

University of South Australia

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I'm Putting My Money on Janet

Abstract:

I'm Putting My Money on Janet is a tongue in cheek, deliberately controversial performance poem which envisages what might happen if writers Janet Frame and Sylvia Plath were to 'go head to head' in a fictional battle scenario. Although the poem was initially intended as an engagement with Frame and Plath Scholarship (Gordon 2013, Bassnett 2007, Carrington 2003, King 2000, Harold and Gordon 2011), responses to its presentation at the 14th AAWP conference indicated that the work's main research contribution lies with form rather than content. In particular, the presentation of performance poetry—which is commonly (dis)regarded as a 'popular' rather than a 'literary' form (Lansana 2004, p 15, Zoe-Baker 2012)—in an academic context raises questions about what sort of place (if any) performance poetry holds in academia. The research statement posits that performance poetry is an under-researched topic in Australian Creative Writing research and suggests some areas for potential research investigations. Readers approaching the poem on the page should bear in mind that it is designed for live performance, not quiet reading. Readers should also bear in mind that the voice of the performance poem is a prosopopoeic device (Gana 2003, p 159)—or, as Carter notes: 'sometimes the mask is to hide and sometimes it's to play at being something you're not so you can watch the reactions...' (2010, p. 55)

Biographical Note:

Amelia Walker is a PhD candidate at the University of South Australia. She has published three poetry collections, most recently *Sound and Bundy* (IP 2012), and three collections of teaching resources for primary school (*All You Need to Teach Poetry* Ages 5-8, 8-10 & 10+, Macmillan 2010).

Keywords:

Performance Poetry, Creative Writing Research, Slam Poetry, Janet Frame, Sylvia Plath

Text of Performance Poem: I'm Putting My Money on Janet

For a quivering student longing for identity and aspiring to be a poet, to be given the idea...that most poets were "mad", to be told "when I think of you I think of Hugo Wolf, of Van Gogh..." gave me a certainty of direction, particularly when I found out that [they] suffered from schizophrenia.

(Janet Frame, letter to John Money 12/12/82, in King 2000, p. 449-450)

She may not feature in as many high school English anthologies,¹

nor on the bedside tables of sweetly troubled twenty-somethings.

She may not have been played by Gwyneth Paltrow,

all blonde hair, wide eyes, sleek red dress and

drawn

out

sighs...

Still, if Janet Frame and Sylvia Plath ever go head to head

in a Hunger Games spin off featuring dead poets trying to kill each other,

I'm putting my money on Janet.

Or should I say Clutha? The mighty New Zealand river.

That would be her fighting name.

And Sylvia? Her fighting name would be Lady La La Lazarus,

comin' straight from the oven, charred and leprous,

a zombie, feeding on the brains of bright young would-be poets

turned dull, dark, brooding know-it-alls

called to haul you through the glum drum

heard it a hundred times drawl

on how Ted

killed

Sylvia.²

And OK. I ain't no coroner.

I didn't witness the event itself.

But from all reports, all evidence suggests,

Sylvia

killed

Sylvia.

Ted was not in the room

nor any kind of general vicinity. Plus

Sylvia already tried to kill Sylvia

at least twice before she ever met Ted.³

That's why I'm putting my money on Janet.

Where Sylvia complained of a childhood

'too poor to buy a magazine,'⁴

Janet fondly recalled her favourite toy,

a tin can on a string.⁵

At twenty-one, both women tried to die,

both failed and were hospitalised.⁶

Sylvia scored Bellevue, a posh private clinic.

Janet, meanwhile, got wrecked on the rocks of Seacliff,

a state asylum where she was injected, shocked,

scheduled for lobotomy, stopped

only when she won New Zealand's top writing prize.

'Oopsey daisy!' the doctors said.

'Better leave your brain where it is.'

Back from the brink, Sylvia had scholarships,

a future full and bright.

Janet got by scrubbing richer people's kitchens,

squeezed her scribbling into the spaces between chores

just like she was squeezed into side rooms

stuck off other people's lives.

Sylvia sighed, pensively

waiting for inspiration to strike...⁷

Janet knew, even a cold iron makes a weapon

if you just damn wield it.

Sometimes you gotta go and put that iron on the flames yourself,

gotta go and build those flames yourself
from scratch
by scratching
'til something sparks.
Waiting for inspiration? Nuh uh,
Janet worked for it,
worked at it, and baby,
how she worked it.
In short, she wrote more
because she lived longer
and so learned more
about writing, about fighting.⁸

Because Sylvia, at thirty, gave up the fight.
Born pretty, she died pretty
in a bloody ugly way.
Born with red hair that could not be combed down, Janet chose,
kept choosing to live.
She grew through womanhood and ageing,
wore the humiliations of cancer.
Even that, though it killed her
never ever combed her down.
That's why I'm putting my money on Janet.

But meanwhile, I'm sorry Sylvia.
You gotta know, this ain't about you.
It's about what people make of you,
The cultists who prop you,
plastic saint on the shop counter of culture
pushing pain as a thing to admire,
a thing to aspire to.
It's about English teachers who see you as an opportunity
to turn troubled kids onto poetry...

...or at least, that's how it happened for me.
And in my admittedly uncritically subjective perspective,
you wrote some good poems Sylvia,
despite your madness, not because of it.
You spoke to a whole lot of people,
you gave us connection... but not hope.
No biggie. Who can give what they haven't got?
If only you had read Janet.
She spoke to fewer people in a stronger voice,
Showed them, showed me,
it is never too late nor too difficult to fight
for loving being alive.

So keep your bee box, Sylvia
and let Gwyneth keep all her sighs.
That lampshade never shed much light
and frankly, it's lacking taste.
I'm gunning it
straight for the *Mirror City*.
I'm putting my money on Janet.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Pamela Gordon for her generous assistance with the details of this poem as it regards Frame's biography. I also thank Gordon for the energy she commits to publishing Frame's works and to discrediting the false mythologies that have arisen with regards to Frame's personal life.

Endnotes

1. This comment is, admittedly, soon to be out of date. The Australian Education system is currently in the process of shifting from individual state-based curriculums to a national curriculum. Under the old curriculums, the anthology *Lines to Time* (Cole 2007), which included Plath (but not Frame), was recommended in the majority of Australian states. Under the new curriculum, neither Plath nor Frame is specifically recommended for study.
2. 'Ted killed Sylvia' is a claim made by some fans of Plath who blame Hughes for her suicide. It is rarely (if ever) suggested as a serious academic argument, but appears in the popular media. For example, see Freeman's discussion of the issues (2013, np).

3. (Carrington 2003, p. 306)
4. 'Too poor to buy a magazine' paraphrases 'so poor she can't afford a magazine,' which technically refers to the character Esther Greenblatt, not Plath herself. (Plath 1971, p. 2)
5. 'One of my favorite toys was a kerosene tin with a piece of rope tied to it, which I pulled along the lawn under the walnut tree and over to the fence for the beasties to share my pleasure in it. There was a song which I sang about my tin, but why did everyone laugh when I sang it? 'God save our gracious tin, / God save our noble tin, / God save the tin.' (Frame 2009, p. 83-84)
6. (Bassnett 2007, p. 208; Evans 2013, np.)
7. 'Sylvia sighed, waiting for inspiration to strike...' references depictions of Plath in the movie *Sylvia* (Jeffs 2003). I recognise that the film does not actually give an accurate portrayal of Plath's writing process. However, as my poem later notes, 'this isn't about [Sylvia], but about what people make of [her]...' I am not criticising the 'real' Plath, but the culturally-constructed image of her, so the film depiction is appropriate for that purpose.
8. 'In short, [Frame] wrote more...' I acknowledge that quantity does not necessarily compete with quality. However my argument here is really that Frame lived more than twice as long as Sylvia and therefore had more time to hone her craft as a writer. That Frame was a critically reflexive writer who thought deeply about the techniques and issues of writing is evident in the various articles and letters collected in *Janet Frame In Her own Words* (Harold and Gordon 2011) and in Gordon's afterword to *The Mijo Tree* (2013). Frame's autobiographical writings also suggest that she worked very hard on her writing (Frame 1987, p. 133).

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Research Statement

Research Contribution

Research experiments sometimes yield findings other than those the researcher envisaged (Dunbar 2000, p. 52-53). This work arose as an engagement with Frame and Plath scholarship (Bassnett 2007, Carrington 2003, King 2000, Harold and Gordon 2011). However, responses to this work at the AAWP conference suggested greater interest in the poem's presentation—as a memorised, bodily performance—than in the poem's themes. The work's significance therefore lies in questions of form, and particularly of performance poetry as a formal literary practice. Presenting a poem written primarily for performance, not the page, at an 'academic' conference was an unusual, if not 'new' research act. The discussions that followed raised three areas for potential Creative Writing research investigation: questions of how (and if) performance poetry stands in the Creative Writing research field; performance as a means for crafting, not just presenting poems; and 'slam' poetry in Australia.

Research Background

Performance poetry is commonly (dis)regarded as 'popular' rather than 'literary' (Lansana 2004, p. 15, Zoe-Baker 2012)—which perhaps explains the relative paucity of relevant published research. Somers-Willett's (2009) works are a notable exception. However Somers-Willett specifically investigates American slam poetry, whereas Australian performance poetry arises from multiple traditions (Zurbrugg 1989) which slam's rising popularity perhaps threatens to silence. Creative Writing research may potentially help to preserve these other histories.

Research significance

Responses to the work's presentation signaled performance poetry to be an under-researched topic in Australian Creative Writing research, and raised three areas for potential Creative Writing research investigations (performance poetry's position in academia, crafting poems through performance, and slam).

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