

# White Lead and Other Stories

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

Department of English

Bar-Ilan University

Gahl Becker

ID 039904461

Adviser: Ms. Joan Leegant

Mr. Evan Fallenberg

01/08/2012

## עופרת לבנה וסיפורים אחרים

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לאנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

גל בקר

039904461 ת.ז.

מנחים: גב' ג'ואן ליגנט

מר אבן פלנברג

01/08/2012

## Table of Contents

Aims and General Description	2
Conceptual Background	3-5
Shape of Project	6-8
Bibliography	9-10

### **Aims and General Description**

My thesis will be comprised of a series of short stories, mainly revolving around change and realization. It has been greatly influenced by the idea of the Secular Pilgrim (Orpaz), whereby a literary figure strives to believe in something greater than him or herself, as he/she wishes for a sudden moment of redemption.

I often incorporate the Secular Pilgrim in my stories while using different genres, themes and schools of thought. Yet the figure of the Secular Pilgrim always remains a modern hero who believes in an underlying truth, and who is forced to maneuver within a postmodernist world where essential beliefs are broken apart. This unraveling of reality is sometimes depicted in my stories through magical realism, by embedding fantastical elements in a common and familiar setting. By doing so, I am interested in creating worlds where my readers are given time to consider certain ideas and be moved by the actions depicted.

## Conceptual Background

Over the years, I have found inspiration in different genres, cultures and philosophical debates, as I try to pay closer attention to stylistic elements such as point of view, voice, language and narrative structure. As a child, I was immersed in Greek mythology (Ovid), children's books (Rushdie, Dr. Seuss) and fantasy novels (Eddings 1996, 1998), and continued to read these genres as an adult. I was exposed to the idea of magic breaking through, and as a result try to integrate fantastical elements into my own writing, as a way of saying that we should leave a space open for the unimaginable to happen to us.

From Greek myths and fantasy I graduated to magic realism. Books like *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith* (Nahai) showed me how this genre "steals" moments of the supernatural and places them within typical, familiar situations, a literary technique which I find very inspiring.

A later source of inspiration was my undergraduate studies, which introduced me to feminism, modernism and postmodernism. I learned how social constructs shape the way we approach the world, and how unique perspectives can trigger change. Feminism forced me to acknowledge the various ways in which men and women are defined and demarcated, through literary works such as *The Awakening* (Chopin) and *Washington Square* (James). I also found inspiration in *The Bell Jar* (Plath), which gave a clear voice to a generation of silenced women.

Modernism is rooted in the belief that there is a deeper meaning to this world than we can immediately perceive, and that to arrive at it we must peel away the façade of everyday life. *To the Lighthouse* (Woolf) and *Maurice* (Forster) both spoke of this, with characters that break from conventions in an attempt to find peace.

Sometimes, though, there does not seem to be any underlying reality beneath our false existence, only layers upon layers of disguise. This is postmodernism, a world where there is no essential truth

worth believing. Literary works such as the groundbreaking *See Under: Love* (Grossman), *Dolly City* (Castel-Bloom) and *The Line of Beauty* (Hollinghurst ) showed me the power of postmodern writing by splitting apart basic conventions such as love, family and an existential sense of justice.

One particular term that approaches the tension between the modern and the postmodern is that of the Secular Pilgrim. In his collection of essays by the same name, Yitzhak Orpaz defines the Secular Pilgrim as a faithless man who tries to save himself from the absence created by not believing. The Secular Pilgrim — a modern man within a postmodern world — seeks redemption while continuing to not believe in God, or any broader, metaphysical connection to the world. The young idealist Holden Caulfield from *Catcher in the Rye* (J.D. Salinger ) is one example of the Secular Pilgrim, who looks for solace without truly believing he will find it.

Many of my stories will reflect this approach by showing decidedly modern characters living within a postmodern world, where nothing is wholly certain and therefore cannot provide a solid sense of support. Left in such a world with no absolute certainties, these characters choose for themselves in what to believe.

Finally, my graduate degree opened my eyes to my own Jewish literary heritage. The courses I chose to take allowed me to approach Judaism in a new and non-judgmental manner, and stories such as *A Conversation with My Father* (Grace Paley) showed me how Jewish humor, grieving customs and family dynamics are all shaped by tradition, and these ideas in turn are examined in several of my own stories. I approach the Jewish aspects of my work out of the literary and theoretical basis I have already established for myself — that of a secular longing for belief, but also of someone who chooses in what to believe and in how to approach the old traditions.

## Shape of Project

The thesis will consist of a collection of short stories. The stories will vary in length, some coming close to parameters of a novella, while some are short-shorts, only a few pages long.

The thesis will include at least two long stories: *White Lead* and *Mourning and Disneyworld*. *White Lead* will follow one main character — Ohr Bleiweis — as she comes to a decision to change her life. There will be six chapters: The first will take place inside her second-hand clothes store; the second at her apartment, during conversations Ohr has with her mother and something of an ex-boyfriend; the third will follow Ohr through a costume shop, as she chooses an outfit for Halloween; the fourth will show her at her mother's apartment, as she confronts her mother about her childhood; the fifth will take place at a costume party, during which Ohr will experience a sort of revelation; and the sixth will show Ohr on vacation, after she decides to move away for school.

The second long story — *Mourning and Disneyworld* — may turn out to be a novella. It will follow a young man named Almond, and skip between his current life as a young adult and his childhood, right before his mother's death and immediately following it. The story will consist of six or seven chapters. As a whole, the story will deal with the effects that his childhood had on Almond's later life, and on what he might possibly be able to take from these experiences to be happier.

I expect there to be 10-11 stories included in the thesis. Certain pieces will be more cerebral, trying to break apart social and literary conventions: *Olive* will follow a man who becomes a tree fairy, and who then decides to rebel against the accepted constructs that keep him and his tree from achieving their full potential; *Wail* will describe a scenario where a pigeon decides to build its nest on the Wailing Wall, and follows a series of events that is triggered by this. Both stories examine the issues raised, as the ideas presented in them develop and change.

Some of the stories will deal with loss: *My Gentle Sister* will talk about a woman coping with her

sister's terminal illness; *Mourning and Disneyworld* will talk about a young man coming to terms with the loss of his childhood; *Someone Else's Wedding* will show a wedding scene where two ex-lovers are reminded of their former relationship. These stories will look at the way different characters cope with their loss, and how they manage to carry on.

Some stories will deal with loneliness: *The Turquoise Vase* will describe the very empty existence of someone obsessed with the idea of love; *Anderson Burning* will show a man grotesquely putting himself on display, in the hope that someone will redeem and love him; *Turbulence* will follow a man who has been stood up, as he recalls past relationships. The people in these stories will be portrayed as vulnerable and at times miserable beings, longing to lead a different life.

Finally, thankfully, the thesis will contain stories about human connections and intimacies. The redemption element in these pieces will usually take place between two people: *Still Life with Mermaid* will capture a tender moment between a young woman and her soon-to-be sister-in-law; *Pétanque* will follow two men as they begin to fall in love; *My Gentle Sister*, *Olive* and several others will also have relationships at their core.

As a whole, this thesis will depict different people in diverse situations, all of whom want something out of life and who strive to better understand the world. In their quests, they will often reach out to one another, as a means of gaining a sense of community as well as a feeling of inner peace.

## Bibliography

- Castel-Bloom, Orly, 1992. *Dolly City*, Tel-Aviv: Zmora Bitan.
- Chopin, Kate, 2000. *The Awakening and Other Stories*, New York: Random House.
- Dr. Seuss, 1990. *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*, New York: Random House.
- Eddings, David and Leigh, 1996, *Belgarath the Sorcerer*. New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1998, *Polgara the Sorceress*. New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group.
- Forster, E. M., 2006. *Maurice*, London: Norton and Company.
- Grossman, David, 2001. *See Under: Love*, Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad.
- Hollinghurst, Alan, 2005. *The Line of Beauty*, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- James, Henry, 1964. *Washington Square*, New York: Signet.
- Nahai, Gina B., 1999. *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, London: Scribner.
- P. Ovidi (Ovid), Nasonis, 1965. *Metamorphoseon*, translated to Hebrew by Salomo Dykman, Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute.
- Paley, Grace, 2001. *A Conversation with My Father*, In: Chametzky, Jules, and John Felstiner, Hilene Flanzbaum and Kathryn Hellerstein (editors), Jewish American Literature, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, pages 799-803.
- Plath, Sylvia, 1999. *The Bell Jar*, Chatham: Faber and Faber.
- Rushdie, Salman, 2006. *The Wizard of Oz*, London: British Film Institute.
- Salinger, J.D., 1991. *The Catcher in the Rye*, Boston: Little Brown Books.
- Orpaz Auerbach, Isaac, 1982. *The Secular Pilgrim*, Raanana: Hakibutz Hameuchad.



- Woolf, Virginia, 1964. *To the Lighthouse*, London: Penguin Books.