

Gender Politics and the Gothic in Karel Schoeman's *This Life*

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Summary

Karel Schoeman's *This Life* (published as *Hierdie lewe* in 1993; translated into English in 2005), like other post-apartheid novels recently published by Afrikaans-speaking authors, considers the past and the future of the Afrikaner people. It is also markedly Gothic in style and content: violence, fear, death, and suffering permeate the tale, whose mood is elegiac. I argue, following a proposition by Gerald Gaylard that "[The] melodrama of the Gothic can be seen as a characteristically modern ... artistic mode ... [that] points beyond itself to the chance, the uncanny, irrational, horrific and sublime in modern life", that Schoeman's particular use of Gothic conventions in *This Life* to represent gender relations on the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century South African farm, and given his concern in this and his other writings about the past and future of the Afrikaner people as well as the role of the artist within the South African context, the representation of the narrator in *This Life* and the gendered climate within which she lives may be read as revealing Schoeman's anxieties about the post-apartheid future of Afrikaner culture. Schoeman's yearning for a lost paradise in his anti-pastoral *This Life* generates a Gothic gloom that encompasses the abjectness of the "good" feminine principle and the destructive power of the "bad" Mother, and that is a manifestation of his anger and sorrow, not only at the loss of the idyll but the original falsity of that idyll. I also argue that, although Schoeman uses his narrator to expose the patriarchal silencing and marginalisation of women, the protest on behalf of women made in this novel is diluted by the writer's linking, in conventional, patriarchal terms, of the narrator's body with the land and its fertility, and by his emphasising that the blame for the desiccation of Afrikaner cultural life rests with a woman, Mother.

Opsomming

Karel Schoeman se roman *Hierdie lewe* het in 1993 die lig gesien en is in 2005 in Engels vertaal en as *This Life* gepubliseer. Soos vele ander postapartheidromans deur Afrikaanssprekende skrywers, werp *Hierdie lewe* ook 'n blik op die Afrikanerdom se verlede en toekoms. Die roman se styl en inhoud word gekenmerk deur Gotiese elemente: die elegiese verhaal is deurspek met geweld, vrees, die dood en lyding. Gerald Gaylard het die volgende stelling gemaak: "[The] melodrama of the Gothic can be seen as a characteristically modern ... artistic mode ... [that] points beyond itself to the chance, the uncanny, irrational, horrific and sublime in modern life". In die lig hiervan voer ek aan dat Schoeman se bepaalde gebruik van Gotiese konvensies in *This Life* om genderverhoudinge op 'n Suid-Afrikaanse plaas

in die laat negentiende en vroeë twintigste eeu uit te beeld, dui op sy eie vrese oor die toekoms van die Afrikanerkultuur ná apartheid. Sy besorgdheid oor Afrikaners se verlede en hul toekoms (in hierdie roman en in sy ander werke), sy besorgdheid oor die rol van die kunstenaar in die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks, en sy uitbeelding van die verteller in *Hierdie lewe* en die genderklimaat waarin sy leef, kan ook beskou word as tekenend van Schoeman se eie vrese. Schoeman se versugting na 'n verlore paradys in sy antipastorale *Hierdie lewe* bring 'n Gotiese somberheid mee wat die ellendigheid van die "goeie" vrou en die destruktiewe mag van die "slegte" moeder omvat. Dit is 'n manifestasie van sy woede en verdriet, nie net omdat die idille verlore gegaan het nie, maar ook omdat dit van die begin af 'n valse idille was. Schoeman gebruik sy verteller om die patriargale oplegging van stilswye en die marginalisering van vroue aan die kaak te stel, maar ek voer ook aan dat die protes namens vroue verwater word deur die verband wat Schoeman in konvensionele, patriargale terme lê tussen die verteller se liggaam en die vrugbare land, asook deur sy beklemtoning dat 'n vrou, die "moeder", die blaam dra vir die agteruitgang van die Afrikanerkultuur.

Karel Schoeman's *This Life* (published as *Hierdie lewe* in 1993; translated into English in 2005)¹ is narrated by a woman who is completely paralysed, to the point of being unable to speak. As she haltingly recalls, and recounts for the reader, the story of her life, she is dying. She is doing so in a Roggeveld farmhouse owned by her Afrikaner family since "Father's grandfather[']s" time (p. 13), of which she has become the owner by default, her male relatives having died: she herself is childless, she is the end of the line. This post-apartheid novel, like others recently published by Afrikaans-speaking authors, considers the past and the future of the Afrikaner people. It is also markedly Gothic in style and content: violence, fear, death, and suffering permeate the tale, whose mood is elegiac. The Gothic atmosphere is initially stimulated by the reader's awareness of the extremity of the narrator's physical disablement – she is buried in her body – to be sustained by the narrator's fear of death and the fact that she is haunted by her memories and by her frustrated longing for the sublime.

Gerald Gaylard says, in an essay titled "The Postcolonial Gothic: Southern Africa", that, although the Gothic can "easily become a parody of itself" through its desire to make "a camp display of its frisson at the transgressive", nevertheless, the "melodrama of the Gothic can be seen as a characteristically modern ... artistic mode ... [that] points beyond itself to the chance, the uncanny, irrational, horrific and sublime in modern life, to

1. Schoeman was awarded the Hertzog Prize for Prose for *Hierdie lewe* in 1995. The Hertzog Prize, awarded annually by the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns is the most prestigious prize in Afrikaans letters; Schoeman has won it three times: in 1979, 1986, and 1995. All references to *This Life* are from the 2005 translation, and will be indicated by page number(s) only.

*the other which never fully disappears*² despite the best attempts of modern empirical rationality and social engineering” (Gaylard 2006: 1; my italics). The end of the official and ideological structures of apartheid – South Africa’s reviled attempt at social engineering – has led a South African writer such as Marlene van Niekerk, in *Triomf* (1999; translated into English in 2004), to “[rework] the conventions common to Gothic fiction to create a literature of terror that captures the *Zeitgeist* of Afrikaner anxieties” (Shear 2006: 70).³ I use these statements by Gaylard and Shear as starting points to consider Schoeman’s use of Gothic conventions in *This Life* to represent gender relations on the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century South African farm; I also draw conclusions, given the concern Schoeman manifests in this and his other writings about the past and future of the Afrikaner people as well as the role of the artist within the South African context, as to how his representation of his narrator and the gendered climate within which she lives may be read as revealing his anxieties about the post-apartheid future of Afrikaner culture.

Gothic Elements in *This Life*

Some of the most common Gothic conventions of content and style that were developed by the genre’s European originators are present in Schoeman’s *This Life*: these include enclosure, ruins, death, darkness, and suffering. The narrator articulates the main source of her suffering, for all that she is paralysed, as not of the bodily but of the psychological, emotional, and spiritual kinds: she fears the “darkness” of death that faces her, while the process of remembering causes her the anguish of reliving her unhappy, lonely life, of reliving the loss of everyone she has loved, of reliving too the frustration of her deepest erotic and spiritual desires. Her life has been un-lived, its stasis underlined by the fact that it is in her childhood bedroom that she is dying. Her bodily paralysis acquires a symbolic significance: if not a Beauty, she is a species of imprisoned Sleeping female.

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2. Cf. especially van Niekerk’s *Triomf*. But, as Gaylard notes, the South African Gothic starts with the *plaasroman*, particularly in *The Story of an African Farm* with its morbidly tragic ending [and it is] inherited by writers such as Doris Lessing, J.M. Coetzee, Mike Nicol, Karel Schoeman, Etienne van Heerden, Anne Landsman, Damon Galgut, K. Sello Duiker, Dambudzo Marechera, Mia Couto, Bessie Head and Zakes Mda, amongst others. (Gaylard 2006: 2)
 3. Shear, like Gaylard, comments on the longevity of the genre: “By drawing upon contemporary loci of fear and cultural anxiety, Gothic literature continually reinvents itself across international borders” (Shear 2006: 70).

Her isolation is total – she has no communication with the young, unnamed “coloured” servant who tends her and is her sole companion – and such isolation is representative of her lifelong loneliness. Her desires and feelings have been of no importance to anyone, both within her family and the narrow social arena of the nearby small town. Her disconnectedness from other human beings is manifest also in her unmarried, childless, indeed virginal, state. Even her apparent good fortune in inheriting her family’s Roggeveld farm arises from her aloneness: as mentioned, her male relatives have all died.

Schoeman underscores how small a mark this life has made on the social world and on the landscape around her, by leaving his narrator nameless. He creates a truly abject female: the repeated images that permeate her memory evoke darkness, silence, emotional bleakness and sterility, alienation from the self and from others, hopelessness, despair and, now, death.

Her world is also one whose forces are inexorable: repeatedly, as the narrator voices her loneliness and marginalisation as child and adult, she also states that, as trapped as she was in the life mapped out for her, so is she now, as she dies, trapped by the processes of remembering. She is compelled despite her conscious will, to struggle to remember and to understand her life: “I am forced to give this account” she says, to “remember ... here at the end of my life,” but “[w]hy must I remember, why must I be forced to remember here at the end of my life?” she complains (Schoeman 2005: 74, 17, 139). The strenuousness of the task that confronts her is suggested by Schoeman’s style: there are frequent series of questions (for instance, on pages 23, 25-26, 34-44, 55, 71, and 72), and there is obsessive circling around key moments (which gradually expose their truth to the narrator’s consciousness). These stylistic features, together with the narrator’s insistent, self-pitying fatalism become oppressive.⁴ Michael Chapman, although here speaking of J.M. Coetzee, suggests a way of responding to Schoeman’s style:

In confronting the psyche of Afrikanerdom in the policies and practices of the dying apartheid state, Afrikaans writers have had to put considerable mental cost into their dissident texts. The hallucinatory, even oppressive character of J.M. Coetzee’s monologues ... needs to be understood ... in

4. For instance, on page 27, the phrase “thin, shy, silent child I must have been” is repeated in “I became a thin shy, silent girl”, then followed in the same paragraph by “thin, shy child”. But there are numerous instances of phrases that are repeated. Steven Bruhn says, “What becomes most marked in the contemporary Gothic – and what distinguishes it from its ancestors – is the protagonists’ and the viewers’ compulsive return to certain fixations, obsessions, and blockages (Bruhm 2002: 261, quoted in Shear 2006: 89, n. 11).

relation to ... the folk-Calvinism of his Afrikaner family tradition that he is so determined to dismiss as a "history of stubborn rejection".

(Chapman 2003: 401)

Schoeman's monologue enacts the "mental cost" to the narrator, who is one of those "other[s] which never fully [disappear]" (to recall Gaylard), as she explores what brought unhappiness and doom to her farm and family, and brought corresponding sterility to the nearby mountain spring at Bastersfontein – there will be more on this correspondence later. It is in the nature of the monologue to create a circumscribed world view and the claustrophobia that characterises *This Life*, as it characterises Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Schoeman's *The Promised Land*, and Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*, monologues all, may be read as residual of both the repressiveness and rigidity of an Afrikaner upbringing, with its brand of Calvinism that stresses duty, hardship, and self-denial, and the effort required by the narrator (and, behind her or him, the author) to write beyond such an upbringing.

Violence and cruelty are typical features of Gothic fiction: as Valdine Clemens says, "the primary impulse of Gothic tales is the arousal of fear ... [so as to] convey admonitory, prophetic, and instructional messages" (Clemens 1999: 1). The narrator says her home was typified by violence and cruelty. Guns were ever-present in the farmhouse and the family seized land from those weaker than themselves by a combination of force and cunning: they drove out the "mixed-race" Basters at Bastersfontein (who themselves would have displaced former Khoisan dwellers).⁵ The family also forced out white Afrikaner farmers whose land they coveted. Although the narrator does not record that she herself experienced physical violence, she endured constant psychological and emotional abuse, and relations within the family were marked by "animosity, dissension and spite" (p. 49). The narrative also raises the strong suspicion that one of the narrator's siblings, Pieter, killed his brother Jakob, Schoeman's tale thus invoking the Cain and Abel trope, which adds to the novel's atmosphere of sinister, primal forces at work.

The hostility of interactions in the farmhouse may be viewed as a manifestation of the psychological and emotional damage caused by the fear, and consequent suppression, of pleasure – in particular of pleasure in sensuality and the aesthetic. Beautiful, gently-raised Sophie, who marries into the family, is repelled by her farmer-husband Jakob's coldness and her mother-in-law's severity; she finds erotic ecstasy with Jakob's brother, Pieter – Pieter who loves books, dances well, plays the violin, and enjoys women's company. After Jakob's death the lovers flee to take temporary

5. Although the "farm was granted to Father's grandfather when the first white people toiled up the passes of the Roggeveld Mountains to find grazing for their sheep", Father recalls having to "flee to the Karoo because they were attacked by Bushmen" (Schoeman 2005: 13).

refuge at Bastersfontein with its spring and its lush fertility of flora and small fauna. Sophie will disappear forever, possibly having perished in poverty, and, when Pieter returns to the farm after many years, he is a broken man: they find no home for their erotic passion. Meanwhile, the narrator's yearning for emotional and erotic fulfilment, first aroused by the sexual attraction she witnesses between Sophie and Pieter and then kept alive in her fantasies (pp. 54-55, 70-71), is confounded by the constrictions of her social world and by the fearfulness she has internalised: the lovers repeatedly, in the dreams and fantasies she has after their flight, fall – into darkness, the depths, watery depths (pp. 44, 56, 58, 71, 72, 73, 96).⁶ Memories of the lovers' bliss, and of their dreadful fate, haunt the memories of the virginal, childless narrator, and, in their repetitiveness, haunt the text. To the rejection of the forbidden fruit of sensuality is added the rejection of whatever does not conform to narrow versions of the socially acceptable and the functional. Mother, as the narrator calls her (using a formal, distancing form of address suggestive of the lovelessness that typifies relationships within the home), is the family's gatekeeper: she disapproves of her children reading books instead of carrying out their chores on the farm and in the household, and tolerates rudimentary literacy only because it can prove useful when settling legal documents. Banished, too, are other religious creeds, even if they are versions of Christianity: Meester, a temporary tutor, conceals his cross, symbol of his Catholicism, showing it only to the narrator. Yet such zealous policing of their faith does not result in a spirituality that is based on deep piety and charitableness in deeds. This is true not only of the inhabitants of the farm but also of those in the nearby small town: the importance to the churchgoers of correct behaviour and conformity to hierarchy ensures that bickering over the status attached to the seating in the church absorbs much energy. Schoeman uses the life of his female narrator to trace the emotional, cultural, and spiritual sterility of these people, and to prophesy the inevitability of their decline.⁷

Abjectness

Choosing a female as victim of this social world enables Schoeman to expose the sexist practices of Afrikaner patriarchy, for it is as a female,

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6. There is a hint of the incestuous desire frequently found in the Gothic genre in several of the narrator's recollections of Pieter's appeal, of his "blonde [sic] head" (pp. 54-55, 56), his "pale body" (p. 57), his "lean, slender body" (p. 59).
 7. By the time of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 the narrator is in her early seventies.

especially as a “daughter”, that the narrator has been kept, unseen and unheard, at the margins of the household, as her two brothers have not.

[W]hile the boys never learned to control their tempers or hide their feelings, I was taught at an early age to keep quiet, to obey and to accept, and the feelings I was never allowed to express must have been buried inside and continued to simmer deep under the surface.

I learned, one might say, to pretend and dissemble where I remained seated in the corner all the years of my life, the unnoticed girl, the unmarried daughter, the spinster aunt, always somewhere in the corner of someone else's home or ... at the fringe of other people's lives

(Schoeman 2005: 27)

Femaleness does not inevitably equate with such thorough oblation as hers; Mother is more forceful than her husband. However, Mother's forcefulness, her “[p]assion and obsession”, is exerted as a perverted form of power and energy (p. 19). Some of her acquisitiveness and cruelty may be attributed, her daughter surmises, to her earlier experience as one of the poor, landless trekboers, whose presence as a factor in Afrikaner history surfaces from time to time in the text.⁸ Mother's past afflictions as a member of a degraded class have not, though, softened her towards those who are lower in the pecking order due to *their* class position, which is entwined with their race designation. She verbally abuses Dulsie, the household servant. Milder-tempered Father treats Dulsie “with a certain respect”, but “Mother knew no respect, and when Father was not there Dulsie bore the brunt of her rage as much as anyone else” (p. 28).

Although Schoeman uses the narrator's point of view to expose Mother's ill treatment of her servants, he does not allocate to her a degree of sympathy for the servants that might appear anachronistic: when she mentions the recent slavery of some of their servants or of these servants' parents, her tone is neutral, matter-of-fact. Even if the servants Dulsie and Gert appear frequently in her account, she does not register awareness that

8. Schoeman's emphasis on the tribulations of the trekboers and their rejection by settled boers serves, as does van Niekerk's *Triomf*, to deconstruct the heroic Voortrekker myth that is central to the construction of Afrikaner cultural and national identity. The trekboers “haunt” Schoeman's text, as the Voortrekkers and their myths, says Shear, haunt van Niekerk's (Shear 2006: 79-81). However, while the presence of the trekboers serves to undermine the notion of a unified nation, blessed as the chosen of God, van Niekerk, says Shear, uses Sophiatown's buried past to challenge the roots of national identity as they are located in the migrations dubbed the Great Trek (Shear 2006: 79-81).

they are being exploited: “[B]ut then there was also old Dulsie, whom I almost forgot, as one is inclined to forget about the servants” (p. 27).⁹

Matrophobia in *This Life*

Mother’s anger, despite the steadily improving material circumstances of the family, may perhaps have been repeatedly stoked by the legalised inequality of ownership of property: while the women run the household and exercise power within the domestic sphere, the men own the houses, land, and livestock; and it is the men who farm the land, land that is a crucial marker of one’s social status and wealth in this community. Although it is Mother who urges her milder husband to expel the Basters and white farmers from adjoining land so that the family may add it to their holdings, the appropriation takes place in her husband’s name. And it is the status and wealth of their menfolk that determine the public manifestations of the standing to which the women may lay claim, such as the seat they occupy in the local church: Mother incurs resentment when she insists on retaining her prime seat in the church after Father’s death.

Schoeman does not, however, point to unequal property rights as a possible irritant to Mother’s sensibilities; what he does draw attention to is the unfairness of the gendered basis of division of labour (and consequent unequal social status and wealth, especially as they relate to land) in relation to the narrator; for instance, he has her describe herself, given the opportunity due to a shortage of white men, as proving well able to run the farm and to organise the annual trek down to warmer winter pastures in the Karroo (pp. 198-199).

Schoeman also slants the reader’s sympathy away from Mother and towards her daughter by painting the older woman, through her daughter’s recollections, as the narrator’s chief victimiser. Women, may, like men, be cruel, ruthless, and mean-spirited, and, frequently, it is older women who impose on younger women the restrictions, even the psychic and physical wounds, such as female genital mutilation, that they themselves have suffered. The portrait of Mother is, however, painted with an excessive degree of dislike. The narrator says in one description:

9. Schoeman’s verisimilitude also leads him to record that the rungs of the pecking order reach “downwards” among the domestic servants and farm labourers, so extending the strata imposed by their white masters:

Dulsie looked down on our other workers because she was the Ounooi’s own slave, as she said herself, and she slept in the house, in front of Ouma’s bed and later in front of the hearth in the kitchen, while they, the ... Hottentots and Basters, had to find a sleeping place in the outbuildings at night, or build shelters in the veld.

[There is] Mother seated in [church in] the front row among the elders' wives, Mother's straight back, stiff neck and angular shoulders. Mother's eyes never wandered in church as she sat rigidly in the place of honour that was her due, while Father faltered and stumbled over the words, and after the service she moved among the churchgoers like a shadow, erect and unyielding in her black dress with the new gold chain around her neck, and she paused to greet people without ever really joining in their conversations, lingered to ask and answer questions without revealing anything or making any concessions.

(Schoeman 2005: 132)

This rigid termagant does not soften with age: "neither did anyone who knew her love or respect her, and she knew this without actually caring in the least, for she desired neither affection nor respect" (pp. 132-133). Her daughter, sitting by her deathbed, receives "no word or sign, no gesture of supplication or reconciliation, no sign of love when the last breath in the small, wasted face on the pillow gave out and the end came" (p. 173).

The narrator does allow for her mother having been emotionally damaged by her trekboer childhood:

[P]erhaps it was not so much the money and the status and the power, as the security these provided, the fact that those people with the wild eyes, the shabby wagon and the scrawny dogs were finally banished to the shadows for good, outside the circle of lamplight where she was entertaining her guests in the voorhuis

(Schoeman 2005: 166)

This scarcely ameliorates the portrait of Mother as a cold-hearted, witch-like figure, one who, always dressed in black, moves through others like "a shadow", like an embodiment of evil.

The matrophobia in *This Life* becomes particularly evident when the novel is compared with van Niekerk's *Agaat*, which presents a mordant critique of Afrikaner farm life during the late apartheid period. *Agaat* is also narrated by a paralysed, Afrikaner woman, Milla Redelinghuys; Milla is also dying on the farm she has inherited, and is also tended by a "coloured" woman (*Agaat* of the title). Though Milla's mother is manipulative, narrow-minded, and unimaginative, she is no "shadow" who accretes a symbolic function as a feared, hated, omnipotent maternal figure. Further, although Milla fails in her mothering of her son Jakkie and can be scheming and manipulative, she is a complex, many-sided character, as is *Agaat* when *she* schemes to usurp Milla as mother to Jakkie. Schoeman's Mother is a "flat" character, a figure of myth and fairy tale, one appropriate to the Gothic mode. Schoeman's fiction, like that of the early Gothic European fictions, "never fully sever[s its] connections to a recognisable depiction of social reality; instead of making a complete break from the fictive 'real', the Gothic mode extends reality to include ... shadowy and potentially

monstrous possibilities ...” (Shear 2006: 72). Indeed, *This Life* is clearly intent on depicting some of the sexist practices involved in gender politics in the nineteenth-century Afrikaner farmhouse, such as the way in which the narrator is treated as less important than her brothers. “Gothic terrors are”, says Shear, “displacements of crystallised cultural anxiety, shadow-selves intimately connected to the dark underpinnings of the social fabric” (Shear 2006: 73). Mother is one such “shadow-self”. She is not as deformed in mind and body as is Lambert in van Niekerk’s *Triomf* – van Niekerk’s use of the Gothic genre entails more extravagant grotesqueries than does Schoeman’s – yet, keeping in mind the fact that Schoeman’s novel does retain “connections to a recognisable depiction of social reality”, it is noteworthy that most of the psychological and emotional damage in the patriarchal world of *This Life* is inflicted by the matriarch. Mother is the main agent, as cultural doorkeeper, of enculturated fear and anxiety, resulting in the repression of desire and pleasure, and she is the main agent of patriarchy as it interacts with racism and classism, her reach extending beyond the farmhouse to effect the displacement of any who would wish to dwell at Bastersfontein (that is, who would have their desires fulfilled and would live in harmony with the natural world).

When Mother dies the daughter is released from “duty”; she is also surprised to find that she is “not lonely” (p. 174), and, in the winter that follows her bereavement, she experiences a species of epiphany: “I remember a heavy snowfall one night during that winter after Mother’s death. [At the time] I was still unused to my newfound freedom” (p. 175). She continues:

Outside the entire world was white, and the vegetable patch, the narrow flower-beds and the street in front of the house were covered and obliterated; the snow lay on the stone walls and the roofs, the grey veld on the outskirts was a pristine snowfield and the low ridges to the east were softened by the thick layer of snow on the rocky ledges. The day was grey and colourless, the clouds low over the hills, and the snow had not melted, so that the landscape retained its whiteness all day long. As I moved from room to room inside the house, the empty rooms were lit up by the bright reflection from outside, and when I looked out, the familiar scene of street, houses and church was unrecognisable I surveyed the new world in which I found myself so unexpectedly.

(Schoeman 2005: 175)

This is a significant moment in the novel. Even if marked by the narrator’s capacity for passion and intensity of feeling, it is noticeable that the scene lacks colour and warmth, and she discovers that, although she “might have set [her] course for some unknown destination” through the veld, all she can achieve during this time of “newfound freedom” is to move to and from between her mother’s grave and the nearby town (p. 177). The framed

vision of the outer world she sees during her epiphanic moment is a reflection of her inner (spiritual) one: while pure, beautiful, and exhilarating, it is colourless, cold, lacking in precise, concrete definition and, above all, without human life. Nature may elevate, inspire with awe, but it does not offer adequate solace to those who are unloved. Further, when the narrator steps outside, beyond the screen of the window's glass, she discovers that she lacks the imagination and spiritual energy to use her newfound "freedom" to follow any path beyond what she already knows (pp. 176-180); she has become alienated from her own desires and feelings (pp. 298, 209). Her mother's work is done.

Matrophobia was a feature of the literature of the early phase of Second Wave Feminism. During the 1960s and 1970s, while groups within the women's movements in Britain and the United States were involved in political campaigns, labour disputes, and demands for better housing, health care, and transport, there also were assaults upon the family as the main locus of gender oppression. This led to the drive to escape what was viewed as the confinement of the roles of mother- and wifehood, an influential literary example of this drive taking the form of Doris Lessing's *Martha Quest* series.¹⁰ The maternal figure created by these female writers may be understood as expressing the daughter-protagonist's revulsion against the internalised mother, as well as her wish to reject the mother's power itself. The rebellious daughter-figure does not wish to become like the woman, usually depicted as unhappy and manipulative, sometimes witch-like, who has served as her role model for adult womanhood.¹¹ Carolyn G. Heilbrun wrote that the fictional "mother-daughter struggle" was a struggle that involves "the love", that "threatens, not murder, as between father and son [as in the tale of Oedipus], but engulfment" (Heilbrun 1987: 12).

The fictional and real-life daughter was also often wary of the "trap" of motherhood and mothering, as was *Martha Quest*. With the 1980s, however, textual representations of the mother in American and British feminist fiction and theory began to change. The fictional mother figure, as of maternity itself, would be rehabilitated (See, for instance, Rosemary Palmeira (ed.) *In the Gold of Flesh: Poems of Birth and Motherhood* and

10. The literature on the rejection of motherhood is extensive. One brief, lucid discussion that takes into account relative culture and class positions is the chapter "Reproduction and Refusal" in Carolyn Steedman's autobiographical *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986: 83-97). A fuller discussion, based on both literary texts and the lives of real women, may be found in *Mothers Who Leave: Behind the Myth of Women without Their Children* (1994) by Rosie Jackson.

11. As Toril Moi says, the images of women school of feminist criticism, and the demand for representation of female role models in literature, both stem from "the deep realist bias of Anglo-American feminist criticism" (Moi 1985: 47).

Michele Roberts's *Flesh and Blood*).¹² The fall and restoration of the mother figure and of motherhood were a feature of *women's* writing. In *This Life* and in his two biographies of Olive Schreiner, Schoeman manifests a perspective influenced by feminist thinking, but Mother is a fugitive from a deeper, earlier layer of the writer's psyche and imagination than is his rationally acquired accommodation of feminism.

Both the moribund narrator and the fearsome, powerful maternal figure have ancestors within the conventions of the Gothic genre, as they have within the traditions of folk fairy tales, but they also conform to literary representations of "woman" that reinforce stereotypes of the Bad, Consuming Mother, on the one hand, and, on the other, of woman who, as signifier of the moral health of a people, becomes a victim of their wrongdoings. An example of the latter is the protagonist of Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*. Mary Turner's murder by her servant Moses has the seal of approval of the heavens, as is shown by a flash of lightning that glances off the blade of the knife and the sky's release of rain.

Unlike Lessing's Mary Turner, however, who transgresses the social and moral taboo against miscegenation in colonial Rhodesia, Schoeman's protagonist does no wrong; she is a "good", passive woman, so "pure" that she dies a virgin. Sexuality and fertility are located by Schoeman in Sophie, around whom golden candlelight tends to play and who has been expunged, or, rather, has expunged herself, along with violin-playing Pieter. Yet the narrator's body and sexuality are linked by Schoeman to the land and its fertility, and here Schoeman follows the lead of patriarchal binaries. Such opposed (and essentialising) binaries, which have been evident in the discourses of European colonialism and imperialism, allocate to masculinity tasks that include conquering, ordering, and controlling land, the wilderness, white women, and black persons, while the white woman's task is to ensure the moral and spiritual generativeness of the elite group and, associatively, of its land.¹³ The novel's imagery is the key to understanding the narrator's

12. Roberts's novel is a particularly interesting example: the protagonist, having symbolically "killed" her mother as Bad Mother by sloughing off her emotional dependence on her, is able to integrate her early memories of her mother as Good Mother and, simultaneously, sing a "love song" for her own unborn daughter.

13. Annette Kolodny in *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*, says:

[W]hat is probably America's oldest and most cherished fantasy [is] a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine – that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification – enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction. Such imagery is archetypal wherever we find it; [it represents] the soul's home ... a realm of

symbolic function: years after Sophie and Pieter have fled, the narrator visits Bastersfontein, where the two lovers hid for a while and which as a result has over the years acquired for her an idealised promise of sexual and emotional fulfilment. When she reaches Bastersfontein, her hair, conventional symbol of female sexuality, having come undone, she finds it to be a “moist, fertile place nestled in the shelter of a low ridge ... the fluttering of white butterflies and the small, shiny leaves of the harpuisbos reflecting the light ...” (p. 122). Both Basters and white Afrikaner lovers having been forced to leave, there is no human presence. The buildings have collapsed: all that has remained are “a few dilapidated hartbeeshuisies, the collapsed remains of a few old shelters or kraals of stacked branches ...” (p. 122). The narrator mourns the loss of her hope of fulfilling her desires: “I remained on my knees ... tears pouring down my cheeks, crying for the first time in years with no one to see my tears” (p. 122). The moisture of the spring and the tears that signal an outburst of her long repressed (“for the first time in years”) feelings are linked by the text so as to suggest that her libidinal desires are connected to the potential fruitfulness of the natural landscape. Both will be suppressed, aborted, finally extinguished.

The chain of imagery linking desire/water/house recurs when the narrator loses Sophie's son Maans, whom she has raised, to her mother, who “appropriates” the boy (p. 65).

I would just sit there [inside my parents' farmhouse], not moving or having the least desire to speak, silently occupied with thoughts I was unable to express. The thatch had mouldered, the stones had been scattered, and in later years there was no sign that a house had stood [at Bastersfontein], that people had lived there, the imprint of their feet no longer visible in the moist earth of the fountain where they had fetched water.

(Schoeman 2005: 128)

The house represents both the narrator's psychic structure and a social and familial framework within which to situate and express her identity. This ruined house, like that in van Niekerk's *Triomf*, echoes the associations of the house in Poe's *House of Usher*, where crumbling buildings signify what Shear terms the “generative demise” of the family (Shear 2006: 83). As her unhappiness deepens, the narrator increasingly shuns human contact. When guests arrive to celebrate her father's birthday, she wishes to “flee the house ... to be surrounded by the rolling silver landscape under the stars; to flee to Bastersfontein ... where the water of the fountain seeps soundlessly into the sand” (pp. 130-131), and by the last page of the novel, the water “has dried up” and “[t]he stones once stacked [to form a wall] have broken up and

nurture, abundance, and alienated labor within which all men are truly brothers.

(Kolodny 1975: 4)

fallen apart, and there is no sign of them among the rocky ledges, outcrops and ridges in the flat, faded landscape of stone” (p. 225). No one else besides her remembers the world of the past, which the stones now represent. And she is dying. Further, Schoeman does not represent death as offering any kind of consolation for the narrator’s life of misery and deprivation and her dreadful struggle to recall her memories: there is no promise of a compensatory reward in the afterlife. Death is darkness, the unknown, echoing the blankness and bleakness of the single epiphanic moment during her life, achieved after her mother’s death, and deepening the aura of Gothic gloom of the novel.

Heinrich van der Mescht, in a review of *Hierdie lewe*, notes that Schoeman, in a rare comment on his work, a comment he applied specifically to *This Life*, said he was influenced by a certain painting, “The Monk by the Sea”, by the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich, and by his research for his book on N.P. van Wyk Louw who lived in the Roggeveld in the small town of Sutherland (van der Mescht 2005: 206, 209).¹⁴ Van der Mescht also notes that Schoeman said that this novel is the most salient example of how something in the landscape grips him, before he is aware of any of the events to take place in it, and that he has been influenced by landscape from early in his life, aware of it as wide, empty landscape (van der Mescht 2005: 211). The narrator cannot, despite her lyrical descriptions of the landscape, find solace in it: it is not so much empty as emptied, by the deprivations of her family. Her capacity for mystical delight in nature, like her sexual and emotional life, will become desiccated, as is symbolised by the dried-up spring at Bastersfontein.¹⁵ Her sole achievement is, as she is dying, to remember, to be able to piece together the remnants of her past and confirm her suspicions about the family history – to hear the voices in the “silence” – and, finally, to be able

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14. Van der Mescht notes that Schoeman has also been influenced in his philosophy and writing by various mystics, most of them European, such as Teresa of Avila and Julian of Norwich (van der Mescht 2005: 213). Schoeman wished to become a monk, lived for a time in a cloister in Ireland, then left, and says he no longer calls himself a Christian (van der Mescht 2005: 213).
 15. Van der Mescht argues convincingly that a comparison of *This Life* with Friedrich’s paintings reveals that Schoeman’s work can, and ought to be, read from the perspective of German Romanticism. Van der Mescht also says that both Friedrich’s painting “The Monk by the Sea” and *This Life* are intense expressions of the lives and thoughts of their creators (van der Mescht 2005: 222). The novel may, then, be read as expressing Schoeman’s frustrated expression of his inability, as an artist, to find within the South African landscape an adequate correlative. It may also be read as an expression of his own and his mother’s spiritual isolation (van der Mescht 2005: 221).

to “behold the dark” of death “with eyes wide open” (p. 224). Tracing her memories she traces the passing of her Afrikaner family, whose labourers and servants have deserted them, who have failed to engage with the land and its former occupants. The future spiritual and societal failures lie within the ethos and mores of nineteenth-century Afrikanerdom itself.

The narrator is, since she constantly underlines the unreliability of her memories, technically, an unreliable narrator; further, Schoeman allows facts about which she is uncertain to remain so: the reader never learns whether or not Pieter did kill Jakob. Yet, precisely because she is the constant, attentive observer of others' lives her tale gains credibility. Further, Schoeman paints her as having more imaginative sympathy and responsiveness to others than does her entire family, so that the narrative solicits empathy for her and her point of view. It is significant that both Meester and Sophie leave their most precious possessions with her as keepsakes, Meester his cross, Sophie a ring with a heart. The narrator's death sees the end of the life of an individual who registered the destructive effects upon her and her family of the mores and beliefs of the Afrikaner farming community, their fear and rejection of learning, of unknown beliefs, of sensuality, and of joyousness. And her unfulfilled life dramatises the drastic consequences of crushing positive aspects of the feminine principle; however, Schoeman follows conventional gendered binaries when he links woman to the land as regenerative feminine.

Some Comparisons

Just as the narrator's psychic, emotional, and physical deprivation have rendered her life, socially and culturally, sterile, so is Afrikaner social and cultural life, the novel suggests, doomed *because of an inherent sterility*. Gothic fiction is, as Shear says, “frequently synonymous with morbid eschatology” (Shear 2006: 87), death and sickness reminding the reader how ineluctable our demise is. Schoeman does not, however, as does van Niekerk in *Triomf* and *Agaat*, exploit the sensationalism offered by the Gothic, nor does he, unlike van Niekerk, exploit the comic potential of its excesses; instead, his exploration of the horror of the annihilation of personal and social existence is achieved with a mesmerising, incantatory weight that renders the text elegiac, its repetitive, obsessive style reaching a pitch adequate to convey the depth not only of the narrator's but also of the author's loss, longing, and nostalgia.¹⁶

16. Shear also quotes Steven Bruhm on repetitiveness in a Gothic protagonist's concerns: “What becomes most marked in the contemporary Gothic – and what distinguishes it from its ancestors – is the protagonists' and the viewers' compulsive return to certain fixations, obsessions, and blockages” (Bruhm 2002: 261, quoted in Shear 2006: 89).

Shear says of van Niekerk's *Triomf* that in invoking tension "between an imagined past and the turbulent present", the novel is "reworking a theme already present in the genre's genesis: "Since its inception in 1764, with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, the Gothic has always played with chronology, looking back to moments in an imaginary history, pining for a social stability that never existed ...'" (Bruhm 2002: 259 in Shear 2006: 79). It is precisely this concern with chronology, looking back and confronting a fearsome present – a concern that Gaylard would include under the term "the transhistorical imagination" – that makes the Gothic genre apt for considering the postcolonial condition (Gaylard 2006: 2).

This Life, although set in the past, functions prophetically and was written and first published just prior to the first democratic elections in South Africa of 1994, when white Afrikaners confronted a post-apartheid/postcolonial future. By this time, as Chapman says, "like several other white writers of the 1980s", such as J.M. Coetzee in *Age of Iron* (1990), André Brink in *State of Emergency* (1988) and Nadine Gordimer in *A Sport of Nature* (1987), Schoeman had written a "State of Emergency" novel with the significant title of *Take Leave and Go* (1992) (Chapman 2003: 404). In this latter novel,

a middle-aged Afrikaans poet sadly [takes] stock of a weeping South Africa. Just as *Promised Land* had promised devastation, so Schoeman's emergency resembles a Beirut option. With rain soaking the windows of the library where he is holed up with his books, the poet-figure has to learn to accept the inevitability of a new order that he is convinced will destroy the old language and seek its own texts. Although he comes to tie the recovery of his poetic potency to the change, he cannot envisage the new texts having their own richness or depth, and in retreating from the unpredictable present Schoeman the author has begun to secure his conception of stability as a text of the past: "History is safe, because it gives you an overview", he said in explanation of his biographical project on Olive Schreiner.

(Chapman 2003: 405)

The Schreiner project was followed by a biography of the highly respected Afrikaans poet N.P. van Wyk Louw, *Die wêreld van die digter: 'n Boek oor Sutherland en die Roggeveld ter ere van N.P. Van Wyk Louw* (1986), and by Schoeman's creation of three fictional voices of the past, in *Verliesfontein* (1998), *Die uur van die engel* (1995), and *Hierdie lewe* (1993).

In South Africa, it has been a matter of major concern that the imaginative writer strike a balance between ethical and aesthetic demands, between, on the one hand, commitment to the literary imagination and, on the other, the force of historical pressures to register precise political and social conditions. As Chapman says, Schoeman has favoured the aesthetic side, the middle-aged Afrikaner poet taking leave of a weeping South Africa in *Take Leave and Go*, followed by the dystopian *Promised Land* (1978; 1972), the allegorical *Another Country* ([1984]1991), and the lyrical *This*

Life (Chapman 2003: 397). Chapman notes that Versluis, in *Another Country*, “learning the truth about Africa from its landscape, as if by the naming of the vegetation we can possess the spirit of the place, ... ignores the possibility of dialogue with Africans” (Chapman 2003: 398). Even though this gap in Versluis’s tale reflects social reality, nevertheless the othering of black, or “coloured” persons in *Another Country* – and, I would add, in *This Life* – may be viewed as arising from Schoeman’s apparent inability to find promise and potential in “any indigenous human culture in Africa” (Chapman 2003: 398).

van Niekerk negotiates more successfully the balance between ethical and aesthetic demands while also using the claustrophobic, confessional mode that Chapman says reveals “affinities to the Calvinist conscience” rather than the “South African English fictional responses” (Chapman 2003: 388), and while also deploying the conventions of the Gothic genre. If, as Chapman says, Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* “stands in ironic relation to earlier forms of farm novels by Schreiner, Lessing and Jacobson, but perhaps more tellingly to the family sagas of the Afrikaans plaasroman” (Chapman 2003:388), then *Agaat* stands in ironic relation to both Coetzee and Schoeman.¹⁷ Milla is, unlike their narrator-protagonists, sophisticated and worldly; she successfully seduces the man she wants as a husband, and she torments him sexually in return for his cruelty to her. Even if Milla is also, like Schoeman’s narrator, dying and paralysed, van Niekerk deconstructs possible echoes of allegorical, mythical forces by assigning to her narrator’s condition a thoroughly contemporary, scientific diagnosis, motor neurone syndrome. Milla is no deranged or distraught female victim with tangled hair: as farm owner and farmer she has participated in both the cruelties, and the creativeness, of Afrikaner culture, of both the feminine sort (embroidery and cooking) and the masculine (managing the farm). A further example of irony in *Agaat* lies in the fact that, while ownership of the farm (indeed ownership of the novel, which is named for Agaat), and knowledge about farming, are transferred to the “coloured” daughter/servant/sister who is a brown Afrikaans-speaker, she may prove to be a more ruthless taskmistress than was her white employer; she may take advantage of the opportunity to exact her revenge upon the other “coloured” servants and labourers who have tormented her for her withered arm and her

17. There is dreadful black comedy in the anguished efforts Milla makes to communicate with Agaat, and they suggest the possibility that van Niekerk is being playful with the post-modernist theme of the urge to communicate and its tensions with the impossibility of communicating. Milla’s physical condition has deteriorated to the point that she can only use one eyelid, but nevertheless she and Agaat do achieve some communication, despite Agaat’s deliberate misunderstandings. In fact, due to closeness of their lives together, and the intimacy of their ambivalent relationship, there is communication at a profound level.

patrician ways.¹⁷ van Niekerk steps beyond the boundaries that identify “Afrikaner” with whiteness, to present a vision that suggests the possibility of transfer and continuity, in language and farm ownership and cultivation. While this is but a vision – rather than what may be claimed as achieved reality – and it is an ironised vision, it is a vision that nevertheless contrasts markedly (and raises the possibility that van Niekerk may have written her novel at least partially in answer) to Schoeman’s characterisations of the protagonist and her mother, who accrue *symbolic* weight, as representing the death of, and in Mother’s case carrying some of the burden of the decay of, Afrikaner culture, beliefs, and mores.

Agaat holds out the possibility noted by Nicole Devarenne in *Triomf*, for “white” Afrikaners and their language to escape the cultural stagnation of Afrikaner nationalism (Devarenne 2006: 105), but it does so playfully, through comedy that is at times dark, even cruel. Another Afrikaans writer, also of a younger generation than Schoeman, whose work explores the possibility of engagement and openness in relation to the post-apartheid era, is Antjie Krog; in *A Change of Tongue*, by way of psychological and physical journeys, she plunges openly into the difficulties of negotiating her identity as a white Afrikaner poet in post-1994 South Africa and, indeed, in the African continent.

Like Coetzee, Schoeman writes apocalyptic fiction in which the future he predicts is gloomy. In Krog’s *Change of Tongue* and van Niekerk’s *Agaat*, however, Afrikaner “whiteness” in post-apartheid South Africa is predicated as, if uncertain, at least open. Both these younger writers record the unstable nature of rootedness and identity, while van Niekerk, especially, can be said to deconstruct these so as to move them closer to the more fluid state of identity demanded within post-apartheid South Africa. In neither *Triomf* nor *Agaat* is van Niekerk sanguine about the ability of white Afrikaners to adapt (Jakkie, the longed-for heir to Grootmoedersdrift in *Agaat*, does not want the farm, does not want to be a farmer, and chooses to live outside South Africa); Schoeman, concerned with his doubts about continuing to find a nurturing cultural milieu within which to function as an artist, in this novel creates a sterile cul de sac – one that will be belied by his future published work.

Conclusion

Schoeman gives a voice to and traces the career of a female protagonist; he also uses her, as focaliser of his tale, to protest against the patriarchal silencing and marginalisation of women. However, his narrator-protagonist is totally abject and her body is linked, in conventional, patriarchal terms, with the land and its fertility; further, the narrative rests most blame for the demise of Afrikaner culture, including its farm life, on a woman, Mother.

Annette Kolodny quotes Joel Kovel who, she says, when presenting a psychiatric model of maturation outlines also the “characteristic plot configurations of American pastoral fiction”:

The very hopefulness that a person sustains himself by is at bottom an impossible illusion, nothing less than the wish to return to maternal fusion ... The wish must ... be perpetually frustrated, and the frustration must perpetually generate aggression. Hence, from the stage of separation onward ... the infant becomes ambivalent, hating as well as loving, and will remain so throughout his life.

(Kovel 1970, *White Racism: A Psychohistory* pp. 251, 260, 261, quoted in (Kolodny 1975: 153)

Schoeman's yearning for a lost paradise in his anti-pastoral *This Life* generates a Gothic gloom that encompasses the abjectness of the “good” feminine principle and the destructive power of the “bad” Mother, and that is a manifestation of his anger and sorrow, not only at the loss of the idyll but the original falsity of that idyll.

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