Doctoring Creative Writing: being creative in a PhD
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I completed my PhD in May 2005 and graduated in the summer. This paper serves as a case-study of my experience of undertaking a PhD in the field of Creative Writing and how I perceived the different tensions of the creative and the academic both at the time and now. I admit that I don't have any grand conclusions about the future of the Creative Writing PhD, but I do hope to share some insights about the process.

My thesis was entitled *The Multiple Perspectives of Jekyll & Hyde: Hypertext and Rewriting*. It involved the rewriting of Stevenson's novella - mostly a third person narrative - as a series of four first person narratives in a way which could be mounted on a computer as a hypertext. The rest of my thesis was a commentary (or exegesis) on the concepts underlying the creative portion, looking at hypertext, rewriting and the combination thereof.

The first tension came straight away in the selection of a topic for my thesis. The suggestion of a PhD was made to me while I was still completing an MA in Creative Writing. As assessment for the MA I had written a novel and was not sure that I wanted to continue straight on with another.

The first option seemed to me to be to do just that: write a completely original piece. However, this would have to have a limit of somewhere around 50-60 thousand words to allow for the researched section of the thesis. The concept of such a strict limit was another reason why I was put off attempting an original piece and instead plumped for the other option - rewriting an existing piece.

Having taken that decision, I had to decide what piece I would rewrite and what I would do with it that would make it worthy of a PhD.

This was one of the crucial things which dogged much of my study - being 'worthy' of a PhD. Never mind that I still haven't had a straight answer as to what a Creative Writing PhD should comprise, but I was constantly striving to make sure it was 'worthy'. As I will come to, with the academic part I at least had strict standards to work towards, but with the creative portion, how could I know if what I was doing was good enough?

For part of my MA I had had to complete a project on an aspect of how texts reach their audience. For this I had examined the growing area of computer-based texts, looking primarily at the websites which published stories and poems. In doing so, I had come across the concept of hypertexts as being distinct from simple electronic texts. In these terms, an electronic text is the closest computerised relative of a paper-based text. One common form of this is the e-book whereby a paper-based text can be read on screen, with access to the different sections via the contents page, and the ability to turn from one page to another. However, the work is structurally no different from its paper-based counterpart and allows the reader no interactivity with the text beyond that which is already available from the physical object. In most cases, this is the production in electronic format of a text which was originally conceived for print.

In order to be a hypertext, a text must demonstrate 'nodal' and 'non-sequential' features: the ability to link from each 'page' to a number of other 'pages', and for a number of other 'pages' (though not necessarily the same pages) to link back. Of course, this nodal structure is not solely the province of computerisation, but the increasing usage of computers - and more particularly the Internet - have made it more associated with the computer than any other form.

The most recognisable form of hypertext today is the World Wide Web, which uses the medium of the Internet to link many billions of pages together into one large hypertext. However, the growth of the web, and the use of mark-up languages such as HTML (HyperText Mark-up Language) have meant that the term has become synonymous with the language used in the creation of web-pages and, by extension, the links themselves – most often indicated by a word underlined and displayed in blue.

This concept had intrigued me and so I decided that I would rewrite a short text into a hypertext and create it as a website that could be accessed on the world-wide web. It

would have to be a short piece as the deconstruction and reconstruction that would be required to form a hypertext from a traditional paper-based text would, of necessity, increase it in length.

And so I set out to find a piece.

Even as I write this, it feels the wrong way round. Where is the 'creative' in this? I am deciding to rewrite an extant piece of literature based on its length and its suitability for conversion into a hypertext. There seems little scope in this for personal creativity but is all very mechanistic. And so it was.

There were other rules I decided my prospective piece needed to conform to. First, it needed to be out of copyright. The possible complications of tackling a piece still in copyright were more than I wanted to get involved with. Secondly, it needed to have been written in the third person as much as possible. I had decided that I was going to split the text up into separate characters and their points of view and so I needed a book that wasn't already in this form, otherwise there would be very little to actually rewrite.

I started to look at various gothic texts, an area of personal interest for me, but they all seemed to be far too long, like *The Mysteries of Udolpho,* or already split into a series of first person narratives, like *Dracula*. And then I hit upon Stevenson's novella *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde*. Like most people I have spoken to since I started my PhD I had never read the story, even though I knew so much about it that I felt as if I had. I looked it over and found it mostly in the third person. Yes, there are two sections in the back, one from Jekyll's point of view and one by his friend and colleague, Dr Lanyon, but there were two glaring omissions which I felt could give me my personal approach to the work.

First there was the butler. As anyone who has read Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* will know, a butler is a fantastic foil for concealing and revealing plot. Secondly, there was Hyde. In the original text Mr Hyde is the traditional gothic 'other' with no chance to talk directly to the reader. With my recreation of the text in hypertext, I could free him and give him voice. Here was my inspiration. Here was my decision. I was to rewrite Jekyll & Hyde as a hypertext.

Little was I to know when I made this decision that the duality of Jekyll & Hyde would form a basis for the rest of the project. Everything became a series of opposites, right up to writing a paper about the process in terms of the creative versus the academic!

As you may have surmised from what you have read so far, my focus was more on the creative side of what was to come rather than the academic. However, the first job that had to be carried out was my research proposal. This was the point at which I had to set down in writing exactly what I was going to do, why it was important - or worthy, if you like - and what I expected it would conclude. This was the start of a process which entirely changed the way I worked - and still work. It required serious forethought and planning. I needed to think about the ramifications of what I was doing and what could be extrapolated from it. I needed to decide what it was I wanted to take from this.

It was very much like writing the conclusion to an essay that you have not yet written. Add to this the fact that I was still not in possession of a clear definition of what a Creative Writing PhD should consist, and you have a wealth of confusion. Still, with the help of my supervisor I wrote the paper and, as I looked it over prior to submission to the University's research board, I was momentarily appalled to see what I was committing myself to. The creative portion was eaten up in one quick sentence and the rest was taken up with academic aims and targets. Still, it was too late to back out now. I submitted it and had it accepted. Now I had to start.

As you might expect with the academic portion acting in part as a commentary on the creative work, I had to start with the creative rewriting. Still, this was where I wanted to start anyway. I was already intimidated by the prospect of the research I would need to undertake and the longer I could put it off - the better.

So, I sat down to write and ... stopped. What was I going to write? How was I going to tackle it? How would it work?

I realised as I read through Stevenson's novella for the umpteenth time that this was going to be a writing process unlike any I had previously undertaken. When I wrote the novel for my MA, the initial idea had been sparked by a dream. At first I started it as a short story. Then, as it expanded, I made it a series of episodic short stories. Then, as these mounted up, I went back and rewrote until I had half a novel, and then continued - with the usual diversions and dead-ends - until I finished it. It was a

piece which emerged and evolved freely and flexibly. The rewriting of Jekyll & Hyde was going to require a much more rigid structure if it was going to work both as a rewriting and eventually as a hypertext. Already the process of the PhD was changing my approach to writing.

So, I sat down and used a pen and paper as a spanner and screwdriver to take the novella apart. I disassembled it into characters, events, dates, points of confluence, and gaps. I drew diagrams and chronologies and slowly but surely immersed myself in a cloud of narrative. As I went through, I corrected the inconsistencies in Stevenson's original - without which it would never work - and introduced new scenes of my own. I decided on character types for my narrators and experimented with narrative voices. I veered wildly from a Victorian pastiche so thick it was nothing more than farcical parody to a clipped, modernist mode that made it sound like Hemingway. Finally, with a balance struck and all things plotted and planned, I sat down to write.

And write I did. I was already over a year into my PhD when I finally started the creative work and a little over 6 months later it was complete - in first draft at least. But this was a first draft unlike any I had completed before. The process of planning and plotting and experimentation had changed the way in which I wrote. Previously my writing had been a case of getting as much down on the page as quickly as possible to just get.. to.. the.. end! After that I could go back and tidy and sort and make it all so much better.

But now, now that I knew exactly where I was going with each sentence, the construction of each became more important. Why rush on to the next sentence until this one was exactly right. I would compose a sentence with pauses to check words in dictionary and thesaurus to ensure the words were exactly the ones I wanted and then I would weigh the sentence in the context of the paragraph. Does it work? Does it balance? Is it too long? Too short? In character? Sufficiently different from the other characters? Sufficiently different from Stevenson? With all of these questions answered and the sentence chewed up and spat back out in whatever form seemed most appropriate, I could then move on to the next sentence.

I have never before finished a first draft and felt that it was so close to being the final draft. This was now two years into my PhD. I had spent the first year mostly

thinking and planning - both about the creative part and the academic part. I had spent the second year actually writing the creative part.

This left two aspects, the coding of the hypertext and the research and writing of the academic exegesis.

I decided to leave the coding for the time being. This was partly because I was confident with what it would entail but also because I wanted to leave the creative work for as long as possible before coming back to it. This would give me fresh eyes to rewrite it before implementing it as code. It would be a lot easier to proof-read, edit and rewrite it in the four single narratives in which it was originally written, rather than as the series of over 300 individual text blocks that it eventually became.

And so I moved ahead with the research. Again, I had no real instruction as to what it should comprise. However, having looked at the topics covered in my reading, I decided on three chapters plus an introduction and conclusion. This would allow me to look at hypertext and the process of rewriting as individual topics in the first two chapters, before bringing them together in the third chapter and seeing how the fact of attempting one aspect affected the other. Again, here was another form of duality in the work.

The first chapter was fairly straight-forward to write as most of my reading up to that point had been on the subject of hypertext. Then I hit the second chapter and I learned - probably for the first time in my academic career - what the word 'research' really means and also just how hard it is. I would read sections from several text books; reading and re-reading just to understand what was being said, and then try to incorporate what I had understood into my argument. A day's reading would become three sentences. Again, as with the creative part, I would craft these sentences until I was happy with them and knew that they said exactly what I wanted them to say. But then a quick break for a coffee would ruin it all. I would return to my computer and re-read what I had just written and I wouldn't understand a word of it. My mind was having to work at a completely different register in order to produce this work and it was a register which required a build-up of work in order to reach it. Each time I wanted to re-enter the argument I was crafting, I needed to read extensive portions of what had gone before in order to know where I was.

I suppose I was prepared from my undergraduate studies that some writing was difficult and required time and effort to understand. I was not prepared to find this with pieces I had written myself. This shook me. I realised, perhaps for the first time truly realised, how deeply complex the English language can be and the concepts that it can create.

And so I worked, becoming immersed deeper and deeper in the research. I invoked Jaques Derrida and Roland Barthes, Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish, Michael Joyce and George Landow. I looked at the physical nature of language in paper and on screen, the cultural nature of language for writers and programmers, the nature of narrative in a fluid environment and the concept of rewriting as re-interpretation.

And then one day my supervisor said - 'Don't neglect the creative part - you still have to code it' - and I was back in the world of my creative product. And that was what it was: a product. By this point I had written so much about the meaning of what I was doing, that the whole creative section had become just another piece in a puzzle. It was no longer a piece of writing connected to me, it was just something to be incorporated. So, I read it and edited it and proof-read it and split it into its 300-plus sections and then set about the code.

With the aid of another supervisor, I developed the framework and worked it through, building up my nodal network. It looked good, it worked, it did what it was supposed to. And yet, somehow, I felt removed from it. It now seemed insignificant compared to the exegesis, despite being over twice as long.

I built the hypertext and tested it with groups of friends and students and the responses reflected the research I had already done. The computer science students talked about problems with the code and the interface without realising that the things they saw as problems had been created specifically to make the hypertext work as a piece of literature. The English students found spelling mistakes and proof-reading omissions and said nothing about the coding or the interface except the occasional 'yeah, it was okay' when prompted.

But I was already back in the land of my exegesis, crafting introduction, conclusion and abstract and re-writing, re-organising and editing as appropriate. I finally finished everything and submitted it three and half years after I started. My viva was about 3 months later and it was all over.

But was it?

During the almost four years since I had started my PhD, I had spent less than one year doing the creative writing. The rest was reading, researching, writing the exegesis and coding the hypertext. In the same time I completed only two short stories of my own. And now, I have come out of the other end of my PhD with what so far seems like a complete inability to write - a really good case of writer's block.

As I said earlier, I previously tackled my writing projects in an ad hoc basis. I had always taken an idea and followed it wherever it might lead. Now, in my post-PhD period, I try this and immediately delete the results. I no longer like my own writing. This seems to me likely to come from two sources. First, in order to rewrite *Jekyll and Hyde* for hypertext, it was necessary to get the narratives into a highly organised state before starting writing. The result was a kind of writing to order which I had never done before. For every paragraph I started, I knew where it had to lead, and where the character was going. This gave me the chance to make my writing as tight and organised as the structure. Perhaps my dissatisfaction comes from lacking this tight structure and I need to implement something similar in my new, self-directed projects.

The second possible source is the writing of the exegesis. As I said, the writing of this was at a level of which I had never considered myself capable. How can I respect any writing I do now unless it is at this level?

And so I find myself in a position where I have to live up to my PhD - carrying on this idea of producing something 'worthy'. I don't feel inclined to implement my first solution. My reason for writing has always come from the same impetus that I have for reading. I am excited to immerse myself in the world of the narrative, and I want to know what happens next. If I plot everything out in as detailed a scheme as I did with the Jekyll & Hyde narrative, then why should I bother to write it at all - I would already know everything of interest about it and the story would be told without having to write it.

As for the second, the only way I can see to write at such a level is to carry on with academic writing - or to set my sites on the Booker or Whitbread prizes with what I write next. But, as a so-far unpublished author, how can I possibly work with such expectations?

I am sure that I will find my way back into my own writing in time, but my current expectations of what I should be capable of doing seem to be stifling me at the moment, and I can only lay this at the door of the PhD.

So, following all of this process, what are my conclusions?

First, one of the main problems I had with my PhD was the lack of any defined structure to it. Other people in the department doing more traditional PhDs were in the position of knowing that their thesis should be of a certain length and with a certain number of chapters. The closest I could get to a straight answer was that I should aim for about the same length. But the disposition within the standard 80,000 words of what should be creative and what should be academic was never adequately explored.

I ended up doing a 55,000 - 25,000 split purely because of the length of the creative part but, as I said, this was tailored in length because of the requirement of a substantial academic part.

Now, obviously, I can only comment on my own experience of doing a creative writing PhD. And I know that any experience of a PhD is different for each of its protagonists. However, the whole process was a struggle between my own desires to be creative and the university's desire for academic rigour and this seems to be the experience of many creative writing PhD students. I have spoken with poets for whom the length issue was reversed, in that they felt that whatever they produced would be too short and therefore, perhaps, not worthy. They compensated by making their exegesis even longer, further unbalancing the process.

It seems to me that more thought needs to be put into what a Creative Writing PhD should be. In what way does forcing a novelist or poet to also become a researcher make them better at what they do?

I have come out of my PhD a much better researcher and a far better teacher, but a better writer? I don't know, and I guess only time will show. I have a PhD but what good it will do me, I don't know. Will I be able to get an academic job now that I have a PhD but have had no major academic papers or novels published? I don't know. But I'm going to have to find out.

One thing that I certainly feel having been through the process, is that writers should get more involved in defining the Creative Writing PhD, giving their input into the possible structure. At the moment, it seems to me to be balanced too far in the direction of the academic and doesn't accurately reflect either a true progression from the more creative-based MAs that are available nor the needs and requirements of a writer wishing to work in education. Also, there needs to be a better idea put forward of just what is 'worthy' in the creative part of the PhD. While it seems easy enough to assess the academic work, the assessment of the creative part seems less well defined and I am sure that it would only help students if they had a better idea of what they had to strive for.

Having said that, I know that the Creative Writing PhD is still very much in its infancy and am sure that these problems will be addressed and corrected as it ages. I look forward to seeing it, even if it is, alas, too late for me.

Postscript:

The above was written and presented at the NAWE's autumn conference in November 2005. The reaction was interesting and the questions I received are worth considering as a postscript.

I was asked to comment further on the guidance given to me by my supervisor and the suggestion was made that perhaps I ended up doing my supervisor's PhD instead of my own. I don't think this is true. However, a lack of focus on my part in the initial stages may have caused that guidance to have a disproportionate affect on the whole project. I maintain that my supervisor couldn't have been any better, however with no clearer an idea of what a Creative Writing PhD should be than I did, the guidance I received was based on previous experience of academic PhDs. I do feel, however, that the choice of supervisor is key and, as more people go through the process of Creative Writing PhDs, I can only hope that some of these newly created academics will go on to supervise others, rather than having to chose a supervisor with no first-hand experience of what is a very different kind of PhD.

I was also asked if I regret doing the PhD. I don't. If given my time over again, I would still do it. However, I am still trying to understand what role I now have and whether it is the one I want, but I don't wish I hadn't done it. The week before writing this postscript I delivered a talk based on my PhD as a guest on an undergraduate course on *Literature and its Readers*. I found it exciting and enjoyable to dive back

into my subject again after nearly a year's hiatus. I was able to be interested once again in the topics I discussed and was pleased to find that, once I started, I didn't even need my notes.

Finally, I am sure those of you who spoke to me after my talk in November will be pleased to know that in late December I was taken over by a fresh idea. I started work on this new novel just before Christmas and progress, while slow, is continuing.