

Introduction

[Although] the dominant figures of Australian social mythology are all male - the bushman, the Anzac, the sporting hero, [...] Australian [...] writers have always been equally concerned with female experience of Australian life, or, indeed, female experience in general. (Goldsworthy, XVI)

Since the beginning of our century, Australian short story writers have extrapolated a broad spectrum of social topics. Significantly, most of them depict the fate of ‘outsiders’ like children, females and foreigners. In the centre of my interest stands the question in what specific way they have fictionalized women’s role. Do they perpetuate rather stereotypical views on the members of the ‘other sex’ or do they prefer to portray them as human individuals by drawing away the reader’s attention from alleged ‘womanish’ attributes? To which degree do Australian fiction writers collide with those criteria of criticism which have been uttered by American, British or German feminist writers? In which regard do their short stories illustrate women’s harmful contemporary social background? How do time and history intervene into their writing? What role do women hold in a social landscape, which originally had exclusively been frequented by males?

To extrapolate a range as diverse and colourful as possible, my survey tries to present a chronologically arranged cross-section of female portraits as they are drawn in Australian short stories. Reaching from late 19th century female writers such as Barbara Baynton up to contemporary literates such as Murray Bail, I selected twelve exemplary stories which I exploited to draw an underpinned image of women as they appear within their Australian social network. Naturally, both time and history intervene in the writer’s portraits. While early 19th century female writers such as Henry Handel Richardson experienced a socio-cultural context where the traditional conception of women had been held together by the cement of strict moral principles, those writers who followed their feminist footprints gained by far more freedom in uttering critique with regard to the ‘woman question’. Up to the mid-twentieth century most of the female characters have been depicted as “passive objects of or victims of male decisions and actions” (op. cit., XVI). Thereagainst, contemporary Australian writers tend to depict female characters as enlightened human beings who are able to create a ‘life of their own’. No matter, in what specific way they are finally portrayed, significantly, women are never dismissed as one question among others. Quite the reverse, they often hold the position of the protagonist.

Surely, it would go beyond the scope of these examinations to give a detailed, textimmanent analysis of each story. Consequently, I tried to crystallize out those passages

which exemplify the views and behaviour of female characters most urgently and refrained from setting high value on the general ‘message’ in the story itself. I am aware that this strategy runs the risk of ‘shallowness’ and superficiality. Nevertheless, I considered it to be more fascinating to concentrate on the great variety of female existence as it is portrayed through the skilled magnifying glass of Australian writers.

Most of the stories have been chosen to illustrate the changing images of women as both male and female writers have transposed them in their literary products. Hence, I will try to depict this development with the help of a chronological coherence. Some themes such as that of the oedipal over-mother or the relationship between wife and husband reappear from story to story. Some of them reveal more ‘Australian-ness’, others deliberately take the focus off the Australian cultural background in order to present female existence in rather general terms. Nevertheless, none of the stories which I selected could be abstracted from the social landscape in which it has been written.

1. Women As Culture Carriers: Catherine Helen Spence’s “Like All First Chapters - Introductory“

In the Introductory chapter of her famous novel, entitled *Clara Morison*, Spence urgently verbalizes a British girl’s nightmarish fear of being ‘deported’ to the fifth continent - a feeling that was “shared by most of her counterparts in both fiction and history” (Goldsworthy, XIII).

At the beginning we learn of the dichotomy between Susan and her younger sister. While the latter is said to be “without one accomplishment that had any remarkable value“, Susan represents the Victorian ideal of a virtuous young lady who knows to play music, to draw, to ‘function’ in society and who seems to be appropriate to relieve her aunt from the domestic work. Thereagainst, Clara is characterized as a more sensitive, silent, dreamy, intelligent and literary sophisticated girl who does not show much interest in social duties such as playing crochet - a manner of recreation which constituted the then upper-middle class community. Precisely because Clara does not fit the British conformity of the 19th century’s sophisticated, metropolitan lifestyle, she experiences the fate of a penniless orphan whose future is completely at the mercy of her calculous uncle. Because the latter wishes “to be spared the mortification of seeing a relative reduced to a nursery governess in his neighborhood“ (4), he decides that Clara should emigrate to Australia. In order to convince her of the correctness of this decision, both Mr. and Mrs. Morison draw an euphemistically glossed-over version of her future in the fifth continent. When they mention the argument that “Clara [is] a pretty good

girl [who] will be sure to marry well in a country where young ladies are so scarce“ (3), they reduce her to the status of a rare ‘bearing material’ that is very welcomed to secure the eventual settlement of the then scarcely populated colony.

Fearfully waiting for the day of her farewell to home, Clara feels mercilessly disposed and carried off to a “mysterious, inchoate, looming, [threadful]“ (Goldsworthy, XVI) country that puts women exclusively into the service of reproduction. Additionally, she suffers from the prospect of being separated from her sister, who embodies the only emotional connecting link to her hitherto life. The final paragraph of Spence’s *Introductory* ultimately exemplifies Clara’s feeling of powerlessness in front of a paternalistic authority which has the ‘inborn’ right to determine her future fate:

[Clara] saw a thousand difficulties from within and from without, which no one else seemed to see for her. And when her friends wished her a safe and pleasant voyage, as if all would go smoothly if she were once landed in Australia, she felt that worse might follow, and that dangers by sea where the least of the risks she ran. (7)

2. Women and the Bush in Henry Lawson’s “The Drover’s Wife“ and Barbara Baynton’s “The Chosen Vessel“

Bush all round - bush with no horizons, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted, rotten, native apple-trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few she-oaks which are sighing above the narrow, almost waterless creek. Nineteen miles to the nearest sign of civilization - a shanty on the main road.

Like many ‘classical’ Australian short stories, Henry Lawson’s “The Drover’s Wife“ is situated into the terrain of the legendary bush, whose hostile landscape is accurately described by the paragraph above. Totally exposed to the climate, the monotony and the dangers of the bush, the nameless *she* in Lawson’s story is presented as a female archetype who exemplarily exemplifies the fate of every Australian bushwoman. It portrays a woman who is deprived of everything which actually constitutes a ‘secured existence’: disposed to a desert landscape her life lacks of a husband, of social contacts and of any recreation. Delivered up to these three sorts of ghettos, she seemingly has assigned to an ascetic, solitary existence.

The opening paragraph presents the protagonist as a strong, courageous, ‘cool’ woman who has come to terms with a life wherein neither passions, nor aggression nor any kind of extreme feelings have a right to exist. But through her stream-of-consciousness-like recapitulation of her past she reveals that her life is not a life of deliberately chosen solitude. We learn that “as a girl she built the usual castles in the air; but all her girlish hopes and aspirations have long been dead.“ (4). Eventually, she has become used to the loneliness, does no longer care about

the absence or presence of her “careless but [...] good enough husband“ (4) and allegedly “finds all the excitement and recreation she needs in the *Young Ladies Journal*“ (4).

Realizing that there is no way out of this utmost degraded life, she has assigned to a fate that has punished her to a lifelong apathetic sullenness. The nameless *she* endures her existence with stoic self-control. During her husband’s absence, she has successfully fought against bushfires, floods, pleuro-pneumonia, bullocks, crows, eagles and violent swagmen. Consequently, the threat by the snake, that crawls into the hut cannot be seen as an isolated incident that could be swept under the carpet. It stands exemplarily for the omnipresent vulnerability of the drover’s wife. Significantly, she seldom allows herself of becoming emotional or ‘sentimental’. Although “she loves her children [...] she seems harsh to them [since] her surroundings are not favourable for the development of the ‘womanly’ [...] side of nature.“ (6).

Nevertheless, she has developed her own way of coping with her fully unsatisfying life. The following paragraph shows her sad and somehow ridiculous attempt of interrupting the monotony of her everyday life:

All days are much the same to her; but on Sunday afternoon she dresses herself, tidies up the children, smartens up baby, and goes for a loneley walk along the bush-track, pushing an old perambulator in front of her. She does this every Sunday. She takes as much care to make herself and the children look smart as she would if she were going to do the block in the city. (6).

This ritual-like interlude in her depressing reality proves that despite her highly cherished stoicism she is dependent on surrogates to bear her suffering. Despite her miserable existence, the bushwoman has not become grumpy. Quite the reverse, “she has a keen, very keen, sense of the ridiculous“ (7)

As mentioned above, the fate of the nameless *she* is no exceptionary case. Quite the reverse, Lawson exposes her as an exemplary victim of a society wherein women’s ‘personal life’ does not have any right to exist. Nonetheless, the final paragraph conveys hope for a better future, since at least her children are seemingly able to estimate her fairly warm-hearted humanity. Promising that “he won’t never go drovin” (8), her little son proves to have an amazing insight into his mother’s inner misery. So the final image that we receive is that of mother and son sitting weeping in their shabby hut, watching the black snake burning in the fire.

Like “The Drover’s Wife“, “The Chosen Vessel“ conveys a hostile image of the bush, too. Through the eyes of the nameless female protagonist, Baynton expounds the problems of the

“malevolent landscape [...] where women without choice, become acquiescent victims of men, largely without realizing it“ (qtd. in Iseman, 31). In addition, it takes the highlighted ‘icon of mother and child“ as its theme.

In the first section of the story, the nameless she is portrayed as a helpless creature who suffers from an incredible state of fear caused by the presence of a violent swagman. When she articulates her fear, her careless husband nips her attempt of being protected already in the bud by stating that she “needn’t flatter [herself], [...] nobody ‘du want ter run away with [her].“ (23). This fierce reduction of her anxiety to ‘womanish vanity’ implies the utmost degradation of the woman’s personality - for in her husband’s eyes she simply is not attractive enough to deserve being honoured by the semen of a violator!

Even the title evokes unmistakable biblical associations - for the Blessed Virgin also is regarded as the ‘chosen vessel’ who received the semen of the Holy Spirit which guaranteed her Immaculate Conception and consequently establishes her as a paragon of purity. Baynton’s sarcastic reversal of this literary *topos* lies in the utmost degeneration of the nameless *she*, who is raped, subdued and destroyed.

The sarcastic cream-cap of the protagonist’s fate lies in her final rape and murder, which could have been prevented by a horseman who confuses “her actual presence with an imaginary vision of the Madonna and child“ (Iseman, 34). So finally,

Baynton’s ‘The Chosen Vessel’ portrays [...] a woman caught and destroyed in a complex web of masculine machinations largely determined by the environment: the isolation of her home is rendered completely by the absence of the hostile husband and exploited by the predatory drifter, and her chance of rescue is lost in a small town maze of politics and religion - both male dominated“ (Goldsworthy, XVII).

3. *The Lesbian Couple* in Henry Handel Richardson’s “Two Hanged Women“

Richardson’s story takes homosexuality, which has continued to be a burning issue of our days, as its theme. With the help of the common problems experienced by a lesbian relationship, her “Two Hanged Women“ urgently illustrates a society where even the lightest deviance from strict ethic codes is punished with public rejection.

In the opening paragraph, the two lovers are secretly watched by another loving couple. Recognizing them (by an intimate gesture?) as two lesbian women, the boy’s surprise manifests in his ambivalent, spontaneous outcry “Well, I’m damned! If it wasn’t just two hanged women!“ (48). If we understand the boy’s statement in its original sense, it simply means that they have committed suicide. Thereagainst, a rather transferred meaning implies the credo of a social reality that predestines these women to be condemned, rejected and somehow ‘hanged’ by public life. If we are inclined to prefer the latter interpretation,

Richardson explicitly focuses the reader's attention to the sad fact that, in her contemporary turn-of-the-century society, being a lesbian was tabooed with being 'sheer impossible'. Since even sexuality in general was viewed with utmost prudery, society tended to brush homosexual inclinations mercilessly off the table. Consequently, it becomes explicable that the younger woman in Anderson's story yearns for a 'presentable' male-female relationship and suffers from the psychological pressures exerted by a moral majority which brandishes homosexual relationships with the stigma of 'unnaturalness'. Together with her mother's permanent complaints, the conception of the then moral virtues have finally led her to the fatal idea of marrying a man whom she actually does not love at all.

The characters are introduced by a significant image which is to symbolize their marginalised place in society: "On this remote seat, with their backs turned on lovers, lights, the town, the two girls sat and gazed wordlessly at the dark sea" (49). Having nothing in front of them than the merciless public damnation, they suffer from the suffocating vacuum of secrets, to which they are bound. Against the background of this social landscape, the younger woman's desire "to be like other girls" (49) appears natural. But her attempt to escape from her real inclinations by seeking refuge in a stereotypically presented 'strong man', is doomed to failure by the awkward level of sexual intercourse. Although she encounters him with real platonic affection, she miserably fails in responding to his erotic advances. This inner turmoil is made manifest through her desperate outcry

Oh, Betty, Betty!...I couldn't, no, I couldn't! It's when I think of *that*...Yes, it's quite true! I like him all right, I do indeed, but only as long as he doesn't come too near. [...] And when he tries to touch me [...] then I feel I shall have to scream - out aloud. [...] Once... when he kissed me ... I could have died with the horror of it. His breath ... his breath ... and his mouth - like fruit pulp - and the black hairs on his wrists ...and the way he looked - and ...and everything! No, I can't, I can't ... nothing will make me... I'd rather die twice over. (52)

In the course of the story, the younger girl justifies her ambivalent yearning for a heterosexual relationship with two 'motives': first, she can no longer bear the public rejection; furthermore, she wishes to 'please' her mother with the planned marriage. Especially the latter point leads into the centre of her inner dilemma. Suffering from the unbearable feeling of being "nothing but a punch-ball" (51) between Betty and her mother, she cannot free herself from the latter's 'chains'. Betty, the older woman, puts her critique of the irreversible, destructive mother-child bond into these pathetic words, which urgently explain the reason for her lover's ambition of seeing "Mother smiling and happy again, like she used to be" (51):

Oh! Mothers aren't fair - I mean it's not fair of nature to weigh us down with them and yet expect us to be our own true selves. The handicap's too great. All those months, when the same blood's running through two sets of veins - there's no getting away from that, ever after. Take yours. As I say, does she need to open her mouth? Not she! She's only got to let it hang at the corners, and you reek, you drip with guilt. (51)

Being torn between love and hate, the younger girl finally seeks refuge in the tender embrace of Betty, who is said to be older and thus more experienced with the potential problems a lesbian ‘coming out’ involves.

Finally, Richardson’s story definitely attempts to deconstruct the then familiar misconception of homosexuality as a ‘perverted mood of nature’ which leads people to ‘depart from the straight and narrow’. Precisely because these lesbian lovers are portrayed as a ‘normal’ couple, who suffers from ‘normal’ problems like jealousy, insecurity and social rejection, they might appear closer to a reader of the 19th century. Undoubtedly, “Two Hanged Women“ must be received as a harsh criticism of the puritan ‘Zeitgeist’ which dominated the turn of the century.

4. *The Sinful Eve*: Ethel Anderson’s “Juliet McCree is Accused of Gluttony“

Anderson’s short story brilliantly confronts us with the absurd origin and perpetuation of gender inequalities. To shed light on the questionable myth of the original sin, Anderson’s ‘alternative genesis’ depicts an Eden-like place where a little girl functions as a representative of the female vessel, as it was seen by the then sexist, patriarchally structured society. Endowed with the witch-like outer characteristics like “red hair“ (69) and “eyes as black as sloes“ (66), Juliet McCree appears as the personified wickedness who commits the infamous mortal sin of gluttony.

The arcadic, idyllic frame where the story is set evokes distinctive associations with the Garden Eden. Additionally, the key motive of the stolen peach seems to prove this biblical connotation, too. With ingenious innocence, Juliet exposes the ludicrous but deeply cherished double standard of morality represented in the personage of Dr. Phantom. The most cynical element of Anderson’s story consists of the reversal of guilt, since finally Dr. Phantom, the plantation owner, appears in the light of a dishonest sinner who has taken away a poor girl’s handkerchief. In addition, the latter is presented as a vain, ridiculous figure who is permanently stuffing fruits into his mouth.

When Juliet McCree struggles with defending herself from being a liar and a thief by arguing that

God gave Adam the earth,[...] He gave him every blessed thing! And I have never heard anyone say that what belonged to Adam does not belong to me. [...] It is only a person like [Dr. Boisragon], who makes a sin of it.(70)

Anderson clearly uses her as a mouthpiece to somehow ‘re-write’ the tale of the original sin. Harshly criticizing those religious upholders of moral standards who “don’t understand God or what God said [and who] begin to make their own rules to suit themselves and [to] invent sin“ (70), the authoress exposes the then conception of women as the ‘eternal sinners’ as an artificially created fallacy to guarantee male domination. Naturally, Juliet’s amazing insight of real Christianity goes hand in hand with the belittlement of Dr. Boisragon, who clearly embodies the stereotype of the ultra-moral religious believer who enjoys applying his paternalistic authority.

On the surface, the attempt of granting a second chance for the ‘weaker vessel’ miserably fails - for the little girl is banned from ‘paradise’ again. But if we shift our attention to her triumphant, innocent leave, we notice that she definitely will *not* suffer from a permanent stigma of guilt. Quite the reverse, Juliet’s inner sense of justice tells her that she has been legitimated to take the fruit. Since she accepted the unjust scapegoating of her own personality to protect her comrades, Anderson exalts her on to a pedestal of a little heroine. Maligned by her hypocritical, religious uncle as Eve’s guilty and sinful descendant, Juliet finally proves to be immune to the eternal stigma of ‘indelible guilt’.

5. *The Aboriginal Woman: Katherine Susannah Prichard’s “Flight”*

Prichard’s story “Flight“ depicts the sad phenomenon how “power and authority, personified in one man, are extended [...] over a group of human beings rendered doubly helpless by virtue of being female as well as children“ (Goldsworthy, XVIII). Mercilessly kidnapped from their mother, their home and their family by Constable John O’Shea, Mynie, Nanja and Coorin experience the tragic fate of all those Aboriginal girls, who are sent to ‘civilization’ to be transformed into “young ladies with real classy names“ (79).

To their kidnapper, the three girls are nothing more than uncivilized, inferior “stinking“ (79) creatures, who own no legitimation of being at least treated as human beings. Strapping them upon his horse, he equals them with a “bunch of wild pigeons“ (79) who first are to “be scrubbed and disinfected“ (83) before being transported to the ‘civilized’ town. Altering their native names into the silly sounding labels “Molly, Polly and Dolly“ (78), he thoughtlessly deprives them of their identity - justifying this utmost degradation with the shallow excuse that their new names are “easier to remember“ (78). Seemingly, it is a matter of course for him to reduce them to the status of secondary creatures. Hence, they are exactly estimated and scrutinized like a kind of good that is to be sold for the best price possible.

Hypocritically justifying the kidnapping of the girls with “the great idea that the kids are being saved from leading immoral lives in the native camps” (84), Mr. O’Shea tries to draw away his wife’s attention from the real purpose behind his job. This attempt significantly fails by Nancy’s indignant insight, which she articulates by the following words:

That’s all very well. [...] But how does it work out? The girls learn to read and write, become domestic servants; but more than half of them lead immoral lives in the towns, just the same. Only it’s worse for them down there, because they’re among strangers. If a half-caste girl has a baby up here, it’s taken as a matter of course. But down south, it’s a disgrace. And anyhow, why can’t the girls be given a chance to come back, work on the stations - and marry? It’s because women are so scarce in the back-country that there are half-castes in the first place. (84 - 85)

Nancy’s reproach leads us into the centre of the whole ‘unpleasant’ affair since she clearly emphasizes the crucial point: the masculine dominated Australian landscape lacks women to such an existential degree that the Aborigines Department has decided to recruit young girls as a kind of ‘culture carriers’ who are to secure the continued existence of the race. For the sake of the ‘country’s benefit’, they are kept in a slave-like state that binds them to white men’s ‘goodwill’ and that exposes them to the danger of surviving by prostitution or criminal activities only. Referring to the fact that the Aboriginal culture is more lenient with illegitimate children, Nancy mentions the dilemma that many unmarried Aboriginal women who are brought to the cities, run risk of losing even more caste by the stigma as ‘fallen women’.

During their flight, the Aboriginal girls are exposed as highly sensitive, agile creatures who do “not need to talk” (88) in order to communicate since their “wise and wary” (87) brown eyes understand each other silently. All in all, their behaviour exemplarily conveys the impression of highly intelligent, beautiful, warm-hearted and innocent human beings who are shoved into the cruel, strange world of the ‘white man’. Their internalized ideal of humanity is ultimately proved when they interrupt their nightly flight. Because they know that Nancy has put her complete trust in them by secretly unfastening their fetters they are haunted by a latent feeling of doing injustice. Unable to bear the idea that the constable could kill his wife after having discovered their flight, they voluntarily return to their prison, reassuring themselves “that their fear of the future was nothing to the terrors they had passed through” (89).

Apart from the tragic fate of the children, Prichard confronts us with the misery of the Aboriginal mothers who have not the lightest chance of defending their offspring. Especially the opening paragraph draws the horrifying image of a “yelling and screaming [...] horde” (77) desperately trying to appeal to the Constable’s conscience to release his ‘prey’.

Significantly, Constable O’Shea does not appear as the personified evil. In the contrary, he is depicted in a rather sympathetic way. All in all, the reader is left with an ambivalent feeling, since there is a harsh discrepancy between the loving concern towards his own children and the horrifying indifference towards the fate of the Aborigines. In a way, he evokes distinctive associations with those German NS soldiers who justified their deeds by arguing that ‘they had only done their job’...

6. *The Adulteress*: Frank Dalby Davidson’s “The Woman at the Mill“

Davidson’s psychological profile of a lonesome, sexually frustrated and emotionally bankrupt middle-aged adulteress is set in a time when adultery was considered as a ‘moral crime’ which offended against the unquestionable dogmatic laws of the church. Constantly suffering from the feeling of being degraded to a maneuverable object,

a part of deal arranged between [...] her father [and her husband] who undermines her, making her feel that in secret he [estimates] her exactly, [marks] her limitations, and [values] her for what she was worth to him (95),

Irene has thrown herself into a love-affair with a younger man - “better looking than any man had a right to be“ (97) - who functions as a means of compensation of her fully unsatisfying married life.

The story opens with Irene desireably attending her lover’s arrival at the mill. During this time of waiting, she exposes her life as a pitiable existence which is dressed up by her careless husband, the complete desertness of the mill and the depressing eventlessness in town. As if to gloss over her definitely miserable existence she has worked herself up into a neurotically idealized love-affair. During the absence of her ‘Prince Charming’, Irene has managed to push herself deeper and deeper into the dungeon of self-denial. Proudly, she treasures the rare compliments made by her lover and does not realize that his real reason for this love-affair lies in the fact that the “encounter with a very desirable m a r r i e d (emphasis mine) woman was in a different class“ (100). Her sad attempts of creating a festive mood by “tidying up the house [...] and changing her dress“ (92) contribute to her ridiculous appearance. All in all, Irene conveys the impression of a disillusioned woman whose fate has not exactly smiled upon her and who now grasps at a straw like a drowning man. Realizing that “she had given too much and too readily“ (98) to her lover, she still bounds herself to see things from an optimistic point of view and hopes that “he would take her away with him“ (98).

Irene’s distaste for the concrete and the fact that she bounds herself to perceive herself through rose-coloured spectacles is exemplified by the following paragraph:

Full figured in youth, the grossness that seemed likely to be her portion in later life had begun to overtake her at thirty-five. The almost waistless body, the large loose bust and thick shoulders, could scarcely have been overlooked except by eyes filled to satisfaction with her more attractive qualities. It was on these that her attention was concentrated. (93)

Furthermore, the passage above undermines the assumption that Irene negates and fears the loss of her youth at the same time and therefore seeks for confirmation in the shape of an extremely young, exalted ‘Prince Charming’. Naturally, this enterprise is determined to fail miserably.

Finally, Frank Dalby Davidson’s portrait of an unhappy wife must be read as a kind of epiphany which Irene experiences by the sudden erosion of her meretricious illusion. Irene’s “sudden accretion of wisdom” (102) is exemplified by the following paragraph:

She realised now the extent of her past pretences; her house of make belief had vanished. Neither in the months of his absence nor in the recent hour of their clipped bodies had they shared a thought. What for her had been a blind groping for something of which life had cheated her had been for him just a cheap sexual success, something to bolster his conceit of himself.(102)

But despite this sudden insight, Irene resists to accept the shame of being reduced to the status of ‘only one woman among others’. Realizing the dilemma that Bert embodies the one and only possibility to escape from her hitherto life, she is put into a panic-like state and desperately tries to cling to her alleged ‘saviour’. Naturally, Bert cruelly manages to nip this sad attempt already in the bud.

Fearing the ostracism as a ‘fallen woman’ by a harsh puritan society, Irene remains bound to her existence. For the future, she can only dream of running away with an imaginary lover since her narcissistic ‘Prince Charming’ actually does not show any honest concern with releasing her from her miserable, tenderless married life. So finally, the woman at the mill remains a “victim of her own isolated circumstances, emotionally at the mercy of the lover who is free to come and go as he pleases” (Goldsworthy, XVII). The story closes with Irene, sitting disillusionedly at her shabby kitchentable. Making aware the dimension of her sudden epiphany, we ask what will become of her. And all we can imagine, is that she will live miserably ever after...

7. *The Wife as Good Spirit* in John Morrison’s “Christ, the Devil and the Lunatic”

Morrison’s splendid social satire, which is set in the time of the Great Depression, geniously ridicules the overemphasized stereotype of the woman as ‘saint peacemaker’ who permanently preaches pacifist, meek doctrines. Besides, it once more presents a woman as a housbound creature that has no idea of the macrocosm of society. Although Hester does not

appear as geographically isolated as the woman in “The Drover’s Wife“, she nonetheless is “obliged by the conventions of marriage to follow - for better or worse - in the wake of [her] husband’s actions“ (op. cit., XVII).

Morrison’s female protagonist clearly embodies the stereotypical angel-like caring mother and loving wife completely devoted to her husband the well-being off her family. Hester’s philanthropic ambition can be traced back to her deep religiosity. In many respects she fits the cliché of the tender soul who could not hurt a fly and who has a good word for everybody. Morrison’s sarcastic element consists of the fact that precisely this authentic samaritan characteristic prevents the family from being better off. The following statement uttered by her husband emphasizes that Hester bears the family’s poverty like a real saint’

Yet never once did I hear a word of complaint or criticism. Hester was the real true-blue Christian, consoling herself in adversity by reminding herself of those still worse off. [...] Faith gave her peace and courage, however spurious, and thereby she suffered less than I the pagan. (131)

She never complaints nor argues nor troubles her husband with her personal miseries. The phenomenon that her husband is nonetheless haunted by a feeling of *mea culpa* becomes explicable if we realize that Hester’s power lies in her silence.

Naturally, it would be a too one-sided portrait of Hester to reduce her to the status of the naïve, ridiculous “devout Anglican“ (130). Apart from her somehow ‘fanatic’ belief in Christian principles, she proves to be endowed with an admirable fair-hearted humanity - a characteristic that enables her to function as the positive *alter ego* of her heathen husband. Recognizing an eventual change in Tom’s personality, his bitterness, vulgarity and carelessness, he points out the danger, that he is “losing pride in [himself]“ (151) and therefore prevents him from being degraded in the eyes of his sons.

The cynical cream-cap upon the presentation of Hester as the personified ‘goodness’ surely lies in her husband’s inability or unwillingness of confronting her with the truth. As if to protect her from the harsh wind that blows outside the microcosm of domesticity, he leaves her in a benevolent state of naïve ignorance by telling her that the money he received from Storey came from a racehorse. Although the reader might be inclined to advocate Tom’s nicely meant effort of sparing her the sad reality, we must not forget that this attempt reduces her to the status of an ‘unadulterous’, retarded child who gains no chance of revising her hitherto innocent view on life. Since the protagonist coops up his wife in the domestic fortress like a fairy tale princess, she has no chance but faithfully following the maxim of *kinder, kueche, kirche*, which restricts her range of activity exclusively to the domestic sphere.

8. The Suffocating Mother - Daughter Relationship in Peter Cowan's "The Voice"

In the centre of this story definitely is a daughter's traumatic loneliness caused and perpetuated by a dominant mother, who controls her life and bounds her to an imposed, suffocating mother-daughter intimacy. Once more, the mother is exposed as the 'eternal amateur' who functions as a stumbling stone for her children's happiness. In this case, she prevents her daughter from leading a life of her own and therefore keeps her personal freedom to the utmost minimum.

By Evelyn's suddenly changed sound of her voice caused by a severe cold, Max, her colleague, gains the opportunity to cast a glance behind her façade and hence develops interest in the old spinster, who up to now, appeared to him as an inconspicuous, shy, colourless 'grey mouse'.

Over time, Evelyn has resigned to her predictable fate as old spinster and does not even think about rebelling against her mother's authority. In spite of her inner dilemma, she has not become grumpy. In the eyes of others, she remains the stoic spinster who copes with her fate with her head held high. Accepting the vicious circle of the mother-daughter love-hate relationship as an unchallengeable status quo, she seemingly does not even recognize Max' attempt of establishing an intimate relationship. When they meet each other at Evelyn's home, they are soon disturbed by the mother, whose sudden appearance unconsciously forces Max to say goodbye:

As they spoke, and he made his excuses for leaving, he looked at the small woman, whose quiet manner held something of authority. There was a certain fussiness about her, as though she did not like things disturbed, or to be unexpected, a suggestion of the fixity of routine that was perhaps also in the younger woman who came to the door with him, thanking him again for the books. (265)

Since this passage exposes Evelyn's mother as an egoistic, dominant 'over-mother' who is not ready to let somebody intrude into their *solitude à deux*, it seemingly perfects the piece of jigsaw that is necessary to recognize Evelyn as a subjugated victim of maternal 'appropriation'.

Finally, Max' half-hearted attempt of freeing her from the maternal chains, remains nothing but an unique twist in her emotionless sobriety. Although the mother is portrayed as the very origin of guilt, Cowan does not refrain from reproaching Evelyn with adjusting to this fanatic maternal authority. Actually, the encounter with Max must have lead her to the poignancy of her solitude. But quite the reverse, she shows no visible signs that could be interpreted as a rebellion against her hitherto existence.

Besides, there are indications which seem to undermine the thesis that there is seething unrest beyond Evelyn's smooth mask of modest satisfaction. For when her mother breaks up their *tête-à-tête*, Max recognizes "that for a moment [Evelyn] looked startled" (265). Nevertheless, she remains a determined figure who is caught in her inner self, trapped through weakness of will and who suffers from her emotional paralysis. The day after, Max experiences the disillusioning emotion of 'business as usual'. Realizing that "her mask would perhaps not slip again" (266), he makes the symbolic gesture of turning away and therefore leaves her in her unchangable, sad existence.

9. *The Female Immigrants* in Elizabeth Jolley's "Poppy Seed and Sesame Rings" and Murray Bail's "A,B,C,..."

Elizabeth Jolley's "Poppy Seed and Sesame Rings" takes the problem of homesickness as its theme. While the female head of the immigrated family still struggles with a severe crisis of identity, the daughter has eventually succeeded in re-integrating herself to the new circumstances.

In the first time of their immigration, 'Mrs. Mosh' has tried to make friends, to acclimatise to people's mentality and to pronounce English words correctly. Since her husband has to work in their shop all day long, she suffers from complete loneliness and feels displaced from all that is familiar. Unable to cope with the Australian living conditions, she finally retreats into the domestic sphere, spends her nights crying and wallows in remembrances of the 'good old times'. In some respects, 'Mrs. Mosh' fits the cliché of the hysterical, fragile and over-emotional harridan who tyrannizes her family by her own inability to adjust herself to the new world. Naturally, her family tolerates her odd behaviour by justifying it with the cultural shock she has sustained. But between the lines Jolley criticises the mother's vehement rejection of leaving her fairy-land-like remembrances.

The image of the mother as the typical *enfant terrible* reaches its climax when her daughter invites an Australian girl to dinner. Naturally, this well - meant effort of softening her mother's loneliness results in a sheer catastrophe, since 'Mrs. Mosh' scapegoats Marion for all that she hates in the New Country.

At the end, the daughter discovers writing as a kind of outlet to compensate the lack of home and to soften the harsh discrepancy between her mother country and the foreign parts. When she wonders why the pen "in [her] hand [...] had an innocence [she] did not quite understand" (286), it is to be interpreted as a clear rejection of a nostalgia which runs the risk

of separating the inner self from the outer world. So finally, Jolley's migration tale urgently juxtaposes the inner turmoil within an immigrant family whose "older generation is backward-looking, homesick, deathbound, while the younger is forward-looking, assimilation bent and moving away from the European culture" (Goldsworthy, XV).

Murray Bail's "A,B,C..." depicts the fate of a British woman who has migrated to Karachi, where she falls in love with a Pakistani. Fascinated and appalled at the same time, Kathy throws herself into a destructive love affair that is partly doomed to failure by the ferocious discrepancy between our occidental culture and the Indian belief in Buddhism.

Eventually, the people around her notice a "change in Kathy's personality" (345). She retreats from her circle of friends, neglects her work at the British Council, begins to wear typically Indian clothes "even though with her large body she looked clumsy" (347) and hushes up her personal dilemma with spectroscopic gaiety. In the eyes of others, she seems to be caught in a trance-like state of mad obsession. The object of her desires is characterized as a charismatic, idiosyncratic painter with a deeply rooted antipathy to the British. Aggressively asking her why Kathy does "mix with these shits" (344), the "wild man" (344) eventually manages to alienate her from her familiar surrounding. Hypnotized by his strong charisma, she does not raise an objection when "one of his many hands [touches] her breasts" (345) in public. Giving her the feeling of being "something extraordinary" (345), the personage of Syed begins to dominate Kathy's whole existence. Due to the Buddhist conception of a male-female relationship, Syed gains the right to 'reign' over her. When she even allows Syed to use physical violence against her, the point of her utmost degeneration seems to be reached. Vehemently excusing Syed's violent attacks with the assumption that "he needs someone" (348) Kathy endures her unbearable martyrdom until she finally manages to free herself from this destructive love. Through which circumstances? We do not come to know.

Finally, Bail's modern adaption of the immigration issue shows the fragility of a woman caught between the man by whom she is completely captivated and his foreign culture which can never be her own. The final image we gain is that of a weeping woman, desperately sitting at her kitchen table, nursing her ashamed and humiliated heart that still yearns for a man who has deprived her of one of the most existential characteristics: her self - esteem.

10. *The Deceived Wife and the Mistress* in Elizabeth Harrower's "The Cost of Things"

Through the perspective of an unfaithful husband, Elizabeth Harrower urgently manifests the dichotomy between wife and mistress. For several years, Dan and Mary has gone through an impersonal, routine married life which eventually has been reduced to its institutional character. Suffering from the imposed every day intimacy of the narrow sphere of domesticity, Dan has found refuge in a love-affair.

While Mary has perfected her ‘sacrosanct’ place at the fireside and appears to be completely absorbed in her husband’s physical good, Clea significantly has no idea of cooking at all. This phenomenon clearly indicates that Clea represents the ‘new woman’ who tends to live a career-orientated, independent, ‘emancipated’ life. Nevertheless, Clea is not endowed with the lascivious, coquettish ‘come-and-find-me’ element. Expecting the ‘typical’ seducing attributes of youth and beauty, Harrower’s readers are bound to learn otherwise. By Dan’s statement that

[Clea] wasn’t *young*. It wasn’t a young look. It was alarmingly straight. It was the look by which he had once identified his friends.(293)

Harrower raises the relationship between the loving couple upon a rather interpersonal level which allows the development of tenderness and friendship. Significantly, we do not explicitly learn of any sexual intercourse. The key-term that Dan ascribes to his mistress is ‘respect’, since she embodies everything which the personality of his wife lacks: Clea continues in asserting her creative ego and proves to be egoistic and self determined. Dan sums up the reasons for his affection by the following words:

Clea knew too much, drank too much, was nervy, pushed herself to excess, bit her fingernails. She was the least conditioned human being he had ever encountered. She was a mirror held up to his soul. She was intelligent, feeling and witty. He loved her.

In some moments, Clea’s unhappiness shimmers through her façade of an advertisement-like attractive, coffee-drinking single. Since Harrower avoids a glorification of the single person’s independent lifestyle as well as the damnation of the housebound wife, she fortunately refrains from putting the wife/ mistress dichotomy in crude black-and-white terms. In the contrary, she shifts our attention to the harsh psychological suffering which a life without husband, family, and children can involve. Clea’s nervous habit of “biting fingernails”(296) clearly indicates that there must be another side of her personal freedom which seemingly results in terrific psychological dilemmas. During a harmful dialogue between the lovers, her life is exposed as a series of missed opportunities.

Although Harrower avoids a polarization of wife against mistress, she nevertheless criticizes Mary's lacking desire for self-determination. In Dan's eyes, she has even changed on purpose - a view that is underpinned through the following paragraph:

How easily [Mary] had divested herself of the girl with the interests and pleasant ways. And what contempt she had felt for him and shown him, for having been deceived, when she was sure of her home, her children. She had transformed herself before his eyes, *l a u g h i n g* (emphasis mine) (289).

This key-passage urgently extrapolates Harrower's subtle critique of the sad phenomenon that many married women completely retreat into the domestic sphere of the 'sacrosanct' home by giving away their need for self-determination. Harrower's image of the traditional home undoubtedly is that of a quiet unnoticed whirlpool that sucks down youth, beauty and enthusiasm - on the condition that the wife herself allows this degradation.

Finally, Dan's love-affair reduces Mary to the status of the personified bad conscience who releases a permanent feeling of *mea culpa* in her husband's mind.

Conclusion

The phenomenon that many Australian writers have dedicated their stories to the examination of female characters, seems to contradict the popular misconception "which sees male figures and male experience as predominant in Australian life" (Goldsworthy, XVI). In the contrary, this cross - section of Australian views on female characters proves that writers from the fifth continent have developed highly sensitive, subtly differentiated portraits of women, which sometimes remind of professionally exerted psychological case-studies of female misery. Precisely because their observations shift the attention to the individual, they create a certain closeness to the female characters and therefore convey a vivid picture of female existence of past and present Australian life. Additionally, many Australian writers have managed to move away from stereotypical female functions such as mother, householder or wife. Nevertheless, there are female archetypes such as Baynton's "The Chosen Vessel" which bear a high resemblance to European or American stereotypical categorizations. But fortunately, the stories do never convey the impression of judging women with the help of traditional patterns of vices or virtues.

In the course of my examinations, I stumbled upon a phenomenon that has often been discussed under the catch-phrase of 'the thousand faces of Eve' (c.f. Fryer, 22) which stand for the woman of mystery who is accurately compared to a kind of prism: if you turn her this way you see one facet; if you turn her that way you see another. In my eyes, Australian short story writers have geniously managed to depict the incredible complexity of female existence

and seemingly reject to put women into simplified categories such as ‘the lesbian’, ‘the adulteress’ or ‘the mistress’.

Naturally, Australian writers have not been immune to global social changes such as women’s fight for liberation. While early stories like Henry Lawson’s “The Drover’s Wife” depict a society which enforced and determined female passivity, Ethel Anderson’s image of an alternative genesis already evokes distinct parallels with Simone de Beauvoir’s proclamation from 1947 that ‘one is not born a woman’. Like many European feminists, both male and female Australian writers force their readers to probe internalized ‘monolithic truths’ such as man’s superiority to woman and vehemently ask for the sense of such an unequal allocation of roles.

Exploiting these stories to gain a colourful mosaic of female characters, I came across unexpected, impressive and shocking portraits. The overwhelming impression that could be followed like a red line, is that of the omnipresent vulnerability of feminine existence in all existential areas of life. Especially the internalized feeling of being born as ‘secondary creature’ echoes in almost every story. Between the lines, each of them reveals the absurdity of everyday patriarchal life that deliberately enforces gender inequality by perpetuating women’s economic dependence on men, their psychological subversion and their sexual oppression. Fortunately, Australian writers have never restricted their stories to the mere description of female misery simply because it was an ‘interesting’ subject. Implicitly, they have always tried to encourage women in their belief of being more than ‘secondary creatures’. Antithetically to the rather subtly provoking portraits of women as the ‘weaker vessel’ writers like Ethel Anderson explicitly demonstrate the potential strength that the female sex holds and therefore conveys hope for the possible deconstruction of artificial femininity. The predominant ‘message’ which finally shimmers through all the stories that I selected, is the encouragement of becoming an undomesticated, economically and psychologically self-determined woman who clearly rejects the stigma of guilt and human ‘secondariness’. Female characters in Australian short stories undoubtedly have paved the way for a new sensibility of women’s potential omnicompetence, their complexity and their almost stoic capacity for suffering.