



Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment coversheet & feedback form

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For completion by the student:		
Student Name: Prithi Sabrina Nathan Shukla		
Module code: HPEN7018 Module title: – Writing Workshop: Researching and Writing to a Single Focus – Assessment 2 - Critical Reflection	Student ID number: 1708142	Educational support needs: Yes/No
Module tutor: Jeni Williams Rosalind Hudis Assignment due date: 02 nd August 2021		
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Writing Workshop: Researching and Writing to a Single Focus

HPEN7018

Assessment 2

Critical Reflection

The module *Writing Workshop: Researching and Writing to a Single Focus* has empowered me to uncover and cultivate essential strategies for my creative work. The lectures have provided invaluable insight into the benefits of combining research with the aesthetic use of language. Both these fundamental components have further refined my style as a writer. The technical elements, creative approaches, and in-depth exploration required for writing fiction have shaped my short story *Tangled Strands*.

In the narrative, Astra, a young French hairdresser, grapples with her conscience over the loss of her sister and a secret affair she regrets. As she is now the legal guardian of her orphaned niece Bella, she is determined to do all she can to provide a happy life for the child. Despite her husband's contempt for the vulnerable ten-year-old, Astra resolves to keep her promise to herself and her sister Celia. The story has been crafted around a salon in the fictional French village of Rochelle, located in the countryside, not far from Paris.¹

This essay will critically reflect, explore, and analyse the research methodologies and writing techniques employed to write my short story. The paper will examine the provenance of this idea, the writerly research, the way the writing is crafted, the editing and reviewing process, and how I wish to apply this expertise in the future.

Idea Provenance

Tangled Strands is an imaginative synthesis of creative ideas that evolved from the selected topic of 'Hair'. The subject was chosen for its universal human application and layers of meaning, entwining the fibres of personal and everyday narrative. The salon and other aspects such as pins, wigs, ribbons, and styles associated with the element of hair, weave their way through the essence of the unfolding content. These features unify the continual

¹ Prithi Shukla, *HPEN7018 Assessment 1* (MA Unpublished MA Assessment, UWTSD Lampeter, 2021), pp. 1-22.

sequence of events and will be examined as the essay progresses. Hair has many connotations and emotional connections, which have invoked comfort, atmosphere and ideas of death and life within the narrative. For example, Bella's extensions made her happy, the act of creating wigs equipped Astra with a distraction from her problems and Celia's salon offered hope.² These features add to the physical and emotional profiles of the characters. They provide a fruitful base for my use of suspense and psychological dilemma, set within complex tangled family relationships. After determining a sketch of the storyline, the anticipated audience, and a primary purpose for the composition, I was able to decide on my detailed research.

Writerly Research

The topic 'hair' was selected after a two-staged process of choosing a promising subject and then researching it to aid and clarify my creative thinking. This produced ideas like keywords such as 'salon' and 'coiffure' that could be pursued through multiple research avenues. A spectrum of sources both fiction and non-fiction supplied me with the necessary writer's raw material. The investigation was accomplished through both scholarly research and informal reading, studying comparable literature for reference. Research from a diverse range of recommended and inspirational authors will be discussed throughout this paper.

Dymphna Callery's advice on background research helped me focus on the areas associated with geographical, historical, and procedural aspects related to the story.³ Procedural here pertains to certain individual accounts and interviews. Nicola Boyd, introduced in the lectures, similarly acknowledges textual data and procedural examination. Her reflection on qualitative research contributed to identifying the parameters of my study.⁴ Furthermore, she supports Flick's suggestions on the necessity of ethnography. His proposals to research people in their own environment and his recommendations to examine text content, 'images, film, and music' were diligently applied.⁵

² Shukla, *HPEN7018: Assessment 1*, p. 5, para 9, p. 11, para 33, p. 22, para 56.

³ Dymphna Callery, 'Writing from Research' in the *Writer's Workbook*, ed. by Jenny Newman, Edmund Cusick and Aileen La Tourette (London: Arnold, 2000), pp. 154-161.

⁴ Nicola Boyd, 'A Creative Writing Research Methodology: new directions, Strange loops and tornados', *AAWP*, March 2015 < <https://www.aawp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Boyd.pdf> > [accessed 18 October 2020], p. 3.

⁵ Nicola Boyd, 'A Creative Writing Research Methodology: new directions, Strange loops and tornados', *AAWP*, March 2015 < <https://www.aawp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Boyd.pdf> > [accessed 18 October 2020], p. 3.

After thoughtful consideration, the two essential features of place and time necessary for the backstory were explored. The geographical location of France and the period of present-day were chosen. To bring the village of Rochelle onto the page, topographical and historical guides, travel books, magazines, maps of villages and online sites were used.⁶ *Tangled Strands* draws on old-world historic quaintness, mingled with imagery of more modern country life. The narrow-cobbled rues, terraced houses, the 'confiserie', the chateau on top of the hill and the candy-striped pole outside the barber's shop, are typical representative features used to imbue a sense of location.⁷ These textual dimensions of place, presented through the characters' point of view, aim to transport the reader into my three-dimensional French village landscape.

Ethnographic study provided substantial information on the current way of life in rural France. Knowledge was obtained through anecdotal articles, interviews on television, blogs, and books. *Rural Writing* edited by Mauricette Fournier revealed the reconstruction of community and family life in the country that has shaped the writings of contemporary French Literary Fiction.⁸ Jason Burke's article and Annie Jouan-Westlund's chapter in *Rural Writing* on Pierre Jourde's *Pays Perdu*, a story about the inhabitants of a French village influenced my comprehension of village mentality.⁹ Ethnographic research selected from *Shaping Modern Time in Rural France* highlighted social structure, customs, and habits embedded in the Aveyronnais community.¹⁰ Richard Cole's idyllic drawings of the village of St Geoire-en-Valdine with its streets, inhabitants and their associated narratives catalysed my imagination

⁶ Helen Adedotun and Samuel Wythe, ed. *The Most Beautiful Villages of France* (Paris: Flammarion, 2019), pp. 9, 13-14, 24, 29, 35., France This Way, *Most Beautiful Villages of France* <<https://www.francethisway.com/most-beautiful-villages.php>> [accessed 11 November2020]., David Abram, *The Rough Guide to France* (Rough Guides, 2003), pp. ii-iii, 1221-1278., James Anderson and M. Sheridan Lea, *France 1001 Sights: An Archaeological and Historical Guide* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2002).

⁷ Shukla, *HPEN7018: Assessment 1*, p. 7, para 19, 21, p. 7, para 17, p. 2, para 2.

⁸ Marina Marengo, 'From the Rural Terroir to the Neorural Novel: The Contradictions and Complementarities between Popular and High Literature in Contemporary France', in *Rural Writing: Geographical Imaginary and expression of a New Regionality*, ed. by Mauricette Fournier (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), pp. 14-27., Antoine Marty and Mauricette Fournier, 'From *La Montagne* by Jean Ferrat to the Website of the Regional National Park of the Mounts of Ardèche (France): Geographical Imaginary and Development of a New Territoriality in the Ardèche Mountains' in *Rural Writing*, pp. 98 -113 (102, 108-109).

⁹ Jason Burke, 'Life, death...and cassis. Inside the village 'hell' that is gripping France' in *The Guardian*, 24 June 2007 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jun/24/books.france>> [accessed 11 November2020]., Annie Jouan-Westlund, 'Pierre Jourde's *Pays perdu*: Elegy or Betrayal?', in *Rural Writing*, pp. 113-129.

¹⁰ Susan Carol Rogers, *Modern Time in Rural France: The Transformation and Reproduction of An Aveyronnais Community* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 192-211.

with scenes and characters.¹¹ In *Tangled Strands*, the village folk's voices, the characters' sentiments and their behaviour all combine to produce a cultural framework. These portray a sense of day-to-day life that governs their activities and the complex fabric of values. Astra's fear of village gossip, Madame Badeaux's inquisitive nature, and Max's village ties are some examples.¹²

Researching the topic of hair in literature furnished me with thought-provoking material. The observations prompted an awareness associated with both hair and gender in writing, and this enabled me to develop characters that emphasise current attitudes. Galia Ofek's analysis on the representation of hair in Victorian literature, demonstrated that authors such as Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens deployed hair as a signifier of a person's sex, using the trope to mark female behaviour and the power relations between the genders.¹³ Her study provided an insight into how this element has been poignantly employed in fictional narratives to project women as the weaker sex, controlled by men. She inspired me to apply a more modern approach, as distinct from Dickens' and Hardy's culturally dated use of hair as an emblematic tool. In *Tangled Strands*, Astra specifically breaks the traditional norms of hairdressing in a conservative French village by opening her salon to both men and women. Ofek asserts that Charles Dickens applied the 'Rapunzel' imagery of hair in *Dombey and Son* to Florence's hair to depict youth and beauty.¹⁴ This conventional symbolism has been inverted in my short story. In the narrative, Astra styles Mrs Badeaux's hair into a stylish 'new bob' and remarks "'long hair ages you.'"¹⁵

Hair is a cultural signifier embodying global traditions and cultural beliefs. *The Encyclopaedia of Hair: A Cultural History*, journals, blogs, and books expanded my awareness of this topic.¹⁶ Researching these cultural associations provided a rich vein of material. The Tibetan mantra ribbon embroidered with hair, a Japanese chignon pin and the Egyptian

¹¹ Richard Cole, *Portrait of A French Village* (London: Coeur de Lion Press, 2012), pp. 1-74.

¹² Shukla, *HPEN7018 Assessment 1*, p. 8, para 23, p. 8, para 23, p. 9, para 27.

¹³ Galia Ofek, 'Thomas Hardy's Morphology: Hair Formation in Scientific and Fictional Narratives', *DQR Studies in Literature*, 47 (2011) pp. 291-311 (291).

¹⁴ Galia Ofek, "'Tie Her Up By The Hair": Dickens's Retelling Of The Medusa And Rapunzel Myths', *Dickens Quarterly*, 20.3 (2003), pp.184-185 (185).

¹⁵ Shukla, *HPEN7018 Assessment 1*, p. 8, para 23.

¹⁶ Victoria Sherrow, *The Encyclopaedia of Hair: A Cultural History* (London: Greenwood Press, 2006), pp. 3, 5., Allison Lowery, *Historical Wig Styling: Ancient Egypt to the 1830s* (Burlington: Focal Press, 2013), pp. 49-53., Sandra Buckley, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Japanese Culture* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 32, 182.

beaded hairpiece are some examples of this bounty.¹⁷ Each of these objects reflect mood and memory, to inform relationships. For example, the backstory associated with the Japanese hairpin creates an ambience of family togetherness.¹⁸ This decorative accessory is a turning point within the narrative as it prompts Bella to reconnect with her aunt.¹⁹

Crafting the Writing

Tangled Strands employs both literary and scholarly techniques. The critical elements of research, stylistic and storytelling approaches, personal memories and experiences, and use of the narrator's voice helped bring an imaginary world to life.

Throughout the writing process a digital journal was kept for recording creative ideas, vocabulary, a bibliography of readings, character profiles, cultural narrative, images, and meanings associated with hair. This practice provided a reservoir of factual and imaginative material. The organised approach inspired fresh ideas.

Reading from the perspective of a writer, short story features such as genre, textual context and narrative voice have influenced my style. *Tangled Strands* is literary fiction; the story is driven by character rather than plot. The village way of life and landscape of rural France were inspired by Joanne Harris' *Chocolat* and Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence*.²⁰ *Dancing Girl*, Margaret's Atwood's collection of short stories on people with complicated liaisons, influenced Astra's complex relationships.²¹ The author's views on patriarchal society shaped the characters of Pierre and Max, who are both self-obsessed men with little regard for women.

Researching creative writing approaches enabled me to apply the essential elements of narrative angle, structure, character, theme, plot, and dialogue. Books, websites, blogs, articles, and journals, as discussed below, were explored. These techniques and processes shaped my writing.

¹⁷ Shukla, *HPEN7018 Assessment 1*, p. 6 para 16, p. 2, para 5, p. 11, para 33.

¹⁸ Shukla, *HPEN7018 Assessment 1*, p. 2 para 5.

¹⁹ Shukla, *HPEN7018 Assessment 1*, p. 2-3 para 5, p. 4, para 9.

²⁰ Joanne Harris, *Chocolat* (London: Black swan, 2007), pp. 11-315, Peter Mayle, *A year in Provenance* (New York, Vintage, 1991) pp. 3-220.

²¹ Margaret Attwood, *Dancing Girls* (London: Vintage Books, 1996), pp. 32-51, 101-117.

Tangled Strands depicts a linear chronology of events advocated by Vladímir Propp in his book *Morphology of the Folk Tale*.²² For example, Astra's custody over her niece led to Astra keeping her infidelity a secret, but Max's arrival at Rochelle exposes his despicable character, her affair, and her husband Pierre's misogynistic ways. This culminates in her leaving with Bella for a new life in Paris.²³ Adhering to Florence Goyet's guidance, my narrative focuses on one 'variable' to maintain the brevity of the short story.²⁴ Astra's single goal throughout the narrative is to secure Bella's happiness despite the personal cost.²⁵

Charles R. Barret's book on the art of writing short stories influenced structure, character development, form, and point of view.²⁶ Similarly, these same essential elements promoted by John Gardner shaped *Tangled Strands*.²⁷ Observing their advice, the reader is transported straight into the story from the beginning with the engaging opening line "'You have beautiful hair, Bella.'"²⁸ This character-driven story, told in both third person limited and third person omniscient, opens with Astra's point of view about Bella, immediately followed by Bella revealing her internal feelings. This simultaneous disclosure creates active characters and instantaneously connects the reader with both the protagonist and Bella.

The pace, flow and rhythm of the text is maintained through short and long sentences. Brevity is used as a tool to promote curiosity and tension. Standalone words such as 'Silent' and short lines like 'She fizzes' are some examples.²⁹ The use of direct language in minimalist style was influenced by Raymond Carver's short stories and Amy Hempel's book *Sing to It*.³⁰ The use of present tense creates a feeling of immediacy.

²² Vladímir Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, ed. by Louis Wagner 2nd edn. (Austin: University of Texas, 1968), pp. 22-23, 79-83, 93-99.

²³ Shukla, *HPEN7018 Assessment 1*, p. 6, para 14-15, p. 9, para 24, p.7, para 18, p. 21, para 49, p. 22, para 56.

²⁴ Florence Goyet, *The Classic Short Story 1870-1925: Theory of a Genre*, (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2014), pp. 68-69.

²⁵ Shukla, *HPEN7018 Assessment 1*, p. 5, para 11, p.17, para 45.

²⁶ Charles Raymond Barrett, 'A Practical Treatise on the Art of the Short Story' *Project Gutenberg's Short Story Writing*, 06 February 2007 < <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/20526/20526-h/20526-h.htm> > [accessed 11 November 2020], pp. 119-208.

²⁷ John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), pp. 17-18, 20-30, 46, 77, 87-89, 155-157, 187.

²⁸ Shukla, *HPEN7018 Assessment 1*, p. 1, para 1.

²⁹ Shukla, *HPEN7018 Assessment 1*, p1. para 2, p 9. para 26.

³⁰ Amy Hempel, *Sing to It* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2019), pp. 5-140.

Gardner's views on the chronological development of a character catalysed this element in *Astra*.³¹ The protagonist first struggles with her dilemmas, but then through her determination, decisions and actions finally overcomes her internal conflict and flaws. For example, evident strength of character replaces initial weakness as *Astra* stands up for herself against Max's blackmail and is able to leave an unsatisfactory marriage.³²

John Hugh Jr.'s *The Fiction Writer's Guide to Dialogue* helped with writing realistic spoken language. Contractions, brief sentences, and colloquial words have been employed to re-create authentic speech.³³ Some conversations indirectly reveal the character's personas, subtly, so as not to disregard the readers' intelligence. For example, "Could you get Monsieur Chaize and Andre a coffee." reveals Pierre's tendencies to control his wife.³⁴

Memories of my starfish earrings, gifted to me by an old Japanese lady, along with parts of her story found their way into this narrative.³⁵

The title *Tangled Strands* was chosen to metaphorically signify the protagonist's and other characters' complex convoluted relationships.

The Editing and Reviewing Process

The story has been revised and redrafted to expand character actions, enhance dialogue and improve the flow of words. For example, instead of Bella clutching onto her beret, her searching for it helps reveal her backstory.³⁶ Nonessential dialogue additions, such as the details of *Astra*'s appointment, were omitted.³⁷ Reorganising paragraphs allowed the writing to progress smoothly, enhancing both rhythm and pace. To establish a present-day setting, modern-day jars of 'hair gel and mousse' were introduced in the opening lines.³⁸ Feedback reinforced the storyline. For example, recommendations to introduce Celia's story earlier in the narrative helps the reader to comprehend *Astra* and Bella's dilemma, enhancing their connection with the two characters. Further inspiration to employ the third person

³¹ Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*, pp. 6, 45, 53-54, 64-66, 187.

³² Shukla, *HPEN7018 Assessment 1*, p. 17, para 45, p. 22, para 54.

³³ John Hugh Jr., *The Fiction Writer's Guide to Dialogue: A Fresh look at an Essential Ingredient of the Art* (New York, Allworth Press, 2015), pp. 1-135.

³⁴ Shukla, *HPEN7018 Assessment 1*, p. 5, para 10.

³⁵ Shukla, *HPEN7018 Assessment 1*, p. 2, para 4-5.

³⁶ Shukla, *HPEN7018 Assessment 1*, p. 1-2, para 2.

³⁷ Shukla, *HPEN7018 Assessment 1*, p. 6, para 13.

³⁸ Shukla, *HPEN7018 Assessment 1*, p. 1, para 1.

limited has influenced my present writing style. Rectifying language, grammar, punctuation, the unnecessary use of ellipses, and the removal of superfluous adjectives has been ongoing. The final piece was proofread to ensure these surface errors were resolved. The last two paragraphs were rewritten to leave the conclusion to the reader's imagination. Both Pierre's drunken behaviour and Astra's thoughts on her dysfunctional marriage were excluded.³⁹

Engaging in this critically reflective process, alone and with my peers, has enabled me to explore my creative practices, recognize my strengths, and find solutions for my weaknesses. I now feel equipped with a good range of stylistic strategies and guidelines. Applying these measures will help me accomplish my current and future writing goals.

Aspirations for the future

The module has broadened my perspective as a writer. It has supplied me with copious knowledge and greater competence, to help me produce original and engaging content with a personal style. Writerly research and the theoretical fundamental elements of writing have furnished me with a strong framework to extend my creative expertise. Having acquired the ability to take a raw idea and translate it into a three-dimensional story, I feel confident I can pursue my career as a professional writer and set up my own creative writing workshop.

³⁹ Shukla, *HPEN7018 Assessment 1*, p. 22, para 55.

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