



Gender, Realism and Power in *The House that was Eureka*

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The more modern industry becomes, the more is the labour of men superseded by that of women. Differences of age and sex have no longer any distinctive social validity for the working class.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*

This paper undertakes a detailed study of characters and their gendered subjectivity in Nadia Wheatley's *The House that was Eureka* (1985), and considers the effects of realism and fantasy on that construction. Of primary concern is the question of whether the novel challenges the constraints of the dominant patriarchal discourses. Whilst the representational function of the text is not the only means by which 'gendering' occurs in this novel, it is an essential element in the comprehension of the dichotomies that arise. However, a detailed analysis of gender and its relationship to power should not be seen to isolate these issues from the entire novel. Rather, their function is to form only part of a holistic understanding.

In the 'Historical Note' that prefaces Nadia Wheatley's *The House that was Eureka* the author clearly outlines the historical significance of the Unemployed Workers Movement and foreshadows the social concerns upon which the book is based. Of predominant

concern are the inequalities of class, wealth and power, and their effect upon society and the individual. Wheatley writes:

In the Australia of the 1930s most of the working class rented rather than owned their homes; and when the Great Depression hit, thousands upon thousands of families couldn't pay their rent, and a very great number were evicted... Given all this, it is not surprising that all over Australia a proportion of unemployed workers - both men and women - formed organisations to protest their economic and social plight, and to demand improvements in their conditions.

(Wheatley 1985, p.ix)

The House that was Eureka is not, however, solely limited to a social concern for the poor or unemployed; it also challenges the constraints of patriarchal ideology as Wheatley positions her female characters in central and active roles. Such characters include both Evie and Lizzie, who overcome their despondency and fear to join in the fight for their rights, and Sharnda a university educated social worker whose professional status and education enable her to attain a level of agency within the text. The determination, intelligence and courage of these females clearly contrasts with many of the male characters, and it is only as the

relations of power and control change that the 'gender appropriateness' of their behaviour is questioned, reminding us that, 'Gender stereotypes define our culturally agreed-upon notions of gender-appropriate (and gender-inappropriate) behaviours and traits' (Golombok and Fivush 1994, p.19). Eventually, those characters that have acted outside the boundaries of acceptable, stereotypical, gender-based behaviour are either subsumed into the hegemonic structure of patriarchal society, or die.

Wheatley writes, 'The history in this book is real, though I have made up some of the people' (p.ix) and in so doing she emphasises the realist link she is attempting to make between history and literature. However, the concept of 'reality' or 'realistic fiction' is problematic, for like Nietzsche's 'Truth and Lies', reality can be seen as 'a sum of human relations, which has been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically . . . an illusion about which one has forgotten that this is what it is . . .' (Nietzsche 1976, pp.46-7). Reality, being a subjective and ideological construction, is thus dependent upon the author's own subjectivity for its formulation. Furthermore, the problems associated with this concept are only exacerbated by the formulaic nature of much popular

fiction (including writing for children) which uses the realist mode. John Stephens explains that, 'Generic discourses readily evoke gender stereotypes because characters are caught up in events which tend to have gendered forms and outcomes.' (Stephens 1996, p.19). Children's literature, as a generic discourse, portrays the process of 'growing up' as a popular theme that functions to insert the child into the norms of adult society. Therefore, the child is shown, even when rebelling or sharing adventures, to be performing some socially conventional roles. Many children's novels that are categorised as realistic fiction employ gender stereotypes and the often sexist depictions they use are excused as images that reflect 'reality'. Such representations have been used in Louise M. Alcott's *Little Women* and *Good Wives*, Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians*, or any one of a number of stories in Gribble's (ed) *Stories for Girls* or *The Girl's Own Annual* books. In such novels as these, gendered behaviour may emerge in the personality traits or actions of a character; for example, males may be described as powerful, rational and independent, whilst females are passive, caring and vulnerable. Those characters who challenge such stereotypes are often stigmatised as abnormal and their behaviour

rendered 'gender inappropriate'.

Concerned with the predominance of sexist stereotypes in children's literature, Marten and Matlin state:

Children must see females engaged in important, active and independent actions if we wish them to believe that women and men are truly equal. Furthermore, young girls must see competent female role models if we would have them be achieving and self-actualising. Additionally, young boys should see that males do not have to hide their feelings—they can express their fears and ask for help.

(Marten and Matlin in Norton 1983, p.374)

In a genre where realism is valued (being 'honest' to children), the writer has to present such ideal figures as if they are realistically plausible. This often means they occur on the margins of normative social groups or that the text moves from realism into fantasy to accentuate them. Whilst realism is central to *The House that was Eureka*, the surreal effects of dreams, ghostly apparitions and the fluid use of time suggest a fluctuation between the genres of realistic fiction and fantasy. Such fluctuations have the potential to both disrupt the conservative hold of historical

behavioural patterns, or to re-introduce those same stereotypes. Furthermore, they enable scenarios such as Lizzie's 'visitation' to spur Evie into breaking out of her class and gender-induced passivity and to counter Noel's false, or surreal, heroism.

In the novel, the fantasy elements come from allowing the realism of the 1980s and the 1930s to overlap as the two time-frames echo through the one space. The realism and the phantasmagoria of time shifts and dream sequences are connected by this sense of place. Nadia Wheatley explains, 'Place is the most important element for me in terms of generating ideas' (Nieuwenhuizen 1991, p.287) and this is reflected in *The House that was Eureka* where the adjoining terrace houses become the physical and metaphorical site of discovery, revolution and change. Having been the home of all four central characters (Evie, Noel, Lizzie and Nobby), the terrace houses become a domestic representation of community discontent and the inequalities within society. They, and the people housed within them, reflect the contemporary social concerns of that society, whether that be the hunger and homelessness of the 1930s or the disheartening effects of unemployment and social isolation in the 1980s. And it is this link between

historical periods, realism and fantasy, that closes off the disruptive potential of the text, since *place* is presented as real and signals a myth of unit that denies difference: the house is Eureka. In this context struggle is celebrated but its efficacy is limited to action authorised by benevolent government agencies and a unified community.

Stephens claims that in a text 'gendering is apt to be systematic because a genre is constituted by linguistic discourse and interpersonal features (that is, the relationship between participants within the text and with implied readers), all of which can be marked for gender' (Stephens 1996, p.17). Therefore, a detailed analysis of the construction of gender in *The House that was Eureka* involves the deconstruction of the primary characters: what they are like, what they do, what happens to them, and how their gender influences such factors. The primary characters in *The House that was Eureka* are all maturing teenagers facing confusing social problems whilst individually struggling with their burgeoning sexual and gender awareness. What follows is a consideration of the influence of gender on their maturation and access to power, and how the text participates in the perpetuation of patriarchal discourse, despite its realist reformist

programme.

The novel begins with the arrival of Evie and her family in their new home, a Newtown terrace house. Despite the many possibilities city-life offers, sixteen-year-old Evie is uninterested in looking for work, making friends or socialising. Her boredom extends to an indifference toward her family and neighbours and her lethargic state is only broached by the repeated intrusions of Noel, his grandmother the invalid 'despot' and her strange dreams about Lizzie. As part of the formulaic constraint upon surface realism Wheatley reintroduces a fairytale schema, as Evie is repeatedly called 'Sleeping Beauty', and makes subtle use of intertextual effects in the evocation of the fairytale. Zipes has pointed out that fairytales provide readers with a secure structure and a set of characters about whom they may feel comfortably knowledgeable and Wheatley employs this framework to reconfigure the text and its gendered representations (Zipes 1983, p.6). Initially, Evie embodies the patriarchal construction of the female: she is passive, irresolute, vulnerable and dependent upon her parents. Such positioning may have been learned from her mother whom Evie claims is 'so scared of losing Ted [her husband] that she'd put herself down, and put

Evie down, just to keep him' (p.16). Furthermore, Evie's ambitions comply with patriarchal ideology as she dreams of supplanting 'that fattish girl with glasses and trailing after Roger [the youth worker] like a puppy on a lead' (p.81). According to Hollway,

The gender-differentiated nature of patriarchal discourse affects women's and men's powers and, therefore, the investment they have in taking up gender-appropriate positions and practices. Girls and women actively engage in certain heterosexual practices in order to re-produce their gender identity.

(Hollway in Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn and Walkerdine 1984, pp.241-2)

In such a context, Evie's passivity (which is primarily manifested through her constant desire to sleep) can be viewed as an attitude invested with gendered meaning, signifying her identification with the patriarchal construction of femininity. However, for Evie, sleeping resembles an act of passive rebellion through which she emphasises her independence from her family, especially from the control of her stepfather Ted, and from the norms of society. Furthermore, unlike her friend Roseanne, Evie does not believe the only solution to her problems lies in the appar-

ent 'freedom' of domesticity, a role dictated by patriarchal ideology.

'I think I'd like to have a baby.' Roseanne says . . . 'If I can't get a job I might as well do something.' It's still all airy-fairy in Roseanne's mind but Evie doesn't know that. It all seems too old for Evie, full of things she can't work out. (p.81)

It is only when Evie discovers the Newtown CYSS and begins to dream about Lizzie and the eviction riots of 1930s that she glimpses the possibility of life, and a career, outside the home. The re-enactment of the Newtown riots gives Evie some focus in her life and enables her to adopt some of the determination and mettle that is a part of Lizzie's character.

'You've really made me want to go [visit the bush], one day,' added Evie. Evie who just a couple of months ago had had absolutely no ambitions. 'Is that right, girl?' Nobby said, thinking: Evie. This girl who barely came to his shoulder, a real nice girl with quick darting eyes, a girl who'd have something alive and strong in her for ever more as a result of being mixed up in Lizzie. (p.191)

Evie's neighbour Noel is an imaginative teenager, a dreamer

whose 'reality' is born of a combination of isolation, loneliness, dreams and fantasies. Noel's world is consumed with the demands of his ageing grandmother, 'the despot', and his fantastic dream-life provides an escape in which he is more 'masculine', more heroic, more attractive and more self-possessed than reality would suggest. Noel 'was funny-looking, or at least his head was; his face was thin, the nose long with a bump in the middle, the neck was long and thin and the dark eyes narrow and slanty. The mouth was wide, but the lips were thin. The face looked pale and a bit sickly in the streetlight' (p.8). Far from a manifestation of masculine power and control, Noel seems pale, weak and sickly. According to phallogocentric discourses men 'are powerful, rational, autonomous, in control and self-confident (Hollway 1984, p.248). These features are, by definition, positively valued in sexist discourses and 'the effect is to foreground men's qualities and conceal their weaknesses and to do the opposite for women' (Hollway 1984, p.248). Noel, however, physically embodies many of the attributes traditionally considered feminine and is disparaged as a 'sissy' by the neighbourhood thugs. Furthermore, his sexual inexperience prohibits him from 'hanging around with the guys at school' (p.84). His many weaknesses

and apparent vulnerability become symbols of his powerlessness, enabling Evie to reveal her own insecurities.

'I don't know what you're talking about.' Evie usually wouldn't admit ignorance to a stranger, certainly not to a male one, but you could see from this person's looks that he didn't count. He was weird. And, despite the partition, Evie could see that he was shorter than her. (p.8)

Noel's weaknesses, his self-consciousness, his softness, his fear and irresoluteness are all attributed to an upbringing in which he was surrounded by women, and it is only through his dreams and eventually the re-introduction of a masculine influence into his life that Noel is able to reclaim his masculinity. Far from challenging patriarchal ideology, Noel aspires toward the power and control that masculinity implies. Like Evie, the return of Nobby (Noel's uncle) is the impetus for the change, and eventually the acceptance that Noel experiences. No longer vulnerable to the threats posed by Matt and Tasso at the corner store, Noel feels more adult, more powerful. The truth about Lizzie and Nobby and their experiences during the 1930s eviction riots releases Noel from his dream-like existence and the return of Nobby completes the circle.

'Noel laughed, so happy all of a sudden, not quite knowing why Matt and others like him weren't going to get him down in future, but just knowing they weren't. It's funny, all those years of wishing for an uncle or someone to go backstop for me, and now I get one, for some reason I can suddenly backstop myself
(p.192).

Whilst Noel does not become the macho hero he dreams of, he does assume a greater degree of conventional masculinity.

If Noel begins as an effeminate dreamer, and becomes a more self-possessed male, Lizzie is from the outset an energetic activist. Struggling to survive during the Great Depression of the 1930s, Lizzie is determined to change the course of history, to reverse the wrongs of the world and fight for social equality. She and her family present a united front, allied with the Unemployed Workers Movement, in opposing the injustices being perpetrated against the poor and the unemployed in Sydney. Lizzie's intelligence, aggression and determination are all characteristics that are commonly attributed to men, and thus Lizzie becomes a discordant figure among the revolutionary fervour of her male relatives and the domestic passivity of the females. Her gender becomes an obstacle in

achieving her political ambitions, for, as a female, Lizzie finds herself ignored and overlooked when the men prepare to defend their home from the police. Subject to patriarchal reasoning, Lizzie finds herself excluded from entering the house as the possibility of danger increases.

Pa treated her like a child. Just because she was a girl. Nobby was only a year older, and Pa let Nobby in the house. Pa let Nobby be the runner. Whereas she Lizzie, a true Cruise and not a feeble-blooded Weston son-of-a-traitor, had been sent to stay around the corner at Mrs Kennet's with Ma and the girls. Even though she'd be much better at being the runner than Nobby, for she was a better size for squeezing through the gap.
(p.65)

Uncomfortable when confined to the duties society allocates to women, Lizzie is a 'proudly lousy mopper' (p.182) who is most content amidst a riot or brawl. She challenges the stereotypes that prohibit female political agency and aspires to become the next Alexandra Kollontai, a Russian revolutionary figure who fought for a social equality that included women.

Lizzie's face was soft as she stroked the rifle. She was far away, caught in a lovely jumble

of the Easter Rising and the Russian Revolution . . . And at the forefront of the barricades is Lizzie Kollontai . . . or is it Lizzie Connolly . . . her long black hair streaming back from the face that glows like a flame beneath the fires of the burning buildings . . . at the forefront of the barricades stands Lizzie, the inspiration of the struggle, the fierce fighter for freedom who works tirelessly, day and night, even now re-loading to fire upon the enemies of the workers' revolution . . .
(p.51)

While this romantic fervour makes Lizzie a hero, especially in contrast to the indolent Evie and the dreamy Noel, it also represents the kind of excessiveness not commonly associated with females. Lizzie's political aspirations indicate her lack of conformity to a patriarchal role and in seeking equality with the (male) socialist revolutionary hero, through the figure of Kollontai, Lizzie becomes a transgressive Joan of Arc-extremist. However, her courage and determination fail her at the crucial moment when the battle for 203 Liberty Street begins. Faced with the danger posed by the policemen and their guns Lizzie hides in the cupboard of the scullery finding sanctuary from the violence of the men outside in a symbolic place associated with women

and domesticity. 'Pa, Mick, Nobby, Nobby, come and get me, I'm stuck here, I'm scared. Not like a wild flame, climbing the barricades, but a girl in a cupboard, Nobby I'm scared' (p.162). Lizzie is only truly courageous at the moment of her death, when she is struggling to preserve the life of her sister amidst a rising flood of water, rather than fighting for a cause.

Lizzie's determination to lead an important role in the eviction riots contrasts with the fear and lack of resolve that Nobby experiences in the face of danger. Unlike Lizzie, he does not have the conviction of the poor; there is no threat to Nobby's home, he will not suffer for lack of food or warmth. According to Lizzie, Nobby lacks the desperation that her own family are experiencing in their fight to remain housed.

Four times now when there'd been a brawl with the cops, Lizzie had wormed her way into the middle, flailing out with tight fists. Despite which, each time the cops had simply picked her up and tossed her out. Like a fish you catch, that's not worthwhile. 'It's not fair,' Lizzie complained. 'It's just because I'm a girl. If I was you, they'd let me fight.' If Lizzie was Nobby. If Lizzie was a bloke, like Nobby. But if Lizzie

was a bloke like Nobby then she wouldn't be in there fighting, because when Nobby saw a brawl with the cops starting, something inside Nobby froze. He couldn't act.
(p.32)

Nobby is drawn to the exploits of his neighbours, the Cruises, and most especially to Lizzie whose determination and fervour contrast with his own 'bank-teller blood'. The reversal of gender roles between Nobby and Lizzie is most evident as Nobby is forced into domestic chores that include shopping, cleaning and polishing. It is Lizzie who is consumed with the need to act, and Nobby who attempts to restrain her impulses. It is Lizzie who introduces the gun and Nobby's reaction is a telling example of the reversal in their gendered positions.

Nobby was shocked. Despite the years spent knocking around Mick and Lizzie, Nobby's mind was still linked to lace doilies, camomile tea, Job the parrot, the sound of the piano, and Saturday morning spent polishing the silver. He'd never seen a gun before . . .
(p.51).

Nobby's weaknesses are closely associated with those of Noel and, like Noel, he lacks the 'masculine' attributes that are associated with the male character in patriarchal dis-

course, and consequently, he is invested with a sense of inferiority. 'Nobby sometimes thought he could feel his father's bank-teller blood creeping in his veins. Blood made from melted pianos, and water left over from washing lace doilies, and silver polish and bank ink and stamp glue.' (p.55)

Accepted as part of the Cruise family, Nobby is torn between his loyalty to his friends and the bond he has with his lonely, but demanding, mother. Finally he is caught in the cross-fire between the two factions, and unwittingly becomes the instigation for the final showdown in which the Cruises fight for the right to remain in their home. Like Evie and Noel, Nobby also undergoes a process of transformation that is instigated by the eviction riots. The possibility of action and danger transform Nobby from a powerless bystander into an image of the traditional patriarchal male whose functions include violence, aggression, and protection.

'Never!' Nobby agreed. Feeling himself getting strong now, a tree not a bearstalk, a comrade not a sonny-boy, looking forward to an act, the blood in his veins not silver-polish and ink but man's blood made of beer and wire and glory.
(p.58)

Therefore, all four of the central characters in the novel are transformed in some way by the eviction riots of the 1930s. Evie gains some of the focus and determination of Lizzie, Noel and Nobby are both masculinised through the traditional forum of 'battle' or 'war' and Lizzie, who rebels at the idea of conforming to patriarchal society, dies fighting to save her siblings as a consequence of being evicted.

The final character who links the two time periods in the novel and whose role is central to the plot is Noel's grandmother. Mrs Weston, or 'the despot', is a figure who signifies apparent dissension from patriarchal ideology as she controls and manipulates the lives of the people around her. Her power lies in her ownership of the terrace houses, which enables her to evict Lizzie and her family in 1931 and ensures the continuation of her control over the lives of others. Initially, it appears that class intersects the discourse of gender in the text, to subvert the dominant order by enabling a female to manipulate the lives of males, an anomaly in patriarchal society and the first hint as to why Mrs Weston is nicknamed 'the despot' and 'Mrs Scab'. This threat, however, is qualified through a variety of devices Wheatley mobilises to highlight the lessening and

limitations of the despot's powers. Where once Nobby's mother 'was seen on the roof, fighting a southerly buster to pull a tarp over the slates while they flew off around her head' (p.36), she is now powerless, bedridden and dependent. Age inhibits her ability to speak; without a voice she cannot take charge, and speechless her control collapses as she is re-situated in the role of the traditional female as vulnerable, passive and dependent. With age, the 'unnaturalness' (according to the lore of patriarchy) of her power is also transposed onto her physical being and she is transformed into the embodiment of the wicked witch:

The blind was down that day, and in the near-darkness of the room the face of the despot glowed out with its thick coating of white powder, glowed beneath the cracks like a whitewashed brick wall. It was Noel's face, gone fat and rotten . . . And the laughter too was wild like Noel's, but vicious, Noel's laugh always included you.
(p.61)

Finally, the despot's power is revealed as only a restricted form of wealth and she is otherwise dependent on men, whether they be her husband, son, male tenants or policemen to enforce and uphold her demands. Thus, the power and domination the despot has

'risen' to achieve at a class level, is spurious at a gender level as it is revealed that it operates only within a domestic (female) space.

In contrast Sharnda is a female social worker whose education and professional status enables her to attain a level of agency within the text. Although only a minor figure within the text, Sharnda symbolises much of what Evie aspires toward in her dreams of having a job at the CYSS. Symbolically Sharnda's true name is Alexandra, a foreshadowing of her successful organisation of the re-enacted riots at 203 Liberty Street and the subsequent concessions her social organisation earns as part of their fight to stay open. Her successes are notable in a text where the success of females is primarily confined to the domestic sphere.

Despite the outward appearance of power residing in the hands of women, men remain the central impetus for all action, conflict and resolution in *The House that was Eureka*. In conjunction with the diminishing powers of 'the despot' there is a shift in the positioning of power in the novel, away from the female figures of 'the despot', Lizzie and Evie, and toward the male figures as the riots and the likelihood of battle increases. Notably there are only men involved in the final

battle between the police and the Unemployed Workers, signifying that public and political power ultimately resides in the physical force employed by men. Even Sharnda is limited to the role of powerless bystander during the mock riots. Neither Evie (in her re-enactment) nor Lizzie are able to penetrate this masculine sphere, and thus, the power to kill, to destroy, to resolve, to intervene, to dominate and to reason remain the sole prerogatives of men.

Through the genre of realistic fiction tinged with fairy-tale fantasy Nadia Wheatley challenges many of the gendered stereotypes constructed by patriarchal discourse by situating females in central and active roles. However, as the generic move from childhood fantasy to adult realism is enacted and as the relations of power shift toward contestation and physical conflict, the gendered schema within the novel re-enters the boundaries of 'acceptable' (patriarchal) behaviour by prohibiting female agency and condoning masculine intervention, domination and violence. Despite the realist-reformist program initially established in the text, *The House that was Eureka*, ultimately perpetuates the stereotypes and ideological frame of patriarchal discourse.

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