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The Haunting:
Poetry and Fashion
in the Creative Writing Workshop

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When I was a kid I was obsessed with Emily Dickinson. That is the first time that poetry and fashion collided for me. I used to dress up as Emily Dickinson and recite her poetry. I wore amazing white dresses with pleated and ruffled collars, just like hers. I made them myself, out of old fabric and vintage clothes. I wore my hair parted down the middle and pulled back. I didn’t leave my bedroom, except to go to school, and I used to get my mum to leave my dinner on a tray outside my room and talk to me through the doorjamb. Just like Emily Dickinson. It really annoyed my family. But I found it invigorating.

Since then, poetry and fashion have been my two vices. When I taught in secondary schools I used to write poetry in my exam supervisions. None of the boys knew because I would sit down the back. If I was lucky enough I would have the poem accepted for publication and put the money towards a pair of shoes or a dress. I’d ‘eBay’ on my lunch break—usually Betsey Johnson and spend my fortnightly earnings, usually on dresses and fascinators.

For me the connection between fashion and poetry is sensuality. I love the way a poem feels on my soft palette as I read it, just as I love the feel of a chiffon skirt grazing my thigh. Poetry and fashion are both imaginative creations. There is poetry in the swish of a dress, the fall of the fabric, the way it can hug a curve or skim the breasts.

Perhaps because of this philosophy I was invited to speak at the L’Oreal Poetry in Fashion week in Melbourne, Australia. In preparation, I decided to take this theme of poetry and fashion into my second year Creative Writing workshop and see what my students made of it. I took in a few pairs of Manolo Blahnik and Christian Louboutin shoes and they composed shape poems, in the style of John Hollander’s “Swan and Shadow” (Hollander, 35). They were amazing shoe-shaped poems that highlighted a specific kind of beauty and aesthetic that linked poetry and fashion. In the next class I told them about a poetry reading I had attended in Harajuku, Japan. I love the Gothic Lolita fashion in Tokyo. Girls wear crinolines and bonnets with big chunky shoes. At this poetry reading the performers recited Basho haikus. Their Gothic Lolita dresses...
had these haikus swirled around the hems of their skirts; painted on
in a flourish of fabric paint. They were just beautiful. I had the photos
I took of the poetry and fashion enlarged and put them up around the
classroom. I made copies of some of Basho’s haikus. My students then
wrote their own haikus and used fabric paint to paint their haikus on
clothing, tablecloths, pillowcases, placemats.

At the end of the semester, the students presented me with a framed
quotation from scholar Remy Saisselin’s article, ‘Baudelaire to Chris-
tian Dior: The Poetics of Fashion’: “A dress may be at some moment
of its existence, a poem of form, color and motion, and at a privileged
instant the dress may transform the wearer into a poetic apparition”
(Saisselin, 109).

Ever since then I have always taught poetry with fashion. I take
beautiful fabric, dresses, beads, feathers and shoes into class to inspire
and inform poetry. Students write through their senses. Over the past
two years they have written some striking poems on everything from
Gwen Stefani’s wedding dress to seeing the world through rose colored
Chanel glasses.

Poetry is fashionable because like fashion, it keeps redefining and
reinventing itself. And of course, they are both performative. I have
often said that I love a sequin as much as I love a sonnet. My students
often raid vintage clothing shops looking for inspiration. Some take
photos of beautiful clothing in expensive shops on their cell phones.
One student even wrote a poem in a dressing room while she was trying
on a Marc Jacobs dress.

This year I was given an entirely new challenge—first-year
Professional and Creative Writing students. In our first two-hour
workshop I asked them to tell me who or what inspired them as writers.
They looked at me blankly. One boy ventured, “I like Clint Eastwood.”
“Good start,” I said, “who else finds something or someone inspiring?”
A girl said, “Sometimes I think Kurt Vonnegut is a good writer.” “Great,
what about everyone else? Does anyone else have a film, piece of music,
painting or book that inspires them?” Silence. And then finally, a boy
says, “I inspire myself,” followed by a dozen nodding heads. Churning
out uninspired mini-narcissists is a sad and dangerous prospect for a
writing teacher. So I turned to Alexander McQueen for help. McQueen
was influenced by everything from razor-clam shells, to Joey’s green
jumper on an episode of Friends (McQueen in Bolton, 1). His collections
are narratives that take flight from the end of the runway.

Recently, I went to the Alexander McQueen Savage Beauty exhibition
at The Met. It was like being in utero. It was dark and the throbbing
music mimicked a heartbeat. The connecting rooms provided a womblike existence, and with a slew of other people, I was squashed down
the birth canal alongside several of McQueen’s creations. The first dress in the collection was made from ostrich feathers and glass microscope slides painted red to signify blood. Of feathers, McQueen has said, “I’m inspired by a feather... its graphics, its weightlessness, and its engineering” (McQueen in Bolton, 170). I took a variety of feathers into class; an enlarged photo of the dress from the VOSS collection (McQueen in Bolton, 143), a YouTube tribute to McQueen created by a fan (Ingenue) and some glass medical slides. We started to discuss McQueen and the ways in which, it seemed, that he could find inspiration from even the most ordinary or mundane things.

The students were interested in McQueen, but initially, this was mostly because of the widespread publicity of his suicide. And, of course, many of the girls were interested in McQueen because they had watched the Royal wedding on television and knew that Catherine Middleton’s dress was from the House of McQueen (Grace, 90). This was a great contrast as the students became interested in tracking some of the ‘darkness’ that they saw in his work, leading to discussions of the white lace bride dress that was seen to be a part of his legacy.

Students were given one of McQueen’s collections/inspirations to research for their first assessed project. My hope was three-fold. First, the students would engage in research to reinforce the ways in which the creative writing is built on strong and thorough research. Second, they would start to understand the importance of inspiration by seeing the kinds of things by which McQueen was influenced and then finally, in turn, to either be motivated by McQueen’s creativity or to find their own muse or series of inspirations for their writing. My students are mostly Generation Y-ers, so their sources are most often websites. I have provided them in the endnotes as most of the exciting scholarship on McQueen is still online; print publications always lag behind curators’ blogs, newspaper articles and online images and videos of McQueen’s runway shows.

Four students researched Jack the Ripper Stalks his Victims (1992), one of McQueen’s first collections from his Masters in Fashion Design at Central Saint Martin’s College of Art and Design in London. Although many curators have discussed the introduction of the “origami design” and the “structure” in this collection, it was the human hair that had been encapsulated in the clothing that made the greatest impression on both the students and me. McQueen stated, “The inspiration behind the hair came from Victorian times when prostitutes would sell theirs for kits of hair locks, which were bought by people to give to their lovers. I used it as my signature label with locks of hair in Perspex. In the early collections, it was my own hair” (McQueen in Bolton, 35). The students began to research Whitechapel in London’s East End in 1888
and while there was much conjecture about the identity of Jack the Ripper, the students began to discuss cobblestones, horse drawn carriages and the lettering in the infamous ‘Dear Boss’ letters (Rumbelow, 118). Students even began to bid on Victorian mourning jewellery on eBay, fascinated by the twisted locks of hair behind glass in a locket, or woven into a bracelet. The students in this group wrote a suite of poems based on photos of children in Victorian mourning lockets that they printed from eBay.

Edgar Allen Poe’s “shadowy fantasies” were said to have inspired McQueen’s designs—more specifically, The Fall of the House of Usher, “Annabel Lee” and “The Raven.” Three students who were completing a double major in Professional and Creative Writing/Literary Studies volunteered to research Poe, his work and reverberations in popular culture. They unearthed the famous episode of “The Raven” in The Simpsons (1990) which led them to discuss birds in film and literature more generally and the way birds are often viewed as menacing. They read Du Maurier’s The Birds and watched Hitchcock’s film of the same title. This led them back to McQueen’s collection, The Bird (1995). Suspected incest at the heart of The Fall of the House of Usher led to a discussion of the Australian film, Beautiful Kate (2009) and Annabel Lee was linked to Humbert Humbert’s first love in Lolita (1955). The students presented a case for why McQueen had called himself “The Edgar Allen Poe of Fashion” (Earle) and others had extended this to talk of him as “The Brothers Grimm of Fashion” (Carrter-Morley, n.p) They read part of the story of “Snow White and Rose Red” (Grimm, 73) which they saw representing some of the striking contradictions at the heart of McQueen’s collections. These students wrote a dark fairytale based on these sources, with a bird as its central motif.

McQueen had a personal connect to the Salem witch trials. His mother

who traces family trees, discovered that her bloodline leads back to a victim of the Salem witch trials who was hanged in the Puritan hysteria of 1692. The themes of witchcraft, paganism, and religious persecution played on the dark and angry side of McQueen’s creativity, but the way he articulated them ultimately ended in one of the season’s most deleterious cases of concept overwhelming clothes (Mower, 2007, 1).

This exercise in genealogy resulted in unearthing a connection to Elizabeth How, thus, McQueen called his collection, In Memory of Elizabeth How, 1692 (2007–8). The students read some of the online Salem Witch trial manuscripts via the University of Virginia’s website (Ray, 2002). They brought in maps of Salem village and printed copies from the trial transcripts. This led them to Arthur Miller’s The Crucible and a discussion of McCarthyism, AIDS, terrorism and even a discussion of

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bullying—all interpretations of these ‘witch’ texts. Some of the students started tracing their own family history online and presented parts of their family tree to the class, discussing their discoveries of mostly convict narratives. On a lighter note, much was made of Sabrina the Teenage Witch (Season 1, episode 23) and Bewitched Season 7, both set in Salem, Massachusetts. Some of the students began writing a series of sonnets based on concepts of the outsider, which they presented to the workshop.

*The Girl Who Lived in the Tree* (2008-9) was influenced by Indian designs and color as well as being

a dreamy quixotic fairy tale inspired by an elm tree in the garden of McQueen’s country home near Fairlight Cove in East Sussex. Influenced by the British Empire, it was one of McQueen’s most romantically nationalistic collections, albeit heavily tinged with irony and pastiche” (McQueen in Bolton, 14).

Three students teamed up and divided their research between the group. The first student found images of the Holi festival. He also linked this to the winner of Project Runway Australia, Johnny Schembri, whose collection was based on colorful photographs taken at this festival. The second student researched elm trees. She was taken with an article and photograph of Herbie the Elm Tree that stood for 217 years in Massachusetts. After becoming diseased it had to be cut down “but part of Herbie is now an electric guitar” (Silver, 1). The third student undertook Google image searches on Fairlight Cove, East Sussex, to get an understanding of the area. She even brought in an advertisement of houses for sale in Fairlight Cove and wrote a piece of short fiction imagining a family who had been living in one of these houses and why they had to sell it.

*The Highland Rape* (1995-6) and *Widows of Culloden* (2006-7) collections were chosen by a large group of students who were studying history as a minor sequence. None had ever studied Scottish history but were interested in McQueen’s statement that “What the British did there was nothing short of genocide” (McQueen in Bolton, 14). The students gave a mini history lecture to the rest of the students discussing the Jacobite risings, and they ended the presentation with photos they had found of McQueen and Sarah Jessica Parker in matching tartan outfits. They discussed the way in which tartan denotes a person’s clan and is an important part of displaying one’s identity and allegiances.

The students and I discussed the way in which *Highland Rape* has often been misinterpreted as misogynistic, condoning and glorifying rape of women. This is because some of the general public missed the greater metaphor at play: “Shown on semi-naked, blood-spattered models that staggered down a runway strewn with heather and bracken, the clothes

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were intended to counter romantic images of Scotland” (Entwhistle, 202). Equally, the real widows of Culloden had lost their husbands in the battle of Culloden Moor. I added to the presentation the image of the striking headdress with antlers poking through bridal lace, created by McQueen (Bolton, 86) and played the runway show which included Kate Moss as a “state of the art hologram” (Mower, 2006, 1) in Widows of Culloden (Ingenue, n.p). I explained how the effect was achieved by an optical device known as ‘Pepper’s Ghost’ and was first employed for a production of Charles Dickens’ The Haunted Man (Frankel, 1). Unfortunately, noone was keen on researching Dickens’ text. However, these students chose to write a variety of ghost stories centered on famous historical battles.

Finally, given my penchant for shoes, in the final week I discussed some of the shoes McQueen designed. Of a particularly artistic pair, he stated, “I got the idea for them from H.R. Giger, and seeing Alien, and then I got a sculptor to make up a shoe so that it looked like it grew right out of the foot. Sick, ain’t it?” (Deeny, 1) But for all of this inspiration, McQueen hanged himself. The students found his comment on his Sarabande (2007) collection revealing. In an interview in Harper’s Bazaar McQueen explained, “Remember Sam Taylor-Wood’s dying fruit? Things rot… I used flowers because they die. My mood was darkly romantic at the time” (Deeny, 1).

McQueen reaches beyond the grave and continues to inspire people. He lives on in many of my first-year Professional and Creative Writing students who now, when asked about their inspirations, can answer: elm trees, cobblestones, Scottish history, Salem, the Holi festival, birds, Giger’s paintings and, of course, Alexander McQueen.

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Works Cited


Frankel, Susannah, "The Ghost of Kate Moss Looms Above McQueen Show." The Independent, March 4, 2006.


Beginning: An Autoethnography
Lauren DiPaula

My feet hurt. Blisters popping out on either side, rubbed against my new shoes and now bleeding. I'm sitting on the blue carpeted floor of the conference center dwarfed by man-sized helium-deprived, spidery orange balloons, writing in my half-full pocket-sized hard-backed spiral black journal. In the photograph the journal will blend in with my black pants and rain jacket. I will look pensive and posed, my chin resting on my knee, my red hair falling over a brow furrowed in thought and into my eyes. It will be a portrait of me at 27, the PhD candidate, dissecting my entry into composition with a ball point pen. Posed and pensive.

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The San Francisco-bought shoes were not yet broken in, and my hair wasn't usually red. I had asked the hairdresser back home to make me look sophisticated and new because I was headed West to meet famous people. She said, “Anyone I would know?” I paused, blushed, and corrected myself: “famous English professors.” Then I smiled.

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Dressed and ready to walk to the Moscone Center and my first CCCC, I spoke with the hotel concierge, who gave me a map and traced the quickest way. Once I finally found the Moscone Centers—there were three—I walked around the block a few times, lost. And when I made my way to the elevator, I was stopped twice, by two security guards. So I told them shyly I was working at the registration desk, and they slid back the partition to let me in.

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Instructions for Newcomers Working the Registration Desk at C's
(Or, my physical introduction to the field.)
Become slightly overwhelmed when the first rush comes.
Become fully overwhelmed when you see that another two big names came by and you had no idea who they were until they were already gone.
If people ask you where Hall D is, tell them you have no idea.
Breathlessly tell your classmates you saw—you spoke to—those two big names. They will tell others that you think you were bragging. Combat this by breathlessly telling the next set of classmates you saw another classmate and his wife. Fame is a matter of perspective.
Blush when you are told (by an attendee) that you are currently standing in Hall D.

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