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Equal Others:
The Erotic as the Site of Power

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

This thesis comprises two sections: a critical research essay focusing on Joy Cowley's 1970 novel *Man of Straw* and the first 30,000 words of an original adult novel entitled *A Fine Piece*. In both sections, I undertake an exploration of the role of the transgressive erotic scene.

In the creative portion of my thesis, transgressive erotic scenes are central to the narrative. The implications of the erotic transgression are central to the advancement of the plot and the development of thematic elements of gender, power, sexuality, romance and nature. *A Fine Piece* traces the effects of betrayal on a family and the role of the erotic in maintaining social conventions in 1960s New Zealand.

In the critical portion of the thesis I investigate the impact of Eros and the desire for unity in Cowley's *Man of Straw*. Using the lens of G. W. F. Hegel's dialectic of recognition, I argue that deep unity and recognition between characters in the novel are largely held in check by the social constraints of 1960s New Zealand. True and mutual unity, then, does not arise merely from physical union but from an ethical decision to consciously value and recognize another person. When the erotic leads to union without this ethical component it occurs in the form of a transgressive act with far-reaching and even fatal implications. I also examine the ways in which Cowley depicts the relationship of characters with the natural world as an indictment against a society that has become increasingly unnatural.

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Introduction

This project involves two parts. The first part is 30,000 words of a longer adult novel, presented here as chapters one to nineteen of *A Fine Piece*. The second part of this thesis is a critical research essay in which I investigate the impact of Eros and the desire for unity through the role erotic scenes play in the novel *Man of Straw* by Joy Cowley.

Not far into the study of erotic writing it becomes clear the erotic scene is not just about the sex. In literature, the erotic act, and the desire for it, brings an understanding of the world the characters belong to: its ideologies and social construction and the way these impact on a character's desire for unity. "Understanding desire as the desire for recognition changes our view of the erotic experience", writes Jessica Benjamin (126). For what we most desire, the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel proposed, is to be recognized as an equal by an equal other (111-12). In this thesis I use Hegel's dialectic of recognition as an aid to understanding a character's needs for unity in the erotic scenes in Cowley's *Man of Straw*.

I was drawn to study *Man of Straw* firstly for the similarity in themes between Cowley's novel and my own. Both books trace the effects of betrayal on a family and the constraints of society on a woman's ability to remain an individual subject. I was also drawn to study Cowley's writing in *Man of Straw* for the way the language of Eros pervades the text, particularly as she evokes the natural world in terms of desire.

In my critical research I examine the role of the erotic scene in *Man of Straw*, a novel written and set in New Zealand in the late 60s. I focus on

how the social mores of this text affect the possibility for unity and recognition between characters. Power shifts of mutuality and domination are reflected in the text through the denial or embracing of Eros, first as experienced within a character, and secondly as experienced within the erotic union of characters. Cowley evokes these states of mutuality or domination, in part, through the characters' perceptions of the natural world. In scenes of unity in the landscape, characters experience a blurring of boundaries between themselves and the natural world. In these scenes of Eros, Cowley affirms the importance of a subject's capability to be free and independent.

I explore the themes of individuality and the possibility of unity in *A Fine Piece*, which is set in Wellington in 1962. The sexual/cultural/political conflicts of my text are played out in the relationship between Tom, a tradesman, and Lily, a designer and mother, as she negotiates and redefines her rights to live as a creative person within the cultural assumptions of the early sixties. It is in the transgression of sexual mores that the struggle for personal freedom will be contested.

The trigger for this novel was seeing a gown called 'Paris' displayed at the Hawkes Bay Museum. 'Paris', designed by a woman with six children, was voted the most avant-garde design in New Zealand in 1963, and the designer, Dorothy Kirkcaldie, was not able to travel overseas to another competition as invited because of family commitments. I wanted to explore within a novel this time of women beginning to claim their power of creativity and the impact this had on the men in their lives.

There are two specific erotic scenes in my novel that affect the family structure by transgressing codes. It is through the shifts in power as Tom seeks to dominate Lily in an erotic scene and Lily seeks a balance in power by having an affair, that I make an emotional exploration of desire and recognition: the struggle against domination to the mutual recognition of each other.