

Thesis Prospectus: *White on White*: Collected Stories

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White on White is a creative thesis consisting of five to seven short stories (approximately 80 to 120 pages total) and a critical introduction. The collection covers a range of themes, including isolation, loss, mortality, identity, faith, obsession, sexuality, and growing up. In my critical introduction, I will discuss my influences and the themes and subject matter that situate my works within the scope of fiction from post-World War II to today.

The title *White on White* refers to the subtle shades of perception and truth in each of the stories. It also refers to the invisibility of isolated characters in relation to their world, and it suggests single-mindedness to fault for some characters. Finally, the title is shared by a famous collection of abstract paintings by Kasimir Malevich, which he said represented the “supremacy of pure feeling” by denying objective representation (qtd. By Pioch). The single similarity between this abstract visual art and my realism fiction is that both attempt to bring out emotion in the audience. Despite that connection, my selection of the title is unrelated to this popular piece of art. Malevich’s reductive Suprematism art “consists of images that had no reference at all to reality;” my aim is to ground my stories in reality (Pioch).

As a form, the short story is ideal for my project as it offers brief slices of life, following a significant conflict and its resolution and implications for characters. The short story, as opposed to the novel, presents a minimal slice of reality, showing only what is necessary for realizing that conflict and resolution. Whereas the novel may follow several subplots and rises and falls in action, the short story is more direct and compressed. This form allows me to get to the heart of a character’s transformation or shift in understanding with clarity and precision. A collection of stories allows me to explore the wide array of themes and subjects I am interested

in writing about. Part of my experience as a writer is that I observe the world around me and attempt to portray it realistically and with an underlying message of truth about it. This curiosity and process of reflection is best communicated through a series of diverse stories, and I will attempt to tie these varied portrayals of life together through over-arching themes and common social contexts.

The central theme that connects these stories is isolation. Each main character, as well as some minor characters, is isolated either by choice or by circumstance, and dealing with that isolation—whether that means breaking free from it or accepting it—underlies each central conflict. In “Mary Louise’s Life after Len,” a ninety-year-old woman finds herself isolated from her family for most of her life because she could not stop longing for her past. When she has the opportunity to live her lost life, she realizes what she has given up in her choice to isolate herself, and she has to confront that choice and its consequences in order to attempt a connection.

“Waking Up” deals with a character searching for answers after his twin sister dies. He is isolated by his inability to grieve and to believe in anything in a world full of blind faith. “Cal’s Last Call” follows a divorcee’s fall as he struggles to stay sober in order to maintain visitation rights with his kids. In “Back Seat Longing,” a story about teenage girls who long to grow up, Christina and Haley become isolated during a shared sexual experience in which one fails to perform and the other is raped.

In most of the stories, the isolation descends following some loss. Mary Louise spends her entire adult life nostalgic for her youthful accomplishments and possibilities, and then her husband dies. In “Waking Up,” Charlie loses both his sister and his faith. Cal loses his family through divorce, and he loses them further as his wife moves on with another man. “Mary Louise” and “Waking Up” also both deal with mortality through confronting the loss of loved

ones. Mary Louise must also confront her own age and the reality of her remaining short life. Charlie must face his loss of faith and its implications for the afterlife. He carries around a severed foot in an attempt to hold onto something tangible. Haley becomes isolated after her rape, and Christina retreats inwardly after she fails to have sex and to protect her cousin.

Obsession and addiction are prominent themes as well. Mary Louise's obsession with the life she could have had isolates her from her own family. Charlie's obsession with finding answers prompts him to keep the severed foot and investigate its origin with desperate single-mindedness. Cal's addiction to alcohol and his obsession with holding onto his family lead to his fall. Thirteen-year-old Christina's unwavering pursuit of sexual maturity leads her and Haley to share a sexual experience neither is emotionally prepared to handle.

The theme of growing up is less prominent in the stories dealing with older characters (i.e., "Mary Louise" and "Cal's Last Call"), but it is central to "Waking Up," which follows a twenty-year-old boy wrestling with issues of identity, faith, and mortality for the first time, as well as "Back Seat Longing," a story about four teenage girls who are eager to mature quickly. These girls link sexual experience to maturity, and they become aware of their age when the adult experiences they seek bring heavy consequences. Their single-minded pursuit of maturity separates them from each other and thrusts emotional and physical issues on them that they are unequipped to deal with, ironically forcing them to grow up despite the obvious fact that they are not ready.

These themes are prominent in post-World War II American fiction, which deals heavily with nostalgia and isolation. The social context in my stories reflects the experience of middle-class, white, American families at the turn of the 21st century, which I will discuss further in my critical introduction. Although the obvious oppression and isolation of other groups makes for a

rich context to explore, even less clearly marginalized groups like the middle-class, white American have experienced (and continue to experience) jarring isolation as a result of lost ideals post-World War II. A breakdown of the nuclear family is one such lost ideal, which I explore in “Cal’s Last Call.” In “Mary Louise,” the nuclear family system fails to satisfy the wife and mother who longs for independence. I look at the behavior of young white girls today who are more and more caught up in emulating celebrities, whether as result of those changing family ideals or as a separate phenomenon, in “Back Seat Longing.” Crisis of faith resulting from disillusionment is another issue of this American middle class that I explore in “Waking Up.” American literature of this period is marked by characters who turn inward to retreat from a fast-changing world they feel out of touch with. Our society as a whole looks for distractions in technology to avoid facing the harsh realities of war, terrorism, an uncertain economy and more, placing them further out of touch. Americans’ narcissistic self-interest has further isolated us from community and our own humanity. The nostalgia of both my characters and myself in these stories is evident in the works of many of my influences. The following writers have shaped my work through their social context, subject matter, themes, and more, and I will discuss them further in my critical introduction: Sylvia Plath, Sandra Cisneros, J.D. Salinger, Jeffrey Eugenides, and nonfiction writers Mary Karr and Alissa Quart.

My clearest influence in both style and theme is Sylvia Plath. Her poetry—most notably from *Ariel*—and *The Bell Jar* deal with isolation, mortality, loss, sexuality, identity, and growing up. Her narration in *The Bell Jar* offers a blend of short and complex sentences as well as an honest voice that presents serious matters of sexuality, identity, mortality, and more with tones alternately serious and lighthearted. Many of my first-person narrators take on a similar voice, offering a realistic balance of seriousness and sarcastic or jovial lightheartedness. I think this

balance is important as it offers relief from intense emotional moments and reflects how many people cope with serious situations by turning to humor.

Sandra Cisneros's vignettes in *The House on Mango Street* deal with isolation, identity, sexuality, and growing up. They follow Esperanza, who, like the author, wishes to share her own experience where the world offers no reflection of it. These vignettes capture subtle but significant shifts in Esperanza's world view and maturity level. Cisneros's influence on my writing is most obvious in *Back Street Longing* as adolescent girls explore their sexuality. Just as Esperanza and her friends are not ready for the shoes that solicit male attention, my girls are equally innocent and grasping for maturity beyond their emotional level.

Mary Karr's memoirs *The Liars' Club* and *Cherry* address growing up, following first her adolescence with sexual assault, family disturbance, and uncertain identity, and then her teenage years with drug use, running away from home, and maturing further. These themes are relevant to my stories, and the female narration offers insight into the female experience, which I myself focus on in "Back Seat Longing."

J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, a coming-of-age story similar to *The Bell Jar*, deals with isolation and the inability to let go of childhood idealism. In my own "Waking Up," Charlie struggles with a sibling death as does Holden Caulfield, and he too struggles with a new perception of his world as a darker place than the one he knew before. Despite Holden's youth, he is also nostalgic for the past, which is a major isolating factor for my characters, Cal and Mary Louise.

Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* addresses the loss of neighborhoods in suburban America and the narrator's struggle to understand the mysterious suicides of a family of sisters in their community. His lifelong process of investigating the events leading up to those suicides

reveals the obsessive human tendency to try to understand the world and our place in it. This obsessive search for meaning is addressed in “Waking Up” as Charlie searches for a tangible belief to fill the void of understanding the world caused by his sister’s death.

Finally, Alissa Quart’s *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers* is a text that analyzes the harmful effects of media and social pressures for young girls and teenagers to perfect their bodies and objectify themselves. Although my main goals as a writer are to reveal truths about the world and its people and to entertain my readers, I also have an interest in expressing my opinion that young girls today are isolated by social and media pressures to objectify themselves and mature too quickly. My concern that television, music, and movies have great influence on this impressionable group of people is expressed in “Back Seat Longing”; however, my interest in this issue is always embedded in a realistic, fully-formed story of literary focus, not simply a statement with the elements of a story forced onto it.

In addition to the above influences, my work shares similarities with many other post-World War II writers who focused on isolation and nostalgia. My emphasis on realism rather than on post-modern experimentation or on presenting mere chaos is central to my presentation of true people and experiences in the world. My voice also has some similarities to that of Lorrie Moore. Other writers whose work I plan to cite in the critical introduction include John Cheever, Raymond Carver, ZZ Packer, and Mary Gaitskill, John Updike, and Joyce Carol Oates.

In addition to my fiction reading list, I will also read various essays on fiction and utilize the Newton Gresham Library and InterLoan Services through Sam Houston State University to develop my critical introduction, which will further explain the above discussion of themes, influences, and aesthetic in *White on White*, and the collection’s connection to other works of fiction.

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