

Master of Arts (Writing) Assignment Cover Sheet

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Assessment Title:

Evoking the Muse: A Practical Guide for Fiction Writers

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Evoking the Muse

A Practical Guide for Fiction Writers

Abstract: Many writers refer to creative inspiration as the *Muse*—an illusive creature beyond their control. By exploring the notion of inspired creativity through a multidisciplinary approach of mythology, fairytale and the collective unconscious, an archetypal image is revealed, depicting the Muse in her ancient guise, and through the symbolism of mermaids. Residing in the depths of the unconscious, the ebb and flow of creativity is highlighted, offering strategies on how to attract the Muse and encourage her to stay. The hypertext links give instant access to references, definitions, examples of author interviews and sites for further study. Concluding with practical exercises for approaching the ‘blank page,’ this site offers a ‘how to’ guide for writers who want to make friends with their inner Muse.

Introduction- The Muse in Ancient Storytelling

I will begin with the Muses . . . For it is through the Muses and Apollo that there are singers upon the earth and players upon the lyre; (Parada, 1997)

This story begins as all ancient tales must, by honouring the Muses. Nine in number, daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, these divine manifestations of the sacred feminine are the inspiration of all the creative arts, written, spoken, sung, and danced. In the oral tradition of Hesiod and Homer, and later through the written word including Plato, storytelling begins by recognizing the Muse, the poet’s source of inspiration.

From the Heliconian Muses let us begin to sing, who hold the great and holy mount of Helicon, and dance on soft feet about the deep-blue spring and the altar of the almighty son of Cronos... (Hesiod, 1914b)

Thus Hesiod starts *Theogony*, and in *Works and Days* he begins:

Muses of Pieria who give glory through song, come hither, tell of Zeus your father and chant his praise. (Hesiod, 1914a)

Homer begins his epic *Odyssey*:

Tell me, O Muse, of the man of many devices, who wandered full many ways after he had sacked the sacred citadel of Troy. (Homer, 1919)

In this way all sacred stories were told. The poets and bards did not plagiarise. They gave credit to their source, the Muse. It may be understandable why Hesiod, thousands of years ago, attributed his creative genius to a goddess, but why do writers today still speak of their Muse? Why do they feel that when present, she causes a flow of creativity and production and when she departs, the wellspring goes dry? Considering an archetypal image of the Muse offers insights.

The Mermaid as an Archetype of Creativity

The Melusine (or Mermaid) is a creature which belongs to the imaginal world. She is non-human and magical, but she will make the effort to come and live in a relationship with a mortal . . . as long her mystery is respected. (Greene, 1980)

Once upon a time there was a hearty fisherman. Everyday he would go out in his little row boat and cast his nets in the deepest waters of the sea. Every night he would return to shore, sometimes with a plentiful catch, sometimes not. One day he cast his net and caught a beautiful mermaid. Enchanted, he fell in love. She fell for him too but it was an impossible relationship as they came from different worlds. Finally the mermaid said, "If you promise not to ask me where I go on Saturday afternoons, I will transform into a woman and marry you." The fisherman eagerly agreed and as the years went by they built a beautiful family together.

But, after a time the fisherman couldn't stand not knowing where she went each Saturday afternoon. When he couldn't contain it any more, he approached her in the kitchen as she poured their cups of tea.

"So, my love, where exactly is it you go every Saturday afternoon?"

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She dropped the tea pot, letting it shatter on the floor. Screaming she gathered their children and fled. He chased after her, following the screams and wails but it was too late. She had returned to sea in her mermaid form and the children were gone.

In some versions the fisherman drowns when he tries to follow her into the depths. In other versions he continues to put out to sea every day, casting his nets in the hopes of finding his love again.

The Ebb and Flow of the Creative Process

The mermaid fairytale, made popular by Hans Christian Andersen, is a metaphor for the relationship between writer and muse--a representation of the creative process in action. Here we have, as in all myth and fairytale, an archetypal image--the emergence of material from the collective unconscious out of the depths and onto the 'dry land and light' of consciousness where it can be expressed tangibly. This is not a steady stream, but an ebb and flow. Sometimes we are touched by the Muse, and other times she is gone.

Mermaid stories depict the dwelling place of creative inspiration by beginning with a deep dark lake or sea, an image of the collective unconscious. The fisherman dips his nets into the depths and one day, in a moment of *chairoi*, he catches the mermaid and falls in love. She agrees to enter his world, but there is always a condition—a box that can not be opened or a key that must not be used or question that must not be asked. This shows that consciousness can bask in the creative light, but must not question too deeply her secrets. The mystery must be respected.

While the fisherman honours this, he prospers with a growing family. When children are born in myths or fairytales, it says something creative has come from the union and the fisherman, with his muse by his side, is indeed fecund. When curiosity overtakes him and he questions her secret, she vanishes, and like the creative process, the fisherman's despair is that of the artist uninspired, the writer facing the blank page. One can only wait in hope that the Muse will return.

Honouring the Muse—10 Creative Ways to Make Friends

Like Hesiod wandering the hills of Heliconia in search of divine inspiration or the fisherman trolling the depths for his lost love, the artist seeks connection with

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their creative source. Although that inspiration lies within, there are ways and means to honour the Muse and bring her life. The one step in connecting with the inner wellspring of creativity is to quiet the bombardment and chatter of the mind.

(1) Meditation:

Meditation, in its many forms, stills the mind, allowing the normally active brain waves, usually high frequency BETA waves (13-30 cycles per second) to drop down to ALPHA - 7-13 cycles per second or even lower to THETA - 4-7 cycles per second. These lower cycles are consistent with hypnosis, day dreaming, creativity, ESP and out of body experiences. By achieving this state, a measurable increase in creativity and intelligence is reported. Freelance writer Patricia Fry suggests a 'walking meditation':

I use Meditation Walking to head off writer's block, to unlock the flow of new article ideas and to work through a problem with a story . . . (Fry, n.d.)

The Muse as Creativity is like a wild horse. It can't be approached with clenched fists, waving arms. The Muse responds to serenity and peace, the open palm approach that meditation support. From a tranquil state, inspiration wells up from the collective unconscious and like in the Mermaid tale, creativity is renewed.

(2) Non-Judgment:

Some writers find that over critical self-assessment of their work, especially in the early stages, sends the Muse running. Author Han Nolan suggests approaching new work as a first time writer might.

When you face that blank page, say to yourself: "I'm not allowed to judge myself today." (Wade, n.d.)

Think about what you are telling yourself and replace negative thoughts with positive ones. Treat yourself as you would a child writing their first story. What would you say to that child? Is that what you are saying to yourself?

(3) Inspirational Music/Sounds

The Muses are closely associated with music and some writers find the right sounds in the background encourages creativity, relaxation and joy. Daniel Handler, author of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (under the pen name of Lemony Snicket), says:

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*I've never had writer's block for an extended period of time --- I just have the occasional 24-hour bug. On those days I listen to *Top Ten,* an album by the Flying Lizards, in its glorious entirety, and then take a long brisk walk.*

(Authors on the Web, n.d.)

(4) Ritual - Routine - Action

Consistency can make a difference when activating the creative imagination. Some writers do their best work in the morning, before the household is active. Others follow a routine that opens them to the Muse. Novelist Sean Stewart suggests arranging life and routine to suit individual needs.

"Do whatever that takes. If it means getting up at four in the morning, get up at four in the morning." (Stewart, n.d.)

Most writers agree that treating writing like a job and ritualizing the practice keeps creative juice flowing. Jonathan Kellerman, who spends 2-6 months planning his novels before he starts writing says:

I treat writing as a job --- I go to work five days a week. I don't sit around drinking espresso . . . waiting for inspiration. (Authors on the Web, n.d.)

(5) Dreams

Image is the language of the unconscious and keeping a dream journal can be a way to communicate with the deeper layers of the mind, opening up the realm of the Muse. Having a note pad by the bed can assist dream recollection, and carrying a pocket pad in waking hours to catch the day dreams is an action that lets the Muse know you're listening.

(6) Physical Exercise

Relaxation and strengthening exercises such as yoga, stretching or even more vigorous dance -- from salsa to trans-dance -- can bring the Muse onboard. Traditionally both yoga and dance are acts of worship, a connection with the divine through the hidden language of the soul. The presiding Muse of dance was Terpsichore and it is said that those who honoured her by dancing received her special favour. (Parada, 1997)

(7) Food

Some writers get so involved with their work that they neglect their nutrition. Some become anorexic, others over indulge in simple carbohydrates and pots of coffee, often with undesirable effect. It doesn't matter if the Muse is looking over your

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shoulder dripping with inspiration if your brain is too zonked to hear her. Frequent small, balanced foods are recommended, especially when struggling with other aspects of the day. Author Deb Pasquella recommends fish, a food high in omega 3 fatty acids--good for brain function.

(8) Reading

Some writers find reading inside and outside their genre helps them evoke the Muse. Books like *The Artists Way*, by Julia Cameron, are full of exercises to bring creative inspiration. Author, editor and freelance writer Jannie Balliet also suggests re-reading work if you are stuck mid-page, or mid-novel:

If you are in the middle of writing fiction, whether it's a story or novel, go back and re-read everything you've written from a reader's viewpoint . . . That generally gives a fresh perspective of what you were originally trying to accomplish when you began writing it in the first place. (Balliet, 2007)

Remember that most writing is re-writing. The prose don't have to be perfect the moment they hit the page. Knowing this can help writers ease up on expectations. Every writer also has their own goals for output. Tom Robbins writes two pages a day. He spent 39 months writing *Fierce Invalids Home From Hot Climates* and another year editing it. Then authors like Stephen King might write a polished novel every year.

(9) Good Vibes

The Law of Attraction says that what you 'think about' is what you experience. If you are thinking like the fisherman on shore after the muse has fled, longing desperately for her return, you are vibrating loss, abandonment and inertia, and that is what you attract! When the muse is gone, thoughts of allowing, joy, vitality, creative abundance and gratitude will bring her back. Once you start thinking your Muse is with you, there she'll be. The trick is to pivot away from negative thoughts and focus on the creative venture that awaits.

Think also about what you tell yourself. Are you saying, "I'm blocked. I'm stuck. I'm empty?" That's not going to help. When friends ring do you tell them, "the well is dry?" What you say to yourself and others is what you are reinforcing. To bring back the muse, you need to turn your thoughts towards her with delight and appreciation.

(10) Clear a Space for the Muse to Dance

One of the most crucial ingredients in honouring the Muse is clearing a space for her. Stephen King talks about this in his article on the *The Writing Life*.

Some writers in the throws of writer's block think their muses have died, but I don't think that happens often; I think what happens is that the writers themselves sow the edges of their clearing with poison bait to keep their muses away, often without knowing they are doing it. (King, 2006)

He refers to his Muse, not surprisingly, as a half-wild gorging beast. To each our own--yet his point is apt when he calls the study or writing room a 'clearing in the woods', a place that attracts the Muse simply by our intentions of what we are about to create. The key is to allow her presence, eliminating anything that might be misconstrued as poison--a disrespect of her mystery.

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