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The Human Condition: Stories on Love and Loss

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for Graduation in the Honors College

By

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Thesis Project

The Making of The Human Condition: Stories on Love and Loss

As both a reader and a writer, I've always been interested in the idea that all stories in literature have been told in one way or another before. Yet, authors find a way to engage their audiences and make these stories new by incorporating new and personal factors within the human connections within stories. For my thesis, I chose to explore this idea and focus on one-on-one human connections as the connecting thread within my short story collection.

Every story within my collection is an ekphrastic piece, meaning that the story is inspired by a piece of artwork, or vice versa. The art pieces within this collection feature many elements created with charcoal. This medium tends to show high contrast and come across as very dark on the paper. I chose to incorporate this medium into my pieces to parallel the dark subject matter that comes across in some of the stories, such as "Deep Wounds" and "Mutual Destruction". The darkness of the charcoal also mirrors the unhappier elements of human connection that are explored within the collection, such as unreciprocated romantic love, infidelity, and selfishness within romantic pairings.

Although some darkness is included in these art pieces, I also tried to balance this with the inclusion of watercolor. Watercolor paint tends to be a lighter, more flowy medium that adds some levity to the overall artwork. This balance is meant to parallel that happy aspects of human connection in the way in which humans thrive within companionship. The use of ink and micron pens is also utilized within the artwork of the collection to emphasize line movement and highlight specific objects.

The art pieces in this collection were completed on either watercolor paper or bristol board. The pieces were then digitally scanned and placed within the word document of the story collection.

The first story in the collection, “Follow Where You Go” was my first attempt at a story that was a longer length, with a goal of 15 pages. It was also the first time I had attempted the use of time jumps or flashbacks, rather than a purely linear timeline. My focus for this piece was the idea of losing and regaining love. It was also inspired by the artwork that accompanies it. The swing set scene at the park in the story was the first scene that was written for the story. After this scene was written, inspired by the artwork, the remainder of the story was written to frame it. Originally, this story included one more character, another friend of Louis’s that worked at the school. However, through editing, I decided that fewer characters would make for a stronger story within the page length.

The next two stories, “Deep Wounds” and “Mutual Destruction” initially started as one story that continuously switched perspectives between Emily and Ryan. However, within my editing process, I decided that the switching perspective may be too confusing for my reader. Yet, I still felt that both sides of the story deserved to be told. As such, I decided to create two separate stories that functioned in tandem with one another. These stories were also my first attempt at incorporating a stream-of-consciousness method. The areas of the story I feel that this is most evident is the meditation by Emily surrounding cleaning products throughout “Deep Wounds”. I wanted to incorporate this method of writing within this story because I felt that someone as severely depressed as Emily may do anything in their power to distract themselves from thinking about their sadness. I felt that the stream-of-consciousness within the story may illuminate the depth of Emily’s mental illness to the reader.

The art pieces for both “Deep Wounds” and “Mutual Destruction” were created after the completion of the stories themselves. Due to the dark subject matter of the stories, I chose to use a limited color pallet and sparse use of color. Charcoal was also utilized in these pieces to further the grave tone of the stories.

With “Flaws in Our Fur” I attempted a few different techniques from the rest of the collection. First, I decided that I wanted to experiment with what point of view was utilized. I wanted to play with narrating through a first-person point of view in attempts to evoke a greater sense of authenticity as well as more effectively gain the reader’s sympathy for the speaker of the story. Another method I experimented with in this story was the use of an object, in this case a stuffed animal, as the vehicle that moves the story along, rather than narrating events as they happen. I felt that this would allow the reader to understand that the speaker is narrating from a place of reflection, rather than discussing in the moment thoughts. As such, I felt that this would evoke a tone of growth and healing within the story.

This story was inspired by the art piece that accompanies it. The artwork was made with the theme of ‘loss of innocence’ in mind. While looking at the art, I was inspired to create a story told from the eyes of a teddy bear. Eventually, that idea morphed into the first rough draft of “Flaws in Our Fur”. The story then underwent major cuts and tightening up of language to reach the version it is now.

The final story in this collection, “Pillow Talk”, was inspired by the short story “Anyuta” by Anton Chekhov. After reading this story, I was struck by the idea that the relationship between Anyuta and Klochkov hadn’t changed at all on the surface. But the dynamic of their relationship had been drastically altered.

My take on this concept started as only dialogue. I felt that the conversation between the two characters told a lot about their relationship without the need of much narration. From there, I built scenery around the dialogue and attempted to give the characters a clearer description. However, I wanted to let the dialogue between the characters continue to tell the majority of the story. I decided to leave the main characters within the story unnamed in order to give it a more universal, relatable feel for the audience, as I felt everyone at one point or another experienced unrequited love. I wanted to make the story as easy as possible for the reader to insert themselves into it. The artwork for this piece was created after the completion of the story itself.

All in all, I feel that I've created a collection of stories and artwork that illuminates the joys, and trials, of human connection. I also feel that the details within each story relate to my earlier sentiment of an author's ability to make relationships individualized, despite the common nature of human-to-human contact.