir is not explicitly written, that is, we never see her writing — although it has been suggested to her by her therapist. Nor is she explicitly telling her story to another character. She is simply telling us, the reader. This is conceivably psychotherapeutic; perhaps this is helping her to heal.

She asked what I thought about keeping a journal of my thoughts and feelings and might I find it valuable. I said, "I don't think so." She waited, eyebrows cocked.

"I'm just not particularly interested in anything I've got to say."

"You're not interested in anything you have to say to yourself, is that what I hear you saying?"

I thought about it. What could I possibly say to myself? What could I say that would help? What could I say that wouldn't twist me up inside and stab me over and over? A sheet of blank paper.

*White Sheets and Other Particulars*

The choice of first person felt obvious because I wished to explore that inner voice. In reality, inner voices can be incredibly messy and even ineffable. The challenge then is to capture and share such states without having the writing itself be so messy as to be unintelligible. In a certain sense, I believe I am borrowing from film, and in particular, a statement by Stanley Kubrick, "You don't try to photograph the reality, you try to photograph the photograph of the reality." (Goggins, 2001) I am not writing about a woman going through this trauma; I am writing about a portrait of a woman going through this trauma, who is speaking to us. This shapes my writing and helps me strike a balance between authenticity and readability.

**Panic Attacks: Remembering versus re-experiencing.** Panic attacks are a key scenic device for illuminating the psychological dynamics of my character. A panic attack is a deep pit where there is just pain, fear and trauma pressing on all sides. During an attack, she does not want to survive it; it is better to let it happen, to let herself go, to die. Just outside of the attack, on either side, is the *brink*, a bridge between surviving and not surviving. We see her go in and come out, and we see her on the precipice.

I am dying. My ears ring as my heart leaps around and my throat closes and I forget how to swallow. Oh God, I can't swallow. I can't swallow. My brain races to remember any stories of people who have not swallowed and then died. I close my eyes. It chases me. It is relentless. My face is numb, my eyes ache, my body quivers. Is this how I die? I want to give in. There is no point. I can't stand it! I can't stand it! I can't do it!

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My model for writing panic attacks assumes that they are unique experiences, independent of their triggers and that there are several strategies that the protagonist deploys to try to minimise, or manage them, once they are underway. Her key trigger is when she attempts to construct a memory of her son's last moments – his last breath and last heartbeat. These symbols are used throughout the story. Through her attempted reconstruction, she is

*reliving* the trauma rather than *remembering* it, and the reliving causes the attacks. This is admittedly a simplified conception of a somewhat more complex phenomenon.

People who have been exposed to highly stressful stimuli develop long-term potentiation of memory tracts that are reactivated at times of subsequent arousal. This activation explains how current stress is experienced as a return of the trauma; it causes a return to earlier behavior patterns...As novel stimuli are anxiety provoking, under stress, previously traumatized people tend return to familiar patterns, even if they cause pain. (van der Kolk, 1989)

In response to these experiences and these intense reconstructed memories, she shuts down. Her hearing is muffled during panic attacks, narrowing her experience. She is still present and aware of things around her but without an emotional connection.

Her voice is far away. I can barely hear her. My heart is loud. My ears are blocked. I hear her counting. I hear, "twenty, twenty one..."

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When she does speak, her voice is whispery and scratchy, which is tied to the abject, pre-lingual state. In the writing, her voice and what she shares is an indication of her current capability to remember and retell.

**Suicide.** I am using my understanding of abjection and of the boundary between meaning and meaninglessness, between life and death, between being together and being separate, to inform my attempts to give this woman words. Her suicide attempt feels like a rebirth and an opportunity to heal.

The character of Septimus Warren Smith in Virginia Woolf's, *Mrs Dalloway*, is desperate to overcome the feelings of meaninglessness as he rails against social conventions and authoritarian rule. The traumas of the war have left him unable to function in the society he once enjoyed, instead, he is paranoid and suspicious and death, for him, is an escape.

Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death. (Woolf, 1925)

Separation is trauma and there is a relationship between the separation from the mother during Kristeva's psycho-sexual stage of development, and the state my character is flung into when she is existentially separated from her son. Her response is to become a walking corpse (on her way to becoming an actual corpse) and her hallucinations express and illustrate her move across the brink into meaninglessness and madness.

**How can I use a *non-chronological flashback narrative structure* to illuminate the nature of the brink?**

**My goals for structure.** The structure paces the narrative to illuminate the character's changing psychological state and capability. The suicide functions as a turning point and rebirth; her life becomes bifurcated, before and after, and therefore the novel is bifurcated as well. In the Part 1, the present is the base from which flashbacks unveil the past. Flashbacks in this section are formatted using italics. Part two begins after the suicide attempt. There is a transition to the past which now becomes the new present, interrupted by flashforwards in italics.

In Part 2, I secure the character in the present by keeping her in a broken lift. The memories come to her as she waits to be rescued. In the layout of the story, I show the brink between parts one and two, by removing the recognised structure entirely for two pages as she moves from life to potential death.

The structure supports varying writing styles, because each of the two timelines requires this, due to the varying psychological state of my character. Structure allows her to have another voice to be able to tell her story in addition to expressing her current moments.

**Placement of traumatic events in the story.** Mid way through Part 1, she shares, "My son is buried under a pink peony plant." I did not want this death to be the lens through which readers come to know the character. They know that she is struggling; they witness this through her anxieties and panic attacks – but they do not know why. Announcing the death early, I believe, would have placed her in a tidy box for the reader: here is a mother who lost her son. I do not intend to be tidy in this way for the reader. Perhaps this knowledge, when

it arrives, will be a jolt, bifurcating the experience of the novel (like Hitchcock killing-off Marion Crane one third of the way into Psycho).

**Pace.** The novel initially presents positive memories and then slowly reveals more conflicted territory. I felt the need for patience, allowing the reader to share time and experience with my protagonist before presenting them with the contrast between her present, obvious anxiety and her initially pleasant past memories. In recognition of some danger in delaying conflict for too long, and potentially disturbing the narrative, certain scenes about her problematic marriage were shifted to earlier positions.

**Structure and “non-chronological flashback.”** I am attempting to leverage multiple schemas of structure, and this is a key experimental component of my piece. Grief and depression can serve as a structure by way of a temporal arc – someone falls into depression and (hopefully) comes out of depression. It is a journey of sorts, perhaps even a mono-myth or hero’s journey. The trauma is the call to the adventure. (Campbell 2004[1968], 45)

The experience of involuntary memory, or intrusive memory, is common when we are relaxed and allow our thoughts to wander a little. We may experience unbidden flashbacks about recent events or cherished moments in our lives. In contrast, traumatic flashbacks, according to psychotherapist, John Marzillier, “stand out from other involuntary memories in that they tend to be repetitive, unwanted and distressing. They intrude into consciousness often, in brief spurts of vivid sensory imagery.” (Marzillier 2012)

Throughout the narrative in the present, the woman is slowly releasing memories. Her first series of flashbacks show moments of her past life, in no particular order, holding no anxiety or trauma. While these serve as exposition for the reader, they do not advance the story. They are merely a first foray into learning to remember. As Marzillier (2012) notes, although rare, these memories can be ‘intense and highly pleasurable’ as in Marcel Proust’s ‘In Search of Lost Time’, where Marcel, the narrator, bites into a ‘petite madeleine’ biscuit and is whisked back to memories of his childhood.

"no sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped...An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin... And suddenly the memory revealed itself." (Proust, 2010 [1913], 51)

**Structure and the brink.** These structural issues serve as a map, but I am hoping that the detail will be at the level of the terrain – given that the map is not the territory. The fact of the two narratives invites an exploration of the boundary – the *brink*. This plays out in a number of ways. The institution serves as a temporal, liminal boundary – separating her life, in effect, into before and after. There is a period suspension between the narratives – as if between waking and dreaming. Examples include moments of hallucination – those may be “taking place” on a certain timeline, but they feel as though they reside in the own space between the tandem narratives. This liminal space related to her being an unreliable narrator. She may be sharing things that have no connection to the objective reality of the story-world.

**How can my approaches to structure be informed by other authors and theorists?** In this section, I explore approaches to literary theory and criticism that have informed my thinking concerning structure. These include Freud’s repetition compulsion, Barthes’ ‘hermeneutic’ and ‘proairetic’ codes, and focalisation categories of Meike Bal.

**Psychoanalytic thinking and structure.** A psychoanalytic lens most obviously provides insights concerning characters in a story, and indeed the author herself. In my discussion in the first research theme, I described how Kristeva’s notion of the abject helped to inform and shape the psychological state of my main character. Here, I draw upon the psychoanalytic concept of *repetition compulsion* to consider and inform my structural decision-making. Freud postulated a repetition compulsion whereby we repeat traumatic events as a strategy for integrating them safely into our psyche. (Laplanche and Pontalis 1998, 78) His understanding of the “repetition-compulsion” led him to hypothesise a death instinct as a major drive in parallel with the sexual instinct. (Salman Akhtar, Mary Kay O’Neil 2011, 102-103) The death instinct seeks a quiet or non-existent state that was evidently overwhelmed by life – to “re-establish a state of things that was disturbed by the

emergence of life. The repetition compulsion is thereby a way of “coming to grips with and to accept the fact of death.” (Freud, 2013 [1923], 709). My novel can be seen through the lens of repetition compulsion in the following ways:

- The character repeatedly returns, in disguised ways – including in dreams, fantasies and hallucinations – to the moment of her son’s death and to seeing his corpse.

This is where we practice. This is your safe place. We are trying to get you to be able to remember Luca’s death without reliving it.

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- Fictive memoir is similarly a retelling – in this case, for the sake of deliberate processing.
- When she is hospitalised, the process of repetition is woven into psychotherapy, which includes a stylised and structured retelling of whatever is going on in the patient’s head. (Morgan 2002, 85)
- The reader, upon reading of a trauma, will have a tendency to replay it, again as a form of integration, as one might occasionally flash upon moments of horror in films.
- Peter Brooks (Dino, 2011) suggests a relationship between the ending of a literary work and a drive that Freud associated with repetition compulsion – the death instinct. In essence, we seek the end of a work for a sense of satisfaction in finality, in ending, in quiescence.

Importantly, repetition compulsion is a normal psychological process that is not necessarily connected to illness, neurosis, psychosis, etc. It is when this mechanism is thwarted that problems – and symptoms – may occur. In *White Sheets and Other Particulars*, the repetition compulsion on her part is indeed thwarted: her *lack of specific knowledge* of how her son died (i.e., last moment, last thought) leads to her “as-if” reconstructions of the incident and prevents the completion of the memory. She is reliving and re-experiencing rather than remembering. This dynamic places her on the brink and periodically triggers anxiety and panic.

A similar break down in the reader's expectations of narrative conventions is found in Tracey Slaughter's short story *Wheat*, where Slaughter disregards climax and denouement as it centres around the pain of losing a child. The story unravels in all directions and reveals the experiences and trauma and pain of grief. The nursing mother is forced to replay the events in part because "... outside of language the memory still comes. It comes to the body."

I would not choose to remember him the way other parts of the dream sometimes make me. Sometimes in the dream I'm in the shower & I hear his voice asking if he can come in...Other times I just shuck his clothes roughly without talking of his body. I don't notice his body because I don't yet know that I will lose it. (*Slaughter, 2005*)

In *White Sheets and Other Particulars*, flashbacks are reconstructed memories. They are not initially traumatic and so their repetition is not a source of trouble – she seems to relate her childhood easily. As her recollections zero-in on the death of her son, she experiences greater anxiety and occasionally panic attacks – these are lingering symptoms taking place in the present. The back and forth *cutting* between the timelines helps the reader experience these psychological patterns.

**Barthes' 'hermeneutic' code.** Of Barthes' five codes that are discernible within narratives, the novel leverages the *hermeneutic* code, which calls attention to anything unknown or unexplained and motivates the reader to seek and discover. (Barthes 1974) The prototypical example is the detective story where this pattern is explicit: one acquires clues along the way, and only discovers the full truth at the end. The novel deliberately withholds information from the reader; the early portions of the story avoid any information about the source of her anxieties (i.e., snares and suspended answers); later, as the reader learns about the problematic marriage there is a sense that she has been painting a picture that may not be fully accurate (i.e., equivocation and partial answers).

*The last car we owned together was pretty new. It was broken into and had most of its parts taken the same week Matt was sentenced to two and a half years in California Correctional Center in Susanville.*

*White Sheets and Other Particulars*



**Metalepsis.** Gerard Genette describes metalepsis as an “intrusion” or “transgression” across levels of reality, for example, when a narrator, who is otherwise not a character in the story, breaks into the world of the story and speaks to a character or to the reader. Monika Fludernik unpacks Genette’s ideas to describe four types of such transgressions (Fludernik 2003) and a version of the second type – ontological metalepsis – can be discerned within the novel. In this type, the narrator places themselves into the story-world by announcing, for example, “Now let’s go see what’s happening at the pub.” In the novel, the protagonist is returning to, and problematically re-experiencing, the past. This is similar, conceptually, to Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall*, where the protagonist brings the audience with him into his childhood classroom. *White Sheets and Other Particulars* avoids, however, such a heavy-handed device that blatantly breaks the illusion. Instead, the protagonist shares her observations as if asking the reader to “notice this.”

## **Conclusion**

The overarching theme of my creative work is understanding and managing the psychological hinterland after a traumatic event. I am particularly interested in the small space between functionality and dysfunction, where one straddles the psychological brink between sanity and falling into ‘madness’. I am also interested in the degree to which one can maintain that balance and even come back from the brink. In my story, I explore the darkness of grief, the motivation for suicide and the strategies that may assist with managing a new normal.

**Audience.** I imagine this work would appeal to an adult audience, as we must imagine the protagonist to be a mature woman, and I assume her challenges and experiences would be more relatable to older readers. I also assume, perhaps unfairly, that women would be drawn to such a story more so than men, although I understand that grief, loss of a child and suicide are not exclusive to women. I think to truly enjoy this story, a reader would have to relish being an active participant in the co-creation of story, insofar as the novel requires the

reader to suspend the conventional expectations of structure and narrative and sometimes even language. The non-linear multi-flashback narrative design is used to help keep the character's voice and the pace authentic to her psychological capabilities. The reader must accept the character's limitations and suspend their own requirements of the story. Finally, I think the story may be interesting, and even valuable, to people in the throes of grief or depression or family members of sufferers.

**Creative Discipline.** As I began writing this story, I assumed it would fall under the somewhat generic genre of literary fiction. However, through discussions with my programme mentor, I began to see it as a fictive memoir. In his book *How Fiction Works*, James Wood argues that "fiction is both artifice and verisimilitude." (Wood 2008). All fiction, but particularly fictive-memoir has to straddle that line between creative license and believability. For example, Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is a fictive memoir told from the perspective of Kevin's mother, through a series of letters to her husband. The memoir nature of the writing is blatant:

On this point I'm brooking no argument, and I intend to take ruthless advantage of the fact that this is my account, to whose perspective you have no choice but to submit. (Shriver, 2010)

As I researched the genre, I was surprised to discover that there seemed to be a reluctance to label novels as fictive memoir. I think the genre has had teething problems due to uncertainty about how best to leverage it. James Frey's book, *A Million Little Pieces*, (Frey 2009) was originally marketed as a memoir but later rebranded as a Fictive memoir after accusations of literary forgery. This kind of confusion left readers a little gunshy about the degree of truth of any 'memoir' related story. I believe placing my story in the fictive memoir genre contributes to legitimizing the genre in general. Likewise, the use of non-linear flashback tandem narrative seems to be less popular in prose than in film, where it can be easily and immediately identifiable with cinematographic techniques. I believe that my work illustrates how this structure can be effectively used in literature to highlight a variety of issues and challenges. One of the issues I encountered as I worked through the flashback tandem narrative, was balancing the authentic pace of the character, as she

revealed her memories, with the readability of the piece. I think there is value to having works out there, like mine, that walk that line. While it is not as unconventional as David Foster Wallace's, *Infinite Jest* (Wallace 2011) or the flash fiction of Lydia Davis, it does challenge the accepted conventions of storytelling and is, therefore, an addition to the conversation.

**Future of Work.** As mentioned previously, this is a developmental first draft of the story I want to tell. I have every intention of fully revising this piece, informed by both my research for this exegesis and the natural editing process. In subsequent drafts, I intend to finely tune that line between readability and authenticity by adding more foreshadowing in the front end of the novel. I intend to tighten up the early flashback vignettes – cut down some of the bulkier flashbacks in order to keep the scenes crisp and specific – while maintaining the distant voice of the character's mental state. I will also subtly increase the use of symbols and metaphor in order to disquiet the reader earlier in the book. However, I will be cautious to allow the symbols and metaphors to be 'discovered' by the reader rather than artificially highlighting them. I think it makes of a more satisfying read.

**Evolution of this thesis.** The novel I am submitting was not the story I had originally planned to tell. I was well into the MCW programme, writing a post-modern, slightly abstract, literary fiction novel told in four books. I was interested in exploring how our understanding of a person is based on our own perspective of them and informed by our experiences with them. My story was a study of one person told from four different perspectives – his brother's, his son's, his wife's and his own. Through these four lenses we would learn about the character at different points of his life and ultimately understand him more fully. Each book was intended to read as an independent short story and would represent an era and age of the protagonist, whose actual age and name would change while their history and personality would not. These stories would then be stitched together and, ideally, the reader would have a much fuller understanding of the character and his personal journey to the man he would become. As I wrote the individual stories, I realised that the voice of his wife was compelling. She was responsible for sharing his troubled early adult years in book three but I knew her story was the one I needed to tell. I decided to strip away the other

stories and concentrate on her voice and experiences, which happened to include the protagonist from the original story as her husband, Matt. The novel I ended up with is very different. Instead of four perspectives to give us a more complete understanding of a character, we have just one, her own. She drip feeds us information about her life in the form of flashbacks, which may or may not be reliable. I wanted to understand her journey through the liminal space between the deep darkness of dysfunction and the light, however dim, of mental stability. My goal was to spotlight the brink between coping and an inability to cope, which I believe I have achieved, and I will continue to refine the story to further illuminate this threshold.

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