Tracing a Tradition of the Literary Gothic in Australian Women’s Fiction and Film Narratives

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to establish a tradition of the Gothic genre in selected fiction and film narratives by Australian women writers, ranging from the beginning of the twentieth-century to the present day. The central argument is that the texts chosen for discussion incorporate a constellation of Gothic thematic concerns which are specific to the Australian cultural and social context and which also reflect female subjectivity in a way that extends the traditional concerns of the genre. This study explores the extent to which the chosen works seek to challenge or reinforce dominant social, cultural, racial and political ideologies in Australia, which traditionally privilege a white masculinist paradigm. One of the key ideas explored is how Australian women writers re-imagine dominant Australian mythologies and narratives, through their engagement with the literary Gothic, to contribute to a dialogue on national identity.

A variety of methodological perspectives have been adopted in the development of this thesis, including various feminist and psychoanalytical frameworks. The discussion has also drawn significantly from the Gothic literary canon, as well as from the substantial critical material dedicated to the study of Gothic literature. In addition, I have engaged with leading critics in the debate on national identity in Australia. The thesis consists of a range of Gothic readings of selected texts from Australian women writers including selected stories from Barbara Baynton’s *Bush Studies* (1901); Katharine Susannah Prichard’s *Coonardoo: The Well in the Shadow* (1929); Peter Weir’s filmic adaptation of Joan Lindsay’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975); Elizabeth Jolley’s *The Well* (1986); and Carmel Bird’s *Mandala Trilogy: The White Garden* (1995), *Red Shoes* (1998) and *Cape Grimm* (2004). Throughout this discussion I have identified a strong Gothic tradition in the work of Australian women writers and identified various recurring themes, motifs and tropes.
Introduction

Tracing a Tradition of the Literary Gothic

The notion of the Gothic in Australia is, in many ways, a contradictory one; the Gothic evokes associations with history and tradition which sit uneasily beside the relative ‘newness’ of European settlement in Australia. Yet, a recently published article by Nicholas Jose entitled, “A Shelf of Our Own: Creative Writing and Australian Literature,” serves as a reminder of Virginia Woolf’s claim that a great writer “is an inheritor as well as an originator.”¹ This simple but powerful assertion by Woolf confirms the importance of a shared tradition among writers and the importance, to a continuing dialogue on national literature, of identifying and valorising this tradition. Jose, who is both an academic and fiction writer in Australia, poses the question: “Is there a shelf of our own – not as self-expressive individuals, but as a group, a literary community – that connects us with our society, past, present and future?”² He later suggests that through a “renewed understanding of Australia’s literary traditions and contexts by creative writers, a reconnection with community and social purpose will be achieved.”³ Although this is somewhat overstated as there has been a substantial increase in both Australian literary texts and academic criticism on Australian literature over the last two decades and, arguably, the establishment of

³ Jose, p.29.
a 'canon,' what is lacking is the theorization of how Australian writers, particularly women writers, who have traditionally been marginalized in discussions on Australian literature, have re-imagined a specific literary genre. This dissertation attempts, in part, to fill this gap by tracing a tradition of a particular genre - the literary Gothic - in the work of selected Australian women writers.

The Gothic genre is steeped in ideas about tradition, a notion which it seems to both revere and consistently undermine, and has, over time, spawned many subgenres and national traditions. The Gothic is also a genre which has resonance within Australia, despite Australia’s comparatively sparse European history. Considering the importance of history to a general understanding of the genre, it is surprising that the Gothic holds particular appeal for Australian women writers. It is a form of literature which comprises a constellation of tropes, themes, images, symbols and ideas which Australian women have engaged with to produce a unique symbolic and narrative language to articulate white female subjectivity. The texts chosen for discussion creatively engage with the Gothic to re-imagine the cultural, social and physical landscape in colonial and postcolonial Australia.

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4 Robert Dixon has commented that Australian literature has, in the last twenty years, reached a certain level of maturity. See Robert Dixon, “Tim Winton, Cloudstreet and the field of Australian Literature,” Westerly 50 (2005), p.246.

5 The use of the word ‘tradition’ and its overall relevance to this dissertation needs to be elaborated on. The word ‘tradition’ as I am using it here relates to the idea of passing on, through story, shared experiences and ways of articulating subjective experiences, rather than to suggest a stifling and rigid set of conventions. A tradition can therefore offer a paradigm through which revision and change is possible, indeed necessary, and can empower those who are influenced by it.
British Gothic Literature: Origins and Context

To begin to trace a tradition of the Gothic genre in writing by Australian women, we must first consider what is meant by the generic term 'Gothic' and how this applies to a particular style of literature. The Gothic is variously described as a mode, a form, a genre, and more recently as "a poetic tradition," by Anne Williams, interpreted as a "myth" by Eugenia DeLamotte, characterised as "a theory of history," by Markman Ellis, and defined as a "language" by Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith. The term Gothic was initially derived from the name given to a barbarian German tribe, 'The Goths,' one of many tribes who defeated Rome in 410 AD, in an attack which contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire. This connection has led to the subsequent association between the Gothic and the destruction of the "civilised values" of Classical Rome. The Gothic genre in literature, however, originated with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (subtitled 'A Gothick Story') in 1764, although the term Gothic was originally applied to medieval architecture, originating in the Ile-de-France around 1140. This French style of architecture was adopted throughout other

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10 Markman Ellis, p.22.
11 Markman Ellis, pp.22-24.
countries in Europe from the 1220s onwards and in England as early as 1170. Walpole was so taken with this style of architecture that he remodeled his own home, Strawberry Hill, in the Gothic style, attracting a multitude of curious visitors. Walpole’s seminal Gothic tale, set in Southern Italy, established many of the tropes still associated with the genre, including the intrusion of the supernatural; the confinement of women; illicit passion; betrayal and revenge; primogeniture; the occurrence of a mysterious crime; a preoccupation with the exotic ‘other’; and the perennial Gothic castle. Indeed, Horace Walpole’s unconventional predilections initiated a fascinating literary style which has an incomparable ability to continually attract reader interest.

Fred Botting in his highly influential study, *Gothic*, comments that the Gothic is “the thread that defines British literature.” There is, however, some difficulty in defining the genre, as it encompasses a broad range of literary texts. The classification of a text as Gothic has become a point of contestation amongst commentators, as the genre is often considered paradoxical and contradictory. Fred Botting continues: “The diffusion of Gothic features across texts and historical periods distinguishes the Gothic as a hybrid form, incorporating and transforming other literary forms as well as developing and changing its own conventions in relation to newer modes of writing.” Chris Baldick offers a more simplified definition when he proposes that an oppressive, claustrophobic

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13 Toman, p.9
15 Although Walpole’s story is designated as the first official Gothic story, many earlier texts, including the plays of William Shakespeare, were antecedents to the eventual development of Gothic literature.
or sinister atmosphere containing elements of the grotesque are required for a
text to be considered Gothic, although this simple description overlooks the
historical link between the Gothic and social upheaval, an association which
reveals the more complex cultural and ideological implications of the genre.\textsuperscript{18}

The Marquis de Sade commented on eighteenth-century Gothic in a prefatory
essay to his \textit{Crimes de l'Amour} in which he links the bourgeoning of the genre to
the social and political upheavals of the French Revolution.\textsuperscript{19} Rosemary Jackson
offers a comparable interpretation of the function of Gothic literature in \textit{Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion} when she suggests that: "Gothic is seen as being a
reaction to historical events, particularly to the spread of industrialism and
urbanization. It is a complex form situated on the edges of bourgeois culture,
functioning in a dialogical relation to that culture."\textsuperscript{20} Jackson also comments that
the Gothic was initially a reaction to the Western European Enlightenment values
which privilege human reason and rationality over the imagination.\textsuperscript{21} Through
the work of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Gothic authors,
including Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis, Mary Shelley and Charles Maturin, the
Gothic developed into a "literary form capable of more radical interrogation of
social contradictions, no longer simply making up for society's lacks."\textsuperscript{22}
Eugenia C. DeLamotte also convincingly argues in her Preface to \textit{Perils of the
Night} that the Gothic:

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{21} Jackson, p.97.
\textsuperscript{22} Jackson, p.97.
\end{flushright}
...has from the beginning been focused steadily on social relations and social institutions and that its simultaneous focus on the most private demons of the psyche can never be separated from this persistent preoccupation with the social realities from which those demons always, in some measure, take their shape.23

The Gothic certainly engages with the darker aspects of human existence and the human psyche, yet, paradoxically, its subversiveness is steeped in a tradition of formulaic plots and hackneyed tropes which have been employed by certain authors in an attempt to exploit the popularity of the genre.24 Despite this, the Gothic as a literary genre has endured, albeit with fluctuating popularity, as it fundamentally attacks deep-seated prejudices and archaic cultural institutions, and debunks pernicious mythologies and social fictions. It has also been utilized to explore and contest dominant social and political ideologies, including western patriarchy and authoritative religious institutions.

Fred Botting has discussed the defining characteristics of Gothic narratives and how they have varied throughout the last three centuries. Botting declares that it was during the nineteenth century that the Gothic became “less identifiable as a separate genre.”25 The movement from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century saw a shift in Gothic concerns from an emphasis on “castles, villains and ghosts,” which had become clichéd and failed to arouse fear in the reader, and was replaced by an “internalized world of guilt, anxiety, despair, a world of individual transgression interrogating the uncertain bounds of imaginative freedom and human knowledge.”26 In addition, in nineteenth-century Gothic

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23 DeLamotte, p.vii.
24 The Gothic genre was first parodied by Jane Austen’s Northanger Abbey (1817) which engendered an association between this highly exuberant literary form and the techniques of parody and satire.
25 Botting, Gothic, p.11.
26 Botting, Gothic, p.10.
literature, terror became secondary to horror, the sublime was replaced by the uncanny and "Doubles, alter egos, mirrors and animated representations of the disturbing parts of human identity became the stock devices."27 As Peter K. Garrett has noted in *Gothic Reflections*, nineteenth-century Gothic involved a shift from the external to the internal, particularly a preoccupation with ideas about the alienation of the self. Garrett comments further on the importance of issues of identity to nineteenth-century Gothic literature:

> In its darkened and monstrous images, Gothic reflects the central nineteenth-century preoccupation with the relation of self and society, which it shares with more realistic fiction, but reflects it in crisis and antagonism, where the self is estranged or abandoned, victimized or victimizing, absorbed in the self-enclosure of madness, the excess of passion, or the transgression of crime."28

Twentieth-century Gothic narratives extend this preoccupation with ideas about the self, particularly the alienation of the self from society which is often focused on the oppressive systems of modernity, although there has been some significant developments.

Firstly, in the twentieth century Gothic narratives have appeared in a variety of fictional forms. Most notably, they have found a natural home in the shadowy spectacle of cinema for which many classic Gothic tales have been adapted to appeal to a modern audience. Moreover, the threat of the supernatural in Gothic literature in the twentieth century tends to take on more richly diverse guises, as noted by Ann B. Tracy, as well as creating sympathy for the monster or feared

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27 Botting, *Gothic*, p.11.

'other.' Although it can be argued that this strategy was utilised by Mary Shelley in the early nineteenth century, with her canonical Gothic tale, *Frankenstein* (1818), it was during the twentieth century that the Gothic villain is most often conflated with the hero (or heroine) to become an attractive or desirable figure. Another important development in twentieth-century Gothic is the prominence of humour, particularly through the device of satire. As Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik point out, parody and burlesque have long been associated with the Gothic (early examples include Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) and Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* (1818)) and many Gothic authors in the last century have responded to the clichéd elements of Gothic tropes by continuing to parody them. One of the epigraphs to Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains*, taken from *Love and Death in the American Novel* by American literary critic Leslie Fiedler, succinctly describes the twentieth-century approach to the Gothic: "The Gothic mode is essentially a form of parody, a way of assailing clichés by exaggerating them to the limit of grotesqueness." Contemporary Gothic writers extend this association between parody and the grotesque, although their approach to the genre is generally more sophisticated in that they manage to unsettle and disturb the reader, as well as invoke humour. It is this emphasis on humour which is adopted by two of the more contemporary authors included in this discussion: Elizabeth Jolley and Carmel Bird.

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Any attempt at the classification of Gothic literature must also include a reference to the distinction which is sometimes made between ‘literary’ and ‘popular’ Gothic, a distinction of some relevance to this thesis. It is the former category that I am predominantly exploring here, although I have included an example of a ‘popular’ text, the film version of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), to consider the appeal of Gothic narratives to a mainstream audience. Fred Botting comments on ‘literary’ Gothic narratives as displaying more serious or self-conscious aspects, which, “echo the concerns about narrative that are embedded in Gothic writing from its beginnings, concerns about the limits, effects and power of representation in the formation of identities, realities and institutions.” By contrast, ‘popular’ Gothic, or formulaic Gothic narratives, draw on clichéd elements of the genre to inevitably reproduce and re-inscribe dominant representations and ideologies. Although the Gothic is generally theorized as a marginalized genre in relation to other literary forms, and is often “excluded from the sphere of acceptable literature,” in Australian literature the Gothic has often been adapted by certain authors to critique or subvert dominant ideologies and representations.

The Female Gothic Tradition

Critical interest in the Gothic arose during the twentieth century, beginning in the 1920s with the publication of three critical texts which were primarily concerned with identifying recurring thematic concerns and locating the Gothic novel

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33 Botting, *Gothic*, p.15.
within an historical context. Although women writers had been working within the Gothic mode for almost two hundred years, whether consciously or not, it is only within the last four decades that critics had begun to theorise Gothic literature by women as a distinct sub-genre. The first widely acclaimed woman writer who has since been described as writing within the Gothic mode and who has become synonymous with any discussion on Gothic literature was Ann Radcliffe, whose work appeared in the last decade of the eighteenth century. Yet it wasn’t until the latter part of the twentieth century, during feminism’s second wave that the term ‘Female Gothic’ was conceived. Ellen Moers coined the phrase in *Literary Women* (1976), a book devoted entirely to a discussion of literature by women writers, and defined Female Gothic as “the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic.” The Gothic genre has been used by women writers for over two centuries as a vehicle for, in the words of Elaine Showalter, “women’s dark protests, fantasies, and fear.” Similarly, Anne Williams, who approaches the Gothic through psychoanalytic and feminist theory in *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*, declares that the Gothic plot continues to appeal to women readers because, “it does not merely protest the conditions and assumptions of patriarchal culture, it unconsciously and spontaneously rewrites

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35 The term ‘Female Gothic’ is still used in theoretical discussions of the Gothic to denote Gothic literature written by women, despite the problematics associated with the use of the word ‘female’ which pertains to the biological categories of ‘male’ and ‘female.’ In her article entitled, “Postmodern Feminine Horror Fictions,” in *Modern Gothic: A Reader* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996) Susanne Becker uses the term ‘feminine Gothic’ for Gothic literature “formed by female subjectivity in the text,” Notes, p.79. However, for the purpose of this thesis, which takes a historical approach, I will, where appropriate, continue to use Moers’ original term, ‘Female Gothic.’


them.” The first critical text devoted entirely to a discussion on Female Gothic literature is *The Female Gothic*, edited by Juliann Fleenor (1983). The essays included in this collection of critical essays emphasise those aspects of Female Gothic literature which are most often associated with the tradition, including madness, monsters and maternity. The essays are also linked by what Fleenor describes as the “perhaps impossible quest” for female identity and wholeness, an idea which frames any discussion on Gothic literature by women writers.

Another influential text which explores the construction of gender politics in Gothic fiction by women is Diane Long Hoeveler’s *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* which explores one of the key themes in Female Gothic literature: the victimization of women or, as Hoeveler describes it, “professional femininity.” According to Hoeveler, Female Gothic literature, advocated by Ann Radcliffe and those who followed her, fulfills the fantasy that women can become empowered through “pretended and staged weakness.” Hoeveler’s study investigates, “why and how women writers have been complicit in constructing limited roles and self-destructive poses of femininity for other women, their readers, to embrace.” Hoeveler traces the origin of ‘professional femininity,’ defined as “a cultivated pose, a masquerade of docility, passivity, wise passiveness and tightly controlled emotions,” to the “originating sources,” specifically novels by British Gothic authors from the late 1780s to 1853, including Charlotte Smith, Anne Radcliffe,

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38 Williams, p.138.
41 Hoeveler, p.7.
42 Hoeveler, p.244.
Jane Austen, Charlotte Dacre Byrne, Mary Shelley and the Brontës. I will consider, throughout this discussion, the extent to which Hoeveler's thesis applies to Gothic narratives by women writers within the Australian context in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

One of the major difficulties with theorizing a separate tradition of literature written by women is that it encourages polarization. The Gothic mode, particularly, has been critically discussed as a gendered form and is a mode of writing which has been marginalized from the literary canon. Women writers have turned to the Gothic to explore female subjectivity and to challenge patriarchal assumptions, and as a result risked that very marginalisation. This problematic is addressed by Jill LeBihan in her discussion on feminism and literature: “At the heart of both ‘Anglo-American’ criticism and ‘French feminist’ theory is the issue of adequate representation for women and femininity, whether that be within a patriarchal structure or within a new kind of structure formed entirely outside the existing ones.” It is this issue of ‘adequate representation’ which is of relevance to this discussion as Australian women writers have traditionally been marginalized from the Australian literary canon, particularly in critical discussions of their work.

It is also important to note that in light of our ‘postfeminist’ age that there has been criticism aimed at continuing the conceptualization of the Gothic in two

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43 Hoeveler, p.xv.
distinct gendered sub-genres. For example, Horner and Zlosnik, in their chapter on ‘Female Gothic’ in *Teaching the Gothic*, comment that by the early twenty-first century the category of Female Gothic was seen to “psychologically universalize female experience or oversimplify the cultural function of the Gothic.” I find this limiting, however, and believe that a contemporary approach to Gothic literature needs to include a consideration of both the history of the genre, which has been conceptualized as a gendered one, and the shift toward a more integrated approach to Gothic fiction, written by both men and women, in which these categorizations will become less rigid. The recently published *Postfeminist Gothic: Critical Interventions in Contemporary Culture* discusses ‘postfeminist Gothic’ as a new category for critical enquiry, and offers a compelling argument for the importance of taking an historical approach to the Gothic, or one which “re-invigorates previous debates on the Gothic, in particular the notion of the Female Gothic and its relation to second-wave feminism,” as well as an approach which sheds light “on the contemporary postfeminist conundrum.” The Gothic is an adapted, and highly adaptable form, and the issue of categorization has always been, and will continue to be, problematic in discussions on a genre that is constantly transgressing its own boundaries.

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45 I am using the term ‘postfeminism’ to describe an approach to feminism which acknowledges that feminism in its current form, or second wave feminism, is no longer relevant to the experiences and concerns of women today.
Finally, the approach to the Gothic genre by women writers has altered quite substantially over time and this will be a recurring concern throughout this discussion. Female Gothic literature by contemporary women writers, for example, fulfills the impulse to change which is not evident in traditional Gothic. Eighteenth-and nineteenth-century Female Gothic often ends in either the death or marriage of the female protagonist and the publication of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) foregrounds the related theme of a woman's lack of subjectivity within the institution of marriage. Syndy McMillen Conger observes:

Brontë's heroine is married early in the novel, but this marriage is no resolution as it is in the traditional Gothic. It does not settle conflicts but exacerbates them, and in Brontë's structure, replaces the period of fearful confinement found in the middle of the traditional Gothic novel...In the early Gothic novel freedom is associated with escape from the dark usurper into marriage. In *Wuthering Heights*, however, in a way which underlines Brontë's adherence to the romantic inversion of eighteenth-century values, freedom is inextricably bound to a social outcast and to the lawless – even incestuous – relationship he [Heathcliff] offers her [Catherine].

*Wuthering Heights* marked a radical shift in the Female Gothic tradition by bringing the heroine and the Gothic villain together for the first time, which acknowledges the heroine's ambivalent attraction to this dark figure. The exploration of family and love relationships, the institution of marriage, and the space of the domestic, both as a place of imprisonment and protection, are central to *Wuthering Heights* and are recurring ideas which will be explored in this thesis in relation to Gothic texts by Australian women writers.

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The Gothic ‘Quest’ in Australia

The Gothic in Australia has engendered various popular iconic Australian cultural images. Three of the more immediately recognizable images include the haunted house on Cloudstreet in Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet* (1991), the murderous ‘Mick’ in Greg McLean’s *Wolf Creek* (2005) and the vanishing schoolgirls in Peter Weir’s adaptation of Joan Lindsay’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975). Additionally, the recent publication of two anthologies on Gothic fiction: *The Anthology of Colonial Australian Gothic Fiction*, edited by Ken Gelder and Rachel Weaver (2007) and *Australian Gothic: An Anthology of Australian Supernatural Fiction 1867 – 1939*, edited by James Doig (2007), suggest a resurgence of interest in the Gothic within Australian literature and the emergence of Australian Gothic as a prominent sub-genre.

The historical association between Australia and the Gothic begins with the first novel to be published in mainland Australia, *The Guardian: A Tale* by ‘An Australian,’ in Sydney in 1838, written by Anna Maria Bunn. The true identity of the author of *The Guardian* was a mystery for many years, and was accidentally discovered by Gwendoline Wilson when conducting research for her book, *Murray of Yarralumla*, published in 1968. Written in the spirit of the Radcliffean Gothic mode, *The Guardian* is described by Elizabeth Webby as “a violently gothic mix of thwarted love, mysterious gypsies, incest and retribution,” yet it is actually set in Ireland and England, not in Australia.

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does, however, make repeated references to New South Wales, typically in a pejorative sense, and generally with regard to the characters, not the landscape. For example, during a discussion about New South Wales that occurs between two of the characters, one of them declares, “All lost characters are found there.”51 This line of dialogue refers to Australia’s function as a penal colony, but also ironically implies that, perversely, Australia may offer the possibility for the displaced and the marginalized to be ‘found,’ or to discover their true selves. Although references to Australia in this novel are limited, it does signal the beginning of an enduring tradition of Australian Gothic narratives.

Very little research has been devoted to Australian Gothic as a literary genre and even less to Australian women writers embracing the Gothic mode, despite the cultural associations often made between Australia and the Gothic. This is surprising when we consider the history of exile and imprisonment in Australia, particularly the mystery and disavowal associated with its convict beginnings. Gerry Turcotte, who conducted the first extensive analysis of Australian Gothic fiction and English-Canadian Gothic fiction, notes in Marie Mulvey-Roberts’ *Handbook to Gothic Literature* that Australia, before its discovery, was imagined as a “grotesque space” and “a land peopled by monsters.” 52 Turcotte further maintains that during the time that convicts were being transported to Australia, Australia was considered “a world of reversals, the dark subconscious of Britain. It was, for all intents and purposes, Gothic par excellence, the dungeon of the

world." David Malouf, in an engaging essay on Australia's British inheritance, comments that during the nineteenth century, Australia was imagined as "an underworld place, literally at the bottom of the world," which similarly invokes a Gothic connection. The literary apotheosis of this dark vision of Australia can be found in Marcus Clarke's canonical nineteenth-century tale about convict life in Australia, *His Natural Life*, which was serialized in the *Australian Journal* from 1870-72 and published as a novel, in a revised form, in 1874.

In *His Natural Life*, Clarke's innocent protagonist, convict Rufus Dawes, is subjected to the horrors and barbarity of the Tasmanian convict system. A. Patchett Martin describes the novel as "a work of singular, I may say of cold-blooded, power...This book must always occupy a foremost position, perhaps I should say a unique position, in Australian literature." However, despite this praise, Martin goes on to describe certain chapters from *His Natural Life* as "the most revolting thing in English fiction" and "almost too ghastly to dwell upon." He also expresses his concern that "the free and untainted population of Australia, which has had no connection with those terrible times of Port Arthur and Norfolk Island, should have this national stigma recorded in indelible ink."

This statement contradicts his earlier praise of the book and also reflects the more sanguine view of the Australian national character which dominated at the time, a view which is also explicated by an anonymous contributor to the

57 A. Patchett Martin, p.19.
58 A. Patchett Martin, p.20.
Australasian Critic, also in 1890, who declares, "the great body of our nascent literature is cheerful and vigorous, as becomes the pioneer writers of a young and hopeful country." This sentiment was to become, according to David Carter, the cornerstone of the development of a national literature. Contrastingly, as Ken Gelder and Rachel Weaver assert, the Gothic in Australia undermines this sentiment and offers a "counter-narrative to the more familiar tales of colonial promise and optimism we are often asked to take for granted." In addition to His Natural Life, Marcus Clarke also imbues the Australian landscape with decidedly Gothic characteristics when he refers to Edgar Allan Poe in his often quoted preface to Adam Lindsay Gordon's Poems:

What is the dominant note of Australian scenery? That which is the dominant note of Edgar Allan Poe's poetry - Weird Melancholy...The Australian mountain forests are funereal, secret, stern. Their solitude is desolation. They seem to stifle, in their black gorges, a story of sullen despair.

It is evident then, that despite efforts to construct Australia as a new and hopeful nation, associations with the Gothic were being made during the nineteenth century which worked to subvert this dominant view and which paralleled the renewed interest being shown in Gothic literature by British women writers in the nineteenth century, most notably, Mary Shelley, Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters.

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Australian Gothic Spaces: Place and Landscape

Traditional eighteenth-century Gothic tales are inevitably set in and around elaborate and ominous Gothic mansions, or the clichéd haunted house, and this tradition continued well into the nineteenth century. The most notable example is American Gothic author Edgar Allan Poe’s short story, “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) which conflates decaying architecture with the breakdown of the psyche, and was the first to establish a nexus between, as Morrow and McGrath suggest in their introduction to *The Picador Book of The New Gothic*, Gothic’s eighteenth-century obsession with architecture and, what has become, the twentieth-century preoccupation with the maladies of the mind, the disintegration of the self and the Freudian discovery of the unconscious.63 Morrow and McGrath comment:

> Where Poe recognized the possibilities of fusion between the historical elements that defined the genre, and his own motivations as a writer to plumb more subtly the geography of madness and the depths of spiritual derangement, the new gothicist would take as a starting place the concern with interior entropy – spiritual and emotional breakdown – and address the exterior furniture of the genre from a contemporary vantage. Night remains as dark as it ever was, but the streets we walk, the houses we live in could not be more different.64

Australian Gothic continues this emphasis on place, although there is a shift in focus from the Gothic castle to the Australian landscape which has often been constructed by European Australia as an empty place, waiting to be conquered. Suzanne Falkiner in her study on the Australian landscape and its influence on Australian writers, *The Writer's Landscape: Wilderness*, notes the relationship between landscape and national identity in Australian literature, which she

64 Morrow and McGrath, p.xii.
describes as “inextricably linked.”65 This idea is elaborated on by Graeme Turner in National Fictions when he comments on the way that the Australian landscape is constructed as Gothic in opposition to Romanticism: “The Romantic desire to find oneself spiritually in Nature has in Australia to deal with a material version of nature that is antithetical to Romanticism: inverted in season, in mood and meaning, the Australian landscape as mirror to the soul reflects the grotesque and the desolate rather than the beautiful and the tranquil.”66 Considering the historical link Australia has with the Gothic, it is compelling to consider Australian literature which embraces Gothic possibilities, particularly in relation to the asperity traditionally associated with the Australian landscape, and the continuing link between the Australian landscape and national identity. This link has been critically discussed in greater depth by a number of commentators in Australia.

Kay Schaffer explores the association between landscape representation and national identity in Australia in Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition which, although published during the decade of the bicentennial, remains an influential text which continues to be invoked in discussions on the Australian landscape. Schaffer considers the Australian bush “the terrain” on which Australia’s national identity has been constructed and central to her thesis is the idea that the bush is typically figured as feminine.67 Schaffer argues: “The bush is typically imagined as a feminine landscape – one

67 Schaffer, Women and the Bush, p.xiii
that is imagined as particularly harsh and unforgiving. 'Woman' carries the burden of this metaphor."68 To illustrate her argument, Schaffer examines a variety of Australian cultural texts, including narratives arising from early settlement, significant literature from the decade of the 1890s (renowned for its incipient attempt at establishing a national identity), popular Australian films including *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) and *Crocodile Dundee* (1986), and the media propaganda which led to the persecution of Lindy Chamberlain following the disappearance of her baby, Azaria Chamberlain, at Uluru in 1980. Schaffer's text has been important in establishing the nexus between the Australian landscape and the feminine and I intend to explore the extent to which selected Gothic texts written by Australian women either reinforce or challenge this premise.

In addition, Roslynn D. Haynes in *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film* also explores cultural representations of the Australian landscape. Haynes's text focuses specifically on how 'the desert centre' has been represented in various artistic and cultural representations in Australia and the scope of her study extends beyond literature to also incorporate Australian painting and film.69 Haynes' engaging work devotes a chapter to a consideration of the Gothic in Australian fiction and film and is more comprehensive in its analysis of the Australian landscape and its impact on national identity than Schaffer's earlier text. *Seeking the Centre* is primarily concerned with contrasting representations of the Australian landscape, especially between European Australia's conceptualization of the landscape as vast and empty, or,

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‘the hideous blank,’ compared with traditional Aboriginal understandings of the land as “uniquely personal and spiritual...the source of life, creativity and renewal...” This thesis will consider ideas from both Schaffer’s and Haynes’s work, although, as the focus of the discussion is on Australian women writers, there will be an emphasis on Schaffer’s conceptualization of the Australian landscape as feminised and the extent to which the selected texts reflect this idea.

In *Uncanny Australia*, Gelder and Jacobs adopt the Freudian concept of the uncanny (or *unheimlich*), so often invoked in discussions on the Gothic, as a way of recasting Australia’s national identity, to include “‘the discourses of the sacred’: that is, the ways in which Aboriginal sacredness manifests itself in the public domain of a modern nation.” Gelder and Jacobs argue, through their conceptualization of Australia as uncanny, that postcolonial Australia is characterized by an ‘unsettled settledness,’ particularly following the Mabo land rights decision in Australia in 1992. Gelder and Jacobs contend that this has destabilised our concept of ‘home,’ or, the idea that, “what is ‘ours’ is also potentially, or even always already, ‘theirs’: the one is becoming the other, the familiar is becoming strange.” The conflation of Australia with the uncanny is important to an understanding of the way Australian women authors have re-imagined their experiences in colonial and postcolonial Australia through

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70 Haynes, p.36. Haynes uses this expression, taken from a description by the *Argus* newspaper of Melbourne, as the title for her chapter on the exploration of the representation of the Australian desert during the nineteenth century.

71 Haynes, p.3.

72 The idea of the Freudian uncanny will be further elaborated on in the first chapter on Barbara Baynton.


74 This landmark decision by the High Court of Australia overturned the doctrine of “terra nullius” (meaning empty land) on which Australia was founded and occupied by the British Crown, finally acknowledging prior ownership of the land by Aboriginal people.

75 Gelder and Jacobs, p.23.
literature, as this idea underpins the way that certain Australian authors have approached the Gothic genre. Carmel Bird's *Mandala Trilogy*, in particular, invokes the idea of Australia as an uncanny nation, one that began, as described by David Malouf, as a "translated re-creation" of British society.\(^{76}\) Bird's trilogy re-imagines Australia as Britain's uncanny double, particularly through her construction of setting and place, and through the centrality of the tropes of replication, imitation and reflection which inform her work.

The Australian Gothic spaces which will be discussed in this thesis are typically related to the Australian landscape, or are unlikely domestic spaces which often contrast markedly with the ominous, labyrinthine castles that characterize eighteenth-century Gothic narratives. The adaptation of the Gothic to the spaces of colonial and postcolonial Australia is one of the more interesting aspects of the integration of this mode within Australian literature. Analogous to the Gothic house in *Wuthering Heights*, Barbara Baynton's *Bush Studies* depicts a fragile, anachronistic domestic space, in this case the prototypical bush hut, which is also vulnerable to intruders.\(^{77}\) In *Coonardoo*, the colonial homestead is the site for the patriarchal and imperial struggle for control over the eponymous central character and the land. In *Picnic at Hanging Rock* we see a return of the Gothic castle with Appleyard College, although it is unable to compete with the Gothic potential of the Australian landscape. In *The Well*, the fragile domesticity the female protagonist, Hester Harper, furiously tries to maintain is threatened by an assumed male intruder who is disposed of in an abandoned well, although

\(^{76}\) Malouf, p.5.

much of the suspense is derived from the uncertainty of the actual existence of
the intruder. Finally, in Carmel Bird’s *Mandala Trilogy*, the Gothic domestic
space is replaced by the psychiatric institution in *The White Garden*, and sinister
cults in *Red Shoes* and *Cape Grimm*, which are enclosed and segregated
communities through which the Gothic themes of oppression and the
confinement of women are explored.

Re-imagining an Australian National Identity

Ideas about national identity in Australia are often exclusionary and can be
framed in terms which are gendered male. As Judith Johnston and Monica
Anderson point out, the development of a distinct national identity in Australia
rarely deviated from the categories of ‘white’ and ‘male.’ Moreover, Susan
Martin draws on Homi Bhabha’s thesis that notions of nationhood are created in
retrospect when she argues that, “the 1890s have been ineradicably installed in
Australian discourses as the moment the Australian nation emerges....”
Therefore, Barbara Baynton’s *Bush Studies*, published at the end of this highly
influential decade, is an apposite starting point for the interrogation of ideas
relating to the formation of a national subject by Australian women writers,
particularly those that critique the proposed masculinity of this national

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78 Judith Johnston & Monica Anderson, “Introduction,” *Australia Imagined: Views from the
British Periodical Press 1800-1900*, eds. Judith Johnston & Monica Anderson (Crawley, Western
Australia: University of Western Australia Press, 2005), p.6.
79 Susan Martin, “National Dress or National Trousers?,” in *The Oxford Literary History of
Australia*, eds. Bruce Bennett, Jennifer Strauss & Chris Wallace-Crabbe (Melbourne: Oxford
University Press, 1998), p.90. The reference is to Homi K. Bhabha, “Introduction: Narrating the
Nation,” *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 1990),
p.1.
character. The first two writers to be discussed, Barbara Baynton and Katharine Susannah Prichard, were both writing at a time which was heavily influenced by the Australian Legend, an ideology which celebrates a national identity based on masculine ideals and concerns. This ideology was predicated on the character of the Australian bushman which is exemplified in many of the characters in the works of iconic Australian author, Henry Lawson and popular Australian poet, ‘Banjo’ Paterson. Richard Nile defines the Australian Legend as a “storyline that has influenced and given shape to nationalistic interpretations of Australia.”

This homogenous and hierarchical perception of the Australian national character excludes most of the Australian population, including women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and all other non-Anglo Australians. Russel Ward’s highly influential book The Australian Legend, published in 1958, is concerned with tracing the development of what he describes as the ‘national mystique,’ which he links to the Australian bush and “the common folk,” rather than the more “respectable and cultivated sections of society.” The ‘typical Australian,’ as described by Ward, is an independent, anti-authoritarian, practical man, always willing to ‘have a go;' he swears, drinks and gambles to excess and is skeptical of intellectual and cultural pursuits, and above all else, he is fiercely loyal to mates. Although Susan Martin points out that a comprehensive review of Australian writing at the all-important turn of the century actually represents the nation “in all its incoherence and multiplicity,” rather than as simply a reflection of the Anglo-celtic male subject, the notion of an ‘Australian Legend’ still retains currency in popular representations of nationhood, as images relating

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82 Ward, pp.1-2.
83 Susan Martin, p.104.
to bush mythology continue to be evoked and the characteristics of the typical Australian continue to be celebrated.\footnote{Susan Martin, p.91.} This thesis seeks to critique this tradition, primarily through a consideration of how Australian women writers have contributed to the discourse on national identity in Australia.

One of the ways women have taken part in the conceptualization of a national identity in Australia is through literature. Eugenia DeLamotte’s description of the Gothic as a ‘myth’ dovetails nicely with Dorothy Jones’ discussion on the experience of Australian women writers in their attempt to engage in the process of ‘mythmaking,’ as a way of expanding representations of national identity in Australia. Jones proposes:

\begin{quote}
A newly settled country affords profound stimulus to the imagination, but its women writers may find themselves mapping two territories simultaneously – the new land, and the nature of female experience within it....Consequently, women writers participating in the mapping and mythmaking of a new country may find themselves overturning or dismissing mythologies inappropriate to the realm of female experience, while in Australia they have the added problem of responding to an emergent national myth which, for geographical and historical reasons, has accorded women little place, generally dismissing them with indifference or hostility.\footnote{Dorothy Jones, “Mapping and Mythmaking,” p.64.}
\end{quote}

Australian women writers, positioned outside the dominant phallogocentric mythic order, have engaged with the Gothic to defy and subvert, in the words of Dorothy Jones, “traditional mythic images.”\footnote{Dorothy Jones, “Mapping and Mythmaking: Women Writers and the Australian Legend,” \textit{Ariel} 17:4 (1986), pp.63-64.} As the Gothic is sometimes theorized as a subversive form of literature, Australian women writers have gravitated toward the literary Gothic mode to explore their uncertain position within a simplified mythology which not only excludes them but is taken to be
self-evident. This peculiar doubling places women in the position of Other, as an antipode, and finds mythopoeic expression in Gothic literature. The deployment of the Gothic mode in Australia creates a space for women to influence the discourse on national identity and gender relations as well as re-imagine European Australia's relationship to the Australian landscape.

A connection can also be made, in relation to the theorizing of Australia as a Gothic landscape, within Clare Kahane's influential discussion on the importance of the mother figure to the Gothic, "The Gothic Mirror," in which she discusses the centrality of the "spectral presence of the dead/undead mother." More generally, the importance of the trope of the 'dead/undead mother' in Gothic literature can be connected in Australia to Australia's distance from Britain, or the motherland, and the anxiety this disconnection evokes within Australia, particularly the destabilizing of identity. As the central and dominating figure of the mother appears to be a recurring character in the texts chosen for this discussion, this idea will also be considered in relation to the continuing influence of Britain on postcolonial Australia and how this has contributed to the tradition of the Gothic in narratives by Australian women writers.

**Introducing the Texts**

Two notable research projects have been conducted on Australian Gothic. The first, a PhD thesis by Gerry Turcotte completed in 1991, adopts a colonial/post-colonial reading strategy which offers a comparative study of both Australian

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and English-Canadian fiction, spanning both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The inclusion of a comparison with English-Canadian fiction in Turcotte's thesis results in a study which diminishes the importance of the Gothic genre to the Australian literary canon. The second, also a PhD thesis, completed in 1994 by Alexandra Rombouts, focuses specifically on the Gothic motif of the intruder and is limited to a discussion on literature by contemporary Australian authors. This study will extend the critical inquiry into the often overlooked contribution that Australian women writers have made to ideas about national identity in Australia through their engagement with the Gothic.

The Gothic as a literary form invariably invokes a variety of responses, either positive or negative, but rarely indifferent. Yet it has proven to be a highly fluid genre which continues to resonate in various historical, cultural and national contexts. Anna Powell and Andrew Smith in their Introduction to *Teaching the Gothic* valorize the Gothic as a form with continuing pedagogical relevance. When considering the relevance of the genre to contemporary readers and its continuing pedagogical and critical currency, Powell and Smith assert:

Gothic is a vibrant, flexible mode, mutating to fit changing cultural and ideological dynamics. Neither Gothic literature and film, nor studies of them, operate in a monolithic generic paradigm. Both creative and critical work expand the ideological and stylistic parameters of the form to produce, rather, a multiplicity of Gothics, including postcolonial, postmodern, and Queer versions.

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Elaine Showalter also observes that Female Gothic literature has taken on "different shapes and meanings within different historical and national contexts."91 Hence, this thesis will explore how women writers have embraced this distinct literary form, particularly in relation to the struggle for subjectivity by women in colonial and postcolonial Australia.

This dissertation explores the use of the Gothic genre in works by selected Australian women writers, from the beginning of the twentieth-century to the beginning of the twenty-first century. The texts I have chosen challenge enduring stereotypes associated with the roles of women in traditionally male-dominated representations of Australian society through the use of Gothic narrative strategies and conventions. The discussion will consider the cultural, social, psychological and political concerns specific to the time in which each text was published, although the focal point of the thesis will be on discourses of gender as the critique of patriarchal assumptions has always been central to Female Gothic literature. I will also engage with other themes which have emerged specifically from the tradition of Female Gothic literature, including the problematics of femininity; maternity and motherhood; the body; confinement; monstrosity and the grotesque; madness; and female sexuality. I will also make connections between canonical Gothic texts which originated from the British tradition - as well as texts from other national traditions - and the selected primary texts, as a way of determining how Australian women writers have re-imagined the mode within a uniquely Australian milieu. Recurring tropes

91 Showalter, p.129.
specific to the adaptation of the Female Gothic tradition by Australian women writers will also be identified and explored.

My starting point will be three short stories from *Bush Studies* by Barbara Baynton (1901), a uniquely feminist Australian writer for whom a resurgence of critical interest emerged during the 1980s and whose work dispels any notion of frivolity associated with the Gothic genre. Barbara Baynton engages with Gothic motifs and tropes to express nineteenth-century Gothic anxieties relevant to the experience of Australian women in colonial Australia. The second selected text, Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929), was considered highly controversial at the time of its publication and has been chosen because of the continuing critical debate which this novel engenders and because of its deployment of a variety of Gothic tropes, including the use of the supernatural, the abuse and control of women’s bodies, confinement and decay. *Coonardoo* was one of the first Australian novels to imaginatively explore the concept of miscegenation and black/white sexual relations in rural Australia and, through the Gothic mode, examines the racial anxieties which permeated colonial Australia. Peter Weir’s film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), based on the novel by the same name by Joan Lindsay (1967), captured the imagination of the mainstream Australian public when the film was released and has been influential in the conceptualization of a haunted Australian landscape, an idea that has continued to resonate in the Australian social imagination. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* engages with the Gothic to critique the continuing influence of British culture on an Australian national identity, although the film ultimately
reinforces racist and sexist stereotypes as a way of appealing to a mainstream Australian audience.

The final two writers to be discussed, Elizabeth Jolley and Carmel Bird, will be critiqued with the awareness that their novels have been published at a time which was more accepting of the exploration of unorthodox themes in relation to women's lives, particularly women's sexuality. In addition, the two contemporary writers discussed in this thesis continue the tradition inspired by Poe in the nineteenth century, of interest in psychic disintegration, particularly the emotional and spiritual distress experienced by women in twentieth-century Australia which is a principal feature of their work. Firstly, Elizabeth Jolley's *The Well* (1986) is one of the most critically acclaimed of all the Gothic novels chosen for discussion. Elizabeth Jolley playfully utilizes the Gothic mode in *The Well* to parody elements of Australian life, particularly the parochial values of rural Australia and the characteristics of its people. However, although *The Well* adopts a satirical approach to Gothic conventions, it is focused on the obsessive relationship between an older and younger woman and offers a disturbing exploration of the destructive consequences of emotional and sexual repression. The final chapters of the thesis will discuss Carmel Bird's three novels, published between 1995 and 2004, known collectively as *The Mandala Trilogy*. The three novels: *The White Garden* (1995), *Red Shoes* (1998) and *Cape Grimm* (2004) are variously set in Melbourne, Victoria, an urban Australian landscape with Europeanised Gothic locations, and the isolated island of Tasmania, haunted by the massacres of the Indigenous inhabitants that took place during white settlement. The *Mandala Trilogy* adapts and satirises Gothic motifs and tropes
and the three novels of the trilogy are primarily linked by their exploration of the oppression of women in the patriarchal milieu of twentieth-century Australia.

Each chapter in the discussion will conduct a close Gothic reading on each of the selected texts. I will include a discussion on the critical reception of the texts as a way of placing each text within its specific socio-historical context and then explore how the text has utilised Gothic narrative conventions and tropes. I will also, where appropriate, suggest links between the selected texts and canonical Gothic texts to determine how the genre has been revised within an Australian context. Finally, I will identify associations between the texts themselves, with the intention of tracing a tradition of the Gothic genre in the fiction and film narratives of Australian women writers.
Chapter One

Barbara Baynton Subverts the Australian Legend in Three Gothic Tales from *Bush Studies*

*Bush Studies*, Barbara Baynton’s collection of six short stories published in England and Australia in 1902, engages with Gothic conventions to radically critique gender politics in colonial Australia. *Bush Studies* is set in the Australian outback, although instead of reinforcing nationalistic discourse about the bush Baynton writes from the perspective of colonial Australian women, a decidedly unusual position for an Australian writer to adopt during this time. An analysis of three of the stories from *Bush Studies*, “A Dreamer,” “Squeaker’s Mate,” and “The Chosen Vessel” will reveal how Baynton utilizes Gothic conventions and Gothic tropes to offer a powerful resistance to the Australian bush legend.

The title of this collection, *Bush Studies*, immediately emphasises the bush, and the use of the word ‘studies’ implies description, analysis and a sense of close examination which imbues the stories with a verisimilitude not often associated with the Gothic, thus valorizing her engagement with the genre. Baynton’s bush ‘studies’ pose a deliberate and iconoclastic challenge to Henry Lawson’s bush ‘sketches,’ in which the idealization and generalization of elements of Lawson’s constructions of bush life, particularly its characters, are rigorously critiqued. Indeed, Anne Summers asserts that Baynton was the first Australian woman
writer to break with the romantic tradition of male bush writing.¹ According to Brian Kiernan, Lawson’s ‘sketches’ of Australian bush life are “often impressionistically brisk” but imply the “general and typical” which forms the basis of his fiction.² It can be argued that Baynton’s ‘studies’ represent an effective protest against these ‘general and typical’ depictions of bush life which Lawson conceded in “A Fragment of Autobiography” were actually idealized portrayals of bush characters. Lawson writes, “My diggers are idealized, or drawn from a few better class diggers, as my Bushmen are sketched from better class Bushmen.”³ Baynton’s stark depictions of bush life, particularly the brutality inherent in many of her male characters, penetrates the patina of stock characters created by Lawson which would play such an integral role in the formation of a national masculinist identity in Australia. Moreover, Baynton subverts many stereotypical representations of colonial Australian women through the creation of unconventional and often strong-willed women struggling against the restrictions placed on them in colonial Australia, restrictions which were strongly influenced by Victorian ideologies of femininity that were anachronistic in the Australian outback. This discussion will focus on the three stories from Baynton’s collection which have received the most critical attention, particularly from the 1980s onwards, and are arguably the most Gothic of the six. Firstly, however, I would like to present a consideration of the critical reception to Baynton’s work as she published her collection of Gothic stories during a time that valorized realism in Australian literature and privileged male writers who

reinforced the idealization of the Australian outback. Her critique of the
Australian bush and its people is most unorthodox.

Baynton and her Critics

Baynton’s relationship to the Australian outback is an ambivalent one. According to Penne Hackforth-Jones, Baynton’s great-granddaughter, who has written a biography of her life, *Barbara Baynton: Between Two Worlds*, Baynton “saw the bush as she found it, unbearable in part, beautiful and haunting in others.” She reportedly wrote *Bush Studies* in an attempt to ‘write the bush out of her.’ Baynton’s female characters, however, are frequently depicted as victimized by the male characters who inhabit the Australian bush, not by the landscape, and these male characters range from indolent misogynists to barbaric murderers and rapists. Baynton’s stories explore the lives of women in rural Australia, lives which were rarely depicted in literature from the perspective of a woman writer. Patricia Clarke declares that, “it was not until the 1890s, when Barbara Baynton wrote her stories of country women living on the edge of destitution that the poor and deprived were depicted in writing by a woman.” This statement by Clarke is not entirely accurate as Louisa Lawson, mother of Henry Lawson and founding editor of the first Australian journal produced by women and committed to women’s rights issues, *The Dawn*, wrote an article about the predicament of women in the bush entitled “The Australian Bush-Woman,” published in 1889. This article discusses the singular characteristics

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5 Hackforth-Jones, p.59.
6 Patricia Clarke, p.126.
and plight of the Australian bush-woman, with particular emphasis on her vulnerability and fortitude in the Australian bush. These women, according to Louisa Lawson, "share almost on equal terms with men the rough life and the isolation which belongs to civilization's utmost fringe."\textsuperscript{7} Lawson is more circumspect than Baynton in her depiction of the Australian bushman in her article and takes care not to describe him in an entirely negative light. Lawson describes him in her article as being not "dissipated" or "brutal," although she concedes that he "has a tendency to leave her to manage the business, and he is rather indolent and neglectful."\textsuperscript{8} This rather weak depiction is later contradicted when she comments on the occurrence of male brutality in the bush. She asserts, "I have known a woman to be up in a tree for three days, while her husband was hunting for her to 'hammer' her. It is horrible to think such things are possible, yet worse things happen daily."\textsuperscript{9} Lawson's article concludes by praising the daughters of these women who she considers, "fit to obtain what their mothers never dreamed of - women's rights."\textsuperscript{10} Although Lawson and Baynton were both concerned with the treatment of women in the Australian outback, Lawson is tentative in her discussion of male violence, whereas Baynton's audacious depiction of male cruelty experienced by these impoverished country women is unique during this time and possesses an imaginative force which Lawson's article lacks. Suzanne Falkiner comments on the historical significance of Barbara Baynton to the field of Australian literature:

Despite the relative smallness of her \textit{oeuvre}, a major aspect of the importance of Baynton in the Australian literary pantheon lies in the fact that her work overcame the chasm between the

\textsuperscript{8} Louisa Lawson, p.38.
\textsuperscript{9} Louisa Lawson, p.39.
\textsuperscript{10} Louisa Lawson, p.39.
impoverished female drudge or deserted wife – often not sufficiently well educated to write – and the middle class woman who had more time to draw on her experiences for literary material.\textsuperscript{11}

Baynton, then, was a pioneering turn-of-the-century Australian writer whose work offered an alternative voice depicting women’s lives in rural Australia to the dominant one put forth by her contemporary Henry Lawson, linked here, for the purpose of contrast.

Reviews for \textit{Bush Studies} were mostly favourable, although a comparison between an English review and reviews by Australian critics reveal how literature in Australia at the beginning of the twentieth-century was often judged by the extent to which, in the opinion of Australian reviewers, it conformed to dominant ideologies about national identity. A review from the English magazine, \textit{Academy and Literature}, praises Baynton as a writer who is ‘fortified and amused by an ironic perception both daring and original.’\textsuperscript{12} The reviewer begins by commenting on Baynton’s uniqueness and then commends Baynton for her courage in depicting an alternative view of Australia:

\begin{quote}
A book that contradicts a preconception is always interesting, and when, as in the case of “Bush Studies” it is full of the fine art which interprets as well as presents, it must be allowed to stand out honourably from what are too justly called “the ranks” of fiction. Speaking generally, we may say that while Australia’s climatic rigours have been freely drawn on to give an impressive local colour...the murk and squalor contingent on a state of soul-deadening isolation have scarcely been peered into by artists of Australian repute.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{12} Anonymous, “Bush Studies by Barbara Baynton (Book Review),” \textit{Academy and Literature} 64 (1903: Jan/June), p. 83.
\textsuperscript{13} Anonymous, “Bush Studies by Barbara Baynton (Book Review),” p.83
By contrast, the reaction to Baynton’s work by A.G. Stephens, literary editor of *The Bulletin*, the principal literary journal in Australia from the 1890s, and initiator of the popular ‘Red Page,’ was ambivalent. Stephens declared in a review of Henry Lawson’s first collection of stories that, “Henry Lawson is the voice of the bush, and the bush is the heart of Australia.”\(^\text{14}\) This quotation illustrates the importance of the bush ethos during this time, which also reveals the extent to which Baynton’s voice, which not only challenges this ethos but attempts to subvert it, must have been disconcerting to stalwarts of this tradition.

The following frequently quoted passage from his review of *Bush Studies* offers high praise for Baynton:

> Its truthful glimpses of Australian life, graphically expressed, could not (would not) have been printed in any Australian paper, though they rank highly as literature and are circulated widely in book form when issued by an English publisher. We are too mealy-mouthed (in print) and stuff far too much ‘respectable’ wadding in our ears.\(^\text{15}\)

According to Hackforth-Jones, Stephens was concerned that Baynton’s work was inaccessible to a large readership, as the characters Baynton had constructed were considered too obscure.\(^\text{16}\) His later remark in a review of Baynton’s only novel *Human Toll* (1907) in *The Bulletin*, “Is this not a perverse picture of our sunny, light hearted, careless land?,”\(^\text{17}\) reflects his discomfort with Baynton’s unorthodox approach to the Australian outback. It is this perversity and ironic re-writing of popular Australian myths of the Australian bush which makes Barbara Baynton such an intriguing colonial Australian author and one who is of special interest to a contemporary audience. Some indication of her future status as an influential Australian writer is evident from an earlier review by Stephens

\(^\text{14}\) Quoted in Falkiner, *Wilderness*, p.60.


\(^\text{16}\) Hackforth-Jones, pp.82-83.

on *Bush Studies* in the *Bulletin* in 1903, although the emphasis placed in this review on Baynton’s use of realism (a recurring preoccupation in reviews of her work) undermines her Gothic vision of the Australian outback:

Her studies of some Australian people and scenes are realistic beyond anything of the kind written here – beyond Lawson, even beyond Miles Franklin. Nothing could be closer to life. For minute fidelity there has been no writer anywhere to surpass this writer...So precise, so complete, with such insight into detail and such force of statement, it ranks with the masterpieces of literary realism in any language.¹⁸

This review also demonstrates how highly Stephens ranked the stories from *Bush Studies* but only through the lens of Australian realism. I would argue that it is Baynton’s willingness to engage with the darker aspects of the Australian bush which subvert the traditional ideal of a ‘sunny, light hearted, careless land,’ an ideal that was so important in the construction of a national identity. Her use of the Gothic is revelatory and depicts aspects of Australian culture which Australians were not ready - or willing - to confront, let alone embrace. In addition, Baynton’s Gothic tales about the Australian bush threatened the burgeoning attempt at a cohesive national identity which arose during this highly influential and nationalistic decade, a national identity which was heavily influenced by Henry Lawson and his sketches of the Australian bush.

Ken Goodwin links Baynton and Henry Lawson in *A History of Australian Literature*, describing Baynton as a writer with “some affinities to Lawson in her gloomily realistic view of life in the bush and her sense of vulnerability and horror,” yet insists that Baynton’s point of departure from Lawson is “in her

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unrelieved focus on the women of the bush."19 Goodwin proposes that Lawson writes "sympathetically" about women, "but can surprise by a sudden off-hand comment."20 Goodwin is tacitly suggesting that Lawson’s fictional treatment of women is inferior to Baynton’s, who writes about decidedly more complex, realistic and diverse female characters and their experiences in the Australian outback during the nineteenth century. Lawson’s male characters exemplify those qualities of the Australian national character celebrated in the 1890s, which were, according to Kay Ferres, "specifically masculine: nomadic, independent, anti-authoritarian and fiercely loyal to mates."21 Kay Schaffer notes that Lawson’s female characters were often depicted as “appendages to men,” which is evident in many of Lawson’s short story titles, including ‘The Drover’s Wife,’ ‘The Selector’s Daughter,’ ‘Brighten’s Sister-in-Law’ and “That Pretty Girl in the Army.”22 The Joe Wilson stories, with the recurring portrait of Joe Wilson and his family, reveals the extent to which Lawson would often depict bush women as overwhelmed by the hardships engendered by the Australian bush. Lawson’s short story, “Water Them Geraniums” introduces the character of Mrs Spicer, a lonely bush woman who lives in an isolated bush hut and whose sole pleasure in life is her pitiable garden of geraniums, “a few dirty grey-green leaves behind some sticks,” the only flower able to grow “in the drought out there.”23 Joe Wilson and his wife Mary befriend Mrs Spicer who dies alone at the end of the story, disgraced by her eldest son’s arrest for horse robbery. Her

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20 Goodwin, p.43.
motto throughout the story is that she is 'past carin'" and epitomizes the female figure of defeat which recurs in colonial Australian narratives.

Lawson's story 'The Drover's Wife' is one that has garnered substantial critical attention. According to Kay Schaffer this particular story of Lawson's had been embraced by both the Democratic Nationalists and the New Critics "in their attempts to define and master the national character,"24 and is therefore pertinent to an understanding of how colonial women were depicted in Australian literature. Although Henry Lawson is not considered a Gothic writer, his treatment of the Australian landscape emphasizes its harshness. Moreover, "The Drover's Wife" has a female protagonist and is set in the Australian bush and the parallels with Baynton are clear, particularly with the final story in Bush Studies, "The Chosen Vessel." Schaffer's analysis of "The Drover's Wife" questions whether the character of the drover's wife in Lawson's story could represent "'the people's dream' of a malleable, pliant, non-threatening but phallic bush/mother?"25 Baynton's tales, by contrast, depict women whose vulnerability in the Australian bush is not met by self-sacrifice and, ultimately, resignation, which are the characteristics embodied by the lonely bush mother in 'The Drover's Wife.' The third-person narrator in "The Drover's Wife" remarks on her masculine qualities but qualifies this with a final comment on her physical limitations as a woman in the bush:

She thinks how she fought a flood during her husband's absence. She stood for hours in the drenching downpour, and dug an overflow gutter to save the dam across the creek. But she could not save it. There are things that a bushwoman cannot do.26

Many of Baynton's characters, in the face of a very real masculine threat, heroically resist and fight, although they are unable to triumph over what is ultimately for them an insurmountable enemy. According to Schaffer, the drover's wife in Lawson's story, "fulfills the people's dream of the perfect mother – powerful, yet capable of being mastered herself, without a struggle." Indeed, this character is expected to adapt to the harsh conditions of the Australian outback and assume the masculine role while her husband is away, but return to her domestic role of wife and mother when her husband returns home. By contrast, the women in Baynton's stories are challenged by the neglect, indolence and brutality of the male characters (often husbands) and struggle against what the drover's wife in Lawson's story diligently struggles to preserve. This distinction is important, as Baynton's female characters, predominantly nameless and therefore representative of 'every-woman' in the stories, are not merely passive victims of the barbarism associated with the Australian bush and its male inhabitants, but do - like the archetypal Gothic heroine - fight for their lives. By imaginatively engaging with the experience of women in the Australian bush, Baynton's collection of stories has emerged as a severe indictment of the treatment of women in nineteenth-century rural Australia.

The only critic to show interest in Bush Studies until 1980 was A.A. Phillips, whose 1965 discussion on Baynton is frequently cited by recent critics. According to Schaffer, Phillips' review "constructs her place and serves as a

27 Schaffer, Women and the Bush, p.137.
Phillips praises Baynton as "impressively individual and a significantly expressive voice from the epoch of the nineties." He also comments on the "undercurrent of revolt against the barbarous fate of being an Australian" in Baynton's work and asserts that Baynton represents "with a rare wholeheartedness this element of revolt against self-confident Australianism, despite the fact that she is not a writer primarily moved by socially critical motives." This barely-concealed patronizing tone continues throughout Phillips' article on Baynton as he describes her work as "melodramatic," a term also employed by Adrian Mitchell in his brief passage on Bush Studies in The Oxford History of Australian Literature and one that is often used pejoratively in association with women writers, particularly those writing in the Gothic mode. Concluding his discussion on Baynton's use of the theme of the 'maternal instinct,' Phillips declares:

Allied with this theme is a bitter insistence on man's brutality to woman – one feels, perhaps without logical justification, that the two themes beat together in the pulse of Barbara Baynton's intuitions. The strength of the obsession is again most revealingly conveyed when the theme forces its way into the incidental detail. The central presence of a callous husband in "Squeaker's Mate" may mean only that Barbara Baynton has observed such a situation and thought it worth developing into a story.

With the use of words such as 'intuitions' and 'obsessions,' Phillips reduces Baynton's work to a corollary of female neurosis, describing the negative portrayal of her male characters as engendered by 'bitterness' which overlooks

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30 Phillips, p.31.
33 Phillips, p.33.
the emotional force of the story. Phillips is also incapable of comprehending the significance of the ‘callous husband’ in “Squeaker’s Mate,” and discounts the memorable female protagonist about whom “Squeaker’s Mate” is actually written. Kay Schaffer argues that Phillips’ essay on Baynton, which introduces Bush Studies, “reveals myriad ways in which the discourse is blind to women as writers and as characters except as they reflect or challenge the bush ideal.”

Phillips’ discomfiture with Baynton’s male characters in Bush Studies becomes particularly evident when he remarks on the final story in the collection, Baynton’s most critically acclaimed tale, “The Chosen Vessel”:

This is a story written with an obviously deliberate economy of style, even beyond Barbara Baynton’s usual practice; and there was no need to create for us the figure of the husband — his absence from the house was all that the narration demanded of him. How vividly that passage does create him; and how significant is the unnecessariness of the creation.

This comment is absurdly contradictory, praising Baynton for the vivid opening scene in “The Chosen Vessel,” yet declaring the negative depiction of the husband-figure as ‘unnecessary.’ His criticism clearly displays its ideological bias as Baynton is condemned for offending against the glorification of the Australian bushman in the Australian cultural tradition, with a character that is cruel and mocking toward his wife because of her unfamiliarity with aspects of the outback. As the story concerns the central character’s vulnerability and isolation in the bush and insists on a grim, yet realistic portrayal of bush life and gender relations in nineteenth-century Australia, the brief opening paragraph establishes the depth of loneliness and frustration the woman feels as the narrator describes the pleasure her husband takes in her humiliation at being afraid of a

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34 Schaffer, Women and the Bush, p.156.
35 Phillips, p.34.
bellowing cow. The inclusion of the antagonistic husband-figure in “The Chosen Vessel” presages the woman’s vile rape and murder by a swagman later in the story and illustrates not only the intense vulnerability of women but also highlights the male brutality they experienced in nineteenth-century rural Australia, a noxious element of bush life largely ignored by Baynton’s literary contemporaries.

Despite Phillips’ glib praise, his criticism of Baynton is heavily influenced by dominant gender ideologies operating in Australia at the beginning of the twentieth century and thus fails to acknowledge her powerful critique of gender politics. Critical interest in Baynton’s work since Phillips was largely non-existent until 1980, the year Barbara Baynton was published as part of the Portable Australian Authors series, edited by Sally Krimmer and Alan Lawson. Since the 1980s, Baynton has become a figure of increased critical attention, especially amongst feminist critics in Australia, which has coincided with the burgeoning feminist movement, which emerged in the previous decade.\(^{36}\) It is also only in recent times that Baynton’s challenge to the Australian tradition can be fully appreciated. Therefore, critical interest in Baynton since the 1980s has largely been focused on her engagement with gender politics. As discourses of gender are central to Gothic literature by women, Baynton is an intriguing literary figure whose Gothic tales extend our understanding of gender ideologies in rural Australia in the nineteenth-century.

Baynton's Gothic Tales

Barbara Baynton's writing is often noted for its grim realism, yet despite her engagement with the macabre and often horrific experiences of women in the Australian bush, certain critics assert that Bush Studies should not be read as Gothic. Thea Astley comments in Three Australian Writers that Baynton's stories should not be viewed as "exercises in Australian Gothic," but rather, as sketches of the "horrible realism of selector life." Astley's comment suggests that to consider Bush Studies as a Gothic text is somehow to attenuate the force of her realism. Similarly, Lucy Frost's criticism adopts a critical attitude toward Baynton's work which could be connected with Baynton's utilization of the Gothic mode. Frost describes the plot of "A Dreamer" as "mawkish...characteristic of soppy fiction written for women's magazines." She also considers the inclusion of the third part of the story in "The Chosen Vessel," featuring Peter Hennessey tormented by his Irish-Catholic conscience as "a silly counterpointing story," declaring, "a more sophisticated writer would not have embraced the resulting melodrama." In addition, A.A. Phillips is anxious to associate Baynton's work with the use of realism as a prerequisite for an Australian author when he declares:

Barbara Baynton is an Australian writer, and she is true to the most persisting characteristic of that breed: she firmly roots her stories in the soil of the actual. She creates the line of the story, its symbolic detail, from the pressure of nightmare impulse, it is true; but she creates the sorts of things which do happen. Her

39 Frost, p.65.
episodes are the events of life-as-it-is. Her characters – at least her men – are often pushed to the limit of the probably evil, but they are not pushed over that limit. They are not Heathcliffs, unacceptable on the level of the actual.\footnote{Phillips, p.35.}

I would argue, however, that the evilness of the male character in “The Chosen Vessel” eclipses that of Heathcliff, especially given the apparent lack of motive for his horrific crime. The subversive nature of Baynton’s use of the Gothic mode, a quality allied with the Gothic from its inception, is being overlooked in these critical responses by Astley, Frost and Phillips. David Punter comments on the influence of the Gothic on eighteenth-century culture in *The Literature of Terror* as, “the archaic, the pagan, that which was prior to, or was opposed to, or resisted the establishment of civilized values and a well-regulated society.”\footnote{David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (London: Longmans, 1980), p.6.}

Further to this, the remarks made by Lucy Frost blatantly mirror the condescending tone adopted by earlier critics of Baynton’s work, such as A.A. Phillips and A.G. Stephens. It is also pertinent to note that the section of “The Chosen Vessel” that Frost criticizes was originally cut out by Stephens in his editing of the story for its publication in the *Bulletin*, in which he changed the title of the story to “The Tramp.”\footnote{Sally Krimmer & Alan Lawson, “Introduction,” *Portable Australian Authors: Barbara Baynton*, (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1980), p.xiii.} Although Frost and Astley represent two disparate points of view regarding Baynton’s use of the Gothic, the former disparaging those aspects of the stories which engage with the Gothic, and the latter defending her use of realism as a genre distinct from the Gothic, I would argue that Baynton combines aspects of bush/domestic realism with Gothic tropes to subvert those elements of nineteenth-century rural Australian life in which phallocentric ideologies of mateship and masculine loyalty predominated.
Traditionally, Gothic literature was seen to oppose realism with its emphasis on truth and reality and its disavowal of irrational or fantastic elements (including the supernatural and grotesque). Female Gothic literature on the other hand has a tradition of fusing the two genres, now recognized as originating with the Brontë sisters, whose novels became a platform for ideological reform of the social, political and economic status of women in the nineteenth century. Baynton’s use of the Gothic similarly allows the expression of the unsaid and repressed. The form itself seems to emerge from the grim reality of her subject matter, and the use of traditional Gothic tropes in her work such as confinement, madness, isolation, suspense, alienation, anxiety and horror fortifies her ability to convey that which could not be directly articulated during the nationalistic decade of the 1890s. Perhaps more than any other writer chosen for this discussion, Baynton’s work exemplifies the conflict between Australian realism and the more fantastic elements associated with Gothic literature.

Baynton refines the formulaic model of Female Gothic literature made famous by Ann Radcliffe and adopted by subsequent female Gothic writers, as a means of highlighting the very real anxieties experienced by impoverished country women in Australia. Baynton’s heroines do not magically triumph over their enemies despite their struggle, as they invariably do in canonical Gothic literature. Diane Long Hoeveler asserts that the “typical female gothic novel presents a blameless heroine triumphing through a variety of passive-aggressive strategies over a male-created system of oppression and corruption, the ‘patriarchy.’”43 There are certainly echoes of Baynton’s stories in this generic

43 Hoeveler, p.188.
description of the Female Gothic. However, where they differ markedly from earlier Female Gothic fiction, is that they are not preoccupied with the bourgeoisie, as are many of the texts Hoeveler discusses in her study, which focuses on the discourse of British Female Gothic, including canonical Gothic texts such as Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian*, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, and Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*. Hoeveler also states in her discussion on *Jane Eyre* that the “fairy-tale dynamics operating here – the lowly brought to triumph and the lordly brought low – suggest that *Jane Eyre* as a novel functions like so many gothic texts, as a species of wish fulfillment.”

Baynton’s use of the Gothic challenges this premise. Writing within a late nineteenth-century Australian rural context, Baynton eschews the engagement with what could be termed frivolous gothicisms, such as the use of the supernatural and the fantasy happy ending. Hoeveler argues compellingly:

> And although she has all of the considerable forces of the patriarchy aligned against her – you guessed it - the young, innocent, naïve heroine manages to gain her rightful inheritance, usually by besting an evil uncle (read: displaced father figure). And to make matters perfect, the heroine further triumphs over the patriarchy by creating an alternative companionate family, marrying a “feminised” man who promises, if not in word then through his sheer incompetence, to be completely malleable.

Hoeveler’s study engages exclusively with preeminent Female Gothic texts within the British female Gothic canon from the 1780s to 1853 and the novels she discusses largely conform to this description of the archetypal female Gothic plot she provides. Writing at the turn of the century, from an Australian perspective, Baynton’s trajectory was analogous to her female Gothic

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44 Hoeveler, p.205.
45 Hoeveler, pp. 6-7.
predecessors, to critique patriarchal discourses, yet Baynton’s Gothic does not indulge in frivolity, but tackles the very real emotional and physical threat facing women in rural Australia.

The first story in Baynton’s collection, “A Dreamer,” is the story of a woman’s solitary journey from a remote train station at night to her mother’s farmhouse, the place of her childhood home, where, on her arrival, she discovers her mother has died. In “A Dreamer” we enter the space of the unconscious, a Gothic realm resembling the narrative mode of nightmare, which continually threatens the dissolution of Baynton’s celebrated realism. In characteristic Gothic style, this story provides no detail about the context of the story except that the protagonist begins her journey in an isolated township in country Australia. The young woman’s journey to her childhood home evokes a concept inextricably bound to the Gothic, that of the uncanny, which is the process of the familiar becoming unfamiliar, or ‘unheimlich’ as Freud famously described this phenomena in his essay on ‘The Uncanny.’

According to Freud, the uncanny is a feeling associated with the “unintended recurrence of the same situation, but which differ[s] radically from it in other respects,” which then engenders a feeling of helplessness and vulnerability. The woman’s terrifying journey home is an uncanny realization that what was once familiar has now become strange, as she encounters terrifying obstacles imposed by these once-familiar surroundings, and is confronted by haunted memories from her childhood.

This brief tale is also about loss, particularly the separation from the mother, both symbolically and literally, which according to Claire Kahane, is at the core of the labyrinthine Gothic plot. Kahane writes, “What I see repeatedly locked into the forbidden center of the Gothic which draws me inward is the spectral presence of a dead-undead mother, archaic and all-encompassing, a ghost signifying the problematics of femininity which the heroine must confront.”\(^{48}\) The ‘problematics’ of femininity and the uneasy relationship to the feminine that exists in the Australian outback is the recurring thematic thread running through the three Gothic stories by Baynton. “A Dreamer” captures a Gothic sense of existential despair and alienation as the young woman is hounded by a diabolical storm, yet it also enacts the daughter’s desire for a return to the mother. “A Dreamer” establishes the centrality of women and their experiences, which are recurring elements in all of the stories, as well as conveying an ambivalence between the protagonist and her relationship to the Australian landscape. In “A Dreamer,” the Australian bush is shown to be frighteningly malevolent, yet, at times, surprisingly accommodating to the young woman.

Baynton’s ambivalence toward the landscape is interesting in light of Kay Schaffer’s thesis which links the Australian landscape with the realm of the feminine ‘other’, as a category of meaning. Schaffer declares that the “pre-eminent meaning encoded in the nationalist myth of the land-as-woman is that of a harsh, cruel, threatening, fickle, castrating mother. She is dangerous, non-nurturing and not to be trusted.”\(^{49}\) For Baynton, the landscape is also linked to the feminine, but her use of landscape imagery in the story vacillates between a

\(^{48}\) Kahane, p.336.
hostile and threatening landscape and a more gentle and supportive one. Images of fierce, deafening wind and savage asphyxiating willows, which characterize the beginning of the story, are supplanted by more benign and comforting landscape imagery later in the story. For example, precipitated by “a weird cry from the ‘Bendy Tree,’” the female protagonist crawls along “the friendly back of the tree” and “among its bared roots rested.” Consequently, Baynton’s depiction of the bush in “A Dreamer” problematises the traditional, phallocentric projection of the monstrous female other onto the Australian landscape. Nineteenth-century male writers would frequently depict the landscape as a hostile place waiting to be conquered. Baynton’s imagery contests this stereotype by showing a more benign side to the Australian landscape, although, as we shall see, her landscape imagery still embraces characteristics associated with the monstrous feminine.

Baynton’s female characters all struggle with their relationship to the feminine, which is metaphorically conveyed through the ambivalence inherent in the depiction of bush imagery in “A Dreamer.” The trees are feminised and assigned the female moniker, ‘Sisters,’ “whose entwined arms talked, when the wind was from the south.” (p.6). However, this is juxtaposed with a contrasting image as the woman struggles to make her way through a creek during the storm and grasps at willows to help pull her along. The narrator declares:

Despair shook her. With one hand she gripped those that had served her so far, and cautiously drew as many as she could grasp with the other. The wind savagely snapped them, and they lashed her unprotected face. Round and round her bare neck they coiled

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50 Barbara Baynton, “A Dreamer,” Portable Australian Authors: Barbara Baynton, eds. Sally Krimmer & Alan Lawson (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1980), p.9. All subsequent references are to this edition and page numbers will appear in parentheses in the text.
their stripped fingers. Her mother had planted these willows, and she herself had watched them grow. How could they be so hostile to her! (p.8).

The image of the willows as hostile and life-threatening is linked to the young woman’s mother who had planted them and evokes the themes of a monstrous maternity. The theme of maternity and the anxieties surrounding childbirth and motherhood are discussed at length by Ellen Moers in the first critical discussion of the Female Gothic, *Literary Women*. According to Moers’ discussion on ‘Female Gothic,’ Gothic literature became a space in which women could articulate anxieties and concerns about motherhood without fear, which originated with Mary Shelley’s canonical Gothic novel, *Frankenstein*.51 As the young woman in “A Dreamer” is pregnant, the story deals symbolically with the anxieties of the pregnant woman and her relationship to her estranged mother. The radical turning point in the story is marked by a “sweet dream-voice” which whispers to the protagonist, “Little woman!” (p.9). This mystical voice constitutes a shift in the narrative in which “Soft, strong arms carried her on. Weakness aroused the melting idea that all had been a mistake, and she had been fighting with friends.” (p.9). The savage wind becomes munificent and “even crooned a lullaby.” (p.9). Again, images of motherhood are evoked, but this time the imagery denotes the nurturing and gentle aspect of the maternal. The ambivalence inherent in Baynton’s depiction of the landscape in “A Dreamer” contradicts the devaluing of the feminine in Australian culture in the late nineteenth century, which was, according to Joan Kirkby, particularly resistant to the feminine and the maternal.52 Krimmer and Lawson remark that despite the “pervading vision of moral chaos and cruelty Baynton’s images of motherhood

51 Moers, p.93.
emerge as a hope for humanity." However, this simplistic reading ignores textual evidence in which, drawing on the tradition of Female Gothic, Baynton depicts an ambivalence toward motherhood which, as we have seen, is suggested by both hostile and benign landscape imagery. Moreover, through the depiction of this ambivalence, Baynton's story valorizes the feminine through the foregrounding of the mother/daughter connection.

At the conclusion of the story, the woman reaches the room her mother is in. The daughter "parted the curtains, and the light fell on the face of the sleeper who would dream no dreams that night." (p.10). The isolated journey to the realization of her mother's death is emblematic of the pregnant woman's rite of passage to motherhood, which for the woman in the story, and in the Female Gothic tradition, is fraught with fear and anxiety, in addition to ecstatic elation. It could be argued that this brief story functions as a prologue to the remaining stories as Baynton's subsequent Gothic heroines, specifically the female protagonists in "Squeaker's Mate" and "The Chosen Vessel," also struggle with the problematics of femininity in rural Australia. This story also establishes the strength of character present in Baynton's female protagonists, who, distinct from Lawson's 'drover's wife,' possess a fierce resistance to their victimization. Baynton defiantly de-marginalises the feminine and the maternal in these stories and "A Dreamer" establishes this strength of character which is emblematic of many of her characters, particularly the protagonist in Baynton's second story in the collection, "Squeaker's Mate."

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Gender roles are interrogated and explored in what is clearly Baynton’s most popular and highly praised story, “Squeaker’s Mate.” Helen Thomson proposes that “the price of female belonging to the bush is the same kind of de-feminising that [Henry] Lawson had defined as inevitable.”54 This idea is explored by Baynton in “Squeaker’s Mate,” a story which draws on the Gothic elements of the macabre and the grotesque. This story sets out to challenge assumptions about gender stereotypes in colonial Australia as well as explore the Gothic theme of women as replaceable commodity. In addition, the peculiarly Australian tradition of mateship, a principal feature of the Australian Legend, is strongly critiqued. The female protagonist, an independent, fiercely hard-working woman, is left permanently crippled when her back is broken in an accident involving the felling of a tree. As a result, the eponymous Squeaker’s mate is rendered helpless and is unable to continue the work which earned her the respect of the selectors, who initially regard her as “the best long-haired mate that ever stepped in petticoats.”55 She becomes wholly dependent on the intellectually inferior Squeaker, who is memorably described by Thea Astley as “ocker supreme.”56 The woman, who we later learn is barren, is confined to a second hut, whilst the despicable Squeaker acquires a new ‘mate.’ The stoic fortitude displayed by the woman throughout the story is contrasted with Squeaker’s indolence and selfish indifference. Furthermore, not only is the


55 Barbara Baynton, “Squeaker’s Mate,” Portable Australian Authors: Barbara Baynton, eds. Sally Krimmer & Alan Lawson (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1980), p.11. All subsequent references are to this edition and page numbers will appear in parentheses in the text.

56 Astley, p.15.
disabled woman neglected by Squeaker after the accident, she is also abandoned by her community:

Next day the women came. Squeaker's mate was not a favourite with them — a woman with no leisure for yarning was not likely to be. After the first day they left her severely alone, their plea to their husbands, her uncompromising independence. It is in the ordering of things that by degrees most husbands accept their wives' views of other women. (p.15).

The rejection of the woman is clearly related to her nonconformity in this bigoted outback environment. This passage also highlights the lack of mateship within communities of women in Australia, a singularly masculine Australian characteristic which is the bedrock on which the Australian tradition was built. According to David Buchbinder, "one's 'mate' may be a childhood or school friend, a co-worker, a drinking companion, one who assists or listens in times of crisis, but is always and exclusively male." Indeed, the title itself, 'Squeaker's Mate' is sardonically ironic as not only could women not be 'mates' with men, the loyalty and trust associated with mateship was not available between women themselves. Characteristic of Baynton's Gothic is the use of irony and "grim humour," to borrow a phrase from Robert White, particularly in her choice of story titles. Furthermore, as we shall see, the way Squeaker treats his so-called 'mate' belies the very meaning of mateship. The community women's sympathies, in line with their husbands, are directed toward Squeaker after the accident, who they gave "many a feed, agreeing that it must have been miserable for him." (p.15). Baynton is quoted by Miriam Dixson as remarking on the lack of camaraderie between women in the outback: "Women of the bush have little

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59 This point will be elaborated on further in the section on "The Chosen Vessel."
to share, and nursing the belief that how they live is quite unknown to one another they have no inclination to entertain a caller."\textsuperscript{60} With only the minimum of assistance from Squeaker, and without any human comfort or support, the crippled woman becomes a grotesque parody of patriarchal constructions of femininity – burdensome, futile and mute.

One of the more salient parallels that can be made in “Squeaker’s Mate” is with one of the most influential characters in female Gothic literature – the madwoman in the attic. Bertha, the mad first wife of Edward Rochester in Charlotte Brontë’s \textit{Jane Eyre}, functions as a vampiric figure in contrast to the sweet, morally impeccable Jane, and has been described by Gilbert and Gubar as enacting Jane’s socially unacceptable desire, rebellion and rage.\textsuperscript{61} Like Bertha, Squeaker’s mate is confined and replaced by a younger woman, yet in Baynton’s story, the reader sympathizes with this displaced character, despite the woman’s increasingly monstrous appearance. Like Bertha, she too shares physical characteristics with the vampire, including “sunken eyes,” “bony fingers” and rank, scorching breath. (pp.24-25). However, Baynton complicates Brontë’s simplistic dichotomy of the raving lunatic and the virginal child-woman, with a hard-working yet barren woman who is callously discarded by her husband and society when her utilitarian function is extinguished, and Squeaker’s new mate, a manipulative, dim-witted opportunist. Furthermore, the crippled woman is mostly silent after she is banished to an old hut, introducing a recurring theme in Gothic literature by Australian women: the silencing of women. The reader is

\textsuperscript{60} Quoted in Dixson, p.186.

unable to know what is going on in her mind as the narrator remarks, "what the sick woman thought was not definite, for she kept silent always." (p.20). Despite this sinister silence, however, the reader's sympathy still lies with the woman, owing to the callous and inane behaviour of Squeaker and his new mate.

The story takes a macabre twist on the day Squeaker returns with his new mate. From this point, Squeaker's previous cruel taunts to the woman to "Go and bite yerself like a snake" (p.17) as a way of silencing her, evolves into the sinister threat "that he would set her hut afire" if she did not keep quiet. (p.19). With the arrival of the new mate, the woman is no longer the hardworking and self-sufficient woman introduced at the beginning of the narrative, but is now referred to by the narrator as 'the cripple.' Her vengeance is played out in the final scene in which the new mate is left alone, as Squeaker reluctantly goes for water. The new mate, "lacking in bush caution," (p.23) carelessly uses all of her limited supply of water too soon. As her thirst intensifies and there is no sign of Squeaker, the new mate attempts to steal the crippled woman's half-filled billy.

The woman feigns sleep as a way of enticing the new mate into her hut and waits for her to make her move:

It was so swift and sudden, that she had not time to scream when those bony fingers had gripped the hand that she prematurely reached for the billy. She was frozen with horror for a moment, then her screams were piercing. Panting with victory, the prostrate one held her with a hold that the other did not attempt to free herself from. (p.25).

When Squeaker returns, he manages to free his new mate and is then attacked himself by the woman's loyal and devoted dog. The woman's victory conveys the tenacity of her spirit, a quality that is being celebrated here, as Baynton skillfully employs the Gothic strategies of suspense and horror to expose the
devaluing of women in rural Australian communities and critiques the way that mateship is predicated on the exclusion and undermining of women.

The extent to which an attack on this beloved attribute of the Australian national character would have been deeply disturbing to an Australian audience is illustrated by the reaction to the screening of a short film adaptation of “Squeaker’s Mate” by David Baker in 1977 at the Rivoli Theatre in Melbourne, in the middle-class Melbourne suburb of Camberwell. According to Phillip Adams, writing at the time for The Age, patrons were so outraged by the film’s treatment of the Australian outback, despite the film winning a major award at the New Delhi International Film Festival, that they literally tore up their seats.62 Adams writes in his column: “Oh, it’s all right to show imported porn or horrific efforts like Taxi Driver. But this fascinating example of antipodean Gothic is subjected to an almost unprecedented form of censorship.”63 This reaction also recalls the response to Ted Kotcheff’s film adaptation of Wake in Fright (1971), based on the 1961 novel by Kenneth Cook, another Gothic re-imagining of rural Australia which savagely exposes the brutality of the male-dominated Australian outback and, like “Squeaker’s Mate,” also explodes the myth of Australian mateship, which includes scenes of alcohol-drenched violent attacks, homosexual rape and a brutal kangaroo hunt. Not surprisingly, this film, which has been critically discussed by both Brian McFarlane and Graeme Turner, was not received well in Australia and had almost vanished altogether from Australian cinema history, with no attempts made to preserve it. Simon Caterson’s recent discussion on the film posits that this reaction to Wake in Fright was, “a sort of

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63 Adams, p.8.
cultural amnesia,"64 and, considering the reaction to the film adaptation of "Squeaker’s Mate" six years later, this cultural amnesia seemed to persist until the release of Greg McLean’s recent Gothic horror film *Wolf Creek* (2005).65

The final story in Baynton’s collection “The Chosen Vessel” extends this critique of the Australian legend further still through the depiction of the brutal rape and murder of a young mother by one of Australia’s most loved cultural figures: the ‘jolly’ swagman. Of the three short stories discussed here, “The Chosen Vessel,” is unarguably the most disturbing. It is in this story that we witness how Baynton’s use of the Gothic diverges so significantly from the ‘wish-fulfillment’ of traditional Female Gothic. The female protagonist in this story is stalked and captured, yet is unable to escape. Here, the Gothic castle is a lonely bush hut and the villainous male is a traveling swagman, who, without reason it seems, takes the life of the new mother, sparing the life of her baby who is later discovered by a boundary rider. A chilling image of the dead woman’s fear for the life of her infant is revealed when the narrator declares that the boundary rider “told afterwards how the little child held out its arms to him, and how he was forced to cut its gown that the dead hand held.”66 According to Juliann E. Fleenor, a key

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65 *Wolf Creek* was a commercial and critical success in Australia although, as it is based on real-life serial killer Ivan Mulat, it presents the murderous ‘Mick’ (a dark caricature of the stereotypical Australian bushman exemplified by Mick Dundee in the highly popular and successful *Crocodile Dundee* films) as an extreme and isolated case, rather than offer Australian audiences a thoughtful critique of endemic Australian cultural beliefs such as mateship, or an interrogation of gender ideologies in the Australian outback.

66 Barbara Baynton, “The Chosen Vessel,” *Portable Australian Authors: Barbara Baynton*, eds. Sally Krimmer & Alan Lawson (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1980), p.85. All subsequent references are to this edition and page numbers will appear in parentheses in the text.
characteristic of Female Gothic is the idea of the double or split personality. Fleenor suggests:

The split personality is the way women have attempted to structure literary reality – either by focusing on the split personality of the males (threatening fathers, lovers, and villains) or by focusing upon their own split personality (as good/evil women) as supported or threatened by good/evil women.  

Although many Gothic texts conform to this simple dichotomy, Baynton’s story contradicts this conventional approach to the Gothic hero/villain as both male characters are threatening figures to the woman in this story. For example, the husband-figure places his wife in a vulnerable position with his callous indifference and heartless disregard of her fears about being alone, which ultimately leads to her murder. The narrator asserts:

More than once she thought of taking her baby and going to her husband. But in the past, when she had dared to speak of the dangers to which her loneliness exposed her, he had taunted and sneered at her. “Needn’t flatter yerself,” he had told her, “nobody’ud want ter run away with yew.” (p.82).

The husband she must depend on for protection undermines her fears, and his ironic statement that nobody would want to ‘run away with her’ proves tragically incorrect. More importantly, however, Baynton de-mythologises the iconic Australian character of the ‘jolly swagman,’ who turns out to be a vile rapist and murderer in “The Chosen Vessel,” subverting one of the most enduring stereotypes in Australian cultural history.

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67 Fleenor, p.12.

68 The character of the jolly swagman in Banjo Paterson’s enduring folk song, ‘Waltzing Matilda’ is considered a hero in the Australian cultural tradition for taking his own life rather than submitting to authorities after stealing a sheep. However, the tragic elements of the song are often overlooked in favour of the swagman’s defiance of authority, one of the defining characteristics celebrated in the Australian Legend.
"The Chosen Vessel" was originally published in the Christmas edition of the *Bulletin* in 1896 under the title, "The Tramp," (without the second part of the story involving Hennessey's vision) which essentially takes the focus away from the female protagonist and places it on the character of the murderer. According to Krimmer and Lawson, Baynton suggested in a letter to A.G. Stephens that the title should be, "What the Curlews Cried," a suggestion which was overlooked by Stephens. Therefore, it is important to consider the symbolic discrepancies between these two titles, even though the story was eventually published as "The Chosen Vessel" in *Bush Studies*, with the second part of the story also included.

Stephens' original title suggestion of "The Tramp" essentially directs the reader's attention to the rape and murder of the woman in the story, as this phrase points to a particular detail in the narrative in the section of the story in which the woman is captured by the swagman. The narrator declares, "...the cry of 'Murder' came from her lips. And when she ceased, the startled curlews took up the awful sound, and flew wailing 'Murder! Murder!' over the horseman's head." (p.85). Rape, as an act of extreme violence, is a complete denial of the victim's humanity and is often featured in Gothic literature by women to convey female vulnerability under patriarchy. Baynton's title was obviously unacceptable to Stephens, who must have thought it too disturbing to alert the reader so blatantly to this aspect of the story through the title. His title selection of "The Tramp" supplants the main focus away from the horror of the rape and murder and back onto the swagman, who it seems male critics had a very difficult time accepting in a wholly negative light. For example, A. A. Phillips inexplicably refers to the

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swagman as “a terrifying figure who is also a terrified figure.” Furthermore, Stephens’ selection of the word ‘tramp’ suggests a benign, homeless wanderer which belies the true murderous characteristics of the character. Even more alarming, however, is the connotation evoked by the word ‘tramp’ of a promiscuous woman, which is extremely disturbing given that the act of rape and murder is central to the story and that a connection is often made between rape and female promiscuity. Susan Barrett comments that, “From the very beginning, Baynton’s stories were subject to a form of male censorship since Stephens heavily edited them in an attempt to render the implicit conventional and thereby make the stories conform to his vision of Australian life.” The eventual change of title to “The Chosen Vessel” for its publication in Bush Studies once again draws attention to the character of the woman as central to the story and is a reference to the final part of the story concerning Peter Hennessey’s mistaken vision of the Madonna and Child, which was later added to the original story.

The bush hut was described by Carolyn Merli at the 2006 ASAL Conference as “the unreliable and permeable space of ‘home’ in the Australian imaginary,” and is a fragile space offering very little protection. The bush hut in “The Chosen Vessel” corresponds to this description as the narrator refers to the ‘cracks’ in the hut’s structure and the frightened woman futilely attempts to construct a barricade for herself and her child from the strange man stalking the hut. Initially, however, the cracks are a space through which the woman can look,

70 Phillips, p.32.
returning the gaze and tracking the man's movements, constituting a form of resistance. This is highlighted in the story when, during the swagman's visit to the woman's hut earlier in the day, the narrator asserts, "She feared more from the look of his eyes, and the gleam of his teeth," than "from the knife that was sheathed in the belt at his waist." (p.82). However, the bush hut is no barrier to external danger and, after a brief sleep, the woman is woken by the image of the man's shadow through the cracks in the hut. The narrator declares, "The moon's rays shone on the front of the house, and she saw one of the open cracks, quite close to where she lay, darken with a shadow...Still watching, she saw the shadow darken every crack along the wall." (p.83). The interstices in the hut which the woman previously used as an implement of resistance and empowerment through her vigilant monitoring of the intruder after he had left the hut, now reveals the threat of his return. The narrator declares, "She had felt safer, far safer, while he was close, and she could watch and listen. She felt she must watch but the great fear of waking her baby again assailed her." (p.84). Finally, the woman flees the hut in terror, racing toward a horseman in the distance and screaming for help. In Australian literature, the bush hut is representative of the iconic domestic space, which also functions as a feminine space. Carolyn Merli also argued that in "The Drover's Wife," Henry Lawson writes woman into the Australian legend as well as re-inscribing her within her 'proper,' domestic space.73 The bush hut is also typically a ramshackle space, characterized by insecurity about boundaries and disintegration, which also makes it a Gothic space. The image of Baynton's Gothic heroine escaping the bush hut in terror recalls the figure of the Gothic heroine fleeing an unseen

73Carolyn Merli, "Stories We Tell Ourselves."
assailant, which has become a cliché image associated with the genre. However, by incorporating this image within a realist Australian setting, Baynton effectively re-animates this hackneyed Gothic trope and subverts Lawson’s re-inscription of the hut as the ‘proper’ domestic space for women; in Baynton’s stories, the bush hut becomes a threatened and terrifying Gothic space.

In her discussion on “The Chosen Vessel” in *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, Susan Martin comments that recent critical interest in Baynton has constructed her as a ‘feminist’ figure, one who offers an alternative voice in Australian literature, particularly in opposition to Henry Lawson, and she considers this construction “misleading.” She argues that as Baynton was one of the few women writers of the period who was published in the, “supposed bastion of the new masculinist national consciousness, the *Bulletin,*” and, despite the heavy editing of Baynton’s work, her writing must have reflected the masculinist ideology which dominated at the time. Moreover, Martin claims that “The Chosen Vessel” “affirms a number of the accepted features” of the Australian masculinist tradition, particularly in her depiction of the inhospitable landscape and its hostility to women and families, although she does concede that Baynton severely criticizes certain aspects of bush mythology that are hostile to women. Martin concludes her argument with the contention that Baynton depicts a place “frozen and divided by religious, class and national affiliations that, in ‘The Chosen Vessel,’ sacrifice female subjectivity to understandings of nationalism based on the removal of the feminine from the political sphere.”

Certainly Martin’s reading that Baynton’s depiction of the bush is divided

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74 Susan K. Martin, p.97.
75 Susan K. Martin, p.97.
76 Susan K. Martin, p.97.
(particularly along gender lines) is a compelling one, but her argument that 'The Chosen Vessel' sacrifices female subjectivity, as the story critiques, rather than endorses, the masculine colonial ideologies which dominated at the time, is much less so. The story ends with an image of the swagman trembling with guilt at the sight of blood, rather than with the death of the woman, which essentially shifts the ideological meaning of the story from the death of the woman, to the guilt of the man who murdered her.

A further example of the way Baynton critiques patriarchal constructions of femininity, rather than sacrifices female subjectivity, is through the satirical approach toward the patriarchal notion of the idealization of femininity in "The Chosen Vessel," through what Julia Kristeva has named the "cult of the Virgin.” The Gothic apparition of the Madonna and child which ‘appears’ to the religiously deluded Peter Hennessey (and is actually the terrified mother who is about to be raped and murdered by the swagman) reveals Baynton’s critique of the idealization of this Biblical figure in Christianity and the consequences this has for women in western culture. Kelly Oliver asserts in relation to Julia Kristeva’s position on motherhood and the image of the ‘Virgin Mother’:

Kristeva argues that the traditional religious accounts of motherhood, particularly the myth of the Virgin Mary, can no longer explain, interpret, give meaning to, motherhood. What she describes as the “cult of the Virgin” has been used by Western patriarchy in order to cover up the unsettling aspects of maternity and the mother-child relationship. The cult of the virgin controls maternity and mothers by doing violence to them.77

Baynton appropriates the myth of the Biblical virgin mother to comment on western patriarchy’s manipulation of this idealistic figure and contrasts that with

the sad figure of the real mother in the story whose desperate pleas are ignored by Hennessey. Baynton is commenting ironically in "The Chosen Vessel" (hence the story's title) on the way the woman in very real danger attempting to protect her child is denied, rather than 'chosen,' and through her depiction of the violent murder of the woman is offering a commentary on exactly why the Australian bush is 'no place for a woman.' Indeed, the woman in the story cannot survive in the Australian bush as she is a threat to the structure of that order, as it seems, was Baynton's work. Kay Iseman convincingly argues that the murdered woman in "The Chosen Vessel," "is an empty signifier which as mother/Mother stands for both sacrifice and redemption. It is not filled by woman, who can be absent in an absolute sense, but by religion, mythology, politics, in the discourses of the symbolic order which supplement the image of woman-as-lack..." Furthermore, the story does establish that the woman does not merely silently comply with the swagman's desire. The narrator declares that, "she knew he was offering terms if she ceased to struggle and cry for help, though louder and louder she did cry for it, but it was only when the man's hand gripped her throat, that the cry of 'Murder' came from her lips." (p.85). The woman's choice to scream for help enacts agency and the denial of the woman's pleas by Hennessey's foolish vision is illustrative of the patriarchal denial of female subjectivity in colonial Australia, rather than Baynton's. Finally, Baynton's closing image of the swagman trembling at the sight of blood places the responsibility of the woman's death firmly with the swagman, rather than conclude with an image of the death of the woman which, in traditional Gothic

78 This clichéd refrain is also the title of a story by Henry Lawson, although "The Chosen Vessel" clearly establishes that this is owing to the male inhabitants, rather then the Australian landscape.

literature, can indicate a denial of female subjectivity. The following chapter on
Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo: The Well in the Shadow* does end
with such an image of female defeat and will be discussed as an attempt by a
white Australian woman to construct the complex subjectivity of an Aboriginal
woman in colonial Australia, through the conventions of Gothic literature.
Chapter Two

Shadows of Whiteness in Katharine Susannah Prichard’s
Coonardoo (The Well in the Shadow)

Almost three decades after Bush Studies was published in 1902, Katharine Susannah Prichard published her controversial novel, Coonardoo: The Well in The Shadow. The novel was published in 1929 (also the year of Barbara Baynton’s death) to a storm of public indignation, as well as critical acclaim. Coonardoo was published on the cusp of the 1930s, a decade described by Drusilla Modjeska as “remarkable” for Australian women writers. Modjeska suggests that “women were producing the best fiction of the period and they were, for the first and indeed only time, a dominant influence in Australian literature.” Like the stories in Bush Studies, Coonardoo is also set in the Australian outback and interrogates ideologies of gender but, extraordinarily for its time, takes an Aboriginal woman, Coonardoo, as its subject. Through the employment of Gothic conventions, Prichard has constructed a narrative about race relations in Australia which, although conforming to conservative Gothic narrative techniques in many ways, offers a disturbing reflection of European Australia’s bigoted attitude toward Indigenous Australians which has persisted, to some degree in some areas of Australia throughout the twentieth century, particularly in rural areas and the conservative political arena. Through the exploration of the destructive consequences of repressed desire, Coonardoo depicts a defeatist vision of race relations in Australia.

The reception surrounding the publication of *Coonardoo*, which engages not only with the contentious issue of race, but also the taboo subject of miscegenation, recalls the dissension surrounding the publication of another controversial Gothic novel, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, published almost one hundred years earlier in 1847. Although Bronte also engages with issues of race through the character of Heathcliff, whose racial otherness is made ambiguous on his arrival with a description by Nelly of his lack of origin, “dirty, ragged” appearance and use of “gibberish that nobody could understand,” critics did not directly express shock at this aspect of Heathcliff’s character. Early critics of *Wuthering Heights* focused on its violence, brutality and somberness, with one anonymous reviewer in 1848 characterising it as imbued with a “brutal cruelty and semi-savage love,” and another expressing the rather extreme view that, “We know nothing in the whole range of our fictitious literature which presents such shocking pictures of the worst forms of humanity.” Even more inordinate is the opinion expressed by an anonymous reviewer in *Graham's Magazine*, describing *Wuthering Heights* as a “compound of vulgar depravity and unnatural horrors, such as we might suppose a person, inspired by a mixture of brandy and gunpowder, might write for the edification

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82 A novel by Maryse Conde, *Windward Heights* (1995) also adapts Emily Brontë’s canonical text *Wuthering Heights*, to explore race relations in Guadeloupe and Cuba. This novel is illustrative of the way colonial and postcolonial writers adapt texts from the British Gothic canon to inform a distinct national literature of Gothic writing.


of fifth-rate blackguards.”

G.W. Peck, however, admired the novel for its originality and "power of imagination," despite commenting on its many perceived faults, declaring in American Review that Wuthering Heights is "undoubtedly a work of many singular merits... It lifts the veil and shows boldly the dark side of our depraved nature." Coonardoo also bravely lifts the veil on many of the less desirable aspects of human nature, in a way which engendered harsh criticism from many of Prichard's contemporaries.

Like Emily Brontë, Prichard was admired for the imaginative power displayed in Coonardoo, as well as being condemned for its subject matter. Mary Gilmore, in a letter to Nettie Palmer in 1928, described Coonardoo as "cold and dirty," which, considering Mary Gilmore had also attempted to write about Aboriginal Australia, conveys the horror associated with the taboo of interracial relationships in Australia during this time. Nettie Palmer, though, did not hold the same opinion of Coonardoo and showed her support for the iconoclastic novel by encouraging a banding together of other progressive writers in response to the uproar surrounding the serialization of the work in the Bulletin.

Similarly, Miles Franklin, in a letter to Katharine Prichard in 1950, offers high praise for Coonardoo: "How did you achieve that book? It is a black opal in the arid red heart of Australia when drought rules." Perhaps the most revealing statement made about Coonardoo, and one reflecting the extent that racism

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88 Modjeska, Exiles at Home, p.89.
against Aboriginal Australians had permeated so deeply the hearts and minds of European Australia, was made by Cecil Mann. Ironically, Mann was one of a panel of judges who were to award Coonardoo the Bulletin prize for the best Australian novel of the year, an honour shared with A House is Built, by Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw. Mann declared in a review of Coonardoo for the Bulletin, “With any other native, from fragrant Zulu girl to fly-kissed Arab maid, she could have done it. But the aboriginal, in Australia, anyway cannot excite any higher feeling than nauseated pity or comical contempt.” Mann also declared in the same review (the part of the review quoted on the back of the 2002 edition of the novel), that “with the white flame of the author’s creative power burning through it,” Coonardoo “is itself vital – a harsh, but a living piece of literature.” As Veronica Brady has noted, Mann’s criticism, more than any other, I would argue, “is a classic expression of the sense of defilement associated with Aborigines.” It certainly points to the courage it must have taken for Prichard to venture into such divisive territory with the intention of breaking deeply-held and pernicious stereotypes associated with Aboriginal Australians. According to Adam Shoemaker, “Australian society did not become open to the interracial ideas it [Coonardoo] espoused for at least another twenty years.” Read from a contemporary point of view then, Coonardoo conveys an account of race relations in Australia during a time when the prevailing attitude toward Aboriginal people was characterized by fear and disgust.

90 Cecil Mann, Bulletin 14th August (1929), Red Page.
91 Mann, Red Page.
Coonardoo is told through a love story, patterned on a Gothic love triangle of sorts, as seen in Gothic texts such as Wuthering Heights and The Monk, A Romance, a still-frequently discussed, eighteenth-century Gothic horror novel, famously written by the nineteen-year-old Matthew Lewis, who was inspired after reading Ann Radcliffe's The Mysteries of Udolpho. Lewis describes Radcliffe's novel as, simply, "one of the most interesting books that has ever been published" and his contribution to the incipient genre of the Gothic marked a turning point in the evolution of Gothic literature toward a revelling in the grotesque, the excess and the demonic. Although Radcliffe was careful to offer a logical explanation for the presence of ghosts in her tales by the conclusion of her novels, Lewis delighted in horrifying his audience with the thrill of the supernatural and the macabre. Fred Botting's description of The Monk could also describe Prichard's Coonardoo. Botting declares, "The Monk is about excess, about excess of passion concealed beneath veils of respectability and propriety." Thematically both The Monk and Coonardoo reveal the collapse of patriarchy, which will become apparent later in the discussion, yet Coonardoo is also a text which engages with Gothic conventions to produce a determined political and social critique of colonial Australia's treatment of Indigenous Australia, particularly focusing on the vulnerability of Aboriginal women with respect to white men. Fred Botting, again, declares, "Uncertainties about the nature of power, law, society, family and sexuality dominate Gothic fiction." Coonardoo is a contradictory novel which explores these uncertainties through the impossibility of interracial love, the abuse of colonial power and the

95 Botting, Gothic, p.77.
96 Botting, Gothic p.5.
manipulation of female sexuality. Through her engagement with the European literary tradition of the Gothic, Prichard ultimately reinforces the traditional Male Gothic plot, in the tradition of Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*, in which the victimized heroine is defeated: in this novel, by patriarchy and colonial despotism.

One of the more difficult aspects of writing about *Coonardoo* is that, although in 1929 the novel was considered deeply shocking and subversive with its depiction of a white man’s love for an Indigenous woman in Australia, Prichard’s limited white colonial perspective is evident, particularly in her use of language and attempt at constructing Aboriginal subjectivity. Although her intention was to write from the perspective of an Indigenous woman, which was one of the first novels by an Australian writer to focus entirely on an Aboriginal woman as its subject,97 aspects of her representation of Coonardoo and the other Aboriginal characters in the novel are, at times, unsettling to a contemporary audience, particularly as Prichard attempts to construct the subjectivity of an Aboriginal woman (yet as later critics recognize) fails to fully realize the interiority of this character. Contemporary critics have also expressed concern about the way Prichard appears to accept the universal belief during this time that Aboriginal people were bound for extinction as a race, which she expresses in her Foreword, and which is reinforced in the novel in the final image depicting Coonardoo’s death, in which her body literally falls apart, her arms and legs resembling “those

97 *The Incredible Journey* written by Catherine Martin, published in 1923, also contains an Aboriginal woman as its central subject.
blackened and broken sticks beside the fire." Historian Henry Reynolds comments that this commonly-held view arose from the theory of evolution outlined in Charles Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871). Reynolds argues, "A host of followers applied evolutionary theory to society and to the Aborigines...Their fate was wrought in the iron laws of evolution; they would inevitably die out, having failed to survive in the struggle for existence." According to Reynolds, this attitude persisted until the first third of the twentieth century and seems to be a belief informing the racial politics of *Coonardoo*. The one particular passage from the Foreword which has continually provoked the most debate is when Prichard quotes an anthropological source, popular during its time:

Basedow in *The Australian Aboriginal* says, "Anthropological relationship connects the Australian...with the Vedda[s] and Dravidians of India and with the fossil men of Europe, from whom the Caucasian element has sprung." They are only a few generations removed, after all, Coonardoo and Andromache. "In other words, the Australian aboriginal stands somewhere near the bottom rung of the great evolutional ladder we have ascended." (pp.xxi-xxii).

Drusilla Modjeska points out that it is possible that Prichard's inclusion of the Foreword was a response to the outrage the novel incited at the time, as it was originally written after *Coonardoo* was published in what appears to be an attempt to pacify the outrage of readers, and not because Prichard originally felt it was necessary to include such 'authoritative' testimonials. Modjeska proposes:

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98 Katharine Susannah Prichard, *Coonardoo*, (1929; Sydney: A&R Classics, 2002), p.247. Subsequent references to *Coonardoo* will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.
She was writing of her time as every writer must, and indeed in the context of the twenties opinion, she was pointing out not the distance between white and black, but the continuity, as she put it, between Coonardoo and Andromache, between Aboriginal Australia and our own mythology. However, from a contemporary point of view, it is perhaps the unconscious assumptions about this mysterious black Australia, given to us through the limits of a white imagination, that tell us most about attitudes to race, then and now.¹⁰²

Responding to the controversy surrounding the novel, Prichard was compelled to describe Coonardoo as a document of social reality, also declaring in the Foreword, “Life in the north-west of Western Australia is almost as little known in Australia as in England or America. It seems necessary to say, therefore, that the story was written in the country through which it moves.” (p.xxi). Susan Lever argues, “Prichard was defending the novel’s seriousness as an account of social conditions, and was probably aware that its lyrical and romantic elements might well invite questions about its accuracy.”¹⁰³ Therefore, Prichard embraces Gothic narrative strategies for the purpose of writing imaginatively about an interracial relationship, but felt compelled to defend the novel through reference to accepted scientific theories about Aboriginal Australia, and an appeal to social realism. I would argue, however, that Prichard’s most stringent critique of black-white relations in Australia is evident through her imaginative engagement with Gothic tropes and conventions.

Anne Brewster, in a recent discussion on Marduara writer, Doris Pilkington-Garimara’s Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence (1996), explains how she was shocked to discover that Coonardoo was set during the same time period as

Pilkington-Garimara’s account of her mother and two aunts’ epic escape from the Moore River Settlement and their subsequent trek home, which involved a 2000 km walk along the rabbit-proof fence, from the northern to the southern coast of Western Australia. As Tony Hughes D’aeth points out, although a gap of almost eighty years separates the publication of these two texts, not only are both novels set during the same time-period, both also concern the Mardu people of Western Australia and “their violent relationship with the colonizing population.”104 Brewster acknowledges her ‘ambivalent’ reaction to Prichard’s novel, as a contemporary reader, conceding that:

I struggled against being implicated in Prichard’s racialised ‘compassion’, which I found profoundly offensive and patronizing, but I simultaneously recognized my own inscription in the historicity of the novel’s racial politics and Prichard’s left-wing inflected concern with social justice.105

It is precisely this ambivalence, engendered by the novel’s disturbing reflection of contemporary European Australia’s relationship with black Australia which unsettles the contemporary reader of Coonardoo, and precisely why this is such an important novel for Australians to read. Brewster further argues, “Prichard had identified a psychopathology of whiteness which was to erupt 70 years later in John Howard’s virulent resistance to Reconciliation.”106 This idea of repressed racism in Australia is a powerful one and the notion of repression, so closely allied to the Gothic, is explored through Hugh’s repressed desire for Coonardoo which eventually destroys them both.

Many critics have been troubled by Prichard’s construction of the character of Coonardoo as docile and fiercely loyal and dependent, first on Hugh’s mother and then, after her death, Hugh. As this character has been constructed through the limited, and limiting, perspective of a European Australian novelist, Coonardoo as a character is largely seen as symbolic, and an extension of the Australian landscape.107 Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra consider Coonardoo as “without powers of thought or conceptualization,” even going so far as to say that “intellectually she is not far above a faithful horse or dog.”108 Another contemporary critic, Sandra Burchill, also acknowledges the complexity of Prichard’s task of constructing Indigenous characters within this cultural and historical context in Australia. Burchill postulates that Prichard rejects representations of Aboriginal people as “degraded, pitiable or as comic savages,” a stereotypical colonial representation exemplified in the comment made by Cecil Mann, yet she criticizes Prichard for romanticizing “elements of native culture which have importance for her argument for white harmony.”109 However, I would argue that with the depth of racism that Prichard was confronting at this time it was perhaps necessary to romanticize certain aspects of

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107 Katharine Susannah Prichard’s short story “The Cooboo,” first published in _Kiss on the Lips_ (London: Jonathan Cape, 1932) eschews the patronizing characterization evident in Coonardoo. “The Cooboo” depicts the split-moment decision made by an Aboriginal woman to throw away her baby after a cattle muster. The woman, who was once renowned for her skills as a ‘stockman’ and has since become hindered by her responsibility to her cooboo, callously discards her baby, but later conveys her anguish over the decision when she cuts herself until she bleeds, in the traditional Aboriginal mourning custom. Prichard sympathetically conveys a tragic decision made by a woman conflicted by her desire to do good work which is made impossible because of the responsibilities she has to care for her infant. Although the language Prichard employs is similar to the racist language used in _Coonardoo_, this character possesses a fierce rebellion and pride not apparent in the docile loyalty of Coonardoo.


her characters as a strategy to open up European Australians to the possibility of viewing Indigenous Australians in a less bigoted way, and to make less ‘shocking’ the idea of interracial relationships and miscegenation. Indeed, viewed within the context in which it was written, Prichard’s strategy allowed readers of the time to think about issues relating to race relations in Australia in an entirely new way. Nevertheless, Prichard certainly touched on a profoundly sensitive cultural nerve in Australia with Coonardoo. In her Introduction to the 1990 edition of Coonardoo, Drusilla Modjeska describes the quandary of writing on Coonardoo as like being possessed with “a strange case of double vision.”

Modjeska writes:

On the one hand there is the radical and passionate view from 1926, and once again I raise my hat to Katharine Susannah Prichard. On the other hand there are the assumptions and procedures she accepted and we do not, the language she could use and we would not; and the lapses and silences that would not, and could not, have been heard then, but which startle us now.

So it is with this peculiar double vision that one embarks on an analysis of the text, a text which is particularly suited to the Gothic, as it is a genre which challenges its readers and critics with its paradoxical conservative and subversive elements. Claire Kahane, referring to traditional Female Gothic literature in “The Gothic Mirror” argues that the Gothic is “an essentially conservative genre” which she declares is the “real Gothic horror” as “the heroine is compelled to resume a quiescent, socially acceptable role or to be destroyed.” As the option of assuming a quiescent, socially acceptable role is not available to Coonardoo, who is callously discarded by Hugh by the end of the novel, the only other trajectory that this conservative Gothic narrative offers its female protagonist is

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112 Kahane, p.342.
death. The character of Coonardoo is very much in the mode of a tragic, Gothic heroine who is ultimately destroyed - not only for desiring, but for loving a man she must only imagine in the role of master.

Like Barbara Baynton, Prichard would also embrace Gothic elements to engage with ideologies of gender in the early twentieth-century in Coonardoo, although her primary focus was on the sexual violence and abuse of Aboriginal women. Prichard was to offer many reasons for the writing of Coonardoo, and the mistreatment of Aboriginal women was revealed as the primary motivation. Years after its publication she wrote that, "The motive of the book was to draw attention to the abuse of Aboriginal women by white men - a subject that demanded immediate attention." Underlying Prichard's engagement with the Gothic is the exploration of race relations in Australia through the tragic, socially proscribed love between its two central characters: Coonardoo and Hugh Watt. The exploration of anxiety associated with otherness evokes the quintessential Gothic novel of the late nineteenth-century, Bram Stoker's Dracula (1897) which is replete with anxieties surrounding race. The vampire as a metaphor for racial alterity and the fear of miscegenation has engendered an association between racial anxieties and the Gothic which makes it a quintessential vehicle for the expression of these anxieties. In Dracula, blood, a literal and metaphorical source of power according to William Hughes, may signify racial difference as well as notions of family, religion and gender. These are all key concerns for exploration in Coonardoo and a further link can be made between

113 Quoted in J.J. Healy, Literature and the Aborigine in Australia (St Lucia: The University of Queensland Press, 1989), p.150.
the dangerous eroticism of the vampire and the sexual tension which exists between the two main characters in *Coonardoo*. Despite this link, however, the Gothic as a genre originated in England and has a long history of conflating racial otherness with metaphorical monstrosity. Gerry Turcotte argues in “Australian Gothic”:

If it is true that the Gothic has been useful for helping to establish a local Australian voice, it has also functioned as a silencing discourse for some, such as the Aboriginal people of Australia. It is not surprising that Aboriginal writers have tended not to use the Gothic mode since it has generally represented for them a disabling, rather than an enabling discourse. In obvious terms, the Aboriginal peoples were themselves constructed as the monstrous figures haunting the Australian landscape, spectres more frightening than any European demon, because they represented a physical threat to settlers and to theories of enlightenment which believed in the civilizing presence of Whites.\(^{115}\)

This statement can be contested through a Gothic reading of *Coonardoo* as the Aboriginal characters, including the eponymous heroine, are sympathetically rendered and are, in many ways, morally and physically superior to the white characters. This is undermined, however with Prichard’s predominant use of Hugh’s and his mother’s points of view in the text which has attracted the criticism that Prichard privileges the white point of view, despite her attempt to imagine the subjectivity of the Aboriginal protagonist. Prichard’s novel also transgresses notions of monstrosity in Australian literature, traditionally associated with the othering of Indigenous people, which contradicts Turcotte’s assertion that Aboriginal people are frequently depicted as the monstrous figures in Australian Gothic.\(^{116}\) On the contrary, there are two monstrous presences haunting this text, one more explicit than the other.

\(^{115}\) Turcotte, “Australian Gothic,” p.18.
\(^{116}\) Australian author Andrew McGahan also utilizes Gothic conventions in *The White Earth* (2004) which is set in rural Queensland. McGahan employs the trope of monstrosity through
The Gothic villain and sexual predator in *Coonardoo* is Sam Geary, the lascivious white landowner whose unrequited lust for Coonardoo over many years ends in an ambiguous and disturbing ‘rape,’ signaling the beginning of the character’s spiritual and moral decay, and ultimately leading to her death.\(^{117}\)

William Hughes comments on the way Bram Stoker’s vampire, Dracula, like Montoni in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian*, “hovers menacingly in the theoretical ground between seducer and rapist,” which is also the function of Sam Geary in *Coonardoo*.\(^{118}\) The character of Sam Geary is also foreshadowed in Prichard’s stage play, *Brumby Innes* which was first performed by the Australian Performing Group and the Nindethana Theatre, Melbourne in 1972, forty-five years after it was written. This play, like *Coonardoo*, also deals with the sexual abuse of Aboriginal women and girls by white male landowners in Australia through the character of Brumby Innes and criticises the lack of justice for the victims, and lack of consequences for the perpetrators, of this abuse. The play is far more disturbing in its racist depiction of Indigenous people than *Coonardoo*, although its main focus is on the savage and brutal treatment of Aboriginal people by Brumby, and the play, like the novel it anticipated, was considered to run “starkly against the taste of the day,”\(^{119}\) particularly with its staging of a corroboree as the opening scene and the incorporation of Aboriginal language.

As a character, Sam Geary is a more complex version of Brumby Innes and his

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\(^{117}\) The disturbing ambiguity of this scene will be elaborated on later in the discussion.


appearances at Wyetaliba over the course of the novel are always marked by his unashamed and boastful lust for both Coonardoo and Wyetaliba station. He cites the Bible as a justification for his involvement with many women, especially Indigenous women, who he uses for his own sexual pleasure, comparing himself to King Solomon. Geary proclaims, "'But King Solomon loved many strange women, together with the daughter of Pharaoh...He had seven hundred wives and princesses, and three hundred concubines...'" (p.235). By contrast, Hugh is renowned for what he considers is his decency and high standards. His daughter Phyllis expounds on Hugh's character, "'I believe in honour, he says. 'Honour, courtesy – and keeping yourself clean.'" (p.206). Hugh's use of the word 'clean' refers to his refusal to be involved sexually with Indigenous women which he associates with defilement. The two characters represent two competing ways in which white men interact with Indigenous women, yet both ways are a denial of the humanity of these women. Geary bribes the disadvantaged Indigenous women with material possessions and through their compliance the women become wholly dependent on him and, as a consequence, are isolated from their communities. By contrast, Hugh's hubris and puritanism prevent him from acknowledging his love for Coonardoo which is another manifestation of disavowal. Prichard demonstrates a variety of competing ways that Aboriginal Australia has been treated by European Australia and all ultimately prove ineffective. In addition to Geary, Coonardoo is also haunted by a far more threatening presence, Mrs Watt, the seemingly benign face of patriarchy.
Before Hugh inherits Wytaliba station it is controlled by Hugh’s mother, Mrs Watt, or Mumae as ‘her’ Aboriginal workers call her. The reader is told that Mumae, “in their dialect meant a father, and was not Mrs Bessie, father and mother to her son, the woman master of Wytaliba since Ted Watt had died so long ago, before Hugh could speak.” (p.3). Mrs Bessie embodies the role of ‘master,’ or masculinised mother, at Wytaliba and it is through this character that Prichard explores the hegemonic relationship between white landowners and their Aboriginal workers. Although Mumae dies near the beginning of the novel, her supernatural presence lingers throughout the remainder of the story as a ghostly reminder of the lingering effects of white colonization. The narrator wryly observes, “Mrs Bessie prided herself on treating her blacks kindly, and having a good working understanding with them. She would stand no nonsense, and refused to be sentimental, although it was well known she had taken the affair of Maria to heart.” (p.9). This statement exemplifies the paternalistic treatment endorsed by Mrs Bessie, an expedient arrangement she considers mutually beneficial and one she hopes her son will continue to reinforce after her death. Yet the love that develops between Hugh and Coonardoo is restrained by the bonds of slavery which is evident in childhood, “A year older, Coonardoo had looked after and played with Hugh when he was little; soon dominated by and obedient to him. Glad of a playmate for her boy, Mrs Bessie taught Coonardoo to read, write and count, as she taught Hugh.” (p.9). Concerned for Hugh’s future when she dies, Mrs Watt notices the “mute devouring love” in

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120 The reference to Maria, Coonardoo’s mother, is the reason the widowed Mrs Bessie singles her out from among the other Aboriginal children on the station as a companion for Hugh. Mrs Bessie’s husband, Ted, a feckless alcoholic who has died before the novel begins, is responsible for Maria’s death and therefore Mrs Bessie feels a responsibility and a sense of guilt toward Coonardoo. It is the close bond Hugh and Coonardoo form as children, encouraged by Mrs Bessie, which creates the impossible love between them which then becomes the tragic paradox of the novel.
Coonardoo’s eyes and “her air of a faithful deserted animal.” (p.9). Yet, she also acknowledges “a suffering and endurance as great as her own.” (p.9). Mrs Watt’s feelings for Coonardoo seem to combine a manner of parental affection with a chilling detachment reserved for a being condemned to servitude. Furthermore, she exerts a fierce masculine proprietorship, masquerading as protection, over Coonardoo as a child and young woman, even locking her up “in the homestead bathroom at night,” to keep Sam Geary away from her. (p.32). This paternalistic attitude toward Coonardoo is reflected in another context in an observation made on slavery in the United States, in an anonymous 1836 review, attributed to Edgar Allan Poe and quoted by Maja-Lisa Von Sneidern in her discussion on the representation of race in Emily Brontë’s Gothic novel, 

*Wuthering Heights:*

Some defenders of slavery typically characterized the black slave as docile, dependent and loyal. In an anonymous 1836 review attributed to Edgar Allan Poe, the author writes: “The peculiar character...the peculiar nature of the negro” differs in “passions and wants and feelings and tempers in all respects” from the white man. These differences create a relationship “of loyal devotion on the part of the slave to which the white man’s heart is a stranger, and of the master’s reciprocal feeling of parental attachment to his humble dependent...[T]hese sentiments in the breast of the negro and his master, are stronger than they would be under like circumstances between individuals of the white race.”

Prichard was clearly influenced by the ideologies inherent in this statement which pervade Imperialist discourse on the assumed character of Indigenous people detained as slaves, offering justification for their mistreatment. These ideologies inform Prichard’s construction of the character of Coonardoo who remains devoted in the way of an idealized and passively loyal servant to Hugh throughout her life. Mrs Watt’s concern for her son’s welfare establishes within

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him the belief that a relationship with an Indigenous woman would be immoral and shameful which, Prichard maintains, is ultimately impossible for him to adhere to because of the internal conflict his love for Coonardoo engenders. When Hugh is no longer able to deny his feelings, his reaction is to try and destroy what he fears most.

Mrs Watt is also praised for her masculine qualities, traits which Prichard valorises in the text as necessary for a woman’s survival in the Australian bush. Prichard’s exploration of gender roles in *Coonardoo* invites the acknowledgement of the tension between nationalism and feminism which existed for Australian women writers, or as Susan Lever notes, the “irreconcilable nature” of “feminist commitment” and “celebration of the Australian bush” exemplified in Miles Franklin’s, *My Brilliant Career* (1901), which was to become a continuing conflict for Australian women writers into the 1930s.122 This is evident in Prichard’s construction of her female characters, including Coonardoo, who are praised in the text for their horsemanship and mustering skills, typically masculine accomplishments. Sam Geary commends Mrs Watt as a “great horse-woman,” yet an element of derision is apparent when he declares, ““Great little woman, your mother, You,” he said, “but she is sewed into her pants, isn’t she?”” (p.43). Gender roles are transgressed with ease as necessary for survival in the Australian bush, despite the obvious sexism inherent in Geary’s comment about Hugh’s mother, yet Prichard is most concerned with the racial bigotry the white characters exhibit. “Mrs Bessie had fits of loathing the blacks. Although she had lived and worked like a man, so long in the Nor’-

122 Lever, “Realism and Socialism,” p.57.
West, without the least respect for conventional ideas which hampered her in anything she wanted to do, her white woman's prejudices were still intact.” (p.25). Mrs Bessie, as the female representative of patriarchal ideologies, embodies those masculine qualities revered in the Australian Legend. Indeed, no other female character in the novel is able to live up to his mother in Hugh's eyes and his wife, Mollie eventually leaves him and the station with his five daughters, unable to endure the strain of living in such harsh conditions. The most sympathetically rendered white female character in the novel is Phyllis, Hugh's oldest daughter, who returns to Wytaliba as a young woman with a love of the land and eagerness to work on the station alongside her father. For Hugh she becomes, temporarily, the ideal mate, before her marriage to Bill Gale, and embodies a masculine hardiness and devotion to Wytaliba, qualities Hugh desires in a female companion. Of course Coonardoo also shares Hugh's love of the land but her connection with the land is constructed by Prichard as one of identification and belonging. By contrast, Hugh's devotion to Wytaliba, and by extension Coonardoo, is grounded in proprietorship. Although Coonardoo as a character is far superior to any of the white female characters in the novel, particularly the mercenary women Hugh brings to the station (Jessica, and then Mollie, whom he marries) his daughter Phyllis embodies those qualities Prichard valorizes as essential for a woman in the Australian outback; she possesses a love of the outdoors, declaring that she “should have been a boy,” but she also displays a more progressive and open-minded attitude than her grandmother, particularly when she expresses her acceptance of her father's love for Coonardoo. (p.173).
Coonardoo is able to withstand the hardships of selector life; indeed, she thrives on the station as a young woman and is depicted as Hugh’s perfect female companion as a way of highlighting the depth of Hugh’s stubbornness. A conversation early in the novel between Sam Geary and Hugh illustrates the oppositional, yet both highly racist and misogynistic, attitudes of white men toward Indigenous women. Geary exclaims, “‘You’re one of those god-damned young heroes. No ‘black velvet’ for you, I suppose?’ “I’m going to marry white and stick white,” Hugh said, obstinate lines settling on either side of his mouth.” (p.56). After the death of his mother and delusional with grief, Hugh gives in to his desire for Coonardoo, the one time in the novel that he relinquishes his punitive self-control. The narrator asserts:

She was Coonardoo, the old playmate; he felt about her as he had when they were children together. This was a childish adventure they were on. His gratitude shook him as he thought of how she had followed and watched over him during the last weeks. It yielded to yearning and tenderness.” (p.77).

Their union has a mystical quality which Prichard suggests is essential for the return of Hugh’s sanity, who, the next day “was like his old self.” (p.77). When his wife, Mollie, leaves him, and Coonardoo’s Aboriginal husband, Wareida dies, Hugh ‘takes’ Coonardoo as his woman, but is never again able to consummate their relationship. Hugh’s repeated and cruel rejection of Coonardoo over many years culminates in her eventual acquiescence to Geary toward the end of the novel.

The central paradox for Hugh is that he is unable to both love Coonardoo and enslave her. Hugh’s failure to maintain Wytaliba, which he inherits after his mother’s death, can be read as a severe indictment of white colonial authority
and the 'iron fist in a velvet glove' mentality which underscores the race relations in the text. Through both a sense of guilt and fear, owing to her husband's role in Coonardoo's mother's death, Mumae forges a special bond with her, although this never extends beyond Coonardoo fulfilling the needs of Mumae and her son, and never really develops beyond an affectionate servility. Mumae plays on the Aboriginal cultural belief in the supernatural and threatens the Aboriginal characters that she will haunt them after her death if they do not continue to obey her law. As she lies dying, she announces to Hugh:

'And afterwards, you can put me down there near the creek, under one of the big gums...I've showed Meenie and Bandogera the place...I can watch all they're doing from there. If they steal the sugar or tea...when you're not looking and have nobody to housekeep for you, I'll haunt them...and give them a guts-ache like I've got when they eat, and...'

(p.69).

After her death both Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters claim that Mumae is haunting the station.

The trope of haunting in Gothic novels is typically linked to fear but it also evokes the persistence of loss and grief and the intrusion of the past in the present. The appearance of white cockatoos on the station after her death symbolizes the obstinate persistence of Mumae's authority over the characters in the novel, particularly the Aboriginal characters who still adhere to her laws. The narrator points out, "No man or woman of the Gnarler would consent to break Mumae's law. They told how her spirit still watched over the place, and what the vengeance would be, should her will be disregarded or disobeyed.” (p.91). Through the collapse of the station at the end of the novel, Prichard critiques this rigid clinging to an archaic ideology enforced by Mumae and Hugh. The appearance of the white 'cockies' in the final passage at the desolated
homestead where Coonardoo returns to die, are a haunting reminder of the reasons for her destruction. The narrator declares, “White cockatoos whirled, screeching and shattering the silence with their fierce, wild cries as they flew round the house and garden.” (p.239). Furthermore, Mumae’s hypocritical white authority reflects a mindset that Hugh’s love for Coonardoo threatens to obliterate. Although Sam Geary is, on the surface at least, the more blatant Gothic villain in *Coonardoo*, it is through the characters of Hugh and his mother that Prichard condemns the paternalistic treatment of Aboriginal people as a more insidious enemy, reflected in assimilationist policies which continued in Australia well into the twentieth century. After his mother’s death, Hugh struggles vigorously to reinforce her superior, paternalistic attitude, yet Prichard’s text portrays an inherent paradox that exists within Hugh: how can he possibly love Coonardoo and at the same time reinforce his mother’s paternalistic style of colonial authority?

Violence towards women is a central trope in Female Gothic literature and Michelle Massé has convincingly argued that masochism is central to the genre.123 Hugh’s brutal and violent reaction to Coonardoo after he learns of her unfaithfulness with Sam Geary shifts the focus away from Geary onto Hugh as the Gothic villain, casting him in the tradition of Emily Bronté’s embittered and enraged, Heathcliff. Interestingly, it is frequently the protector figures who are the most threatening in the Female Gothic tradition, typically brothers, fathers and husbands. Hugh acts as a brother-figure to Coonardoo when they are children but, as an adult, he frequently abuses the power he has over her. For

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example, Coonardoo is callously implicated by Hugh with knowledge of his mother's illness after her death: "'If you had told me,' Hugh said harshly, 'we might have saved her. She might have been here now.' He knew he was unjust; that Coonardoo had done as she was told. It gave him satisfaction to see her shrink away as though he kicked her." (p.74). However, in the following passage, the narrator reveals Hugh's inner conflict through the depiction of Hugh's feelings toward Coonardoo which, to a contemporary reader, reinforces the racial differences between them in a way which privileges Hugh's whiteness and exoticises Coonardoo:

She was like his own soul riding there, dark, passionate and childlike. In all this wide empty world Coonardoo was the only living thing he could speak to, Hugh knew; the only creature who understood what he was feeling, and was feeling for him. Yet he was afraid of her, resented a secret understanding between them. (p.74).

These two quoted passages from the novel link Hugh's fear of his feelings for Coonardoo with his joy in hurting and humiliating her. The sadomasochistic nature of their relationship arises from Coonardoo's position as slave on Wytaliba, but also from Hugh's fear and resentment at the unspoken love between them.

The relationship between Hugh and Coonardoo challenges traditional Female Gothic constructions of relationships between men and women. Ros Ballaster argues that, "In the female Gothic, then, it seems to be the case that what cannot be said is what is remarkably obvious, that women in patriarchal culture are accorded only one function, that of mediating male power, to which their own
sexual desires are immaterial.”¹²⁴ This idea is particularly relevant to the relationships between Coonardoo, Sam Geary and Hugh, as Hugh considers Coonardoo his property and Geary consistently attempts to steal her away from him, thus she becomes an object of lust for both men. However, Prichard does challenge this aspect of the Female Gothic tradition by constructing a more complex representation of sexual desire in relation to Coonardoo. The scene in which Coonardoo gives in to Geary’s advances reiterates that for Coonardoo sexual desire is instinctive; she is described as “half dead in her sterility,” which contrasts with Hugh’s unhealthy repressed desire. (p.215). The narrator asserts:

Geary came along the veranda. He lurched against the door of the room she was in, and the door opened. Coonardoo hung powerless before him. Heavy and drunken, in the doorway, his eyes glazed, Geary stood, swaying, an old man with his hair on end, his face red, swollen and ugly. Coonardoo could have moved past and away from him in the darkness. But she did not move. As weak and fascinated as a bird before a snake, she swayed there for Geary whom she loathed and feared beyond any human being. Yet male to her female, she could not resist him. Her need of him was as the dry earth’s for rain. (p.216).

Jack Beasley in *A Gallop of Fire*, considers Coonardoo’s inability to resist Geary as evidence that this is not a rape, which is how some critics read it. Beasley declares, “Love making of ethereal refinement it isn’t, but it certainly isn’t rape either. The scene also underlies KSP’s persistent presentation of female sexuality as existing only in response to that of the male.”¹²⁵ On the other hand, Drusilla Modjeska considers Coonardoo the only female character in the novel granted a “full and desiring sexuality,” despite the fact that she must also carry “the shadow of the sexual repression white culture imposes on its own

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women." The narrator is detailed with the description of Geary's physical unattractiveness and has established very clearly the fear and loathing Geary inspires within Coonardoo, yet it is also obvious in the construction of this scene that there is a moment of possible escape. Although this incident between Coonardoo and Geary is disturbing for this reason, it could also be read as further highlighting Prichard's critique of Hugh's stubborn arrogance and denial of his own desire which becomes a far greater transgression. This idea is returned to when his daughter Phyllis says to her husband, "'Do you know, Bill, it's my belief our dear Youie took my mother like most men take a gin, and Coonardoo's been a sort of fantasy with him.'" (p.238). During the same conversation she declares, "his repressions have rotted in him." (p.238). Coonardoo's acquiescence to Geary, therefore, can be read more sympathetically in light of these comments by Phyllis which, although Prichard does conflate sexuality with Coonardoo as a black woman, the novel is more critical, I believe, of Hugh's inability to acknowledge his own sexual and emotional desires.

The taboo of miscegenation is explored through the character of Winni, or Winning-arra, the child shared by Hugh and Coonardoo. Although Hugh refuses to acknowledge Winni as his son, the two share a close bond. Eighteenth-century Gothic was primarily concerned with aristocracy and the importance of bloodlines, and nineteenth-century Gothic extended this to include a preoccupation with race. This traditional theme is revived in Coonardoo to explore the threatening possibility of mixed races in Australia. Moreover, miscegenation is also linked to the construction of the sexuality of Indigenous

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women. Aileen Moreton-Robinson asserts in *Talkin' Up To The White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism*, "White middle-class feminists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries perceived miscegenation as being the result of Indigenous women's sexual promiscuity, lack of dignity and lack of self-respect."\(^{127}\) Although some of the Aboriginal women are offensively constructed as promiscuous in *Coonardoo*, Prichard is also highly critical of the sexual abuse and manipulation of Indigenous women by white men. The child between Hugh and Coonardoo, however, is not a result of sexual abuse and is intended to reflect the love between them. Moreover, the five daughters Hugh has with Mollie are largely a disappointment to Hugh compared to his feelings for Winni, which also suggests the privileging of masculinity in rural Australia; as a boy, Winni is more valuable to Hugh than his daughters. The narrator comments, "Mollie's baby, fresh and pink-and-white, was a fairy creature. Hugh loved her; but she was less real, much less his own than that son of a whirlwind. Always as he leant over, played with and held the baby, he thought of Winni. His affection for the boy plagued him." (p.130). Therefore, Hugh's white bigotry also robs him of a relationship with the child he shares with Coonardoo. After Hugh's vicious and cruel treatment of Coonardoo, and the necessary selling of the station, Hugh gives Winni the option of staying with him or going off to find work. Winni's choice to search for Coonardoo demonstrates dignity, loyalty and compassion, characteristics which Hugh lacks, and illustrates Prichard's critique of the racism associated with miscegenation in Australia during this time.

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Furthermore, the novel naturalises Coonardoo’s masochistic behaviour as she continues to love Hugh regardless of the violence done to her. It is with shock that the reader registers the extent of Hugh’s violent attack on Coonardoo when he discovers her involvement with Sam Geary. He is possessed by a jealous and possessive rage and, instead of directing his rage at Geary, he violently confronts Coonardoo, almost killing her:

"Get away from me. Keep out of my sight," Hugh cried. "Never let me see your face again. Go to Sam Geary. Be one of his gins. I’m done with you." Coonardoo cried out moaning and hanging on to him. Hugh struggled with her, trying to wrench the thin, strong arms from about him. To escape her desperate grasp he dragged her across the fire. Screaming, as the fire bit into her flesh, Coonardoo clung to him. Flames squirted up from the dry rag of the trousers wrapped round her legs. Hugh twisted her wrist back, thrusting her away from him. Coonardoo fell back into the fire. He strode off among the trees. (pp.223-224).

The use of fire here as the source of potential annihilation is particularly horrific and fire frequently functions as a motif in Female Gothic literature as an instrument of destruction. Perhaps the most recognizable fire in the Female Gothic canon is the one which destroys Thornfield Hall in Jane Eyre, the patriarchal prison of both Jane and her maniacal counter-part, Bertha. However, in Jane Eyre the fire can also be seen as regenerative, as the old patriarchal order is replaced by the new with the death of Bertha and the marriage between Jane and Rochester. In Coonardoo, however, set in the scorching heat of rural Australia, Hugh’s punishment is particularly brutal, especially when we consider the importance of fire to the spiritual practices of the Aboriginal culture, particularly the fire corroboree performed during ‘pink-eye’ ceremonies described earlier in the novel. However, in Gothic literature it is typically a castle or a house that is burned, not a person, which demonstrates Hugh’s desire to destroy Coonardoo and the complicated feelings she evokes in him. Fire also
becomes a weapon of retaliation and revenge for Hugh which, as a trope in Female Gothic literature, can be empowering for the Gothic heroine who is released from patriarchal oppression through the burning of the emblematic patriarchal prison. Moreover, fire is troped as male in Coonardoo through the Aboriginal fire ceremony which is then linked to fertility, so this scene could also be read metaphorically as the potential destruction of the land, symbolically represented by Coonardoo, by the white masculinist colonial ideologies embodied by Hugh. A conversation between Mumae and Saul Hardy (the previous owner of Wytaliba who, in his old age, lives on at the station) about the Aboriginal fire corroboree which took place, illustrates this connection:

“What was it all about?” Coonardoo heard Mumae say to Saul Hardy, next day, although she dared hardly confess the eavesdropping to herself even. “I don’t know. It has some sex significance, I suppose. Fire is male. They believe smoke caused by the men in these dances impregnates some female spirit of things which dispenses life – for birds, beasts, coolyahs, bardis. The abos themselves, I think.” (p.27).

Despite the blatant racism and ignorance inherent in this reply, Prichard establishes the importance of fire which then takes on greater significance later in the novel. It is also this violent scene, in which Coonardoo is burned, which draws on the Gothic convention of the female Gothic heroine banished from the home, most often seen in the male Gothic tradition. Kate Ferguson Ellis demonstrates in The Contested Castle that in male Gothic literature, the threatening or disobedient female is often banished from the home as punishment. Ellis asserts:

Focusing on crumbling castles as sites of terror, and on homeless protagonists who wander the face of the earth, the Gothic, too, is preoccupied with the home. But it is the failed home that appears on its pages, the place from which some (usually ‘fallen’ men) are
locked out, and others (usually ‘innocent’ women) are locked in.\textsuperscript{128}

Although \textit{Coonardoo} inverts the gender roles inherent in Ellis’ comment, the novel does enact the idea of the failed home and Coonardoo as the ‘fallen’ woman, is banished from her home. The novel’s final chapters trace the slow decline of Wytaliba station which mirrors the deterioration of Coonardoo’s mind, spirit and body. She returns home years later, physically diseased and haunted by memories, to find Wytaliba station, once so energetic and alive, has undergone a similar process of decay.

Coonardoo survives the attack by Hugh although, after he banishes her, she is heart broken and lost in despair and confusion. The narrator asserts, “Nothing was left of the clean straight aboriginal woman, nothing of her pride and dignity and grace. She was no longer Coonardoo, but Pearl, the “black pearl” of a pearler’s crew, and before that she had been Esmeralda.” (p.245). Without Wytaliba, Coonardoo wanders aimlessly, adopting different identities; she allows herself to be used sexually by Chinese pearlers and then discarded. Yet the text makes tragically clear in its critique of the enslavement of Aboriginal people by white colonialism, the adamantine hold servitude had on the minds of the enslaved:

\textit{Youie had sent her away, driven her far from the place where she belonged, her place and the place of her people. She had gone; his will carrying her, when she did not know where she was going. Her feet, her legs, her arms and hands had been obedient to him; taken her away, wandering through the ranges, for how long she did not know, until she walked into Monty’s camp, and he had looked after her. For no other reason could she have left her own country and the country of her people.} (p.246).

Coonardoo, as the well in the shadow, despite the racism inherent in this metaphor, is the life source of the land. Without her, the text implies, the land is ravaged by drought, as its prime source of nourishment has disappeared. Coonardoo’s decline mirrors that of Wyataliba and, in the most bitter of defeats, Hugh is eventually forced to sell his beloved station to his nemesis, Sam Geary. Therefore, Coonardoo’s deterioration can be read as a metaphor for the severing of the bond between Indigenous people and the land as a reflection of the dispossession of their culture, which indicates that a sacred and irretrievable relationship had been lost. Roslynn Haynes argues that, “Prichard elevates and dignifies her protagonist through her traditional association with the land,” even though this serves to reinforce the way Western society conflates primitive cultures with Nature.\(^\text{129}\) Certainly as a tragic Gothic heroine, Coonardoo is unable to break free from the cycle of domination so often seen in the Gothic and she is unable to comprehend the systematic abuse perpetrated on her by Hugh, not to mention his continual rejection of her. Prior to her death Coonardoo is left wondering “at the ways of white men with aboriginal women,” a situation which she is ultimately destroyed by. (p.245).

Prichard includes a conversation between Hugh, Saul Hardy and Mollie, Hugh’s wife, a staunch supporter of the use of the Aboriginal workers as slaves, as a way of contrasting the competing ideological positions in the text, as well as subverting deep-rooted and harmful stereotypes of Aboriginal people. Mollie is the most overtly racist character in the novel and Saul represents a point of view favouring ‘native’ Aboriginals over those more immersed in white culture. The

\(^{129}\) Haynes, pp. 187-188.
narrator maintains, “Through all the nervy restlessness and fury of Mollie’s discontent Coonardoo was her slave.” (p.134). Moreover, Saul responds to Mollie’s assertion that, “‘the abos are filthy and treacherous. I thought you had no time for them,’” by replying, “‘No girl,” he said quietly, “they are not treacherous – except when they have been treacherously dealt with. And filthy? You never saw a wild black look as dirty as a native about the towns.’” (p.126). Saul and Hugh also go on to discuss the unjust treatment of Indigenous people, especially at the hands of the law, an abuse which was to continue many years after the publication of Coonardoo. Coonardoo is victimized (like the helpless Female Gothic heroine) in relation to these competing colonial attitudes toward Indigenous Australia and the audience is positioned to sympathise with her, yet the pessimistic ending of the novel has garnered a variety of critical interpretations.

The various contemporary critical reactions to Coonardoo attest to the continuing power of the novel to create debate and controversy. Most critics have approached the novel with the intention of critiquing its racial politics, which has given rise to a variety of responses. Two of Prichard’s more outspoken critics are Kay Schaffer and Susan Sheridan. In Women and the Bush, Schaffer conducts a poststructuralist reading of Coonardoo, arguing that through “white possession of the land, disruption to tribal life, and imposition of white moral values on the Aboriginal people,” Aboriginal existence is gradually eroded and the native population is tainted.130 She concludes her analysis with the assertion that “the politics of the novel defy and at the same time reinforce white colonial

authority through the maintenance of the Big Dichotomies.”131 Susan Sheridan has written a number of times on Coonardoo, her most recent discussion being a response to Ric Throssell’s criticism of her first critique of the novel. Sheridan argues that in both Coonardoo and Mary Durack’s Keep Him My Country (1955) there is no “doubt that the white man who loves the land/woman will still be its owner and user...Thus the fantasy of reciprocal inter-racial love becomes a kind of justificatory myth for white settlement.”132 There are certainly elements of this in Prichard’s construction, although Sheridan acknowledges that the position of women writers is always contradictory and white women are “positioned in racist and colonialist discourse as dominant subjects,” and therefore, as we have seen in Coonardoo, “the relationship of white women writers to prevailing discourses of nationalism, race and gender is a profoundly ambiguous one.”133 Indeed, Coonardoo reflects these ambiguities and a consideration of more recent critiques of the novel reveal a more positive consideration of these ambiguities in relation to the racial politics of the novel.

A discussion by Susan Lever convincingly argues that “feminist critics have struggled to reconcile its obvious commitment to the experiences of women, and to an Aboriginal woman in particular, with its endorsement of now discredited white attitudes to the land.”134 Lever’s discussion focuses predominantly on Prichard’s use of language and point of view, to contest earlier readings. According to Lever, as Coonardoo embraces the shifting perspectives of its

133 Sheridan, p.150.
134 Lever, “Realism and Socialism,” p.57.
characters in an attempt to convey the complexity of the many competing points of view in the novel, it challenges "any reading which proposes that its meaning is single and easily identified, including those which see its identification of the land with the feminine as endorsement of the major dichotomies of a masculine Symbolic Order." Lever also comments that the novel is aware, with its inclusion of Aboriginal songs and Ngarlawongga language, that the construction of the subjectivity of the character of Coonardoo and the experience of Aboriginal people lies beyond the Symbolic order, "identified by feminists as phallogocentric" and belongs to the order of the Imaginary, which cannot be coded through the conventions of language. Indeed, Lever argues that, "Prichard acknowledges that while her novel must adopt Western language conventions there is an inexpressible order which it cannot code." For this reason Lever points to the novel's "awareness that its literary forms are inadequate to the experience of its subject," as Prichard attempts to "envision the world from the viewpoint of those excluded from the language and culture on which the novel depends." A more recent discussion by Delys Bird also acknowledges the limitations Prichard faced but declares that "Prichard does break formal (fictional) and racial (social) boundaries in her attempts to 'see things as the blacks see them,'" a perspective which she does not achieve in her non-fictional writings. Bird's discussion begins by acknowledging troubling aspects outlined in the Foreword to Coonardoo in which Prichard "proclaims

135 Lever, "Realism and Socialism," p.60.
136 Lever, "Realism and Socialism," p.61.
137 Lever, "Realism and Socialism," p.61.
138 Lever, "Realism and Socialism," p.61.
139 Lever, "Realism and Socialism," p.66.
both the dissolution of the Indigenous culture and its idealized and essential nature,” a statement which resonates with earlier criticism of the novel. Therefore, it seems that if the novel’s Foreword is accepted as a treatise describing Prichard’s politics, this exerts a powerful influence on the way the politics of the novel are read. As has already been noted, the Foreword was written after *Coonardoo* was published, as a way of attenuating the hostile response the novel evoked. Correspondingly, this casts doubt on some of the statements made by Prichard in the Foreword with regard to a reading of the racial politics of the novel. Bird also acknowledges the ambiguity present in the novel’s ending.

On her return to Wytaliba, many years after Hugh banishes her from her land, Coonardoo finds the station has been deserted. The final passage evokes Coonardoo as a shadowy, disease-ridden and defeated figure who returns home to die. Modjeska, in her 1990 Introduction, reads the ending as a warning that European Australia must accept with love the original inhabitants of this country in which they are no longer made to bear the twisted, repressive fears and desires of European Australians. Bird’s reading of the ending, particularly Coonardoo’s death, recognizes two possible meanings. Bird insists, like Modjeska, that on the one hand the novel “might be read as a warning that Australia’s future as a just and productive society depends on whites learning to respect, understand and learn from Aboriginal culture,” whereas it could also function “as a fulfillment of ethnographic forecasts of the time that predicted the

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inevitable disappearance of Aboriginal people and their culture.” Bird’s discussion recognizes that Prichard was motivated, in her writing of *Coonardoo*, to expose the exploitation of Aboriginal people, yet she criticizes her for “idealization and mystification of the power of the other, figured in the land, woman and a natural primitivism.” Nonetheless, Bird concludes that Prichard’s struggle to recognize a subjectivity beyond the parameters of white colonial existence is both “historically and imaginatively significant.” Therefore, the Gothic genre, as it is utilized in early twentieth-century Australia by this particular author has, in many ways, reinforced essentialist and damaging racist ideologies about Indigenous Australia but it has also been utilized by Prichard to challenge paternalistic white colonial authority and the sexual abuse of Aboriginal women.

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Chapter Three

The Spectacle of the Lost Child in Picnic at Hanging Rock: Peter Weir Popularizes Australian Gothic

The Gothic genre, as invoked in Coonardoo, manifests in similar ways in Peter Weir’s film Picnic at Hanging Rock. Decay and loss are also tropes which operate in this narrative, despite the very different form it takes as film. The fluctuating popularity of Gothic literature for well over three centuries has, in modern times, continued in the visual medium of film. Film is an ideal vehicle for the visual enactment of Gothic tales as it is a mode of storytelling which illuminates the potency and aesthetic appeal of visual imagery and the Gothic is a highly visual form of literature. A plethora of cinematic versions of three classic Gothic narratives, Frankenstein, Dracula and The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde in particular, have all been adapted for the screen many times over, which illustrates the continuing appeal of Gothic films. Whilst it is possible to list a number of Australian films which contribute to the constellation of films which could be classified as Gothic, or are at least partially influenced by this mode, some of the more recognizable films in Australian cinema are also imbued with a Gothic sensibility. Films such as Wake in Fright (Ted Kotcheff, 1971), the Mad Max trilogy (George Miller, 1979/1981/1985), Bad Boy Bubby (Rolf De Heer, 1993) and the more recent, Wolf Creek (Greg McLean, 2005) all establish, to varying extents, a claustrophobic atmosphere of Gothic horror. Two further examples of Australian films infused by Gothic thematic concerns and an ambience of disintegration include Geoffrey Wright’s Romper Stomper (1992), a film deemed controversial at the time of its release for its shocking depiction of
racism and extreme violence in the Western suburbs of Melbourne, Victoria, and Neil Armfield’s *Candy* (2004), based on the novel of the same name by Luke Davies, which traces the physical, mental and spiritual decay of its two central characters who are gripped by a powerful addiction to heroin. A further example, although it is usually considered a New Zealand rather than an Australian film, is Jane Campion’s critically-acclaimed, *The Piano* (1993) which draws on the Female Gothic tradition to critique patriarchal ideologies in colonial New Zealand through the central story of illicit passion.

However, one film which is immediately recognizable to mainstream Australia and, indeed, international audiences, is *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Peter Weir’s 1975 film adaptation of Joan Lindsay’s 1968 novel.1 This film is included as part of the “new wave” of Australian cinema which emerged during the seventies, and was, according to film critic David Stratton, “a triumphant artistic and commercial success.”2 *Picnic at Hanging Rock* was one of the leading films of this revival and is described by Robin Wright as “extremely influential” in the development of an Australian film industry.3 More recently, Albert Moran and Errol Vieth describe it as “the quintessential Australian period art film, the marriage of a muted commercialism with a foregrounded aesthetic textual surface that was seen as a guarantee of ‘quality.’”4 As Susan Hayward suggests, “Literary adaptations gave cinema the respectable cachet of entertainment-as-

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1 The following chapter will predominantly discuss the director’s cut version of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, released on DVD in 2004. If material is discussed which appears in the original film and not in the director’s cut, this will be noted.
Ironically, of course, the book is now greatly overshadowed by the film and is not generally considered of a very high literary standard, although the film continues to be discussed as a defining one in relation to this highly influential decade in Australian cinema history.

Ross Gibson observes that the newly burgeoning cinema in Australia in the 1970s can be linked to issues of national identity. He remarks that the new wave of Australian cinema seemed to arise at a time when Australians were “in need of self-definition and self-congratulation,” after two decades of “conservative rule and economic stagnation.” It is during these times of social crisis and upheaval that, historically, a renewed interest in the Gothic emerges. The most salient illustration of this is the appearance of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) at the end of the nineteenth-century which is a compendium of anxieties about advancements in technology, the emergence of the ‘New Woman,’ and issues of racial purity. Certainly, the expression of, and engagement with, Gothic themes in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* illustrates the power of a ‘popular’ Gothic text to become embedded within the cultural mythology of a place. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is an example of a ‘popular’ Gothic text as opposed to ‘literary’ Gothic, although the film’s success was partly derived from its apparent literary origins. As it is set during the formative nationalist period around the time of Federation, it superficially raises questions of belonging and national identity, predominantly through its depiction of landscape, and challenges European Australia to consider its relationship to a land with a colonial history of displacement and alienation.

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However, the main thematic purpose of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is to assert a masculinised Australian identity separate from Imperial Britain. Graeme Turner argues in *Making it National* that “Throughout its white history, Australia has obsessively defined itself in opposition to Britain: Australia was what Britain was not and even those attributes we shared – our ‘common traditions’ – were said to be inflected differently within an Australian context.”7 This is illustrated in *Picnic* through the representation of archaic and rigid Victorian traditions epitomized by Mrs Appleyard (Rachel Roberts) and the slightly neurotic and ineffectual British upper middle-class Michael Fitzhubert (Dominic Guard) who is contrasted with the quintessentially laconic and affable working-class Australian, Albert Crundall (John Jarratt). I will argue that despite the film’s iconic status within the Australian film industry, which is now beginning to weaken with an ever-increasing repertoire of quality Australian cinema emerging over the last two decades, both the film and the novel engage with Female Gothic tropes to ultimately reinforce, rather than challenge, dominant racist and sexist ideologies in Australia. This film is also significant to a consideration of Gothic literature by Australian women as it incorporates many of the tropes which have come to define the tradition, including the lost child motif, the cruel and dominating mother-figure and the ambivalent relationship to the Australian landscape.

Perhaps one of the reasons for the film’s iconic status within Australian culture is its engagement with the horror of losing children to the inhospitable Australian landscape, a quite specific ‘Australian anxiety,’ according to Peter Pierce, which

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can be traced back to the beginning decades of European settlement in Australia. “The lost child,” Pierce writes, “is an arresting figure in the history and the folklore of colonial Australia. More profoundly though, the lost child is the symbol of essential if never fully resolved anxieties within the white settler communities of this country.”8 Possibly, what makes *Picnic at Hanging Rock* such a compelling narrative, despite both the film and novel’s use of hackneyed symbols and two-dimensional characters, is that it taps into that quintessential Australian fear: lost children in the Australian bush. Moreover, the narrative at the heart of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, which tells the story of three young schoolgirls and their school mistress who disappear under mysterious circumstances at a popular Australian tourist spot at the turn of the century, has become an iconic Australian fable. Maureen Bushell points out that Australians became “magnetically attracted” to this story and “saw it as a cultural experience characteristically our own.”9 Certainly, it is a story which is lodged within the cultural imagination of Australia in the twentieth century and is often referred to in many texts which discuss Australian cultural narratives, particularly in relation to the real-life disappearance of Azaria Chamberlain in 1980.10 Through the exploration of the lost child motif, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* became more than just an intriguing unsolved mystery, or an aesthetically engaging visual depiction of the Australian landscape; it ensured the film of its place within the cultural imagination of Australia.

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10 Notable examples of texts which mention *Picnic at Hanging Rock* include John Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner’s *Myths of Oz: Reading Australian Popular Culture*; Graeme Turner’s *National Fictions*; Kay Schaffer’s *Women and the Bush*; and The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature, edited by Elizabeth Webby.
The Australian link to the Gothic is made problematic by what was considered to be, during European settlement, Australia’s limited history. Antiquity, or antiquity as a fictive construction, is one of the key features of traditional Gothic literature. Typically, in eighteenth-century Gothic literature such as Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1797), entrapped heroines are haunted by ancestral secrets, long-buried, within prodigious, ancient castles and are frequently terrorized by their male inhabitants. In place of the castle in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is the Australian landscape, emblematised by the Rock itself which becomes a menacing symbol of the mystery and peril associated with the ancient Australian landscape from the beginning of European settlement. The Rock in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* visually mirrors a Gothic castle with its dark, ominous aspect and foreboding presence, which is achieved visually through the use of a low angle camera shot, in which it dominates the frame. Judith Johnston cites Australia’s function as a prison for the British “as fostering the Gothic in the imaginations of those who journeyed out from Europe and endeavored to write about their reactions to the Australian landscape.”\(^{11}\) With this literary legacy in mind, it is not surprising that the representation of Hanging Rock in the film has a terrifying quality and this is linked to the implicit fear of the racial other which is hinted at in the novel and functions as a subtext in the film. As I will demonstrate, the Indigenous is fused with the landscape in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* as a way of expressing the horror of the Indigenous other and the fear associated with the Australian landscape.

The Australian landscape is frequently allied with the Gothic in representations of Australia. Australian poet Judith Wright declares, "In Australian writing the landscape seems to have a life of its own. Sometimes it takes up an immense amount of room; sometimes it is so firmly pushed away that its very absence haunts us as uncomfortably as its presence could."\(^{12}\) Whether it is depicted as emblematic of the horror of the monstrous feminine or horror of the racial other, in Australian cinema the landscape has consistently featured as a principal motif. In what can be described as one of the more recognisable Female Gothic texts in Australia, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* evokes the anxiety surrounding the mystical and feared presence of an Indigenous other which is metaphorically expressed in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* through the mountainous mass of the Hanging Rock and its 'anthropomorphic' ability to bewitch and absorb three innocent schoolgirls and their teacher. However, the film is more explicit in its suggestion of a feared Indigenous presence than the novel, although neither fully confronts the issue of race. This is an issue of interest to Weir whose next film project following *Picnic at Hanging Rock, The Last Wave* (1977), explores race relations in Australia and has been criticized for a lack of depth, romanticizing the Aboriginal characters in the film, and the absence of any serious commitment to revealing the complexities of the plight of Aboriginal Australians.\(^{13}\) Similarly, in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* the sub-text of race is manipulated to ultimately assert a white, Anglo-Celtic masculine national identity.


The film begins with a voice-over from Miranda (Anne Lambert), one of the young schoolgirls who disappear at Hanging Rock during a school picnic on St. Valentine’s Day, 1900 at Mt. Macedon, Victoria. The voice-over, spoken in a suitably tremulous adolescent voice, is a quotation from that central figure to the Gothic, Edgar Allan Poe: “What we see and what we seem is but a dream - a dream within a dream.” This slightly altered line is from Poe’s poem “A Dream Within a Dream,” which, in the first stanza, reads, “All that we see or seem/Is but a dream within a dream,” and again in the final stanza, “Is all that we see or seem/But a dream within a dream?”14 The opening voice-over, as well as containing an obvious reference to dreams at the beginning of a film which overflows with dream imagery and references to dreams, hints at the notion of the illusory nature of time and sensory experience which has thematic relevance in the novel and which is employed by Weir to lend the film a wistful, dream-like tone. Furthermore, the opening voice-over alludes to the presence of the Indigenous other through its association with the Dreaming. In keeping with the Anglo-Saxon appropriation of aspects of Aboriginal cultures, the Aboriginal ‘Dreamtime’ has been both misunderstood and misrepresented by European culture. Diane Bell, an anthropologist who has worked extensively with Aboriginal cultures describes, “the Law of the Dreamtime” or jukurrpa, “as an all-encompassing, all-pervasive force in the lives of the desert people,” originating with “the mythological ancestors who pioneered the country and gave form and meaning to their society and its institutions.”15 This association with Aboriginal ‘Dreamtime’ contributes to the ambiguity and mystery which both the film and novel exploit to create an atmosphere of intrigue and suspense.

The mystery surrounding the veracity of Joan Lindsay’s tale was one the author herself helped to perpetuate, contributing to the fascination and mystique surrounding the novel and film. When asked in an interview filmed in 1974 for the Australia Council Film Series whether the story was actually true, Lindsay replied, “It’s an extraordinary thing to me that people are not content to leave it as a mystery…fact and fiction are so closely allied – some of it happened and some of it didn’t.” The film exploits this mystery by making reference, before the opening credits, to the disappearance of several members of ‘a party of schoolgirls from Appleyard College,’ implying that the story which follows is based on an actual disappearance – a strategy which contributed substantially to the success of the film. However, Yvonne Rousseau dispelled these rumours in The Murders at Hanging Rock, originally published in 1980, which is a thoroughly researched, yet tongue-in-cheek parody, of the reader’s obsessive preoccupation with the desire to unravel the mystery of what happened to the schoolgirls and their teacher at Hanging Rock. In the recent documentary also entitled “A Dream Within a Dream,” Peter Weir recalls the audience outrage at the lack of a resolution to the film and concedes it is something he would not try again. As the director of films such as Dead Poet’s Society, Gallipoli, and Master and Commander, Peter Weir has since become a highly commercial filmmaker whose films engage with predominantly masculine themes including, triumph over evil, male camaraderie or ‘mateship,’ and the heroic quest. It is interesting, therefore, that his first commercially successful film was set in the

16 “Joan Lindsay,” Australia Council Archival Film Series, 1974.
Gothic spaces of an anachronistic English boarding school and outback Australia, and that most of the characters are female. Despite this, however, the film adopts a male gaze and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is an example of masculinised Female Gothic, exemplified by the initial opposition between the two central male characters, Michael Fitzhubert, whose arrival in Australia coincides with the disappearance of the girls, and Albert Crundall, the working-class Australian who works as a coachman for Michael’s uncle. The second part of the film, after the disappearance of the girls, also privileges a masculine point of view through the friendship which develops between these two male characters, whose class differences become less important as they unite to solve the mystery which is set up during the beginning of the film.

Nevertheless, the masculine logic that the film adheres to is contradicted by the ending, which is left unresolved and refuses a clear-cut and logical conclusion. Novak and Breen describe *Picnic* as “an enigma rooted in ambiguity,” through its ability to set up a story with melodramatic potential without ever adhering to a traditional melodramatic narrative mode. Furthermore, paradoxically, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is one of the first commercially and critically successful Australian films which essentially remains outside the parameters of mainstream cinema, particularly through the intrusion of Female Gothic tropes and, as Jonathan Rayner points out, through its engagement with European art cinema of the 1960s, and its failure to resolve its central mystery. *Picnic* arrived at a time when predominate images on Australian screens and televisions were

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exemplified by a hyperbolic form of masculinity in Australia, or ‘ockerism.’ Characteristically, the male ‘ocker,’ according to Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka, is “blunt, loud, hedonistic and conservative in the populist manner.” The Australian ‘ocker’ celebrates parochialism and is unapologetically misogynistic and racist. Albert, who emerges as the stronger of the two male characters, embodies characteristics associated with the male ‘ocker,’ but he also possesses those qualities associated with Australian masculinity which are being celebrated here, such as an egalitarian spirit, and, through his willingness to join Michael on the Rock to search for the girls, this character reinforces the importance of mateship to Australian culture.

Christine Theodosiou explores the cultural and political factors which influenced the overwhelmingly positive reception of Picnic in Australia, citing the Whitlam government’s encouragement of a film industry with international appeal as a contributing factor to its success, in addition to the Whitlam government’s embracing of artistic and cultural diversity. According to Theodosiou, this embracing of diversity “questioned the sanctity of a single national aesthetic identity by promoting notions of difference,” which saw a backlash by the general public at the time and, as Picnic was a return to a more conservative aesthetic with its focus on the past and the Australian bush, it was embraced by a mainstream Australian audience. The film’s celebrated mise-en-scène

23 Theodosiou, p.67. Gough Whitlam was in office as head of the Australian Labor Party from 1972 to 1975.
24 Theodosiou, p.67.
however, which is influenced by the artistic tradition of impressionism, emphasises authenticity and the aesthetic appeal of the costumes, props and setting, rather than conservatism. Weir comments in an interview with Jonathan Rayner in 1993 that he adapted the style of the European film with “slower rhythms” and “lack of exciting developments” as a way of creating “something approaching the hypnotic.”

Jonathan Rayner describes Picnic as the first ‘quality’ Australian film but it is one that, despite its artistic approach to style and unconventional engagement with Female Gothic themes, reinforces a conservative masculine national identity, which would have been appealing to mainstream Australian audiences.

I want to now address the critical reception of Joan Lindsay’s novel, on which the film was based, which has attracted widely differing responses since its publication, especially since the release of the film. It has been described as, “silly” and disparaged for “clichéd and stilted writing” and, “threadbare… attempts at philosophizing,” by Brian McFarlane, as well as being lauded by John Taylor as responsible for “the creation of the Australian film industry.”

As Brian McFarlane points out, the publishing history of the novel reveals that it benefited immensely from Peter Weir’s film. Two early pre-film reviews commend the novel, but are hardly rapturous with praise and from these reviews

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25 Rayner, p.65.
26 Rayner, p.69.
29 Brian McFarlane points out in Words and Images: Australian Novels into Film (p.5) that Picnic at Hanging Rock was first published in 1967 in Australia by Cheshire, in Britain by Chatto and Windus in 1968 and re-printed by Penguin in 1970. In 1975, the year the film was released, the novel was re-printed five times, three times in 1976, twice in 1977, and again in 1978, 1979 and 1982. It was published in the U.S. by Penguin in 1977.
it appears that the novel initially met with a lukewarm critical reception. Martha Lemming in *Australian Book Review* in 1968 describes the novel as one of "considerable subtlety, elusive in meaning and even in fact, understated throughout, with the haunting allusiveness of an old photograph of people one once knew well but can no longer quite 'place." Similarly, Scrutarius in *Walkabout* talks about its "disturbing, rather nightmarish quality," but seems frustrated by its lack of a resolution, "Having set up the mystery, the book, no whodunit, leaves it unsolved." This same reviewer, then goes on to describe the events of the novel in a rather perfunctory way, finally concluding, however, that, "one does get the feel of the Rock and its potential for tragedy." The first review of the novel was published by an anonymous reviewer in *The Bulletin* in 1967 and is, comparatively, full of high praise for Lindsay as an "ingenious" suspense novelist. This review points out the supposed 'factual' origin of the mystery, claiming, "A friend in Victoria assures me the school of the mystery is well known." The reviewer goes on to describe Joan Lindsay as a "spellbinding teller of a graceful tale," and is quick to reassure the reader that *Picnic at Hanging Rock* "is an enchanting tale of mystery too light, and even at its grimmest, too sunlit, to be called Gothic." This review conforms to traditional notions of an Australian literature and recalls the words of an anonymous contributor to an Australian journal in 1890 describing Australian literature as "cheerful and vigorous, as becomes the pioneer writers of a young

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32 Scrutarius, p.46.
34 Anon, "Sunlit Mystery," p.82.
35 Anon, p.82.
and hopeful country." In contrast to the two later reviews, the focal point of *The Bulletin* review is evidently on the promotion of the novel as a 'sunlit' Australian mystery with its basis in realism, elements which are traditionally valorised in the field of Australian literature.

After the release of the film, the novel was inevitably returned to, especially because in this period filmed versions were expected to be true to the novels on which they were based. Therefore, the novel became the basis of intense interest due to the popularity of Weir's cinematic interpretation. For example, in an article which discusses Weir's adaptation of the novel for cinema, Marek Haltof concurs with McFarlane when he declares that the novel "owes its fame to Weir's film," which he describes as "a symbol of the Australian film revival," and Peter Weir as a "master of creating an uncanny, oneiric atmosphere." Similarly, Scott Murray praises the film as "one of the finest Australian films of the revival" and considers it, during the mid-nineties, "no less striking than in 1975." A review in the *National Times* by P.P. McGuinness declares, effusively, that *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is "a superb and beautiful film, virtually perfect in its balance and delicacy, handling its incidents with such skill and sensitivity as to leave one almost breathless." In this particular review, the novel itself, on which the film is based, is neither praised nor criticised and is only mentioned to inform the audience that this was the original source for the

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40 P.P. McGuinness, "Peter Weir's Hauntingly Beautiful Film Makes the Film World Sit Up," *An Australian Film Reader*, eds. Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan (Sydney: Currency Press, 1985), p.188.
film. Likewise, Jonathan Rayner’s more recent critique of the film in *Contemporary Australian Cinema* focuses on its success as a literary adaptation. He praises the film as a “major achievement in the furtherance of the emergent Australian film culture” and notes that, “*Picnic at Hanging Rock* essayed a sophisticated art film treatment” which resulted in Weir being considered the “first potential auteur” of the Australian film industry.  

Rayner only mentions Lindsay’s novel to comment that it was “relatively unsuccessful” before the appearance of the film and enjoyed a “marked popularity after it because of the film’s reception.”

In critical discussions which involve analysis of both the novel and the film, it seems that praising the film at the expense of the novel has become a standard critical response. For example, Brian McFarlane proffers, “the film’s visual power, the intelligent suggestiveness of its images and sounds, transforms the original text into a wholly new creation, and one that is much more worth discussing.” The novel does tend to be disappointing to a contemporary reader, which is not surprising considering the hype surrounding it. However, although Weir has distilled the most captivating elements of Lindsay’s novel to create an Australian Gothic suspense film, he has also included certain aspects from the novel which have attracted criticism such as a lack of character development, many of the characters come across as predominantly stereotypical and clichéd, and its use of prosaic dialogue. Much of the overwhelmingly positive criticism of the film overlooks these negative features by emphasizing the memorable visual achievement by Weir.

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41 Rayner, p.65.
42 Rayner, p.66.
43 McFarlane, p.55.
Furthermore, although the majority of the criticism seems to focus on the film, an exception to this is an article on the novel by Joan Kirkby which discusses the theme of European intrusion into an alien and inhospitable landscape. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* explores the turn-of-the-century clash of cultures and the anachronism of European culture in Australia. Kirkby alleges parallels between *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924), declaring that Lindsay has brought the theme of the confrontation of European culture with an alien landscape “into the repertoire of Australian fiction.” Kirkby argues that in these three novels, “it is human violations of the earth that precipitates inexplicable occurrences in nature and eruptions of evil in society.” To Kirkby, Mrs Appleyard, who is emblematic of Victorian authority, “never acknowledges the force and spirit of Australia and persistently violates it with her alien ideals of control and order,” whereas Miranda, Mrs Appleyard’s polar opposite, is a “fey child of the Australian bush.” Kirkby argues that not only is Miranda completely at ease within the Australian landscape, she willingly allows herself to be enticed into complete absorption with it during the picnic at Hanging Rock, at the same time as leading “her companions away.” Kirkby concludes with the assertion that *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *The Scarlet Letter* and *A Passage to India* all demonstrate “the necessity of man’s learning to acknowledge those forces [of Nature] and live in harmony with them.”

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challenge her assertion that so many parallels can be found between them. Nevertheless, her argument that *Picnic* explores the alienation of European culture in Australia is revealing.

More recently, a particularly well-researched masters thesis by Maureen Bushell extends Kirkby’s thesis further still by declaring *Picnic at Hanging Rock* an ‘Australian myth of origin’ with parallels to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, in an attempt to reveal a richness within the novel that had not previously been acknowledged. Bushell argues:

> Miranda becomes emblematic of Australia, the emerging nation, and that through her actions linking the imported culture with the indigenous nature, her encounter with nature can be read as transforming the culture in positive ways, purging and renewing and bringing it into a new relationship with the aboriginal earth spirit.\(^{49}\)

Bushell’s use of the word ‘aboriginal’ seems at times to be applied in a broad sense here, meaning ‘original,’ rather than referring directly to a unified people. Both Kirkby’s and Bushell’s symbolic approaches to the novel place the forces of Nature as central to their discussion, although neither mentions the association with the landscape and its Indigenous inhabitants. In *A Storm in a Tea-cup* Bushell argues that Lindsay engages with the theme of reconciliation through the characters of Michael and Albert,\(^{50}\) which then becomes about reconciliation between classes. She dismisses the possibility of any engagement with issues of race in Lindsay’s novel arguing:

> The gulf between the indigenous and European races was considerably lower on the agenda and has only quite recently been given considerable attention, so we should not be surprised –


\(^{50}\) Bushell, *A Storm in a Tea-cup*, p.19.
though we can express dismay – to find that Joan Lindsay makes no reference to the Aboriginal question in her novel.\textsuperscript{51}

Not only is Bushell incorrect in claiming in 1996 that it is ‘only quite recently’ that race has become an issue in Australian literature, as my chapter on\textit{Coonardoo} demonstrates, I also contend that Lindsay does suggest fear of the Indigenous other in the novel, which Weir then develops further in the film version. During the opening scenes, before the disappearance, in which the girls are exploring the Rock, Lindsay writes, “Irma was aware, for a little while, of a rather curious sound coming up from the plain. Like the beating of far-off drums.”\textsuperscript{52} Despite this statement’s banality, not to mention brevity, with overtones of B-grade jungle movies from the 1930s and 1940s, the issue of race is certainly being addressed. Bushell overlooks Lindsay’s oblique engagement with race to focus almost exclusively on the novel’s critique of class distinction. Indeed, neither Kirkby nor Bushell, in their discussions of the novel, confronts the underlying racial anxiety of the film by linking the Australian Gothic horror of the landscape with a feared Indigenous presence.

\textit{Picnic at Hanging Rock} sets up the opposition between Hanging Rock and Appleyard College in the film’s opening sequence to establish the opposition between a manifestly European cultural world and the physical Australian landscape. This is achieved through still shots of Hanging Rock during the opening credits, shot through a morning mist at dawn which resembles a haunting landscape painting, and accompanied by an ominous deep, rumbling sound. The shot of Hanging Rock then dissolves into an establishing shot of

\textsuperscript{51} Bushell, \textit{A Storm in a Tea-cup}, p.18.
Appleyard College in which the camera rises from the ground, slowly revealing the solitary, partially-obscured, dreary aspect of the college. The unmistakable sound of pan-pipes accompanies the first image we have of Appleyard College, establishing a wistful mood in relation to this severe and repressive Victorian institution. The austere relic of the College is described by Joan Lindsay in her novel as “an architectural anachronism in the Australian bush – a hopeless misfit in time and place.”

Marek Haltof comments that, “The awe-inspiring Rock is photographed like an old Gothic castle; as in Gothic novels or horror films, it dominates the region and awaits its new victims.” Indeed, repeated still images of the Rock throughout the film give it an increasingly menacing and foreboding countenance. Appleyard College also functions as a Gothic space, representative of a repressive and archaic Victorian society and the two edifices compete for dominance throughout the film. The link between the Gothic and repressive boarding schools which enforce stern pedagogical regimes and austere discipline, can be found, particularly, in the work of Charlotte Brontë, including one of the most identifiable novels in the Female Gothic canon, *Jane Eyre*. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* also engages with cruelty to children and Cliff Green, who wrote the screenplay, declares in the documentary, “A Dream Within a Dream” that he considered this a major theme. This is poignantly illustrated in the scene following Irma’s return to the College, the only girl out of the three missing who is eventually found. Irma’s re-appearance at the College evokes an uncanny hysteria in the other schoolgirls, who begin to viciously attack her, demanding

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53 Lindsay, p.41.
55 Charlotte Brontë’s subsequent novel, *Villette* (1853) is also set in an all-girl boarding school which is apparently haunted by the specter of a nun. In addition, the recent, highly popular *Harry Potter* series for children, written by J.K. Rowling, has also been extremely successful as a series of films and are principally set in an enchanted Gothic boarding school.
answers to the mystery. Following this scene, the camera cuts to a shot of Sara Waybourne, the dark-haired orphan girl who becomes the scapegoat for Mrs Appleyard’s escalating fury, who is strapped to an archaic instrument of torture designed to correct the posture of young girls. This barbaric Victorian disciplinary device evokes Gothic associations with cruelty to children and symbolically conveys the extent to which British ideologies had become anachronistic within an Australian context. The threat of danger is also connected to the Rock which is established at the beginning of the film through a speech given to the girls by Mrs Appleyard. They are warned that the Rock is “extremely dangerous” and they are forbidden “any tomboy foolishness in the matter of exploration, even on the lower slopes,” an edict four of the girls ignore.

Paradoxically, however, the Rock also functions as a space of liberation from the repressive Victorian college for the young girls. During their time on the Rock, the girls, under strict instruction by Mrs Appleyard that they may remove their gloves “once the drag has passed through Woodend,” are shown removing their shoes and stockings, exploring the slopes, and dancing uninhibitedly. This ambivalent construction of the landscape which is both oppressive and liberating extends the tradition of early Australian Female Gothic, such as in the work of Barbara Baynton, who also displays an ambivalence in her construction of the Australian outback. In Jonathan Rayner’s chapter on the Gothic in Australian cinema he proposes that this ambivalence is a key feature of Australian Gothic. Rayner asserts that, “Picnic’s treatment of the natural landscape is ambiguous, in contrasting its seductiveness and liberation with its inscrutability and menace,”
and it is this feature that "reveals its association with Australian Gothic." What has now become a key feature of Australian Gothic is an historical legacy reflecting the frustration felt at the discovery of the harshness of the Australian landscape compared to the idyllic paradise promoted during white settlement. Robert Holden notes, "The promotion of Australia as a colonial outpost and the proliferation of emigrant manuals, particularly during the goldrushes, often advanced a rosy vision of colonial opportunity and lifestyle." Gothic depictions of the Australian landscape arose from the frustration experienced by white settlers with the discovery of a landscape which failed to fulfill this vision and which seemed to possess a mysterious and dangerous quality. Moreover, the continuing ambivalence toward the landscape is linked in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* to the ambivalence felt toward its Indigenous inhabitants.

The racial anxiety underlying the film is subtly constructed through the use of juxtaposition, specifically the scene involving the 'black tracker.' In the scene after the girls have disappeared, several close-up shots of the Rock are shown which is then juxtaposed with an image of the face of an Aboriginal man emerging from the spinifex, evoking an association between the two. These memorable shots of the Rock clearly show markings that resemble human faces, giving it an unsettling animated ascendancy. In addition, the soundtrack incorporates the sounds of distant yelling combined with a clamorous, repetitive, scraping noise which evokes an association with Indigenous tribal ceremony which, in addition to the sound of the didgeridoo, signifies 'native' culture to a European Australian audience. The repetition of certain distinct sounds and

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56 Rayner, p.69.
images in association with Aboriginality which have dominated mainstream Australian culture through the popular mediums of film and television, are evoked in this scene to establish the subtext of racial anxiety. Despite the brevity of this scene its impact ensures that the association lingers for the remainder of the film. A long-shot reveals that the Aboriginal man, who is dressed in colonial uniform, is in fact a ‘black tracker,’ a member of the search party organized to find the missing girls and their mistress. Although he is the only Aboriginal character to appear in the film, the suggestion of a connection between Aboriginality and Hanging Rock, if only for a moment, is indelibly established. The scene works to imbue the remainder of the film with an underlying racial anxiety, which signifies an Indigenous past that has been denied and the presence of an Indigenous other which has not yet been controlled and tamed. Weir has intentionally created doubt in the mind of the viewer about the association between an Indigenous presence and the threat of the landscape and then sought to reassure his audience that this character is a benign, even ‘tamed’ presence.

Unlike the character of the ‘black tracker’ who appears in the film and who works for the colonials, which is signified by the use of costume, the Rock in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* represents the Indigenous people of Australia whose culture has been deeply misunderstood by European Australia and is therefore a foreboding and frightening presence. In Weir’s film, the Australian landscape enacts its revenge by absorbing colonial Australia’s most treasured members: its children.

The figure of the ‘black tracker’ is also intertwined with the lost child motif. Robert Holden discusses the role of the Aboriginal tracker in relation to the
popularization of a real-life case of a missing boy in a mid-nineteenth century annual for children, *Parley's Magazine*, entitled "The Child that was lost in the woods of New South Wales." Holden comments:

Indeed, the stance attributed to the Aborigine in lost in the bush stories is one of the very few in nineteenth century literature which partakes of the heroic: in a preliminary statement to this particular story the Aborigines were characterized as 'the most abject of any race of savages' and yet, by the successful conclusion, two in particular were credited with a 'noble disposition' whose 'steady perseverance' won the day.\(^{58}\)

The legacy of the 'black tracker' in Australian culture as a noble and heroic figure is exploited by Weir, as the figure of the tracker in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* functions, momentarily, as a dubious and threatening figure associated with the disappearance of the girls, but then is quickly established as a trusted leader of the initial search party once his identity as a tracker is revealed, evoking the stereotype of the harmless Aboriginal who has been tamed and put to 'good use' through his indoctrination by white colonialist ideologies.\(^{59}\)

The public response to the disappearance of Azaria Chamberlain in 1980, just twelve years after the publication of Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, was a real life enactment of the terror associated with the lost child in the bush. Carmel Bird's fiction, more than that of any other Australian writer, imaginatively explores the motif of the lost child as an undeniably Australian narrative. She suggests in an interview with Shirley Walker:

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\(^{58}\) Holden, p.63.

\(^{59}\) Rolf De Heer's recent film, *The Tracker* (2002), subverts the racist stereotype of the 'black tracker' through constructing the character of the Tracker as wily and complex, which is played by iconic Australian actor, David Gulpilil. In deference to 'The Tracker,' the appellation given to him in the film, the remaining, all-white characters are also not named and known only as The Fanatic, The Follower and The Veteran. A shot of The Tracker advancing toward the camera opens the film, in which he is placed center screen, dominating the characters around him despite his enchained prisoner status. Furthermore, the soundtrack by acclaimed Aboriginal musician, Archie Roach, reflects solely the interiority of the character of The Tracker throughout the film.
The most vulnerable member of a family is the child. It sometimes seemed that the spaces of Australia swallowed the children up and perhaps the two most dramatic examples of this are Azaria Chamberlain and the schoolgirls in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. This latter is not a true story but is universally taken to be true because it dramatizes a narrative that is lodged deep in the Australian psyche.\(^6^0\)

The fascination with this motif in Australian art and literature has a long history. It is one of the defining tropes of Gothic literature in Australia and, in the cruellest of ironies, was tragically played out on a very large scale in Australia with the very deliberate removal of babies and young children from Aboriginal families for many years. In a contemporary twist on this motif, Rachel Perkins offers an Indigenous perspective with the award-winning *One Night the Moon* (2001). In this unconventional short film, a musical set in the Australian outback in 1932, a young girl is enchanted by the moon at night and becomes lost in the Australian outback when she climbs through her bedroom window, to follow its light. Her father, a racist landowner, refuses to allow an experienced Aboriginal tracker, Albert Yang, to lead the search party to find his daughter. The all-white search party is unsuccessful in its search for the little girl, leading her mother to defy her husband’s racist stricture and seek help from Albert to find her daughter. With Albert leading the way, together they discover the child’s body. This short film explores racism in colonial Australia from the perspective of a grief-stricken mother and Aboriginal tracker. The images of the Australian outback in the film subvert conventional depictions of an unwelcoming Australian landscape and, instead, fully display its diversity and beauty. The landscape in this film is only depicted as hostile and stark from the white characters’ perspective. Rachel Perkins remarks in an interview with Kathryn Millard that she watched *Picnic at*

Hanging Rock and read Peter Pierce’s The Country of Lost Children as part of her research for the film.\textsuperscript{61} One Night the Moon re-considers the lost child motif in a film which honors both the Indigenous perspective on the figure of the ‘black tracker,’ as well as the splendour and majesty of the Australian landscape, which challenges firmly entrenched cinematic depictions of the landscape in Australian film narratives. Furthermore, the motif of the lost child appears to have particular resonance with women writers and women filmmakers. More recently Deborah Robertson’s Careless (2006) explores the lost child motif in an urban context through the notion of the sometimes tragic consequences of adult carelessness, rather than through an explicit link with the Australian landscape. In Picnic at Hanging Rock, however, the lost child is emblematic of, as Pierce suggests, “the forfeiting of part of the national future, or of an anxiety that Australia will never truly welcome European settlement.”\textsuperscript{62} It is this anxiety about the impossibility of belonging which is fundamental to the thematic concerns of Picnic at Hanging Rock.

Jonathan Rayner identifies Australian Gothic in film as, “a mode, a stance and an atmosphere, after the fashion of American Film Noir, with the appellation suggesting the inclusion of horrific and fantastic materials comparable to those of Gothic literature.”\textsuperscript{63} He identifies films from the seventies and eighties which he classifies as part of Australian Gothic cinema, which include The Last Wave (Peter Weir, 1977); the Mad Max trilogy (Dr George Miller, 1979/1981/1985); and Shame (Steve Jodrell, 1987). Although he acknowledges the varying


\textsuperscript{62} Pierce, The Country of Lost Children, p.6.

\textsuperscript{63} Rayner, p.25.
settings and locales in which these Gothic tales are enacted, he does identify three thematic concerns common to Australian Gothic in film as: "a questioning of established authority; a disillusionment with the social reality that that authority maintains; and the protagonists' search for a valid and tenable identity once the true nature of the human environment has been revealed." The thematic concerns identified by Rayner are, arguably, very masculine ones. *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, on the other hand, draws heavily on the Female Gothic tradition, with its emphasis on repressed sexuality, the lost child motif, cruelty to children in oppressive institutions, the desire to escape from the all-embracing mother-figure (represented by the stern matriarch, Mrs Appleyard) and confinement within the domestic sphere, in addition to offering no real narrative resolution to the central mystery. This is then problematised in the film as the camera's gaze is male, which mostly follows the reactions of the two central male characters, Michael and Albert. Therefore, the film establishes an uneasy relationship between the Female Gothic elements and its compulsion toward masculine Gothic themes. For example, Michael begins to question the authority of his aristocratic background through his friendship with Albert, yet his solitary search for Miranda on Hanging Rock seems to strip him of his reasoning powers and he begins to display typically hysterical or 'feminine' symptoms. In addition, Albert, the laconic but good-natured working-class Australian who embodies more typically Australian masculine qualities than the more refined Michael, establishes his masculine superiority over Michael when he seeks to complete his mission of finding the missing girls. Unlike Michael, Albert is more familiar with the Australian landscape and therefore more equipped to

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64 Rayner, p.25.
handle the climb up the Rock, although he initially considers Michael 'mad' for considering it. Although Albert is successful in uncovering one of the missing girls, Irma Leopold, the film establishes that every attempt at masculine control of the physical environment is ultimately thwarted by the sublime power of the Rock.

Gothic literature by women is most effective when it is utilized as a vehicle for protest. Yet Weir's film reinforces stereotypical roles for women, particularly through the central character of Miranda. In both the film and the novel Miranda is associated with a white swan, an embarrassingly hackneyed symbol of innocence and deathly perfection. This recalls the nineteenth-century Gothic fascination with the death of a beautiful young woman, emblematized by Edgar Allan Poe in his famous declaration, "the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world." Male authors in the nineteenth century created an angelic female ideal known as the 'angel in the house,' an ideal which Virginia Woolf considered one of the most insidious images imposed on women and one that was necessary for a woman to 'kill' in order for her to assert her own beliefs and opinions as a writer. This stereotype is associated with the character of Miranda in Picnic at Hanging Rock and is directly remarked upon by the French school mistress, Mlle. De Poitier, when she declares that Miranda is a "Botticelli angel." Indeed, Dermody and Jacka question whether the disappearance of the schoolgirls in Picnic at Hanging Rock

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is actually represented in the film as Gothic horror, or as a ‘celebration.’

Although it is made clear that the disappearance of the girls and Miss McCraw has a devastating ripple effect on the lives of the other characters, the disappearance of the girls, particularly the ethereal and delicate Miranda, is romanticized, and her subsequent ‘visitations’ in the form of a white swan throughout the film suggests that she now belongs to a transcendent or heavenly realm. Moreover, the employment of swan imagery recalls the Greek myth of ‘Leda and the Swan,’ in which Zeus transforms into a swan to rape the mortal woman, Leda. This particular myth was savagely critiqued by British author Angela Carter in one of her early Gothic novels, *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), which was published one year before Lindsay’s novel. The disparities inherent in the representation of femininity in these two texts highlights the way Female Gothic texts can reinforce destructive, romantic images of femininity, as in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, or effectively challenge these images.

The depiction of death in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* can be considered in relation to another, critically-acclaimed Gothic film, *The Piano* by New Zealand director Jane Campion. During one of the final scenes in *The Piano*, the film’s Gothic heroine, Ada, plunges to the bottom of the sea, with a rope from her beloved piano entwined around her foot. Rather than succumbing to an underwater oblivion, Ada is given agency through the demonstration of what Laleen Jayamanne describes as “Gothic will,” with her last-second refusal of death.68 In contrast, the schoolgirls in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* hypnotically embrace

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67 Dermody and Jacka, p.105.
absorption by the Rock in what seems a complete paralysis of their wills. Even the stern, sexually repressed mathematics mistress, Miss McCraw, who is described by Mrs Appleyard as possessing a “masculine intellect,” is seen by Edith, in a somewhat ridiculous inclusion in the narrative, to be running toward the Rock wearing only her underwear, suggesting that even a character as controlled and rational as Miss McCraw is transformed into the equivalent of a hysterical schoolgirl when confronted by the mysterious power of the rock. Stella Bruzzi discusses fetishism and costume in three popular films, including Picnic at Hanging Rock and remarks that Picnic is an “exclusively male fantasy in which representation, symbolism and narrative converge to evoke the (adolescent) male obsession with the female sexual object.”

A reading of the representation of femininity in the film supports this assertion, as the most sympathetically rendered female characters are all young and beautiful, and function purely as objects of desire. Weir constructs a dreamy, hypnotic atmosphere through filmic techniques such as soft-focus, slow motion and superimposition, which culminates when three of the four girls disappear into an opening in the Rock. The use of soft-focus slow motion combined with the languid, hypnotic movements of the girls as they ascend the Rock, has led film critic Neil Rattigan to observe that they appear as though they are walking toward a lover’s embrace. There is certainly a sexual aspect to the magnetism that the Rock exudes which is deliberately included to contrast with the repressive sexuality enforced at Appleyard College.

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The two-dimensional character of Miranda, who disappears early in the film and by chapter three in the novel, is also representative of the idealized Australian girl and functions as a screen onto which the other characters project their own fears and desires, in much the same way as colonial Australia has projected its fear and desire onto the Australian landscape. In a discussion on the central importance of the landscape in Australian cinema and its role in Australian mythmaking, Ross Gibson states: “In such national myths, the landscape becomes the projective screen for a persistent national neurosis deriving from the fear and fascination of the preternatural continent.” In *Picnic at Hanging Rock* the landscape functions as an unknown, unknowable and devouring presence which seems to defy representation as either masculine or feminine. The character of Miranda, which is linked to the landscape, represents an ideal that compensates for the lack which characterizes the lives of the other characters as a consequence of their exile in an alien landscape. To the French mistress, Mlle. De Poitier, Miranda is connected to the Italian Renaissance painter Botticelli, when she declares at the picnic, as has already been noted, that Miranda is ‘a Botticelli Angel.’ To the orphaned girl, Sara Waybourne, she is the only person to extend any real kindness and becomes a substitute for familial love. To Michael, she epitomizes a transcendent and unattainable other-worldly beauty that he struggles, futilely, to possess. However, to Mrs Appleyard, Miranda’s disappearance, as head girl of the college, is the precursor to the complete disintegration of the stability and orderliness of her world, which metaphorically conveys the cutting of ties with Victorian England in Australia and the emergence of a new, somewhat feminised, masculine Australian character; a

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71 Gibson, p.50.
masculinity which is a hybrid of the contrasting masculinities represented by Michael and Albert and one which has a new, and essential, respect for the power of the ancient Australian landscape.

The politics of the film largely reinforce, rather than challenge, dominant ideologies of Australian national identity. Robin Wright convincingly argues that *Picnic at Hanging Rock* confirms dominant ideas about the Australian national character, usually conceived of as an Anglo-Celtic, working-class male who is independent, anti-intellectual, suspicious of authority and fiercely loyal to mates, which is often contrasted with the reality of Australian society.\(^72\) She further comments that Peter Weir adopts a “sophisticated representational strategy” in relation to the way landscape is depicted in the film.\(^73\) Wright asserts that Weir’s film constructs an Australian narrative that is critical of the continuing influence of British colonizers in Australia, represented by the stern and oppressive Mrs Appleyard, yet one that also embraces certain aspects of European civilization and artistic traditions, through the idealised character of Miranda, who is overtly linked to European artistic figures, Botticelli, Beethoven and Shakespeare.\(^74\) In this way the film endorses a national identity which retains a nationalistic sense of pride in the Australian national character, but one that does not necessarily “reject all aspects of the colonizing culture in order to claim ownership of the Australian landscape.”\(^75\) The new Australian character which emerges at the end of the film has purged certain aspects of its link to the mother-country and asserted its own identity. This is illustrated in the final scene

\(^{72}\) Robin Wright, “Developing our own space: Place and Identity in Recent Australian Cinema,” p.1.
\(^{73}\) Robin Wright, p.5.
\(^{74}\) Robin Wright, p.6.
\(^{75}\) Robin Wright, p.6.
between Albert and Michael which takes place in Albert’s living space.\textsuperscript{76} Indeed, all of the scenes between Albert and Michael take place throughout the film within Albert’s terrain, granting him, as the ‘typical’ Australian male, the more dominant position. Moreover, Michael’s character must undergo a necessary process of adaptation to be accepted by Albert, signaling the importance for British culture to adapt to the Australian context. In this scene, Albert relates a dream to Michael that he has of his sister Sara saying goodbye to him, again evoking the reference to dreams introduced in the opening voice over. This scene takes place just before we learn of Sara’s suicide and suggests that the characteristically laconic working-class Australian male has been somewhat subdued through his contact with the rock, so that the new masculine Australian identity that emerges at the end of the film has become less arrogant in relation to the landscape and more open to the possibility of understanding beyond his limited physical and material existence. In addition, the friendship between Albert and Michael conveys an overcoming of class and national difference. The differences between them, which was the defining feature of their relationship in the early part of the film, have been resolved by the conclusion and a strong friendship has developed between them, signifying the successful merging of aspects of British culture within the Australian context.

The final sequence in the film adopts a voice-over narrator for the first time to inform the audience of Mrs Appleyard’s bizarre death – her body was found at the bottom of the rock, after a failed attempt to climb it. The voice-over also

\textsuperscript{76} The shift of focus from Michael as the hero of the film to Albert is established in the Director’s Cut version of the film which omits scenes in which Michael becomes romantically involved with Irma after she is found by Albert on the rock. The removal of these scenes then removes the audience association with him as a potential romantic hero.
reveals that the mystery of the missing girls has never been solved. Visually, the film returns to the scene of golden innocence before the disappearance of the girls at the picnic and slowly pans each character, lingering on the beauty of the scene before cutting to a final shot of Miranda as she turns to wave goodbye, a repetition of the shot used earlier in the film. The final scene of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* does not offer a resolution, as has already been commented on, but it does metaphorically enact the final farewell to the lingering cultural ties between Australia and Britain, particularly those aspects of British culture which have become oppressive and out-of-place in this newly-defined Australia in the 1970s. The film also retains links with aspects of European culture, as Robin Wright has argued, particularly those associated with European artistic traditions through the idealization of Miranda, but eschews those repressive aspects represented by Mrs Appleyard. The next novel for discussion, Elizabeth Jolley's *The Well*, subverts many of the ideas about national character and the Australian landscape endorsed in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, through its satirical approach to the Gothic.
Chapter Four

Obsession and the Absent Mother in Elizabeth Jolley’s *The Well*

The epigraph to Elizabeth Jolley’s *The Well* (1986) introduces the Gothic themes of obsession and human possessiveness. The novel’s epigraph, taken from the text, is an abridged version of a dialogue between the novel’s protagonist, Hester Harper, and her father: “‘What have you brought me Hester? What have you brought me from the shop?’ ‘I’ve brought Katherine, Father,’ Miss Harper said. ‘I’ve brought Katherine, but she’s for me.’”

*The Well* invites the reader to enter the singularly Australian Gothic terrain of quiet horror, set on the margins of rural society in the Western Australian wheat-belt. This novel can be placed within a tradition of Gothic literature by women which is located within the domestic sphere. The conflation of domestic realism with the Gothic mode originated, historically, in the nineteenth century with the work of the Brontë sisters. It is particularly discernible in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) which is predominantly set in opposing domestic spaces in rural Yorkshire. Gothic fiction grounded in the domestic sphere can also be seen during the late nineteenth century with Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) and more recently in the work of Angela Carter, particularly *The Magic Toyshop* (1967). Jolley extends the use of this mode in a uniquely Australian rural atmosphere of social isolation, drought and illimitable space. Moreover, *The Well* explores the power of fear to destabilize. In *The Well* fear can enslave, and distort reality, but it also has the ability to cut through illusion and delusion, exposing social artifice and self-deception.

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This deceptively simple novel explores the relationship between a teenage orphan, Katherine,\(^2\) whose background remains dubious, and the ageing spinster, Hester, who ‘acquires’ Katherine on a shopping expedition. The two women live alone together on the Harper property after the death of Hester’s “ailing and often demented father,” who is depicted humorously by Jolley as a caricature of a decrepit Australian landowner and patriarch who resembles, “a character in a play” and “wandered about the house trying to remember where his pistols were.” (p.14). Following the death of the old man, Hester inherits the family property and the two women embark on a hedonistic lifestyle of excessive consumption and pleasure, including “everything money could buy.” (p.39). Such a self-indulgent consumerist existence was previously denied to Hester whose solitary existence was dominated by the frugalities and concerns of her father’s property. The arrival of Kathy, and her father’s subsequent death, liberates Hester from these restrictions and releases in her a renewed interest in the material and sensual worlds. The two women prepare elaborate meals for themselves, spend hours shopping for clothes, food and furniture and entertain each other with music, dancing and invented fairy-tales involving a vulnerable princess, an ugly ogre and a handsome prince. The narrator observes, “Between them they developed a capacity for pleasure. Their life was all pleasure.” (p.38).

However, their hedonistic lifestyle cannot be sustained and the arrival of an

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\(^2\) Jolley’s choice of the name Katherine for the young orphan in *The Well* pays homage to one of the most recognisable nineteenth-century Gothic heroines: Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights*. Both women become objects of obsession, both react to their oppression with madness, and both are deluded by romantic fictions. However, parallels can also be made between Katherine and Heathcliff. She, like Heathcliff, is also a foundling, and both act as disruptive forces within the isolated rural communities they infiltrate. Therefore, the parallels which exist between Katherine and Heathcliff invert the Gothic convention of the masculine as a destabilising force in Gothic literature.
intruder - a clichéd Gothic convention that Jolley deliberately parodies here-threatens to destabilize their precarious, seemingly idyllic, existence. Gothic excess and hedonistic self-indulgence have been recurring tropes in earlier Gothic narratives such as Oscar Wilde’s only novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891), which is set in late Victorian England. The eponymous central character falls narcissistically in love with his own portrait and, in a Faust-like pact, ensures that he retains his youth and beauty. His portrait is gradually transfigured into a grotesque caricature which registers the external signs of ageing and moral decay, whilst his actual physical appearance remains unchanged. The morally decadent lifestyle Dorian succumbs to in his ever-increasing lust for sensory gratification eventually ends in murder and Jolley humorously re-imagines this theme of epicurean excess in The Well to critique Australian society’s increasing imitation of American consumerist greed and materialism. In addition, The Picture of Dorian Gray is renowned for its covert references to homosexual desire which is also a feature of Jolley’s novel.

Early reviews of The Well, Jolley’s fifth novel, extol her ability as a storyteller and her skill in crafting a suspense novel. Brian Dibble in Overland remarks on Jolley’s status as “a major Australian writing talent,” describing The Well as her best work to date. Dibble proposes, “With this book her characteristic manic humour is somewhat subdued, her vision more steady and sober.” Shirley Paolini also applauds Jolley’s “techniques of storytelling,” which, she declares, “include wit, irony, suspense, and ambiguity.” Susan Hosking reviews both The

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5 Dibble, p.83.
Well and Tim Winton’s *In the Winter Dark* (1988), another intense and claustrophobic Gothic novel located in remote farmland in an isolated valley in the southern region of Western Australia known as the Sink, in which residents are terrorized by an unknown intruder, later believed to be a native cat. Hosking praises Jolley’s novel over Winton’s, declaring that *The Well* is written “with greater subtlety, teasing her readers and alleviating her profoundly dark message with wit and sheer devilment.”7 These initial reviews are temperate in their praise of *The Well* and, by contrast, Stephanie Trigg’s effusive comments seems excessive: “This seems to me an extremely elegant work, pure as refined gold in its intent and highly polished in its accomplishment, without a single scratch or smudge to dull its gleam.”8 Trigg also asserts that *The Well* signifies “a return to the ground” of two of Jolley’s earlier novels: *Milk and Honey* (which also creates a claustrophobic Gothic atmosphere) and *Palomino*. Trigg asserts that *The Well* is a “very loving re-examination of the themes of...friendship and love between an older and a younger woman, and the jealous possessiveness of over-devotion.”9 But Trigg over-simplifies the relationship between Hester and Katherine with this statement and overlooks the more sinister aspects of Hester’s attachment to Kathy. The exploration of female relationships in *The Well*, is a Gothic re-figuring of the older woman/younger woman relationship as seen in Jolley’s *Palomino*. However, *Palomino* depicts an actual sexual relationship between Laura and the much younger daughter of Laura’s estranged friend, Andrea and the central relationship in *Palomino* is a considerably more nurturing and generous one than the central relationship in *The Well*. Laura and Andrea in

Palomino agree to separate before their solitary existence becomes defined by jealousy, possessiveness, fear, paranoia and rejection, as it does for Hester and Katherine in The Well. The Well continues the consideration of an unorthodox relationship between an older and younger woman, yet is characterized by extreme dependency, deception and grasping, rather than love, and explores the tragic consequences that occur when such a fragile relationship is threatened by an outside element. In his discussion of The Well, Paul Salzman considers the novel a “commentary” on Palomino, in which the “potential repression” of Palomino becomes dominant in The Well.\(^\text{10}\) However, this implies that Palomino is the stronger of the two texts, whereas I would argue that The Well eclipses Palomino as a novel, particularly through its adaptation of the Gothic and the interplay between the Gothic mode and domestic realism, its subtle use of irony and humour, and its satirical treatment of certain elements of contemporary Australian society.

In an article on contemporary Australian writing Delys Bird remarks, “The invisible orthodoxy of the early 1970s was that Australian fiction was a masculine territory.”\(^\text{11}\) The Well, with its emphasis on the experiences and desires of women sets out to defy this orthodoxy.\(^\text{12}\) Susan Lever notes that the

\(^{10}\) Paul Salzman, Helplessly Tangled in Female Arms and Legs: Elizabeth Jolley’s Fictions (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1993), p.17.


publication of Helen Garner’s commercially successful novel *Monkey Grip* in 1977 (seven years after Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch*) marked the beginning of a feminist consciousness in Australian fiction.13 Delys Bird concurs with the comment that the publication of Helen Garner’s *Monkey Grip* in 1977 was, “the book that marked the renaissance and the politicization of ‘women’s writing,’ in Australia.14 The advent of the second wave of feminism in the 1980s saw a proliferation of Australian fiction by women which included an increasing critical awareness of the fluidity of gender roles in contemporary Australian society. Jolley employs the Gothic genre to disrupt and disturb the *status quo* and is a writer particularly suited to what is sometimes described as ‘literary Gothic.’ She was one of the foremost Australian writers during the 1980s and 1990s, winning numerous literary awards for her work, including the Miles Franklin award for *The Well* in 1986 and was awarded the Order of Australia in 1988 for her contribution to literature. Jolley has discussed in interviews how her work was rejected for many years as it was considered too risqué for an Australian audience. She explains in an interview with Stephanie Trigg in 1986 that *Palomino* was held by a publisher from 1976 to 1980, and the short stories ‘Grasshoppers,’ ‘Long Distance Lecture’ and ‘Fellow Traveller’ were all rejected “very strongly” because of the nature of their exploration of homosexuality.15

However, although Jolley’s work was overlooked for many years, it is unclear whether this was related to her engagement with the theme of homosexuality. Trigg, revealingly, refers to Jolley’s tendency toward ‘self-fashioning’ in the title of her review of *The Well* which comments on Jolley’s tendency toward

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constructing herself as a subversive writer. Indeed, Jolley contradicts her previous statement in an interview with Jennifer Ellison the following year. In response to Ellison's question on whether Jolley has any theories regarding the recent proliferation of Australian women writers being published, Jolley comments:

I felt when I was being rejected I was being kept down, but that may just have been a personal paranoia, you see. It never occurred to me that it was because I was a woman. I don't think it was. I think it would be because some of the stuff wasn't quite ready, and that it is just very hard to break into publishing anyway, whether you are a man or a woman, isn't it?16

In the interview with Trigg, Jolley continues her consideration of the vagaries of Australian publishing: “It’s interesting, though, the climate has changed completely in what’s acceptable. Well, I think a great number of people receiving our work were perhaps older people and were still putting a colour on Australian writing that had existed for the previous years…”17 With this statement, Jolley highlights the newfound freedom that Australian women writers were afforded in the 1980s, during the time that The Well was published. Socio-political changes in Australia contributed to the flourishing of interest in novels written by women about women’s experiences and Bird has also argued that “Jolley’s fictions may have been taken up at the time they were as much because of their postmodern formal qualities as because they were by a woman, or often concerned with female sexuality and other issues to do with women’s lives,” all reasons Jolley has cited for the continuing rejection of her work.18

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17 Ellison, p.257.
Although Jolley’s work was often rejected early in her career, she experienced a high degree of success during the 80s and 90s, a time in which Australian women writers experienced a new freedom in literature. Her work has also attracted international praise; Angela Carter wrote in *The New York Times Book Review* that, “her fiction shines and shines, like a good deed in a naughty world.” More compelling, however, is her popularity amongst the general reading public, given, as Brenda Walker remarks, the “unsettled and unsettling” quality of her work. It is this unsettling quality which confirms Jolley’s use of the Gothic, a disturbing and disruptive genre which seeks to undermine accepted traditions. Jolley’s sophisticated use of the Gothic in *The Well* parodies certain elements of Australian society, such as Australia’s fascination with American cinema, and the increase in consumerism which intensified during the decade of the eighties in Australia, and the parochial values underlying rural Australia. It is also through the use of parody that Jolley critiques patriarchal inscriptions of femininity, particularly through the character of Kathy, whose simple-minded acceptance of banal Hollywood romance results in her adoption of a fake American accent. In addition, the non-linear structure of *The Well* challenges the conservative realist tradition which had previously defined Australian literature and increases the impact of the Gothic.

*The Well* begins with an accident that becomes the catalyst for the shattering of Hester’s idyllic domesticity with Kathy, forcing her to confront the repressed aspects of her terrible past. However, the suspense of the novel is heightened by

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19 Angela Carter, quoted in “An Interview with Elizabeth Jolley,” by Stephanie Trigg, *Scripsi*, p.245. This statement by Carter is actually a quote from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*.

an instability and anxiety which is present before the accident, due to the impending visit by Kathy’s friend from the orphanage, Joanna, and the repeated warnings to Hester to curb her spending made by her solicitous financial advisor and long-time friend, the aptly named Mr Bird. Mr Bird is distrustful of Kathy and attempts to alert Hester to her potential for deceptiveness. Kathy’s mendacity is commented on by the narrator, as Katherine, relating stories to Hester about her time in the convent, “repeated several incidents of unkindness or unfair treatment often describing the same incident over again with added details which made Hester wonder sometimes about the truth of them.” (p.15). The narrator also comments on a peculiar physical characteristic of Kathy’s which also suggests a propensity for duplicity: her tendency to squint. The narrator declares, “If the squint gave her [Hester] some uneasiness she dismissed it at once.” (p.16). It is not until after the accident, however, that their lives are thrown into disorder. Kathy, unlicensed and excitable after a party given by the Borden family as a celebration for the purchase of Hester’s property, begins the long drive home to the isolated cottage the two women share as Hester takes her place as a reluctant passenger. Driving recklessly and not expecting anybody to appear on the dark, deserted road, “something hits the Toyota with a dull heavy thud.” (p.5). When Hester investigates, she declares, “It’s not a roo, Katherine. It’s not a roo. Don’t come out, its too horrible. We’ve caught something on the bar.”” (p.6). She orders Katherine to drive close to the well, not revealing what has been hit or whether it is still alive. The opening passage is an altered version of the accident which is repeated with more narrative detail half-way through the novel and raises questions that are never really resolved or allayed, as well as self-consciously locating the story firmly within an Australian socio-cultural
context with references made to two cliché images of contemporary Australian culture: the Toyota and the kangaroo. Although mention is made of certain popular culture figures such as the American film actor John Travolta, again signalling contemporary Australia’s fascination with American popular culture, the story could seemingly take place within any small rural Australian community. The film version of *The Well* exploits this potential by adapting the story to a contemporary Australian setting with a vivid early-nineties grunge aesthetic, particularly in relation to Katherine, which imbues the character with a more sinister quality that is only ever really hinted at in the novel. The film’s mise-en-scène, inspired by the photographic artistry of Bill Hensen, utilises a bleach by-pass technique, producing an unnatural light which magnifies the concealed and hides what we most often see. It is a striking visual effect which evokes the notion of liminality and gives visual expression to Jolley’s thematic concerns of exposing social artifice and deception.

*The Well* is set in the Gothic spaces of the Australian wheatbelt with the narrative revolving around the central motif of an abandoned, desiccated well. Initially, the well becomes a mirror which reflects the fantasies and fears of the two female protagonists. Before the accident, Hester and Kathy fantasize that fairy tale inventions of differing forms reside in the well. Hester, perhaps in an attempt to displace her own feelings of alienation, imagines that a “troll with horrible anti-social habits” lives in the well. (p.32). By contrast, Kathy imagines a handsome prince, a reflection of her child-like and naïve belief in romantic fictions. The liminal space of the well itself also symbolizes the anxiety about the rupturing of boundaries which assails Hester, and blurs the boundaries
between reality and fiction; a device which will also be discussed in the final chapter on Carmel Bird’s *Mandala Trilogy* and a recurring one in contemporary Australian Gothic. Hester and Katherine create an unstable, illusory world which is destabilized by the advent of an intruder. Eugenia C. DeLamotte points out in *Perils of the Night* that, “Gothic terror has its primary source in an anxiety about boundaries...”\(^{21}\) DeLamotte expands this statement to add, “In the world of Gothic romance, the physical and metaphorical boundaries that one ordinarily depends on prove unstable, elusive, ineffective, nonexistent.”\(^{22}\) In traditional Gothic, anxiety about boundaries is symbolically expressed through the Gothic conventions of secret doors and labyrinthine passageways, immense caves and caverns, and the supernatural. Australian Gothic is predominantly set in the vast spaces of rural Australia, a landscape seemingly without boundaries which, paradoxically, intensifies a sense of entrapment. In *The Well*, as Kathy and Hester begin their long drive home, the endless road is surrounded by “black paddocks edged with the black shadows of the saltbush,” which is “flat and straight.” (p.3). The narrator remarks, “The surrounding countryside...could seem desolate and frightening for anyone travelling especially if they had no home to go to.” (p.3). In Australian Gothic, anxiety about the countryside has led to the recurring motif of a carnivorous landscape, capable of rupturing and consuming its inhabitants, and violating the boundary between the animate and inanimate. This is the dominant anxiety in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and is returned to in *The Well* with the disposal of an unwanted intruder in the abandoned well. In addition, Barbara Baynton’s Gothic stories emphasize the isolation and vulnerability experienced by women in the Australian outback and

\(^{21}\) DeLamotte, pp.13-14.

\(^{22}\) DeLamotte, p.22.
this theme is extended in *The Well* as Hester’s isolated existence leads to her destructive and obsessive attachment to Katherine. Interestingly, in Prichard’s novel, Coonardoo’s name is translated as the ‘well in the shadow’ and her eventual destruction is mirrored, on her return, by the desolation and abandonment of the homestead and surrounding landscape. However, as the character Coonardoo represents the well in the shadow, which in *Coonardoo* becomes a marginalised space which is discarded and neglected, the symbolic potential of the well is re-imagined here, shaped by Jolley’s satirical approach to the traditional gendering of the landscape in the Australia imaginary.

The well begins as a place of fairy-tale inventions; a benign and sunny place where Hester and Kathy spend hours warming themselves, telling stories and fantasizing. However, the intermittent, yet perennial, rattle of the well’s cover and the mysterious “drip drop” of “cool sweet water” in the seemingly barren well eerily suggests, early on, its potential for disruption in the women’s lives. (p.95). One of the most recognizable Gothic writers from the nineteenth-century, Edgar Allan Poe, published a short story, “The Pit and the Pendulum,” which details the madness of a man forced to die in a subterranean pit. The narrator asserts: “It was not that I feared to look upon things horrible, but that I grew aghast lest there should be nothing to see.”23 Poe’s story imagines a subterranean Gothic space like the well in Jolley’s novel, which becomes an existential void, and terrifies because it reflects a lack of meaning and purpose. For Poe, it is the reality of this lack which produces the real Gothic fear, and for Hester and Kathy, the empty well reflects the lack which characterizes their personal lives.

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The potent space of the well is, as many critics have commented, linked to the realm of the feminine. Water “moves unexpectedly,” in the wheatbelt, according to Hester, and takes on special symbolic significance in *The Well*. (p.30). In the parched areas of rural Australia, water is often associated with growth and nourishment, yet in *The Well* it is associated with chaos and excess. Paul Salzman makes the connection between the escalating water in the well and images of blood associated with female sexuality. Salzman argues:

> The water deep underground is a sign of both death and life; it is underground and contained, and accordingly an image of Hester’s repression, but it also bursts forth from the apparently dry well. The water is linked with the blood of menstruation and also miscarriage.  

This reading conflates water and blood, convincingly arguing that the symbolism of the well evokes the pain of loss for Hester, particularly the traumatic loss of Hilde, her mother-substitute, and the only nurturing female relationship available to Hester. Joan Kirkby’s discussion similarly links the well to the realm of the feminine when she comments that, the well is an “emblem of the archaic, irrepressible mother” which explains why the un-mothered Hester whose entire life has been lived in the shadow of her patriarchal father, has such a difficult time trying to contain the contents of the well. Considering the importance of the mother figure to Female Gothic literature - particularly the absent mother - this has thematic relevance in the text, as both Katherine and Hester are motherless. The narrator points out, “Hester had never known her mother. Neither had Katherine. They did not talk of this as the word seemed to have very little meaning for either of them.” (p.47). However, both of these readings have

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24 Salzman, p.20.
overlooked Jolley’s satirical adaptation of Gothic conventions to destabilize the male-dominated tradition of the construction of gender and landscape in the Australian imaginary.

After the sale of her property Hester and Kathy move to an old cottage situated “in the farthest corner of her land.” (p.27). Recalling the isolated hut in Baynton’s “The Chosen Vessel” in which the female protagonist is raped and murdered by a travelling swagman, the remote cottage in The Well is neglected and in a state of decay before Hester and Kathy transform it into a domestic haven. The narrator describes this abandoned space: “All the windows of the cottage were broken and the verandah was rotten but Hester declared it was all worth fixing. The landscape was stark, ugly even in its bareness. Near the boundary fence there were, at intervals, groups of trees making thin patches of shade.” (p.27). The bark hut is an iconic Australian space which is frequently depicted as constantly under threat from the intrusive and dangerous Australian landscape, yet in The Well it is mostly the space of the abandoned well which has implications for Jolley’s use of Gothic conventions. Jolley satirises traditional Gothic conventions to destabilize the male-dominated tradition of the gendering of the Australian landscape through the possible entrapment of the man in the well. This takes on greater significance with a consideration of the way the Australian landscape is often feminised in traditional representations of the land in Australian narratives. The image of a man trapped in a well also recalls the Australian Gothic idea of the landscape consuming its inhabitants, as discussed in the previous chapter on Picnic at Hanging Rock. Kay Schaffer considers this a “powerful male fantasy” and Jolley subverts this fantasy through the gender
inversion of the entrapped figure in the well.\textsuperscript{26} The image of a man trapped below the earth’s surface, effectively inverts the Gothic tradition of the victimized heroine entrapped in the patriarchal Gothic ancestral castle and creates a satirical image in which the cruel and feminised Australian landscape enacts a type of revenge on the mythic, arrogant male hero who seeks to conquer and subdue the land. Jolley conflates the typically male Gothic hero/villain in \textit{The Well} with the female character of Hester which, again, effectively satirises this prominent Gothic figure.

Roslynn Haynes explores a variety of textual representations of the Australian desert, in \textit{Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film}. Haynes argues that the Australian desert “imprisons characters through isolation” and is unable to “protect them from the evil within themselves,”\textsuperscript{27} ideas which are explored by Jolley in \textit{The Well}. Haynes further comments on the symbolic role of the desert in Australian Gothic narratives:

\begin{quote}
...there are numerous variations on the traditional stereotype of the imprisoned heroine. Against the power of the desert, males, too, may be disempowered; or the villains may be not the land but evil men who are, in turn, punished by the desert; or, very rarely, the female protagonist may emerge victorious.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

Although \textit{The Well} is set in the wheatbelt, a locale which is closer to the coast than to the more remote desert center which is the focus of Haynes’ discussion, this idea can still be applied to Jolley’s novel as many of the features of the outback which have been gothicised in Australian narratives are present in Jolley’s depiction of the rural Western Australian wheatbelt; features such as vast


\textsuperscript{27} Haynes, p.208.

\textsuperscript{28} Haynes, p.185.
spaces, isolation and the starkness of the surrounding landscape. The principal
difference between the outback and the wheatbelt, which is figured as a liminal
space between the opposing spaces of the city or the bush, is the importance of
water, particularly rainfall. As has already been established, water in *The Well*
has important symbolic significance as it is linked to the fear of psychic irruption
and is associated with loss. This motif will also be discussed in greater depth in
the final chapter on Carmel Bird’s *Cape Grimm* as it represents a key trope in
contemporary approaches to the Gothic by Australian women writers.

As in nineteenth-century Gothic literature written by women, *The Well* critiques
patriarchal assumptions, but extends the traditional terrain to explore
transgressive sexualities as well as malevolent maternities. Jolley engages with
the Gothic cliché of ‘the return of the repressed’ to explore the psychic
consequences of the repression of the maternal and the denial of sexual desire.
Kathy’s infantilism is encouraged by Hester for her own cruel purposes and is
commented on by Mrs Borden when she remarks on Kathy’s Peter Pan collar
being too ‘nave,’ [naïve] a comment Hester finds insulting and “laden with
disturbing implication.” (p.1). This aspect of Hester’s character is dramatized
further when the reader learns of Hester’s distaste for motherhood and her
tendency toward narcissism which are illustrated by the following incident:

One day the young wife of one of the farm men, dressing up her
baby, had come across from the farm cottage pushing the shabby
little pram over the rough ground to visit her, to talk to her and
have her admire the child. Not understanding nor caring about the
young mother’s need, Hester had merely, from her lofty place on
the verandah, dismissed the visitor watching with a superior
detachment as she made her slow way back to the loneliness of
the long day while her husband was somewhere out in the
paddocks. (p.30).
Jolley’s novels often present characters who are hostile to the conventional institution of marriage and family. The paradigmatic married couple in *The Well*, the Bordens, are regarded with contempt by Hester. The narrator remarks, “All people, especially people like the Bordens, had only one idea in their heads and that was to make couples of people and to follow this coupling with reproducing.” (p.119). Hester’s aversion to motherhood and sexuality is linked to her childhood relationship with her governess, Hilde Herzfeld, who is abruptly sent away after Hester, at the age of fourteen, discovers Hilde, “crouched on the floor, her nightdress spread like a tent, red splashed, round about her.” (p.121). Hester, “knowing something of the scene already – never having been banned from the sheds and out-houses – began slowly to understand something dreadful.” (p.122). Torn between her loyalty to her father and her affection for Hilde, Hester ignores Hilde’s pleas to fetch help and returns to her own bed, abandoning her cherished friend. The trauma of witnessing Hilde’s miscarriage and the guilt associated with the abandonment of her friend are memories that are triggered for Hester by the disposal of the apparent wounded/dead man in the well. Hilde is the alien European presence associated with the body and described in terms of bodily excess: “If she looked back on Hilde as Katherine must see her she noticed again, in her memories, the stains in the armpits of Hilde’s dresses, *‘Ach! Ich schwitze!’*, dark moist half-circles, fascinating and repelling.” (p.16). Hilde also introduces Hester to new sensual experiences when they travel to Europe together and is responsible for Hester’s education. She is ultimately discarded, however, by Hester’s grandmother, who is emblematic of a rural Australian society which is typically suspicious of intellectual expansion and sensual knowledge. Hester’s desire for Kathy and her
desire to return to the maternal bond shared with Hilde jeopardizes her position in a society which privileges heteronormativity and masculine values. Through the key relationships between Hester and Hilde and Hester and Kathy, Jolley questions the place of the feminine in Australian society and its power to destabilize and disrupt the dominant, masculine cultural tradition.

Like the incarcerated Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, the idea of a man in the well is a polluting presence to the female protagonist, representing the repressed aspects of the two central characters. Yet, this motif of the projection of undesirable traits onto the Gothic double is extended in *The Well* to include not just socially unacceptable rage and sexual desire, as Bertha Mason, Jane’s uncanny double or alter ego does in *Jane Eyre*, but is complicated by Hester’s fear of heterosexuality which becomes associated in her memory with intense suffering and loss. Hester comes to understand that a woman deemed worthless within the dominant symbolic social order, is ultimately shunned. It is the trauma associated with sexual knowledge that the ‘father-identified’ Hester is determined to shut out of her self-contained paradisical life with Kathy, which then becomes displaced onto whatever is in the well. The possibility of a male body in the well is the ‘nameless dread’ remarked on by Eugenia DeLamotte, which she defines as “the dread that is nameless because its object is diffuse, unclear, insusceptible to definition.” According to DeLamotte, this nameless dread, represented by various Gothic villains from Manfred to Schedoni and their monolithic and unearthly castles, assail the heroines of Gothic romance. The novel never really defines what exactly is down the well, which in turn becomes

29 Kirkby, “The Call of the Mother,” p.61.
30 DeLamotte, p.16.
31 DeLamotte, p.16.
for Hester the threat of psychic irruption and loss of self, as she fights furiously
to prevent the intrusion of this irruption. This is portrayed symbolically toward
the end of the novel as heavy rain threatens to bring the undefined presence to
the surface and Hester’s rising fear is mirrored by the overflowing of the well.
The presence of the well is also linked to Hester’s shattered relationship with
Hilde, a loss which haunts Hester throughout the text. She is the lost mother
figure Hester continues to grieve for in her adult life. This is foreshadowed,
symbolically, in the opening sequence during the drive home as Hester observes
the disappearance of the moon. The narrator comments that, “the moon seems to
slide into a bank of ribbed dark cloud,” signalling the repression of the maternal
within the context of the novel, and, more generally, the absence of the feminine
from the tradition of Australian literature.32

Jolley, like Australian women writers previously discussed, engages with the
Gothic to question the social and cultural consequences of the horror of the
female ‘other’ inherent in the Australian cultural tradition. Hester’s terror at
what the object in the well represents and her frenzied attempts to prevent this re-
surfacing, mirror Anne Williams’ reflections on Male Gothic in Art of Darkness,
of which Matthew Lewis’ The Monk and Charles Perrault’s “Bluebeard” are
cited as emblematic texts.33 Williams argues that, “Male Gothic expresses the
horrors inherent in the premises of Western patriarchy – that ‘the female’ (the
mother) is ‘other,’ forbidden, and dreadfully, uncannily powerful, a monster that

32 Jolley will later reverse the traditional association of the moon with the realm of the feminine
in the melancholic My Father’s Moon, published in 1989. The central image of the moon in this
novel evokes the absence of the loving bond the protagonist, Vera, shares with her father.
33 Williams, p.115.
the nascent self must escape at the cost of whatever violence seems necessary.”

This image of the monstrous (m)other has traditionally been projected onto the Australian landscape, an idea that Jolley parodies in *The Well*. Moreover, Jolley parodies this male Gothic strategy through the character of Hester Harper, an elderly female character, “gaunt and odd,” (p.68) who is marginalized because of her physical deformity and who can only gain acceptance through the rural, masculine economy of land ownership, dictated by her father. Like British author Angela Carter, Jolley’s use of the Gothic is imbued with parody. Jolley seems to delight in lampooning many elements of Australian rural society through her characters, especially the crude Bordens, who ‘breed like farm animals,’ all sons, and usurp Hester’s prominent and venerated social position within the farming community, once they acquire her land. In Jolley’s novels, as in colonial Australian myth and culture, the ownership of land bestows on the owner prestige and social influence, although Hester’s respected position within the farming community proves ephemeral as Hester attempts to re-establish, through her relationship with Kathy, a connection to the domestic world. Her interest in maintaining the family property becomes secondary to Hester’s hopes of re-creating the loving bond she shared with Hilde and she is forced to sell the property. The narrator comments on the importance of Hester’s relationship to Hilde: “With Hilde, Hester felt safe and young and happy.” (p.142). Sharing the same initials, Hilde is the feminine aspect Hester has denied which became linked, in childhood, to anguish and loss.

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34 Williams, p.135.
Hester’s feelings of disgust toward the patriarchally-sanctioned institution of marriage stems from her horror of sexuality which is linked in Hester’s childhood imagination with the clandestine relationship between her father and Hilde, which leads to Hilde’s miscarriage. The following scene illustrates how as a child, Hester distorts the shadow of her father and Hilde into a terrifying image of dissolution and exclusion:

Later, during the nightmare, as her father and Fräulein Herzfeld hurried along the passage, the double light from their two shadows, grotesque and tremulous, moving up and down and across the walls, colliding, became one. Her father, yawning, told her stories in a deep voice about the great red fox and brother wolf… (p.141).

Yet, it is hinted that Hester’s grandmother is the figure of betrayal and perhaps responsible for bringing on the miscarriage which sends Hilde away, severing the most important relationship in Hester’s life; a relationship she attempts to recreate with Kathy, with disastrous consequences. Hester’s grandmother appears briefly in the text, yet the following statement by the narrator hints at the terrible force of her influence. The narrator remarks:

Quickly it had become all too clear. The petted, nimble and courageous crippled girl grew into a tall clumsy adolescent female. The father who had once hoped with what he knew to be his only chance for a son must have hoped again for a son, a healthy capable boy, a partner and a companion, without bargaining with the attitudes of his mother, Hester’s grandmother, and not knowing fully her punishments. His shame and disappointment must have accompanied him through all the years as did the memory of the banishing of Hilde Herzfeld accompany Hester herself, having turned away – as she did then, not wanting to know – from the terrible and secret pain.” (p.150). (Italics added).

The controlling and destructive mother-figure, represented by Hester’s grandmother in The Well, is developed more fully through characters discussed in the previous two chapters: Mrs Watt in Coonardoo and Mrs Appleyard in
*Picnic at Hanging Rock* (and foreshadows the murderous Petra in Carmel Bird’s *Red Shoes*). Mrs Watt and Mrs Appleyard are both cruel defenders of an archaic tradition of patriarchal privilege which causes great suffering to the younger generations under their care. As Claire Kahane has demonstrated, the focus of Female Gothic literature is the relationship to the mother and here Jolley explores the psychic consequences of the repression of the mother-figure.

*The Well* is the only text I have explored thus far which appears to be deliberately crafted as a Gothic novel, albeit with the author’s intention of satirizing the genre, and has been critically discussed specifically in relation to the Gothic as a mode. Jolley discloses in an interview with Stephanie Trigg in 1985, one year before the publication of *The Well*, that *Milk and Honey* was intentionally written in the Gothic mode. Discussing the writing of *Milk and Honey*, Jolley declares, “I was interested in the idea of exaggerated behaviour because of people being closed in on each other, so that really, what seems very odd behaviour isn’t.” This statement could equally apply to the claustrophobic relationship between Hester and Kathy. Their relationship is not sexual and it is arguable whether Jolley intended to imply an undercurrent of desire between them, considering Jolley often explores lesbian desire in her novels. I would agree with Pam Gilbert’s reading that, “The domestic trivia of day-to-day life is intimately shared but is never overtly sexual.”

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and Katherine, however, is problematic and defies a simplistic classification. Hester is like a mother to Katherine, but she also takes on the traditionally masculine role of provider, despite the fact that they do each other's hair and shop together like close girlfriends. In an interview for the Australia Council Series in 1992, Jolley describes Hester as resembling an 'aunt' figure to Katherine, which belies some of the more sinister and sexually covert aspects of their relationship. However, Jolley contradicts this statement within the context of the novel as the narrator comments on the peculiar nature of the relationship between Hester and Katherine, "She treated Katherine with an affectionate though severe generosity. She did not regard herself as a mother or even as an aunt. She did not attempt to give any name to the relationship. She realized quite quickly that she was possessive." (p.14). With this statement, the narrator highlights the transgressive nature of their relationship, as well as its potential for conflict. The mention of Hester's 'possessiveness' over Kathy is a quality often associated with a sexual relationship and is further complicated, given that Hester is a woman, by the patriarchal control over women's bodies often seen in the Gothic and which is a feature of Hester and Kathy's relationship.

Hester's repressed desire for Kathy and Kathy's taunting awareness of this desire is best illustrated by the dancing scene at the Borden's party. The subversive nature of Jolley's work, according to Julie Carr, is at its most potent, "when her female characters usurp the authority of phallocentric discourse by writing their experiences with the body."39 The following scene illustrates the way that Jolley constructs a language of the body through movement and dance in *The Well*,

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revealing the hidden aspects of the relationship between Hester and Kathy, particularly the struggle for power underlying their interactions:

Katherine with her head thrust forward and down was moving jerkily, like a wooden doll, towards them, her eyes were empty of expression and her mouth slightly open. She shook her shoulders and let her arms hang by her sides. She let the shoulder-shake slide to her hips. She moved to the right and to the left advancing steadily towards Hester and Mrs Borden. (p.74).

This scene is privileged in the film as the opening scene, although it is somewhat altered, which testifies to the way somatic expression can convey so much more than dialogue; everyday communication between characters is unreliable and these highly visualized moments in the text are imbued with an authenticity that language, figured as unreliable and untrustworthy, is unable to convey. In the novel Kathy is depicted as marionette-like, with her doll-like, jerky gestures. Through her movements, Kathy demonstrates her awareness of Hester as a puppet-master as well as displaying her awareness of the physical hold she has over Hester, who sits watching Kathy dance “with a little smile in the corners of her mouth.” (p.74). The narrator later remarks, “The dance was for her [Hester] the only physical manifestation of physical love.”(p.97). Angela Carter has also used dance and theatre in her Gothic novels to explore and debunk pernicious social fictions of femininity, an idea explored in the previous chapter on Picnic at Hanging Rock, a text which reinforces pernicious stereotypical representations of women.40 However, such social fictions are challenged in The Well through Katherine’s susceptibility to the illusion of Hollywood cinema and the false

40Carter also employs the Gothic motif of the puppet master in her 1967 novel, The Magic Toyshop, in which a re-enactment of the mythic story of “Leda and the Swan” is staged. Set in a macabre London toyshop, the performance inverts Yeats’s modern, glorified version of the rape of Leda by Zeus to reveal the actual sexual and emotional violence endemic in the myth. The re-enactment takes place on a makeshift stage and is performed by the fifteen-year old niece of the owner of the toyshop, a cruel patriarch who creates and manipulates a grotesque, over-sized swan puppet for the stage performance.
promise of personal happiness through materialism. The narrator comments, "Advertisements everywhere, in magazines and especially at the cinema, told Katherine that if only she had this or that perfect happiness would be hers. Hester's common sense deserted her quite often and, without meaning to be, she was taken in." (p.39). The two women's idyllic domesticity is suffused with superficial pleasures and as they become more and more disconnected from reality, Hester's paranoia and doubt about the solidity of her relationship with Katherine intensifies. However, through dance, the hidden power struggle between Katherine and Hester is elucidated. It also adds a deeper dimension to our understanding of the central characters. Katherine, particularly, enjoys the freedom which inheres in somatic expression, a freedom not available to Hester but one she can experience vicariously, through looking. For Hester, it is a moment of shared pleasure. Even though, through the act of looking, Hester appropriates the male gaze, Kathy does not become for Hester during this scene the object of desire, but rather an external expression of Hester's desire. The narrator observes:

Whenever she watched Kathy dancing, Hester, though outwardly showing no signs, moved in a wonderful freedom within herself...The music, the beat and the rhythm of the dancing filled her with a glow of satisfaction and a realization of deep happiness...She felt as if her hair was loose and as if her clothes were bright and light and as if they moved too, easily with her own rhythm. She felt free of bitterness, jealousy and longing. She was free from anxiety; who minded now, at this moment, about drought or about floods. She forgot she was lame and had always to depend upon a stick. (p.73).

This passage reveals the true significance of Hester's repressed desire for Katherine. It constitutes a moment of transcendence for Hester from the sado-masochistic power struggle which characterizes their relationship and challenges the privileging of the male gaze. Anne Williams argues that in Male Gothic, the
gaze becomes “another aspect of those omnipresent boundary violations that lead, eventually to punishment,” whereas in Female Gothic, “to gaze becomes a creative rather than a destructive act. In ‘realizing’ things or persons other than herself the heroine literally ‘makes them real.’” 41 This textual moment also evokes sympathy for Hester in which the reader comprehends her marginalisation from a culture that worships youth and physical beauty. In addition, it is in this moment that Hester is able to forget about her dependence on her ‘stick,’ symbolic of the patriarchal order which Hester has an uneasy and awkward relationship with throughout the text. As Claire Kahane argues, “the female Gothic depends as much on longing and desire as on fear and antagonism.” 42 Through the expression of dance, Jolley creates a space of feminine sensuality, desire and empowerment which is further accentuated and illuminated in the novel through the contrast between this particular scene and the mundane exchanges made between Hester and the other members of the party.

Hester is introduced to the reader by calling attention, firstly, to her age and physical deformity. “Hester Harper was no longer young when her father, old Harper, died. In spite of a lame leg which caused her to walk awkwardly leaning on a stick, and in spite of her own advancing years, she decided that she would continue to run the property.” (p.7). This fairy-tale style of narration recalls the fairy tale elements present in Charles Dickens’ Great Expectations and parallels can be drawn between Hester and Miss Havisham, who, like Hester, is also an emotionally crippled, ageing spinster who expediently ‘adopts’ a young orphan.

41 Williams, p.145.
42 Kahane, p.342.
In *Great Expectations*, Miss Havisham is described as "the Witch of the place," a pariah who carries a "crutch-headed stick on which she leaned." As has already been established, Hester is the Gothic villain in *The Well*, yet Jolley creates a Gothic villain who attracts both the reader's sympathy and repulsion, a strategy utilized by Mary Shelley in her promethean tale of terror, *Frankenstein* (1818). Despite 'the creature's' physical monstrosity, Shelley imbues her monster with a humanity that surpasses his 'civilised' creator. Like the creature in *Frankenstein*, Hester's physical deformity precludes her from forming conventional and accepted intimate relationships. Fred Botting points out that monsters in Gothic literature were often used as a cautionary strategy, "thereby emphasizing the benefits of virtuous conduct and signaling the proper – disgusted – reaction to examples of vice." Following the lead of Mary Shelley, contemporary Gothic fiction tends to blur the boundary between the morally corrupt and the virtuous, the beautiful and the grotesque. Jolley herself describes Hester, rather diplomatically, as "not a particularly pleasant person." Although outwardly, Hester displays a level of altruism appropriate for a wealthy and respected landowner, her motives are dubious. For example, Hester's kindness in adopting Katherine is supplanted by her obsessive need to control her. Her sizeable contributions to various charitable organizations are off-set by the way she callously decides the children no longer need assistance when they reach a certain age. (p.41). Her dismissive and callous nature is further demonstrated when Hester expresses her preference for poultry over dogs: 'Poultry, she said,

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enjoy your company if you’re prepared to give it, but if you don’t want to bother you can just throw them their food and forget about them.” (p.38). The reader is also given a hint of Hester’s sadism and potential for murder when she breaks the neck of a rooster that was annoying her: “...Hester, suddenly disturbed by the too close crowing of their most handsome rooster, tilted her chair back and, putting an arm around the edge of the flywire door, caught the bird by the neck and, with a twist of her strong fingers, she broke his neck.” (p.50). The image is, characteristic of Jolley, both disturbing and humorous as the harmless rooster becomes emblematic of Hester’s desire to subvert the threat of masculinity into her carefully ordered world. Closely linked with the theme of monstrosity is the Gothic theme of madness.

Despite its affinity with domestic realism, *The Well* is a departure from the orthodoxy of traditional Australian realism as Jolley plays with the notion of illusion in a particularly dark way, suggesting the possibility of insanity and psychotic breakdown. The terror associated with madness, the exploration of the fragility of the mind and the transgression of the border between madness and sanity are all hallmarks of Gothic literature. In *The Well* doubts are cast on Katherine’s sanity after Hester disposes of the ‘body’ down the well. This recalls the crippled protagonist in Baynton’s “Squeaker’s Mate,” whose madness is rooted in a justified rage against the husband who replaces her for a younger woman and takes the form of a menacing and savage silence. Kathy begins to

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46 For example, the depiction of madness in the Female Gothic is detailed with increasingly grotesque and vivid detail in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1897). The protagonist, a young married woman, is diagnosed with a case of nervous illness by her physician husband, confined to an oppressive bedroom in a rented estate and ordered to rest. The enforced confinement and lack of intellectual stimulation causes the woman to become delusional and she begins to hallucinate a kaleidoscope of terrifying images, the drama of which is projected onto the hideous yellow wallpaper adorning the walls of the ‘sick’ room.
have conversations with the supposed man in the well and it is unclear whether she is actually talking to a man or not, as Hester herself never hears him speak. It is also suggested that Kathy may be deliberately deceiving Hester, given that her tendency toward deception had been established early in the text or, that she may be experiencing a psychosis brought about by the trauma of the accident. The awareness of Kathy’s skill at impersonation increases the reader’s uncertainty, and contributes to the suspense of the novel, as does her fake American accent which, the narrator declares, “played an alarming role in the representation of unreality.” (p.124). The communication between Kathy and the man in the well continues and eventually Hester starts to believe Kathy’s delusions about their conversations. Kathy insists that the man, who has revealed to her that his name is Jacob, has promised he will marry her if she will rescue him, recalling her earlier fantasy of a handsome prince living in the well. Weakened by a particularly severe migraine, Hester’s possessiveness and obsession with Kathy leads her into believing Kathy’s delusions, which increases the uncertainty in the mind of the reader. The reality of the existence of the man in the well becomes the ultimate threat to Hester as his apparent proposals of

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47 In one of the final shots in the film adaptation of The Well, Kathy (played by Miranda Otto) is shown leaving the Harper property with large amounts of stolen money, revealing that she had been deceiving Hester all along with the intention of stealing her money. By contrast, the novel doesn’t actually reveal whether Kathy has been deliberately deceiving Hester.

48 The name Jacob, taken from the Old Testament, refers to the younger son of Rebecca and Isaac and, although he is devoted to God, Jacob (like Kathy) could also be deceptive. Despite his flaws, Jacob was chosen by God to continue the patriarchal line which then became the nation of Israel. Thus, Jacob is a Biblical figure representing patriarchy who, in The Well, becomes a threat to Hester and a potential rival for Kathy’s affection.

49 Given the fairy-style narration, the motif of the well is also linked to the popular Brothers Grimm fairy tale, ‘The Frog King’, in which a crafty frog who lives in a well must convince a beautiful young princess to keep him as a companion in return for her favourite toy, a golden ball, which has fallen down the well. The frog resides in the well and speaks to the princess, in much the same way the intruder speaks to Kathy. On the surface, this is a harmless tale which instructs young girls not to judge by superficial appearance alone; that what appears to be a frog may actually be a handsome prince in disguise. Yet ‘The Frog King’ can also be read as a tale of sexual initiation, as Kathy’s sexual awakening is dramatized in the novel through these disturbing imaginary conversations with a supposed man in the well.
marriage to Kathy signal the beginning of a sexual awakening in the young girl which Hester has steadfastly attempted to repress. Hester is horrified at the thought of Kathy’s involvement with the man in the well, and, indeed, any man:

The idea of Kathy bearing a child could not be thought about and the idea of some man, that man, touching or handling her perfectly made and childlike body was repulsive...Kathy would be completely absorbed by him. She would want to look after him, to cherish him. (p.152).

Madness is linked in *The Well* to Hester’s transgressive desire for and emotional dependence on Kathy. The young woman becomes imprisoned by Hester’s desire and her isolated existence is fertile ground for the development of an unrealistic belief in fairy-tale romance which is then projected on to the man in the well. Through the trope of madness, Jolley explores the nature of transgressive desire as well as questioning the social construction of compulsory heterosexuality. More generally, madness as a trope plays a central role in the Gothic, particularly the Female Gothic. Charlotte Brontë’s madwoman in the attic is an iconic symbol of the fracturing of the self and nineteenth-century Gothic novels written by women often conflate repressed anger and madness. Gilbert and Gubar argue:

For it is, after all, through the violence of the double that the female author enacts her own raging desire to escape male houses and male texts, while at the same time it is through the double’s violence that this anxious author articulates for herself the costly destructiveness of anger repressed until it can no longer be contained. (p.85).

This conventional Gothic image is complicated in *The Well* by the fact that Hester is both Kathy’s double and her master, the cruel jailer, who, mimicking one of her father’s gestures, wore “all the keys on a gold chain around her neck.” (p.7). Complicating the Male Gothic convention of woman as terrified victim,
women in contemporary Gothic are also capable of embodying the role of cruel patriarch in their attempt to deny the ‘chaos’ of femininity.\textsuperscript{50}

Feminist literary critics have identified a link between marginalisation and the Gothic and an association can be made between Hester and the marginalized woman who fails to conform to the status quo of the society she lives in, sometimes referred to as a ‘freak.’ Hester could, bearing in mind her physical deformity, unmarried status and repudiation of conservative patriarchal values, be described as a freak, a pejorative term, but one which has also been applied to the woman artist. Ellen Moers in \textit{Literary Women} identifies a link between the pre-occupation with freaks and the Female Gothic tradition.\textsuperscript{51} Moers has suggested that the term freak is “a better word than monsters for the creations of the modern female Gothic.”\textsuperscript{52} Elaine Showalter concurs: “Looking at freaks in the 1940s and 1950s signified a woman artist’s determination to confront the forbidden without flinching, to activate a powerful female gaze. Freaks and feminists were weirdly bonded.”\textsuperscript{53} Indeed, Hester is really only able to transform her desperate situation at the conclusion of the novel, after the well has been closed, by adopting the persona of the artist/writer.

Hester’s confrontation with repressed aspects of the past is familiar Gothic territory; Australian Gothic also engages with the haunting of the past, and the desire to destroy it. Tim Winton’s \textit{In the Winter Dark}, published two years after

\textsuperscript{50} In her discussion on Freud, Anne Williams identifies a resemblance between Freud’s formulation of the unconscious and the figure of the vampire. According to Williams, the Freudian unconscious is “dark, ancient, primitive, a repository of lawless desires and ‘feminine’ chaos,” p.245.
\textsuperscript{51} Moers, p.108.
\textsuperscript{52} Moers, p.108.
\textsuperscript{53} Showalter, p.135.
*The Well*, is an interesting novel for comparison as it also employs Gothic conventions to explore the singular power of the past to disrupt the present. In Winton’s novel, escalating fear and paranoia amongst the four main characters leads to the death of the protagonist’s wife, whilst the three remaining characters are left silenced by the tragedy. One particularly tragic character repeats his trauma endlessly to the darkness of the night. The characters in Winton’s *In the Winter Dark* are either silenced or trapped in the devastating trauma of repetition. Contrastingly, in *The Well*, as Sue Gillett points out, the closing of the well is the “turning point in her [Hester’s] development as potential artist...Shutting the well is the final banishing, it is the accumulation of a history of banishing.”54 Indeed, Hester is only able to comprehend and therefore transfigure her desperate situation through the process of story-telling, through which she can once again distance herself from the pain of her recent experience. This transformation is a partial one though, as her obsession with Kathy remains, even intensifies, beyond the closing of the well:

> She feels the obsession coming over her and she can think only of Kathy, of her appearance, of the sound of her voice, and of her dancing. She thinks of how Kathy will tell her that she wants to go away and leave her and she thinks of what she must say in reply and she wants to break down and weep before this conversation can take place.” (p. 171).

Still, by the novel’s end Hester’s characteristic mechanism of repression is replaced by the desire for understanding through representation. DeLamotte observes: “Whatever its terrors and despairs, Gothic fiction is based on at least one faith: The confidence that there is a door always open from the haunted mind into yet another region of sublimity, the palace of art.”55 Although this claim is

55 DeLamotte, p.145.
excessive, it does resonate with constructions of contemporary Gothic literature by women which seeks to create spaces of liberation from patriarchal confinement. Contemporary approaches to Female Gothic by Australian women writers seek to create spaces of resistance through the act of storytelling – an idea which will also be explored in more detail in the following chapters on Carmel Bird’s *Mandala Trilogy*.

The repetition of the accident scene is also significant for our understanding of Jolley’s use of the Gothic genre. Delamotte argues:

> Repetition in women’s Gothic serves a double and self-contradictory function. It mimes the claustrophobic circularity of women’s real lives in that it shows the heroine, who must confront the same terrors repeatedly, doing the same thing over and over. (p.177).

Jolley seems to be parodying the Gothic mode through the structural device of repetition, commenting on the genre’s tendency for replication, and myopic dependence on rigid formulas and clichés. Hester’s dangerous retreat into an illusory world, leads to the creation of Hester as storyteller, the emergence of ‘woman as artist’ whose liberation from this suffocating circularity lies in the power of self-construction. This has significance for the re-framing of nineteenth-century Gothic literature by women and its heroines, whose lives typically end in marriage or death. Speaking broadly about the recurring writer characters in Jolley’s fiction, who, like Hester, are also crippled or oppressed in some way, Sue Gillet remarks:

> For each of the fictional writers in Jolley’s novels, writing represents the imaginative escape from the confines of their outward existences. Writing allows the expression which their lives have been denied: its function is curative. Indeed, Jolley, in
her departure from the realist mode, has created a type of writing which liberates and empowers the repressed feminine.56 Toward the end of the novel Hester admits that a solution is not possible which extends the twentieth-century Gothic tradition of unresolved endings. Like Picnic at Hanging Rock, The Well sets up a mystery without any intention of a resolution, or, as Sue Gillett remarks, Jolley’s “concern is with ongoing struggle, not with resolution.”57 This is revealed in the final chapter of the novel.

In the scene which ends the novel, in which Kathy and Hester are on their way to pick up Kathy’s friend Joanna, Hester leaves Kathy behind in the car after they have run out of petrol. Kathy remains wedded to domesticity in the novel’s final image of her hand-sewing the Rosalind costume she intends to wear for an upcoming fete alongside Joanna’s Orlando - both characters from Shakespeare’s As You Like It. Significantly, this play is renowned for its use of cross-dressing and includes the often quoted Shakespearian monologue: “All the world’s a stage/And all the men and women merely players/They have their exits and their entrances/And one man in his time plays many parts.” (Act 2, Scene 7).58 The allusion to As You Like It at the conclusion of the novel, in which Hester begins to relate the story of the intruder to the Borden children, questions the reality of the story we have just been told which raises the possibility of the characters as possible fictional inventions in Hester’s imagination. Moreover, The Well favours the disjointed structure of previous Gothic texts, such as Bram Stoker’s Dracula and Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. Rosemary Jackson describes

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57 Gillett, “Breaking the Realist Mirror,” p.117.
Frankenstein as “structured like a line of receding mirror images,” which “moves from the outer tale of Walton, to the inner tale of Frankenstein, to the tale-within-the-tale of the monster’s confessions.” The structure of The Well emphasises circularity with the repetition of the central accident at the beginning, and again half way through the novel. Yet, in the final scene, with Hester alone with Mrs Borden and her rowdy sons, the novel finally breaks out of this circularity. Hester’s reaction to Dobbie Borden’s comment about her broken ‘roo’ bar is the moment at the end of the novel in which the truth about the experience with the man in the well may be revealed. Hester responds to this challenge by fictionalizing the events, so that we have a fictional story within a fictional story which effectively blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, reality and truth. This final act of storytelling, after Hester’s unsettling confrontation with psychic repression, confirms the possibility of liberation through creative self-expression, which is also a theme of great relevance to the novels which comprise Carmel Bird’s Mandala Trilogy.

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59 Jackson, p.104.
60 This blurring of the boundary between fact and fiction is also a prominent feature of the work of Carmel Bird whose Gothic fiction is the subject of the next two chapters.
Chapter Five

*The Mandala Trilogy: Reframing the Gothic in Carmel Bird’s The White Garden and Red Shoes*

The following two chapters will focus on the work of Carmel Bird, specifically the three novels referred to as the *Mandala Trilogy: The White Garden* (1995), *Red Shoes* (1998) and *Cape Grimm* (2004). Carmel Bird is one of Australia’s leading contemporary writers whose novels, including *Crisis* (1996) and *The Bluebird Café* (1990), as well as many of her short stories, are informed by, and parody, Gothic conventions. Despite the predominance of male narrators in her fiction, Bird adopts a feminist approach to the Gothic tradition as her work is particularly concerned with “the return of the feminine and the dark side of the feminine.”

The darker aspects of human experience, articulated through Gothic tropes, resonates not only throughout all of the works by Australian women writers discussed thus far but in other texts by Australian authors, including fiction by Kate Grenville, Tim Winton, Andrew McGahan, Dorothy Hewett, Brenda Walker, Gail Jones and Peter Carey. Bird’s Gothic topography includes a shift away from the isolated Australian settings of the outback and wheat-belt, both recurring locations in Australian Gothic literature, to the urban landscape of

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1 ‘Mandala’ is the name given to the psychiatric clinic in the first novel in the trilogy, *The White Garden* which is set in the late 1960s in Australia and parodies, through its use of the name Mandala, the counter-cultural movement which emerged in America during this time. This movement embraced ideas related to Eastern religion and philosophy, including the Hindu and Buddhist use of the Mandala as a tool for meditation. The naming of the clinic in *The White Garden* also evokes Patrick White’s novel *The Solid Mandala* (1966), set in the fictional suburb of Sarsaparilla, which is intended as a critique of the suffocating conformity of suburban Australian life — a theme also explored in *The White Garden*.

2 Shirley Walker, “Conversations at Rochester Road,” p.278.
Melbourne, Victoria and an “imaginary” Tasmania, formerly Van Diemen’s Land, which is evoked to re-imagine Tasmania’s dark past.³

Fusing a unique blend of fiction and fact, or “faction,” as Shirley Walker has described Bird’s work, the three novels of the Mandala Trilogy present a diverse range of Gothic thematic concerns, including colonial displacement and longing, betrayal, the oppression and abuse of vulnerable people by charismatic authority figures, madness, the lost child, the problematics of femininity and the sequestering of women.⁴ Bird’s Gothic disturbs because we know the horrors that she describes, although fictional, have their basis in reality. Bird is particularly concerned with giving a voice to female characters who are either silenced or unheard, which is achieved through the process of acknowledgement and recognition of their stories. Bird’s work possesses a rare honesty and candor, which, combined with her delightfully sardonic wit and moments of magic realism, has led to comparisons with Angela Carter, Jeanette Winterson and Gabriel García Márquez. In Bird’s fiction, Catholic mysticism and bizarre religious cults are interwoven with real-life horrors, as well as an impressive array of intertextual references, including folk tales and mythology, to give narrative authority to women whose stories have been suppressed.⁵

Although the three novels of the trilogy can be read as separate narratives, the many parallels that can be found in the three texts creates a nexus between them.

⁵ As Bird invokes a large range of historical, literary and cultural intertextual references in the Mandala Trilogy it would be impossible to address them all within the limits of this chapter. Therefore, only those references pertinent to the discussion will be commented on.
For example, all three novels contain a charismatic character whose self-delusions and desire for power are destructive to the people around them. The three novels also parody the trope of the Gothic castle as they all incorporate a contemporary alternative to this ubiquitous Gothic locale. The Gothic has an enduring association with architecture and the trope of the Gothic castle, despite being a cliché, remains a key symbol of physical and psychological confinement, a recurring theme in Gothic literature by women. The Gothic castle, according to Valdine Clemens, “may be associated with the maternal or sexual body, the human psyche, or the patriarchal social order.” In all three novels of the trilogy the traditional Gothic castle is supplanted by an imprisoning structure that can be associated with these Gothic concerns. The Mandala Psychiatric Clinic, which was once a Gothic-style convent, is the setting for The White Garden and is, through the despotic figure of Ambrose Goddard, associated with the harmful effects of patriarchal subjugation and patriarchally-inscribed texts, for women. In Red Shoes, the “large, grand fantasy-gothic” Hill House is home to the members of the Hill House Brethren cult, of which Petra Penfold-Knight is the surrogate ‘Mother.’ Red Shoes employs the Gothic motif of the central and dominating figure of the mother and explores issues in relation to motherhood and cruelty to children. Finally, in Cape Grimm, the Gothic edifice, located in Tasmania, is the Black River Psychiatric Detention Facility; a beautiful, modern

7 Carmel Bird, Red Shoes (Milsons Point, NSW: Vintage, 1998), p.110. All subsequent references to Red Shoes will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.
8 In her interview with Shirley Walker, Bird mentions Jonestown and Heaven’s Gate as sources of inspiration for the cults which appear in Red Shoes and Cape Grimm, both of which ended in the mass suicide/murder of its members. Bird also refers to other religious communities in this interview such as Oneida (a nineteenth-century community originating in New York) and Herrnhut, the first religious sect established in Australia (1852 – 1889). See “Conversations at Rochester Road,” p.283. A further, current example of an Australian religious community, located in Sydney’s north-west is Hillsong Church, established in 1983, and whose name recalls the cult featured in Red Shoes: the Hill House Brethren.
self-enclosed and inward-looking structure designed by a Norwegian architect and constructed "such that the heart of the interior of the main building would resemble the interior of a nautilus shell."9 Despite its exterior beauty, however, Black River is home to some of the world’s most opprobrious criminals, linking it to Tasmania’s nineteenth-century history as the place where the ‘worst’ criminals were sent. The three novels are also imbued with a proliferation of intertextual references, particularly the repeated references to and engagement with imagery from both popular, and slightly more obscure, fairy tales. More importantly, however, is Bird’s characteristic approach to the Gothic through the mode of satire which, as Donna Heiland posits, is the “keynote” of modern Gothic and acts as “a powerful weapon against Gothic formula.”10 In addition to guarding against formulaic Gothic this satirical approach to the Gothic by contemporary women writers is a deliberate strategy of subversion. Indeed, as Sigmund Freud claims, “Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious.”11 Bird’s humour incorporates a sophisticated use of irony and dark satire to comment on the experiences of women under patriarchy in Australia.

9 Carmel Bird, Cape Grimm (Pymble, NSW: Flamingo, 2004), p.8. All subsequent references to Cape Grimm will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.
The White Garden

*The White Garden* is a mystery in the tradition of Ann Radcliffe’s *Mysteries of Udolpho*, about the death of a twenty-eight year-old woman, Vickie Field, in Melbourne, Australia in 1967. Her death in the White Garden, one of the many gardens in the grounds of the Mandala Psychiatric Clinic and a double for the White Garden created by Vita Sackville-West at Sissinghurst Castle in Kent, takes place on the same day as the death of Ronald Ryan, ‘The Last Man Hanged in Australia.’ The significance of this double tragedy, one fictional and one based on fact, is also commented on in the final chapter of *Cape Grimm* by the narrator, Paul Van Loon, as, “a message signifying the pointlessness of the punishments human beings can devise.” (p.239). It also reinforces the way human beings are capable of acts of great cruelty.

The theme of punishment has been a central concern to the Gothic since the eighteenth century and it is closely linked to the notion of transgression. Like Elizabeth Jolley’s *The Well*, *The White Garden* also shares elements of the detective story in which Laura Field, Vickie’s younger sister, seeks to uncover the truth behind her sister’s bizarre death in the grounds of Mandala, which is caused by an allergic reaction to the sting from two honeybees. During Laura’s investigation into Vickie’s death thirty years later, which is propelled by her search for a missing red book Vickie was carrying at the time of her death, Vita Sackville-West’s *The Eagle and the Dove*, Laura also discovers the disturbing truth about the macabre psychiatric practices at Ambrose Goddard’s Mandala Clinic.
Early reviews of *The White Garden* are full of praise for the writer who was later hailed as the creator of 'Tasmanian Gothic.' Robyn Friend describes it as a "clever, witty and fascinating book," although she does have some difficulty with the labyrinthine plot details. Michael Sharkey declares, "Bird writes fiction every bit as spectacular as Angela Carter's but, I think, with infinitely more sympathy for ordinary people relegated to the fringes of psychiatric and spiritual wellbeing. The book is a clever, wise and humane triumph." Rosemary Creswell comments that the novel is "complex and compelling," describing Bird's use of language as "breathtakingly sensuous and poetic." Bird herself describes *The White Garden* as a "dark examination of psychiatric abuse and religious delusion." It is the combined narratives of the women at Mandala which challenge the authority of the masculinist paradigm personified by the owner and chief psychiatrist of the clinic, Ambrose Goddard.

It is also suggested in the novel that the social and cultural restrictions placed on these women, who are described by the narrator as "birds with clipped wings and crippled minds," greatly contributes to their emotional and mental distress and inability to function in society; they are "unable to take part in the rituals of family, work, friendship," which, ironically, leads to their incarceration at the

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asylum.\textsuperscript{18} The novel, set in Melbourne, Australia critiques the narrow and restrictive choices available for women in the patriarchal milieu of urban Australia in the 1960s. Richard White argues in \textit{Inventing Australia} that the role of women in Australian society at this time was dependent on their position as “the great consumers” which relied on their seemingly dominant position within the domestic realm of the home:\textsuperscript{19}

Men had many outlets in “the Australian Way of Life,” as workers, fathers, sportsmen, beer-drinkers, home handymen. Women were part of it only as full-time housewives and mothers. The variety of experience which women could have outside family life was denied, yet in 1961 a quarter of factory workers were women, and a third of females over 15 were not married. Women had at least been given a role in the dominant image of Australia, but it was one that worked to keep them in their place.\textsuperscript{20}

Many women at the clinic are middle-class wives and mothers and are admitted by their bewildered families when they start to show signs of a ‘breakdown’. Juliann Fleenor suggests: “The Gothic world is one of nightmare, and that nightmare is created by the individual in conflict with the values of her society and her prescribed role.”\textsuperscript{21} It is the suffocating conformity of middle-class suburbia and the restrictive roles of ‘wife and mother’ that are posited in the novel as the reasons that these women, sometimes violently, withdraw from their lives and are incarcerated at Mandala.

Through the Gothic trope of the confinement of women Bird explores the abuses, hypocrisy and cruelty present in modern psychiatry through the fictional

\textsuperscript{18} Carmel Bird, \textit{The White Garden}, (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1995), p.16 and p.20. All subsequent references to \textit{The White Garden} will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.


\textsuperscript{20} Richard White, p.50.

\textsuperscript{21} Fleenor, p.10.
Mandala Clinic. This preoccupation extends the nineteenth-century fascination with, and questioning of, the morality of scientific progress and discovery, explored by Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein*, and examined again later in the century in two texts that were to become embedded in the popular imagination: Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860) and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). Bird relocates this inquiry within a modern psychiatric institution, inspired by the lurid details of an actual doctor whose experimental psychiatry devastated the lives of many people.

The inspiration for Mandala and the character of Ambrose Goddard is based on the true story of Dr Harry Bailey, chief psychiatrist at Sydney’s infamous Chelmsford hospital during the 1960s and 1970s. Bailey conducted unorthodox treatments on his patients, mostly women, which included involuntary ECT (Electro-Convulsive Therapy) and the controversial Deep Sleep Therapy which Bird employs as a motif to satirise the idea of the silencing of women, an often explored theme in contemporary literature by women. Bailey was eventually charged with the manslaughter of one of his patients, although the charges against him were later dismissed, due to lack of evidence. In *The White Garden*, Bird questions the ethical treatment of the mentally ill, which comprises some of the most vulnerable members of society, and comments on the self-serving motivations of certain doctors. Like the real Harry Bailey, the central male character, Ambrose Goddard, commits suicide in disgrace when the barbaric treatment of his patients including severe neglect, molestation, arcane

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22 Indeed, Collins was to continue to explore his questioning of science in later, less well-known novels such as *Heart and Science* (1883).

treatments and the administration of a lethal cocktail of psychedelics to already fragile minds, results in many deaths and many more lives destroyed.

The narratives by Laura and the other female characters, particularly Therese Gillis, a twenty year-old patient at Mandala whose tape-recorded monologue forms the greater part of the narrative, consistently undercut Ambrose Goddard’s attempts at producing a ‘master’ narrative. Goddard’s attempts to control both the narrative (the novel begins with a first-person monologue by Goddard which reveals that he identifies with tribal hunting elephants) and the lives of his patients, are subverted by the narrative resemblance to a “broad piece of lace,” in which “the centerpiece is not the body of the woman in the garden, but the image of the two honeybees.” (p.3). This distinctly feminine image of lace, characterized by intricacy and delicacy, is a metaphor for the complexity of the narrative structure in *The White Garden* which is made up of many interweaving stories, fictional and fact, which creates a link between the past and the present. Contemporary Gothic fiction replaces traditional Gothic dualism with an emphasis on multiplicity, specifically the multiplicity of the self. The reliance on a variety of narrators in *The White Garden* foregrounds the fragmentation of the female Gothic subject, while the counter-narrative of Laura’s quest for insight into the circumstances surrounding her sister’s death, signifies a move toward psychic wholeness and integration that the patients at Mandala are denied.

The central metaphor of the White Garden, haunted by the death of a young woman, disrupts our notions of a garden as a place of peace and sanctuary and is a Gothic image which projects “ghostly images by day, ghastly images by night.”
In addition, the novel also points out that the word ‘garden’ is an anagram for ‘danger.’ The garden, then, can be associated with the mythological Eden, a garden paradise with the potential for corruption although, in place of the mythological serpent, is the honeybee. The significance of the honeybee and its centrality to *The White Garden* is remarked upon by Bird in her interview with Shirley Walker as being “the instrument of death,” which evokes an ironic association with the Biblical serpent, the catalyst for the ‘fall’ in Christian mythology. Through this ironic association, Bird subverts this defining patriarchal myth, one which continues to dis-empower and undermine women and, instead, envisions an imaginatively rich gothicised garden with creative possibilities.

The White Garden is filled with a vast array of flowers, designed to produce the illusion of a “shimmering whiteness,” and is, according to the narrator, a “small facsimile, an imitation, a gesture, a tribute to the White Garden that Vita Sackville-West made in Kent.” The White Garden functions in the text, initially, as an unfulfilled promise of protection and a haunted replica of an English garden that becomes the setting for the death of an unknown Australian actress who masquerades as Vita Sackville-West for the perverse entertainment of Ambrose Goddard. This replication also recalls Appleyard College in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Although not a place of beauty like the White Garden,

24 Shirley Walker, “Conversations at Rochester Road ,” p.283. The honeybee has also been associated with the Greek Goddess of the hunt, Artemis (Diana), and, historically, with Napoleon Bonaparte. In Christianity, the honeybee is linked to Saint Ambrose, Doctor of the Church, who is often depicted as a baby with a swarm of bees about to “settle on his lips.” See The Oxford Companion to Christian Art and Architecture, eds. Peter and Linda Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.13.

25 In one of many historical parallels, Vita Sackville-West was allergic to wasps and was stung in the original garden at Sissinghurst estate, an incident which Bird alludes to in the novel (p.33) and one that is also referred to by Victoria Glendinning in *Vita: The Life of V. Sackville-West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), p.385.
Appleyard College is a replication of an English college which is hopelessly out of place in the Australian bush and which fails to offer protection from the devouring Australian landscape. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* introduced the idea that postcolonial Australia is haunted by its links to British culture and this idea is returned to in *The White Garden*, although Bird is not so concerned with establishing a separate Australian identity from Britain in this novel, which was a major preoccupation of Peter Weir’s film.

The re-enactment in the garden also involves two of Goddard’s more severely deluded patients, Therese Gillis and Rosamund Pryce-Jones, who believe they are St Thérèse of Lisieux and St Teresa of Avila. On the day of Vickie’s death in the White Garden, Goddard had arranged for the two ‘saints’ to meet the woman who had published a biography based on their lives, *The Eagle and the Dove*. The complex construction of the garden in the text functions as a space of empowerment for Therese and Rosamund who assist in its creation and are responsible for maintaining and nurturing the garden. Caren Kaplan, in another context, discusses the significance of the space of the garden to contemporary women writers through the biographical writings of Michelle Cliff, a Jamaican-born writer who is “radically deterritorialized from a Carribean culture and a race by a family conspiracy of silence and denial.”

Kaplan discusses Cliff’s final image of the garden in her biography, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, and declares that the image of the garden as constructed by Cliff offers,

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a new terrain, a new location in feminist poetics." Caren Kaplan says of the significance of the space of the garden:

Not a room of one’s own, not a fully public or collective self, not a domestic realm – it is a space in the imagination which allows for the inside, the outside and the liminal elements of in-between...It points towards a rewriting of the connection between different parts of the self in order to make a world of possibilities out of the experience of displacement.

Similarly, the eponymous White Garden becomes the only place at Mandala where the patients can experience a limited degree of autonomy and liberty. The garden becomes a space of imaginatively expression and spiritual nourishment for the displaced women at Mandala. By the conclusion of the novel, Laura declares that for her the White Garden “doesn’t feel sinister” and has become a “monument” to her sister. (p.216). Thus, the meaning of the garden evolves over the course of the novel; it is a fluid space which, despite its Gothic associations with death and haunting, also enables the women to move toward wholeness and restoration. Indeed, Rosamund Pryce-Jones, one of the patients responsible for caring for the garden, becomes one of the few patients to leave Mandala and recover from her illness. Eventually the White Garden comes to represent a sacred memorial to the people whose lives were lost at Mandala.

The replication of Sackville-West’s garden at Mandala is one of many peculiar doublings in The White Garden and is an index to the masks and disguises worn by many of the women characters in the novel, some as intentional disguise or play-acting and some as a result of psychotic breakdown in which they assume the identity of someone other than themselves. The novel asks, “How can it be

27 Kaplan, p.197.
28 Kaplan, pp.197-198.
that a life is so sad and insignificant that the man or woman living the life must take on the persona of someone else?" (p.19). Judith Halberstam remarks on the way Gothic literature deploys the motifs of costume and disguise to produce the grotesque:

We might also say that the grotesque effect of Gothic is achieved through a kind of transvestism, a dressing up that reveals itself as costume. Gothic is a cross-dressing, drag, a performance of textuality, an infinite readability and, indeed, these are themes that are readily accessible within Gothic fiction itself where the tropes of doubling and disguise tend to dominate the narrative.29

The issue of female identity is central to the three novels of the trilogy, particularly *The White Garden*, and Bird's comic use of costume in the text produces the grotesque effects of a haphazard masquerade which recalls Diane Long Hoeveler's description of women in traditional Gothic novels adopting the "pose of victimization."30 In *The White Garden*, the familiar Female Gothic trope of woman as victim is satirized, as the female characters, many of whom are in the grip of a very serious psychotic breakdown, masquerade as eminent cultural and religious figures. This extends Diane Long Hoeveler's analysis that women in nineteenth-century Gothic fiction enact a "pretended and staged weakness"31 as the dis-empowered patients in *The White Garden* 'perform' identities which give them a sense of empowerment, even though this is actually an illusory sense. Therefore, the trope of the victimization of women in Gothic literature is problematised in this novel: although Bird approaches this theme satirically, there is also an underlying tragic element to these women who are severely oppressed by mental illness, which is further exacerbated by Ambrose Goddard's cruel medical treatments. This aspect of the novel also illustrates the

30 Hoeveler, p.13.
31 Hoeveler, p.7.
complex fusion of horror and humour and the increasingly complex engagement with traditional Gothic tropes which characterizes contemporary approaches to the Gothic.

One of the key features of the Gothic are an interplay between the arousal of fear and laughter which, according to Fred Botting, “has been inscribed in Gothic texts since their inception.”

Bird’s Gothic fiction combines satirical humour with a realist horror, without trivializing the more serious themes. The strategies of the use of irony and parody in contemporary Gothic texts undermine the possibility of pejorative associations with melodrama at the same time as allowing contemporary Gothic writers to draw on features of the genre to critique certain cultural ideologies. It is precisely this interplay of humour and fear that is utilized as the women at Mandala act out the eminent identities they have assumed. The two women who believe they are saints are dressed in nun’s habits and reside together, separate from the other patients, in their own cells in the old Convent wing of the hospital. In addition, the character known as Shirley Temple is a grown woman who flounces around the clinic with ringlets in her hair, dressed in frills and bows. Still, the more disturbing aspects of the fracturing of identity, and the alienation and disconnection experienced by the women in The White Garden is also conveyed through the tropes of reflection, doubling, replication and imitation. Bird explains in her interview with Shirley Walker that, “many of the moments where characters see things through windows, or see things in mirrors, are key moments within the narratives.”

These moments foreground a way of seeing which relies on a reflective process.

32 Botting, Gothic, p.168.
33 Shirley Walker, “Conversations at Rochester Road,” p.278.
(the window or mirror) and functions to destabilize the privileging of the male gaze, in a novel marked by the relentless surveillance of women. One such key moment of reflection involves Ambrose Goddard’s first personal experience with hallucinogens and involves the image of a mirror. Hallucination is a state of mind highly pertinent to the Gothic as it involves the dissolution of boundaries and delves into the chaotic space of the unconscious.

After purchasing the convent (which was to become Mandala Clinic) from the Catholic Church, Goddard conducts group experiments with LSD in the ‘crystal chapel,’ anticipating the future abuse of his vulnerable patients. Goddard’s own first encounter with LSD is a nightmare experience which leaves him screaming and weeping on the floor. Initially, he experiences a “sensation of great helplessness,” and begins to hallucinate. (p.16). During this hallucination Goddard is plunged into a surreal and terrifying experience of confusion and irrationality, producing a strange uncanny vision which has symbolic significance for the way female subjectivity is constructed in the novel:

He seemed to move through a mirror, to see the great dark pupil of a ghastly eye. He would move through the mirror, back and forth, pulled and tormented. There was writing, tiny spidery writing in purple ink. He kept trying to read it, but he had lost the ability to read, to understand words. He knew it was English but he couldn’t make head nor tail of it. (p.16).

This moment in the text contains two ideas of central importance to The White Garden: the fragmentation of female identity, symbolized by the mirror and the eye; and the power of language and the written word, signified by the spidery writing and Goddard’s inability to comprehend it. This scene metaphorically conveys Goddard’s vicarious and involuntary experience of women under patriarchal control, which is illustrated by the unsettling sensation of moving
back and forth through the mirror, demonstrating the dissolution and fracturing of female subjectivity. The ‘ghastly eye’ signifies the male gaze and the objectification women experience, as a kind of hyperbolic and terrifying surveillance.\(^3^4\) This scene also evokes the helplessness experienced by women who have been marginalized within a language system that denies women agency and devalues women’s stories, a language that, as in Goddard’s nightmare vision, seems incomprehensible. It depicts women’s alienation from language, or, as Anna Smith asserts, “the alienation women feel from the world of thought and culture in which they have rarely had an active part.”\(^3^5\) Given that language reflects patriarchal assumptions and traditionally ignores the experiences of women, Bird creates a new language for the female characters in *The White Garden*: a language cloaked in madness. Bird describes this language as “word-salad” which is a playful, at times nonsensical, at times revelatory and lyrical, stream-of-consciousness speech containing nursery rhymes, song, punning, rhyming and the surfacing of memory, dreams and confessions, and which is, according to Bird, “akin to poetry” existing in the “chasm between the conscious and the unconscious.”\(^3^6\) The effect that this language has in the text is to validate and affirm the multiplicity of women’s experiences and create a space

\(^3^4\) The cover of *The White Garden* includes a painting by Surrealist painter Paul Delvaux, Phases of the Moon [Les Phases de la Lune] (1939), which is held at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The painting depicts a naked woman posing, her top half covered by a strategically placed pink bow, whilst two men are standing in front of her. Although the woman is offering herself as a spectacle for the gaze of the two men, neither of them are paying her any attention: one of the men looks away, while the other is examining a rock specimen. In the background of the painting an artist, a half-naked young man who is being followed by several naked women, represents the antithesis of the two foregrounded men. David Scott comments that an important aspect of Delvaux’s work “consists of subverting or deconstructing the conventions governing visual representation in the western world.” See David Scott, “Words in the Paintings of Paul Delvaux,” *Image and Narrative*, 13 (2005). [http://www.imageandnarrative.be/surrealism/scott.htm](http://www.imageandnarrative.be/surrealism/scott.htm) (accessed 17/07/08).


of resistance outside of the nightmarish patriarchal prison of the clinic. Goddard’s attempts at self-experimentation offer him the opportunity for insight into the lived experience of his patients by metaphorically collapsing the boundary between himself and his patients, but instead his unsettling hallucinatory experience serves to reinforce his hubris and diabolical desire for autocracy. From this point in the novel, Goddard begins to experiment with a variety of powerful and dangerous psychotropic medications on the women, and repeatedly rapes and molests them while they are medicated or unconscious.

Ambrose Goddard is an excessive Gothic villain whose role as a psychiatrist is less about the treatment and healing of mental illness than the fulfillment of personal glory with the publication of his work on delusions, a study of the relationship between psychiatry and religion entitled, *Illumination*.37 His patients at Mandala are integral to the publication of his book in which he encourages and exacerbates their delusions.38 The traditional Gothic villain, who embodies a deadly duplicity, is parodied in the hyperbolic character of Ambrose Goddard. To the frightened family members of the women he is treating he exudes a professional charm and authoritative veracity which, in their bewilderment and

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37 In addition to the more obvious association between the Christian biblical patriarch and the surname God(dard), the name Ambrose is a truncated version of Ambrosia, the nectar of the Gods in Greek mythology which preserved their immortality, as well as a reference to the name given to the nectar and pollen created by honeybees. Goddard’s name reflects the grandiose perception he has of himself as well as contributing to Bird’s complex symbology pertaining to the honeybee. Ambrose also recalls the villain in Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk*, the monk of the title Ambrosio, who rapes the innocent Antonio while she is unconscious, a strategy Goddard emulates when he rapes his sleeping patients who have been administered Deep Sleep Therapy.  

38 The fictional Goddard’s views on delusions are based on what has been termed the anti-psychiatry movement, exemplified by the work of Scottish psychiatrist R D Laing (1927-1989). Laing’s work was primarily concerned with the delusions of schizophrenics which he believed expressed a valid lived reality, as opposed to orthodox psychiatry which viewed madness as a distressing disorder that required medical intervention. Laing compared schizophrenic delusions and madness to a shamanic journey, one with real potential for insight and transformation for the sufferer. See John Clay’s *R.D. Laing: A Divided Self* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996). Bird is satirising the obvious dangers associated with ‘alternative’ psychiatric treatments as well as questioning the field of psychiatry in general and the power it assumes over people’s lives.
anxiety about their loved ones, they are incapable of challenging. Behind the locked doors of Mandala, Goddard commits the most maleficent crimes against his patients. In this sense Goddard is akin to the mad scientist, an archetypal character in Gothic horror, described by Mary Ellen Snodgrass in the *Encyclopedia of Gothic Literature* as, “mad researchers whose evil curiosity, inhumanity, and dabblings in fearful concoctions parallel the guile of the Gothic villain.”

Like the mad scientists before him, Goddard’s ultimate downfall is hubris. Goddard is an urbane and sophisticated Gothic villain which represents a marked shift from the brutal and aggressive male bush characters constructed by Barbara Baynton in *Bush Studies*. In addition, *The White Garden* moves away from the realism of early Australian Gothic through its satirical exploration of institutional religion.

The Gothic is the ideal genre for the exploration of spiritual unease and religious delusion. Fred Botting explains that the Gothic “condenses the many perceived threats,” to enlightenment and humanist values, “threats associated with supernatural and natural forces, imaginative excesses and delusions, religious and human evil, social transgression, mental disintegration and spiritual corruption,” which are all elements explored through Bird’s engagement with the Gothic. Indeed, eighteenth-century Gothic, exemplified by Anne Radcliffe’s *The Italian*, makes use of elaborate monastic settings to instill fear in the reader and expose the supposed hypocrisy of the Roman Church in opposition to Protestantism. In the twentieth century particularly, the power and influence of

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40 Snodgrass, p.219.
41 Botting, *Gothic*, p.2.
the Church has been replaced by the influential discourse of psychiatry. Fear is derived in late twentieth-century Gothic from the breakdown of the mind and the revealed fragility of the psyche. The way that the discourse of psychiatry has supplanted the Church is symbolically conveyed in *The White Garden* through the Mandala Clinic which was originally built as a convent and school in the 1870s and purchased by Goddard to be transformed into a new-age psychiatric clinic which conforms to the hippie ideal of the 1960s. The narrator remarks, “An air of the fairy castle played about the convent, mingled with a touch of the prison, a hint of the madhouse.” (p.15). Convents are constructed as ambivalent spaces in Female Gothic literature and traditionally function as either a place of refuge or a place of restriction for the hapless heroine. For example, E.J. Clery points out that in Radcliffe, the convent signifies a “refuge for women, a place where they could escape crisis in the patriarchal family and secure some autonomy.” However, as George Haggerty observes, the convent in *The Italian* becomes the locus for corruption and virulence. Moreover, Fred Botting contends that in nineteenth-century Gothic, “Female persecution and imprisonment is of a more modern cast with the asylum replacing the convent and the country house the castle.” Bird extends this nineteenth-century tradition in *The White Garden*, as the convent wing of the hospital becomes the isolated home of Therese and Rosamund who, encouraged by Goddard, live out their lives as saints, imprisoned by their own delusions which are exacerbated by Goddard’s experimental treatments. Their lives become a morbid and

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44 Botting, *Gothic*, p.133.
extravagant travesty which parodies the patriarchally sanctioned cloistering of women and comments on the ineffectuality of psychiatry and traditional religion as therapeutic and healing discourses. Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853) has become a principal text in discussions on Female Gothic literature and also includes an institution, in this instance a school for girls, which was once a convent. *Villette* utilises the intrusion of the supernatural, in which the ghost of a nun haunts the central character, to explore anxieties about female sexuality and Catholicism, which are also themes explored and developed in *The White Garden*. The supernatural elements in *Villette* are parodied by Brontë, as the ghostly nun is later revealed to be a man who disguises himself in a bid to win the affections of a woman he wishes to court. Bird evokes the supernatural in *The White Garden* through the psychosis of Therese Gillis which allows her to engage with the supernatural without reverting to the traditional Radcliffian technique of explaining it away at the end.

The silencing of women is a central theme in the trilogy and has both fairy tale and Biblical origins. Marina Warner, who writes from a feminist perspective on the representation of women in myth and folk tale, traces the origins of “the virtues of silence, obedience and discretion,” to the tradition of Christianity.45 Warner cites the Christian allegory of the Fall to illustrate the symbolic force and “scriptural legacy” of the suppression of women’s speech, in which Eve, “the pattern of all women to come,” tempts Adam to eat from the tree of knowledge through her words, with the result that “speech must be denied her daughters.”46

Bird has spoken about the recurring image of the voiceless woman in her fiction

46 Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p.30.
and the reclamation of power through the written word in an interview with Susan Lever:

And throughout my work there is an image of a small powerless, voiceless girl. She runs through all my fiction...Then, in my work, there is also the image of the writing woman. The small powerless woman can come forward, she can write. This way she can be heard, can express her own problems, ideas – her own version of the world.47

The women in *The White Garden* who are incarcerated at Mandala are stripped of their volition and it is only through the inclusion of lengthy interior monologues that their stories are revealed. This idea of empowerment through the written word is more fully developed in *Red Shoes* and *Cape Grimm* in which significant passages of the text are devoted to the private journals of women whose identities have been shaped by their indoctrination in a spiritual sect. The story of the patients at Mandala, however, dramatizes the beginnings of the struggle for women’s subjectivity within a male-dominated Australian culture that emphasizes subjection and conformity. Allusions made to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (p.19), Daphne Du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (p.22 and p.31) and references to castles weeping blood (p.48), evoke archetypal Gothic images of powerless women confined within ancestral castles. A phonetic parallel can be drawn between Manderley, that ancestral Gothic estate by the sea in *Rebecca* in which a recently married woman strives to live up to the impossible standards of feminine beauty and domesticity set by her husband’s first wife, and the Mandala Clinic, which reinforces the women’s struggle for acceptance in a patriarchal society which circumscribes the roles of women. The silencing of women is

literalised in a frightening way in *The White Garden* through the controversial treatment, Deep Sleep.

At Mandala, Deep Sleep Therapy is administered to the patients, usually without consent, in the aptly named Sleeping Beauty Ward in which patients are put in a coma-like sleep for many days, unconsciously enduring repeated incidents of humiliation and torture. The narrator explicates, “As they lay in their own excrement and vomit and blood and urine, naked, dying, their relatives would try and visit them, try to have the treatment stopped, but Goddard was God, and his word was law.” (p.5). The narrative of Therese Gillis enacts this silencing: “Therese lay silent and unresponsive in the bed. Her mother stared in desperation and anguish at the other women in the Sunroom...But her daughter’s eyes were blank and her mouth was closed.” (p.49). Shirley Walker identifies the central theme of *The White Garden* as “female longing and despair,” which is counter-acted by the allusion to the texts of Vita Sackville-West and the two saints which, Walker asserts, “are all texts of female defiance.”48 Interlaced within these dark narratives of struggle and despair are texts by inspirational women of real strength and power.

The three pivotal historical intertextual references are complex and inspiring women who introduce notions of martyrdom and the avant-garde: St Theresa of Avila (1515-1582) who was canonized in 1622, St Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897) who was canonised in 1925, and author Vita Sackville-West (1892-1962). Vita Sackville-West is now mostly recognised for her affair with Virginia Woolf

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and as the inspiration for Woolf's novel, *Orlando*, but was also an accomplished poet and novelist in her own right. More importantly, however, is her role as creator of the White Garden and her association with Bloomsbury, with, as described by Shirley Walker, "its aura of alternative sexuality and aristocratic decadence," which invokes the themes of Gothic excess and transgression. The intertextual link to Vita also evokes a glamorous image of androgyny which functions as a compelling contrast to the piousness of the two saints. St Theresa of Avila was a revolutionary and mystic visionary who lived during the sixteenth century and founded a new holy order of nuns. She is commemorated by Sackville-West in *The Eagle and the Dove*: "It is sufficient to say that no woman lacking the determination, the inspiration, and the ability of St. Teresa could possibly have triumphed. This visionary was one of the most capable women the world has seen." George Eliot alludes to St Teresa in *Middlemarch* to establish a contrast to the novel's protagonist, Dorothea Brooke. Judith Johnston remarks that Teresa's "life of achievement is offered as a contrast to the heroine of *Middlemarch*, Dorothea Brooke, and all that Dorothea fails to achieve." In addition, in her Prelude to *Middlemarch*, George Eliot pays tribute to Saint Teresa, remarking that her "passionate, ideal nature demanded an epic life," which she achieved through "the reform of a religious order." Sackville-West also highlights the differences in character between St Theresa of Avila and St Thérèse in *The Eagle and the Dove*. Despite the emphasis Sackville-West places on St Thérèse's humility, and what she describes as her "concealed and humble

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life,\textsuperscript{53} the impact that her text, *Histioire d' une âme* had after her death (orders requesting her book were received in large quantities from all over France) is inspirational, and attests to the power of the written word.\textsuperscript{54} In contrast to the grand life of Teresa of Avila, St Thérèse is emblematic of the ‘small, powerless woman’ who is empowered through textual expression. The presence of these three women, who are associated with writing and epic achievement, creates a vital contrast in the novel to the horrific forms of oppression experienced by the women confined at the clinic.

Closely linked to the mystery of Vickie’s death is the narrative of Therese Gillis who is admitted as a patient at Mandala by her mother and who comes to believe she is St Thérèse of Lisieux. The narratives of St Thérèse of Lisieux and Therese are presented in the text as a continuous monologue, differentiated only by italics, which links the saint’s desire for union with the Divine and close relationship with her sister, Celine, with Therese Gillis’ affection for and longing to reunite with her childhood friend, Violetta.\textsuperscript{55} The linking of the two monologues enhances the imaginary connection between them and Bird’s representation of these accounts are reproduced ironically as she conflates the mystical visions of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux with the anguished hallucinations of Therese Gillis, blurring the line between mysticism and delusion. It is also revealed that Therese’s separation from Violetta at age twelve is the catalyst for her breakdown as a young woman, which results in her hospitalization at

\textsuperscript{53} Sackville-West, p.172.
\textsuperscript{54} Sackville-West, p.174.
\textsuperscript{55} This key relationship in the text also mirrors Vita Sackville-West’s relationship with her childhood friend, Violet Keppel, with whom she had a love affair during her marriage to Harold Nicolson.
Mandala and is triggered by her favourite sister, Bridget’s, decision to enter the convent.

The special bond between sisters, as well as the cruelty often present in certain sibling relationships, is also disclosed in Therese’s monologue. The following passage celebrates the joy and solidarity of sisterhood:

I swam in the sea with my sisters, our hair like foam, our tails shimmering with rainbows inspired by petrol spilling on wet tar. Holding hands we would ride up, up on the rising, curling swell. All the waters of the world, all the perfumes of Arabia, all the stars of heaven. We were a troupe, a team, a laughter, a tranquility, a marvel of mermaids. And I swam in the sea with my sisters, and the sun shone all day long. (p.87).

Therese is also the plaything to her five older sisters who dress her up as “Daphne the deaf and dumb Downs Syndrome sister” to elicit sympathy from “the lady in the witch’s house round the corner.” (p.82). Therese also recalls childhood moments of real cruelty, “One day they took off my underpants and held me on a cold iron bar until I screamed, and then they comforted me. ‘What good girls they are,’ my grandmother said. ‘They won’t let that little one cry for even a minute.’” (p.82). Therese’s friendship with Violetta is a loving alternative to the ambivalent relationship she has with her own sisters and the loss of this important friendship is the catalyst for her delusional split from reality, as her own identity becomes subsumed by the saint they called the Little Flower. Susanne Becker refers to Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) as “one of the first modernist versions of that writing that tells the sexual woman’s story.” The mad woman, the overtly sexual and voiceless woman-made-monstrous who is condemned in nineteenth-century Gothic, exemplified by

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56 Becker, p.72.
Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre* and Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights*, is given subjectivity in contemporary Gothic literature by women. Therese’s desire for Violetta represents an aberrant sexuality, which is not acknowledged or valorized by their society and the two girls are separated abruptly when Violetta is forced to move away with her family, after her father remarries. The lyrical passages which describe Therese’s feelings for Violetta contrast sharply with the brutal acts of sexual violence perpetrated by Goddard and create a space in the text in which Therese can articulate the depth of her erotic feelings, despite her confinement. The representation of homosexual desire in *The White Garden* recalls Hester Harper in Elizabeth Jolley’s *The Well* and reflects the way contemporary Australian women writers employ the Gothic mode to question hetero-normativity in contemporary Australian society. Despite these contemporary concerns, however, Bird’s work is also concerned with those traditional tales which continue to resonate with the modern reader: fairy-tales.

One of the recurring elements of contemporary Gothic by women writers is their engagement with fairy-tales. Fairy-tales informing *The White Garden* include Charles Perrault’s “Sleeping Beauty” and Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid,” which are both cruel and violent tales concerned with betrayal and female suffering. The familiar tale of Sleeping Beauty, who is awakened from a hundred-year-sleep by the kiss of a handsome prince, is transformed into a hellish image of abject misery and abuse in *The White Garden*. The following Gothic scene from *The White Garden* describes the patients in the Sleeping Beauty ward and evokes a nightmarish image of enforced unconsciousness and
neglect which subverts the patriarchal image of female passivity contained in the fairy tale:

They were covered in sores, and their breathing was laboured. They were in a state of deep sedation, and from time to time each of them would cry out in the terror of nightmare, shrieking as the devil of hallucination danced across their tortured minds. The ward was lit by one ghostly green light. (p.164).

In addition, Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” frames the narrative of *The White Garden*, with its central theme of female sacrifice. Bird strongly critiques this theme as the women locked away at Mandala are unable, or unwilling, to sacrifice what is precious to them so that they can conform to patriarchal values. Fairy tale motifs are also employed by Elizabeth Jolley in *The Well* to challenge these ubiquitous patriarchal scripts. In the work of contemporary women writers, particularly those writing in the Gothic mode, fairy tales are restored to a place of prominence and honour the oral tradition of women story-tellers from which they are derived. Fairy tales, often devalued and disregarded as mere entertainment for young children, are introduced to comment on universal themes which reflect the experiences of women’s lives. More importantly, however, they are reclaimed from the distortions of patriarchal discourse and are adapted within a contemporary context in which contemporary women writers subvert and challenge Western patriarchal inscriptions. Bird’s use of fairy tales also corresponds to her project of writing about “the discovery of universal values.”

The use of fairy tale and folk tale will be explored in greater depth in the following section on *Red Shoes* as both the narrative and the central character in the second novel of the trilogy are significantly influenced by the conventions and motifs of traditional fairy tales.

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In *The White Garden* textual consumption is a motif for discourses of knowledge women are forced to ingest. Toward the end of Therese's tape-recorded confessions she begins to eat pages from *The Imitation of Christ*, the fifteenth-century spiritual text written by Thomas à Kempis with its emphasis on passive devotion to God. The ingestion of this text coincides with the deepening decline of Therese's grasp on reality as she fully abandons her own identity as Therese Gillis and assumes the persona of St Thérèse. Therese registers her increasing mental distress when she comments, "I have wept. I have eaten two pages of the book [*The Imitation of Christ*]. I will make a meal of it." (p.100). In addition, this motif is utilized again, toward the end of the novel, in an alternate fairy tale which has parallels with the narrative of *The White Garden*. It tells the story of the triumph of a young woman in her quest to find the red book of knowledge which was lost when her older sister was murdered by an evil man, disguised as a noble lord. After many years, the young heroine's quest comes to an end, at the house of a wise man who lives in the mountains, when she discovers the book in the belly of a fish. On discovering the red book her older sister is restored to life and she and her sister both consume the red book of knowledge, a positive act signifying the importance of seeking knowledge and understanding. By contrast, Therese's digestion of certain pages from *The Imitation of Christ* has the effect of exacerbating her delusions; it signifies her final splitting off from reality, her "colonization by the Little Flower," (p.171) and she begins to live a delusory and non-authentic life. However, the digestion of knowledge by the sisters in this story is a powerful image conveying the importance of the consumption of the right kinds of knowledge and contests the Biblical image of Eve who is punished
in the Garden of Eden for seeking knowledge. This modern fairy tale, embedded within the narrative, is a story of fortitude, persistence, love and hope and appears prior to Laura uncovering the truth about her sister’s death which symbolically mirrors her successful quest. The final image of Laura releasing pages from her red book, *The Eagle and the Dove*, into the sea, is a gesture symbolizing release; release from the past and liberation from her obsession with the mystery surrounding her sister’s death. It is a moment of empowerment and closure and foreshadows the importance of the sea as a central motif in the final novel of the trilogy, *Cape Grimm*. The final image of Laura releasing the scarlet ribbon which, “serpentine, moves slowly,” also suggests possibilities for further stories and leads into the second novel in the trilogy, *Red Shoes*. (p.218).
In *Red Shoes*, Bird’s employment of folklore and mythology becomes central to our understanding of the narrative. The novel is structurally unique in that it is divided into two sections, The Narrative and The Footnote, which are intended to be read interchangeably, with the pun on the word ‘foot’ linking it to the ‘Red Shoes’ of the title. The preface at the beginning of the Footnote reads, “The material in The Footnote is like the life that moves beneath the surface of a pond. The Narrative exists above the water, partly dependent on the matter below.” (p.234). The Footnote contains references to historical figures, fairy tales and myths, and includes explanatory notes on the significance of a wide array of symbolic references pertinent to The Narrative. The Footnote, then, is structurally equivalent to the Gothic basement or crypt, in which Bird delights the reader with tales of “the darkest, most sadistic, masochistic kind.” (p.8).

While *The White Garden* presents an eclectic range of narrative voices, a Gothic device which subverts traditional realist narratives, *Red Shoes* differs from *The White Garden* with the adoption of a single narrator, Beau, the guardian angel of one of the three central female characters, Petra Penfold-Knight. Beau’s wry humor is integral to his narrative style and is evident in his instruction to the reader that “the story I tell you is best read as a kind of dream, as a mirage, perhaps,” which parodies the Gothic convention, established by Horace Walpole, of the author of a Gothic work claiming that the origin of the story came about
Moreover, Beau’s insistence that the novel be read as a dream and his repeated caveat, ‘Be not afraid,’ which parodies the words of the Archangel Gabriel at the Annunciation, does nothing to ameliorate some of the more disturbing elements of the novel, particularly the narrative of fifteen-year-old Celeste. (pp.5-6). Celeste is appropriated from her unwed teenage mother, Sylvie, when she is born, to become the first child raised at the newly formed religious cult, the Hill House Brethren. The cult is the creation of another charismatic, Dr. Irving Clay, who becomes known as the Captain. His character plays a minor role, however, and it isn’t long before Petra can ‘out-charisma old Irving’ in the eyes of the other cult members. (p.113). In addition, although all three novels in the trilogy rely on fairy tales to inform the narrative, Red Shoes, which is an adapted version of the Hans Christian Andersen tale “The Red Shoes,” is the novel that most resembles the style and structure of a fairy tale. Like Angela Carter, with whom she is often compared, Bird challenges traditional interpretations of fairy tales and imbues them with a satirical, modern twist.59

The story of Petra in Red Shoes begins in a dilapidated red brick house in Tasmania during her childhood and then moves to Melbourne, Victoria when she is a young adult.60 The modest shoemaker’s home in Tasmania where Petra is

58 In addition to Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto (1764), Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1817) and Robert Louis Stevenson’s The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1886) are further examples of Gothic novels whose authors claim they emerged from a dream.

59 British playwright Howard Barker radically re-configures the Grimm Brothers’ version of “Snow White” in his play, Knowledge and a Girl (the Snow White Case). In Howard’s play the wicked stepmother is returned to a place of prominence as the rebellious Queen, and Snow White is stripped of her virginal innocence. Barker’s play subverts many of the elements of the original tale, particularly those which reflect stereotypically patriarchal representations of women.

60 Bird’s choice of the name Petra recalls the lost city of Petra in Jordan, home to the nomadic Nabatean Empire. Once a magnificent and thriving city, Petra was abandoned and left to disintegrate after the defeat of the Nabatean Empire by the Roman Empire. The defeat of Petra
raised evokes both the young girl in Andersen’s tale of “The Red Shoes,” who is also born into a life of poverty, and Andersen himself, whose father was also a shoemaker. This narrative device is characteristic of Bird’s approach to intertextuality, which intentionally hovers on the line between the imaginary and the real. Furthermore, Petra’s humble childhood Tasmanian home is juxtaposed with the various houses of Melbourne which are mostly palatial buildings reflecting a European aesthetic. Donna Heiland remarks in *Gothic and Gender*:

> The relation between mother country and colony is not just one of difference, but also one of likeness, an uncanny doubling that is by definition gothic, and that makes clear the uncertain ground on which terms like “nation,” “mother country,” and “colony” really stand.61

Bird’s trilogy enters this territory of Gothic uncertainty to explore white postcolonial Australia’s uneasy relationship to the mother country. Petra is the appointed ‘Mama’ of the Hill House Brethren and her relationship to the members of the brethren, especially the young girls under her care, engages with one of the key tropes of Female Gothic literature: the ambivalent relationship to the mother figure. This relationship in *Red Shoes*, particularly between Petra and Celeste, can also be read as a metaphor for the ambivalent relationship between the postcolonial subject in Australia, and the motherland. In addition, the European-style settings presented in the first two novels reflect this uncanny doubling of likeness and difference through the replication of the architecture of the mother country, further intensifying the uncanny experience of the Australian postcolonial condition. Replication is a central motif in *The White Garden* and this is extended in *Red Shoes* through the European Gothic settings. ‘Shalimar,’

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Sister Denise Winter's Home for Unwed Mothers, is the place where Sylvie Fisher is sent until her daughter, Colette, is born and is described as a marvelous house with elaborate ceilings, brass chandeliers and a sunken garden. Similarly, the "grand fantasy-gothic" (p.110) Hill House is home to the male contingent of the Brethren and is based on Monsalvat, an actual landmark on the outskirts of Victoria, which is made up of a variety of Gothic-style buildings, built in the 1930s. Beau remarks, "It was just the place for bringing up the children, a neat little prison within a paradise." (p.89). Again, recalling the anachronistic Appleyard College in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, these European-inspired nineteenth-century Victorian buildings, a reflection of British Imperialism, function in the text as archaic sites of human misery, cruelty and suffering and form a stark contrast to the dangerous and isolated natural landscape of Tasmania, which becomes the Gothic setting for *Cape Grimm*. Moreover, it is not until *Cape Grimm* that an Aboriginal ghost penetrates this textual landscape as Bird extends her challenge to the patriarchal social order in Australia to also encompass an exploration of colonial dislocation and the alienation of European Australia against the backdrop of the dark history of Tasmania and the brutal treatment of its Indigenous inhabitants.

Reviews of *Red Shoes* invariably allude to Bird's pastiche of fairy tales to enrich and augment the narrative, as well as its structural affinity to this form. Anna Skea describes *Red Shoes* as "a horribly fascinating story" and a "tale which is worthy of the Brothers Grimm at their grimmest." In addition, Nicholas Birns comments on The Footnote section which contains references to many popular

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fairy tales as a ""reparative space," where the ravages of the past can be comprehended in a way that makes the future possible," which also remarks on the way Bird re-imagines many of the old tales.63 Similarly, Thuy On maintains that the "power of the book lies not in its tale of cult brain washing but in Bird's use of myths, fairytales and historical grotesqueries to create a montage of story telling."64 The intertextual presentation of fairy tales in Red Shoes dovetails nicely with her adaptation of Gothic conventions to reveal hidden, suppressed and forgotten stories in twentieth-century Australia.

Scholarship in the field of myth and fairy tale reveals the enduring power of these stories. Angela Carter points out that although one of the first "self-conscious" collections of European fairy tales was assembled by Charles Perrault in 1697, women were the original tellers of the oral tales that were to become known as fairy tales.65 Owing to this association, fairy tales have long been trivialized and disparaged. Auerback and Knoepfmacher in their introduction to Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers comment that although the most acclaimed writers of literature for children were men, including Lewis Carroll, George MacDonald and James Barrie, they assert that women writers during the mid-and-late-Victorian period in England turned to the fairy tale, which was an 'acceptable' mode of literature for women, as a way of voicing their "yearning for autonomy and authority."66 Although this may be true for the women writers that Auerback and Knoepfmacher critique in

63 Nicholas Birns, "Guardian Angels, Human Evil" Antipodes, 12:2 (1998), p.120.
Forbidden Journeys, including Christina Rossetti, and the lesser-known Juliana Horatia Ewing and Jean Ingelow, the fairy tale market in England in the late nineteenth-century was dominated by male writers, and women’s contributions were often devalued. An example of this is the polymath, Andrew Lang, who published a series of twelve books on fairy tales between 1889 and 1910 which were gathered by Lang’s wife and other women contributors. According to Judith Johnston, Lang acted as “overseer” and “editor-in-chief” on these publications, which were actually translated by Lang’s wife and other women, which suggests “the degree to which his work might be considered an intensely commercial enterprise, run along factory lines, rather than active scholarship.”

Jack Zipes points out that the majority of nineteenth-century writers working within the fairy tale genre, including Lang, were concerned with maintaining the status quo of conservative Victorian ideals and constructed stories which reflected this. However, certain women writers at this time, including Charlotte Brontë, were adapting elements of fairy tales through the emerging form of the novel, as a way of offering a critique of gender ideologies in Victorian society.

Attest[ing to the authority of the fairy tale tradition, and indeed, its link to the Gothic, Maria Tatar notes the parallels found between the tale of “Cinderella” and Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre, which, Tatar argues, “inaugurated with full force the critique of fairy-tale romance in fiction by women for women.” In addition to Victorian women writers, elements of fairy tale narratives are also

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discernible in Virginia Woolf’s canonical modernist novel, *To the Lighthouse*, which Auerbach and Knoepflmacher assert makes us “aware of moralistic male revisions of female journeys.” From this tradition, Bird, whose stories are also concerned with journeys, particularly journeys associated with migration and its associated sense of displacement and exile, crystallizes the authority and significance of the tales within an Australian cultural context. Bird comments in an interview with Gerardo Rodríguez that she is fascinated by the German folk tales which, she declares, are “probably speaking a feminine language which appeals to women writers in particular.” This idea corresponds with the way that the Gothic, which is also considered an orthodox genre and an ‘appropriate’ one for women writers, is utilized by women as a way of contesting dominant cultural and social ideologies.

The use of myth and fairy tales by women writers has been explored by Susan Sellers in *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women’s Fiction*, which details the considerable scholarship that has been conducted in this field, in addition to discussing the work of a diverse range of contemporary women writers whose work engages with these traditional stories including A.S. Byatt, Hélène Cixous, Anne Rice and Angela Carter. Bird acknowledges the importance of these tales when she comments in an interview with Gerardo Rodríguez that these popular stories, “express in Western thought many of the deep problems in human life in such a magical and frankly matter-of-fact way. I love that tone, and I feel nourished by it.” Firstly, it is important to note that Sellers does not draw any distinction between ‘myth’ and ‘fairy tale,’ “as the terms seem currently

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70 Auerbach and Knoepflmacher, p.7.
71 Salas, “‘Time and Tide’: An Interview with Carmel Bird,” p.130.
72 Salas, “‘Time and Tide’: An Interview with Carmel Bird,” p.128.
synonymous,” although she does acknowledge the “important differences in their historical evolution” and considers the happy ending the “peculiar province of fairy tale.” Sellers identifies the two principal theorists in the study of fairy tales as Jack Zipes and Marina Warner and postulates that her own thesis derives from these seminal figures, although she does differ from them in certain ways. Sellers argues that for the revised story to retain its power as myth it must contain elements of the original story; that to “alter the status quo,” it is important to acknowledge the “existing cultural currency,” and then change can be effected through the re-interpretation and re-invention of mythic material.

Similarly, Marina Warner, who Bird quotes in *Red Shoes* and refers to in her interview with Shirley Walker, remarks: “Myths convey values and expectations which are always evolving, in the process of being formed, but – and this is fortunate – never set so hard they cannot be changed again, and newly told stories can be more helpful than repeating old ones.” In a similar vein, Jack Zipes’ sociohistorical approach to myth and fairy tales incorporates the belief that revisions to fairy tales are important, indeed, necessary:

The purpose of producing a revised fairy tale is to create something new that incorporates the critical and creative thinking of the producer and corresponds to changed demands and tastes of audiences. As a result of transformed values, the revised classical fairy tale seeks to alter the reader’s views of traditional patterns, images and codes.

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74 Sellers, pp.135-6.
75 Bird responds to the question postulated by Shirley Walker in “Conversations,” on whether she is familiar with Marina Warner’s work on fairy tales by stating that she is a “huge fan” of her work, p.285.
Generally speaking, Sellers, Zipes and Warner all acknowledge the importance of fairy tales as a literary form whilst at the same time reinforcing the significance of reconfiguration and creative engagement.

Bird introduces an interesting strategy in her approach to the tales. In a recent interview, she revealed that, "on a big scale I am re-writing [the Hans Christian Andersen story] ‘Red Shoes,’” but that she is also concerned with preserving the essence of the original tales, as told by Andersen and the Grimm brothers.\(^{78}\) In the Footnote section Beau narrates two different versions of “Cinderella;” the first is the Chinese version recorded in the late ninth century and the second is the adapted version by the Grimm brothers. Beau remains faithful to the original versions of the tales, criticizing Disney for extracting “from both the Grimms and Perrault the elements that appealed to his moral and commercial sense and has, with his powerful images and songs, implanted his versions of the stories into the hearts of children all over the world.” (p.250). Through Beau, Bird valorises fairy tales and myth as multivalent and constantly evolving stories which contain archetypal patterns with continuing relevance. The archetypal patterns which are represented in fairy tales and myth and which emerge from the novels of The Mandala Trilogy include the triumph of the oppressed; the grief associated with loss and heartbreak; the desire for spiritual transcendence; the wonder of human endurance; competition and envy between women; the lost child and cruelty to children; and the healing power of love. However, Bird has also expressed an ambivalence toward these tales in her other writings, especially with regard to the power they have in shaping women’s perceptions and expectations of

\(^{78}\) Carmel Bird, in an interview with the author at her home in Melbourne on June 28, 2007.
themselves. In *The Common Rat* (1993), a collection of short stories and essays published before the trilogy, Bird includes an essay entitled, “The Red Riding Hood Virus,” describing the effect of fairy tales on young girls as akin to a virus which can kill, particularly the clichéd fairy tale depiction of the female characters as submissive and waiting to be “discovered and rescued.” The novels of *The Mandala Trilogy*, however, adopt an approach to fairy tale and mythic material with an emphasis on critical reconsideration.

Both fairy tales and Gothic literature have been described as conservative genres with readily recognisable tropes and conventions, many of which overlap. Parallels between the narrative conventions of folklore and Gothic literature are readily identifiable: the use of supernatural elements, the preponderance of orphans, confinement and escape, the persecuted heroine, haunting, the stealing of children, the lost child and, as Lucie Armitt remarks, the “alluring façade” of home which becomes “an imprisoning structure containing *unheimlich* secrets.” Paradoxically, however, for contemporary women writers it is precisely through the adaptation and extension of these orthodox literary forms that subversion is possible. Maureen Duffy asserts that both myth and fairy tales enable the reader to “experience vicariously states and desires” which they are unable to actually live out. This also recalls Diane Long Hoeveler’s assertion that many Gothic texts written by women function as a source of ‘wish fulfillment’ for the reader who can indirectly experience the adventures of the heroine. This idea,

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82 Hoeveler, p.205.
however, is more pertinent to eighteenth-and nineteenth-century Gothic literature by women with its emphasis on adventure, and escape from the domestic into exotic lands. Moreover, fairy tales are often dismissed as harmless stories for children which serve a didactic and moralizing function when introduced at a certain point in a young person’s life. It is this position that Bird challenges, particularly in her presentation of the story of “The Little Mermaid,” which the narrator describes as one of Petra’s preferred stories to read to the young girls at Hill House. Petra uses the stories as tools of study for the children and other members of the Brethren, as a way of constructing the world outside the walls of Ararat as a place of “evil and darkness and terrible dangers, full of murderous villains and tricksters,” which is also very revealing of the way fairy tales have been employed to shape the ideas, and fears, of young children. (p.176). The following passage on “The Little Mermaid,” with its overarching metaphors of the silencing of women and self-abnegation, is taken from The Footnote and is typical of Beau’s colloquial commentary on the tales before he relates them. It also highlights the way Bird, through Beau’s commentary, is determined to invert the notion of fairy tales as merely innocuous entertainment for children as Beau comments on the way that feminist theory will blatantly disavow certain folklore narratives that appear to circumscribe women:

This is one of the key anti-feminist stories, yet girls in the 1990s apparently still identify with the sacrificial life of the mermaid. What I mean is, you couldn’t get away with writing this story today, because of feminism. But there is something deep in the story, and some answering chime in girls. Even now. Like Cyane, the mermaid dissolves into the water. Why would girls get so hooked by this twisted stuff? I realize that Petra was hung up on stories about mutilated feet, and that she loved to feed this image to her young flock. But she is far from the only adult who presents this fare to a child, places it on a child’s pillow as a bedtime story. Nightmare, more like. (p.272).
Beau, although technically an angel, is gendered male and what appears to be a comment which is critical of fairy tales actually highlights the problematic relationship between fairy tales and feminist thought which also mirrors the conflicting relationship between feminist theory and Gothic literature. Certain feminist critics, such as Karen E. Rowe, attest that "fairy tales perpetuate the patriarchal status quo by making female subordination seem a romantically desirable, indeed an inescapable fate."\(^\text{83}\) In addition, Gilbert and Gubar argue, "As the legend of Lilith shows, and as psychoanalysts from Freud and Jung onward have observed, myths and fairy tales often both state and enforce culture's sentences with greater accuracy than more sophisticated literary texts."\(^\text{84}\) However, Maria Tatar in the Introduction to *The Classic Fairy Tales* adopts a more progressive stance on the function of fairy tales. Tatar convincingly argues:

Some versions of Little Red Riding Hood's story or Snow White's story may appear to reenforce (sic) stereotypes; others may have an emancipatory potential; still others may seem radically feminist. All are of historical interest, revealing the ways in which a story has been adapted to a culture and been shaped by its social practices. The new story may be ideologically correct or ideologically suspect, but it can always serve as the point of departure for debate, critique, and dialogue.\(^\text{85}\)

Indeed, contemporary writers' approaches to fairy tales acknowledge the influence of these "sacred cultural texts,"\(^\text{86}\) to shape and influence our lives. Bird's approach to the fairy tale canon is not exactly a close re-writing of specific tales in the way Angela Carter re-works popular fairy tales for a contemporary

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\(^{85}\) Tatar, p.xiv.

\(^{86}\) Tatar, p.xvii.
adult audience, but she adopts them as a supplement to her own story, sometimes presenting different historical versions and often offering a critique or comment after the telling, which honours the significance of these archetypal patterns to our lives.

*Red Shoes* has a simpler narrative structure than *The White Garden* and evokes a fairy-tale clarity and guilelessness characteristic of Beau's style of narration. Petra Penfold-Knight is a child of uncommon beauty and extraordinary charisma, who has the 'Halo Effect,' and is described by Beau as "a kind of witch, a fascinating, mesmerizing, charismatic witch-woman." (p.15). The 'Halo Effect' is a term used by Beau in *Red Shoes* to describe irresistible and potentially destructive charisma; a rare combination of beauty, charm and talent possessed by all three protagonists in the trilogy. In addition to the connection with Hans Christian Andersen's, "The Red Shoes" Petra is also linked in the text to the Andersen tale, "The Snow Queen" and exemplifies, indeed parodies, the cruel and dominating mother figure which recurs in Gothic fiction. The majority of Gothic texts by Australian women writers explored thus far includes an example of the cruel and imperious mother figure: Mrs Watt in *Coonardoo*, Mrs Appleyard in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Hester Harper in *The Well*, and Petra Penfold-Knight in *Red Shoes*. Moreover, in each successive text this archetypal Gothic figure becomes increasingly treacherous and is satirized in *Red Shoes*. It is also interesting to note that no such figure appears in the early Gothic stories of Barbara Baynton; the maternal figure in "The Dreamer" dies and is brutally raped and murdered in "The Chosen Vessel." However, the inclusion of the mother figure in Baynton, albeit in a different capacity than in the subsequent
texts discussed, anticipates the significance of the maternal figure to the Gothic writing of Australian women and reflects the socio-historical context in which Baynton was writing which greatly influenced the thematic concerns of her stories, particularly the very real threats facing colonial women living in Australia’s outback. The representation of the mother figure in the Gothic work of Australian women writers, which is linked to ideas about national identity and the landscape, has become increasingly complex and subversive in their representation and is one of the defining tropes of the Australian Female Gothic tradition.

Beau’s narration conveys only a small degree of sympathy for Petra as she predominantly functions in the text as an evil and fascinating character, emblematic of those cruel women in fairy tales such as the wicked stepmother in “Snow White” and the self-absorbed and icy Queen in “The Snow Queen.” Alternatively, the reader’s sympathy is evoked through the tragic story of Sylvie and Colette. Sylvie is the teenage mother of the baby Colette – later renamed Celeste - who is stolen by Petra to become one of the first babies to be raised by the Hill House Brethren. Sylvie, who “knows only loss and the madness of her own imagination,” mourns her child for the rest of her life. (p.204). Petra’s cruelty is best illustrated by the horrifying and calculated murder of Celeste, her surrogate daughter, when she realizes Celeste is beginning to question the bizarre spiritual doctrines of the cult Petra has helped establish.

*Red Shoes* introduces the idea of the cult, or religious sect, which is further developed in *Cape Grimm*. The phenomenon of religious sects ties in well with
Gothic concerns as they typically exist outside the center and evoke the Gothic tropes of confinement and oppression. Through the extremist religious community of the Hill House Brethren, Bird re-imagines an alternative to the Gothic castle, which also moves beyond the asylum of *The White Garden*, as a site for the struggle for autonomy and liberation from oppression, by the heroine. Cults are marginal and hermetic religious sects that invite suspicion, ridicule and fear from mainstream culture, yet are a curious recurring historical phenomenon. In *Red Shoes* and *Cape Grimm*, Bird explores the terrible abuse of power that one charismatic individual can exert over a large group of people to the extent that they become alienated from their families, their homes and their identities; they become zombie-like in their adherence to the law of the cult. The narrator comments on the autocratic nature of the Hill House Brethren, “Their beliefs were many-faceted and flexible, but there were rules, the principal one being absolute loyalty to Irving Clay – the Captain, the Master.” (p.91). The religious sects in *Red Shoes* and *Cape Grimm* become the locus of patriarchal oppression and the cult is emblematic of dominating cultural, political and social institutions which deny individuality and are hostile to notions of difference. The children of Hill House have their hair dyed blonde and are all dressed in the same outfits, including the obligatory red shoes. In addition, as cults are frequently targets for ridicule, the satirical elements characteristic of contemporary Gothic, work particularly well. However, although the cult is based on a patriarchal social order with Irving Clay at the helm, this idea is problematised through the character of Petra who, over time, usurps the patriarchal role. The traditional Gothic dichotomy of the aggressive male villain and his hapless female victim is inverted as Petra, the femme fatale, becomes the malevolent female figure of
death to Celeste, the naïve and innocent victim. Cults are also linked to issues of power through control of the mind and body, and are inevitably tied up with the sexual manipulation and abuse of its members, which includes both adults and children. This sinister aspect of the cult is not overlooked by Bird, and Jack Zipes’ description of the mermaid in the tale of “The Little Mermaid,” as “voiceless and tortured, deprived physically and psychologically,” evokes the link between this tale and the deprivation experienced by cult members who are enslaved by a poisonous doctrine designed only to empower its leaders.87

The two fairy tales that are central to the narrative in Red Shoes, “The Red Shoes” and ‘The Little Mermaid’ are both tales by Hans Christian Andersen which revolve around the leitmotifs of feet and shoes. They incorporate the puritanical idea of self-sacrifice and the disempowerment of women, and are tales which explore the pain of loss and separation. These themes are extended in the tragic story of Sylvie who is unable to heal from the loss of her child. Sylvie’s story is linked to the Greek myth of Persephone and Demeter, which is re-told in the Footnotes and is a myth portraying the strength of a mother’s love for her only daughter which acts as a contrast to the malignant maternity embodied by Petra. Sylvie and Petra represent two extremes of motherhood: one is grieving the loss of a child unjustly stolen from her and the other is so obsessed by her desire for power and domination that she murders her adopted child. This focus on motherhood also foregrounds the motifs of the lost child and the stolen child, which are a recurring anxiety in Australian Gothic literature and which are of particular interest to Bird. Pierce comments on the significance

of the lost child to Bird’s work: “The figure of the abused, abandoned, kidnapped, murdered child is sovereign in Bird’s fiction, and its presentation the more frightening because effected with such equanimity, with a sense that this is now the normal state of affairs.” While it is true that Bird consistently returns to this image in her work, I believe that she is fully cognizant of the significance of this motif in Australia and the traumatic legacy that such a loss entails.

The lost child also takes on greater symbolic importance in Australia with the emergence, in the early 1980s, of evidence concerning the removal of Aboriginal children from their families. Bird has edited a book, *The Stolen Children – Their Stories* (1998), published in the same year as *Red Shoes*, which is a collection of first-hand accounts from Indigenous Australians, now known collectively as ‘the stolen generations,’ who were taken from their families when very young and placed in institutions, or with white families, as part of European Australia’s policy of assimilation, or, as Bird writes, “a policy of systematic genocide.”

The appropriation of children from frightened and confused young mothers to form the first generation of members of the Hill House Brethren further extends the imaginative engagement with this motif in contemporary Australian literature. Bain Attwood asserts that our understanding of the removal of Indigenous children from their parents “is now central to Australian historical consciousness.” The program of assimilation underlying this shameful moment in Australian history, with its emphasis on the disavowal of difference, is

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satirized through the absurd homogeneity of the ‘cult’ in Bird’s work. Furthermore, *Red Shoes* re-imagines the traditional approach to the motif of the lost child which, in colonial narratives, usually entails a single child lost in the harsh Australian bush. In the introduction to *The Stolen Children – Their Stories* Bird writes, “The history of white Australians is marred by children lost in the bush, children spirited away by unknown agents. The stories of these children have become the stuff of myth, icons of horror, and they ring with the notes of darkest nightmare.”91 In another study of the image of the lost child in the Australian bush, *Babes in the Bush: The Making of an Australian Image*, Kim Torney comments that until World War One, the figure of the lost child “became the dominant Australian image of loss.”92 Bird initially re-animated this iconic figure in the late twentieth century in *The Bluebird Café* (1990), the novel published prior to the trilogy. *The Bluebird Café* introduces the lost child motif in Bird’s work and follows a more traditional approach to the motif than seen in *Red Shoes*. Also set in Tasmania, *The Bluebird Café* concerns the disappearance of the midget child, Lovelygod Mean, and explores the mythology that builds up in the town over this disappearance. *The Bluebird Café* also anticipates the trilogy through what has now become some of Bird’s trademark narrative strategies: the inclusion of multiple narrators, a back section with detailed references to a variety of intertextual references pertaining to the narrative, and the establishment of Tasmania as Bird’s preferred territory for Gothic mythmaking.

The story of Celeste, who we first meet as one of the stolen babies, resumes in the novel when she is fifteen. Celeste’s pseudo-release from Hill House, orchestrated by Petra, creates a textual space in which she is free to articulate her true thoughts and feelings about her life under the despotic rule of ‘Mother.’ Her account is, like that of Terese in The White Garden, a genuine struggle for subjectivity and a desperate attempt to make sense of a world in which her identity has been subsumed by the outlandish spiritual discourse and bizarre ritualistic practices of Hill House. However, as we later learn, Petra has complete access to Celeste’s diaries and her presence hovers over her confessions in a way that recalls Claire Kahane’s influential essay on the mother figure and its relation to the Gothic, “The Gothic Mirror.” Kahane was one of the first theorists to identify the importance of the mother figure to the Female Gothic which she considers more influential to the Female Gothic plot than the heroine’s flight from the male villain. As was introduced in the discussion on Barbara Baynton’s “The Dreamer,” Kahane’s discussion identifies the “spectral presence of a dead-undead mother, archaic and all-encompassing, a ghost signifying the problematics of femininity which the heroine must confront.”93 In Red Shoes, however, through the character of Petra, the all-encompassing spectral presence is larger than life. Moreover, the ‘problematics of femininity’ has even greater resonance in Australian Female Gothic, as the mother figure in Australia traditionally evokes anxieties about the landscape. Here though, the focus is on Petra as the over-civilising and controlling mother figure and the suffering this invokes, which is emblematic of the anxieties surrounding Australia’s attempt to forge its own identity, separate from England, a theme

93 Kahane, p.336.
already explored in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Kahane continues: “This ongoing battle with a mirror image who is both self and other is what I find at the center of the Gothic structure, which allows me to confront the confusion between mother and daughter and the intricate web of psychic relations that constitute their bond.”94 Celeste’s struggle for identity and desire for freedom can also be read as a metaphor for the struggle by Australian women in a nation which can be demonstrably hostile to female subjectivity. *Red Shoes* involves a shift of emphasis from the struggle with imperial dominance, toward an exploration of the experiences of women, and female identity, in Australia in the mid-to-late twentieth century. As Kahane asserts, the Female Gothic narrative “encourages an active exploration of the limits of identity.”95 As with the intense and obsessive mother/daughter relationship in Elizabeth Jolley’s, *The Well* contemporary Australian Female Gothic foregrounds the ambivalence inherent in this relationship as a key to understanding female identity.

The struggle between Petra and Celeste involves the young girl’s desire for the necessary separation from the mother at the same time as she fears this separation. Petra desires total domination over her surrogate daughter and ultimately this struggle ends in both their deaths. Ellen Moers comments in *Literary Women* on the “impetus to self-destruction,” which she considers has become an increasingly significant theme in the work of women writers in the twentieth century and which has also become a defining one in Female Gothic literature.96 Celeste’s death could be read as a self-destructive act by Petra as it is commented on in the narrative that Celeste resembles Petra’s young self, a self

94 Kahane, p.337.
95 Kahane, p.342.
96 Moers, p.107.
particularly loathsome to Petra because of her experience with sexual abuse by her childhood friend's father, who turns out to be the local minister. It is also significant that Celeste is murdered in Tasmania, a place which recalls the isolation and misery of Petra's childhood.

Celeste proceeds to chronicle her thoughts and impressions in an isolated, sparsely furnished house by the sea in Tasmania, known as the 'Apartment.' The significance of Tasmania as a Gothic location, with its sense of isolation and disconnection from Australia's mainland, is introduced in *Red Shoes* and expanded on, in greater depth, in *Cape Grimm*. Tasmania is the place of Petra's troubled childhood and also the place where Celeste is murdered, burnt to death in a deliberately lit fire masterminded by Petra. Beau, ironically, comments, "The wicked queen succeeds in destroying the beautiful young Snow White in a burning tower on the edge of a far-off cliff." (p.204). In *Red Shoes* the heroine is destroyed, but not before Celeste's act of rebellion sparks the beginning of the downfall of Petra and her cult. Alison Milbank proposes in *Daughters of the House* that, "What can be asserted in relation to the Gothic novel is its own concern with the lack of mothering, and how a revaluation of mothering is essential in the creation of a self of value." 97 Bird shows the deadly consequences of this lack of mothering in *Red Shoes* through the malignant mother figure of Petra. The female protagonist in *Cape Grimm*, by contrast, is a young mother who emerges from a devastating loss as a woman of real strength and vision, a figure conspicuously lacking in *Red Shoes*.

Suffering bodies, particularly female bodies, have long been associated with Gothic literature and cruelty to children as a theme has appeared in all of the texts discussed thus far - with the exception of Barbara Baynton, whose stories are more contained and thematically focussed on relationships between men and women in colonial Australia. All three novels in Bird’s trilogy also include examples of cruelty to children, although the examples in *Red Shoes* are particularly disturbing. *Red Shoes* contains many incidences of extreme cruelty to children. This cruelty is employed by Petra for her own amusement and as a way of instilling fear and maintaining compliance. The children are exposed to various physical tortures, including beatings, starvation and one child, Golden Jade, endures years of suffering from having her feet bound “according to ancient Chinese rules.” (p.169). In addition, the young girls also serve as sexual playthings for the men at Hill House and must endure a particularly harrowing initiation ceremony, ‘Threshold,’ in which they are given LSD and raped by Ambrose Goddard (from *The White Garden*, who makes a brief re-appearance here) while Petra voyeuristically delights in this sadistic spectacle of cruelty. Celeste comments that during her Threshold experience, “the most frightening thing was hearing the Mother laughing on the other side of the room. There was no refuge.” (p.188). A further example is the way Petra would order a child to be held by their ankles, naked, over a “pit of excrement in the cellar,” for a minor transgression. (p.18). Moreover, in *Red Shoes* the character most likely to act as the heroine, Celeste, has no real agency and is unable to confront and challenge the oppressive forces that control her. The oppression experienced by Celeste extends beyond traditional physical confinement and becomes both a physical and psychological enslavement.
Through the character of Petra, who is as capable of cruelty and manipulation as the male Gothic villain in *The White Garden*, Bird subverts gender stereotypes associated with traditional Gothic literature. Unlike Mrs Watt in *Coonardoo* and Mrs Appleyard in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, who are eventually defeated by the patriarchal power they desperately try to emulate, Petra easily usurps Irving's role as leader and uses it to her own advantage. Like Ambrose Goddard, Petra also commits suicide, but not because her reputation has been destroyed. Her death serves to elevate her even more in the eyes of the Brethren. Moreover, Celeste in *Red Shoes* has parallels with the character of Virginia Mean in the final novel in the trilogy, *Cape Grimm*, who is liberated from the oppressive cult which defines her early life and who must struggle to create a life for herself and her child in a strange new world.
Chapter Six

Carmel Bird Re-mythologises the Tasmanian Landscape in *Cape Grimm*

*Cape Grimm* begins with a fictional letter written by one of the Grimm brothers, Jakob, to Lady Jane Franklin, the respected and accomplished wife of the Governor of Van Diemen’s Land, Sir John Franklin (1836-1843), which personally thanks her for bringing his tales to the Antipodes.¹ This letter, Bird asserts, conveys the idea of the dissemination of stories from Europe to colonial children, “stories transmitted by a woman to nourish the minds and hearts of the children of Tasmania, so far away from the centres of ‘civilisation.’”² The technique of the framing narrative in *Cape Grimm*, which links this novel to the previous two in the trilogy through the foregrounding of stories and children, also recalls the use of a framing narrative in Mary Shelley’s canonical Gothic text, *Frankenstein*. Indeed, there are many analogues to be found between Mary Shelley’s Gothic tale of scientific exploration and Carmel Bird’s *Cape Grimm*: both novels include a maniacal visionary figure who is ultimately defeated by his own masculine hubris (Victor Frankenstein in *Frankenstein* and Caleb Mean in *Cape Grimm*); both texts are thematically concerned with ancestral ties and the bonds within families; both explore the Gothic theme of alienation; and both explore the potentially destructive forces of nature. Caleb Mean, who is first introduced in the text as a child, is the ‘charismatic’ protagonist in *Cape Grimm* and completes the trilogy of the three charismatic figures who Bird conceived as

¹ Lady Jane Franklin is an esteemed figure in the history of colonial Australia. The published diaries from her overland journey to Port Phillip and Sydney in 1839 offer an intriguing account of colonial society in Australia. See *This Errant Lady: Jane Franklin’s Overland Journey to Port Phillip and Sydney, 1839*, ed. Penny Russell (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2002).

² Salas, “‘Time and Tide’: An Interview with Carmel Bird,” p.131.
comprising, “a trinity (man, woman and child) where each character would be charismatic and evil, but different according to age and gender.” Cape Grimm also introduces the key character of Caleb’s wife and cousin, Virginia, who is associated with the motif of silence and who takes on a significant role in the text as a female visionary and healer.

The critical reception of Cape Grimm was mostly positive, although some negative reactions attest to the uniqueness and challenging nature of the novel. In an early review, Murray Waldren claims that as an author Bird is still “dramatically underestimated by local literati,” commenting that “few other writers here operate with such sustained originality in exploring disquieting themes.” Specifically commenting on Cape Grimm, he declares it is a tale that “fully engages heart and mind.” However, James Ley, despite considering Cape Grimm a novel of “real substance,” is critical of the first-person narrator Paul Van Loon, who he feels “lacks credibility” as a psychiatrist and, at the end of the review, asserts that “the fiction itself might have been better served by being more grounded.” Ley displays an obvious distaste for the fantastical and Gothic elements of the novel which recalls the earlier preference for realism in the field of Australian literature. However, Peter Pierce, like Waldren, considers Bird “one of Australia’s finest storytellers and connoisseurs of history.” He commends Cape Grimm as “a bravura performance, a fantasia of and on

3 Carmel Bird, “‘Time and Tide,’ An Interview with Carmel Bird,” p.126.
4 The name Virginia, intended as an homage to Virginia Woolf, is a favourite name of Bird’s which is also the name of a character in The Bluebird Café (1990) and is used as a pseudonym by Bird in the writing manual, Dear Writer (1988).
5 Waldren, p.8.
6 Waldren, p.8.
storytelling, that makes all the stranger the tale Bird has added to the many told of Tasmania. It is also in *Cape Grimm* that place, specifically the setting of Tasmania, plays such a central role in our understanding of Bird’s use of Gothic conventions within an Australian context, which has led to her being hailed by some commentators, as observed by Murray Waldren, as the creator of ‘Tasmanian Gothic.’

Another Australian author who belongs to this elite sub-genre of Australian Gothic is Tasmanian novelist Richard Flanagan, whose grotesquely satirical novel, *Gould’s Book of Fish* (2001) also gothicizes the Tasmanian landscape. Imprisoned at the Sarah Island penal colony, Van Diemen’s Land, the convict narrator, Billy Gould (based on an historical figure whose book of twenty-six fish paintings is held in the State Library of Tasmania), describes a Gothic, rat-infested island stinking of death, a “fetid settlement” defined by “oppression, degradation and subjugation,” which is surrounded by poisoned water. Flanagan constructs a unique, although difficult to classify, postmodern account of European settlement in Australia through the disjointed prose of a nineteenth-century convict which details a scathing portrait of the brutal treatment of convicts and Aboriginal Australians in Van Diemen’s Land. *Gould’s Book of Fish* revels in Gothic excess and the grotesque and utilizes these tropes to satirise the attempt made by colonial authorities to create a new world in colonial Australia which is a replication of Europe. Although Flanagan and Bird are both concerned with similar themes, particularly the re-imagining of Australian history in Tasmania, *Gould’s Book of Fish* is more extreme in its use of satire

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9 Pierce, “Clouds gather in a grim Skye,” p.11.
10 Waldren, p.8.
and delights in providing detailed and vivid descriptions of convict brutality in colonial Australia. One point of difference between the two texts, however, is the presence in Bird’s text of a charismatic Gothic villain.

Caleb Mean becomes the object of fear and disgust in *Cape Grimm*: the Gothic villain who is monstrous and loathed, but also charismatic and mesmerizing and who belongs to a tradition of Gothic figures who are captivatingly charismatic, yet destructive. The plot of *Cape Grimm* also involves a religious community, or cult, as does *Red Shoes*, but this novel focuses less on the strange activities of the cult, and is more concerned with tracing its origin and depicting the devastating after-effects of its destruction.12 The cult in *Cape Grimm* evolves from the imagination and peculiar religious beliefs of the Mean family, with its “remote pure way of looking at the world,” over many generations until all of its members are incinerated by Caleb, the cult’s chosen prophet and charismatic preacher, in a mass conflagration from which only himself, his cousin and young lover Virginia, and their child Golden survive. (p.169). The novel traces Caleb’s heritage back to the arrival of his ancestors, Minerva Hinshelwood, “an exotic South American beauty,” from Peru (p.81) and Magnus Mean, a Scottish Protestant from the Isle of Skye, who are shipwrecked in Bass Strait in 1851 (along with an orphaned baby, Niña), thrown together by fate in a union which

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12 At her appearance at the Brisbane Writer’s Festival in 2007 Bird discussed *Cape Grimm* and mentioned the Tasmanian-based cult, the ‘Exclusive Brethren,’ a name which, according to Bird, “promised great strangeness and otherness.” She discussed the Brethren as inspiration for the religious community in *Cape Grimm* and also referred to an article written by Michael Bachelard in *The Age*, August 22, 2007 which reported that the Brethren had a private meeting with then-Prime Minister, John Howard. The article claimed that the Brethren frequently donated money to the Australian Liberal Party, demonstrating the disturbing covert influence certain sects may have on people’s lives.
becomes “pure legendary romance” in the Mean family and leaves them stranded on Puddingstone Island, Van Diemen’s Land. (p.88).

This novel also employs a Gothic narrative structure which interweaves various textual sources, including Virginia’s chronicle and the opening letter from Jakob Grimm. This effectively unsettles the first-person narration by the ironically named narrator, Paul Van Loon, Caleb’s psychiatrist and sometime poet for whom Caleb is a life-long object of fascination. Furthermore, like Red Shoes, Cape Grimm is structurally divided into two sections. The first section contains the narrative and the second, “Time and Tide,” contains material presented in a linear and chronological fashion, although the meanings are in fact non-linear and “intersect and interact in many diverse patterns and manners” at varying points in the narrative. (p.247). This vast collection of material, positioned at the end of the text, has become a signature strategy of Bird’s which is also utilized in both Red Shoes and The Bluebird Café (1990) to add depth and richness to the details of the narrative.

An extract from the journal of real-life explorer Matthew Flinders appears before the Prologue to the novel which also includes a quotation from the fictional character Carrillo Mean - another recurring strategy of Bird’s in her project of blurring the lines between fact and fiction. The quotation from cartographer Matthew Flinders, who circumnavigated Van Diemen’s Land in the late

13 Caleb is essentially Paul’s alter ego or Gothic ‘double,’ which links this novel to Robert Louis Stevenson’s masculine melodrama, Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.
14 Carrillo Mean is also a character from The Bluebird Café whose philosophical and learned quotations often appear throughout the trilogy. Although he is part of the Mean family, Carrillo is an erudite and esteemed academic without links to the community at Skye who has founded “a well-respected centre for the recovery of lost children in California.” (p.114).
eighteenth century, locates the novel firmly within the Gothic genre as it explains
the genesis of the naming of Cape Grim, which is derived from its grotesque and
beastly physical appearance: "The north-west cape of Van Diemen’s Land is a
steep, black head, which from its appearance I called ‘Cape Grim.’" (p.IX).
Moreover, the opening of the first chapter entitled, ‘Dust,’ establishes that this is
a novel concerned with re-mythologising national identity in Australia. The first
line, which prefigures the destruction of the religious community of Skye, named
after the island on which Magnus Mean, Caleb’s ancestor, was born, reads:
"Once there was a fair country where the people lived in peace and in prosperity
until there came a time when a strange child appeared and the land was turned to
dust, to dust and ashes.” (p.1). This ‘strange child’ is a reference to Caleb who
is nicknamed El Niño by his family, the Spanish name for the infant Jesus, who
is described by Paul as an “awesome, angel/demon,” who then later becomes the
maniacal, charismatic leader of the settlement at Skye.15 (p.35). The first
chapter also situates the narrative in a post-9/11, twenty-first century political
context in Australia, making reference to the tenth anniversary of Mabo and the
sinking of the SIEV-X.16

The previous two novels in the trilogy, which are both predominantly set in
Melbourne, Victoria, reflect a postcolonial Australian city which is, physically
and ideologically, shaped by Victorian England. Although many of the tropes

15 El Niño is also the name of a “global climatic perturbation” which affects weather patterns and
alters climates around the world and is responsible for the shipwreck which brings Magnus,
Minerva and Niña to Puddingstone Island. (p.265).
16 Mabo was a land rights decision made by the High Court of Australia in 1992 which
overturned the doctrine of “terra nullius” and acknowledged previous ownership of the land by
Aboriginal people. The SIEV-X was a migrant ship carrying hundreds of refugees, adults and
children, from Indonesia en route to Christmas Island. Almost everybody on board the ship were
killed when the ship sank in October, 2001.
recurring in Australian Gothic are present in *The White Garden* and *Red Shoes*: the lost child, cruelty to children, the imperious mother figure; in *Cape Grimm* Bird emphasises place by gothicising the Tasmanian landscape and linking it to Australia’s colonial past, particularly the massacres of the Tasmanian Aboriginals. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin comment in *Post-Colonial Studies* on the importance of place to the construction of identity in colonized societies:

But if we see place as not simply a neutral location for the imperial project, we can see how intimately place is involved in the development of identity, how deeply it is involved in history, and how deeply implicated it is in the systems of representation – language, writing and the creative arts – that develop in any society but in colonized societies in particular.\(^{17}\)

Place is central in *Cape Grimm* to the re-imagining and challenging of dominant historical representations of national identity. In a recent interview I conducted with Bird she discussed the significance of Tasmania (her birthplace) as separate from the rest of Australia, not only in terms of its literal physical separation from the continent of Australia, but also the severity of the penal system in Tasmania as the historical relocation for England’s worst criminals.\(^{18}\) She also commented on the irony of Tasmania’s barbaric European history coupled with the palpable beauty of its landscape. Tasmania, as it is represented in *Cape Grimm*, is often lovingly described by the narrator and is, at times, imbued with a magical, fairy-tale quality; the vibrant landscape is alive with beauty, colour and movement. Yet, it is also a gothicised landscape, inhabited by “some great brooding spirit” (p.4) and described as a place of “mysterious and impenetrable swarthy forests, woods of deep and black-green shadows where demons lurk and angels hover


\(^{18}\) Carmel Bird, in an interview with the author at her home in Melbourne on June 28, 2008.
nervously.” (p.2). Tasmania is certainly an appropriate place to explore ideas of haunting and the uncanny, as it often evokes images of a remote and untamed landscape in the Australian imagination. Suzanne Falkiner comments in *The Writer's Landscape: Settlement* that of all the states in Australia, “Tasmania seems most prey to its geography and history in the mind of its writers.”¹⁹ Bird’s narrator, Paul Van Loon, establishes the vital connection between story and place in the first chapter:

> Sometimes I feel in writing these stories I give the account not only of the people and the events at Cape Grimm and nearby, but of Cape Grimm country itself, this place where the very winds and the very air are caught and sifted and measured and recorded. For Caleb and his deeds really are fashioned of the air – of the history and the geography, and they are made from the rocks and the trees and the water. (p.21).

The significance of place is also demonstrated in Bird’s earlier novel, *The Bluebird Café* (1990), also set in Tasmania, in a remote village which becomes an Americanised tourist mecca after the construction of ‘The Historic Museum Village of Copperfield,’ a hideous replica of the actual town of Copperfield, located in the far north-west of Tasmania, at Cape Grim. *The Bluebird Café* explores the idea of the commodification and exploitation of place and, like *Cape Grimm*, is concerned with the historical significance of place, and its continuing influence on the present.

The representation of landscape in *Cape Grimm* signifies a movement from simplistic traditional representations of the Australian landscape as cruel and fickle -and feminised, as argued by Kay Schaffer - toward a more complicated depiction, one that embraces the possibility of diversity and beauty and which

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subverts early masculinised Australian myths involving the exploitation of the land. Graeme Turner comments in *National Fictions* that, “the preoccupation with the land and its communities is so strong in Australian narrative as to be remarkable.”²⁰ Furthermore, in traditional Australian narratives, the solitary (male) character is often at odds with his environment and any attempt at mastering the landscape usually ends in defeat, which, according to Turner, results in “the construction of the condition of enclosure, restriction and entrapment,” or, the Gothic condition.²¹ Turner further comments on the continuing focus and survival of the bush legend in Australian narratives as a result of its “ideological mythic function” rather than “its close relation to historical conditions.”²² Bird challenges the ‘ideological mythic function’ of the Australian outback by offering a new myth of landscape, one which broadens our understanding of a silenced and shameful colonial past. Moreover, the Gothic nature of the landscape in *Cape Grimm* is altered drastically from these early imaginings.

Bird’s construction of the Australian landscape undermines the devaluing of the landscape which is a feature of the dominant masculine tradition. Bird gothicises the Australian, or, more specifically, the Tasmanian landscape, which is described by the narrator as a “wild, cold, haunted place.” (p.155). However, Bird’s depiction of landscape also allows for the possibility of beauty, and involves the complex intermingling of disparate elements. Bird’s vision of the Australian landscape blends aspects of European culture with vital elements of Aboriginal history, as well as maintaining a respect for the land - an approach

which has only recently began to emerge in Australian narratives. For example, Virginia’s descriptions of the landscape in her chronicle poetically describes her surroundings in a way which valorizes the natural world. She describes the sea as a “dreamy turquoise” which is “festooned with the slow lace of waving foam.” (p.111). She also writes of “the shy albatross, in their dignified courting dance on the rocks down below,” which contrasts significantly with the traditional focus on the Australian outback in the male tradition which often constructed the landscape as flat, empty and featureless. (p.111). Virginia’s connection to nature is further illustrated in her chronicle when she is imprisoned for questioning at Hobart, after the holocaust at Skye. Confined within a cell Virginia longs for the sights and sounds of nature:

The temperature in the room was always the same. I could not smell the earth, I could not sense the rocks that must lie deep at the base, at the bone-creaking foundations of the building. I could not imagine the haunted rivers and whispering, rustling, spectral streams that must run somewhere nearby in the world of the hospital or prison where I was kept. (p.104).

Virginia’s unique perspective has added interest for the reader because she has been sequestered from mainstream Australian society for much of her life. She writes in her chronicle, “I realize that I have no real concept of society in general, for that is the way we were always meant to be in Skye, ignorant of the wicked world.” (p.122). As a character Virginia is free from many of the cultural stereotypes about Australian society and the biased and negative attitudes toward Australian history and the landscape that pervade the value system of mainstream Australian culture. Bird utilizes Virginia’s innocent perspective to critique this bias and challenge these attitudes.
One of the central recurring images in *Cape Grimm* is the sea. Chapter eighteen opens with a quotation from Goethe, which reads, “All is born of water. All is sustained by water,” which hints at the significance of water in *Cape Grimm* as a life-giving source. (p.175). Water functions as a complex motif in Elizabeth Jolley’s *The Well* and appears as a recurring motif in Australian Gothic literature by contemporary women writers. The proliferation of sea imagery in *Cape Grimm* marks a shift in the Australian Female Gothic imaginary from the arid Australian outback to the vast impenetrable depths of the ocean. In *Cape Grimm*, the ocean is, contradictorily, a place of beauty, linked to the power of the imagination, as well as a place of menace and fear. After Minerva and Magnus are shipwrecked in Bass Strait, the narrator declares, “Above them loomed the arcing no-colour of the southern sky while deep down serpents larger than imagination thrashed in steely dark-green shadowy ocean depths.” (p.92). In a land renowned for its lack of water, and this lack is introduced in the apocalyptic first line in which the land is imagined by the narrator as “turning to dust,” water takes on special meaning. (p.1). The trope of water also recalls the famous second stanza from Australian poet Dorothea Mackellar’s poem ‘My Country’ which reads: “I love a sunburnt country/A land of sweeping plains/Of ragged mountain ranges/Of droughts and flooding rains.” 23 This rather hackneyed stanza from ‘My Country,’ which is often quoted in relation to the Australian landscape, is a reminder of the second, often overlooked, image which emerges from this line: the flooding rains. An over-emphasis on drought and heat has resulted in a rather limited conceptualization of the Australian landscape and

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23 Dorothea Mackellar, “My Country,” *My Country and Other Poems* (Lloyd O’Neil: South Yarra, Victoria, 1982), p.11. The name Dorothea appears in *Cape Grimm* as a beloved, innocent three-year-old girl who tragically dies after eating a poisonous hydrangea flower. This character will also be referred to in the discussion on the lost child motif.
Bird challenges this over-representation of drought in traditional depictions of landscape and discourses on national identity, through a privileging of water in *Cape Grimm*.

Many of the significant events in the narrative take place on and around the ocean; it is both a place of peril which also offers the possibility for escape, a contradiction the novel doesn’t ever really resolve.\(^{24}\) *Cape Grimm* also incorporates many intertextual references in which the sea is emphasized and includes references to a giant squid, the legendary ‘Kraken,’ a giant non-human, mythic sea creature, in two of the most important scenes in the novel: the original shipwreck in Bass Strait in 1851 and Caleb’s death, after he escapes from Black River. Water in *Cape Grimm* also physically separates the characters from their true homes, becoming a symbol of alienation which evokes the postcolonial anxiety of separation from the motherland, a recurring thematic concern in Gothic literature by Australian women writers. This anxiety is apparent in most of the characters in the novel, who are all displaced in some way from their idea of home.

*Cape Grimm* also explores the dislocation and alienation of the migrant experience in Australia as Paul relays anecdotes about his experiences as the grandson of Dutch immigrants, and comments sardonically on his mother’s “bleak Tasmanian teenage migrant life.” (p.14). The experience of otherness is a hallmark of Gothic fiction and in *Cape Grimm* Australia is experienced as a frightening and bewildering place for Van Loon and his migrant family. Paul

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\(^{24}\) Caleb drowns in Bass Strait toward the end of the novel after a failed escape attempt from Black River.
remarks that his parents were treated as outsiders growing up in Australia, “refugees from a strange place, unwanted second-class citizens.” (p.12). Paul’s own experience of growing up in Australia was influenced by his Dutch heritage and his parents’ alienation, but his own experience with ostracism was largely a result of a ‘lazy’ right eye for which he was required to wear a black eye-patch.25 Paul Van Loon challenges stereotypical ideas of an ‘Australian’ man; he is a romantic who loves D.H. Lawrence and an outsider who is teased as a child. Van Loon is also feminised in the text which further marginalises him from mainstream Australian culture. In the first chapter he is associated with ‘Rapunzel,’ “As a joke we sometimes call my office ‘Rapunzel’s Tower,’” one of the more recognisable fairy tales from the Grimm Brothers and a reference to Van Loon’s office at the Black River Psychiatric Detention Facility, where he works as a psychiatrist. (p.10). The figure of the moonbird (or shearwater) is symbolic of this desire for belonging which defines many of the characters and is illustrated by a diary entry made by Virginia after the loss of her family in the burning of Skye: “I am a sad lost remnant of a lost people, forever searching in my broken and bleeding heart for my sisters, forever longing for my home.” (p.161). This theme of displacement also leads to a consideration of how Bird utilizes the Gothic to contest the narrative of white settlement in postcolonial Australia which invokes the idea of Australia as a haunted nation.

Ken Gelder asserts that postcolonial nations such as Australia can “re-animate the traumas of their colonial pasts” through Gothic narratives, usually through the exploitation of the uncanny effects that the postcolonial experience invokes;

25 Difficulties in the vision of male characters in Gothic literature by women writers is often a way of feminising them. Indeed, the feminisation of Edward Rochester in Jane Eyre is a result of blindness caused by the fire at Thornfield Hall which precedes Edward and Jane’s marriage.
that is, a merging of the familiar with the unfamiliar. He also argues that postcolonial narratives "remain caught somewhere in between reconciliation and difference." In *Cape Grimm*, the silenced history of Tasmania is explored through the Gothic trope of the supernatural which is utilized in a way that 're-animates' the massacres of the Tasmanian Aboriginals. In one of the more interesting Gothic strategies employed in the novel, *Cape Grimm* dismantles widely-accepted assumptions about the colonial history of Australia through the intrusion of the supernatural to problematise historical accounts of the treatment of Indigenous Australians. Bird skillfully incorporates a spectral figure into the narrative, a young Aboriginal girl, Mannaginna, and the reader becomes a silent witness (through the eyes of Virginia) to her historically silenced version of history. It is not the explained supernatural of Ann Radcliffe and Charlotte Brontë, but neither is it intended as a frightening haunting characterised by the earth-bound ghosts of Cathy and Heathcliff, as Mannaginna, a beautiful fifteen-year old girl, is described by Virginia as a "dark bright spirit." (p.182). Bird politicizes the Gothic convention of the supernatural to explore the highly debated issue of the colonial treatment of Aboriginal Australians, extending the tradition which began with novels such as Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929) and which foreshadows Gail Jones' *Sorry* (2007).

Bird's construction of the Aboriginal spectre Mannaginna, although filtered through a white colonial perspective, not only acknowledges the silenced history of Aboriginal people in Australia, but also the affinity between Aboriginal people and the land, and the possession of mysterious forms of knowledge which remain

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outside the experience and comprehension of European Australia. Virginia writes, “Did I dream this, Mannaginna? Black girl, did I dream you? You show me the tracks of ants, you lead me to the nests of strange and edible insects. You teach me the names of trees, of winds, of mysterious pathways. I touch your hand and it is real.” (p.181). Through the descriptions by Virginia, European Australia is also a silent witness to the massacres which took place in Tasmania many years before, which have been the subject of much historical debate in Australia. Lyndall Ryan asserts in *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*:

In 1981 most of the published work on the history of the Tasmanian Aborigines had appeared in the nineteenth century. It included the histories prepared by James Bonwick, James Erskine Calder, James Backhouse Walker and John West. All these historians claimed that the Tasmanian Aborigines had fought an unsuccessful war with the settlers and, having lost, were either in the process of dying out or had already done so.28

As the history of Indigenous Australia is typically described through the discourse of white colonial male historians, Bird offers a counter-history which is concerned with resisting and undermining this discourse. When Mannaginna appears to Virginia, scenes from Australia’s violent past are played out like a film, in “a whole theatre of the imagination.” (p.181). Virginia writes:

> We see a company of black men on the shore, throwing spears, we see black women who are stolen, and black women who are pleased enough to leave the tribe to travel with the sealers. We see black people making sad mistake after sad mistake, and white people making different violent sad and mad mistakes as the chaos grows and the rain falls and the animals flee and forests fall. And swiftly death comes to haunt the tribal lands, death in the guise of war and of disease and sorrow...Like George Augustus Robinson, I hear the shrieks of the mothers, the cries of the children, the agony of the men. And I see the people, and I see the massacres, and they move across and through the phantom landscape of my sight. (pp.181-2).

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Cape Grimm is primarily interested in the story of the Mean family and, therefore, Bird does not go into a great deal of depth with her treatment of this aspect of the narrative. However, despite this, Bird also does not simplistically represent Aboriginal people merely as passive victims of European Australia. The Australian historian, Henry Reynolds, has sought to dismantle stereotypes about the Aboriginal response to white invasion and Cape Grimm reflects Reynolds' approach to the events which took place during white settlement. Reynolds proposes in The Other Side of the Frontier, which was one of the first historical accounts of white settlement to fully explore the complexity of the response by Aboriginal Australia to white settlement: "The black response to the invaders was more complex and more varied than anyone has hitherto suggested. Even sympathetic whites speak as though there was a single mode of black behaviour. Yet there was always diversity, contradiction, competing objectives." The above passage from Virginia's diary in Cape Grimm also conveys this observation made by Reynolds. In the following chapter, "The Ghosts of Suicide Bay," Paul elaborates further on these massacres while acknowledging that an account such as Virginia's would be dismissed as ridiculous. It is an interesting use of the supernatural, a Gothic convention most often associated with frivolity, but one which has been evoked in twentieth-century literature as a way of confronting and healing from crimes committed in the name of Imperialism. Attesting to the reality of the massacres, Reynolds comments:

Frontier violence was political violence. We cannot ignore it because it took place on the fringes of European settlement. Twenty thousand blacks were killed before federation. Their

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burial mound stands out as a landmark of awesome size on the peaceful plains of colonial history. If the bodies had been white our histories would be heavy with their story, a forest of monuments would celebrate their sacrifice.³⁰

In *An Indelible Stain?* Reynolds explores the question of genocide in Australian history, a topic which has generated substantial national debate. On the question of possible genocide in Tasmania, Reynolds declares: “Many settlers undoubtedly were extirpationists at heart, but it is not clear if this was true of the officials and military officers.”³¹ He does, however, explain that genocide is always a question of intent and although historical evidence clearly shows that Colonel George Arthur, who governed Tasmania from 1824 – 1836, intended to defeat the Tasmanian Aboriginals and appropriate their land, it fails to demonstrate whether his intent was to actually destroy the entire race of Tasmanian Aboriginals.³² Furthermore, between 1830 and 1834, surviving Aboriginals in Tasmania were sent to Wybalenna, a settlement on Flinders Island in Bass Strait.³³ Reynolds’ research on this settlement reveals that, although the death rate on Flinders Island reflects the annual rate of death in concentration camps (which have been declared by the UN as linked to unquestionable acts of genocide) it is still not possible to establish intent.³⁴ By contrast, *Cape Grimm* offers an alternative account of Tasmanian history, one which does not rely on the ambiguity of historical evidence. The narrator asserts, “When people can listen with the heart to dreams and poetry, then they will know the truth.” (p.190). Bird’s depiction of race relations in Tasmania during this highly contested period appeals not to cold logic and historical fact, but to the

³² Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain*, p.78.
³³ Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain*, p. 78.
imagination, particularly through the engagement with the Gothic motifs of haunting and the uncanny.

The trope of haunting recalls Toni Morrison’s Gothic novel *Beloved* (1988), set in 1873 after the Civil War and Emancipation in America, which evokes the haunting of a young black woman to imaginatively confront the trauma of slavery in America in the nineteenth century. The character of Beloved, according to Rebecca Ferguson, “represents the whole traumatic experience of slavery...she is dislocated in herself as well as dislocated in time, full of grief and need, love and resentment.”^35^ Although Bird’s depiction of the massacres of Tasmanian Aboriginals in *Cape Grimm* is not quite so far-reaching in its political treatment of race relations as *Beloved*, it does attempt to correct biased historical narratives by commenting on the impossibility of repressing violent histories and acknowledges the urgency for contemporary Australians to be aware of this history. Finally, Mannaginna evokes the fear of the lost child, which has become one of the defining motifs in Bird’s Gothic narratives and is returned to again in *Cape Grimm*.

*Cape Grimm* includes many examples of the lost child, the first instance being a little girl lost at sea, which is linked to the political context in Australia. The reference is to the actual sinking of the SIEV-X I in 2001, a ship carrying hundreds of asylum seekers, mostly women and children, from Indonesia en route to Christmas Island. The image of the little girl, alone, in the middle of the ocean pleading to her father, “If I die in the sea, don’t leave me here alone,” is

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one of the most disturbing examples of the lost child in the novel. (p.22). Counter-acting this image of loss is one of survival, through the character of baby Niña, whom Bird mentions in her interview with Shirley Walker, declaring, “And of course in Cape Grimm there are several occurrences of lost and stolen children – baby Niña being (to me at least) a very important and optimistic one.” Niña is saved from death by Magnus and Minerva in the section which traces the heritage of the Mean family, detailing their arrival in Australia by shipwreck, and symbolizes survival and hope. By contrast, the little three-year-old girl, Dorothea, who dies from eating a poisonous hydrangea flower is a further example of a tragic lost child, whose death becomes legendary within the Van Loon family. The narrator comments, “There would forever be unspeakable pain surrounding the memory of Dorothea. She is a tender loss, a gap in the emotional landscape in the family.” (p.34). In Cape Grimm the lost child motif emphasizes the vulnerability of childhood which is always in danger of being damaged or corrupted in some way. The motif of the lost child is also employed in far more dense and complicated ways in Cape Grimm; there are more examples of children being lost, so the anxiety surrounding the loss is heightened, but also because the child, Golden, who appears to have inherited her father’s potentially dangerous charisma and her mother’s other-worldly knowing, contradicts this image of childhood vulnerability and innocence, as does Caleb, the charismatic child who grows up to become a mass murderer. Golden, whose surname is Mean, refers to the phenomenon of a naturally occurring pattern, as Paul reveals in ‘Time and Tide,’ “in the realm of things that grow and unfold in

37 This cherishing of childhood is linked to the intertextual references to fairy tales in Cape Grimm, which includes some of the more obscure tales from the Grimm brothers and Hans Christian Andersen, than those included in Red Shoes.
steps," such as the shell of the paper nautilus, the seed head of the sunflower and the configuration of the inner ear. (p.271). The name Golden has further significance as it is also used in Red Shoes for the name of one of the girls in Petra’s Hill House Brethren, Golden Jade, who is separated from the other girls because of a foot deformity which results in her having her feet bound in a particularly cruel way. Both girls are special in some way, although Virginia’s daughter Golden, as we shall see, is singularised by a gift rather than a deformity.

Fire is a trope that has become so pervasive in Gothic literature by women as to become clichéd. It is traditionally utilised to destroy the Gothic castle in Female Gothic literature, an act which signifies the subversion of the old patriarchal social order. Typically, the use of the trope of fire in Gothic novels occurs at the end of the story, as a metaphorical cleansing and purifying of whatever Gothic drama has been enacted. In Cape Grimm, however, the fire is indicated in the first line (already quoted) and the burning of Skye is a highly contrived, mass conflagration which occurs close to the beginning of the narrative. The burning of the old order and the possibility for renewal, which is often what a Gothic fire signifies, is actually explored in this novel, rather than just suggested at the novel’s end, as in earlier Gothic tales. The character of Virginia, the only survivor apart from Caleb (and their child, Golden) is the sole figure who must assimilate the devastating genocide of her entire family by the man she loves, and then attempt to re-enter mainstream society. Through the act of chronicling her thoughts, ideas and impressions, the seventeen year-old Virginia begins to

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38 Examples of the metaphorical use of fire include the burning of Thornfield Hall in Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre, the fire which destroys Uncle Philip’s patriarchal toyshop in Angela Carter’s The Magic Toyshop and the destruction of Manderley in Daphne du Maurier’s Rebecca.
make sense of her hopelessly fractured existence and moves toward establishing a new life of freedom for herself and her daughter.

The Female Gothic motif of silence is re-figured by Bird through the character of Virginia and the silenced narrative of Tasmania’s history, motifs which intersect in the narrative. The silenced history of the massacres is told by a character who has also been silenced through tragedy, and the massacre at Skye is conflated with the massacres of the Tasmanian Aboriginals in the novel, so that Virginia is a highly empathetic witness to these events. Virginia’s silence earlier in the novel is a reaction to the trauma of losing her family in such a devastating way and recalls the silenced protagonist, Ada, in Jane Campion’s *The Piano*. Gail Jones, in her critique of the film, identifies a connection between silence and creativity and posits that Ada’s lack of speech in *The Piano* is constructed to subvert traditional representations of silence and, therefore, is not dis-empowering. Instead, Ada’s voice is displaced in various ways in the film: through the singular opening voice-over; through her daughter who often speaks for her; through body language and touch; through writing on a pad (like Virginia); and, principally, through the expression of music. In *Cape Grimm* Virginia’s silence is clearly the result of trauma but is also a necessary phase in her gradual return to civilized life and assimilation of incomprehensible trauma and loss. Virginia writes in her chronicle:

> I am unable to speak, unable to bring myself to open my mouth and utter, give voice, explain the progress and significance of the events of which I have found myself to be a player as well as an observer...Unable to use my voice, I therefore write this chronicle, this diary, in which I seek to document my

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observations, my thoughts, my feelings. Silence is a shield, a defence; it is also a weapon. (p.69).

Indeed, a respect and acceptance is afforded to Virginia and her need for time to heal by her caregivers, Father Fox and Gilia and Michael Vilez, which affirms her reaction to loss and trauma with the choice to remain silent until she is ready to speak again. Patricia Laurence identifies women’s silence as a ‘strategy of resistance and choice – a ritual of truth.’ Laurence continues:

In a new turn in feminist criticism, the preservation of these female silences by female authors is noted, and in a reversal of the traditional notion of women’s complicity with oppressive circumstances or cultural exclusion, such silences are viewed as a difference of view, an alternative code of “truth,” or, sometimes, an expression of anger – the only kind that would be socially tolerated.

I would argue that Virginia’s silence encompasses all of these aspects and, as a result, Virginia’s chronicle has greater power in the space of this male-narrated novel because, as Laurence observes, often these silent characters “become the ‘knowing’ and subjective centers,” of the novel. This description by Laurence aptly describes Virginia in Cape Grimm and also Rosamund Pryce-Jones in The White Garden who, although remaining silent for many years about the circumstances of Vickie’s death, is the character who finally reveals the truth to Laura about her sister’s death in The White Garden.

There is also a recognition in The White Garden of the dangers associated with enforced silence, or, as Tillie Olsen identified in her groundbreaking book about damaging silences which have pervaded literature, “unnatural” silences which

42 Laurence, p.158.
she defines as “the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being.”

The silencing of the women at Mandala, particularly the macabre Deep Sleep Therapy, is murderous and is really a form of punishment and cruelty, disguised as psychiatric care. Virginia’s lack of voice in the early chapters of *Cape Grimm*, however, can be seen as enhancing the believability of her subsequent encounters with Mannaginna and her ability to communicate with this strange, metaphysical world. Her chronicles act as a substitute for her spoken voice, yet we can’t forget that these are re-told through the narrator, Paul, who exerts a masculine control over her diary, as well as expressing a scientific cynicism toward her confessions, which he patronizingly describes as “naïve.” (p.238). Virginia’s voice eventually returns and she is an intriguing female character who contradicts the troubling image of female madness and defeat depicted in the previous two novels in the trilogy, particularly the character of Therese Gillis in *The White Garden*. Virginia’s diary is also essential to our understanding of her character and represents a movement toward agency and healing after her enslavement by Caleb. Bird quotes Anaïs Nin in *Dear Writer*, “The people who turn to the diary are seeking themselves, the tracing of a route toward expansion and awareness, the road to creativity.”

This impulse toward creative self-expression by female characters has also been identified in *The Well* and was discussed in relation to the previous two novels in the trilogy.

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43 Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1978), p.6. Olsen was the first theorist to critically explore the subject of silence as an area of critical enquiry. ‘Unnatural’ silence, according to Olsen, is not chosen but enforced on a person who is born into what is deemed the ‘wrong’ gender, race, class or time-period.

The relationship which develops between Paul and Virginia appears to be a supportive and loving one, although it is still troubling because of the age difference between them and Virginia’s lack of worldly experience. According to Eugenia DeLamotte in *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic*, “the ideology of Gothic romance idealises female passivity and dependence. At the crucial moment Gothic heroines are rescued, almost always by a man.”45 Although in some respects Paul is Virginia’s rescuer, *Cape Grimm* complicates the plot of a conventional Gothic romance in various ways. Paul helps Virginia to find her voice (his name is the first word she speaks when she begins to speak again) but the essay she writes at the end of the novel suggests that she is still influenced by some of the strange ideas held by Caleb and the Mean family, which defined her identity in the world before she met Paul. The relationship between Paul and Virginia enacts the possibility of reciprocated desire which is an interesting inversion of the Gothic theme of aberrant or corrupt desire. The narrative trajectory of *Cape Grimm* is the loving family, which opposes the artificial devotion to the cult and its leader, but the concluding ambiguous conversation between Paul and Golden severely undercuts the idea of ‘happy families.’ Interestingly, the first names of the couple recalls the novel by French writer Jacques-Henri Bernandine de Saint-Pierre, *Paul and Virginia*, published in 1787, which is a tale of tragic love, set in Mauritius, and this intertextual link establishes an undercurrent of doom to this relationship which belies the way it is presented, by Paul, in the novel.

45 DeLamotte, pp.221-2.
Cape Grimm raises a question which has preoccupied Gothic literature since the eighteenth century and concerns the nature of evil: how should society punish those people whose crimes against other human beings are so horrendous they are unable to live in society? The Black River Psychiatric Detention Facility is a very different psychiatric facility than the one depicted in The White Garden (the name Black River evokes associations with the spiritual and moral depravity of the inmates) as it is not women who are confined within its walls, but mostly male criminals, “dangerous rejects from society” who have done “incredibly mad and unspeakably terrible things.” (p.8). The facility which houses these most vicious of criminals is an architecturally-designed prison comprised of pastel-coloured chambers, rather than cells (intended as an experiment,) “each one inviting, embracing, stimulating,” which reflects the significant changes in social attitudes toward ideas of justice and retribution and, indeed, mental illness, than was illustrated by the barbaric treatments in The White Garden, which is set in Australia in the late 1960s. (p.8). The novel suggests that after the initial fascination and horror engendered by such gruesome criminal acts, and the desire by the public for the sensationalism of these crimes has worn off, there is a need to disregard the existence of these criminals. The novel does, however, hint at an alternative form of punishment for these murderous criminals. The repetition of a children’s rhyme earlier in the novel, the last line of which reads, “Burnandonedayyouwillburn,” combined with Caleb’s bizarre death after he escapes Black River, implies that true justice exists outside of those punishments that human beings can derive. (p.21, p.26). Although the approach to human punishment has changed significantly throughout the course of human history, becoming increasingly less severe over time, Bird seems to be suggesting that
society has not made any real progress when it comes to punishment for transgressions on a large-scale and the novel does not really offer any definitive solutions. Shirley Walker suggests, “Perhaps the nature of the El Niño cycle – the ‘eternal return’ implicit in it – suggests the emergence, again and again, of evil and charismatic leaders like Caleb.” Through the Gothic trope of ancestry, the origin and nature of evil is explored in the novel.

*Cape Grimm* traces the heritage of the mad visionary Caleb Mean, but this is done in a way that subverts the traditional gendered privileging of the male line. The trope of ancestry is also linked to the Gothic theme of the family curse and, to adopt a phrase by Robert Mighall, ‘ancestral returns’ which Mighall asserts is the “defining property of the Gothic mode, which is characterized by its attitude to the past, its tyrannies, legacies and unwelcome survivals or returns.” Although the narrator is male, it is Virginia’s heritage which becomes the focus of the story and her daughter, Golden, becomes the surviving ancestral link. This tracing of the female ancestral line inverts the Gothic trope of primogeniture which propelled the plots of early Gothic literature and, although the character of Golden is a child, she is given greater significance in the final scene with an ominous statement about the end of the world. This tracing of ancestry is employed to explain the crazed actions of Caleb, which the narrator suggests was the result of “many factors and ingredients,” which “came together over more than five generations to produce the events of that summer night in 1992.” (p.42). Bird is not conclusive about explaining the true cause of Caleb’s evil act,

46 Shirley Walker, “All the Way to *Cape Grimm*,” pp.274-5.
48 There is a brief mention by Paul in the final chapter of his and Virginia’s unborn children (twins), but only within the context of being Golden’s ‘half-brother’ and ‘half-sister.’ (p.238).
and with the character of Golden, who may return in the fourth novel *The Green Language*, there is an ambiguous blending of good and evil through her parentage, suggesting perhaps that to act on evil is a choice and not, as the early Gothicists proposed, a biological imperative. Paul realizes toward the end of the novel, "Caleb is after all, when all's said and done, a man like any other – which is a horrible thing in itself to contemplate. If he is like me, am I like him?" (p.215). In an uncanny echoing of her father's mad sermons, Golden smilingly predicts the end of the world in a conversation with Paul which ends the novel. After uncovering a statue of El Niño (an unsettling reminder of Caleb), Paul says to Golden, "the past can throw out very long shadows," to which Golden replies, "I suppose one day everything under the earth and everything under the sea will probably come up to the surface...That will be the end of the world" (p.243). This could be interpreted as ironic, or chillingly prophetic, given that Virginia notes in her chronicle that Caleb considered Golden a child with a special mission and the "gift of prophecy." (p. 101). The ending to *Cape Grimm* is ambiguous, unlike the endings of the first two novels in the trilogy which offer closure to the story that has developed. The ending of *Cape Grimm* also creates space for the development of another novel but it does not really resolve some of the difficult questions it has raised. However, in a novel so preoccupied with the inevitably of returns and the intrusion of the past in the present, it is possible to conclude that Golden Mean, an uncanny child with sinister potential, is likely to make a return in a future novel by Carmel Bird.

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49 In the interview I conducted with Bird she mentioned that the trilogy may be expanded to become a quartet with the soon to be published, *The Green Language*. 
Conclusion

My original idea for this dissertation was to conduct a comparison of Gothic literature, written by Australian women, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Instead, what has emerged is a thesis which traces a tradition of the Gothic by Australian women writers, focusing predominantly on the twentieth century. It was not until I serendipitously stumbled across the article by Nicholas Jose which included the statement made by feminist writer Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) (quoted in the Introduction) that a great writer is ‘an inheritor as well as an originator,’ that the central idea for this thesis really began to take shape. This article highlights to me the importance for identifying a tradition amongst a community of writers, as well as the need to continually question and re-define that tradition.

Throughout this thesis, I have focused on how Australian women writers have re-imagined a particular genre, the literary Gothic, and have found that through the consideration of this genre within a unique setting, the Gothic may be liberated from the dangers of formula and cliché. The Gothic is an inherited genre in Australia and one, I believe, which will continue to resonate within Australian fiction and film narratives. Gail Jones’ novel *Sorry*, published in 2007, is a further example of a contemporary Australian writer who has drawn on Gothic conventions and motifs to subvert traditional masculinist myths and narratives which have come to define the Australian cultural tradition. Jones’ novel engages with many of the tropes which I have identified as belonging to a distinct tradition of Gothic literature written by Australian women writers,
including colonial displacement and longing; betrayal; madness; the victimization and silencing of women; violence and sexual abuse; and the destructive consequences of repression. In addition, I have discussed more specific ideas in relation to the Gothic in Australia and discussed how Australian women writers have re-imagined the Australian landscape in a way which extends and complicates traditional masculine depictions of landscape and which challenges Kay Schaffer’s thesis that the Australian bush is inevitably depicted as a harsh and unforgiving feminised landscape in Australian literature. I have identified the recurring trope of the cruel and dominating mother-figure which I have linked to ideas about national identity in Australia, particularly the anxiety evoked through distance from the motherland and I have discussed the lost child as a key trope within this tradition as well as the alienation and dislocation experienced by women in colonial and postcolonial Australia. Finally, I have identified the Gothic trope of haunting as a metaphor for the intrusion of the past in the present and the idea of Australia as a nation haunted by the spectre of its colonial past.

As we continue to question ourselves as a nation, our place in the world and our relationship to our past, Australian literature will continue to represent those elements of Australian society which are difficult to integrate within an homogenous and overly simplified ‘image’ of what it is to be Australian. Australian writers will also continue to re-imagine the symbolic and narrative language of the Gothic to question discourses of power, to highlight social contradictions, to interrogate established cultural ideologies and, most importantly, to give narrative voice to some of our more unsettling stories.
Appendix

Re-imagining the Gothic in Contemporary Australia: Carmel Bird Discusses Her Mandala Trilogy

Carmel Bird’s first book, a collection of short stories entitled Births, Deaths and Marriages was published twenty-four years ago and she has been publishing consistently ever since. Carmel Bird’s contribution to the field of Australian literature as novelist, editor, the author of writer’s manuals and several short story collections, is preeminent. As one of Australia’s most innovative and prolific contemporary authors Bird’s extensive list of publications comprises of eight novels, including those that make up the critically-acclaimed Mandala Trilogy, The White Garden (1995), Red Shoes (1998) and Cape Grimm (2004); a book for children; a radio play, about the life of an Indigenous Tasmanian girl, Mathinna, who was adopted for a short time by the governor of Tasmania in the mid-nineteenth century; as editor of four anthologies of short stories by Australian authors, including The Penguin Century of Australian Stories (2000); and as editor of The Stolen Children – Their Stories (1998), a devastating collection of oral histories by Indigenous Australians who were forcibly removed from their families as small children. The Stolen Children – Their Stories offers white Australia an insight into the suffering endured by Indigenous Australians whose lives were shattered by the shameful policy of assimilation and, as Bird contends in the Introduction, the stories may have a redemptive quality, “in the act of telling both for the story tellers and for the listeners.”¹ Two themes fundamental to Bird’s work which are evoked in many of her texts are the lost child and the cultural importance of stories. Stories and the art of storytelling have the potential to be a source of healing and regeneration in Bird’s fiction and are often a source of empowerment for many of her characters.

Bird is also the author of three writing manuals, including the recently published *Writing the Story of Your Life* (2007) and one of her short stories, "A Telephone Call for Genevieve Snow" was made into a film, winning the *Silver Lion Award* for the best short film at the Venice International Film Festival in 2000. Several of her novels have been short listed for various awards and three of her novels, *The Bluebird Café* (1990), *The White Garden* and *Red Shoes* have all been short listed for the prestigious Miles Franklin award. Currently, she is working on *The Green Language*, a novel which she anticipates will extend the *Mandala Trilogy* into a quartet. Bird’s work is notable not only for its inventive narratives, richly diverse intertextual references and distinctive use of irony, but for the way it keenly evokes various Australian landscapes, particularly her birthplace of Tasmania, which becomes the key setting for the novels of the *Mandala Trilogy*. Bird’s Tasmania is a beautiful but haunted island that she often returns to in her work to interrogate and explore its dark history, creating a space for untold and forgotten stories. However, she is particularly concerned with the lives of Australian women, whose daily struggles, through her imaginative prose, become heroic feats.

My interest in Bird’s work was initially sparked by her playful, yet darkly satirical use of the Gothic genre. Having completed the discussion on the first novel of the *Mandala Trilogy* for the final chapter of my doctoral dissertation and ready to embark on a critique of the second novel, *Red Shoes*, I was thrilled to have the opportunity to personally interview Carmel and discuss with her some of the questions I had about her work. Carmel’s generous responses to my questions greatly enriched my understanding of her work and inspired me in the writing of the final section of my dissertation. The following interview took place at Carmel’s home in Melbourne over the course of a winter’s day in June 2007.
Was it a conscious choice to write your three novels The White Garden, Red Shoes and Cape Grimm as a trilogy?

No, it wasn’t a conscious choice. It was something that happened after writing The White Garden, I think. I think, you know. I haven’t thought about that. I didn’t sit down and think, “Must write a trilogy.” I wrote The White Garden and then I was still interested in charismatic people and the power they have over others and how interesting that is when it is used for selfish and even dark and even evil purposes. So, I moved on (I don’t know how these things happen) but I moved on to a charismatic woman and moved from the colour white to the colour red – I’m very interested in colours and how they function on our emotions and in our psychology – and then I realized that I was doing white, red and black...although, I haven’t named the black in Cape Grimm, but it’s black.

I am interested in the way thinkers organize the world and one of the ways of organizing the world is through alchemy and white, black and red are the colours of alchemy. So I thought I would have this trilogy focusing on those colours but what’s happened now is there is a fourth book which is green, so I don’t know what I am doing about any of that.

I think it is so amusing that Ambrose Goddard from The White Garden pops up again as a minor character in Red Shoes.

Oh, he would have to, yes. And his daughter is in Cape Grimm. The psychiatrist at the facility is his daughter and she is very bad - she was a little girl in The White Garden. She is one of Caleb’s doctors at the psychiatric facility and he is obsessed with her. She is using him and using his stuff for her own academic and career advancement, but he’s obsessed with her. He takes off in a little boat from her place and he drowns, probably attacked by a giant squid. Well, it happens! Of course, the giant squid is patterned into Cape Grimm because it was present at the original shipwreck which brought the Scottish man and the South American woman to Puddingstone island.
There are so many intertextual references in your work, it is almost like searching the internet - you start at a particular point and then you end up somewhere completely unexpected.

It is interesting that you say that because when interactivity became possible, electronically, it was very familiar to me because it is how I think and how I write. The CD-Rom of Red Shoes was a very natural thing for me to do. I had to get technical people to help me, but the design was mine. Even as far back as The Bluebird Café (which has got elements of these other novels in it as well) that also has a section at the back, called “A Reader’s Guide to The Bluebird Café.” So, already the idea of interactivity within the text itself is there so that there would be a mention in the body of the text of some person with an interesting name and then you can look at the back and find out what it means.

I love it. I am always going off and googling things so, to me, it is a similar process.

It is, yes.

You mentioned earlier the concept of charisma and the power that certain individuals possess over a large number of people which I see as linking the three novels of the trilogy.

Yes and one was a man, one was a woman and one was a child, representing the holy family. Where The Green Language picks up on that is that it begins with the theft in Rome of a miraculous statue of baby Jesus; the holy family is breaking down. When one is constructing these things they take the writer, or me anyway, by surprise.

So it must be awkward for someone to ask you about that?
No, it’s not awkward. It is very interesting to reflect because I don’t know that, before, I constructed for myself that idea that there is the holy family and, ‘oh my goodness!’ the baby’s been stolen, again.

*In Red Shoes* you describe the phrase ‘Green Language’ as the “ancient language of the birds.” Can you comment further on the meaning of this phrase?

It is the name of the language of the troubadours. It is a punning language and nobody can really pin any of it down. It is sometimes called the language of the birds, so it goes back to a very ancient idea that the birds speak to each other and carry very important messages from God. There are certain people who can interact with them, such as St. Francis.

*I think it is a beautiful phrase.*

It is a beautiful phrase. However, in the current ecological climate I am a bit worried about having it as a title because it is going to make people think it is about being green; the language of the ‘greenies.’ There is a character in it who is one of the charismatics, but not quite in the same way as the earlier books, who purports to speak this language. He makes puns and jokes all the time, so he could be very irritating. I have to be careful of him.

*What about Caleb’s daughter, Golden (from Cape Grimm), does she pop up in this one?*

Well she has to, but I haven’t really got her yet.

*I want to talk about humour in your work. I see your use of the Gothic and contemporary approaches to the Gothic, especially by women writers, as employing a distinctive satirical spin on traditional approaches to horror fiction.*

It is taking the mickey out of itself and, surely, *Frankenstein* was? When you think Gothic you think *Frankenstein* and Mary Shelley was so bright and
intelligent and wild that surely she must have been being funny - she was making fun of science.

*And of course* Frankenstein *is still so relevant, even more relevant now in many ways with genetic engineering and human cloning.*

There is a lot of that kind of stuff in *The Green Language.* It is really a lot about human reproduction and babies.

*To me there are so many parallels between Cape Grimm and Frankenstein, even the way Cape Grimm begins with a letter.* Frankenstein also begins with a letter, from Walton to his sister, so structurally there are parallels, and even the idea of Caleb as a mad visionary reminds me of Victor Frankenstein and his creation. *Did you have that book in mind when you were writing Cape Grimm?*

No, I don’t have things in mind when I write but certainly one is influenced by everything that one has read. But no, I wasn’t thinking of Frankenstein at all and if I did think of something I think it would restrict me.

*Many critics have commented on your use of satire and irony, particularly in relation to very disturbing material. That is one of the elements of your work, and contemporary Gothic literature, that I enjoy so much - it is not just funny, but utilizes a very distinctive dark humour...*

And it draws attention to the darkness in a safe way.

*Yes, I had that impression with Beau, the narrator of Red Shoes. Some of the things he describes are really so disturbing but, as a guardian angel, he has a detachment from what he describes. Reading Red Shoes is like reading a fairy tale which has these really gruesome characters and incidents, but the reader is distanced from this.*

Well, the fairy tale element comes into *The Green Language* as well and I love that thing at the end of some fairy tales where there is a little couple of lines
where it says something like, "my tale is done and the mouse runs up the clock," which I have put into The Green Language.

**I have been researching fairy tales and trying to figure out why contemporary women writers are so drawn to them. What is it that drew you to fairy tales?**

One of the earliest books I had - I think I got it when I was seven - is a thick, dark-blue, leather-bound volume of Grimm with beautiful fine rice paper and illustrations by Cruikshank. He illustrated Dickens too. They are black and white, very detailed, very rigorous, very dark etchings. I was fascinated by the stories and the illustrations and I have never, ever forgotten the stories. Obviously they made a profound impression on me, partly because I hadn’t read much else at that time. They are very powerful stories, so receiving them in such a lovely volume at such a young age made them key narratives and pieces of key language that stayed with me and also the Cruikshank images; I can just conjure them up. For me it goes back that far. It is very hard to grasp the why and wherefore of these things but I can actually pinpoint that book and I can truthfully say that it fascinated and affected me and I’ve got many different copies of Grimm. The Grimm stories were largely collected by the brothers from women story tellers. The women would be sitting around cooking, sewing, knitting, looking after children and there was no television or radio so they would tell stories. They are the stories of the human family.

*I read that the Grimm brothers claimed that their tales were true to the original but it later came out that they had altered them and, of course, every re-telling changes the story, if only slightly...*

Yes, but I do think that they had their own agendas. They inserted Christian morality where perhaps it didn’t exist in a story, as the story had been told to them. I don’t know. I’m not an academic. I don’t study things; I revel in them.

*I am very interested in Hans Christian Andersen stories. There is something quite disturbing about them, especially ‘Red Shoes,’ and ‘The Little Mermaid.’*
'The Steadfast Tin Soldier,' which you have retold in the 'Tide' section of Cape Grimm, is particularly heart breaking.

They are absolutely heart breaking, particularly 'The Little Mermaid' and 'The Snow Queen,' which I remember reading as a child. "When she was walking on her feet it was as if she was walking on hot knives." The cruelty in all that and the dreadful irony of it and the desire that the reader has for her to be saved; it is brilliant stuff.

And it seems in the Grimm tales that the underdog triumphs, whereas in Andersen's tales they don't. They seem to get punished...although, in "The Snow Queen," Kay and Gerda are re-united in the end, so that is more hopeful.

And there's that horrible incident in 'The Snow Queen' where the mirror shatters into a million pieces and a piece of it goes into Kay's heart. The mirror is such a magical object; it is magical that you look in a surface and are reproduced back to front.

The tale by the Grimm Brothers, 'Hans-my Hedgehog,' which is alluded to in Cape Grimm is one I hadn't heard before...

It's so strange, yes. That came immediately to mind when I had Caleb because he is the hedgehog and the hedgehog in literature, in folktale anyway, is a signifier of weird, difficult animal life. Shakespeare uses it in Richard III.

They are not nasty creatures though?

No they are not, but they are prickly.

I consider your approach to fairy tales as allowing them to work on the reader without an overt or deliberate attempt at subversion. They act more as a supplement to your own story. The tales presented in the 'Footnote' section of Red Shoes, for example, are narrated, and sometimes critiqued, but are not
radically altered in the way some contemporary women writers have approached them. Was this your intention?

I want the reader to know the story that Grimm or Andersen wrote, whereas so many people think they know the story of ‘Cinderella,’ they think they know the story of ‘The little Mermaid’ and I wanted the genuine (in so far as I can offer it in English) text to be available. However, it is still an interpretation.

But it still preserves the original essence of the tale.

Rather than re-writing and changing and subverting, yes. I wanted my readers to know my sources.

I also see Red Shoes as a re-written fairy tale, so it is almost as if you are doing both.

That’s true; on a big scale I am re-writing ‘Red Shoes.’ When I am doing it I don’t know that I am doing it, but I can come back now as an observer, with a certain detachment, and say, “yes that is what I was doing.” It is very nice for me to discuss it with you, because otherwise I wouldn’t think about it.

Can you elaborate on how the fairy tales fit within an Australian context?

I tried to signal that, and this was deliberate, with the letter at the beginning of Cape Grimm, saying that Jane Franklin brought the tales to Tasmania. I imagine she possibly did and I had a lot of fun writing the letter; people think it’s real. So, Europeans who came to Australia in the nineteenth-century brought with them Christian religion, that’s in the letter, and the other side of things which is the fairy tale. They brought those things with them just as they brought roses and primroses. So I think it is interesting the way stories traveled then. It’s very different now, of course, because everything travels electronically, but then you had to actually bring them in your head. Some people, such as Jane Franklin who was very interested in scholarly matters and wanted to civilize the Europeans of Tasmania, many being very uncivilized people, brought with them
the European folktale which then became assimilated into colonial thinking. A lot of colonial children would have had books by Grimm.

*I guess it's a way of linking Australia to the motherland, through story?*

Yes, or linking the New world with the Old world.

*Let's talk about Tasmania. Cape Grimm is set in Tasmania and evokes a haunted landscape which is linked to Australia's colonial past and the widespread massacres of Australia's Indigenous population. It struck me that the Australian landscape and historical events are so important to Cape Grimm but are not so significant in the first two novels...*

No, they're not. There are no massacres in the first two. I suppose there is no order in which you have to read them. I know that Ambrose Goddard is Sophie Goddard's father and he's dead before *Cape Grimm* but that also goes back into the nineteenth-century, so maybe *Cape Grimm* is the first one.

*And he dies at the end of The White Garden and pops up again in Red Shoes...*

That's true. I hadn't really thought that out but maybe *Cape Grimm* is the first one, starting with the child. Or maybe *The Green Language* is the first one because it goes back much further, and in Europe too! I am not setting out to write Australian Gothic or Australian anything, but I just write what I make up.

*So, you weren't actually thinking of the Gothic when you were writing the trilogy?*

Oh no! It is always a surprise to me when people use the word Gothic in connection to my work because I don’t think of it that way.2

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2 A distinctive feature of Bird's work is her originality which is supported here by her response to my question about her use of the Gothic genre. However, I also believe that Bird's statement, earlier in the interview, that "certainly one is influenced by everything that one has read," is more suggestive of the approach I have taken to the idea of an Australian Gothic tradition throughout this dissertation. (p.262.).
Although, you have been described as the creator of 'Tasmanian Gothic.' Do you think there is such a thing as 'Tasmanian Gothic'?

Well, there probably is. Richard Flanagan, *Gould's Book of Fish*, would have to be Gothic. Tasmanian history is profoundly dark and dreadful. It's so dreadful and the ironic thing about it is that Tasmania is in the shape of a heart and it is very physically beautiful and very fertile, and they have wonderful fish and cheese and flowers and wine.

The thing about Tasmania is that it is concentrated in that little heart shape and it's this most beautiful little chip of land and is surrounded by wild sea. The massacres that took place in Western Australia, Queensland, Victoria - the injustices that were perpetrated on the Indigenous people - were perpetrated across the whole country, but the difference with Tasmania was that it was concentrated and bounded by the sea. Also, the Tasmanian Aboriginal people were a different race and it is a race that has effectively been removed from the face of the Earth. There is argument to say that there is Tasmanian Aboriginal blood in many of the people of Tasmania but it is not 'straight' Tasmanian Aboriginal blood. Effectively, the race itself was, if not completely wiped out, the attempt was there to completely wipe it out and the belief was there.

On top of that was the convict system which was, one is inclined to believe (the penal system in Tasmania) the most brutal of anywhere in Australia and the place people were sent to as the worst punishment. That's the other dreadful side to it and the society of Hobart in the early days of European presence was a very corrupt and horrible society. There was a general air of corruption about the whole thing. Here they were, people from England, free people in this place and they didn't want to be there. Nobody wanted to be there, except the Indigenous people, and people like Lady Jane Franklin came along and tried to civilize it and to a certain extent were reasonably successful, I suppose. She did a shocking thing which I have written a radio play about.
There was a young Aboriginal girl of about eight, called Mathinna, and Jane Franklin virtually adopted her into Government House. Jane Franklin didn’t have any children of her own so this was kind of like a child of her own. Mathinna was raised from her tribal beginnings on King Island (her people had been sent off to King Island) and then treated as a princess in a grand house in Hobart. She was paraded about the town in a beautiful red dress, her portrait was painted and she had pet possums. On the one hand she was treated like the spoilt child of the house and on the other hand treated as a curiosity, it is all so wrong, and, of course, Lady Franklin thought what she was doing was right. She wasn’t setting out to be cruel at all. However, when the Franklins went back to England it was the belief that if they took the child with them she wouldn’t be able to tolerate the climate of England and she would die. So they left her behind. And where did they leave her? She no longer belonged to her own people and she didn’t belong to white society either so she was dumped in an orphanage. She grew up in the orphanage and when she was twenty-one she was a hopeless, alcoholic prostitute. She fell down one night in a puddle and drowned. So, it is a very dark past. I have a strong sense and even a strong belief that the darkness of that past and the blood spilt during the injustices of that time haunts the island.

That is something which has come up a lot over the course of my research: the idea of Australia being haunted by our colonial past and the mistreatment of Indigenous Australians.

Certainly, but in Tasmania it is palpable. It is a place ripe for Gothic interpretation by minds that are inclined to think in that way, although, not everybody who grows up in Tasmania thinks like that.

I have found that conducting research on an aspect of Australian literature has provoked a variety of responses. I read in an interview that you believe the ‘cultural cringe’ is still strong in Australia and this is something I have come across too.
As I see it the Australian ‘cultural cringe’ is alive and well. It is reflected in many writers’ festivals – they are not for local writers so much as for overseas writers. And in the lack of Australian texts on University courses.

I wonder what it will take for Australians to begin to really embrace our own stories. There doesn’t seem to be a respect for Australian stories within Australian culture; there is a strong sense of shame there.

There is. The country was founded on shame and that shame is still here and it still functions in the ‘cultural cringe.’

The Gothic has a long association with the trope of the supernatural which is intended to excite terror or, at least, anxiety and apprehension in the reader. It also seems that this effect is very difficult to achieve, particularly as contemporary audiences are so desensitized to fear. I think the supernatural elements work so well in Jane Eyre for example, but, in Villette, the supernatural is parodied and it is the witnessing of the psychological breakdown of Lucy Snowe which really disturbs the reader. For this reason, I was fascinated by the ghost of the young Aboriginal girl in Cape Grimm, Managinna. What makes the supernatural work so effectively in your novel, I believe, is that the spectral figure of the Aboriginal girl does not evoke fear as such, but achieves a certain uncanny effect through its link to the massacres that took place in Tasmania. Did you find it difficult to achieve this effect?

I think it has to come from the heart and the supernatural in Jane Eyre comes from the passionate heart of the writer and I think that’s what happens in Cape Grimm – I am totally in that moment of supernatural visitation. It is also in The Bluebird Café.

Also, the reader witnesses the massacre in the novel through the connection that Virginia has with Managinna which, I think, is a great way to represent a history that is so often misappropriated and misrepresented by white Australia.

Virginia and Managinna have a strong connection with each other.
To approach something like that, which is very serious, but then to also link it to the supernatural - you can't really go for the effect of horror or fear in the way of traditional Gothic. Do you plan to incorporate the supernatural in The Green Language?

The Green Language has a lot of links to the supernatural, very strong links to the supernatural because of the element of the importance of the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus, and that's kind of supernatural. It is a delicate matter which has to be really carefully approached and it's nice for me to realise that you realise the approach that I made to Managinna, and that is similar to what I am doing with a bigger narrative, The Green Language.

In The White Garden you don't really have that obvious supernatural element. Like Villette it is really the psychosis and the mental breakdown of the women which unsettles the reader...

Yes, although there are supernatural elements within the psychosis, such as the incident with the Mona Lisa and the washing machine.

Yes, but it is very subtle in that novel.

Of course, it is within the madness, in the psychosis.

And there is a real freedom within madness to play with this.

Of course there is, that is the marvellous thing about the language of insanity in The White Garden. It was such a joy to write because it can get away with all that.

The Gothic is typically characterized by an atmosphere of dread and decay which, I think, is captured so brilliantly in certain scenes in The White Garden, yet the garden itself becomes a space of resistance and empowerment for the
women at Mandala. Is it important to you to write novels that give the reader a sense of hope or at least the possibility for renewal?

Oh always, always. My work is all about giving the reader a sense of hope and a sense of beauty. Beauty, goodness and hope. That's what I write about. But in working with those elements I must explore the binary opposites of those elements, and so that is why I work with madness and criminality and lack of hope and darkness. I am writing the dark side of beauty, goodness and hope. And, of course, the garden is beautiful too, so the beauty is always present but I suppose I largely examine its opposite.

**Elements from each of your novels can be traced to actual events or people. Can you tell me about the intersection between fact and fiction in your work?**

I just love playing on the line between fact and fiction and jumping one way and then jumping another and not letting the reader realise, unless they are really alert, where is fact and where is fiction. That is a huge part of the back sections of all the books.

*I love the timeline in Cape Grimm which combines factual and fictional events.*

Yes and I guess I am saying in the end it doesn't really matter whether it is fact or whether it is fiction, whether it is true or whether it is false. What is true? What is false? They are the playful questions that most of my work is addressing in some way or other. Back in *The Bluebird Café* you can't tell, necessarily, whether what you are being told in ‘A Reader’s Guide to The Bluebird Café’ is an historical fact or something that I made up. The funny thing of course is, and this is part of the joke, the more absurd things are the more likely they are to be true.

*The Gothic as a genre also plays around with realism and the fantastic.*

It does. Who’s to say whether there are ghosts or not and I don’t think we will ever know.
It is not really something that can be proven scientifically.

No, but what is science? Why are we so carried away by science? Science is very wonderful and incredibly important in so far as medical advancement and so on. We can’t function in our world without physics and chemistry and all the facts of science but there is a huge other element to being alive in the universe now or ever and it doesn’t come under science as we know it.

Science is limited.

It is limited, but it’s good. Science is wonderful and it is a kind of magic in itself. But there is another magic and that is limitless and that, I guess, is what I’m talking about.


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