

Flinders University

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***The Role of the Examiner: Scholar, Reviewer, Critic,  
Judge, Mentor***

**1 Introduction**

The writer is like a foetus trying to do gymnastics.  
- Samuel Beckett

Samuel Beckett's wry pronouncement about writers points to the contortions that they undergo and the anxieties that they face, whether their talent is developed or emerging. Higher degree candidates, in an effort to become professional, train in the expectation that after a few years they will be able to perform competently, if not to an Olympic standard. Most (although not all) are at the beginning of their artistic careers and need knowledgeable supervisors and sympathetic peers to help them in the process of articulating, analysing and defending their practice.

This self-reflexivity might not be natural for everyone. Writers' methods of composition vary, and the self-consciousness that careful revision demands can occur at different junctures. Nevertheless, the fact that the candidate-supervisor relationship develops over time means that there is scope for mentors to learn how to tailor their editorial comments to particular students and for those students to learn how to accept that advice.

Examiners, however, do not have a relationship with the candidate that develops over time. They are in a very different position and, consequently, have different expectations. In fact, creative arts' examiners have multiple identities compared to their traditional academic colleagues. They are at once scholars, reviewers, critics, judges and mentors as they negotiate their way through the plural discourses that the creative arts thesis has become. The manner in which they perform their tasks can influence both novices' career prospects and the literary culture in general. At the same time, they remain guardians of the establishment, accreditors who decide whether a higher degree should be awarded. Since creative writing is a relatively new discipline in the academy, its standards have been scrutinised closely over the past ten years. Standards for research higher degrees in general, however, are now under review as well 'in response to demands for greater transparency and accountability' (Lawson, Marsh and Tansley 32). This movement to ensure quality control at a national level will eventually, no doubt, flow back to include the creative arts.

This paper theorises what examiners do by first considering what the creative arts thesis is and then how that determines examiners' multiple

identities. Next it examines the practical difficulties that examiners face, confronted by innovation and variety, and effective thesis strategies that can result from an understanding of the dynamics of the examination process. Finally, it offers cautions to postgraduates who must realise that they have responsibilities to examiners who comprise their final academic audience.

## 2 The Creative Arts Thesis: The Nature of the Beast

The new type of higher degree thesis that requires self-reflexivity, creativity and experimentation as well as scholarship is a fascinating hybrid creature with a claw firmly embedded in two bodies - the arts and academia. To switch biological metaphors, we are in the process of defining a new species of thesis within the genus of the MA or PhD. Examiners have to recognise the genus first and then try to identify the characteristics that individual examples of the new creative arts species have in common, which confirms their membership in the group. The variations and innovations, of course, demonstrate their originality; these differences are what make them memorable.

It is a truism in the creative writing discipline that authors need to be aware of their audience no matter what their genre; the same applies to higher degree candidates. If the creative arts thesis is a polyphonic discourse, then it has multiple audiences. Who are these readers/listeners? The candidate herself, the supervisors and the public (whom candidates aspire to reach through publication or performance) are all addressed. The final audience in the accreditation process itself, however, comprises the examiners who are gatekeepers - gatekeepers who ask themselves questions, if not explicitly, then implicitly. Fortunately, these questions are predictable, born of academic training; they condition what examiners expect. What shape does a PhD have? What does 'an original contribution to knowledge' (as university statutes require) and/or to culture signify and does the thesis in front of us provide the answers? Students (as well as their supervisors) need to be aware of these expectations at some point in their candidacy.

Although we can presume that they have been selected for their specialties in particular and their acumen in general, examiners of this new creature cannot be expected to bring the same wealth of experience they might have in straight academic evaluation. Of necessity they have been learning on the job, developing ad hoc methods of reading when little or no guidelines were supplied in the discipline's infancy, and extrapolating from what they have gleaned supervising their own students. At the beginning of the new millennium, a collective professional memory has evolved, however, much of it now available in the articles published in *TEXT* and other contemporary journals.

I will consider the nature of the exegesis briefly because that, and its relationship to the creative product, in my experience often determines whether a PhD thesis passes or fails. Criticism of the exegetical component has considered how it positions writers within the culture at large and how it accords with the research culture and ethos of the university as a commentary that interprets or guides (Brady 2000, Dawson 1999, Krauth 2002, Kroll 1999, 2002, 2004, Stewart 2001, Taylor 2000, Woods 2000, et al). The *Oxford English Dictionary* explains that 'exegesis' derives from the Greek meaning 'to interpret, guide and lead' (1984: 921).

Although not applied to Scripture any more, the term still can denote 'an explanatory note, a gloss' or 'an expository discourse' (921).

Postgraduates are first commentators on their own original texts, guiding their readers to understanding. Examiners, however, are higher authorities, if not on a theological level, then a theoretical one. They have the last word in this orderly disputation about the creative arts thesis. They can bless the work and allow the novice to pass upwards to the next level (permanent employment, for instance) with all the rights and benefits appertaining thereto (such as a living wage and the ability to become a supervisor), or they can require penance in the form of major revisions. But the ecclesiastical metaphors break down here, because intelligent commentary, while it might suffice for some MAs or MCAs, is not enough by itself for a PhD, as some universities now specifically advise. Commentary - or description of origins and methodology - must be theorised to some degree.

Examiners face a plethora of methodologies born of the novices' common goal - to qualify for a PhD - and differing agendas. They have to make sense of theorised commentaries and journals, standard literary and/or cultural criticism, as well as exegeses that deconstruct themselves, questioning their necessity and validity while trying to fulfill university requirements (see Brady 2000 on the subversive exegesis). In fact, some guidelines now suggest that the relationship between the creative product and the exegesis can be part of the original contribution to knowledge; the symbiosis can be innovative. The University of Wollongong was one of the first to ask 'There should be an integral relationship between the creative work and documentation' (Wollongong), while Melbourne University now explains (in bold face) that 'the candidate may argue...that the relationship between the two parts contributes to the originality and creativity of the whole ('Additional Information for Examiners', RHDC 6/2002).

What are examiners required to do with this mercurial hybrid with altered genes, which eventually wants to break out of its academic shell to enchant, provoke or terrorise the public? Compared to their colleagues who evaluate scholarship, they must be creative enough to play metaphorical dress ups, donning a number of identities.

### **3 Multiple Tasks, Multiple Identities**

Examiners are required to evaluate on a number of levels. They consider:

1. the academic subject matter itself - the examiner as scholar
2. the creative product itself - the examiner as arts reviewer
3. the creative arts thesis as hybrid - the examiner as critic of the whole as a literary or cultural statement
4. the creative arts thesis as original contribution to knowledge or culture - the examiner as judge or accreditor
5. the creative arts thesis as work-in-progress - the examiner as mentor or quasi-creator.

Let me elaborate upon each identity. As scholar, the examiner considers the breadth and quality of the research and the cogency of the thesis. Has the candidate surveyed the field sufficiently and made his or her case? As arts reviewer, the examiner functions more as an expert in the field who writes a review article, first critiquing the work and then situating the novel, play, script, etc. among its contemporaries, evaluating its contribution. As critic of the whole, the examiner looks at the shape and purpose of the thesis, at how well the artistic and academic components relate. Do they harmonise or intentionally conflict in order to produce an effective (convincing, challenging, provocative, potent) cultural statement? In other words, is it clear why these components have taken the form they have and relate in the way that they do? As judge or accreditor, the examiner evaluates the whole (not the individual work of art or critical essay) as an original contribution to knowledge (for the PhD) that fulfills university higher degree requirements.

The fifth and last identity is perhaps the most contentious, and one that might seem presumptuous: the examiner as mentor or quasi-creator. In the report, an examiner can not only praise or critique, but ask for revisions. Even if the work evaluated is already in print or has been performed, it might be clear that it could be improved. In this sense, examiners function as mentors - wise counsellors - uber-editors, quasi-creators. It is certainly true that if all examiners ask for major revisions, and agree on the general thrust, the candidate will have to make them before the degree is awarded. They have power, then, to affect the final shape of both creative and critical components, just as agents, editors and publishers can affect a submitted manuscript - and reviewers the fate of a published or performed work. Even if the suggestions are minor, however, the candidate as tyro might learn something about technique or approach that will condition the next creative project. Not only can early career artists benefit from this dynamic; informed criticism can condition the future production of any creator.

The multiple identities I have defined, therefore, make examiners of the creative arts thesis not only guardians of academia but of the literary culture because their decisions can affect students' academic and artistic progress. It is a heavy responsibility to help to advance or interrupt a career. Not passing a thesis causes pain; passing an unworthy thesis debases the degree and creative writing as a relatively new discipline in Australian higher education is being scrutinised closely.

Finally, to complicate matters, examiners seem to have more varied backgrounds than those who evaluate straight academic material. This situation has arisen because not only are creative arts theses hybrids, but increasingly they are multidisciplinary. Some examiners will be pure academics (not necessarily specialising in the same area), some writers, some writer-academics (not necessarily working in the same genre). They have to engage in a fair amount of ad hoc cogitation to perceive how each thesis is an original work of art reinterpreted and situated in a research context. Given the challenges that examiners face because they are functioning at the boundaries of a new frontier, can we identify any common problems? Another way of conceiving of this dilemma is to ask: how can candidates read their theses from the examiner's point of view and thus forestall misinterpretations?

#### **4 Of Strategies and Examples**

### a) Reading Strategies

'How do I read or view this work?' is the first question that critics unconsciously or consciously ask themselves whenever they encounter a new text. Giving examiners a reading strategy, therefore, is the most obvious first solution to the problem of misinterpretation. Readers (expert or not) base their judgments on previous practical experience as well as literary and cultural knowledge. We do not negotiate our way through texts blindly or innocently. For example, we do not judge a collection of rap lyrics as if they are meant to be Shakespearean sonnets, although we are still conditioned by our prejudices and predilections. So what if some critics (or examiners) normally would not consider rap lyrics as poems, worthy of being published separately from the music, as language that merited re-reading? A preface would have to make the case before critics read the book, or an afterword would have to cause them to reassess their initial impressions. In other words, the candidate needs to make the case for the project as a whole, even if the critical material is interwoven with the creative. Especially in the case of experimental material, a preface, introduction or afterword needs to orient examiners so they know how to approach or to reread this original text.

Make no mistake. I am talking about authorial intention here, which is alive and well in the exegesis. This is the place that candidates can take control. As in a traditional PhD, where researchers pose questions and elucidate methodologies, creative arts students must manipulate their readers (audiences) so that they comprehend a particular point of view (whether theoretical, cultural, aesthetic, or all at once). Research questions might be raised covertly, embedded in the project in toto, or posed explicitly. Style and organisation are always paramount as they affect the quality and nature of the creative product as well as the argument. In certain respects the creative arts thesis is more difficult, because if candidates employ innovative, unorthodox methods, and keep critical discussion to a minimum, they leave more up to the perspicacity and good will of their examiners. They hope that, even if they are not on the same wavelength, they can flow along parallel tracks.

This is a risky strategy as any literary historian knows, because sometimes even what are now considered classic works have missed their mark with individuals, let alone reading publics. Jonathan Swift's 'A Modest Proposal', a supreme example of irony, certainly scandalised some of the more obtuse in eighteenth-century England and Ireland. Whenever writers resort to irony, they compliment readers, whom they assume will understand the discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. In the twentieth-first century, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* still outrages portions of the moral majority who see it as condoning child abuse. Having a creative work speak for itself leaves examiners no more enlightened than seasoned reviewers, who must make of a text what they will. Examiners should not be in the position of doing most of the construction and analysis of the argument, as if they were partners in the degree. That is the supervisors' task.

I will now summarise some of the variety of discourses I have encountered and the way in which the theoretical groundwork helped to orient examiners. That in a most basic way is what theory can do; it clarifies a reading strategy - one among many.

A recent PhD student of mine chose to do the degree precisely because she was interested in how the research would shape her novel. Consequently,

her dissertation is more traditionally oriented, growing out of excellent primary research in women's life-writing both here and in Canada. The theoretical framework was postcolonial and feminist. The personal dimension, as to why she composed the novel, is not foregrounded, although it is explained. Examiners would not have much difficulty with this type (neither did), since the scholarly approach is familiar.

Only the change in scope might cause an academic (not a writer), who had not encountered a creative arts thesis before, to pause. Since students submit a creative work as well as a critical one, they do not have as much space to survey a field (which is not their primary focus, after all). Their research and the associated questions they pose are dictated by their project as a whole and, in fact, the results partly presented in the creative portion. Obviously if the candidate can clarify this logic (to herself as well as to readers, so she does not attempt too much) then it makes the examiners' task easier.

A Visual Arts PhD I examined in the 1990s included interviews with Australian artists, but set in context by current visual narrative theory. Both interview and theory were then used to illuminate the candidates' own work, embodied in a picture book. Another example of a mix of discourses occurred in the creative portion of a work that comprised a collaborative autobiographical novel, written by the candidate and her ethnic partner. The exegesis focused on heterosexual collaborative artistic partnerships, on autobiographical fiction and on how migration affects a host country. The research illuminated both the subject matter of the novel and the technique.

*b) Presentation Strategies: Layout, Medium, etc.*

Creative arts theses can be presented in a variety of forms to examiners. In fact, the form, layout and medium itself of any thesis can be significant, can embody meaning. A standard bound thesis, with appropriate referencing, says to examiners:

"I am a traditional academic product. I look, sound and feel like the PhD you have completed. I can be scrutinised in the same way that your own thesis, your students' theses and other candidates' have been scrutinised. We speak the same language, understand the same cultural codes and implicitly acknowledge the validity of this type of academic product. You do not have to invent a method to evaluate me. Open me up and read on."

The creative arts thesis, however, does not have to echo that standard refrain. It can sing its own song. Some candidates now weave a variety of visual and verbal discourses as well as media from more than one discipline into their work. One of the ways of helping examiners to make sense of this improvisation is physical presentation. Simply how a thesis is bound - as one or two volumes - can embody meaning. If it is presented in two parts and numbered, examiners will probably read in that order. They have the ability to flip from one to the other, however, if they so desire. For example, they can read a novel and then the exegesis, but refer back to the novel at will. If the thesis is bound as a unified whole, then examiners are more constrained. Prefaces, manifestoes, innovative paragraphing and chapter divisions can all manipulate audience. If part of the work is online or on CD-ROM, candidates can fine-tune how examiners experience their project.

## 5 Cautions and Advice

From an examiner's point of view, the thesis as a whole has to appear to have been well-conceived from the outset, even if this is not the case. Each part has to harmonise or conflict to support the project's overall thrust. Donna Lee Brien's presentation, 'What comes first, the creative work or the exegesis? The chicken and egg conundrum in the creative writing higher degree' ('Illuminating the Exegesis Symposium,' 28 March 2003; published in 2004 [Brien 2004]) surveys strategies and considers options. She discusses the 'varying temporal relations between the two usual parts' after a preliminary survey of students. In fact, her own working method appears not to be typical, because she wrote her exegesis first. It consists of primary research for a fictionalised biography and also investigates 'the challenges of writing fictionalised biography'. Her examiners will be able to see immediately the reason behind this strategy before they read the creative product, the result of that research.

One of the major problems for higher degree students seems to be conceiving of the possible relationships between the creative and critical portions. Some push thoughts of the exegesis aside and then in the second or third year of study it becomes an afterthought. Examiners will find it hard, therefore, to read it as anything else without major surgery. The relationship between the parts might be hazy, tangential (even if they grew side by side); the critical might not directly illuminate the creative. Too much might be left to the imagination of examiners who are required to supply the connections.

I have found this to be the problem most often in Honours or Master theses. The research might be superficial and arbitrary; key critical sources might not have been read in the original, only cited as they appear in secondary sources. Examiners might be put in the position of scholars who read a writer's unmediated workbooks or journals, and have to devise their own theory about influences and artistic process. Those who rise to the challenge of attempting an innovative structure, and who argue that this has become part of their original contribution to knowledge (in the PhD), should know that this strategy is harder to accomplish.

On the other hand, examiners should be aware that any PhD thesis is not necessarily ready to be published as is. It needs to be competent, well-conceived, cognizant of relevant primary and secondary texts in the area, but not perfect. Experienced readers do not fall into the trap of that class of book reviewer who finds it hard to be encouraging to novice authors, or who cannot resist asking for changes to make the creative product into 'the book I would have written'. As Paul Dawson suggests, it needs to be able to 'sustain the same sort of critical scrutiny deployed in the study of exemplary texts' (Dawson 1999). That does not mean that publishers will be bombarding students with lunch invitations or thrusting contracts in their faces, as appealing as those fantasies are. It suggests that their work will raise questions and perhaps even answer some of them, so contributing to literary and cultural debate.

Professor Lynne Van Luven, Head of the Professional Writing Program at the University of Victoria in Canada, has remarked that postgraduates are for the most part apprentices and should be evaluated as such (talk at Flinders University 2003). As a result, their second or even third manuscript might make it into print, but not necessarily their first. This more realistic attitude towards postgraduate work does not conflict with

current efforts to develop national standards for conventional postgraduate degrees in Australia. According to many experienced examiners, 'a research higher degree is a stepping stone into a research career, rather than a "Nobel Prize"' (Mullins and Kiley 2001 as cited in Lawson, Marsh and Tansley 2003: 35).

Finally, examiners require assistance to do their job effectively and charitably. In order to provide that assistance, candidates should revisit their universities' guidelines, which would have been sent to them when they commenced their studies (and which are probably now buried in the bottom of the file cabinet along with the parking and fire drill regulations). They need to articulate again the relationship between the parts of their thesis. They need to situate themselves in terms of the history, past or present, of their artform or particular genre, or understand how the one that they are creating or adapting has developed out of previous work. Keeping these general propositions in mind when writing or revising introductions and conclusions is one way students can educate examiners, who might not know about their area in detail or be able easily to judge how original the contribution to knowledge or culture is.

To simplify and summarise the above points, candidates should be able to clarify in their minds, and somewhere on paper, the following:

1. the subject area and the research questions to be asked;
2. the thesis in a formal sense - a proposition to be proved or disproved, either in the exegesis or in the creative product or by the two in concert (one might conceive of this also as clarifying the themes of the creative product);
3. the nature of the original contribution to knowledge or culture (PhD); or at least how the work demonstrates a high degree of independence of thought and approach; or how their work is 'an innovative re-interpretation of established ideas' (Flinders University statutes 2002).

Remember that examiners receive university guidelines with every thesis, some more detailed than others. They are fresh in their minds and so they need to be fresh in the candidates as he or she revises. Examiners accept the responsibility of being as objective as possible, and of proving their case about the thesis by giving evidence in their reports. They know that they can affect what happens to the creative product (as a reviewer might) as well as a student's career. A clear statement of intention and working method helps them to understand the underpinnings of the thesis. Examiners should not have to guess, therefore, the answers to those points listed above. They will not demand that every promise be fulfilled, just that it be articulated clearly and/or creatively enough and an attempt made to suggest the thesis' significance in the culture.

## 6 Conclusion

To say the truth, I believe many a hearty curse hath been devoted on the head of that author, who first instituted the method of prefixing to his play that portion of matter which is called the prologue...

In like matter, I apprehend, some future historian...will, after much scratching of his pate, bestow some good wishes on my memory, for having first established these several initial chapters... (Fielding 1749/1966: 739)



Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* is one of the first major English novels to exploit metafictional techniques. As an eighteenth-century author working in a relatively new form - the extended prose narrative - he grappled with the challenge of composing a comic novel and the ironic critical essays that comment on it as well as the literary culture of his time, just as a higher degree candidate might today. He complains of the trials of composition as he composes and constantly undercuts himself in front of the reader. In the persona of Fielding as author, he makes it clear just how difficult maintaining an extended prose narrative can be and just how vulnerable writers are.

Despite what traditional academics might believe, pursuing a higher degree in the creative arts is not easy either, as I said at the beginning of this paper. Articulating one's practice and situating it in context comes more naturally to some than to others. Looking over one's shoulder as well as being aware of multiple audiences can be exhilarating and disorienting. The hybrid nature of the beast - the creative arts thesis - means that one acceptable template does not exist. Candidates are creating not simply the creative portion as they progress, but the entire structure, one that is as individual as their personality. In varying degrees the exegesis can be theoretical or confessional, descriptive or analytic. As in Fielding's case, the critical portion can be interwoven in the body of the creative work and just as engaging.

Students must constantly ask themselves, to whom am I addressing my work? Is its purpose enlightenment, provocation, subversion, entertainment - or all at once? Should I let two parts work in harmony or grate against each other? Perhaps even more provocatively, they might ask will a thesis that functions well as a whole fall apart as individual entities, so that the creative portion might not appeal to a general audience? Postgraduates exist within a community of scholars and so want to contribute to arguments about contemporary culture, but they are also artists who want to be recognised as such.

Examiners of the creative arts thesis are affected as well by this mixed agenda. Of necessity they function as multiple personalities, performing multiple tasks. They are of course academic gatekeepers, responsible for maintaining standards, but they also have affinities with publishers' readers, reviewers and assessors on government arts boards, who decide whether a work is worthy of publication or funding. Is it at the cutting edge, or just more of the same old thing? Or is it the best example yet of a movement or trend? A cogent report that summarises the major achievements and weaknesses of a thesis, however, can help to advance a postgraduate's work beyond the present project. The most useful identity of examiners, therefore, is perhaps that of mentor or uber-editor, for their comments can look towards the future, not the past.

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