

---

## Inertia Creeps: Hesitancy in Janet Frame's Short Fiction

Joel Gwynne

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/9365>  
DOI: 10.4000/ces.9365  
ISSN: 2534-6695

**Publisher**

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 1 April 2007  
Number of pages: 7-18  
ISSN: 2270-0633

**Electronic reference**

Joel Gwynne, "Inertia Creeps: Hesitancy in Janet Frame's Short Fiction", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 29.2 | 2007, Online since 08 January 2022, connection on 06 November 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/9365> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.9365>

---



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International - CC BY-NC-ND 4.0  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

# Inertia Creeps: Hesitancy in Janet Frame's Short Fiction

This article explores Frame's 'undecidability', the *modus operandi* which collapses conventional binaries via textual hesitation. The argument explores the intrinsic unclassifiability of Frame's short fiction, and suggests that the narrator and reader are both situated within an extended moment of decision-making. The article explores Frame's fiction in a manner that challenges critical responses that categorise her work as either social-realist or figurative.

Given Frame's status as the foremost writer of fiction in the history of New Zealand letters, it is hardly surprising that the realisation of her national significance dominated the literary press upon her death in 2004. Yet, despite intense local critical attention, it is difficult to eradicate the sensation that Frame has ultimately eluded international academic and public perception. Similarly, it is even difficult to claim that her fiction is passionately embraced by the most discerning factions of New Zealand's reading public. In this context, it is perhaps difficult to account for Frame's local critical popularity; the plaudits after her death failed to correspond with the predominantly mixed critical responses and intense reactions that her fiction invoked during her lifetime. Yet, regardless of whether readers admire or reject her work, it is difficult to deny the humanistic and aesthetic ambitions of her vision, succinctly conveyed by H. Winston Rhodes upon the publication of her first novel *Owls Do Cry* (1957): 'By her manner and method Janet Frame brings us closer not to the average New Zealander but to common humanity in its suffering and search' (Rhodes 328-9). Rhode's observation suggests the universality of Frame's aesthetic ambition, and that similar to Sargeson's her work is minoritarian in its Deleuzian refusal to construct a normative and representative notion of the New Zealander. Indeed, even in her most accessible work, it is clear that Frame's artistic investigation concerns the recesses of subjectivity and abstraction; whether the reader is able to configure such explorations often seems irrelevant.

Frame's intense perception and emotional receptivity accounts for her status as a visionary whose fiction extends the possibilities of impressionism and the Mansfield tradition. Lydia Wevers suggests that her 'early stories use the narrative perspective on New Zealand (established by Mansfield) of the experience and point of view of a child' (Wevers 281), exemplifying the perspective that Frame's fiction, despite its inaccessibility, is discernibly the work of a New Zealander operating within the expansive paradigm of New Zealand letters. Indeed, Wevers' comments are emblematic of the tendency to stylistically classify New Zealand narratives, and can be read as demonstrative of a desire to locate Frame: 'This distinction between "real" stories, which in *The Lagoon* correspond to the official encoding of the adult world, and "unreal" comforting

stories that children like, repeats itself in various forms throughout Frame's work. It generates later distinctions between environments and codes of behaviour, between autobiography and fiction' (Wevers 280). The identification of such distinctions and boundaries is crucial to any critical practice that endeavours to position fiction within models of genre and history, yet I would like to continue the aesthetically plural focus of scholars such as Jan Cronin in suggesting that surely this is not an appropriate critical response to Frame: a writer who revels in the negation of distinctions and classification. Such a mischievous narrative practice is certainly devalued by the reductionism of Wevers' comment that Frame's later short fictions 'reveal a movement away from the realistically framed narrative based on childhood to sketches, fables and fantasies explicitly concerned with the unreal, the visionary' (280). Of course, it is unfair and inaccurate to isolate an individual critical perspective, however it is certainly this form of polarised view of Frame's fiction that contributes to the solidification of her binary status as either a social realist or a visionary; a dichotomy that has been frequently reasserted since the publication of her first collection of short fiction.

Indeed, in her 4YA radio review of *The Lagoon and Other Stories* (1951), Dorothy Neal White declared that the narratives 'will rank in New Zealand literature beside Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party* and Frank Sargeson's *A Man and His Wife...* Janet Frame works within the tradition of the New Zealand short story' (King 2002:109). White's appraisal focuses on the quality of the prose, and commends the contribution to the galvanisation of continuity in New Zealand literature. Similarly, during the typesetting of the collection, Denis Glover wrote to John Money and confided that he 'could not help making the Mansfield comparison all the time' (Cited in King 92). Almost half a century later, Michael King's biography reveals Frame's aesthetic position in the history of New Zealand letters: 'Echoes of T.S. Eliot possibly point to a more appropriate medium for her writing – that of the incantatory voice of the poet consumed by his or her vision – rather than that of the prose writer' (479). Upon the publication of her poetry collection *The Pocket Mirror* (1968), J.C. Reid commented that 'Frame is a true poet; any future consideration of her achievement must take into account the poetic personality revealed here' (Cited in King 2002:330). Indeed, if we consider the aesthetic composition of Mansfield's impressionism, specifically the employment of objects as correlatives to states of feeling, it is not difficult to see why the figuration and symbolism of Frame's fiction has persistently been read as extending Mansfield's mode. Despite this, there has been a certain degree of discord regarding the locality of her short fiction, and the predilection to identify the distinctions between 'reality' and 'fiction', and in accordance between locality and universality, has dominated critical responses to Frame. Therefore, I intend to explore Frame's methods of dissolving conventional binaries by focusing on the hesitation of her narratives, where the narrator and reader are both situated within an extended moment of decision-making. In doing so, it is possible to suggest that her narratives frequently elude the resolute binaries invariably invoked by overly simplistic critical responses that read Frame as either realist or figurative. Todorov's concept of 'hesitancy' is

particularly expedient when attempting to destabilise binaries; despite his status as a structuralist, Todorov's 'hesitancy' has proved an important concept in deconstruction, comparable with Derrida's 'undecidability', and represents an exploration currently neglected by postmodern interpretations of Frame's work. This is important, as an examination of the space that mediates realism and non-realism, the textual space of 'hesitancy' where a narrative is neither resolutely realist nor non-realist, is an important strategy in understanding the 'unclassifiability' of Frame's short fiction. A method of exploring such 'hesitancy' is via an examination of the relations between the binaries of natural/supernatural and literal/allegorical.

### **Natural/Supernatural**

Frank Sargeson commented that during her lifetime Frame's obsession with death became 'repeatedly freakish, a tiresome reiteration of her refusal to admit that there are people in the world as such, not just a gallery of monsters transformed into such by her Boschian imagination' (King 377). In 'The Reservoir' (1963), the 'undecidability' of Frame's quasi-Gothic aesthetic is exposed:

we knew the frightening deep places where the eels lurked and the weeds were tangled in gruesome shapes; we knew the jumping places, the mossy stones with their dangers, limitations, and advantages. [...] If one morning the water turned the color of clay and crowds of bubbles were passengers on every suddenly swift wave hurrying by, we would look at one another and remark with the fatality and reverence which attends a visitation of prophecy. [...] By afternoon the creek would be on high-flow, turbulent, muddy, unable to be jumped across or paddled in or fished in, concealing beneath a swelling fluid darkness whatever evil which "they", the authorities, had decided to purge so swiftly and secretly from the Reservoir. (Frame 1963:3-4)

The creek is imbued with a Gothic resonance, yet every description is suggestive; nothing supernatural actually occurs. The condemnation of the authorities, which potentially implies a social critique, is undermined by the supernatural attendance that constitutes 'they'; it evokes the presence of a mysterious body of people rather than a collection of administrators. The distortions of the imaginative vision of the child positions 'The Reservoir', like 'Swans' (1951), as a narrative of innocence and experience via the child's perspective of the adult social world. As in Maurice Duggan's 'Towards the Mountains' (1955), the adults place limitations on the freedom of the children by prohibiting a visit to the reservoir, yet the narrative disrupts the very practical concerns of the parents and renders the threat a more imaginative vision of supernatural peril, in which the material threat of drowning is usurped: 'They said it was a lake. I thought it was a bundle of darkness and great wheels which peeled and sliced you like an apple and drew you toward them with demonic force, in the same way that you were drawn beneath the wheels of a train if you stood too near the edge of the platform' (11). The vision of the unreal threat is projected onto the non-mental objects of the surroundings: 'the sighing sound of it reached

our ears and troubled us. [...] in an almost perfect calm which we knew to be deceptive. [...] the trees sighed, and told us to be quiet...in case we disturbed something which must never ever be awakened?’ (15). When the children arrive at the reservoir they realise it has become dark and head home; they encounter no danger, and the narrative closes with an ironic comment on the neurotic attitudes of their parents: ‘How out-of-date they were! They were actually afraid!’ (17). Frame thus provides a realist programme of solution in the dénouement; the children were scared of nothing other than their own imaginations.

In *The Fantastic* (1975), even though Todorov distinguishes his structuralist approach to genre from a Freudian psychoanalytical approach, his conclusions correspond with many of Freud’s, especially in attributing literary terror to the collapsing of the psychic boundaries of self/other, life/death, reality/unreality, natural/supernatural; concepts of the ‘fantastic’ and ‘uncanny’ govern the *modus operandi* of Frame’s narratives, as indicated in the supernatural implication of ‘The Reservoir’. The ‘fantastic’ is a significantly more potent moment of ‘undecidability’, or in Todorov’s terms a moment of ‘hesitation’, which extends the previous discussion of ‘The Reservoir’ as all ‘fantastic’ experiences conceal a subversive perception of the relations between the non-mental object and the mental subject. Yet, Frame’s fiction even manages to elude and collapse Todorov’s classifications between the ‘fantastic’, the ‘uncanny’ and the ‘marvelous’. It is therefore important to consider the definition of the ‘fantastic’ and the distinctions between the related sub-classifications, in order to explore the composition of Frame’s subversion:

The fantastic requires the fulfillment of three conditions. First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural or supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader’s role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work—in the case of naive reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as “poetic” interpretations. (Todorov 33)

Todorov’s categories can be explored in the textual context of ‘Swans’, where the narrator, her siblings and her mother take a trip to the beach. However, when they arrive at the sea it fails to conform to their expectations, and the assumption is that as the journey was made without their Father, the Mother must have followed the wrong directions. Frame situates the narrator and reader in a moment of hesitation by first disrupting the grounds of gendered epistemological thought. The Mother and the Father both dominate their respective spheres of gendered knowledge: ‘Mother always said things would be all right, cats and birds and people even, as if she knew, and she did know too, Mother knew always’ (Frame 1951:58). As the Mother is ‘big and warm and knew about cats’ (60), the children accept her reassurances that Gypsy, the household cat, will survive her period of convalescence. However, the final line of the narrative ‘But

when they got home Gypsy was dead' (60), reveals the failure of their Mother's knowledge. Similarly, the reader is invited to assume that as the gendered terrain of the Mother's knowledge is disrupted, so too is the masculine assurance of the Father's sense of logistics: '[He] knew which station was which and where and why and how' (59). When the family arrives at the beach, they realise that 'They had never been here before, not to this sea. They had been to other seas, near merry-go-rounds and swings and slides, among people, other girls and boys and mothers' (61). The failure of their Mother's knowledge suggests the potentiality of their Father's failure of knowledge, and it is feasible that the family have not actually arrived at the wrong sea, but rather at an in-between space of ambiguity. Indeed, the story corroborates the hesitation of the 'fantastic', as the reader and characters are suspended within a moment of decision making. There are 'no other families, and Fay thought for a moment, what if there is no sea either, and no nothing?' (62). Like the collapse of the Mother's knowledge, the sea is situated between the known and unknowable, a territory that may or may not actually exist. Todorov identifies the 'fantastic' as a moment that ultimately *precedes* a decision; rarely is the moment suspended throughout the entire narrative. Of course, the prominent exception is Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), where Peter Quint is quite feasibly either an apparition or a product of the governess's imagination. Yet, the 'fantastic' is, the vast majority of 'fantastic' fictions, only a *moment* of hesitation that precedes a decision between the 'uncanny' and the 'marvelous':

[In the uncanny], events are related which may be readily accounted for by the laws of reason, but which are, in one way or another, incredible, extraordinary, shocking, singular, disturbing or unexpected, and which thereby provoke in the character and in the reader a reaction similar to that which works of the fantastic have made familiar. [...] Thus, the uncanny is an 'experience of limits'. [...] If we move to the *other* side of that median line which we have called the fantastic, we find ourselves in the fantastic-marvelous, the class of narratives that are presented as fantastic and that end with an acceptance of the supernatural. (Todorov 52)

'Swans' represents, like *The Turn of the Screw*, a narrative of suspended hesitation within the 'fantastic' moment; it refuses to confirm either of Todorov's previously defined distinctions between the 'uncanny' and the 'marvelous', principally as a consequence of the transitional experience between the sea and subject. Indeed, the fluctuation between the experience of the 'wrong sea' and the 'distinguished sea' negates reconciliation:

But the sea roared in their ears, it was a true sea, look, it was breaking white on the sand and the seagulls crying and skimming and the bits of white flying and look at all of the coloured shells, look, a little pink one like a fan, and a cat's eye. Gypsy. And look at the seaweed, look, I've found a round piece that plops, you tread on it and it plops, you plop this one, see it plops, and the little girls running up and down plopping and plopping and picking and prying and touching and listening, and Mother plopping the seaweed too, look, Mum's doing it and Mum's got a crab'. (Frame 1951:62)

The 'wrong sea' becomes the right sea when it corresponds with their concept of the sea; whether they have actually visited the sea on a prior occasion or not dissolves into insignificance, despite the initial concern that 'they had never been here before'. The narrative thus centralises the mental impressions of the imagination, the vision of the sea framing the 'reality' of the sea, not in terms of the inability to assemble subject and object, which in itself undermines realism, but rather in terms of the process of subject *transforming* object. Yet, the authority of the visionary transformation is itself negated as the family realise 'But it cannot go on for ever' (62). The sea exists only as long as the concept of the sea exists: 'Where is the place to put our things, and the merry-go-rounds and the place to undress and that, and the place to get ice-creams?' (62). When the children return to asking 'Mum, have we come to the wrong sea?' (62), the 'undecidability' is evident in the moment of hesitation within the contradictory response: 'I don't know, kiddies, I'm sure' (62). Yet, once again the transitional nature of the sea ensures that we cannot choose between a natural or supernatural explanation for the sensibility of displacement; Frame's 'undecidability' floats in-between Todorov's distinction between the 'fantastic-uncanny' and the 'fantastic-marvelous'. The vision of the 'distinguished sea' is reaffirmed, temporarily situating the experience in the former classification: 'So it was all right really, it was a good sea, you could pick up the foam before it turned yellow and take off your shoes and sink your feet down into the wet sand almost until you might disappear and come up in Spain. [...] It was a distinguished sea' (63). This sensation of reassurance is further destabilised by the uncertainties of knowledge. The children contemplate what it would be like if their father was there, bestowing his knowledge of material, masculine practices: 'Father here making the fire and breaking sticks, quickly and surely, and Father showing this and that and telling why. Why? Did anyone in the world ever know why? Or did they just pretend to know because they didn't like anyone else to know that they didn't know? Why?' (64). Thus, the suggestion of pretence further disrupts the 'uncanny' explanation that the 'wrong sea' occurred because of a deviation from their father's spheres of knowledge, thus abandoning the reader and narrator inert in the 'fantastic' moment.

In her childhood, Frame discovered the consuming power of nature through the river Clutha, and the consequential sublime experience attests to the effect that landscape can exert on perception, and is emblematic of Frame's sensitivity towards the relations between the material and the consciousness. In addition, her autobiography admission that when she was younger she read Jung and Freud renders the consideration of transformation, the consciousness and the 'fantastic' particularly pertinent. At the close of 'Swans' we observe the amalgamation of such interests when the family observes the swans on the lake:

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, hundreds of them resting and moving softly about on the water. Why, the lagoon was filled with swans, like secret sad ships, secret and quiet. Hush-sh the water said, rush-hush, the wind passed over the top of water, no other sound but the shaking of rushes and far away

now the roar of the sea like a secret see that had crept inside your head forever. And the swans, they were there too, inside you, peaceful and quiet, watching and sleeping and watching, there was nothing but peace and warmth and calm, everything found, train and sea and mother and father and earwig and slater and spider.

And Gypsy?

But when they got home Gypsy was dead'. (Frame 1951:66)

This consummates all the invocations of realism and non-realism, and the collapsing of corresponding classifications. Indeed, the dark, which is itself a non-entity and an absence, *becomes* the presence of the swans, as does the 'shaking of rushes', the physical turbulence of the non-presence of the wind. This 'undecidability' is integral to the intensification of the 'fantastic' experience, which is terrifying precisely because it can not be adequately explained. Rather than attempting a definition, most critics resort to describing the 'fantastic' experience, usually by way of the dream-like visions of doubling and death that invariably seem to accompany it. 'Swans' is saturated with both the condition of 'doubleness' via the juxtaposition of the 'wrong sea' and the 'distinguished sea', and the presence of mortality that exacerbates the impression of threat that is finally realised with the death of Gypsy. The swans are 'fantastic' entities as they assume, in their form as 'secret sad ships', a threat that is unexplainable, and if we consider a narrative such as Mansfield's 'At the Bay' (1916) and its family beach experience (the tradition that Frame is read as extending), we understand why such opaque transformations unsettle the genre. Certainly, the familiarity of the tradition and the genre, and the familiarity of our experience of swans as passive, beautiful creatures, accentuates the 'fantastic' as the reader's unease does not derive from a feeling that is externally alien. In Freudian readings of the 'uncanny', the malign presence of the swans constitutes 'an experience that is strangely familiar which defeats our efforts to separate ourselves from it' (Freud 1953:347). Yet, as we have explored, 'Swans' is not a conventional 'uncanny' experience, nor a 'marvelous' one; the swans are not supernatural entities, yet nor is their threat rationally explained. The narrative refuses to substantiate the 'this world' and 'that world' division and instead collapses distinctions until the reader and narrator occupy the line between imagination/reality and self/other via a suspended state of hesitation.

### **Literal/Allegorical**

Anna Grazia Mattei reads the narrative 'Two Sheep' (1962) as an example of the 'apologues and allegories which contain the essence of the author's existential meditations' (Mattei 1992:55). Even though Mattei classifies the narrative as an allegory, and indeed a fable is of course a genre that retains affinities with pure allegory, she observes that one of the sheep 'finds himself in the infinitely precarious situation of someone "at the edge", in a kind of twilight world, a no-man's land between being and non being' (59). Mattei disregards that within the philosophical framework she advocates, the sheep occupies what Gilles Deleuze



ultimately identifies as a 'plane of immanence'; a state that is neither interior nor exterior, but rather exists on the 'outside'. If the sheep possesses a consciousness, then this capacity of course leads to a thought which creates a 'plane of transcendence'. This produces an exterior – such as the world we know, doubt or represent – and an interior – such as the mind or the doubting subject. Thus, the relation between this interior and exterior relies on what remains hidden, presupposed or 'outside' rather than exterior; a 'plane of immanence'. The example Deleuze provides is an accessible one: 'A door, for example, can create a border between exterior and interior, but this distinction would have to take place in space, which would be the more radical outside' (Deleuze 2004:364). Yet, what Mattei fails to explore is that such a state signifies the metaphysical ground of hesitancy which, as Todorov discusses in *The Fantastic*, disrupts the entire ambition of allegory. Certainly, Todorov suggests that a fable is only allegorical if it succeeds in avoiding hesitancy in the reader: 'A third degree in the weakening of allegory is to be found in the narrative whose reader reaches the point of hesitating between the allegorical interpretation and the literal interpretation' (Todorov 69). Todorov is thus suggesting that if a narrative is ostensibly allegorical, though contains some form of internal consistency where the 'marvelous' is integrated with the fictive reality of the narrative, then the narrative is not purely allegorical but rather a 'hesitating allegory' (73). This is of course the fictional landscape of the fairy-tale; in 'Hansel and Gretel' we do not question the existence, motivation or psychological state of the witch in the woods who constructs a confectionary house in order to entrap children, nor the white bird who leads the children to her, nor the assistance of a duck who guides them home. Similarly, in Frame's "'Hecate, You Look Angerly'" (1963) the fact that Miss Dawson lives with her mother 'in a small house with smoking chimneys and a pointed roof made of confectionary' (Frame 1963:58) is merely documented constitutes an absence of realistic contextualisation, even though the narrative is firmly realist. The 'marvelous' thus functions in Frame to disrupt the narrative in interesting ways, yet this disruption has been marginalised in the context of criticism that reads such fictions as pure allegory, and thus takes the 'marvelous' for granted by separating it from realism. It is therefore important to explore why certain narratives fail as allegories, and thus pave the way for a response to the 'marvelous' narratives within the 'magical realism' of their own fictive terms. Frame's 'An Interlude in Hell' (1962) invites the reader to remain suspicious of allegories or indeed any narrative that attempts instruction through a truth narrative, evident first in the disruption of simplistic classifications: "'Friend or foe?" I whispered through the small square window [...] The stranger smiled mockingly. "You don't really believe in categories like that, do you?"' (Frame 1962:135). The narrator is subsequently murdered by the stranger, and the afterlife context suggests allegory in the discussion of her experiences of her time on earth, and the potential for moral instruction that is a dominant characteristic in allegory. Yet, this allegorical potential fails to develop, and the divine manifestation asks the narrator why she invested such faith in the stranger: "'But he questioned your belief in categories? Friend or foe. Wet or Dry. True or False'"

(136). The narrative concludes that ‘Truth becomes a shriveled nothing’ (136), thus the allegory invites the reader to maintain an anti-humanistic scepticism; the symbolic meaning of the allegory is to challenge any moral or religious truth narrative, of which the allegory form proliferates in its oppositional humanism.

In ‘A Night of Frost and a Morning of Mist’ (1962), Frame reveals a movement away from the ‘fantastic’ of ‘Swans’ and into the realm of the pure ‘exotic marvelous’, which Todorov defines as a form where ‘Supernatural events are reported without being presented as such’ (55), and proceeds to define the form as a composite of natural and supernatural elements where ‘the mixture exists, of course, only for the modern reader; the narrator implicit in the tale situates everything on the same level (that of the “natural”)’ (Todorov 55-56). The allegory involves a vocal blowfly:

‘Don’t kill me,’ he said, in that small voice used by insects, animals, furniture, who appear in fairy stories and startle people (the woodcutter, his son, the young man lying on the grassy bank in the wood, the servant girl sweeping the bedrooms of the palace) with their cries, ‘Don’t kill me, Help! Help!’ He knew, however, that he lived in a modern age when cries for help are ignored when they are made by creatures whose feet are padded with death. So he decided to impress me with his fame’. (Frame 1962:106)

The hesitation in this allegory is manifested in the disjunction between the suggested social critique of existence in a modern society where distress is ignored, and the fact that in literal terms the reader never learns if the blowfly in actual fact possesses a consciousness, or if the narrator’s imagination is responsible for enacting a fictive dialogue. After the narrator kills the blowfly the narrative slips into a realist mode which fails to suggest any form of allegorical implication. At the close of the narrative we witness the appearance of a vocal tomcat, who points out that the narrator fears death and yet refuses to embrace life. This is clearly another exotically marvellous moment, yet allegorical implication is negated by the intensely personal nature of the communication; the narrator’s conclusion that she will combat the ‘armies of life and death’ (108) alone bears no relevance outside of the textual space. Thus, the narrative invites the reader to interpret it as a literally ‘marvelous’ moment of ‘magical realism’ rather than a pure allegory. Similarly, the narrator of ‘The Training of My Tigers’ (1962) concludes that ‘I will be led to the scaffold every night of my life, and though I protest that the shape of it does not suit me, that the timing, the measurement of the inches between myself and death are crude and inconceivable, nothing comes to my rescue’ (Frame 1962:124). There is nothing beyond the figuratively personal sphere of the text, and this level of inaccessibility defeats the ambition of allegory. Of course, there are prominent exceptions where Frame’s allegories succeed, and if we briefly invoke Jean Baudrillard’s *The System of Objects*, the critique offered by the Perpetual Snowflake in ‘Snowman, Snowman’ (1962) is interesting:

You will have noticed how buildings emerge from the earth – houses, the shops at the corner, plants, your neighborhood tree that is burdened with snow. All these

things – even televisions and gondola shopping bags, are anchored to the earth or to people upon the earth, and when you find the point of anchorage, the place which most resists the ravages of the tides of forgetfulness and change, there you will also find the true meaning of the objects, their roots, those hairy tentacles which embrace the hearts of people or merely cling there, like green moss to a neglected stone that no one will ever want to overturn to observe the quick-running life beneath it (Frame 1962:8).

The Perpetual Snowflake appears to agree with Baudrillard's conviction that what is lacking in the subject is invested in the object, and the narrative is clearly allegorical in its appraisal of the materialism of consumer society and its interaction with objects. The object and subject are dissolved to expose such deficiency, and the narrator observes that 'when it snows the earth is obscured and people are unaware of the divisions between street and pavement and they become afraid for they have always known where to walk' (25). We hear Frame behind the narrative judgment that people are essentially conformists. Indeed, observing a postman delivering mail we are informed that 'the house is neither in one street nor the next' (13), which causes problems as 'it is so important for people to know where they live, and to let others know, to have their places defined and numbered' (13). The focus of the allegory is that mankind's failure is manifested in its inability to resist boundaries and classifications, and this certainly invokes the conventional responses to Frame's allegories as yet another example of her social critique. Yet, it is crucial to consider that we witness the dissolution of classifications that hold no social function, but rather reveal the plurality of Frame's aesthetic ambitions.

Certainly, even 'Snowman, Snowman', one of Frame's more successful allegories, instills a moment of hesitation in that it invites the reader to examine the text literally on the basis of its fictional explorations; its examination of the in-between textual and metaphysical indeterminacy of mind/body, object/subject. If we do so, then it is possible to discern that even the ostensibly non-realist and wildly fantastical 'Snowman, Snowman', a narrative that 'pushes most single-mindedly against the limits of known reality' (Delrez 125), retains points of contact with realist narratives such as 'Swans' and 'The Reservoir'. Similar to 'Swans', where the 'fantastic' validates the divisive relations between object/subject, 'Snowman, Snowman' dissolves mind/body in a manner that is emblematic of Frame's convolution of the relations between realism and non-realism. Indeed, it is narrated by a snowflake that has been formed by human hands into the shape of a snowman, and David Dempsey's appraisal that the narrative is 'a dialogue between an existentialist snowman and a Platonic "Perpetual Snowflake"' (Cited in King 252) is thus not strictly accurate; the snowman is merely the form the snowflake is assuming. Dempsey simplifies the narrative, reducing it to an 'exotic marvelous' where the snowman, a non-mental object, becomes a conscious subject. Even though this reduction would connect the text to prior narratives that render such disintegrations, the story is more complex; the snowflake is an 'undecidable' entity that even disrupts a 'marvelous' programme of solution. The subject is within the form of a

snowflake, *within* the form of the snowman; the separations paradoxically constitute a homogenous body of snow, yet the flake separates itself from the snowman *and* from other snowflakes, which are perceived by the narrating snowflake as lacking a consciousness, with the exception of the Platonic dialectics of the Perpetual Snowflake. Furthermore, even though the snowflake possesses a consciousness, the pre-eminent attribute of humanity, it separates itself from humanity: 'I have learned something of her life from the Perpetual Snowflake who has explained to me the view, the situation, the prospect of my immortality and its relation to the swiftly vanishing life of people' (Frame 1962:3). The snowflake is thus separate to humans, separate to the 'snowman' of its form, and separate from other snowflakes:

I have a strange sensation of being, a mass chill and clumsiness, a gazing through pine-forest eyes upon a white world of trees drooping with snow, the wind stirring milk-white clots and curds of my essence in street and garden, for my immortality does not mean that I contain myself within myself, I breathe my essence in a white smoke from my body and the wind carries it away to mingle it with the other flakes of the lost armies that flew with me to earth, and that still fall.

(3)

The snowflake thus peers through the eyes of the snowman, as our minds respond to images through our eyes, yet whilst we read such a configuration as a singularly cognitive process, the snowflake engages with the world through mind and body. The snowflake's consciousness is not situated behind its eyes, as the human consciousness operates the eyes as an intermediary to vision; rather its entire physical and mental being is situated behind the eyes of the snowman and within the body of the snow that constitutes its head. There is a complete denial of mind/body duality, and a rejection of classification: 'Everything is named and contained and controlled. Today I seem to feel like an animal that is being killed slowly, but I have not the certainty of knowing the boundaries and labels of my own body' (10). This is not merely an abstract rejection of division; the snowman observes its practice in reality in the behaviour of Tiny, a mentally retarded woman 'who became angry with her snowman, at the way he stood in the garden, not speaking or smiling or moving, just submitting to the perpetual collision of fresh flakes upon his body' (23). Thus, the narrative disrupts the duality of mind and body within the spheres of both realism and non-realism, precipitating a further degeneration of boundaries that once again serve no allegorical purpose. Like the end of 'Swans', a narrative read as a realistic vignette, where 'train and sea and mother and father and earwig and slater and spider' (Frame 1951:66) are collapsed into the same stream-of-consciousness anti-mimetic equilibrium, the snowman concludes: 'I am human. Am I human? Are all other creatures snowmen? [...] How is it that I fear death yet I have died? Or is the human deception true, and death is only a dream, it is death that dies?' (Frame 1962:102-3). This disintegration of stable logocentric rationality, which is also associated with death in 'Swans', demonstrates that even in allegory Frame's plural aesthetic ambition assumes central importance. Indeed, if the transparency of divisions such as good/evil are

central to the morality of the allegorical form, then Frame's vision disrupts the purpose of allegory, and instead foregrounds the conviction that classifications of any form are ultimately damaging. If this is the moral of the story, then the moral is negated by the uncompromising pluralism of Frame's aesthetic ambition.

It is not difficult to notice that the discussion of 'Snowman, Snowman' defeats the structure of this article, yet by doing so affirms its aesthetic ethos. The examination of 'Snowman, Snowman' incorporates a discussion of the object/subject dissolution via a Baudrillardian condemnation of materialism, whilst the narrative formulates the reality/simulation disruption via its assault on social conformity. Similarly, the allegorical possibilities of the 'exotic marvelous' snowman are impossible to isolate from prior discussions of the 'fantastic' dissolution of the natural/supernatural. The narrative even dissolves the generously flexible sub-classifications of oppositions that I have explored throughout; it is impossible to examine any binary without invoking a consideration of multiple associated binaries. Thus, by repudiating the structure of this article, Frame's short fiction affirms the aesthetic statement it constitutes: that her narratology is intrinsically unclassifiable.

Joel GWYNNE  
University of Hull

### Works Cited

- BAUDRILLARD, Jean. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. Trans. Chris Turner London: Sage Publications, 1998.
- DELREZ, Marc. *Manifold Utopia: The Novels of Janet Frame*. Amsterdam: Rudopi, 2002.
- FRAME, Janet. *The Lagoon and Other Stories*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. Ltd, 1951.
- . *Snowman, Snowman: Fables and Fantasies*. New York: George Braziller, 1962.
- . *The Reservoir: Stories and Sketches*. New York: George Braziller, 1963.
- . *Janet Frame: The Complete Autobiography*. London: The Women's Press, 1989.
- FREUD, Sigmund. 'The Uncanny' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Trans. James Strachey, London: Hogarth Press, 1953: 341-354.
- GRAZIA MATTEI, Anna. 'Two Sheep: A Fable' *The Ring of Fire: Essays on Janet Frame*, Ed. Jeanne Delbaere, Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1992: 54-62.
- KING, Michael. *Wrestling with the Angel: A Life of Janet Frame*. Auckland: Penguin, 2002.
- RHODES, H. Winston. Rev. of 'Owls Do Cry', *Landfall*, 11:4, 1957: 327-330.
- TODOROV, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to Literary Genre*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975.
- WEVERS, Lydia. 'The Short Story' in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Sturm, Terry (ed.), Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1991: 245-320.