

She'll be Right:

Writing the wrongs within the Australian literary landscape

Critical Response

Reflection Statement

“No sooner have I formed the question than I realise it has been lying just beneath the surface of my consciousness, waiting to be asked.”

- Jessica Anderson, *Tirra Lirra by the River*

As presented through the prism of relational-cultural theory, *She'll be Right* explores the chronological development of Australian feminist texts to establish a counter-cultural canon and expand the rigid concept of Australian national identity. My desire to navigate the complex web of cultural relations in literature was derived from my dual loves of Australian literature and feminist theory. As these passions were best expressed within the critical analysis form, the demands of the process of academic research and writing both stretched my essay skills and bolstered my personal understanding of the Australian canon, proving to be immensely satisfying upon the conclusion of my essay. As a derivative of both interest and investigation, my threefold purpose emerged: to challenge the limitations of the former exclusionary, masculine Australian canon; to assert the strength of the resistant female canon; and, ultimately, to engage my audience by affirming my own authentic critical voice.

From the outset, my Major Work was sustained by my love for feminist theory, inspired by my English Extension 1 coursework. In part, my essay applies the concept of gender regulation embedded in language that I have explored within texts in the Language and Gender module. However, my essay extends beyond the parameters of the module, revealing how gendered power differentials contingent on contextual values operate outside texts, reflected in the phallogocentric value schemata of canon formation.

To appeal to my intended audience, my Major Work has presented a nuanced, textually integral argument that is simultaneously imbued with both authoritative critical reference and my own

conclusions. Derived from my investigation into form, I envisioned my essay would be published in Australian literary journals such as *The Southerly* and *Quadrant Online*. Through my research I encountered *The Southerly's* 2012 issue titled *Mid-century Women Writers*,³¹ a publication that *She'll be Right* would complement due to the convergence of purpose, form and audience. The journal's aim of emphasising the "shared historical context of feminist authors through the rubrics of the present"³² resonates with my essay's cumulative construction of a resistant canon. As a result, I decided that my intended audience is comprised of erudite readers, well-versed in the evolving criticism of the Australian canon as well as those interested in feminist literary studies.

In order to achieve my first purpose and challenge both societal and literary totalising representations of Australian identity, it was imperative that my essay articulated a comprehensive definition of the Australian canon. Utilising Robert Dixon's essay, *Institutionalising Australian Studies*³³ I was able to draw upon Dixon's definition of national identity as a "fabricated, societal construct"³⁴ to underpin my assertion, stated in my introduction, of the canon "as a mechanism to assert dominance". Built upon the dichotomous relationship between Australian cultural standards and national literature, I incorporated a nuanced discussion of how social and cultural context influences a text's publication and reception. Furthermore Martin, Wodak, De Cillia, Reisigl, and Liebhart's identification of "national sameness"³⁵ in their essay, *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*,³⁶

³¹ Brooks, David and McMahon, Elizabeth. *Mid-century Women Writers*. Australia: The Southerly 72.1, 2012. Web.

³² Ibid.

³³ Dixon, Richard; Bird, Delys and Lee, Christopher. *Authority and Influence: Australian Literary Criticism 1950-2000*. Australia: University of Queensland Press, 2001. Print.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Wodak, Ruth; De Cillia, Rudolf; Reisigl, Martin and Liebhart, Karin. *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*. London: SAGE Publications, 1999. Print.

³⁶ Ibid.

provoked my response for the call to “cultural difference”. Thus my essay recognised the way the literary canon, as fundamentally defined by the oppositions and negotiations of difference, can dually serve as historical restitution to diversify the colonial-patriarchal fashioning of the Australian image.

As a means to trace the collaborative feminist dynamic that has emerged in the shadow of Australia’s past canonical masculine hierarchy, I recognised the necessity of a theoretical lens to frame my analysis. As Plutarch stated: “Research is the act of going up alleys to see if they are blind.” The rigorous nature of my investigation initially presented me with multiple “alleys” of disparate sociocultural theory applicable to identity formation, most notably Vygotsky’s model of *Social Development Theory*³⁷ and Piaget’s *Four Stages of Cognitive Development*.³⁸ However, to ensure my framework resonated with the highly variegated nature of female authorship I chose Judith V. Jordan’s relational-cultural theory, *Towards Competence and Connection*.³⁹ Drawing on the fundamentally relational nature of the Australian canon through this theory, I extrapolated the cultural interaction of female-male relationship psychology to the broader interpretation of female-male authorship.

Following the selection of my theory, my investigative research focused on the application of sociocultural theory to textual analysis. This led me to Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*.⁴⁰ As a seminal text that recognised the burgeoning movement of female authorship, the essay’s depiction of

³⁷ Vygotski., Les et al. *The Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky*. New York: Springer US, 1987. Print.

³⁸ Piaget, Jean and Inhelder, Barbel. *The Child’s Conception of Space*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1967. Print.

³⁹ Jordan, Judith V, Linda M, Hartling, and Walker, Maureen. *The Complexity of Connection*. New York: Guilford Press, 2004. Print.

⁴⁰ Gilbert, Sandra M. and Gubar, Susan. *The Madwoman in the Attic*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. Print.

“when female resistance becomes feminist rebellion”⁴¹ resonated with my establishment of an oppositional female canon. However, in my investigation of Gilbert and Gubar I encountered numerous critics who recognised the “limiting”⁴² and “essentialist”⁴³ interpretation of variegated female experience. To overcome the limitations of Gilbert and Gubar’s rigid model of theoretical application I incorporated a critical counterpoint in my own essay to recognise the inability for an abstract framework to definitively encapsulate a text. This is expressed in my connections between texts, allowing textual analysis to drive my discussion and Jordan’s theory to function as a vehicle to unite the cultural movement of Australian female writing.

To achieve my second purpose and assert the resistance of the female canon, my essay required a selection of texts that were strong examples of prominent Australian feminist literature, chronologically developed, and further, reflective of the interdependent nature of the female canon. This was expressed in my choice of Helen Garner’s *Monkey Grip*⁴⁴ and Jessica Anderson’s *Tirra Lirra by the River*⁴⁵ whose protagonists share an onomastic connection. Built around the respective Noras, the connection to Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*⁴⁶ illustrates the significance of shared sources of inspiration that create a free atmosphere to “write like that,”⁴⁷ ultimately sustaining my concept of the profoundly cumulative process of canon formation.

Realised through my postmodern-focused analysis of Kate Grenville’s “decentred male voice” in *Joan Makes History*,⁴⁸ my textual discussion of experimental form allowed me to recognise

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² O’Gorman, Francis. *The Victorian Novel*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Pub., 2002. Print.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Garner, Helen. *Monkey Grip*. New York: Seaview Books, 1977. Print.

⁴⁵ Anderson, Jessica. *Tirra Lirra by the River*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1978. Print.

⁴⁶ Ibsen, Henrik and E Haldeman-Julius. *A Doll’s House*. Waiheke Island: Floating Press, 2008. Print.

⁴⁷ Harper, Hilary. *An Interview with Kate Grenville*. Canberra: New Writing 3.1, 2006. Web.

⁴⁸ Grenville, Kate. *Joan Makes History*. Latham, New York: British American Pub., 1988. Print.

the way postmodernism both affects and is affected by liberating narrative. Further, I utilised Cixous' theory of *L'écriture Feminine*,⁴⁹ as a vehicle to explore the inextricable relationship of female literary liberation and postmodern expansions of form, discovered in English Extension 1 coursework. In this way, the originality and power of my essay lies in its interdisciplinary approach that synthesises a number of theoretical methodologies, such as feminist, post-colonial, post-modern and relational-cultural theory.

The investigative focus of my analysis contracted from exploring Indigenous, multicultural and gendered Australian literature to a narrower, and thus deeper, exploration of feminist texts in recognition of the female gender as a category, in itself, that is highly diverse and nuanced. As a result, my selection of Alexis Wright's Indigenous text *The Swan Book*,⁵⁰ inspired by Holgate's article *Unsettling Narratives*,⁵¹ asserts both a universal and a highly variegated understanding of Australian femininity, considering both specific incarnations of female Indigenous identity and its broad formation.

In the pursuit of my third and final purpose, to assert my authentic critical voice, investigation into form inspired me to experiment with essay convention and bring my own personal voice to the forefront of discussion. Pertaining to the female authorial voice, Zora Simic's comments such as "women increasingly wanted to write novels, like me, right now" in her article '*Women's Writing' and 'Feminism': A history of intimacy and estrangement*,⁵² enabled me to privilege my personal female experience through writing, allowing my essay to connect my

⁴⁹ Cixous, Hélène. *Stigmata*. London: Routledge, 1998. Print.

⁵⁰ Wright, Alexis. *The Swan Book*. University of Western Sydney: Giramondo, 2013. Print.

⁵¹ Holgate, Ben. *Unsettling Narratives: Re-Evaluating Magical Realism as Postcolonial Discourse through Alexis Wright's Carpentaria and the Swan Book*. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 51.6 (2015): 634-647. Web.

⁵² Simic, Zora. '*Women's Writing' and 'Feminism': A history of intimacy and estrangement*. Australia: University of Western Australia, 2013. Print.

audience through my authentic voice. Furthermore, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*⁵³ was useful in learning the mechanics of the essay form, as well as revealing the significance of rhetorical strategy. Included in the *Anthology*, Gilroy's utilisation of a sail motif in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*⁵⁴ inspired me to construct a metaphor that telegraphs the progression of my argument and reflects the organic structure of the resistant female canon. This can be seen in my metaphorical allusions to the iconic physicality of the Australian landscape in recognition of the shared space of male and females. I reimagined the Australian canonical landscape as "crusty" and "barren," but ultimately as "a fruitful environment for the growth of the female narrative" to mirror the expansion of the female narrative space.

Naturally drawn to a regimented structure of composition, reclaiming my female voice proved challenging as I struggled to retain academic rigour whilst employing metaphorical devices. My departure from the masculinist mode of the traditional essay to a more lyrical style is, in itself, an act of resistance to the evaluative biases of the patriarchy and reflects the alternative framework of diverse values. Therefore, as a result of my continual efforts to develop a consistent critical tone, I believe that my expressive style is now my essay's greatest strength. Perhaps most importantly, however, the execution of this essay has engendered a deep, personal respect for Australia's historical tradition of female authors, therefore curing my own lingering symptoms of 'cultural cringe'.

⁵³ Leitch, Vincent B. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Norton, 2001. Print.

⁵⁴ Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. *Contemporary Sociology* 24.3 (1995): 399. Web.