

Fall 12-17-2019

Two Makes a Couple: Fictions on Intimacy

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Recommended Citation

Conner, Alyssa C. and Richardson, Jessica, "Two Makes a Couple: Fictions on Intimacy" (2019). *Honors Theses*. 335.
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ENGL 496 H1

April 13, 2019

Fiction Portfolio Reflection

In my fiction portfolio, I write about intimate moments between people, with close attention to overlooked ideas, and their interactions with each other in real-world, sometimes in slightly fantastical contexts, with a hint of magical realism. When developing and writing these pieces, I chose to ground them in a near-future, mostly realistic society, particularly in the southern part of the U.S. Yet, throughout the portfolio I chose to step out of my comfort zone by introducing fantastical elements into my pieces. For example, an old woman, past child-bearing age gets pregnant by a young man and a man develops an elixir to make neighborhood cats healthy. These concepts of aging, one's purpose in life, and identity are all things that I think I have grown to enjoy writing on, whereas prior to this portfolio, I would usually only write realistic short stories. The inclusion of magical, surreal elements only increases the intimacy and hyper-realness of the relationships within the short stories.

I chose Jessica Richardson as my thesis advisor, who taught the Creative Writing Workshop class two years before I began working on my thesis. It was in this class that I initially became drawn to writing on observing inconsistencies and contradictions in life, particularly those of women. Also in this class, I was introduced to the idea of using constraints to draw from when writing. While working on my thesis, I was also enrolled in her Fiction Workshop class. For my thesis, she picked out readings from writers like George Saunders and Aimee Bender to

develop constraints to help write my short stories. These readings were drawn from authors that teach in MFA programs of interest to me, as well as short stories taking place in contemporary settings. Many of these readings intrigued me, especially “Cat Person” by Kristen Roupenian and “Los Angeles” by Ling Ma. Both of these short stories feature modern woman facing issues with relationships with men, in particular relation to toxic masculinity. This concept sparked my interest, as it is something so personal and close to write about, yet something that is usually glazed over in modern writing. Toxic masculinity and harassment of a woman by a man in the workplace is a topic I explore in “Two Makes a Couple,” as well.

“Los Angeles” also follows an uncommon style and voice, which explores realistic situations in an unrealistic scenario, that only elevates the hyper-realness of the piece. This is an interesting addition to a piece that deals with realistic issues women face. In “Los Angeles,” the narrator talks about her ex-boyfriend that abused her, as he is also an important character in the story. Yet in a very unrealistic sense, the narrator lives in a house with all 100 of her ex-boyfriends. Outside of my advisor’s recommendations, I also found a similar short story on the New Yorker when reading “Cat Person.” “The Metal Bowl” by Miranda July is also narrated by a woman and explores her sexuality through a hyper-real lens. This piece also influenced my short stories, such as “Science for Romantics.” Overall, I tried to explore and maintain this hyper-realness throughout my short stories.

For “The Old Woman & The Bachelor,” I used the constraint of using a fairytale retelling, including writing in a flat, detached third-person perspective. “The Old Woman & The Bachelor” is a loose retelling inspired by Beauty and the Beast. It tells the story of an aging, 76-year-old woman falling pregnant by her 20-something lover unexpectedly. Through the

pregnancy, she begins to appear younger, as though going backwards through time. While writing this piece, I mainly struggled with the idea of not making the story appear ageist or even sexist, as it deals with the idea of a woman becoming younger (which could be thought to be synonymous with becoming more beautiful) and the idea of a woman finally becoming pregnant after having previously been incapable of doing so. To fix this, I tried to draw attention away from the scandalous nature of the age difference in the piece. I think this was easier to do when focusing on the romance aspect of the story and the relationship between her and her lover, rather than focusing solely on the pregnancy and her age. That way, it becomes a piece more about the intimacy of two people that are completely different, yet completely devoted to each other. It is a complicated and odd relationship, which made it almost uncomfortable at times to write, but also rewarding. The theme of the piece, or my intention in writing it, is the double standard when it comes to women. By writing it, I am questioning how women are viewed and how they tend to be seen as less desirable as they grow older. In my piece, I challenge this idea by focusing the attention of the piece on the relationship between the woman and the man. Essentially, in the piece it makes the relationship between an older woman and a younger man normal--the man has no obvious doubts in the relationship. This is important because one would expect the woman's old age to be a concern for him, but it is not. He does not even question it in the piece, making it almost a utopian relationship that is usually not found in today's society.

“Recipe for the Right Medicine” was written after being inspired from “Tiger Mending” by Aimee Bender. These constraints included having a fantastical element related to an animal, a relationship between siblings, use of the first-person narrative, as well as the voice of the narrator being slightly generalized and child-like. The piece is narrated by a young adult woman whose

brother has just returned home. Her brother has created a cat elixir that, after drinking it, makes the local street cats healthier, and keeps attracting them to come back. “Recipe for the Right Medicine” was the most unique piece I wrote in this portfolio compared to my usual writings. This is not only because, prior to working on my portfolio, I did not usually write in the first-person, but also because the writing is very abstract. There are not many details included. Also, the narrator is not necessarily the main character and the magical element is a main focal point of the story. At times it almost seems like the short story could branch off into a longer piece, delving more into the mystery of the magic of the elixir. Yet it is still a piece focused on the relationship between the brother and sister. It is quite detached, making it lose a bit of hyper-realness and intimacy, but it instead focuses on the relationship in a less grounding perspective. The themes in the piece include the relationship between a close brother and sister, with the sister looking up to her older brother, in particular. It also explores themes of loneliness in relation to the brother and his need to seek the company of the local cats, and finding oneself and one’s purpose in life.

“Two Makes a Couple” was developed after reading the short story “Cat Person” by Kristen Roupenian. I used constraints to begin this story, including to end on a line from the antagonist, use text messages, dialogue contrasting the narrator’s voice, people putting on personas where nobody is as they seem, and to defamiliarize a familiar setting. In addition, like “Cat Person,” “Two Makes a Couple” includes a feminist theme by following an average woman and interactions by an aggressive man. This piece was difficult to write, simply because it is the only one in my portfolio that features a physical, intimidating antagonist. In most of the other pieces the conflict is mainly between the main character and something intangible. But this piece

was very strong in that it explores the struggle of a woman, toying with a theme of sexuality and unwanted advances by a man. I did not plan much for this piece apart from the main idea. The dialogue, situations, and even the main character herself came along naturally while writing it. This piece examines themes of women, particularly how societal class interacts with sexual harassment. It contrasts this form of harassment and focuses on a smaller setting in comparison to the more well-known movement of women in a more visible light of the entertainment industry. Instead, it centers on the struggle of a woman in a poorer setting that feels obligated to put up with the harassment for the sake of her livelihood.

“Science for Romantics” was written outside of my thesis project, and was written for my Fiction Workshop class, instead. I did not create any constraints for this piece, but I did utilize metaphor and was inspired from “The Metal Bowl” by Miranda July. “The Metal Bowl” features a husband and wife relationship, and I focused on a husband and wife relationship in “Science for Romantics.” The piece takes place in a near-future society where a young girl decides to create her own husband through a lab. She comes into conflict when her husband desires a child when she specifically asked that he does not want children. This piece is mostly introspective thought, which made it interesting to write. It is less action and scene and more the narrator trying to understand her situation. This piece examines relationships in young marriages, particularly young marriages. This idea is especially examined in how loneliness can drive a society to the need to create their spouse. In relation to the narrator, it explores the imperfectness of a relationship that was designed with the intention to be perfect. It explores the ultimate ends of marriage--that by putting expectations on people within a marriage can lead to pressure and tension within the relationship.

When ordering my pieces, I tried to create a progression of the different types of relationships throughout. “The Old Woman & the Bachelor” follows a romantic relationship, and that is followed by “Recipe to the Right Medicine,” which, in contrast, follows a sibling relationship. “Two Makes a Couple” reverses the romantic trope and follows a more negative relationship, and then “Science for Romantics” bookends the portfolio to follow another romantic relationship. Throughout creating my portfolio and writing for my classes, my writing has matured. I can definitely see an improvement in my writing itself as I have read more from published authors and learned different language techniques, such as distinguishing points of view and the language within these point of views. The topics I write on have also matured and gotten deeper and more focused--I have explored complicated relationships between lonely people and written about topics in relation to women that are normally glossed over. I think there are still areas I can improve on, such as strengthening setting, such as making it more concrete and clear, as well as focusing on building a world around the characters. Overall, by working on my thesis, I have been able to produce more short stories and improve my writing through this. I would not have been able to complete and revise my portfolio without the help of Professor Jessica Richardson for inspiring me and guiding me through the process. I am so thankful for the opportunity to produce a complete work of writing and I am proud of how it turned out. This portfolio has helped me to focus on the area of fiction that I love to write about--it has helped me to express and given me an outlet to write on the small details of life and interactions between complex people that are often overlooked.