

## **Creative Writing Options within Level-Three History Assessment**

### **Abstract**

This project has explored creative writing as a viable assessable activity for undergraduate historians, by developing creative pieces as an optional genre of assessment among the students of two, level-three modules. It has been made possible by funding from the History Subject Centre, and by collaboration between colleagues in History and English at Keele University. The tangible results of this project comprise two module bibliographies, six sample assessments (four of a good standard, two exhibiting serious flaws) and assessment guidance for students. The integration of history with fictional genres in this way will prove stimulating for students who are engaged by the inherent 'story' element of History, but also offer academic staff a rigorous scheme for assessment.

### **Report**

In 2010, the History Subject Centre funded a project exploring the potential for creative-writing assessments in undergraduate History. The money was to be devoted to teaching relief January-June 2011 for the design phase of this project, involving the expansion of assessment criteria, the development of a creative-writing workshop, and the participation of Alannah Tomkins (the principle applicant) in creative writing. Tomkins's level-three teaching to undergraduate Historians at Keele is located in the field of the social history of medicine, so all of the activities under this grant have been directed towards creative writings around the experience of illness, the doctor-patient encounter and the practice of medicine. This report should be read in conjunction with the original funding application, which provides details of the two relevant modules, called 'Sickness and Suffering?' and 'From Sawbones to Social Hero?'. It is enough to say here that both of the modules will be assessed in part via a piece of genre writing, EITHER a creative piece OR a more familiar empirical genre such as a book review or a biographical sketch. When the modules are taught for the first time in 2011-12, students will be able to choose which genre to attempt.

The design-phase activities have now taken place, giving rise to a body of material referenced below and attached to the accompanying email. The most significant alteration to the project arose when it became apparent that, rather than a single creative-writing workshop, students would best be prepared for this mode of assessment via weekly exposure to creative and other genre writings. Therefore it is envisaged that both modules will be delivered via weekly, two-hour classes, where the first hour will be devoted to a standard seminar discussion of secondary reading and the second hour will be allocated to the scrutiny of genre writings.

To this end, I have devised two module bibliographies that reflect this historical/creative emphasis. In the case of 'Sickness and Suffering?', the bibliography includes secondary historical readings, examples of

contemporary literature concerned with the topic for the week, and one or more examples of modern literature which also make use of the same topic. In this way, students will be guided to consult fictional literature of the period, and also fictional work published in the late twentieth or early twenty-first century. One of the modern works is a novel written by Caroline Rance, a former student of Tomkins, based upon her undergraduate history dissertation. Seminar discussion on fictional treatments of medical history topics will be stimulated, in the early weeks of the module, via discussion of prepared writings in the manner of the creative assessments that students may themselves attempt, authored by Tomkins. These include two examples of fair or good assessments: the first is a monologue from the perspective of a young man discovering he has contracted plague in 1625, while the second is a short comic play about venereal disease. The third specimen writing has been constructed as an example of a poor submission, written by a 'student' who can mimic the diction and sentence structure of the period but who has undertaken minimal research giving rise to numerous errors. This third piece is a facsimile pamphlet on the subject of smallpox, and is 'marked' so that students can see where the author has been so mistaken. In later weeks students will be encouraged to bring their own drafts, either in the form of creative work or in the manner of a preliminary review of one of the contemporary or modern works listed for that week. Student involvement, however, will not await invitation in the third or fourth week of the module. In each early week there will be an 'improv' exercise, to inculcate habits of writing and reading aloud for this module. In the first week, for instance, students will be introduced to or reminded about the structure of the limerick form, and then asked to write a limerick in five minutes on a subject of their choice; however, they will also witness the tutor engaging in the same activity but where they specify the topic for Tomkins's limerick.

In the case of 'Sawbones to Social Hero?', the bibliography is akin to the description above but also includes a list of names (of prominent doctors, patients or other historical characters) who would be suitable for biographical review under the terms of the module's 'empirical' mode of assessment. Seminars will be run in the same way as given above, but with the role of biography added to the discussion (and with at least one fictional biography listed among the modern literary works; see *Fled is that Music*). Students will again be introduced to three sample assessments. The two examples of fair or good assessments will comprise a poem written about the first cholera epidemic and an invented newspaper article on the subject of a music hall mesmerist's act. The 'marked' item in this case is a ghost story based on the murderous activities of Burke and Hare. This piece is poorly written, but based upon some decent historical research (and so is the diametric opposite of the smallpox pamphlet in terms of its attributes); incidentally, all project participants are agreed that it is likely that future student submissions are more likely to exhibit the failings of the ghost story than of the pamphlet.

A set of assessment guidelines have been produced for students who choose the creative genre for their submission. Students who prefer to submit a book review or a biographical piece will be instructed to follow Keele's standard requirements for a History essay regarding footnotes and bibliography. The

only element of this phase not yet complete (and incidentally not flagged in the initial application) is the supply of non-historical creative writings by undergraduate students of English to Tomkins for shadow-marking. This will take place in early July, when all marks for undergraduate English creative-writing modules have been confirmed.

The project will enter its implementation phase in autumn 2011 when students embark on the 'Sickness and Suffering?' module. An application will be made to Keele's Teaching Innovation funds in spring 2012 to fund the evaluation and dissemination phases of the project.