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Shrinking Violet

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A thesis + exegesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Creative Writing

This thesis consists of a full-length screenplay for a feature film. A summary of the screenplay is as follows:

Violet, a gay high-school graduate, yearns to leave her small town. She's been accepted at several big universities, while her best friend hasn't. When Cleo begs Violet not to leave, Violet stays. She reads about a bourgeois lesbian photographer in Wellington, Renee, and desires her 'perfect' life. Eventually, having enough of Cleo's ungrateful behaviour, Violet leaves for Wellington. She moves in with her artist aunt, along with flatmates, Jane and Luke. At a march for gay rights, Violet spots the photographer, Renee. Through a series of risky hijinks, in which she engineers their meeting, and lies about who she is, she enters Renee's life. Because Renee has told her she's not 'experienced' enough, she invents a relationship with her straight flatmate. Eventually Violet and Renee sleep together, and Violet soon finds that she has a half made-up baby-room in her house. Freaking out, she gets drunk and sleeps with Jane, dumping Renee over the phone. The next day the flatmates regret what they did, and Violet heads toward Renee's house- deciding she might be ready to have a child. When she gets there, Renee has her ex in the house- Violet's lecturer. Renee discovers that Violet was lying about her age, and by implication her life, and Luke discovers what happened with Jane. Violet goes back home, where she grieves the loss of her relationship, and failure of her mission. When she sees that Ben is now dating one of the 'preppy girls' from school, she befriends Cleo again. She asks her mother to forgive her and comes out as gay.

The Thesis is framed by an Exegesis which is a 6000-word essay on the subject of: (a) the genre of the Thesis (b) the development process from synopsis to second draft

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Attestation of Authorship

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 acknowledgements), 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.



Exegesis: Shrinking Violet

Abigail Johnson

2018

The following exegesis will discuss the creation process of my thesis, a feature film-length script, entitled *Shrinking Violet*. The exegesis will be split into two parts. Part One will analyse the genre of the work. Part Two will address the construction process of my individual work.

Part One: Genre Analysis

In this section I will analyse the genre of my thesis, *Shrinking Violet*, with an aim to demonstrate understanding of the set of expectations the genre's audience brings. The case will be made that the genre is recognized by the industry. I will explore the history of the genre and contrast the genre's contemporary expectations. I will finish by explaining how my work fulfils these expectations, while providing a fresh perspective.

Genre Definition

The genre of my thesis, *Shrinking Violet*, is best categorised as 'Indie Drama/Romance'. Recent examples of the genre include *The Big Sick* (Emily V. Jordan & Kumail Nanjiani, 2017), and TV show *Master of None* (Aziz Ansari & Alan Yang, 2015)

My script is also a heavily queer narrative, which I will touch on. A recent example of a 'Queer Romantic Drama' includes *Call Me by Your Name* (James Ivory, 2017).

In the Industry

One of the most critically lauded films of 2017 has been Michael Showalter's independently-financed romantic drama, *The Big Sick*. Written by real-life couple Kumail Nanjiani, and Emily V. Gordan, based on their own courtship, the film has scored an impressive 98% on review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes, indicating universal praise, and has been credited with "revitaliz(ing) the often moribund romantic comedy subgenre with a true story of love, death and the everyday comedy of being a 21st century American." (Dargis, 2017). It has since been nominated by the 2018 Academy Awards for 'Best Original Screenplay'. And perhaps more noteworthy than the critical praise is the film's financial success. On a budget of NZD \$6.9 million, the film has amassed a worldwide gross of NZD \$67.5 million- making it one of the highest-grossing independent films of 2017. After premiering at Sundance Film Festival, the film was acquired by Amazon Studios for NZD \$16.5 million. It also screened at film festival South by South West, where it won the *Festival Favourite Audience Award*.

Call Me by Your Name, in turn, is a more serious romantic drama, revolving around the first queer experience, and first love, of a 17-year-old male. It has been described as a “full-hearted romantic masterpiece.” (Richards, 2017.) On an NZD 4.8-million-dollar budget, the film has returned a \$34 million-dollar box office, and has received universal praise. The film was distributed in the US by Sony Pictures Classics. Leaning into the film’s queer theme, Sony Pictures Classics released a short teaser, titled “Dance Party” on ‘National Coming out Day’. The film has since been nominated for four Academy Awards, including Best Picture, and Best Adapted Screenplay.

While the filmic landscape for the New Zealand-made romantic drama does at first glance appear smaller than overseas, one shouldn’t write off the genre, or its New Zealand audience too quickly. TVNZ web series *Auckland Love* is a recent example of the New Zealand romantic comedy/drama in episodic format. Relevant to my own work, which focuses on a queer female narrative, the series also features a lesbian character as co-lead, and follows her romantic, and sexual, pursuits. The show, which produced its first season as a Youtube-based web series, was picked up by TVNZ, who renewed the series for two more seasons. Three seasons of the show are now available on NZ content streaming site, TVNZ On Demand, with the most recent being released on September 8th, 2017. TVNZ describes the series as following; “The trials and tribulations of being a 20-something-female in Auckland, the hilarious highs, and those ridiculously familiar lows...”

History of the Genre

Romantic-drama films have been coming out of Hollywood since at least the 1930s, with films such as Victor Fleming’s *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and Michael Curtiz’s *Casablanca* (1942) credited as some of the genre’s earliest classics. The genre continues to create films of calibre today, with Luca Guadagnino’s *Call Me by Your Name* (Grierson, 2017), and Michael Showalter’s *The Big Sick* (Cohen, 2017) being hailed as modern-day ‘instant classics’. The marked differences between the romantic films of the 1930s versus those of today, however, are vast, and will be discussed in section 5.

While the romantic film appears to originate in the 1930s, the genre, and its conventions, can be traced back to Shakespeare’s plays, and perhaps even further. As put in *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, “These comedies have a pedigree that includes William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and Oscar Wilde.” (Grindon, 2011). J.M Everson notes in *Shakespeare for*

Screenwriters, that *The Taming of the Shrew* has become “a template for popular romances in Western culture.” (2013). He cites the conventions employed in the play, as being key signifiers of a typical romantic drama/comedy. I will lay out those key signifiers in section 4.

While romantic films are sometimes seen as unserious, light-hearted fare, Leger Grindon reminds that; “these films reward study because they deal with dramatic conflicts central to human experience.” (Grindon, 2011). And the sheer number of highly regarded romantic dramas- or films that deal with a romantic dalliance as their central thesis- that have gone on to win Best Picture at the Academy Awards (*Moonlight*- 2017, *Titanic*- 1998, *The English Patient*- 1996) should lay to rest any scepticism toward the genre.

By contrast, queer romantic films, that is; films dealing with the romantic entanglement of a pair of characters of the same gender, have a much thinner history. The first and only queer romantic film to win Best Picture at the Academy Awards was Barry Jenkin’s *Moonlight*- as recently as 2017. Said *Salon*; “The well-deserved win is a necessary step toward inclusion for an awards show that has struggled to treat queer art as having the same importance and relevance as its competition.” (Lang, 2017.) Prior to that, only five queer-themed films had been nominated in the category (*Dog Day Afternoon*, *The Hours*, *Capote*, *The Kids are Alright*, and *Milk*.)

While queer films have existed since as early as the 1919 (*Anders als die Anderen*- *Different from the Others*- a silent German film about homosexual life), the mainstreaming of the genre has only occurred recently. Nowadays, “stars, known to be straight, can ‘play gay’ without a stigma attached to it. Mainstreaming implies that the films intentionally address a ‘straight’, crossover audience.” (Mennel, 2012). Notable works of ‘mainstreamed’ queer film include Jonathan Demme’s *Philadelphia* (1993), Andy and Lana Wachowski’s *Bound* (1996), and Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain* (2005).

Brokeback Mountain is a particularly significant cornerstone in modern queer cinema. The Focus Features release, starring ‘A-list’ actors Heath Ledger, Jake Gyllenhaal, Michelle Williams, and Anne Hathaway made NZD \$245 million against a NZD \$19million dollar budget. According to Mennel (2012) “Lee’s highly successful film intervened in a public discourse about the self-understanding of the American nation and masculinity by rewriting the conventions of the Western.” The ground-breaking film controversially lost Best Picture to Paul Haggis’s *Crash*, after several members of the voting academy refused to watch it.

Said Oscar winner, and voting academy member, Ernest Borgnine; “If John Wayne were alive he’d be rolling over in his grave”. (Kinser, 2012.)

By contrast, the explicitly queer romantic drama *Call Me by Your Name* has attracted no such sentiment, having been nominated for four 2018 Academy Awards. Sebastian Lelio’s *A Fantastic Woman*- a drama centred around the life of a transgender woman- has also been nominated in the Best Foreign Language Film category in 2018- and has attracted no notable upset.

Key Signifiers

A ‘romantic drama’ is a film involving at least two characters who have romantic involvement with each other. Everson (2013) notes, “The end-goal of every romance is to bring the two characters together. Whether it’s suggested or explicitly shown, the audience needs to see the moment when the two characters unite.” This convention, while common in the romantic comedy, is often subverted in romantic dramas- such as *Blue Valentine* (2010), and *Titanic* (1998), and is often subverted in modern romantic comedies too, including (*500 Days of Summer* (2009), *Master of None* (2015-) and *La La Land* (2016).

In *Writing the Romantic Comedy*, Billy Mernit describes seven beats that romantic films share (2000).

- The Chemical Equation: Setup
- The Cute Meet: Catalyst
- A Sexy Complication: Turning Point
- The Hook: Midpoint
- Swivel: Second Turning Point
- Dark Moment: Crisis Climax

- Joyful Defeat: Resolution

Michael Hauge (2014) describes 6 categories of the romantic film, listing the most common category as '*Secrets and Lies*'; "...since almost all Hollywood romantic comedies are built on deception. The hero is lying to, or withholding information about, someone – usually the person she's falling for. When the secret is finally revealed or the lie exposed, it will split the lovers apart."

In section 2, History of the Genre, I cited *The Taming of the Shrew*, which has been called "a template for popular romances in Western culture" (Everson, 2013). In making the case Everson cites the 'friction' between the two leads, also referred to as a 'battle of the sexes'. He mentions the 'fun and games' engaged in by the leads, and ultimately, the resolution which brings the two characters together- all key conventions of a traditional rom-com. The Shakespearian play was remade as a late 90's film *10 Things I hate about You*. While the latter is slated as a direct retelling of the former, there are marked difference between the two. Scholars have noted the 'misogyny' in the original play, which sees the 'shrew', Katharina, 'tamed' (Costa, 2012). In the 1999 update, Katherina becomes Kat- a young feminist. By the end of the film she is not, in fact, 'tamed', but in love with her equal. *Bustle* credits the character as 'inspiring a generation of feminists' (Young, 2016). This significant shift from 'misogynistic' to 'feminist'- while keeping a majority of the structural plot points- marks a trend I will explore in Section 5. Everson also translates the Shakespearian line "The course of true love never did run smooth", from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to mean "nobody wants to watch a happy couple"- an allusion to the type of conflict necessary to create tension in this genre.

When Harry met Sally (1989) is considered a pivotal film of the romantic genre, and, while it employs many of the key romantic signifiers, the film is a noted 'genre-breaker'.

Screenwriter Nora Ephron, has said of the story; "I find that people are always trying to stick [external conflict] in to movies. And then you stick it in in the beginning and you have to keep sticking it in, and sticking it in. Because the minute you stick something into a movie it has to keep popping up. So, you've got this big, fake, subplot you didn't care about at all."

Video essayist Michael Tucker explains in *When Harry Met Sally- Breaking Genre*

Conventions; "A familiar storyline in love stories goes like this: Boy meets girl. They can't stand each other but are forced to spend time together. And in doing so fall in love."

However, in this screenplay, this is subverted. When the future love-interests meet, its true they can't stand each other, but go their separate ways for an entire decade. By not "forcing the characters to spend the whole movie together," the script "surprises the audience, and makes them curious about what comes next." (Tucker, 2017). As put by Robert McKee, a script; "must not only fulfil audience anticipations...but must lead their expectations to fresh, unexpected moments, or risk boring them." (1997.)

Contemporary Expectations

While many have pre-emptively declared the romantic film, in particular the romantic comedy, 'dead' (Seigel, 2013), the truth is, the romantic film is merely evolved. As illustrated in the viral MTV Youtube video '*If Famous Movie Romances Were Feminist*' (2016), most classic films of the genre appear, to a contemporary audience, dusty and 'problematic'. As put by the Washington Post "we now live in a thinkpiece era, and frankly, none of the wildly popular, cult status-like movies of the 1990s — otherwise known as the peak rom-com period — escape unscathed." Many familiar romantic comedy tropes- in particular ending by kissing, consummating, or marrying, are so ubiquitous they have become predictable and cliché. And more importantly, they don't reflect modern dating culture. Romantic films, whether they go by that name or not, are still thriving in the current market- they simply don't look like the genre as it was previously known.

Aziz Ansari's runaway Netflix hit *Master of None* is a notable example of the modern, and successful, approach to episodic romantic writing. The series follows Aziz as *Dev* in his search for love. The pilot, in direct contrast to traditional conventions, opens with the protagonist engaging in a one-night-stand with his future love interest. Following an awkward night together, the romantic interests don't then encounter each other for another three episodes. Eventually the couple do develop a relationship, which blossoms and complicates over the course of the season, however, in the final episode, the couple breaks up. The show has earned a rarely-achieved 100% approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes, and The New York Times, described the series as "the year's best comedy straight out of the gate [...] an adorable but mature rom-com." (Poniewozik, 2015).

Master of None, shares many a convention with the biggest indie-romantic drama of 2017 *The Big Sick*, not least that the male leads in both are Indian-American. The race of the characters, and the ‘interracial-ness’ of the central relationships are not ignored in their respective works but are deeply explored- to the point where the conflict, or some of the conflict, within these storylines are both due to the character’s race. This is not to say that ‘race’ or ‘interracial dating’ are forthcoming trends in the genre, but that, ‘issues’ and types of conflict that were once reserved for ‘indie’ films, have now joined the mainstream. Where deeper, and more complex, human issues were once the terrain of only low-budget, ‘alternative’ films, modern audiences expect to see relationships onscreen that reflect the complicated realities of life. “While it hasn’t entirely abandoned certain tropes, more often than not, the modern rom-com deconstructs them. In other words, a type of storytelling that once remained unsubverted is now constantly being subverted.” (Chaney, 2017.)

How my screenplay fulfils those expectations

At it’s core, my thesis is a romantic drama- though this is complicated by its being a *queer* romantic drama. As I have explained above, the complication of ‘true-life issue’ is an expectation that audiences bring to modern romantic film. Despite this, the piece still employs many of the conventional tropes of the genre. The protagonist, *Violet*, is a young woman who, desires another, seemingly unattainable, character. The fact the two characters are the same gender, however, is not the issue that causes their romance to be denied- it is their age differences. The script uses the same structural archetypes of the romantic film, while allowing the queerness of the characters, and their age differences, to complicate the journey. The love interest, Renee, initially denies Violet a relationship. By denying the protagonist her goal, Renee is simultaneously love interest and an antagonistic force. This is a common trope among romantic films. The ‘break-up’- usually a pivotal scene among romantic films, happens over a quick, unheard, drunken phone-call- in which we only see one side. The true ‘loss of everything’ moment comes later, in scene 123, wherein Renee learns about Violet’s deceptions.

How my choice of genre affects the characterisation of the script

While it is necessary in a modern romantic comedy to subvert many of the traditional genre conventions, a screenplay must also adhere much of the same archetypes. Because of this, many of the familiar romantic conventions are present in my work. At scene 50, the two love interests engage in their 'meet-cute'. This meeting, however, has been engineered- and then improvised- by Violet, who desperately wants to engage with the desirable Renee. It can be read that Violet is informed by the canon of romantic films when she sets up this meet-cute. She sets up a meeting akin to convention of the genre- and when this goes wrong she must think on her feet.

Violet engages in *Secrets and Lies*, outlined by Michael Hauge (2014) as one of the most common style of conflict employed in the romantic genre. In my script, Violet falls in love with Renee, who tells Violet she is too young and inexperienced. This leads Violet to *deceive* Renee, by pretending to date her straight flatmate Jane- in a bid to prove her experience. Because the 'core romance' must be the driving motivation behind a character's behaviour, Violet is too blinded by her desire for Renee to notice that she is creating problems for other characters, or to stop from creating further problems for herself.

How my screenplay provides a fresh perspective

As explained above, for a romantic film or television series to succeed in 2018 and beyond, the work *must* subvert the genre's traditional conventions. Audiences are no longer interested in the genre if they find it to be predictable or misogynistic. Perhaps the most obvious convention my thesis subverts, is the genre's historic heteronormativity. In my work, the romance occurs between two women characters- and neither of these characters are shown to have had 'straight' relationships in the past. Steeped in queer iconography, the piece is not subtle about its queerness- using the words 'lesbian', 'bisexual', in dialogue.

It is not enough, however, to write a traditional romance, that only switches the core relationship from straight to gay. This is evidenced by critical and commercial failure *Jenny's Wedding* (2015), starring reigning rom-com queen Kathrine Heigl (*Knocked Up*, *27 Dresses*) as a lesbian. The New York Times noted; "...one of the many irritants in this trite, well-intentioned lecture on tolerance: The audience is always several moves ahead of the script." (Catsoulis, 2015). The 'twist' of being gay is simply not a big enough twist if it sits inside a predictable script.

My thesis also quite obviously subverts the so-called mandatory 'happy ending' - in which the romantic interests end up together. Instead, the irrevocable difference- their ages- cannot be surmounted, and thus, the pair cannot, and do not, get their 'happily ever after'.

Part Two: My Script

In this section I will reflect on the intentions and decisions I made in constructing the dramatic narrative of my script. I will outline the story structure, and elaborate on key turning points, and explore the core dramatic conflict. I will finish by explaining why I wished to create this piece, and what I hope to have achieved.

Synopsis

What happens in the story

Violet, a gay high-school graduate, yearns to leave her small town. She's been accepted at several big universities, while bestie Cleo has not. When Cleo begs Violet not to leave, Violet, quietly disappointed, stays. She reads about a bourgeois lesbian photographer in Wellington, Renee, and desires her 'perfect' life. Cleo's hooking up with Ben and ignores Violet when he's around. Eventually Violet has enough of Cleo's behaviour, and they bust up. Violet moves to Wellington to study.

She moves in with her artist aunt, along with flatmates, Jane and Luke. At a march for gay rights, Violet spots the photographer, Renee. Through a series of risky hijinks, in which she engineers their meeting, and lies completely about who she is, Violet ends up in Renee's life- though Renee tells her they can only be friends.

Renee says she doesn't want to be Violet's introduction to 'life'. Violet interprets that she needs to prove she's experienced, so she pretends Jane is her casual, non-monogamous 'girlfriend'. Luke becomes jealous of Violet's seeming interest in his girlfriend, but Violet reassures Jane that she doesn't like her that way. This, in-turn, makes Jane insecure.

Eventually Violet and Renee sleep together, and Violet soon finds that she has a half made-up baby-room in her house. Freaking out, she gets drunk and sleeps with Jane, dumping Renee over the phone. The next day the flatmates regret what they did, and Violet heads toward Renee's house- deciding she might be ready to have a child. When she gets there, Renee has

her ex in the house- Violet's lecturer. Renee discovers that Violet was lying about her age, and by implication her life, and Luke discovers what happened with Jane. It all comes to a screeching-fever pitch, which is only dismantled when Aunt Trish breaks up the scene, with news about Violet's friend.

Violet goes back home, under the guise of seeing her troubled friend. There she grieves the loss of her relationship, and failure of her mission. When she sees that Ben is now dating one of the 'preppy girls' from school, she befriends Cleo again. In the end, she decides she must live truthfully. She asks her mother to forgive her and comes out as gay.

What the story is about

This story is about role-playing and identity. Violet only becomes her true self right at the end of the piece. Throughout she constantly wears different personas and attempts to outrun her age. The dramatic question at the heart of the story is *can she get away with it?* And, of course, she cannot. Her deceptions mount, and eventually catch up to her, to the point where she loses everything. It is only at the end, when she is essentially back to story square one, that she realises she cannot deceive her way through life, and she becomes her true self.

Character

Stakes

The main line in the script is the relationship line, though with several people: Violet and Cleo, Violet and her mother, and Violet and Renee- with several other small relationship lines in the mix also. Ultimately, of course, the key relationship is between Violet and herself, concerning 'who she truly is', or the 'inner arc' line- though this is shown externally through the relationship line. Violet displays a pattern of sacrificing her identity for other people- particularly love interests. In the first act she sacrifices her ambitions for Cleo. In the second she sacrifices the entirety of who she is for Renee.

- (i) Emotionally at stake for Violet is her relationship with Renee. She stakes her life on pursuing the relationship- changing who she is entirely, and mounting lie after lie, under a misguided belief that a relationship with this

‘perfect’ woman will bring her happiness. Also, because of how she has engineered this relationship, exposure is at stake. The danger of Renee discovering the truth is present in every moment, and informs everything they do together. Every moment they share- even those which are joyful- are coloured by the untruths Violet has told to get there.

- (ii) Violet completely changes who she is in order to pursue Renee. From superficial visual elements, the way she presents in her clothing and grooming, to deeper deceptions regarding her identity. She lies about her age, plagiarises her aunt’s occupation, and lies about having a casual relationship with her straight flatmate. Even the pair’s ‘meet-cute’- a mainstay in the romantic genre, is entirely contrived by Violet, to the point where she purposefully causes Renee harm (slashes her tyres) to engineer a ‘saviour’ moment.
- (iii) From the moment Violet first implements her strategy to ensnare Renee, nothing goes according to plan. As it wouldn’t. At eighteen Violet is still a child in many ways- and the plans she makes lack forethought. When the set-up doesn’t result in a connection as planned, Violet raises the stakes immediately by slashing Renee’s tyres. From this point onward, she must keep lying. When Renee asks how Violet affords an expensive bottle of wine, Violet lies about her age, and claims her aunt’s occupation. From this untruth many more untruths unravel, until it all comes to a head, when they are exposed.

Arc

The arc Violet takes is from naïve to experienced, though she gets there by acting incredibly child-like- while, simultaneously, attempting to appear grown-up. By the end of the script she has understood that she cannot outrun her age- she cannot cheat life. She realises that she must be truthful about who she is- in particular to her family. In the first act of the script Violet is ‘herself’ in many ways, but she is sacrificing who she is to appease her friend, and hiding her ambitions, desires, and sexual orientation from people. In the second act she not herself in any way. And by the final act, she has gotten to her ‘true self’.

Core

The core struggle that Violet wrestles with is a desire to escape adolescence. She wishes to live a particular, idealised, version of life, that she sees modelled by Renee- though she only sees one side of Renee's story. She doesn't understand that Renee also has unfulfilled desires (to be a mother) because she doesn't understand that adulthood comes with its own difficulties.

Any person can relate to the desire to escape the mundanity of adolescence, for the seeming ease and freedom of adulthood. And, of course, every person must learn life-stages cannot be jumped. Each stage initiates one for the next, and they must be experienced as they come.

Story Structure

Key Turning-Points

The main story line in the script is the relationship line, in which Violet takes actions in pursuit of a life with Renee. She takes similar, sacrificial, actions in Act One with Cleo. Key turning points on the Violet-Renee relationship line include:

1. Violet sets up a fake 'photography consultation' with Renee, in order to 'meet' her.
2. The set-up fails, so Violet slashes her tyres, in order to offer Renee a car-ride.
3. Violet attends a dinner at Renee's house, where, to fit in, she lies about her age and occupation.
4. Violet tries to kiss Renee.

5. Rebuffed by Renee for her apparent inexperience, Violet initiates a 'fake relationship' with Jane, to prove herself.

This goes on, each lie building upon the last, until Violet is well out of her depth.

- (i) In the first key turning point, the false consultation, Violet begins the irrevocable journey of ensnaring Renee's attention under false pretences. Once she has made this step she cannot go back- she has commenced on the path.
In the second turning point, Violet learns that things will not go easily, and she must take more extreme measures to entangle herself in Renee's life. While the first step was planned, the second is improvised. She takes the extreme move of slashing Renee's tyres. Now she is in deep, and must lie (obviously) about what happened.
Entering Renee's life quickly from this point, Violet is forced to invent on the fly. When asked for her age and occupation she gives the answers she believes will impress. Once given though, she cannot take them back- and each continual action must continue this charade.
In the fourth key turning point, Violet makes her true intentions known by trying to kiss Renee. Her desire for Renee is now known to Renee. This irrevocably changes their relationship dynamic. Where there was previously plausible deniability in Violet's intentions, now her desires are clear.
In the fifth key turning point that I have named, Violet ropes other people into her charade, unbeknownst to them. By taking this step Violet expands her deception exponentially- causing Luke to be suspicious, and Jane to be emotionally manipulated, all while adding another lie to the tapestry for Violet to stay on top of.
Each of these mounting lies escalate the tension, and create further risk of exposure, even as they advance Violet's relationship with Renee.
- (ii) With each key turning point Violet becomes less herself. The deeper she continues with her lies, the further she is over her head. Each beat affects her relationship to herself and the people around her. Even as she makes

progress on the relationship line, she will feel more and more distant from her true self. She loses her sense of humour and originality, and even as she gets closer to her goal, feels more and more like a fraud.

- (iii) At each turning point the audience should feel increasing anxiety for the character. As she escalates the level of risk, the audience should experience the accompanying worry. The audience should also miss the character's nature, as it was shown in the first act. In this act, though she was troubled, she was comfortable enough to 'display her personality'. The further she becomes a 'fish out of water' in the second act, the less the audience sees of this personality. This should escalate the tension of each turning point, as the audience should hope to see her return, while simultaneously should not want her to fail on mission. The audience should feel relief when the character's original traits make their return, in the final act.

Dramatic Question

The dramatic question set up in the script is *will this character be exposed?* Or, reversely, *will she get away with it?* Will she be able to fool Renee into believing these falsehoods, and entering a romantic relationship?

Because the script begins with a prologue, within a different setting, the set up of the central dramatic question takes place at the beginning of Act Two. This happens when Violet begins explicitly changing her presentation. At this beat, a symbolic change occurs. The character begins the journey of altering who she is, to fit in with Renee. The concrete change occurs when Violet and Renee meet at the 'fake consultation'. It is here that Violet begins explicitly lying. From this point onward, the audience should worry about the character 'getting away with it'.

The question is answered overtly by scene 123 (front lawn confrontation). It is here where Violet's lies are exposed, her age catches up to her, and the harm she has caused other people is felt.

Core Conflict

The core conflict in the Violet-Renee relationship line is the pair's age difference. While the number of years between them is only fourteen, not unheard of, it is the difference in life-stages that causes the pair true hindrance. It is this difference in life-stages, juxtaposed with Violet's desire to be with Renee, that propels the central conflict of the film, and embarks Violet on her journey to 'outrun her age'. This line escalates quickly and dramatically as Violet, hindered by her naivete, and lack of forethought, comes up with several lies on the fly- lies which come back to haunt her when she cannot corroborate them.

The core conflict in the Violet-Cleo relationship line is a difference in values. Despite being best friends, Cleo takes advantage of Violet's love. Cleo asks Violet to sacrifice her ambitions, while placing her pursuit of men on a higher pedestal than their friendship. It's also apparent that Cleo has experimented with Violet sexually, making no regard for the emotional consequences of these actions. This takes its first major escalation when Cleo begs Violet not to pursue her dreams. The major choice Violet faces in Act One is between a wonderful friendship- that grows disappointing, or her ambitions. When she finally chooses to pursue her ambitions, the audience should be glad for the decision. It is only once Cleo has her heart broken by Ben that Violet can forgive Cleo and begin mending their friendship.

The core conflict in the 'deception' action line is that Violet's life is not what she claims it to be. Her life as it is, and as she claims it to be, do not match up. This causes perhaps the most explicit conflict within the script. The three key lies she tell regard; her age, her occupation, and her casual 'relationship' with Jane. Because all of these are explicitly untrue, Violet constantly risks exposure, and comes up against problems. As she continues on this line the tension that she will be found out escalates, until, inevitably, she is.

Ending

In the end Violet turns back to her hometown- ostensibly under the guise of seeing her old friend Sally, who has attempted suicide. Once there, though, she grieves the loss of her relationship with Renee, and the failure of her life in Wellington.

It is during this time that she finally reads a book that she has claimed to have read- a symbolic action wherein she embarks on 'doing' things, as opposed to pretending to have done them. While incubating, she ignores her mother and Cleo. It is only after she sees Cleo

has also had her heart broken, and she learns that her mother gave up a promotion for her, that she realises she must mend these relationships, and come out to her mother.

The decision moment is seen when Violet, seeing Ben is now with Rachel, forgives Cleo. The ultimate moment of change, however, is seen when she finally initiates a conversation with her mother- the final scene of the script. Up until this point she has never driven the dialogue with her mother- she has only, typical of adolescence, run away from it. Now she demonstrates a true marker of growth.

The key insight that Violet has by the end is that she cannot 'roleplay' through her life. She must be who she is. This is shown explicitly, as she begins the process of coming out to her mother.

Theme

Intention

My principal intention in writing this story was to create a queer female narrative that did not revolve around the 'coming out' process, or a character grappling with their sexual orientation. I did not want to tell a story where the character's sexuality provided the 'twist', or the catalyst to action. My intention was to write a piece that could also work, almost beat for beat, if the central couple were switched to a heterosexual pairing. The protagonist's actions are informed by her youth and her unique personality, not by her sexual orientation.

Having said this, I also wanted to create a piece that was steeped in queer iconography. In particular I wanted to use the words 'lesbian' and 'bisexual' in dialogue.

I also wanted to surround the protagonist with an abundance of female characters, of varied ages, some straight, several queer, and some whose sexuality is never stated. While many of the most critically acclaimed queer films are heavily male driven (*Brokeback Mountain*, *Moonlight*, *Call Me by Your Name*) and many female driven queer films still use a strong cast of men (*Carol*, *The Kids are Alright*) my intention was to show a person's reality consisting of mostly women. My experience of the world involves knowing and interacting with innumerable women, and I generally interact with fewer men than women in my day-to-day life- and yet almost never see this reality reflected in cinema. My intention was to right this

omission, however, to only do so in an organic way- never wishing to change the gender of a character if it made sense for them to be male.

The audience

While the LGBT+ community are a key audience for queer stories, the best queer films and media succeed in being universally relatable. *Call Me by Your Name* tells the story of first love. *Moonlight* tells a story of poverty, among other themes. My intention with this piece was to create a universally relatable story of *adolescence*. To capture the desire to move forward with one's life- and using all manner of deception to get there. While the audience may not relate to the protagonist's actions, they should be able to understand the anticipation from which they stem. The key takeaway should be that life is un-cheatable.

Key image

I have intentionally made Violet's journey quite visual. This is particularly noticeable in the way she presents herself- she dramatically changes outwardly, in attempt to change inwardly. However, the key takeaway image is in scene 123, when Violet, hungover and paralysed, is on the front lawn- unable to get up. It is here that all the people she has hurt hover above her, question her, and essentially 'tell her off'. Despite what she wears or says, she is relegated to child. It is here that her age catches up with her. It is here that she officially 'loses everything'. And it is from here that her lesson will be learnt.

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