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"SO MANY PEOPLE GOING THE OTHER WAY":
AN EXAMINATION OF THE MORAL STRATEGY
OF LANGUAGE USAGE IN FIVE NOVELS
BY JANET FRAME

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
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at Massey University

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PREFACE

The title quotation is from Janet Frame's novel, Living in the Maniototo (72). Abbreviations and editions of the five primary sources referred to in the text are as follows:

- EA The Edge of the Alphabet. London: W.H. Allen & Co., 1962.
- SG Scented Gardens for the Blind. London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1982.
- SS A State of Siege. London: Sirius, 1989.
- LM Living in the Maniototo. London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1981.
- CP The Carpathians. London: Century Hutchinson Ltd., 1988.

Some of the ideas developed in the chapter on Living in the Maniototo were first sketched out in a paper on that novel (39.498) written in 1990.

I wish to thank my supervisor, Dr William Broughton, for his influence and patient guidance in the preparation of this thesis. Sincere thanks also to my husband, Geoff, and our children Mark and Bronwyn for their enthusiastic support.

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INTRODUCTION

Janet Frame develops a clear moral strategy in her novels which appears to reflect a theological paradigm. In each novel she saves some of her characters to be her "chosen remnant", and damns others. The morality of Frame's realm is idiosyncratic and subverts that of society. The characters in her novels who are depicted as the pillars of society or as materialistic "successes" are not found among her "elect" for, to Frame, materialism is the arch-enemy of the imagination. It is the outcasts of society, the mad, the maimed, the poor and the eccentric who populate Frame's sacred domain. These are the ones to whom she entrusts her priceless treasure: the poetic language of the imagination. The lack of authentic vision displayed by the other characters disqualifies them from "election".

The sovereignty of Frame as the arbiter of morality is clearly evident in her novels for she judges her characters according to a strict moral code of language usage. Her sole criterion for moral judgement is the extent to which her characters allow an imaginative vision of life to shape their language, a vision that transcends and transforms concrete reality. This thesis traces the development of Frame's moral strategy through a chronological selection of five of her novels: The Edge of the Alphabet (1962), Scented Gardens for the Blind (1964), A State of Siege (1966), Living in the

Maniototo (1979), and The Carpathians (1988).

Frame develops her own "doctrine of predestination" in her novels. She either predestines her characters to a lifelong grappling with reality through the imaginative use of language, or to a life of materialistic stultification expressed through the language of conformity. There is no evidence in the novels of "conversion" from the cursed realm of language usage into the blessed realm and the characters travel a fixed path. The reader knows from the outset that characters like Pat Keenan, Lance Halletton, and the Shannons will be doomed because of their insensitivity towards the imaginative use of language. Others, however, like Daphne Withers, Thora Pattern, and Erlene Glace will be saved because of their use of poetic, ideosyncratic language. This foreshadowing of destiny does not mean, however, that Frame's work is devoid of surprise, subtle ambiguity, or paradox.

Frame delights in subverting the reader's expectations. In Scented Gardens for the Blind, Vera Glace appears damned through her constant cloying attempts to force Erlene to speak. Yet she is ultimately saved, and with the twist in the novel's denouement we discover her to be the secret imaginative creator of all the language in the novel. In A State of Siege, Malfred Signal appears to be "lost" in her rigid conformity to a set vision. Yet her courage and determination to pursue a faint desire for change and then to hold fast to it through the terror and fear that threatens

her sanity, ensures her salvation. Mavis Halleton, the struggling writer who is constantly distracted from writing her own novel does not seem to fit Frame's criterion for salvation. Yet she does not give up and finally presents us with Living in the Maniototo, proof of her intense struggle to remain faithful to the imaginative use of language. Mattina Brecon, the bored, wealthy philanthropist who seeks to "possess" people in foreign lands by "knowing" their lives and buying their land seems to have placed herself beyond Frame's pale. Yet Mattina's valuing of memory above all else earns her a place among the "elect", even though her function in The Carpathians is ultimately revealed to be that of a "character" within her "son's" novel.

The nature of Frame's salvation is highly paradoxical: Thora Pattern and Zoe Bryce commit suicide, Malfred Signal dies mysteriously, Vera Glace is incarcerated in a psychiatric hospital where her long-awaited speech amounts to primeval sounds, Mavis Halleton is constantly thwarted from writing her novel and Mattina Brecon dies of terminal cancer. Frame "rewards" her heroines with incarceration and death. Her salvation promises no joyous afterlife because her form of enlightenment is synonymous with oblivion. Frame saves her "elect" from their tortuous existence on the "edge of the alphabet" by moving them off the edge and forward into death. For them to move closer towards the centre of society would be a backward move and tantamount to "death in life", an infinitely worse predicament, in Frame's eyes, than death

itself.

The outcome of Frame's moral strategy is deeply pessimistic for, although she values the supremacy of the imaginative use of language she allows so few of her characters to use it. Even in novels like Scented Gardens for the Blind and The Carpathians where the death of the old language signals a new start, the "new" language amounts to unintelligible primeval utterings. There is, however, a recognisable development in the depiction of Frame's pessimistic world view. The dichotomies of the early novels seem to be less harsh in Living in the Maniototo and The Carpathians, though they are no less absolute. The humour and the closer association of the protagonists with the suburbia Frame disparages, merely serve to intensify the reader's recognition of the underlying deeply pessimistic vision. Frame's moral strategy ensures the salvation of a minuscule minority whilst leaving the vast majority without hope.

The first novel to be examined, The Edge of the Alphabet, depicts the rigid dichotomies resulting from Frame's moral strategy for language usage. Thora Pattern articulates her language of the imagination from a position of incarceration, like Daphne in Owls Do Cry. She is marginalised by society because of her authentic vision and dwells precariously on "the edge of the alphabet." Of the three other protagonists, Zoe Bryce is the only one whose outward journey mirrors an inward journey and faithful search

for reality. She joins Thora on the "edge" in her use of a language of insight and death. Pat Keenan's language, in contrast, reflects society's norms in its preoccupation with caution, convention and materialistic pursuits, and Frame consigns him to the stagnation of the status quo. The imaginative language of Toby's dream-world belies his inarticulateness but his preoccupation with fame disqualifies him from a firm position on the "edge" and he exists in a vacuum of illusion. Frame rewards the singleminded search for the truth of the imagination and all forms of compromise are disqualified.

In Scented Gardens for the Blind, Frame's "elect" are still separated from society. Erlene has little contact with the outside world and "speaks" her language of the imagination as a dumb recluse. Frame endows her with insight and sensitivity that act as a foil to the inadequacy of the other characters. Edward evades reality and lives in the past, presiding over his regiment of toy soldiers and the history of the Strang family. His delusions of grandeur are reflected in his deceptive language that denies truth. Vera Glace is eventually revealed to reside in the world of the imagination, a "mad" domain which is devalued and made invisible by society but honoured by Frame.

Frame uses the journey motif again in A State of Siege but, unlike Toby or Edward, Malfred chooses to exchange one state of consciousness for a vastly different one. She

renounces a former conventional vision in order to embark on a search for a truthful imaginative vision. The reality she confronts plunges her into a lurid world of terror where her past taunts her. To break with a lifetime's habit of viewing costs Malfred her life but her sacrificial adherence to truth, depicted through poetic interior monologue, wins her Frame's salvation. Malfred dies because the degree of enlightenment she attains is incompatible with life in a world of false materialistic values.

In Living in the Maniototo, Mavis Halletton experiences the writer's frustrating propensity to succumb to distraction. Yet her imaginative use of language is the standard by which Frame judges the language of the other characters in the novel. Through the depiction of the real, the surreal and the metaphorical, Frame makes great demands upon the reader by constantly subverting the reader's expectations. The shifting identity of the narrator, the confusing disappearance and reappearance of characters, and the black humour distances the reader from the author and results in an unsettling reading process. Throughout the novel the reader gains insight into the creative process of writing fiction, a process which is of supreme value to Frame.

Frame's next and most recent novel, The Carpathians, also makes strenuous demands upon the reader as the concepts of the Gravity Star and the Memory Flower subvert the

conventions of proximity and point of view. Frame builds further on the paradox of the memory as both truthful and arbitrary, explored in Living in the Maniototo. Although Frame saves Mattina through her faithful quest for the memory of the land and damns the residents of Puamahara for their materialism and neglect of memory, the reader's expectations are ultimately subverted in the final revelation of John Henry Brecon's "authorship". These final two novels reveal that Frame manipulates not only the fate of her characters but also the expectations of her readers.

The theological paradigm apparent in each of the five novels examined in this thesis reflects Frame's sovereignty as author. The chosen few that accumulate through the novels meet Frame's criterion for language usage leaving those cast aside to remain forever beyond the pale. Salvation is reserved for the elite, those who find it are rewarded with early death, and Frame's judgement is final.