

The City and the Growth of New Zealand Fiction: Janet Frame's 'Miss Gibson and the Lumber Room'

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One of the most remarkable cultural developments in the twentieth century was the growth of a large number of new literatures in newly developing independent nations, now referred to as group as Post-colonial literature. Arguably, the most successful case is that of the United States of America, which was the first country to become colonised and gain independence. America now has a body of literature so well established that few, if any, academics consider it when using terms such as Post-colonialism. But this emergence from self-consciousness is relatively new—as recently as the publication of Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* in 1953 critics were still inclined to talk about the establishment of the American novel and of an American voice. America has successfully managed the task of taking literary genres from the European metropolises and putting into those genres its own characters, plots and themes, and in the process it has made any changes to the adopted form that might be necessary.

New Zealand is the youngest and among the smallest of the

former British colonies, and its literature is largely a twentieth-century phenomenon. It may be no surprise, then, that in New Zealand fiction the short story has developed first and become the most advanced fictional form. Critics have noticed New Zealand's 'longstanding preference for the short story' and have ascribed this to difficulties with publication and the 'smallness and homogeneity' of the local readership.¹ The *Oxford History of New Zealand Literature* notes that 'as a form the short story has enjoyed a privileged status in New Zealand and, more than the novel, been the genre in which the preoccupations of a colonial and post-colonial literature have worked themselves out.'² It is also widely agreed that, in the period up until the last few decades of the century, the foremost practitioners of the short story have been Katherine Mansfield, Frank Sargeson, Maurice Duggan and Janet Frame, all four of whom can be classified as Modernists. This is partly accidental, because Katherine Mansfield lived overseas and was influenced by European literary trends that had not yet reached New Zealand—and because Janet Frame mostly concentrated on short fiction in the early part of her career, with Post-modernism a feature of her later novels (and some late stories). But it is also a fact that Modernism, which concentrated on individual psychological revelation through the poetic use of local language, proved an

¹ Williams, Mark. *Leaving the Highway*. Auckland, Auckland University Press, 1990: 192.

² Wevers, Lydia. *Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*. Auckland, Oxford University Press, 1991: 203.

eminently exportable form for new literatures to adopt, in a way that, for example, the late-nineteenth century romance did not.

Having migrated mostly from Britain, and having brought with them notions of literature from a European city-culture, New Zealand's would-be writers faced the task of creating a literature *ex nihilo* through two near-contradictory activities. On the one hand, they had to see their new country as it was and find means of expressing this within borrowed literary forms, and on the other hand they had to reject the cultural baggage that came with borrowed forms of expression so that they could see their new country truly. Borrowed forms have a tendency to write their own content. For a century critics and reviewers have tended to focus on the former of these tasks. New Zealand short stories and novels mostly receive praise when they are local versions of types of writing fashionable overseas—this can most charitably be described as a forgivable provincialism. But for New Zealand writers the latter of the two tasks, the rejecting of cultural baggage, has been by far the more consuming preoccupation. As a result, each new generation of New Zealand writers has tended to claim that it is the first to throw off completely the shackles of British culture and to write clearly about New Zealand—doing so in the form and style most in vogue somewhere else. These confusions appeared early. They permeate a monograph on New Zealand literature, for example, published by New Zealand PEN in 1936 to mark the first Authors Week. This was also the year Sargeson's first collection of short stories was

published and a tradition of local fiction might be said to have begun. The monograph was produced too early for Sargeson to be mentioned, but already its fiction-critic, Alan Mulgan, praises a large number of New Zealand writers for their perceptive realism. Yet he also complains that New Zealand writing lacks sophistication and notes that it is difficult to produce a local literature because 'New Zealand society is the most English of all over-sea settlements.'³ At the heart of this continuing confusion is the problem of authenticity. An authentic literature understands the nature of its relationship to the world it transforms and understands its relationship to the literature of other cultures.

In an acute essay on his provincial experience of reading the literature of England, the Caribbean writer V.S. Naipaul notes: 'Everything in books was foreign; everything had to be subjected to adaptation; and everything in, say, an English novel which worked and was of value to me at once ceased to be specifically English.'⁴ In a new culture, the process of adapting what one reads about from the

³ Mulgan, Alan. 'The New Zealand Novel'. *Annals of New Zealand Literature: being a preliminary list of New Zealand authors and their works with introductory essays and verses*. Wellington, L.T. Watkins Ltd, 1936: 10.

⁴ Naipaul, V.S.. 'Jasmine.' *The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles*. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972: 25. In her autobiography Frame recalls similar experiences with language while growing up. She notes playing a game in which she became a powerful jackdaw, although she had never seen one and knew them only from stories. [Frame, Janet. *To the Is-land: An Autobiography: Volume One*. Auckland, Century Hutchinson, 1982: (chap 4) 31.] She also recalls her confusion between local people and characters from fiction, and she recalls deciding that the stone doorstep of the nearby Murphy's house must be the stone her father sang of in the song 'The stone outside Dan Murphy's door', which had therefore 'materialized from a *song*.' [Frame, *op. cit.*: (chap 5) 34.]

European metropolises to one's own environment is necessary and pleasant, but it then corrupts a provincial writer's ability to produce a literature of his or her own. Naipaul felt:

I might adapt Dickens to Trinidad; but it seemed impossible that the life I knew in Trinidad could ever be turned into a book. If landscapes do not start to be real until they have been interpreted by an artist, so, until they have been written about, societies appear to be without shape and *embarrassing*. It was embarrassing to be reminded by a Dickens illustration of the absurdity of my adaptations; it was equally embarrassing to attempt to write of what I saw.⁵

In Naipaul's case, he eventually found some Trinidadian stories which provided a starting point and thus 'did not trigger off fantasy'.⁶

⁵ Naipaul, *op. cit.*: 26. In her autobiography Frame recalls she 'began to collect other words labelled "poetic"—*stars, gray, soft, deep, shadowy, little, flowers*...some having begun as my words in my poem but being used, in the end, because they were the words of "poetry" and because poetry emphasized what was romantic (dim, ineffable, little, old, gray) I felt I was well on the way to becoming and being known as "poetic and imaginative". [Frame, Janet. *To the Is-land: An Autobiography: Volume One*. Auckland, Century Hutchinson, 1982: (chap 20) 166.] She also recalls: 'I refused to accept that if I were to fulfil my secret ambition to be a poet, I should spend my imaginative life among the nightingales instead of among the wax-eyes and the fantails. I wanted my life to be the "other world". I thought often, gratefully, of the generous poets who had entered my world to write about Myrtle and the kingdom by the sea, mixing fact and fantasy in a poetic way that only made more vivid the events in Oamaru'. [Frame, *op. cit.*: (chap 22) 181.]

⁶ Naipaul, *op. cit.*: 27.

He was able to write, though Naipaul notes that because so much of his experience of objects had come from books first and from life later, he always felt an unavoidable estrangement from English literature and a strong sense of the separateness of word and referent. In New Zealand it was the stories of Katherine Mansfield and, in particular, Frank Sargeson, that provided the local models others could follow. Vincent O'Sullivan has observed that until the 1960s at least: 'you then learned fairly early on that these were the two ways New Zealand stories had come to be written—in the perceptively feminine, middle-class, stylish manner of Mansfield, or with the working-class, masculine, no-frills directness of Sargeson.'⁷ O'Sullivan's generalisation expresses the popular conception of these writers, but it also essentially correct. Mansfield wrote mostly delicate, expressive stories from the point of view of children; Sargeson wrote mostly tough-guy, laconic sketches from the point of view of working men. Both were highly poetic Modernists. Both spawned a large number of lesser imitators.

Maurice Duggan and Janet Frame, who were born in 1922 and 1924 respectively, absorbed and were assisted by the existence of a fledgling Mansfield and Sargeson tradition. They were also influenced by Sargeson's adversarial attitudes to New Zealand society: anti-puritan, anti-bourgeois and anti-intellectual. Neither directly imitated Mansfield or Sargeson, but both Duggan and Frame

⁷ O'Sullivan, Vincent. 'Introduction.' *The Oxford Book of New Zealand Short Stories*. Auckland, Oxford University Press, 1992: vii.

show a Modernist-Symbolist fondness for the beautifully made, largely self-referential artefact. In the process of finding their own voices, they found it necessary to reject elements of the English content in their cultural background. Both, like Sargeson and Mansfield before them, made journeys to Britain which helped bring into focus the non-English nature of their own experience. Duggan later complained of his high-school education that it contained: 'Something about the white walls of Tunis: something about a dying slave; something about a square that broke. All committed, at one time, to memory; all regurgitated, in mindless rote, during the doodling, dozing buzzing hour of the English lesson.'⁸ Frame, despite writing a great deal of Georgian poetry in her childhood, rejects the fantasies that English literature evokes in her early story 'Miss Gibson and the Lumber Room.' This story, written in 1946 and published in 1951 in Frame's debut collection, *The Lagoon and Other Stories*, can be read as a literary manifesto. Such manifestoes are important to writers of new literatures, who find themselves creating not only their own work but also trying to define the way it is to be read and, through this act, hoping to create their own readership.⁹ And such self-consciousness was part and parcel of the nationalism of that period. Many other New Zealand writers of the

⁸ Duggan, Maurice. 'Maurice Duggan on Art and Form in Fiction.' *Critic*, 28 Apr. 1960: 8.

⁹ Michael King notes that 'Miss Gibson and the Lumber Room' was shown in manuscript to John Money 12 August 1946. [King, Michael. *Wrestling with the Angel: A Life of Janet Frame*. Auckland, Viking, 2000: 534 (note 50).]

mid-twentieth century seemed preoccupied with the problem of simply being a writer in a young country, and many male writers who attempted to present themselves as full-time professionals were unusually assertive about their vocation (perhaps as a reaction to the stigma of effeminacy that New Zealanders attached to literature).

Janet Frame's life is well known to New Zealanders through her much admired autobiography, published in three volumes from 1982 to 1985 and the subject of a successful film.¹⁰ She grew up in an impoverished South Island family, the child of a railway worker, had two of her sisters die in accidental drownings and suffered a mental breakdown in her twenties. She was committed to a psychiatric hospital where, now notoriously, she was misdiagnosed as schizophrenic. This resulted in repeated electric-shock treatments and nearly ten years of incarceration. Frame was due to receive a leucotomy operation when the news came that her first book of short fiction had won the Hubert Church Award, and the operation was called off. Eventually she was discharged from the New Zealand mental health system. She stayed in a hut in the garden behind Frank Sargeson's house where she wrote her first novel, and then travelled to England where she received compassionate psychiatric care and was able to resume living her own life. More novels and three more collections of short stories were to follow. But for years Frame's critical reception has suffered from the biographical fallacy:

¹⁰ 'An Angel at My Table', (1990), directed by Jane Campion.

commentators have confused Frame with her victimised heroines and suggested that her poetic use of language implies mental frailty, or at least some lack of narrative control. As recently as 2001, in a review of Michael King's biography of Frame, *Wrestling With the Angel*, C.K. Stead was opining, 'Because she is not strong on narrative, and somewhat erratic in temperament, there are often structural inconsistencies in her fiction.'¹¹ In fact Frame's fiction uses unusual organic narrative structures and particularly complex metaphorical imagery, and it seldom discloses itself easily to its readers. Despite this, and especially since the popular acclaim for the film version of her life, she has become a national icon. It is a curious phenomenon that her outsider status has not hindered her popularity with New Zealand's large and conformist middle class, the more so since this group is relentlessly the object of attack in her fiction. But some explanation may lie in the critic Bruce King's observation that the middle class is typically a restless and spiritually dissatisfied group and therefore, paradoxically, it sees attacks on the middle class as in tune with its own values.¹²

'Miss Gibson and the Lumber Room' appears to be a typical early Frame story; it is written in a *faux naïf* style that at first glance, since the narrator is a twenty-one-year-old student writing to a former teacher, seems particularly inept.¹³ The two features of this

¹¹ Stead, C. K.. *Kin of Place*. Auckland, Auckland University Press, 2002: 280.

¹² King, Bruce. *The New English Literatures*. London, Macmillan, 1980: 230.

¹³ Frame's early stories were often criticised for being about children and being

style are a lack of punctuation and an odd mix of sophisticated and simple language registers. But a certain psychological regression when communicating with a childhood authority-figure is not unusual. Furthermore, a writer beginning in a young country will approach her material, language and form in a manner equivalent to that of a child; and not only Frame but also her narrator, J. F., is attempting to write in this fresh way. In writing her letter, the narrator is hoping to be true to her memories and to evoke them on the page—and they tumble out as they are thought, without regard to punctuation. Thematically, too, the mix of language seems appropriate because it involves trying to shake off all suggestion of cultural influence or sophistication and to find some more authentic, spoken form. Thus the fact that the naive narrative voice is a contrivance merely reinforces, and adds resonance to, the story's thematic purpose. The opening paragraph—a sparsely punctuated single sentence—examines by implication the narrator's juvenilia. At school she had to write a composition once a week for her teacher. The brief examples she gives—all descriptions of landscape without characters—offer only cliché ('the glory of the bush'), the obvious ('the rata on fire'), the over-literary ('the last rays of the setting sun

written in a childish style. In her autobiography Frame comments on the reception of *The Lagoon and Other Stories*: 'The literary critics of the time, having been persuaded that our literature had "come of age", found themselves embarrassed by so many writers writing of childhood: they supposed, How could a nation be adult if it wrote of its childhood? The longing for "maturity" was desperate partly because, among other terms for stages of growth, maturity was a fashionable word.' [Frame, Janet. *An Angel at my Table: An Autobiography: Volume Two*. Auckland, Century Hutchinson, 1984: (chap 14) 103.]

touching the hill-tops with gold'), abstract speculation ('the beauty of nature'), and a mix of archaic and non-New Zealand language ('the gentle zephyr caressing the meadow'). All these are jumbled together as one inseparable mass of worthless words. The narrator then repudiates all this by announcing, 'I was an awful liar'. She feels the necessity of telling 'the truth' now because she is twenty one and, having attained her majority, is an independent adult. It is no coincidence that as a nation New Zealand was in a similar situation when the story was written. In 1940 New Zealand held its centennial, commemorating 100 years of nationhood (since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi) with much ballyhoo and a number of literary contests. The newly established Frank Sargeson shared first prize in the New Zealand Centennial literary competition for the short story. Furthermore, the purple descriptions of landscape that appear in the narrator's compositions were also a feature of the romance writing which was the only established form for early New Zealand fiction, before the appearance of Sargeson and Modernism.

Having started with the Miss Gibson of the title in its first paragraph, the story uses its second paragraph to introduce the mysterious 'lumber room'. Extra space allows New Zealand houses to have rooms which European homes may not manage—a wash-house and a 'spare' room—but a lumber-room is not a New Zealand object or expression. It is known to New Zealanders only through reading European fiction. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines a 'lumber-room' as 'a room for lumber or disused chattels'.

In contrast, *The Dictionary of New Zealand English* lists only 'lumber', meaning "To arrest and charge (someone) with (or impose a sentence for) an offence; to catch (someone) out in some illicit or underhand act'. The latter definition seems appropriate in the light of the narrator's confession. Addressing Miss Gibson, the narrator paints a brief picture of her teacher reading from 'a little blue book intermediate composition hints and suggestions' which is so prescriptive that it aims to instruct both pupil and teacher. For the reader a view emerges of Miss Gibson as a spinsterish, Eurocentric scholar. Indeed, she appears to stand for scholarship as a whole at the time of the story, which may be why the narrator notes vaguely, 'It was partly your fault you know.'¹⁴

From the composition book Miss Gibson reads out to her class of girls 'a sort of essay'.¹⁵ The qualification 'sort of' indicates a basic confusion, both in the composition book and in the minds of the girls listening, about the form of the written piece: whether it is non-fiction or fiction, and thus its relation to real life. What is clear is that the essay, about a man exploring 'the treasures of the past'

¹⁴ 'Miss Gibson' was a teacher of Frame's at Waitaki Girls' High School. See note 17. In her autobiography Frame recalls: 'One morning Miss Gibson came into the classroom and without any preliminary discussion sat at her table, opened a book, said in her "announcing" voice, "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge" and began to read. She read the entire poem and said, "Write an essay on the ancient mariner for next week," then left the room. The lesson was over.' [Frame, Janet. *To the Is-land: An Autobiography: Volume One*. Auckland, Century Hutchinson, 1982: (chap 22) 181-182.]

¹⁵ No indication of the girls' age is given, though the fact that this is a single-sex class, the use of an 'intermediate' level textbook, and the content of the narrator's composition all suggest a secondary school class.

stored in his lumber-room, is hackneyed and sentimental. The man cries, and the class reacts in an equally sentimental fashion. Some of 'the more fragile girls', presumably hoping to boost their own reputations for sensitivity, make the gesture of taking out their handkerchiefs. (The narrator does not mention them actually crying.) The sentence which describes this action ends with a noticeable sense of let-down, in the expression 'when you read that bit.' The bathos possible in the simple word 'bit' acts as a form of proof that the writing which precedes it is overwrought. Nevertheless, the essay continues to pile on its effects: the man's voice breaks with emotion and he stares into space. Curiously (at least in the narrator's reported version), despite staring into space the man also notices precious objects in the room. These objects indicate the man's early mental life, 'the first book', and his early physical life, 'the tennis-racquet his first one', and the man feels the sadness of nostalgia. Just as Miss Gibson stands for Eurocentric scholarship, so the lumber-room stands as a repository of the past and of tradition.¹⁶ As a European adult, the man in the essay has a long personal and national history, unlike the short personal and national histories of the New Zealand schoolgirls listening to his story. But the paragraph ends with a reassurance that the girls,

¹⁶ It is thus worth noting the following quotation as a possible source for Frame's story: 'America is, therefore, the land of the future, where, in the ages that lie before us, the burden of the World's history shall reveal itself. It is a land of desire for all those who are weary of the historical lumber-room of Old Europe.' Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *The History of Philosophy*, Introduction.

picking up on the work's cues, feel that the essay is sad and understand its meditative intention. The narrator even refers to the lumber-room as 'old', meaning both its history and a sense of comfortable familiarity. The man is familiar with his own lumber-room, and the girls, already accustomed to the appearance of such unknown objects in written works, have now familiarised themselves with the word and with how they should react to the essay.

Bizarrely perhaps, Miss Gibson then sets the girls the task of writing compositions about their own exploration of their own lumber-rooms. Clearly she has in mind an imitation of what she has just read out. In cultural terms, writers in a new country find themselves similarly required to produce imitations of subject, and also of style, so that like the girls they must mind their 'ands and buts' and paragraphing. They are required to do so by the only readership available: Eurocentrics such as Miss Gibson. Furthermore, because what they produce is essentially imitative their work can be judged according to European standards, hence Miss Gibson's complaint that 'no examiner would ever etc', trailing off in the narrator's account as too commonplace to continue with. However, it is an unfortunate paradox that while the writing of the girls (and by extension authors in a new country) is to be heavily prescribed, anything they produce can never be as good as the original, because their works will necessarily be imitations. Under the influence of Kafka, perhaps, the narrator of the story has herself

referred to by Miss Gibson only as 'J.' (and she refers to her family later as 'the F. family'). This use of initials can be read as indicating an uncertainty of identity in a land not yet authentically written about. But since J.F. conveniently matches Janet Frame, the initials also play with the conventions of fictional character and autobiography in a literary environment that is fatally confused about the relationship between literature and life. The initials tease the habits of provincial readers who are inclined to view any transforming work of literature as non-fiction and to take offence at what they see as their own portrayal.¹⁷ Miss Gibson read out 'a sort of essay', and 'Miss Gibson and the Lumber Room' is the narrator's (and Frame's) response: a sort of story that mixes elements of fiction and non-fiction.

Beginning with a colloquial storyteller's 'Well', the next paragraph, which describes the narrator's home, moves further and further away from reality. The narrator's reaction to the essay about the lumber-room has been to adapt it to her own life and use it as a trigger for fantasy. With the mention of family servants the narrator's writing becomes unconvincing; with the appearance of a

¹⁷ In fact, just this scrutiny awaited 'Miss Gibson and the Lumber Room' on its publication. Former classmates of Frame's at Waitaki Girls' High School identified the character Miss Gibson as Janet Gibson, one of Frame's teachers—though fortunately Janet Gibson pronounced herself pleased with the story. [King, Michael. *Wrestling with the Angel: A Life of Janet Frame*. Auckland, Viking, 2000: 110.] A famous case was to occur later, in 1956, on the publication of Guthrie Wilson's novel *Sweet White Wine*. The novel was set in Palmerston North, and an unflattering article in the *Manawatu Daily Times* which viewed the novel as non-fiction, headlined '*Sweet White Wine* Made from Sour Grapes', was the subject of a libel action.

French cook it moves into mere exaggeration. Finally the writing changes into a foreign language. And even the French expressions given form contradictory nonsense: yes madam, yes indeed, I don't care. The next paragraph starts 'Of course', indicative of the narrator's beginning to think according to a formula. The paragraph expands on the previous one through a character sketch of the family's gardener. The writing is far removed from New Zealand reality in both its language and content. The narrator's family now has an 'estate'. The gardener doubles as a gipsy violinist. The whole paragraph seems a cliché borrowed from a Bronte novel but, significantly, its various parts do not cohere. It is unlikely that a gipsy would be named Charles. An old man would probably not have 'flashing eyes'. Someone with a Bohemian, artistic past would not likely seek employment as a gardener. The gardener/violinist is in fact two clichés, the mysterious old man and the romantic young artist, melded together. But for the purposes of the narrator's fantasy this does not matter.

In a reversal of the reader's expectations, the narrator announces that she did not put the gardener or the cook into her composition for Miss Gibson. It is enough that these figures have become part of the population of the narrator's imagination. They now proceed to corrupt her imaginative output. They form the basis of a drama she writes for her family to perform. Despite its apparently straightforward title, the reader can believe that 'The Cook and the Gardener' is almost certain to have been a complete

fantasy. But the narrator, influenced by the 'sort of essay', seems confused about the relationship between reality and fantasy in her drama, since she refers to it as 'a curious romance'. To the reader the latter half of the paragraph, a description of the seemingly high-class F. family children performing in 'the Summerhouse', appears to be a still further descent into fantasy and seems of a piece with the narrator's earlier fantasising. In fact, however, Frame's autobiography makes clear that this event is true. The Frame family did have an old summerhouse at the back of their garden, and the children did perform small concerts there. Frame really did have a brother named George who acted as something like manager—although, paradoxically, the use of his whole name makes him seem a fictional character here, in contrast to the implications of the initial 'J'.¹⁸ Just as the narrator is uncertain about the relationship between reality and fantasy, Frame attempts to make the reader's experience mimic the action of the story by mixing elements of fiction and non-fiction. In a reversal of the narrator's situation, the reader expects to find fiction and so mistakenly reads

¹⁸ George Frame is referred to as 'Bruddie' in Frame's autobiography. Frame recalls that George was a collector of junk from the local rubbish dump and that 'because [George] owned the furniture when we played house and the theatrical set when we staged plays, he was able to appoint himself as landlord and stage manager'. She also recalls: 'One of Bruddie's welcome finds was dark red velvet curtains that we could use as stage curtains in the summer house. Bruddie also provided the "gold" (a glittering brass chain) for use in *Honest Jacob*, which we adapted from a story found in an old schoolbook, of the man who found gold in the bread and took it back to the baker: an example of honesty.' She also notes that 'Our plays were performed with song items between'. [Frame, Janet. *To the Is-land: An Autobiography: Volume One*. Auckland, Century Hutchinson, 1982: (chap 14) 111-112.]

non-fictional elements in the story as fantasy. Thus, in effect, the reader too has been corrupted by the pernicious influence of the 'sort of essay' on the lumber-room.

In the next paragraph the narrator begins to imagine a concert so intensely that it seems to come to life on the page, with 'There will be a solo by Valmai from Dunedin'. This is all the more remarkable because of the inconsistent combination of Valmai's performance: singing a children's hymn and demonstrating a Scottish dance. But in the background Frame is still mischievously mixing fiction and non-fiction. On the evidence of her autobiography 'Valmai' is a fiction, whereas the drama on the same programme, 'Honest Jacob', was actually performed with its contents as described.¹⁹ However, the reader cannot know the difference. Corrupted writing offers no clues to where reality ends and fantasy starts. But the moralising implicit in the two performances—Valmai sings 'Jesus bids us shine' and Honest Jacob shows that 'Honesty is the Best Policy'—pricks the narrator's conscience and brings her mind back to the issue of her adult knowledge, that the lumber-room and the fantasies it evokes are essentially untrue to her experience. In a separate paragraph the narrator now repeats that she was 'an awful liar'. It is her own judgement on her willingness to play the game arranged by the cultural authorities, Miss Gibson and the blue composition textbook. To some extent it is also Frame's judgement, though the word 'liar'

¹⁹ See note 18.

has on both appearances been qualified with the epithet 'awful'. The word 'awful' can mean 'bad', but it can also mean 'filled with awe', which was the narrator's position as a schoolgirl. With this repetition the story has reached its halfway point. The second half at last proceeds to describe not the narrator's corrupted imagination but a product of that imagination, which is examined in detail: the narrator describes her composition on the lumber-room.

The narrator begins unpromisingly with the admission that the contents of her composition will not have been memorable for her teacher, an implicit admission of literary failure. Her lumber-room is, appropriately for an emblem of artificially highbrow culture, high up on the third floor of her home. The room is also made of appropriately transcendental materials, featuring stained-glass windows which (again appropriately) give a view of otherworldly creatures: 'angels blowing trumpets'. Moreover, the windows are objects informed by a sense of artistic tradition, since they are hand-painted 'by an artistic relative'; though the narrator's qualification, 'probably', maintains the problematic and confusing nature of her connection with the art of the European metropolises. Although the narrator is from a young country, she states that her lumber-room is 'crowded with memories.' As a result, the narrator says, she 'mused' there for a long time—a carefully chosen word since the Muses were the ancient Greek goddesses of the liberal arts. The narrator is at pains that her composition should imitate Miss Gibson's essay and so she has tears 'very properly' come to her eyes.

In fact, the second half of the story is in essence a copy of the first half. Both begin with a short paragraph in which the narrator announces that she has been a liar. Both then proceed to paragraphs in which someone enters a lumber-room and begins to cry.

Three paragraphs then follow which illustrate processes of cultural corruption. In the first, the narrator in the lumber-room experiences false memories. As a schoolgirl she is almost certainly too young to have owned a ball-gown, and a christening frock as described, literally 'all in silver', would be ridiculous—like a suit of armour. From these falsely remembered, impossible objects comes false thinking, borrowed from a European writer. The narrator reacts to what she claims to find by quoting from a poem by Wordsworth which the girls have 'done' and which she remembers as: 'there was a time when meadow grove and stream'.²⁰ From such an artificial mode of thought comes false sentiment: the narrator exclaims 'O childhood', evoking a non-existent nostalgia for a period in her life which is not yet really past. And finally, from striking such a pose, false sentiment is expressed in false language. The narrator uses archaisms, putting 'thou and thee and hast' into her writing. In this way the paragraph describes the process of literary corruption.

The man in Miss Gibson's essay found his 'first book' in the

²⁰ Wordsworth, William. 'Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood', line 1. The poem is an appropriate choice, since it opens with Wordsworth's lament for the loss of the immediacy of childhood feelings.

lumber-room, and so in the next paragraph the narrator begins to describe finding her first book as well. But there is a sense of one-upmanship in the description of her book and the consequent evocation of further nostalgic feelings. Whereas the man's book was torn, the narrator's has 'red and gold pictures'. Whereas the man felt vaguely sad on seeing his book, the narrator specifically 'yearned for the days that were no more.' To cover the falsity of this feeling the narrator again resorts to an appropriate quotation borrowed from an authoritative European writer. She notes that she 'put in Tennyson here', both in the sense of putting his words into her composition and of inserting them into her own thinking.²¹ A fresh irony adheres to her quotation of Tennyson's comment on idle tears, 'I know not what they mean', since clearly the narrator does not want to understand the empty meaning of her own burgeoning feelings. The narrator has, through imitation, created a false situation and set herself a dishonest sentiment as a something like a mental goal in competition with the original. To achieve this state she now proceeds to imagine herself being suitably 'moved' by imagining a suitably moving setting. In this way the paragraph describes the process of the corruption of the imagination, and so there is considerable ironic significance in the twenty-one year old narrator's

²¹ Tennyson, Lord Alfred. 'Songs from "The Princess". IV. Tears, Idle Tears', line 1. This poem, like the Wordsworth poem which precedes it, is also a meditation on 'the days that are no more'. These words from the poem, which come to the narrator's mind even before she decides to 'put in Tennyson' and which act as a cue, suggest the extent to which her reading has influenced the articulation of her thought.

claim that 'this was the saddest part of my essay.'

The game of one-upmanship continues in the third paragraph on cultural corruption. The man in the essay found his old tennis-racquet in his lumber-room and so the narrator also begins to find 'things of the past'. She starts with convincing former possessions, a doll and a bicycle, but soon abandons these to focus on an appealing though unlikely watch 'with the three opals in it'. This jewelled watch the narrator claims to have received on her third birthday and somehow 'out-grown'. The man in the essay received his tennis-racquet from his grandmother, and so the narrator now constructs an increasingly fantastic account of the relative who gave her the watch, her grandly named 'Great Aunt Mildred'. New Zealand's British heritage was, and is, crucial to New Zealanders' sense of identity, and so although the narrator claims to have 'out-grown' what was passed on to her, as a significant relative Great Aunt Mildred's British background is nevertheless emphasised. Furthermore, Frame shows the narrator naively describing her aunt's distant journeys from Britain (then by ship) as she 'used to come and see us from London', implying that the only aspect of the relationship with Britain that has been truly 'out-grown' is a faithful conception of Europe's inaccessibility. Next, the narrator expands the upper-class nature of Great Aunt Mildred's British background to the point of absurdity. Looking through Buckingham Palace fence at the King, which the narrator's British relative may actually have done, is not enough. The narrator then has Great Aunt Mildred

have ‘supper’—an English word—with the King in an ending to her account taken obviously not from family history but from fairy tale. The narrator’s substitutions of reality with more appealing fantasies, firstly in her personal memories and then in her family past, describe the process of the corruption of a sense of history.

The Eurocentric Miss Gibson prescribed the way the girls in her class were to write their compositions, but even here the narrator is not to be outdone. Instead of needing to labour over her ‘ands and butts’, in the next paragraph the narrator lays claim to artistic genius. She claims to have read Shakespeare at age six, even the difficult problem play *Measure for Measure*, and to have mastered Bach on the violin, appropriately a rare Stradivari.²² What matters to the narrator is that her genius reveals itself in forms of artistic endeavour imported from Europe, and thus, like her imitative composition, the narrator’s mind can be judged by European standards. She notes that everyone claps at her playing. Miss Gibson’s evaluation of the narrator’s finished composition is then revealed too, and at ‘fourteen out of twenty’ it is not, as the narrator concedes, memorably good or even especially bad. Despite the effort that the narrator has clearly put into giving her teacher the sort of composition asked for, the falsity engendered by its essential imitativeness means that both content and style remain second-rate

²² In her autobiography Frame recalls that at Otago University she studied *Measure for Measure* and it became her favourite Shakespeare play. [Frame, Janet. *An Angel at my Table: An Autobiography: Volume Two*. Auckland, Century Hutchinson, 1984: (chap 3) 24-25.]

in the eyes of Eurocentric scholarship, hence Miss Gibson's comment: 'highly improbable watch your writing.' The narrator is still so incensed at the unfairness of this evaluation that she repeats Miss Gibson's judgement in a separate paragraph, and her anger at this denigration of any true value in her imaginative output reveals her motive for writing to Miss Gibson now. The narrator even feels the need to bolster her ego with a further paragraph reminding Miss Gibson that she is now twenty one, and revealing that she is 'a sort of student at a University'. But this is all the authority she can muster. With her Eurocentric education continuing, the narrator in this sort of story about inauthentic experience can only feel herself to be a 'sort of student'. Nevertheless, Frame has begun once more to introduce fact into fiction, since as a Dunedin Teachers' Training College trainee from 1943 to 1944, able to attend Otago University lectures, she was genuinely 'a sort of student' shortly before she wrote 'Miss Gibson and the Lumber Room'.²³

For the third time the narrator now repudiates her composition with, 'I was an awful liar'. In the story's penultimate paragraph she begins to sketch a deft picture of her true self. She does this through a form of Keatsian negative capability, by identifying her fantasies as false and then substituting the truth. The narrator had a broken

²³ Frame was still a part-time student at Otago University in 1945, until entering a mental hospital for the first time late in that year. In fact, since Frame was born on 28 August 1924 and 'Miss Gibson and the Lumber Room' was written by 12 August 1946 [see note 9], Frame would still have been twenty-one years old when the story was composed.

rag doll, which indicates that she was not wealthy. At age six she read only the products of popular culture. She thinks she read nothing at age five, which indicates that she was not a precocious genius. Her imagination was influenced by writing from overseas, though not by highbrow works like Shakespeare but rather by simple escapist children's literature, such as 'Bunch of the Boarding School the Sneak of the Fourth' and 'The Princess Prefect'. The narrator did not come from the sort of artistic background that might have appreciated Bach at parties; even playing 'the loveliest bits' would have provoked mere fidgeting. The use of the word 'bits' in the penultimate paragraph echoes and mirrors the 'bit' Miss Gibson read out of the essay in the second paragraph of the story, which caused some of the class to feign tears. But here, used to tell the truth about an audience reaction, the word seems entirely without the bathos it produced at the story's start.

The story's final paragraph continues the process of repudiation. But the first sentence, rejecting the large house, cook and gardener and saying truthfully that the narrator lived in a small house, repudiates not items from the narrator's composition but those adaptive fantasies which hearing about the lumber-room generated in the narrator's later imaginative life and which corrupted her thinking. What the narrator wishes here is a complete cleansing. And indeed, for the remainder of the paragraph, the narrator no longer needs to rely on the substituting process of negative capability. She no longer repudiates anything and can describe her family

straightforwardly. Her mother provided domestic comfort of an unpretentious sort. Her father, when home from work, enjoyed leisure of a homely kind, and the only local colour he generated was planting non-exotic pansies. The list of family pets indicates a semi-rural background common in New Zealand at the time of the story, and the presence of visitors 'who swore' indicates an unsophisticated community. Furthermore, the narrator was not alienated in this environment but enjoyed an uncomplicated happiness. Her simple statement, 'I liked being alive', suggests that she had no need in her life for the large emotions that come with a divided sense of self. As a child in a young country she had no past to be a burden to her and was not concerned about its absence, since 'it was the present that mattered'. Finally, the narrator finishes up by addressing Miss Gibson with a newly confident 'if you really want to know'—an implied reminder that the necessity for this cleansing is partly Miss Gibson's fault—and announces 'we didn't even have a lumber-room.' In a new land, the family had no need of, or desire for, a repository of tradition. This final announcement, partly because of the use of the collective 'we', and partly from the added emphasis in 'even', has a tone of mischievous pride. A sensibility freed by geography from the burdens of tradition has the advantage of being able to map out a completely new imaginative territory, and understanding this becomes a form of artistic liberation.

'Miss Gibson and the Lumber Room', then, is the type of story a writer has to write in order to be free of the corrupting influence of

the cultural baggage accompanying forms of literature from the European metropolises, and also to move from the denial of an old culture involved in negative capability towards the genuine exploration of the new. Indeed, the story's purpose as a manifesto is the only convincing reason for its epistle form—in real life people do not write letters to former teachers explaining about lying over nothing important in an unmemorable school-composition, particularly if they were harmlessly giving the teacher what was wanted. Even if one assumes that the narrator has unmentioned literary aspirations and thus feels the necessity of her own act of literary cleansing, the basic premise of the letter is still unlikely. But after writing this story, Janet Frame has gone on to have a long and productive literary career, which includes the writing of her autobiography in the 1980s. It was not until the publication of her autobiography, over three decades after the appearance of 'Miss Gibson and the Lumber Room', that Frame's private mixing of fact and fantasy in the story could be known by the general reader. Thus, at least in part, when writing 'Miss Gibson and the Lumber Room' Frame was communicating not with a readership but with herself. This type of literature, writing for private satisfaction, occurs when no satisfactory readership exists. And this is the essential paradox of a literary manifesto in a young country: it is the message about a usually public activity which one sends to oneself.

Having convinced herself and dedicated herself to the task of a local literature, a writer like Frame then creates a readership along

with her imaginative product. This happens because the authenticity of the writing—the sense of immediacy the writing creates between reader and subject—conjures up readers who have been waiting for the authentic to appear and speak to them, with them in mind. Such writing does not address its readers' sense of pre-existing patterns of life (since any that the readers have will likely be false); rather, the authentic pioneering work articulates patterns of life that readers did not previously understand existed. Thus readers of a new literature (or those encountering a new literary form) often have unusual difficulty at first. A story of a new and authentic type may look strange, because its newness. The readers, too, have no tradition, no widely assumed view of their own society supplied by previous literature, against which any new work can be appraised. Writing that manages authenticity creates a readership over time that can leave such self-consciousness behind. And in the case of an immigrant culture like New Zealand's, the first authentically recognisable pattern of life will be, paradoxically, an admission as in Frame's 'Miss Gibson and the Lumber Room' of the inauthentic nature of one's own cultural experience.