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Smooth as marble, furious as a tiger: applying theories of disruption and deception in short story writing

Abstract:

This paper demonstrates how students in a short story writing course at an Australian university have used narrative techniques drawn from philosophy, literature and science – such as disruption (Badiou), epiphany (Joyce), and paradigm shift (Kuhn). These writers have shaped and crafted their work using the plot structure of Freytag’s pyramid but have ‘bowerbirded’ these theories of disruption in order to produce award-winning and publishable short stories. The paper analyses four stories in depth in order to demonstrate how writers can improve their short story narrative techniques, but also to offer pedagogical strategies for creative writing teachers of short stories.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

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Introduction

This paper emerges from a Writing the Short Story course I taught for many years at the University of the Sunshine Coast. The course has been remarkably successful, with Creative Writing students winning prestigious international literary awards – including the 2023 Oodgeroo Noonuccal Prize and the 2020 Kuracca Prize for Australian Literature – as well as other regional and national prizes. In addition, stories produced in the course have been published in leading Australian literary journals. What these successful stories have in common is that they erupt onto the page and tear the fabric of perceived reality, using three analogies borrowed from various scientific and religious theories, a creative writing method called ‘bowerbirding’ whereby a writer collects useful and shiny things to help hone their craft, without claiming expertise in the subject of those things or using them strictly within their original context (Brady, 2000; Brien, 2015; Williams, 2015). In the course, students are encouraged to write a short story using these frameworks, and to submit the resulting final draft to a competition or a literary journal.

To illustrate how these frameworks work in practice, this paper focuses on four student stories in detail. Each demonstrates different ways of applying these strategies; consequently, many of the writers have gone on to significant literary recognition.

The first example comes from Yasaman Bagheri, a student in the short story course, whose assignment told the story of a child refugee detained in a hotel overlooking Brisbane’s Story Bridge. The story challenges the glittery facade of a seemingly vibrant city, and is reminiscent of Ursula Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” (1973), where a community’s happiness is juxtaposed with – and dependent on – the suffering of an imprisoned child. In Bagheri’s story however, no-one walks away. It claims that everyone is complicit in the dehumanisation and persecution of boat refugees. “The Story Bridge” won a Future Leaders national prize and was published in *Climate Health and Courage* in 2020.

Adam Brannigan, who also took the course, has been published extensively. Brannigan’s submission, “Great Grandmother Arrabrilya” (winner of the 2021 Kuracca Prize for Australian Literature) mourns the loss of the author’s Indigenous language and resorts to “whimsical pre-invasion idylls” in order to encircle the void of an obliterated past. By inventing a past and a language, the author reclaims First Nations narratives in an inventive way (2021).

Another student from the course, Dakota Brown writes in “Lungs on Fire” of a schoolgirl who develops a serious lung condition, which neither her peers nor her parents take seriously. The story takes an unexpected metaphysical and fabulist (magic realist) turn when the girl metamorphoses into a raging bushfire and takes revenge on humanity for not believing the seriousness of her condition (Brown, 2020). “Lungs on Fire” was a runner-up for the 2020 RD Walshe Writing for the Environment Award and the judges praised Brown for her imaginative vision of the Earth’s future: “the Earth is in good hands if the sentiments expressed in these

pieces are indicative of the attitudes of our young in relation to caring for the Earth” (Smith, 2020, last paragraph).

Finally, Katerina Gibson’s story “Fertile Soil” (winner of the 2021 Commonwealth Short Story Prize, Pacific region and later published in a collection of their stories), appears at first to be a simple story about student day-to-day life in Brisbane, but soon takes a surreal, uncanny turn with strange encounters around the city. The story destabilises conventional ideas of identity, and issues of displacement, colonisation, invasion, and historical grief emerge from these everyday personal events, and “unpicks the stitches of gender and genre” (Paull, 2022, paragraph 1).

Short story as deception

To understand how these four stories work, we can trace the methods they use to three key concepts. First, students were able to bowerbird Alain Badiou’s notion of an ‘event’ – “subtraction” from the encyclopaedia of the status quo. Second, each short story initiates a conceptual shift and disrupts perceived cultural, political or other paradigms by way of what Thomas Kuhn calls an anomaly (Oberheim et al, 2024). Thirdly, this shift is expressed by way of an ‘epiphany,’ or spiritual awakening of one or several of the characters, or vicariously by the reader (Joyce, 1944, p. 216). These elements have been deliberately framed by the students within Gustave Freytag’s (1985) pyramid structure or narrative formula (p. 114).

The students also worked within the traditional conventions of the short as taught in the course. Edgar Allan Poe (1846) suggests that a short story should be read in one sitting, creating one single effect so that no word is wasted (p.163). Brander Matthews (1885) adds that an effective short story must have ‘compression’ and ‘ingenuity’ (p. 73). The French realist Gustave Flaubert (1922) also suggests that brevity is essential and that every word should count, stating “we must craft a story with ‘le mot juste,’ [the right word] in every instance” (p. 5). Ernest Hemingway and Raymond Carver also advocate for tightly crafted minimalist writing, where “every word had better be the right one” (Carver, 1981, paragraph 10). The power of the short story, however, is not solely in its brevity or even its skilful minimalist crafting, but in its *deception*. For Hemingway (1990), a story is deceptive, like the tip of an iceberg, with most of its substance hidden beneath the apparent meaning (p. 528). For Carver (1981), a word must do more than its “seemingly innocuous” denotative intention:

It’s possible, in a poem or short story, to write about common-place things and objects using common-place but precise language, and to endow those things – a chair, a window, a curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman’s earring – with immense, even startling power. It is possible to write a line of seemingly innocuous dialogue and have it send a chill along the reader’s spine. (paragraph 9))

Flaubert’s insistence on brevity is also deceptive: he insists that a story should appear polished on the surface but hot like lava underneath, or else like a pouncing tiger, suggesting that something much larger is at work subtextually: “lisse comme un marbre et furieux comme un

tigre [smooth as marble and furious as a tiger]]” and “chaud en dessous et splendide à la surface [hot underneath and shiny on the surface]” (Byatt, 2002, paragraph 12).

Freytag (1895) suggests that the structure of a short story should follow a recognisable pattern that a reader can anticipate – that of initial crisis, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution – as if the story is a problem that needs to be solved (p. 114). But such a narrative structure depends on a deviation in the usual order of things. The initial crisis of a story occurs because something happens out of the ordinary – an event, anomaly, disruption or a rupture in the fabric of being.

Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” (1894) exemplifies Poe’s, Hemingway’s, Carver’s and Flaubert’s requirements: it has a single effect, is compressed, has no extraneous material and uses *les mots justes*. More than that, beneath its deceptively simple surface lies lava bubbling up and a tiger ready to spring out of its caged structure. The 688-word story follows Freytag’s pyramid structure closely: it opens with an initiating crisis as Mrs Mallard, a happily married Southern woman, is told – gently, because of her weak heart – that her husband has died. The rising action mirrors her literal climb upstairs to grieve in solitude, culminating in the climax: her slow, transformative realisation of freedom and the possibility of a life lived for herself. When her relatives call her back down, fearing for her health, she descends the staircase like a goddess in triumph – what seems to be the falling action and denouement, leading the reader to expect her liberation. However, in a plot twist, Mallard’s husband is alive and walks through the door – the shock causing her to have a heart attack. Misinterpreting the event, the doctor explains that she was so happy to see her husband alive that she died of the “joy that kills” (Chopin, 1894, p. 30).

These plot devices can help make the story work, but in essence its transcendence lies in what is *not* said – the lava bubbling under the surface of the story. “The Story of an Hour” is about entrapment in a patriarchal system from which there is no escape except death. The cutting dark irony of the last words, “she died of the joy that kills,” is a chilling and smug misdiagnosis of cultural oppression that encircles a black hole in the narrative from which a tiger leaps out at us.

This effect is achieved through the interplay of three analogies - paradigm shift, event theory, and epiphany. The paradigm shift is the exposure of marriage as an oppressive patriarchal institution; the ‘event’ is the husband’s death that heralds a new awareness of freedom; and the epiphany is the realisation that the protagonist, released of her husband’s domination, can live freely.

Short story as epiphany

At the heart of an effective short story is the epiphany – a device coined from a religious context by James Joyce (1994), who defined it as a “sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself” (p. 211). For example, in “Araby” (1914) one of Joyce’s early stories in *The Dubliners* collection, the scales

of romantic illusion fall from the young boy's eyes at the end of the story, resulting in this epiphany: "Gazing up into the darkness, I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger" (Joyce, 1996, p. 35).

Other well-known and often anthologised short stories also centre on moments of epiphany. John Updike's "A&P" (1961) chronicles a similar crashing of naively and misogynistically formed chivalric illusion at the end of the story when the protagonist makes what he thinks is a moral stand and quits his job on principle for the freedom of the girls to wear bathing suits in a convenience store. He is not only rejected by the girls he is trying to impress, but is not even noticed by them. His epiphany is dark: "[the shop manager's] face was dark grey and his back stiff, as if he'd just had an injection of iron, and my stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter" (Updike, 1961, p. 22).

In Chopin's story, the epiphanous moment is positive and occurs in the middle of the story as the climax, when she realises with joy that her husband's death means freedom from the marriage system:

There would be no-one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. (Chopin, 1894, p. 30)

Such epiphanies are more than self-realisations; they are tears in the fabric of a carefully woven civilisation, an exposure of a black hole underneath the illusion of solid ground. The curtain has been torn down. The power of that epiphanous sentence passes judgement on all people and systems that impose a 'powerful will' upon others – in this case, marriage.

To write a story that achieves this moment of enlightenment requires the writer to locate and write into a pivotal moment of epiphany – whether drawn from their own life, observed in others, or distilled from an embryonic self-realisation – and chronicle this shift in consciousness.

Short story as paradigm shift

To deepen one's understanding of what an epiphany is, and therefore write a short story that can effectively use epiphany with a powerful subtext, writers may consider using another analogy – this time one borrowed from the philosophy of science.

Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) describes a paradigm as a shared intellectual framework or "disciplinary matrix": a narrative, a worldview, a consensus of how things are. Over time, however, anomalies or discrepancies may unsettle that paradigm and disturb the ideological bias of the frame, causing a crisis (Roberts, 2000, p. 60). Such crises are eventually resolved by a revolutionary change in worldview, in which the now-deficient paradigm is replaced by a new one that accounts for those anomalies. Kuhn points to a historical

scientific example of this – the paradigm of the geocentric universe. A view so strongly held by the mainstream authorities of the day that it was blasphemy punishable by death to think otherwise. A watertight scientific reasoning held that belief as truth, until rebel scientists, including Galileo Galilei, began to see anomalies in the paradigm (Hannam, 2009, p. 329). A philosophical epistemological example of paradigm shift is the one Plato proposes in his allegory of the cave. The mainstream worldview/reality/truth is seen and unquestioned by men chained to the back of the cave, but the one who turns away realises that this so-called reality is an illusion – a constructed worldview comprised of projected shadows of puppets on the back wall by puppeteer reality-controllers. The one who turns away crawls out of the cave to witness another, more real reality. In doing so, he undergoes both an epiphany and a paradigm shift, after which his mission is to return to convince the prisoners at the back of the cave that their paradigm is false (McNamara, 2024, p. 10).

Kuhn cites many examples of such paradigm shifts, the most striking being the move from a flat-earth to a spherical-earth paradigm, and from a Copernican worldview, grounded in teleological and religious explanations of the universe, to a Newtonian worldview, grounded in mechanistic ones. I ask students in the class to think of more contemporary examples of worldviews, assumptions, or narratives that need to be unsettled and questioned, such as scientific, political, moral, or social paradigms. In this context, what should interest the writer is the anomaly – the process of enlightenment, those moments of unsettling when the paradigm is questioned and begins unravelling because of a discrepancy or a pinprick in the fabric of ‘truth,’ and the ensuing destabilisation and epiphanous ‘AHA’ moment. This, I argue, is the lodestone at the centre of a successful story – the deconstruction or demystification of dissection of a fixed paradigm.

Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” reveals traditional marriage as an oppressive institution. Yet this view is incommensurate with the characters of the story who make the actions of Mrs Mallard fit their own paradigm – that she must have died of joy to see her husband alive after all. ‘Incommensurability’ is another Kuhnian term whereby proponents of competing paradigms cannot understand each other due to differences in underlying assumptions and can thus lead to incompatible world views and communication difficulties. The paradigm shift comes slowly to Mrs Mallard herself as she is surprised and at first resistant to the joy she feels at her husband’s supposed death, but there is no paradigm shift for the other characters in the story who remain fixed in a false belief system.

Freytag’s pyramid outlines these stages of paradigm shift neatly: the initial crisis produces an anomaly in the paradigm, the conflict intensifies and the tear widens (rising action), the falsity or inadequacy of the paradigm is revealed (climax), and a new paradigm emerges (resolution). In all of the case studies discussed in this section – Chopin, Plato and geo-centrism – the mainstream world does not accept the new paradigm as incommensurate, and continues to interpret the world as before in bizarre ways: Mrs Mallard is said to have died of the joy that kills; the chained prisoners in Plato’s cave execute the man who has an incommensurate paradigm to theirs; Galileo is excommunicated from the Church.

Short story as event

Not only is a short story *about* an event in the normal sense of the word, but it *is* an event – a deeper type of event, which Badiou calls an ‘événement’ (2005, p, 173). In order to explore the *gravitas* of a short story even further where an epiphanous moment is extended to a seismic shift in culture, I suggest the use of the ‘event’ in a philosophic and political sense. For Badiou, an event is revolution and social change, a disruption or rupture of the normal, “a radical break from the repetition of a present existence, an accepted situation of bodies and languages” (Sandhya, 2020, p.23). In *Being and Event* (2005), Badiou argues that an *événement* occurs haphazardly. It does not make sense in terms of the accepted paradigm or dominant ideology, but becomes an unexpected intervention which changes the rules of the situation. This allows that particular event to be visible. Similar to an anomaly that heralds a paradigm shift, an event erupts drastically on the scene.

An event is something akin to a rip in the fabric of being, and/or of the social order. It is traumatic for the mainstream, and exhilaratingly transformative for participants. Events are so radical as they consist both of destruction of the existing order and definition of a new order. This said, the point is to puncture the organisation of reality. Existing hierarchies and value-statements must be destroyed, or falsified, by the event. Such an act is taken to disrupt reality. Every event has its roots in a particular excluded part (McLaverty-Robinson, 2014)

Badiou gives several historical examples of events. These are scattered across the fields of politics, art and science. For example, according to Badiou, Schoenberg’s invention of tonal music was an event, as was Cantor’s formulation of set theory in maths and the emergence of modern art (Clark, 2023, p.1). Other examples are falling in love, the Russian Revolution, the Maoist movement, the Paris revolt of May 1968 in France and the Arab Spring. He includes any group excluded and de-recognised in the situation who challenges the dominant discourse and the state. What Kuhn terms ‘scientific revolutions’ are also examples of events.

Thinking about a humble short story in this expansive way may help to find its larger significance. The event erupts in secret invisibility. “The Story of an Hour” heralds an event – a new way of thinking about marriage. The event is Mrs Mallard’s secret awakening in her room, just as the event in “A&P” is the end of a way of thinking for the boy, realised inwardly. The epiphany in Le Guin’s short story “Those Who Walk Away From Omelas” is the realisation that the suffering child is necessary for utopia. The event is not the discovery of the imprisoned child but the exodus of those who walk silently away.

A writer accesses the event though writing about an epiphany that disrupts the paradigmatic status quo. Usually this can be accessed by freewriting prompts such as “I have never told anyone this but...” or “the secret I cannot share with anyone is this...” or “What event shook your world? Why?” Freewriting may also unearth the truth of the event. Stephen King suggests an archaeological analogy of writing as digging and discovering artifacts buried in our unconscious (2001, pp. 163-164). Undetected until we unearth them, significant things are

waiting to be discovered through the act of digging – unbidden truths that we discover about ourselves and the world by writing.

The power of a short story, however, often lies in what is not said. Minimalist techniques, such as Hemingway’s iceberg theory, serve to omit the actual ‘event’, paradigm shift, or epiphany, and give power to the hidden *événement* that crashes out of the jungle like a tiger or erupting volcano:

If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. (Hemingway, 1932, p.192)

“Hills Like White Elephants” is the classic example I use in the course in order to demonstrate how to avoid the elephant in the room (pun intended, perhaps not only by me but Hemingway himself). The unmentionable *événement* in this story is the decision to have an abortion, which is never mentioned by either protagonist, and many readers do not guess on a surface reading that this is the subject of the conversation. The marble surface is smoothed over by euphemism and platitudes: ‘It’s really an awfully simple operation, Jig,’ the man said. ‘It’s not really an operation at all’ (Hemingway, 1955, p. 72). Writers in the course have adopted this technique to good effect. Brown, for example, does not mention climate change denial in her story, but that is its main theme. If, for example, we wish to write about an event like the sinking of the ‘Titanic’, we could describe the slight shuddering of the table, or the glass of wine on the table shimmering, and omit the actual event. In all these cases, the short story achieves its force not by naming the event, but by allowing the unsaid to erupt through subtext, silence and implication.

Student applications

This section will delve into how these methods and analogies have been applied in the student stories. In Gibson’s piece, the ‘event’ begins on the surface with a party, which precipitates, both bodily and mentally, a dissociation in the protagonist, where she has *déjà vu*, does not identify with the constructed person others see her to be, and another reality erupts, leading to a paradigm shift: “It was instances like this that brought on me a peculiar dawning, or feeling, of erasure” (Gibson, 2021, paragraph 9). At the end, the protagonist experiences an epiphany and a partial resolution, arriving at a form of acceptance:

As I climbed up the stairs to the stranger’s apartment, the most unusual feeling came over me. I began to feel as if I’d walked this way before. As if, despite knowing I hadn’t met anyone at the party, I was about to catch up with old friends. When I rang the doorbell a man I’d never met answered it, but I knew, as I looked at him, already, the smell of his neck, the taste of him. An odd lightness overcame me, like I was finally adjusting to the altitude of the place. I felt, as I rubbed my thumb over my fingertips, as if their prints would dissolve. (Gibson, 2021, second-last paragraph)

The understated and compressed story jars, disrupts and unsettles a glossy surface reality. One of the judges of the prestigious Commonwealth Short Story award commented that they “loved this story for its layers, the way it speaks of place and displacement, colonisation, invasion and grief, and yet does so with such a light touch that it is also simply a story about *deja vu*, or the stuff that makes up a life” (Books + Publishing, 2021, paragraph 2).

Brannigan’s story “Great Grandmother Arrabrilya” is ostensibly a nostalgic elegy about his grandmother and the judges praise the author for the way he “weaves First Nations language and culture seamlessly as he takes his readers on a lyric journey into a world that... defies linearity and the finality of death with its cyclic rhythms that rise and fall in ancient sequential motions that honour both Country and ancestors” (Clemens et al, 2021, paragraph 1). However, the story also disrupts the conventional form and narrative of a First Nations pastoral narrative by using postmodern devices of metafiction and deconstruction to imagine and construct the event, an epiphany of a deep connection to the natural world that is now only possible through story.

The story begins with a quest – a complex call back to Country to rediscover lost words and lost culture from his (constructed avatar) grandmother, Arrabrilya: “She is old beyond all ages. She is beautiful above all beauty. She is wiser than all my wisdoms and the wisdoms of my people. She has had many names, given to her by many other dreamers” (Brannigan, 2021, np). The paradigm shift and epiphany occur subtly. Brannigan contemplates bodily transformation in union with the natural world:

I think about my ending, and about where my *gnarun* will travel when my brown skin goes cold. Maybe I will be a *tdkil-tdkil*, brief and colourful, chasing each other through the seasons. Or I might be a leaf on a branch full of other leaves, dancing gently in the bright blue breeze. I could be a lizard, bursting with laughter at being tickled by *illiwa*, or a brief *yera*. Perhaps I might be something that abides a longer while, such as a big old gnarly *burrinin*, mellow and green. Or could it be that I will be a round stone in the deep part of the creek, solemn and singing quietly to myself. That would be good, too. (Brannigan, 2021, third last paragraph)

Brannigan writes the story in a way that leaves the door open for what they call a “secret reading”, which they feel the critics have missed. The Indigenous language they use, for example, is more emotionally than historically accurate, more a bricolage or collage of sounds. Language needs to be fictively recreated where none exists or has been erased by colonial invasion. Even the title of the story is a fictional made-up word. A key component of the short story course was the focus on Flaubert’s “le mot juste” and sometimes, Brannigan (2023) claims, the *mot juste* is the made-up one: “Arrabrilya” or “Nurwandana” or a “tdkil-tdkil” (Brannigan, 2021, third last paragraph).

Bagheri’s “Story Bridge” chronicles the life of a young refugee girl (based on the author’s own experience of incarceration) who arrives illegally by boat to Australia and is detained in Nauru for six years before finally being imprisoned in a hotel in Brisbane, and whose only view out of her window is the iconic Story Bridge.

Six long years of you-will-never-this, you-will-never-that, you-have-no-rights, you-are-nobody, ‘you’ and always a big “NO” in front of her. The ‘you’s’ inside a detention centre on a 21-square kilometre island called Nauru all rush into her head. How can they expect her to be happy and forget? And it always goes back to the nineteenth of July. If you seek asylum by boat, you will not make Australia home. (Bagheri, 2020, p. 177)

The event is not the absurd series of detentions she endures, culminating in the most absurd detention of all – in a “luxury” hotel on the Brisbane River, but what seems a tangential “insignificant” news item she sees on TV, where a nine-month-old is found dead on a Gold Coast beach. The baby’s family was homeless, and this triggers a crisis in the protagonist:

“They could have been living in a house. Do you know how much it has cost for me to be in Nauru for six years?”
 The nurse shakes her head.
 “500,000 dollars a year,” she cries. “How many houses can be built with that much money?”
 “Oh, darling, I’m sorry.”
 “I just don’t understand. Why are billions of dollars spent to make someone like me end up in a mental health hospital while some people don’t even have a house to sleep in?” (Bagheri, 2020, p. 180)

The epiphany hits her at the end:

“It’s like cutting someone’s legs and then buying them a bicycle made of gold”. The grand narrative and empty words of the politician and the state media are stripped away as she juxtaposes these two realities presented:
 “You are safe, darling.”
 Safe? Safe like strip searches, like guards everywhere, like the day they beat you and no human rights, no women’s rights, no children’s rights, no refugees’ rights could stop them.
 “You are safe. Close your eyes.” (Bagheri, 2020, p. 180)

The epiphany is not a happy one, but rather a Freytag resolution:

In her dreams the narrative is changed. She is in control. She is bigger than the guards and that man. They become tiny miniature dolls. She can put them away in a box. These are the perks of the medication: you will lose your mind for the ease of yourself. *You will have to learn how to carry all these broken pieces together with you, walking on the streets of a city you don’t measure up to. If they can’t grow a heart, it’s best you lose your mind.* (Bagheri, 2020, p. 182)

“The box” referred to in the above passage is the story itself. In that sense, catharsis and resolution come first through the writing, and later through the enabling of her voice to be heard in publication and in the publicity generated by the award. Ultimately the story is about the incommensurability of clashing paradigms, the “a rip in the fabric of being, and/or of the social

order” (McLavery-Robinson, 2014, p.175). “She looks at the bridge through the window of a hotel, The Oakwood Hotel & Apartments. But how does the bridge look at the hotel?” (Bagheri, 2021, p. 175).

The bridge referred to is the iconic Story Bridge that spans the Brisbane River and unites East and West Brisbane – the largest steel span bridge in Australia, designed and constructed by Australians – named after John Douglas Story, a visionary who advocated for its construction in the 1930s.

Brown’s story “Lungs on Fire” disrupts the deceptively smooth surface of Australian life and the story crackles across the page like wildfire. In their review of the story, *Courier Mail* correspondent Matt Collins (2020) claims that “a young Coast writer has used the emotional heartache her family endured during the Peregrine fires to pen an award-winning story (paragraph 1). Yes, this event was the catalyst for the story, but Brown’s surrealist narrative does not mention the Peregrine fires or family heartbreak or climate change denial, and is instead about a schoolgirl in Perth who complains about her lungs being on fire. No-one believes that her ailment is real, and she has an inexplicable need for revenge: “I am furious and on the pursuit of revenge, but at the same time terrified and alone. My whole-body burns, my hairs prickle, my lungs scorch and my throat’s dry... I scream but nothing comes out” (Brown, 2020, np).

The discrepancy in the perceived reality or ‘grand narrative’ is that her health condition is denied and misinterpreted (coincidentally much like Mrs Mallard’s in “The Story of an Hour”), and the narrative is disrupted when she bursts out of character and becomes a wild bush fire. The *événement* occurs when she becomes a shapeshifter and takes “[r]evenge, for their unappreciation, their disrespect, of what I have given them. Of what they, themselves, are ... for their unwillingness to learn. (Brown, 2020, 9 paragraphs from the end).

Suddenly, I am the fire: taller than the trees, lighter than the leaves, the only bright ball in this pitch-black sea of bush. I move fast though I feel nothing. Everything disintegrates before me and this satisfaction makes me travel stronger. Quicker. I am glowing as magnificently as the sun: red, orange and white all at once. My body burns like nothing I’ve ever felt, every tendon and hair are alight. But I do not care, the fact I am accomplishing what I came here for fuels me and I push on in a rage of glory. (Brown, 2020, 7 paragraphs from the end)

The “elephant in the room” is human destruction and disregard for the natural environment, and human civilisation’s marble surface smoothed over by euphemism and platitudes. Similar to “Hills Like White Elephants” the main subject of the story is not mentioned directly.

The hidden part of the iceberg in this story is the the emotional heartache the writer and their family endured during the Peregrine fires” and beneath that, climate change and human carelessness and indifference. Brown writes a disjunctive, displaced, disruptive narrative about a girl on the other side of the country who has an invisible health condition that is not believed

until it erupts and spills out onto the page, and “fuels” the fire, the story and the writer (Collins, 2020). The story disrupts and disturbs in that it portrays a protagonist who takes delight in the revengeful destruction of the environment in her avatar as wildfire.

In all these cases, each of the four students’ short stories aims to disrupt a paradigmatic truth and allow the lava to flow over the smooth surface, the tiger to pounce through the hidden thicket. And in all these cases the incommensurability of the new paradigm is suppressed by the antagonists – the old guard – who suppress the new. It is the reluctant protagonist who undergoes the epiphany of paradigm shift. A personal epiphanous experience can be examined in the writing of a short story by challenging the ideological underpinnings of belief systems, deconstructing one’s experience and asking why a particular moment is significant – how it “dissects the myths of our time” (Coetzee, 1988, p. 3), reflects a deeper shift in consciousness of the age or culture, and deconstructs cultural assumptions. As writers, we might not be able to answer this – or even recognise it in our stories – but we can sense a larger significance of an event or life-changing moment while we are writing. Mrs Mallard’s plight is not hers alone but echoes the cries of women at the time to be “free” (Chopin, 1894, p. 30) and exposes marriage as a patriarchal system of oppression. Our role as short story writers is to embody such events, to document paradigm shifts and to articulate epiphanous moments.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on one way of structuring writing a short story – the rising action/falling action Freytag model – but it must be acknowledged that this model has limitations, and has been seen as phallocentric (Williams, 2012, p. 2020) and masculosexual (Alison, 2019, p. 17). Jane Alison’s *Meander, Spiral, Explode - Design and Pattern in Narrative* (2019) critiques the traditional Freytag “dramatic arc [where] a situation arises, grows tense, reaches a peak, subsides” and proposes other possibilities: cyclical and intricate nature-based patternings, such as meandering, spiralling, exploding, networking and fractal structures. The structural method described in this paper is therefore one way to think of a story among many and students have since experimented with other forms in this class, creating stories that are cyclical, image-based, transmedial, multi-viewpoint and reader-interactive.

Yet the fundamentals remain. In order to write a good short story one needs to be able to write well: to craft, to use *les mots justes*, to compress and to locate events that are significant and that resonate beyond our personal experience. Our secret task – and this may be unconscious to us at the time, too – is paradigm shifting, disrupting the fabric of perceived realities and cultural ideologies, taking off our ideological glasses, dissecting myths, deconstructing, allowing the invisible to speak and allowing the event to erupt. How we do this is to sense something bigger than us beneath our writing, by being sensitive to anomaly, incommensurability, learning to recognise an *événement* underneath the smooth surface of our writing. Then a short story can allow a tiger to crash through its undergrowth, can let lava bubble through the marble surface of our words.

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