“Drawing a Daisy on a Post-it”: Expressions of the Phenomenology of Illness in Literary Fiction set in 1956 and the Present Day

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

English and Media Studies

at Massey University, Manawatu, New Zealand

Susan Ray Wootton

2015
Abstract

This thesis explores representations of the experience of illness in literary fiction. It argues that the portrayal in literature of an imagined character’s subjective experience of illness constitutes a phenomenological perspective on the illness experience, and that literary fiction’s performance of a phenomenological approach offers important insights to a holistic understanding of illness. Section One is a critical essay which examines two contemporary literary texts by the light of recent scholarship in the areas of medical philosophy and medical sociology. A concern frequently expressed by writers in these areas is that the modern biomedical paradigm, while increasingly sophisticated in its science, risks neglecting its art, and that this, in turn, de-humanises medicine in a manner that is fundamentally harmful to the lived experience of illness. Modes of talking about illness which encompass subjective, phenomenological, experience offer a way to rectify this. I argue that creative fiction is therefore a powerful form in which to explore the lived experience of illness. I apply this notion to a close reading of two literary texts, one set in 1956 and one in the present day. By its very nature, however, literary fiction’s power lies in its effects on the imagination, and is only clumsily explained by analytic argument. Thus Section Two of this thesis is a creative partner to the critical essay and aims to demonstrate, or perform, the thesis. This creative section is an extract from a novel called Strip, set in present day New Zealand and told from the perspectives of a mother and a father whose teenage daughter has a terminal illness.
Acknowledgements

Several people have provided support, guidance and reflective feedback in the course of writing of this thesis. I am grateful to you all. For her enthusiasm for this topic and her unwavering belief that I could add something to the field of knowledge in this area, thank you Dr Annemarie Goldstein Jutel. For setting me on track and keeping me there, thank you Dr Thom Conroy. Thank you to Dr Joe Baker and Dr Fenella Devereux for thorough medical examinations of early iterations of Strip. Any medical errors remaining in the text are mine alone. I thank Sarah Entwistle for her astute proofreading. The generosity, strength, wisdom and insights of two people in particular are knitted into this thesis. Thank you Carolyn Upton for those talks in your kitchen, and, later, at your bedside. This thesis honours your memory and your spirit. Thank you to Doug Lilly, who paid attention while I tried on gazillions of word combinations, who wasn’t afraid to send me back to the keyboard in search of a better sentence, who always championed the final choice. This thesis is dedicated to you.
“Drawing a Daisy on a Post-it”: Expressions of the
Phenomenology of Illness in Literary Fiction set in 1956 and the
Present Day

Table of Contents

Abstract
Acknowledgements
Introduction
Section One: Critical Research Essay
“Drawing a Daisy on a Post-it” and “the Posture of Grace”
Works cited
Section Two: Creative Thesis
Strip (an extract from a novel in progress)