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The Form and Function of the Modern Fable in Janet Frame's Short Stories

Critics have long debated the degree to which Janet Frame is a social-realist writer. To understand Frame's fiction properly, we need to see it in the context of fantastic literature as a whole, and especially the modern fable. The fable offers Frame an opportunity to explore the realm of the imagination while expressing deeply held views on social and philosophical questions. *The Lagoon and Other Stories* contains both fables and largely realist stories that employ elements of the fable. Fables like "Spirit" and realist stories like "Swans" thus need to be read in the light of the techniques of fantastic literature in general and the modern fable in particular.

One area of controversy in the criticism of Janet Frame's work is the degree to which she is a social-realist writer. Should her work be read as primarily mimetic, or is it essentially non-realist, featuring elements that contradict and even challenge conventional notions of realist fiction? Leading the group insisting on the mimetic nature of Frame's fiction is Patrick Evans, who views her as not just a social satirist (see his Twayne volume, especially p. 38) but also a fundamentally autobiographical writer, particularly in the short stories in *The Lagoon and Other Stories* (1951). Indeed, he claims, "Only an understanding that many references in this earlier fiction are disguised incidents in the writer's own life will enable the reader to understand the work fully" (41). His approach leads him to make the astonishing claim that "Frame is an extraordinarily egocentric writer who finds herself in everything and will empathize with her environment only in order to cannibalize it" ("Farthest from the Heart" 31). Evans's work has provoked cogent rebuttals from, among others, Alan Tinkler and H. Winston Rhodes. Meanwhile, on the other side of the critical divide, Marc Delrez in his introduction to *Manifold Utopia* (2002) outlines and then rejects the various critical positions – from John Sargeson's to those of later postcolonial and feminist critics – that see her work as "primarily mimetic and satirical" (xiii). Christine Lorre, citing the well-known distinction Frame makes in her essay, "Beginnings" (1965), similarly complains in her article that critics have exaggerated the degree to which Frame's fiction deals with "this world" rather than "that world."

Efforts to see Frame as non-realist have sometimes led to an equally extreme opposite perspective. In his critique of social-realist analyses, Delrez insists that "verisimilitude may simply *not* be Frame's primary criterion of excellence in fiction" and that she seeks to move "beyond" it as "she insists on the need for a new order of representation which involves a deep unsettling of our dominant assumption about people or culture" (xxii-xxiii). He reads Frame's work in the context of postcolonialism; in a somewhat different critical context, concerning her role as a social satirist, Vincent O'Sullivan says that "social relationships in fact mean very little to her" (26). Perhaps the most extensive argument insisting on her primary interest in the world of the imagination – "that world" – and her status as a writer of fantastic literature is Joel Gwynne's recent article, "Inertia Creeps: Hesitancy in Janet Frame's Short Fiction" (2007). Gwynne bases his view on Tzvetan Todorov's definition of the

fantastic as work that produces “hesitancy”: the reader of a work of the fantastic, Todorov says, is made to hesitate between a rationalist/materialist and a supernatural interpretation of the work’s events. Gwynne takes Todorov’s definition as the final word on what constitutes the fantastic and reads Frame’s fiction as provoking that sort of “hesitation.” In fact, however, Todorov’s definition of the fantastic is quite idiosyncratic. Most scholars in the field see fantastic works as doing quite the opposite of what Todorov claims; that is, truly fantastic works make it very clear that, in the case of fantasy at least, a supernatural interpretation is without doubt the correct one (Todorov calls such works “marvelous”; on current theory on the fantastic, see Attebury, Zahorski and Boyer, Swinfen, Manlove, Eilers, etc.).

Indeed, one problem with studies of Frame’s fiction, and in particular her short stories, is that they do not adequately place her work in the context of fantastic literature in general. That Frame works in the fantastic mode in at least some of her works is undeniable; her collection *Snowman, Snowman* (1963) is quite accurately subtitled *Fables and Fantasies*, and some stories published in other collections, including the largely realist *The Lagoon and Other Stories*, are also without doubt fantastic. To understand Frame properly, we need to review the qualities of fantastic literature, and especially the modern fable. Frame wrote her most clearly fantastic short stories at exactly or nearly the same time as other writers elsewhere in the world, notably Jorge Luis Borges and Michael Bullock, were composing their own fables. Given Frame’s literary roots – especially in Romantic literature, with its emphasis on the imagination and transcendent visions – and cultural context in the postwar period, it is not at all surprising that she would be, whether by design or not, among the ranks of the modern fabulists. Exactly how she fits into that historical and contemporary context requires an understanding (as far as space allows) of the nature of the fantastic as a whole and of the fable – both ancient and modern – in particular, as well as a consideration of Frame’s philosophical and moral views.

First, as we have seen, Todorov’s definition of the fantastic, or at least his use of the term, needs to be challenged. Most scholars agree that the fantastic involves a contradiction of what both author and reader understand the world to be and how it works – what Eric S. Rabkin in *The Fantastic in Literature* (1976) refers to as the “ground rules” (4). The fantastic creates what Darko Suvin calls, in his study of science fiction, “cognitive estrangement”; while Suvin limits his analysis to science fiction, in fact all fantastic literature produces a sense in the reader of a radical discrepancy between what is portrayed in the text and what the reader “knows” of the world. (Rabkin refers to this effect as the “anti-expected” [10].) Fantastic, otherwise known as non-mimetic, literature is characterized by the depiction of the impossible, or more precisely what a culture considers to be the impossible: for example, supernatural forces in the case of fantasy or non-existent technologies in the case of science fiction. C. N. Manlove defines a work of fantasy as “[a] fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds, beings or objects” (16); by “irreducible” he means that it “must not be possible wholly to explain the supernatural or impossible away” (“Nature” 21). In terms of Frame’s fiction, then, we should note that if the seemingly fantastic element can be explained as a childhood fantasy or the product of a psychological state or perception, the story is not fantastic. The imagination plays a prominent role in

fantastic literature, but when it comes to identifying the fantastic in fiction we must distinguish between the author's (or implied author's) imagination and her characters'.

That Frame emphasizes the imagination as the artist's most important faculty of perception is undeniable, and her view complicates our understanding of the role of the fantastic in her work. Scholars have shown how strongly influenced she was by Romantic writers, and the importance she placed in "that world"; she also shared the Romantics' beliefs in the visionary role of the author (see, e.g., Bazin 121-22) and the redemptive and illuminating power of art (Evans *Janet Frame*, 48). The result is a metaphoric quality to her writing that, for O'Sullivan, is evidence of "a blatantly romantic stance" (29). It is on these grounds that Delrez rejects the social-realist interpretation of her fiction in favour of a "utopian" analysis seeing her as promoting a deliberately undefined, entirely transcendent vision; in fact, for Delrez it is the lack of definition of what she seeks to portray that makes it utopian for her, and he refers to her art as a "kind of over-reaching into the unknown" (xvi). He believes that her work operates on a tension between two "poles" – social comedy on one side and utopianism on the other – but argues that "the pole of comedy only finds its full significance when it is pitched against the opposed pole of Frame's utopianism, from which it draws its motive power" (xv).

Besides this Romantic stress on the importance and power of the imagination and its ability to offer transcendent visions, there are other ways in which Frame's work might be seen as anti-realist.¹ For example, a number of scholars have remarked on the metafictional qualities of her short stories in particular, such as Tinkler and Evans's "Farthest from the Heart" (1981; on metafiction, see Waugh and Currie). Lorre similarly notes how the theme of storytelling in "The Lagoon" undercuts the story's verisimilitude, calling all forms of narration – especially the grandmother's and that of the narrator herself – into question (253). Evans and others have discussed the poetic nature of Frame's prose, suggesting that we must read her stories as networks of motifs more than realist narratives.

But the sharp distinction some critics make between fantastic mode or technique and social concern, between "this world" and "that world," must be questioned. The picture we sometimes get of the "Romantic" Frame should not delude us into seeing her as therefore less interested in "this world" and its ills. (And in fact the Romantic authors were heavily engaged in social concerns; they were not mere seekers of spiritual enlightenment and higher Truths.) Fantastic literature frequently holds up a mirror to reality, offering a renewed perspective on the world as we know it – what is referred to by scholars in the field as the primary world – and of all the fantastic genres none is more socially relevant than the fable. Frame writes modern fables, and the fable is a genre that, in both its ancient and modern manifestations, combines fantasy and social concerns. Rather than dealing with a transcendent realm, the fable focuses very directly on moral and social issues, even at times approaching those issues in a satirical manner. By its very nature, the fable is thus rooted in "this world" no matter how much it evokes or depends upon "that world"; furthermore, even Frame's social-realist short stories exhibit some of the elements of the fable. To

1. I use the term "anti-realist" within the broader mode of modernism in general. Metafiction undercuts the mimesis by highlighting a given text's constructedness, even when everything in the text is realistic, in the sense that it does not violate what we know of the primary world.

understand Frame's use of the genre, we should briefly review the features of both the ancient and modern forms of the fable.

The ancient or beast fable, best illustrated by the works of Aesop, is characterized by the following tropes (for a discussion of the genre, see, e.g., Swinfen 12-15):

1. It depicts animals that are clearly intended to be thinly disguised human beings, while retaining their supposedly distinctive "natural qualities": foxes are sly, certain birds are foolish while others are wise, etc.;
2. The animals in the fable are rational and able to speak, as they embody and express human qualities and attitudes;
3. The characters are representative rather than individualized;
4. The tale is very short, offering a brief, focused narrative;
5. Images and symbols tend to be archetypal;
6. Above all, the tale points up a moral that may be explicitly or implicitly expressed.

The fable's moral usually involves individual ethics, criticizing human attitudes and behaviour more than specific social problems, although fables have also been used to satirize powerful groups and individuals in society. Sins both serious and minor are held up to attack through allegory, as the animals overtly represent human flaws and the consequences of unwise choices. The ancient fable is normally set in a secondary world; that is, the world of the fable is unconnected to the primary world in that the fact that animals think and talk is not intended to be surprising to that world's inhabitants, who are all or nearly all talking beasts. It is a form of immersive fantasy – fantasy that immediately transports the reader to a world unlike the reader's own.

The modern fable possesses many, but not all, of these features. Modern fables, including beast fables like George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), may be of novel length; also, they may be set in the primary world, rather than a fully immersive secondary world, but nevertheless draw the reader into a fantastic "side" of that world we may not be aware of (Swinfen 13). However, most modern fables resemble their ancient counterparts in that they are brief, they portray a limited number of representative figures rather than fully rounded characters, and they offer morals. We often think of twentieth-century literature as expressing a modern and postmodern radical relativity when it comes to questions of ontology, epistemology, and morality, but in fact recent authors have not been at all hesitant to assert definite social, moral, and philosophical values. A number of contemporary short story writers and novelists have engaged in powerful social and moral critiques, and used fantasy to make statements about the problems they see in modern life. Robert Scholes has been a leading scholar of the modern fable-writers, whom he calls the fabulators: writers like Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and Thomas Pynchon. He describes their fictional practice in this way: "modern fabulation, like the ancient fabling of Aesop, tends away from the representation of reality but returns toward actual human life by way of ethically controlled fantasy. Many fabulators are allegorists. But the modern fabulators allegorize in peculiarly modern ways" (11). Among these modern ways are the following revisionist fable tropes:

1. The characters tend to be humans rather than animals;
2. The setting may be either the primary or an immersive secondary world;

3. The narrative remains brief, but with less reliance on clear cause-and-effect, and indeed may be surrealistic;
4. The moral is seldom explicit;
5. Specifically modern issues rather than general human traits are the most common targets of satirical or philosophical attack.

The surrealistic effect is to some extent a function of the nature of the characters and the moral. Since the author's philosophical and/or moral purpose is paramount, the characters do not behave in psychologically explicable ways, but function as archetypal figures in the brief moral drama. The imagery remains archetypal, as in the ancient fable, and indeed some authors – like Frame – rely quite heavily on such archetypes, to the point where these common images appear not only in their fantastic works but also in their realist texts. Frame's most characteristic image patterns, involving repeated metaphorical and symbolic references to the sun, birds, water, and oppositions of darkness/light, inside/outside, and so on, are unquestionably archetypal.

As mentioned above, two of the best examples of modern fabulators in the short story are Jorge Luis Borges and Michael Bullock. In *Ficciones* (1956), for example, Borges tells a number of short tales each of which relies on a conceit or implausible image – like the eponymous library in “The Library of Babel,” a library that contains everything and is apparently eternal and infinite. Borges's tales are philosophical explorations in descriptive and narrative prose; as his American editor says, “Borges restates, in a few allegorical pages, the circular, ceremonial direction of our curious, groping, thrilling and atrocious ignorance” (Kerrigan 9). In a similar vein, Canadian surrealist Michael Bullock has published a number of collections of surrealist short stories including *Sixteen Stories As They Happened* (1969) and *Green Beginning, Black Ending* (1971), which, much like *Snowman*, is subtitled *Fables*. Like Frame's stories, Bullock's are often only two or three pages long and in the first person. They depict fantastic situations in which the narrator encounters human and animal characters – or rather figures – who trigger seemingly illogical responses on his part. In fact, it would be more precise to say that these responses obey dream logic. While there is no room here to go into detail about Bullock's work, it is worth noting that his stories seem to argue for a more spontaneous and direct relationship with the world of nature, the unconscious, and the imagination than we generally experience in modern life. A comparison of the works of Frame and Bullock would likely prove quite fruitful.

Frame's short stories, then, must be seen in the cultural context of modern fabulation, the writing of fantastic stories designed to convey moral and philosophical truths as the author knows them. Of course, Frame's first story collection predates Borges's, and *Snowman*, *Snowman* predates even Bullock's magazine publications (as he began publishing his surrealist stories in the late 1960s). Thus, we cannot trace influences on Frame's work in the stories of these other fabulators. It is not unreasonable, however, to argue that she is responding to the same cultural developments, and to a large extent simultaneously arriving at the same literary solution to the problem of how to respond to them. Like other creators of modern fables, she employs the fantastic in distinctly modern ways to deal with issues in “this

world,” however much her techniques may rely on “that world” of the imagination for the expression of her views.

As a number of critics have pointed out, a major preoccupation of Frame’s work is death. However, just as it would be a mistake to see her use of the fantastic as evidence of a lack of interest in social and moral questions, it would be equally wrong to see her favourite theme as evidence of a purely macabre obsession. Recent scholars of Frame, such as Anna Smaill and Simone Drichel, have replaced our earlier image of a self-absorbed, somewhat pathological individual with a sophisticated thinker, one who treats death as a philosophical more than a psychological issue (see especially Smaill’s article). We now recognize that what Frame seeks is a balancing of polar opposites, the achievement of a healthy balance in our recognition and acceptance of both life and death, and indeed in all the other dichotomies we face: our internal and external lives, self and other, that which is defined as “sane” and “insane,” and so on (on her desire to achieve wholeness out of dichotomies, see Rhodes 112-13; Lorre 247; Evans *Janet Frame*, 34-36; Rutherford 24; Jones and Jones 56; see also W. H. New’s discussion of “Or And” reading as a necessary strategy for reading Frame’s stories in his essay in this volume). On the other hand, she expresses definite preferences, arguing in favour of certain kinds of thinking and behaviour and against others. Above all, like other modern fabulators, Frame rejects much of modern bourgeois life: its materialism, its conventionality and conformism, its spiritual emptiness. Modernity leads to the withering of the imagination, and the substitution of material values for more emotionally and spiritually satisfying ones. She sees the modern world as a trap, one that constrains the individual, and so many of her characters are bound by their circumstances and caught up in stultifying routines (Rhodes 128). She rejects what Evans calls “safe, ritualized, and repetitive behaviour” and “the tendency of any industrialized society towards the mass production of commodities and the consequent effacement of individualism” (*Janet Frame* 36). O’Sullivan sees this position as explaining her portrayal of marginal characters, including patients in mental institutions: “not to be an outsider, not to be a victim, not to be mentally disturbed as those Others conventionally say, is to be mechanical, processed, unaware” (26-27). A conformist society like ours, Frame believes, requires us to compromise and adapt; “[f]ailure to adapt leads of course to persecution, ostracization and in some cases destruction” (Rutherford 25). One constant target of Frame, and also of her Romantic and Modernist influences, is popular culture, which she sees as filling our minds with clichés that reveal “how man’s experience is limited and distorted by the infection of all that is banal, second-hand, and evasive in a society which batters the spirit, through newspaper, film, radio, and popular journalism, into a state of uneasy unhappy materialism” (Dalziel 27). The language of popular media, Dalziel continues, reflects the “spiritual meagreness” of modern culture. Challenging such threats to individualism and imagination is the artist, whose special role in society is to be a visionary and a spokesperson for the Other. In holding such views, Frame is philosophically very much in line with her Romantic and Modernist literary forebears and many of her postmodern contemporaries. We can see this approach clearly in the development of the Modernist short story; authors like Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Sherwood Anderson, and, in New Zealand, Katherine Mansfield were, in R. C. Feddersen’s words, “engaged in a creative reaction against the formulaic short story”

of the sort written by writers like O'Henry (xxiii; see also the histories of the short story by Bates, Canby and Dashiell, and Reid, among others).

Frame explores these themes through both the fantastic and the social-realist modes. Regardless of mode, she addresses common concerns and makes quite definite statements about where she stands. (Here I disagree with Judith Dell Panny, who argues that the allegorical element in Frame's work "does not urge the adoption or the affirmation of moral precepts; rather, its moral purpose is to encourage a reassessment and questioning of codes and values that have long been taken for granted" ["Hidden Dimension" 59]. Urging her reader to question and even reject the values of the modern world is affirming a moral precept.) On the other hand, while it is important to recognize the important distinction between her fantastic and realist works, it is nevertheless true that she incorporates elements of the modern fable in her realist works. We do not need to go as far as some critics in seeing all of her works as essentially fantastic, but it is clear that certain fabulist techniques can be found in stories that provide psychological or other "logical" explanations for what seem to be fantastic features. Such stories qualify as parables: brief stories that point up morals in much the same way as fables do, but that feature human characters and are fundamentally realist. Nevertheless, even these parables contain elements that recur in her fables. As we have seen, the majority of her unquestionably fantastic works appear in *Snowman*, *Snowman*, but even in *The Lagoon and Other Stories* we can find examples of fantasy, as well as of realist stories that can be understood better in light of literary contexts we have been examining.

One of the truly fantastic stories in *The Lagoon and Other Stories* is "Spirit." The story is a dialogue between two disembodied spirits in a doctrinally unspecified afterlife. Evans makes the implausible claim in his Twayne volume that Frame was an independent literary soul largely unaffected by her reading: "Although few strong literary influences stand behind her art, a large body of literature stands at its side" (32). This story offers compelling evidence of quite the opposite. We cannot say for certain what work might have directly inspired the tale, but dialogues of this sort pervade the Western literary and philosophical tradition, and the similarities between "Spirit" and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion" (1839) are striking. In both short stories, the dialogue involves a newly passed soul and one who has experienced the afterlife for some time. Both texts offer only dialogue – we are given no descriptions of the speakers or even attributions of their speeches. One major difference is that while Poe's story is apocalyptic, portraying what is apparently the end of the world in a fiery cataclysm, Frame's deals with an individual death.

The techniques of the fable are evident in this tale, and so are the themes we have been discussing. First, the story is only two-and-a-half pages long; Frame spends little time on characterization and even less on plot. Her goal is not to create a fully realized mimetic fictional world, but to highlight certain themes in as direct and concise a form as possible. The characters remain voices, but that is entirely appropriate to both the theme and the function; as we will see, the newly arrived soul was little more individualized in life than he is in death. We are meant to see him not as a fully rounded character but as a typical figure – in other words, as a classic fable figure, who conforms to type rather than lives and breathes as an individual. Instead of a sly Fox or a steady if unspectacular Tortoise, then, he is a representative Human. More

specifically, as becomes clear in the story, he is a representative *Modern Human*. For the sake of clarity, since his life is the focus of both the narrative and the story's implied moral, we will refer to him as the protagonist.

As in Poe's story, the experienced spirit seeks to initiate the recent arrival into his new condition, doing so primarily by asking him to remember his life on Earth so that with the review can come an easier transition from a life dominated by linear time to a timeless existence. Both stories portray the transition through a change of names. In Poe's story, both characters must adopt new names to replace their Earthly ones, while in "Spirit" the souls have no names at all, just numbers; the new arrival used to be Harry but is now Spirit 350, and when he names himself and his wife, the experienced one asks in some surprise, "Do you have names?" (67). The stories thus make it clear that death brings a new and permanent identity, one that permits the characters to review their own lives and experiences from an "othered" perspective. The fantastic element thereby contributes to the elaboration of the theme of life and death, as protagonists look upon their lives from the point of view of their afterlives.

It is from Spirit 350's review of his life that we learn about the sort of person he was, and by extension the sort of people we have all become in our modern, bourgeois society. The first sentence of his review is more telling than he knows: "There's nothing much to say" (67). Indeed, it is immediately apparent that he has had not much of a life at all, and the reason is precisely that it was, as he says, "The usual thing" (67). The lack of punctuation in his account of his childhood highlights the mechanical nature of his litany of routine activities: "Born in the South Island went to some kind of school learned writing and spelling and profit and loss and compositions My Holiday What I would most like to be when I grow up – " (67). It is worth noting that his education is not entirely school-based; his industrial-capitalist society has taught him about "profit and loss." Ironically, his commonplace school assignment asking him to say what he wants to do when he grows up illuminates the constricting nature of his society; while he wanted to be "an inventor or explorer or sea captain" he had no real opportunity to be any of those. As he says dismissively, "these are just fancies we get when we are little kids running round the garden playing at being grown-ups" (67). Our society tramples upon and belittles any such imaginative ambitions; its schools may ask us what we want to do, but severely limit our choices at the same time.

Instead of pursuing his dreams, Harry marries young and then leads an uneventful, uninspiring life, one that is not shaped by passion, imagination, desire, or vision but determined by convention and dominated by routine:

We are creatures of habit. Lived in a little house, had four kids, worked at gardening, each day a round of eating and sleeping and other pleasures, pictures on the weekend, the bar on Friday nights at five for bar lunch cold fish and dead potatoes, footy in the weekend, footy's a kind of game, every day mostly just going backwards and forwards doing this and that. (68)

Again, the protagonist reveals more than he realizes as he refers only in passing to "other pleasures," presumably sexual ones that one would think meant more to him than this. We see here an excellent example of the rigid, thoughtless, unfeeling nature of modern life that Dalziel describes in her summary of Frame's philosophy. Popular culture – the sort of entertainment that embodies and promotes what Dalziel calls

“spiritual meagreness” – has contributed to Harry’s state; when the other spirit asks him if he had newspapers, Harry replies,

- Of course. And radio for the wrestling and the serials, and books too. And there’s some sort of music and some of the folks paint and dance but give me three feeds a day and a comfortable place to live.
- You say there’s music and dancing?
- Not for me. They’re always trying to leave their mark on the world some sort of a trail but it’s like the wind and the sand ha ha. (68)

The form of the fable gives Frame an opportunity to portray that emotional and spiritual emptiness in an entire human life and all of modern society by having a typical product of that society recount his whole life in just a few sentences. The speed and conciseness of the narration, both required and facilitated by the fable form, expose just how hollow that life has been.

While Poe’s characters have achieved a transcendent status offering a vision of pure enlightenment after they die, Frame’s newcomer has been assigned to spend all of eternity on a “nice permanently juicy leaf, quite small but comfortable” (68). Spirit 350 complains, “A leaf. A leaf. But I was a man. Men can’t live on leaves” (68). Spirit 350 insists he deserves more, offering a suddenly remembered (and somewhat unconvincing) list of his passions: “I’ve wept and laughed and fallen in love. I can remember and think, look at me thinking, I can think” (69). His claims to a full human experience are undercut, however, by his need to quote (in fact, slightly misquote) *Hamlet*: “‘in form and moving how like an angel’ (they say)” (69). When Frame’s characters quote rather than express themselves directly, and especially when they rely on clichés or common sayings, they merely expose their lack of imagination and spiritual wholeness. However, he has no choice in the matter; as his interlocutor tells him, “Nothing can be done now” (69). Even in death, then, he is trapped in a limited, unsatisfying existence.

Frame’s fable contains one other common feature of the genre, and it is this feature that connects her fantastic to her realist works. The fable, as we have seen, relies on archetypal images and symbols, providing readers with instantly comprehensible and easily interpreted allegorical objects and beings. Throughout Frame’s fiction, large black birds often symbolize death, and death in the form of a predatory bird is what Spirit 350 identifies as his only enemy in life: “A big black death swoops down from the skies at any moment to carry us away. A kind of death got me yesterday while I was sunning myself in the garden” (68). Death is therefore merciless and it attacks unexpectedly – qualities with which Frame would be familiar given the family tragedies that she experienced. Such sudden death is especially distressing for someone like Harry, who has tried to live his life in as predictable a manner as possible; one cannot help wondering if the unforeseeable nature of death bothers him more than its reality. He consoles himself with the knowledge that his death will be memorialized in conventional ways: “It’s funny, and next year there will be the notice in the paper Sacred to the memory of, Gone but not forgotten” (68). At the end of the story, as Spirit 350 frets about his constricted future, the other spirit reassures him that “there’ll be no swooping blackbirds to bother you. You may eat and sleep and slide up and down even making a little permanent silver patch of your own and remember no blackbirds to bother you” (69). Whether 350 admits it or not, he has

reached his own version of heaven: an afterlife very much like the life he made for himself, and that his society defined for him, yet better in that he will actually make a permanent mark and need not fear the sudden attack of Death interrupting his routine.

In its brevity, fantastic elements, typical characters, archetypal images, and moral purpose – as it exposes the spiritual emptiness of modern culture and life – the story is a superb example of a modern fable. Frame dramatizes her views about life and death, and above all about modernity's imposition and encouragement of death-in-life, through portrayal of the supernatural. Fantasy becomes the vehicle for a moral statement in the best tradition of ancient and modern fabulation.

The other fantastic, or possibly fantastic, text in *The Lagoon and Other Stories* is "The Birds Began to Sing," in which the narrator says she has a conversation with "four and twenty [...] blackbirds" (107), the number and species constituting an obvious allusion to the children's nursery rhyme. This quality of the text is further stressed in the one-sentence paragraphs with the repeated "I saw" beginnings, as if the text were designed for early readers. Yet the imagery is anything but childish; the narrator experiences a dark vision of life and death, and of the effects of the struggle between imagination and reason. At first, the blackbirds insist they will sing forever: "We are singing they said. We are singing and we have just begun, and we've a long way to sing, and we can't stop, we've got to go on and on. Singing" (107). Throughout the story, however, the narrator questions them, determined to learn the name of the song so that she can capture, control, and humanize it:

I am a human being and I read books and I hear music and I like to see things in print. I like to see *vivace andante* words by music by performed by written for. So I said what is the name of the song, tell me and I will write it and you can listen at my window when I get the finest musicians in the country to play it, and you will feel so nice to hear your song so tell me. (108)

By ceasing simply to experience, enjoy, and respond spontaneously to their song, by moving her "hearing" of their song from her imaginative and emotional faculties to her rational and acquisitive ones, she loses the ability to hear it at all: "They stopped singing. It was dark outside although the sun was shining. It was dark and there was no more singing" (108). Since the sun – a common archetype in myth, literature, and Frame's work usually representing knowledge and life – is still shining, clearly the "darkness" she refers to is internal, not external. She has tried to turn a natural song into a work of popular culture or entertainment, one restricted by the conventions of popular art: "words by music by performed by written for" (note the lack of punctuation, once more signaling mechanical expression rather than a sincere and truly felt sentiment). As a consequence, she has killed the song for herself.

We do not have room here to examine in detail how fable elements contribute to her social-realist stories in the same collection. However, a few examples will illustrate how features of the fable appear in and lend certain specific qualities to those stories. Most obviously, her social-realist texts are often equally short; they rely on concise narratives, broadly sketched characters, and recurring motifs and symbols that either already have or take on archetypal significance. It may be true that the collection was compiled by someone else – John Money was largely responsible for the publication of the volume – but the stories in *The Lagoon and Other Stories* exhibit consistent

patterns in their narrative technique and imagery. For example, “Tiger, Tiger” recounts the experiences of very young children on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day; the narrator yearns for a tiger, and lives in a world of both reality and imagination. While waiting for the sun to go down, Jan asks her brother Dids to play Birds with her, a game that involves dropping death out of the sky on enemies like Miss Miller, the sewing teacher (87-88). The sun finally sets: “the sun sank down behind the hospital hill and the birds went to bed in the trees and the dreadful meaning quiet of Christmas Eve came down over the street where we lived” (88). The sun and its light represent the world of hope and life, except for those unfortunate enough to incur the wrath of the Birds, while darkness brings out all the fears and mysteries of childhood. Jan refuses to believe in reality, as she much prefers fantasy; thus, she will not accept that the sound she hears at night is “a toy motor-car running across the floor [...] it couldn’t have been of course” (89), since that would not fit in with her belief in Santa Claus. Her power of childish imagination is so strong that the next morning she insists that she receives the tiger she wanted, in the face of all evidence to the contrary. We are not expected to believe that she actually sees a tiger in her dining room (contrary to what might happen in a Michael Bullock fable, for example), simply that she has used her imagination to fill the void created by her lack of a present (89-90). The story is social-realist, then, but as a parable, and like a fable, it dramatizes a moral – we must recognize and accommodate the consoling and enriching power of the imagination – and incorporates such archetypes as the sun and death-dealing birds in its imagery. One sees a similar effect in “Swans,” with its theme of the power of the imagination, as children prove able through sheer will and thought to turn the “wrong” beach into the “right” one, and, once again, black birds as archetypal symbols of death: “They looked across the lagoon then and saw the swans, black and shining, as if the visiting dark tiring of its form, had changed to birds” (51). As critics have shown, the sun, birds, water, liminal spaces like beaches and lagoons, and other motifs pervade her short fiction (e.g., Evans *Janet Frame*, 42; Smail 80; Lorre 248-52), forming a kind of symbolic shorthand in much the same way fables use archetypes and commonly recognized animal characteristics (however mythical they may be) to convey moral points to their readers as concisely as possible.

Janet Frame’s fables, and to a lesser but still significant degree her social-realist parables, rely on recognizable fantastic techniques to communicate her moral and philosophical vision. Frame is fully aware of the difference between the real world and the world of the imagination, but she seeks to reconcile rather than entirely erase all distinctions between them. “This world” and “that world” remain distinct, but they need not displace each other. One way she strikes a dynamic balance between the historical/autobiographic world and the world of the imagination is to employ the fantastic as a literary device. By writing stories that are fantasies, or that incorporate fantastic features, she can illuminate various moral and social issues, expressing through the power of her own imagination her philosophical and moral opinions about how modern people live and think ●

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