Critical Commentary for Practices of Storytelling MA Module (2023) on:

- *Alone (short story)*
- *I don't like plants (poem)*
- *Beyond the Veil (poem)*

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Alone

Inspiration for *Alone* came primarily from my fascination with Carl Jung's 'analytical psychology'; Jung placed importance on individuation, and he is best known for his work in the concepts of archetypes and the collective unconsciousness, named due to how many of the same ubiquitous ideas and themes appear in hundreds of globally distinct cultures, beyond the confines of space and time[1]. Jung's theories are often connected to the occult due to their broader ties of self-discovery, particularly in regards to tarot and the major arcana; dealing with the profound and cosmic struggles of all people, the major arcana feature identifiable archetypes identical to Jung's, each with upright (positive) and reversed (negative) meanings[2].

The 4th of the major arcana, The Emperor, represents masculinity, embodying fatherhood, and authority when upright, but when reversed: dominance and control. Being functionally identical to Jung's father archetype[3], these interpretations are what created the character of the Shadowed Man. Both a character and a warning, the Shadowed Man represents the tragedy that many transgender women often experience: depressed, voiceless, controlled, and at the mercy of a 'superior'. I chose to portray this by having the Shadowed Man give the Boy a piece of black paper, and a black pen to write with, as well as literally removing his mouth – the complete denial of self, independence, and voice. During the final paragraph, I reveal that the Boy is a transgender Girl, one that never had her own voice due to how oppressive the cycle of the Shadowed Man was. Taking inspiration form Jung's theories of the anima/animus[4] I wished to demonstrate what I felt I needed to do whilst closeted: project my masculinity (often manifesting in unhealthy ways) to affirm to myself that I was not a woman. Through using a persona of 'manly man' I had tricked myself into feeling secure, but, in retrospect, I can now see that I was repressing my true self. Much like the Girl, I had only come "alive" when I found my voice.

For the Shadowed Man, I drew greatly from the Lovecraftian Old God, Nyarlathotep, of the Cthulhu Mythos. First detailed in his short story *Nyarlathotep*, Lovecraft introduces Nyarlathotep as "the crawling chaos" in the opening line[5]. This would go on to become his epithet, which almost speaks entirely for itself: he is omnipresent, malevolence itself and, as we find out through Lovecraft's short story, a pestilence, one that infects and brings ruin to the world. Beyond the literary interpretations of his first appearance, the epithet also creates a unique visual image for each reader, as his material presence is hard to pin down; for me, Nyarlathotep is the Shadowed Man, a force that repeats a cycle of torment, removing the Boy's voice, giving him no choice but to become the new Shadowed Man, forever doomed to stay in samsara, and in so doing, eternally removing the chance to become "alive". Notably, the Girl is only able to do so when she kills the Shadowed Man, the representation of her future, and experiences 'death', or in her case, rebirth.

Initially, *Alone* was hard to read; I wrote it this way intentionally. However, due to feedback I had received, not many people were able to even understand it, which was not what I wanted. Although *Alone* is explicitly a surreal text, I did not want it to be beyond understanding; a crucial element of

[1] Collected works Vol. 12. Psychology and alchemy. Pg 188. Jung, C. G. (1953).
[2] Carl Jung and Jungian Archetypes in the Tarot: The Various Aspects of Our Selves. Gong, Tina (2018, accessed 03/01/24).
[3] The Father Archetype. The Jungian Confrerie (author unknown) (accessed 22/12/23).
[4] The Secret of the Golden Flower. Commentary by Jung, C.G. in Collected works Vol 13: Alchemical Studies. Pg 60. (1929)
[5] Nyarlathotep. Lovecraft, H.P. (1920, accessed 19/12/23).

surrealism is surprise and juxtaposition to create a super-reality[6], however, said super-reality must be decipherable to a spectator / reader and not just merely confuse them. I feel that by clarifying what I wanted to do with *Alone*, it made the piece much more evocative, whilst still maintaining the surrealist and dreamy haziness I wished for it. As an exploration of my past whilst repressing my true gender, I feel it was very powerful, and I reminder for me to never inhibit myself again.

[6] The Automatic Message (First ed.). Breton, André (1997).

I don't like plants

I don't like plants is about my depression, which I characterised as not just as a wild plant, but also as a disease, something that "grows inward" away from sunlight, instead of towards it like all other plants. It is a plant that does not grow off a symbiotic relationship, but rather a parasitic growth, that feeds off my life. In many stories, the idea of decay and blight is used to show a literal and metaphorical decomposition of society[7], particularly in Gothic literature. In Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the biological decay of the swamp like setting, is used in conjunction with the rapidly deteriorating mental health of Roderick[8]. The use of botanical rot being used as a vehicle for loss of control / identity, is also shown in modern works: the location "Mementos" in *Persona 5 Royal*: infected to its core with putrid black vine-veins with secluded pockets for those giving into their distorted desires.



The Entrance to Mementos - Persona 5 Royal (ATLUS)



A Mementos Pocket - Persona 5 Royal (ATLUS)

The fear of losing myself is something that I fear greatly; I feel that I am in a constant battle against this "plant" to remain as me, and not fall to nihil. To emphasise this, in the last few lines, I once again refer to Lovecraft's *Nyarlathotep* ("shapeless entity of nihilism", "chaos crawls in"); beyond the literary meanings I touched on prior on *Alone*, Nyarlathotep's pure formlessness means that he can become anything, but his most popular depiction is as a reptilian humanoid.

[7] "What is the concept of decay in American Gothic literature and how is it related to social or psychological factors?" answered on enotes.com by Ossa, Michelle P (M.A.) and Kelley, James (accessed 20/12/23)
[8] "upon the bleak walls --upon the vacant eye-like windows --upon a few rank sedges" The Fall of the House of Usher, Allan Poe, Edgar (1839, accessed 21/12/23)



Nyarlathotep as depicted in the Yu-Gi-Oh! Trading Card Game: Outer Entity Nyarla (Konami Entertainment)

It's due to Nyarlathotep's infinite physicality that his other moniker "God of Many Forms" is so captivating: he is not just physically everything, but also emotionally. He is Jung's idea of the "shadow" given form[9]; whatever you resent or repress within yourself, he is always that resentment made corporeal: the chaos that crawls into your heart, the shapeless entity of nihilism, coming to reap what you had never sown.

I don't like plants was hard for me to write, but very therapeutic as well. Taking a deep delve into what I view my loathing and despair to be (what it materialises as, what it does to me) wasn't easy, but was ultimately very satisfying. To use Jungian theory once more, Jung speaks on the persona confronting the shadow i.e. the consciousness confronting the personal unconsciousness. This process, where light and dark meld together to form a single whole, is what he defined as the self – the true you[10]. Through writing and analysing *I don't like plants*, I feel more comfortable in my emotions. which, to have such a deep response, is not something I was expecting but am thoroughly happy about. Although currently present in me always and something I may always have to struggle with, my depression does not have to define me.

[9] Joseph Campbell — Jung and the Shadow System. Joseph Campbell Foundation (YouTube: 0:10-1:10) (15/07/19, accessed 03/01/24)
[10] "Ancient Myths and Modern Man" in C. G. Jung: Man and his Symbols. Henderson, Joseph L (1978) p. 120

Beyond the Veil

Defined by Oxford Languages as a nebulous space of liminality crossing the boundaries of life and death, the phrase "beyond the veil" alludes to an answerless question: what life (if any) is there after death? Interestingly, this question has a rather unique answer for transgender people: in my experience, many trans people admit that their lives truly started when they began transitioning and living as their true selves. In this way, it is not unfair to describe this as a rebirth. Ergo, a trans persons' life after death, is life itself. This process that trans people go through is often tinged with sadness, or grief, for the life and connections they had to leave. These antithetical feelings of euphoria and mourning is what I aimed to convey within *beyond the veil.*

Using the tarot cards "Death and "The World", I wished to convey what Pauline Boss refers to as "ambiguous loss" and how it can manifest for a trans person. Defined by Boss as experiencing grief for someone who is still living but mentally or physically altered[11], I posit that a trans person can experience this in a unique way: we can experience ambiguous loss for what never was or what was stolen from us i.e. being born in a body we 'shouldn't have'.

In Liz Dean's *The Little Book of Tarot*[12], she details how "Death is the card of endings and transitions" and how The World (when reversed) represents an unresolved situation and the frustration it brings. These interpretations informed how I presented Death as a necessity for change for the sake of one's happiness, and The World as a frustrating obstacle and reminder to the speaker of their lack of wholeness. Using tarot in this way allows me to accurately divine an experience I, and most trans people, undergo almost daily: euphoria for versions of our bodies and lives that exist within us, and dysphoria for the crushing reality for what is. This discordance between the mental and material spheres that trans people occupy within themselves is why I feel comfortable in my reformed definition of Boss' ambiguous loss when applied to trans people: an almost ritualistic sacrifice for a rebirth as their true gender. Dr Natalia P Zhikhareva notes that "transition offers an opportunity to be your true Self at the costly price of claiming that which you value" and relates the alchemical exchange of 'old-life to new-life' to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' five-stage grief model to exemplify trans grief and Boss' ambiguous loss[13]:

> [On Kubler-Ross' denial and rejection stage]
>
> "Often, the first reaction to learning about your gender identity is to deny the reality of your authentic Self. "I am not trans," "This is only a phase I am going through," and "It's just a sexual fetish" are common thoughts." – Dr Zhikhareva

Having struggled with these exact thoughts myself for many years, I find Zhikhareva's findings to be extremely poignant to the current lived experiences of trans people, and I wished desperately to incorporate her findings into my analysis, simply due to how true it is for me.

Beyond the veil is a very special poem to me. Written just before I began hormone-replacement-therapy, it's a summation of my thoughts and feelings over the last 2 years since I began transition: frustration, and hope. Ultimately, the core of this poem is the dichotomy of being trans: a life built on the hope that you will one day become who you see yourself as, and the frustration felt when no

[11] The Myth of Closure (Pg 1). Boss, Pauline (2012, accessed 03/01/24)
[12] The Little Book of Tarot (Pg. 78 & 94). Dean, Liz (2023)
[13] Gender Transition Through 5 Stages of Grief and Loss. Zhikhareva, Dr Natalia P (02/09/19, accessed 29/12/23)

progress is made: when the NHS takes upwards of 7.25 years for an initial appointment[14], is it any wonder why trans people often struggle with their self-image, and why dreams seem to be the only places real for us? This poem is a promise to myself to create a future for myself in which I can confidently say “I love myself”, so that the world I dream of is never lost to me again.

[14] UK GIC Wait Times. Updated in 2023 by https://www.genderkit.org.uk/resources/wait-times/

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