Great art is precisely that which never was, nor will be taught, it is pre-eminently and finally the expression of the spirits of great men.

Acknowledgements

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis traces the development of the artist figure as a leading character in twentieth-century Australian novels. In Australia there have always been complex interconnections between the worlds of art and literature, perhaps the most obvious being the cluster of artists and writers centred on the journal *Vision*, co-edited by Norman Lindsay’s son Jack with Kenneth Slessor, who was heavily influenced by Lindsay. Slessor’s poem “Five Bells”, an elegy for his artist friend Joe Lynch, later became the subject of a mural painted for Sydney Opera House by John Olsen. Although this and other connections between poetry and art are of interest, this thesis concentrates on fiction only.

Some years’ work as curator of a significant institutional art collection and as a lecturer in art history, together with a research degree in nineteenth-century art history, have provided me with the opportunity to write about both historical and living artists. This experience led me to the understanding that artists are often inarticulate or misleading about their own art, and the question arose as to what extent the reputation of artists depends on written discussion of their work. These thoughts were the genesis of the subject of this thesis, which asks whether a convincing artist character could be created in fiction and goes on to examine the means used to develop the fictional artist character.

For the purposes of this study the figure of the imaginary artist as a character in a novel has been defined as a visual artist who produces easel paintings or artist’s prints. Sculptors, photographers and craft workers are excluded, although novels have been written about them. This thesis also excludes conceptual artists whose work relies solely on concepts that eliminate necessity for a concrete realization of their idea, although abstract concepts underpinning all art are referred to in discussion of the fictional artists. The characters analysed have much in common with the stereotype of the isolated artist figure with a privileged insight into the workings of society; an outsider who exploits
society through his or her art, who possesses an almost divine talent and is highly intelligent; however, this study also examines some exceptions to this type.

The methodology followed in this thesis relies on a close reading and analysis of the selected texts, with detailed discussion of the novelists’ writing styles, utilizing elements of semiotic and structural analysis, and an iconological approach to some of the imagery. This is supplemented with reference to contemporary literary criticism, and argument from art history and theory, French philosophy, psychology, classical mythology and the preoccupations of society at the time the novels were written.

A survey of critical literature on the subject is followed by my overview of the historical development of the artist figure. Twentieth-century Australian novels analyzed have been chosen from work by a variety of authors, both male and female, some with professional experience of art, others with only a general interest in the area. Artist figures discussed are also male and female.

The novels of Barbara Hanrahan and Davida Allen draw on their own lives and experience as artists; both Eleanor Dark and David Malouf, with little detailed knowledge of art, refer to contemporary ideas and reveal personal preoccupations. Dark creates a life for her female artist that she, as a writer, would have found ideal. After including a series of minor artist figures, in the widest sense of the word, in most of his earlier novels, Patrick White drew on his wide-ranging knowledge of art in creating first, an Indigenous artist who is a figure of redemption as one of four leading characters, and then, a major artist figure who may have been White himself in a visual instead of literary persona. Research on French theory, creativity and women artists widened Sue Woolfe’s understanding of art in producing her artist character, while David Malouf’s elusive artist exists in a poetic landscape.

**Previous studies**

Critical material on the artist figure in general is sparse with no previous detailed study of this topic. A survey of studies of various aspects of the topic, all reflective of society at
the time of their publication, is provided in Chapter 1 of the thesis. These include a discussion of creative women in relation to fertility myths; the connection between literary artists and nineteenth-century Romanticism; the influence of the nineteenth-century Kunstlerroman on American literature; a discussion of the nineteenth-century artist character, which the writer sees as largely in decline, and a most penetrating analysis of portraits in fiction. Australian critical material is even more limited, but includes a short essay linking European and Australian traditions, and an unpublished thesis on Australian poetry. Helen Hewitt has recently examined White’s association with the Sydney art world, discussing his art collection and its relationship to his writing. She takes a different approach to mine, in concentrating on the links between White’s novels and his Australian art collection, and occasionally referring to European artists named in White’s texts. A useful inclusion is the Art Gallery of New South Wales’s inventory of artworks donated to them by White. I seek to define how twentieth-century Australian writers have depicted the figure of the artist. In White’s case, this not only involves direct mention of named works of art, but also references to imagery from unnamed but well-known European artworks, with which White would have been familiar from his knowledge of European and English art collections. As White himself said in a letter to Cynthia Nolan about The Vivisector, “It will have to be done through implication and images rather than direct statements.”

Development of the artist figure

My overview of the historical development of the artist figure in fiction will provide a background for analysis of the questions asked by this thesis. In summary, I argue that one factor in the mid-nineteenth century emergence of the artist figure was the changed position of the artist in European society. Originally regarded by society as an artisan, through a series of changes, both in society and in the training of artists, by the nineteenth century, and the advent of Romanticism, the artist came to be seen as a gifted and special individual, epitomized in the largely mythical stereotype of the artist as genius. The

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emergence of Bohemianism, and the popularity of stories and plays by Henri Mürger and other French writers, added to the stereotype of the artist figure and confirmed the public’s perception of the artist as a romantic ideal, outside society, but privy to its secrets which were made visible through his art. Two other factors, influential in the development of the novel featuring an artist as the leading character are, firstly, the mode of English nineteenth-century art history, written as a history of the life of the artist and occasionally including imaginary embellishments, which later led to many late nineteenth-century art critics also writing fictional accounts of artists’ lives, and, secondly, the advent of Modernism which precipitated changes in the form of the novel, particularly in introducing a more intense concentration on the inner life of the subject.

The nineteenth-century artist figure in Europe

Although this thesis deals with twentieth-century Australian novels, I will argue that some of the artist figures portrayed are based on nineteenth-century stereotypes. Therefore it will be necessary to outline characteristics of the precursors to the twentieth-century model, which are briefly forecast here. It is generally agreed that the artist novel first came to prominence in Europe. Mürger, seen by some as the source of the genre, was preceded by two writers whose novels influenced it: the French Nodier whose 1802 novel was inspired by Goethe’s artistic heroes, and Georges Sand who set the broad artistic scene with a heroine who was a singer. Many French novelists, including Balzac, had a good working knowledge of art. Zola and du Maurier\(^3\) also contributed to the genre, but I maintain that it was Proust, and his revelation of the inner life of the artist, who propelled the artist novel into the twentieth century, as opposed to earlier novelists who described the outward trappings of the artist’s life. In England, Hazlitt and Ruskin created a receptive climate for the artist novel’s appearance in the second half of the nineteenth century. A number of writers who were either trained artists or art critics featured artists in novels. Wilde’s famous Dorian Gray, who is the subject of a portrait not the artist, outshines the artist figure Basil Hallward in his novel. In England, most nineteenth-century fictional artists are described in terms of behaviour, looks and clothes, suggesting that the authors were more concerned with outer appearance than inner

\(^3\) Although born and educated in Paris, du Maurier is usually regarded as an English author.
feelings. The artist occasionally appears as a bohemian foil for worthier figures in English nineteenth-century family sagas. Women contributed to the genre, at first creating female artists as amateurs, but later producing novels addressing problems faced by artists, and society generally. But in considering both male and female writers and artists, it was well into the twentieth century before a fully rounded artist figure, as a woman *au fait* with contemporary ideas in art, was developed by Virginia Woolf.

**The nineteenth-century artist figure in Australia**

It will be shown that, in Australia, women writers preceded men in developing the artist character in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. One writer, who was also an artist, and several others wrote stories about successful women artists. The prominence of artist Adelaide Ironside, who was their contemporary, presented an inspiring model for these writers, whose artists followed similar careers to Ironside’s. Other women writers featured men as well as women artists, one character being based on Charles Condor, who drew a self-portrait as a character from Balzac. I suggest that the idea of the artist as bohemian had some currency in Sydney; in 1888 Condor was reading Mürger, and du Maurier’s *Trilby*, the tale of a Parisian artists’ model who became a singer, which appeared as a play in Sydney in 1896. Male writers did not take up the artist figure until 1912, when a journalist who was also an artist wrote a play about an artist. However, I argue that the Romantic artist-as-genius stereotype was not as prominent in Australia as it was in Europe. Nineteenth-century Australian women writers in general portrayed strong intelligent women artists and their position in society, relating these novels to the first wave of feminism in Australia.

**The artist figure in the twentieth century**

Further analysis confirms that the artist figure in twentieth-century literature gained popularity as the century advanced, therefore only a representative selection will be discussed. James Joyce set a pattern, although his hero was a poet not a visual artist. The early twentieth century saw a number of popular novels featuring artists but, as the century progressed, the artist figure changed, embracing the avant-garde, revealing an inner life, or becoming the centre of political, feminist, mystery or other stories.
confirms that ideas relating to Modernism changed the style of the artist novel, particularly in relation to narrative style and manipulation of time. Woolf led the way with a female abstract artist figure; other women writers endowed the artist figure with their own autobiographical characteristics. Women writers in America addressed problems of the black woman artist. A number of English writers were also art critics or artists, notably Joyce Cary, whose hero Gully Jimson set a brilliant precedent. In the 1930s, the idea of including the artist figure in novels which also had other preoccupations, such as politics, probably led to crime novels which feature artists as leading characters. Other writers place the artist in exotic settings. Post-modernist tendencies are seen in artist novels that combine historical material with an imaginary account of the artist.

It will be shown that in twentieth-century Australian literature the artist figure also appears in a variety of situations. Artist characters are involved with preoccupations of various sections of society, such as Vitalism and women’s liberation. Artist figures appear in family sagas; some writers based artist characters on historical figures, others satirized the artist figure. Women writers have placed artist figures in unusual situations, both in Australia and in other locations; others have used a Post-modernist format and some have created artist figures in mystery stories. Male writers feature both male and female artists in enigmatic explorations of the inner world. Some women writers have expanded the artist figure to include genres other than easel painting.

The survey, outlined above, will demonstrate that the artist figure is now accepted as a leading character in a novel. I will conclude from argument in the first chapter that the stereotype of the artist as romantic hero, developed in the nineteenth century, has in some cases continued into the twentieth century, but the nineteenth-century version concentrates on the exterior characteristics of the artist while, in the twentieth century, the interior view is more common. The survey will also show that variations occur between male and female writers in depicting male and female artists; writers who are also artists are more inclined to produce semi-autobiographical figures, while writers who
are not artists introduce their own preoccupations in societal or philosophical aspects of the character.

Chapter 2 analyses an artist figure in two novels by Eleanor Dark, *Sun Across the Sky* (1937) and *Waterway* (1938). The discussion shows how Dark overcame a limited knowledge of art in creating an artist as a character. The indirect influence of Norman Lindsay’s involvement with the popular enthusiasm for Vitalism, combined with the sculpture and concepts of Raynor Hoff, are employed to give some credence to this artist figure. Another contributing factor is the influence of Christopher Brennan. Dark bestows upon her character a way of life that could be taken as an exemplar for the creative woman, including women artists, in 1930s Australia.

Patrick White’s artist figures are discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. The character of the artist, not always a visual artist, runs through many of White’s novels. To support the analysis of the way White created the figure of the visual artist, a discussion of the sources of his knowledge of art, particularly European art with an emphasis on German Expressionism, is included. While White owned a significant collection of Australian art by the end of his life, it will be argued that, at the time of creating the artist figures discussed, his collection was quite small. Though making occasional references to works of art he owned, he drew more extensively on his knowledge of contemporary European art and art history in the formation of the artist figures discussed in this study. It will be argued that the artist figure gradually came into prominence in White’s novels, as White perfected the idea of the imaginary artist in succeeding novels. The artist Mr. Gage in *The Tree of Man* (1956) is a minor but important figure who only appears in retrospect. Alf Dubbo, the half-Indigenous artist in *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), the only major Aboriginal artist figure in Australian literature, is one of four leading characters, who is not entirely convincing as an artist, but fills the role of redemptive hero. With some reservations, it will be argued that White’s main artist character, Hurtle Duffield in *The Vivisector* (1970), is the most powerful and convincing of all the artist figures examined, realized through White’s penetrating understanding of the concepts of creativity, his
ability to cross-reference ideas, his witty punning and oblique reference to examples from European art, all conveyed through his distinctive narrative method.

Chapter 5 deals with the artist figures created by Barbara Hanrahan in four novels, *Sea-Green* (1974), *Kewpie Doll* (1984), *Michael and Me and the Sun* (1992) and *The Frangipani Gardens* (1980). It will be shown that Hanrahan drew on her own expertise as an internationally recognized visual artist in the formation of the artist characters in these novels. In the first three novels, it will be argued that, while detailed descriptions of the process of art making add weight to the characters, particularly in *Sea-Green*, the concentration on the psychological development of the character blurs the conceptual side of the character’s art. Hanrahan’s employment of visual metaphors and covert reference to classical mythology is discussed, and compared to White’s more urbane use of similar mythology. A discussion of *The Frangipani Gardens* will show how Hanrahan broke out of the semi-autobiographical mode to create a female artist imbued with the characteristics of the nineteenth-century artist stereotype, overlaid with concern for the position of the woman artist in society.

Sue Woolfe’s *Painted Woman* (1989) is analysed in chapter six. It will be argued that Woolfe based the male and female artist figures in this novel on a complex of ideas from theories of René Girard centering on myth, violence and the scapegoat in the generation of culture and religion, which Woolfe adapts to the creation of art. Feminist art history, psychology, and ideas on the unlocking of creativity including, surprisingly, reference to management studies are also called upon in the creation of her artist figures. Issues of feminism shape the dominant female artist figure, leaving the male artist as the villain, whose death makes the eventual emergence of the female artist possible. I will argue that a full appreciation of the artist figures in Woolfe’s novel is contingent upon a knowledge of the theories, particularly of Girard, drawn upon in formation of these artists and that the novel presents an unusual exploration of creativity in both literature and art. Artist figures created in novels by David Malouf, *Harland’s Half Acre* (1984), and Davida Allen, *The Autobiography of Vicki Myers* (1992), are discussed together in chapter seven as, it is argued, both these novelists had agendas other than the creation of the artist
figure. It is proposed that *Harland’s Half Acre* was written as a tribute to Queensland, and that the artist figure is a way of depicting the landscape and life of South Eastern Queensland during the artist’s lifetime. Malouf takes a romanticized view of the artist as an isolated genius observing society. The mores of society and the grandeur of the bush, as observed by the artist and conveyed in Malouf’s poetic descriptive prose, are all recorded in the artist’s paintings. This artist figure is unique among the characters analysed in this study, in that his art appears not to be strongly linked with his sexuality or lack of it. Similarities and differences between Malouf’s and White’s artist figures will also be discussed. In discussion of Allen’s *The Autobiography of Vicki Myers*, it will be argued that, while Allen has produced a convincing artist figure, partly based on her own life as an internationally recognized expressionist artist, the rationale for this artist figure is connected to a commercial marketing arrangement for the author’s paintings. Sexuality and the position of the professional artist in relation to domesticity and procreation are also issues which shape the representation of this artist.

The final chapter outlines the conclusions reached through this analysis of artist figures in Australian novels. I will discuss the difference in artist figures produced by novelists who have a professional knowledge of art and those who do not; the difference in gender representation and realization of male and female artist figures and whether one or the other is more convincing, and the contrasts between male and female writers. The difference in concepts of the artist figure, and how these change in the twentieth century, will also be discussed, as will the question of whether earlier artist figures are more informed about art than later figures or vice versa, and whether these are relevant trends or not. Finally the question of how much of the creative process is revealed in the writing technique of the novelists, and whether there is any equivalence between visual art and writing style, will be addressed. The aim of this thesis is to present an analysis of the artist figure and its viability in twentieth-century Australian novels.
CHAPTER 1

The Artist Figure in International Literature

In order to set the background to my analysis of the artist figure in twentieth-century Australian novels, an outline of the critical literature on artists as characters in the novel is followed by a discussion of various historical features which influenced the development of the artist figure in fiction. First, changes in theoretical approaches to art history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are outlined, followed by an overview of changes in the position of the artist in society. This led to the artist-as-genius stereotype, which became the focus of artist novels in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Development of the novel and changes in art practice with the advent of Modernism are also discussed. Examples illustrating the general development of the artist novel in nineteenth-century Europe, England, briefly in America, and in Australia are then referred to. Particular note is made of authors who were also artists or had a professional knowledge of art, and of women writers, since my analysis reveals that these writers exhibit different approaches to those of the writer with only a general, educated knowledge of art. Finally I survey the artist figure in international twentieth-century literature. This section concludes with a survey of twentieth-century Australian novels which feature artists, excluding those analysed in depth in this study.

Critical studies of artist novels

Critical studies of this topic are sparse and reflect the preoccupations of society at their time of publication. For example, Grace Stewart, *A New Mythos: The Novel of the Artist as Heroine 1877-1977* (1979), published at the height of the women’s liberation movement, examines the woman writer, poet and visual artist, as portrayed in relation to myths such as those of Faust and Demeter.¹ P.M. Pasinetti, *Life for Art’s Sake: Studies in the Literary Myth of the Romantic Artist* (1985), concentrates upon European literature,

but the visual artist is not dealt with, rather the artist is seen as a poet or writer.² Ursula R. Mahlendorf, *The Wellsprings of Literary Creation: An Analysis of Male and Female “Artist Stories” from the German Romantics to American Writers of the Present* (c.1985) discusses the emergence of the *Künstlerroman* in the nineteenth century and its influence on American writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Artist of the Beautiful* (1844). Mahlendorf defines ‘art’ as ‘kunst’ and argues that early childhood artistic inclinations can be channeled into various artistic genres, whether visual art, literature or any other art form. She is interested in the psychological basis of creativity as portrayed in a selection of novels.³

Maurice Beebe defines the artist as one who creates works of art in any medium, that is, literature, music or visual art.⁴ He divides the artist novel into three useful categories: the artist as divided self, where there is a gap between the normal, everyday life and the interior and creative life of the same artist; the artist who experiences life in order to produce art; and, conversely, the detached artist. In the novels given detailed analysis in this thesis, the theme of the artist as divided self appears as ‘the gap’, frequently referred to in Sue Woolfe, *Painted Woman* (1989). The artist who must experience life to produce art fits the character of Hurtle Duffield in Patrick White, *The Vivisector* (1970), also in Davida Allen, *The Autobiography of Vicki Myers* (1991) and in the novels of Barbara Hanrahan. The artist as outsider could apply to the artist in David Malouf, *Harland’s Half Acre* (1984). However, not all the artist characters discussed in this study fit into these categories, and some exhibit characteristics from all three categories. While Jeffares argues that the artist novel declined and almost disappeared at the end of the nineteenth century, Beebe sees James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and *Ulysses* (1922) as the epitome of the genre, and the inspiration for many twentieth

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19th-century writers to continue the theme.⁵ A.S. Byatt has much of interest to say on this topic, although she concentrates on portraits rather than on the imaginary artist as the leading figure in a novel.⁶

There is very little critical material on the artist figure in Australian literature. Elwyn Lynn wrote a pithy article, “The Artist as seen by the Novelist”.⁷ He comments on novels by Emile Zola, Joyce Cary, Irving Stone, William Golding, Lawrence Durrell, as well as two Australians, Hugh Atkinson and Patrick White, and others. As an artist, art curator, art critic and former English teacher, Lynn gets straight to the point in his astute analysis. Zola, *L’Oeuvre* (1886), fails to produce a convincing artist figure because Zola was out of touch with the art world by the time he wrote it. He tried to hybridise Monet and the pointillists in his artist Sandoz and only succeeded in producing a self portrait. Cary’s Gully Jimson ‘thinks like a painter’; Stone is pretentious and boring and White, in Alf Dubbo, produces an improbable artist who is portrayed more for his journey to spirituality than his art.

Other material is of peripheral interest to this topic. Susan Muranty’s Ph.D. thesis, “The Sword, The Pen and the Brush: Australian Poetry and Painting in the Battle with Tradition, 1923-1948” (1991), deals with the influence of Norman Lindsay on Australian art and poetry, including that of Rosemary Dobson.⁸ Helen Verity Hewitt, *Patrick White, Painter Manqué: Paintings, painters and their influence on his writing* (2002) takes a different viewpoint on White to that of the present study. Although Hewitt presents some interesting insights into White’s novels, she only occasionally examines White’s method of developing the artist figure, taking it as a given. She looks for references in White’s novels to his friendship with various artists and to his own art collection but, with a few exceptions, largely omits analysis of the imagery that White takes from various European

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⁷ Elwyn Lynn, “The Artist as seen by the Novelist”, (Contemporary Art Broadsheet, Sydney, December 1961), pp. 4-7.
painters, particularly the German Expressionists which, on my reading, exceeds any influence from his own collection.9

**Position of the artist in society**

The appearance of ‘The Artist’ as the subject of novels in the mid-nineteenth century is due as much to the position of the artist in society as to the history of the novel. It is also linked to the way that art history was written in English in the nineteenth century, that is, as the history of artists’ lives. Random examples include Anna Jameson, *Memoirs of Early Italian Painters* (London, 1846) and Alexander Gilchrist, *The Life of William Blake* (1863), the former widely read, even in Australia.10 A variation of this is Anne Thackeray Ritchie, *Miss Angel* (1875), a biography of Angelica Kauffman, which must be called semi-fictional, because, for marketing reasons, the author downplays the widely recognised achievements of this Swiss-born artist who became a foundation member of the London Royal Academy. These so called ‘true’ accounts of artists’ lives left little need for the emergence of a fictional artist character in literature; on the other hand, they may have encouraged the fictional genre. It has been argued that there was a ‘close creative link’ between art and literature in the nineteenth century, given the literary skills of art critics William Hazlitt, W.M. Thackeray, George Moore, Henry James and Oscar Wilde, all of whom, except Hazlitt, produced novels that included artist characters.11 The biographical style of English art history was eventually largely replaced by a Marxist style of art historical analysis, which takes into account the social and economic background to production of the work of art but does not refer to the life of the artist.12 This left the field open to the popular genre of semi-fictional recreation of lives of real artists, a twentieth-century example of which is Irving Stone, *Lust for Life* (1935), a fictional version of Van Gogh’s life. The complex twentieth-century historiography of art later involved many different theoretical approaches, including feminism, deconstruction,

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9 Hewitt, op.cit.
11 Jeffares, op.cit., p.132.
semiotics and psychoanalysis. Novels examined in this study also employ some of these approaches; for example, Sue Woolfe draws on feminist and psychological arguments in *Painted Woman*, while Davida Allen’s *The Autobiography of Vicki Myers* is preoccupied entirely with the place of the woman artist in society.

To understand the position of the artist in the nineteenth century, it is useful to remember that, until the sixteenth century, artists were trained through apprenticeships organized by guilds. When the guilds declined at the end of the sixteenth century, the painter and sculptor, as opposed to the more menial stone carver, engraver and goldsmith, were trained in Academies of Fine Arts set up under royal patronage. By the end of the eighteenth century, technical aspects of art production were carried out by engravers and other artisans under the artist’s direction, and the artist became a gentleman, providing works of art for the aristocratic patrons of the Academies. In France the Academy was abolished during the Revolution, although re-instituted under a different name and system, designed to produce political art for the state. In England the Academy survived. But around this time, particularly in Europe, the idea developed that the artist occupied a unique position in which, through the prism of genius, he was able to expose aspects of society and nature not visible to the ‘common man’, an idea which sprang from the Romantic movement. Some artists set up separate groups, such as the Pre-Raphaelites, the Nazarenes and others, in which they taught themselves. The journals of Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) reveal the analytic, introspective nature and ideas of the Romantic artist. “The inner spark exists. I find it dominant in me”, he wrote in 1822. “In painting a mysterious bond is established between the souls of the sitters and those of the spectator … all souls meet in your painting”. This theme continues throughout his journals. In 1854 he wrote that the artist “summarizes, he renders clear the sensations that things

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arouse within us, and which the great run of men, in the presence of nature, only vaguely see and feel”.

Particularly in France this led to the development of the largely erroneous stereotype of the artist-as-genius, an outcast from society, who produced masterpieces of art while starving in a garret. Romanticism’s notions of the artist’s inner life and genius combined with two important economic developments in society. Firstly, the rise of industrial capitalism paved the way for the emergence of individualism in society. Secondly, as the nineteenth century wore on, the system of patronage through which artists were supported by aristocratic or state patronage, together with opportunities of exhibiting at the Academies, changed to a dealer-critic system in which the lone artist faced a volatile art market controlled by dealers and commercial galleries. The additional feature of the artist stereotype, that of genius, had no basis in reality.

All this was compounded by the largely literary Bohemian movement, which revolved around groups of poverty-stricken, young poets and writers who lived in the Latin Quarter of Paris and were inspired to some extent by Victor Hugo. The writer Henri Mürger, who tried to become a visual artist, and whose work is referred to below, was the centre of one group. These shifting groups or cenacles included young men such as Nadar, who became a world famous photographer, Gustave Courbet, the anti-establishment young artist, and Charles Baudelaire. They lived for art, met in cafés, drank and talked. Mürger’s Scènes de la vie de bohème (1851), a sanitized version of his own life, originally published serially and then adapted as a play performed to huge audiences in 1849, underlined the formulation of the public’s idea of the artist figure.

Until well into the twentieth century, public opinion generally saw the self-employed visual artist, striving to market work through the dealer and gallery system, in terms of

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16 Janet Wolff, op.cit., p.11.

From Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word*
this stereotyped idea of the artist-as-genius.\textsuperscript{18} Later twentieth-century artists who found other modes of operation, for example those producing public art for government or corporate organizations, do not fit the stereotype outlined above.

It is arguable that, by the mid-nineteenth century, this stereotype of the artist-as-hero, a fascinating and intriguing individual, suggested to writers new possibilities for a character who could be fictionalised as the focus of a novel. In general, the fictional artists of the twentieth century, referred to in this study, have much in common with the nineteenth-century stereotype of the artist discussed above, although the twentieth-century works concentrate on the interior narrative of the artist’s consciousness, while the nineteenth-century novels concentrate more on the artist’s physical position and only occasionally describe the consciousness of the artist as viewed by the exterior narrator.

\textbf{History of the novel}

The rapid industrial development of the western world not only saw a change in the status of the artist, but also coincided with the rise of the Modernist movement. Artists took on the precepts of Modernism in their art making, although public perception of the artist retained elements of the nineteenth-century stereotype, as noted above. This change affected writers as well as artists, since preoccupations of the Modernist novel included a concern with inward states of mind and a change from the novel of bourgeois society to a new interest in artistic consciousness.\textsuperscript{19} These changes presented novelists with an artistic crisis, similar to but also different from the crisis faced by artists. In the twentieth century, the newly emphasized conceptual basis for both the disciplines of visual art and literature presented another opportunity for the development of the character of the visual artist in fiction, in which the inner life of the artist became the focus of the character, in contrast to the nineteenth-century artist-as-hero described more for his (they were nearly all males) bohemian life and position in society. As E.M.Forster noted, “there is an affinity between him [the novelist] and his subject-matter”\textsuperscript{20} which suggests a tendency

towards an interior view of the subject. Obviously there are many other factors, such as the rise of literacy, which affected the general development of the novel and thus had a peripheral bearing on the development of the artist character.

The artist novel in nineteenth-century Europe

Puccini’s popular opera La Bohème (1896) confirms that the fictional artist was well established in European popular culture by the end of the nineteenth century. The Bohemian characters of the opera include an artist, a poet, and a musician, the three artistic types that feature as heroes of nineteenth-century novels, although my study deals only with the artist figure. The source for the libretto is Mürger’s Scènes de la vie de bohème, Puccini fighting for the rights with Leoncavallo, who used the same source for his own opera, La Bohème, of 1897.21

European writers preceded the English in the depiction of the fictional artist. Perhaps the first of these was Charles Nodier, Le pientre de Saltzbourg (1802). Nodier was inspired by Goethe, The Sorrows of Young Werther (1774) although it is Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister’s Lehryahre (1795-1796), where the hero is an actor, which is said to have founded the tradition of the portrait of the artist novel. George Sand’s Consuelo (1844), whose artist heroine is a singer, is credited with influencing French readers in acceptance of the general artist novel.22 Sand described the inner life of the introspective Romantic artist and included a number of artistic characters, mainly musicians, in her novels. Jeffares has argued that Mürger’s Scènes de la vie de bohème was also seminal to the development of novels about artists.23

Many prominent nineteenth-century French novelists who produced imaginary artist characters also had a detailed knowledge of art or art theory. Honoré de Balzac was familiar with Diderot’s essays on painting and discussed the text of Le Chef-d’Oeuvre inconnu (1831-1847) with Théophile Gautier. Le Chef d’Oeuvre inconnu, a short story, probably had more influence on the representation of the visual artist in literature than

22 Beebe, op.cit., p.267, p.74.
23 Jeffares, op.cit., p.20.
any novel. Scholars of art and literature are still speculating as to whether Balzac anticipated the abstract expressionist movement, or whether his fictional artist went mad and produced an indecipherable mess when he painted his last portrait. *Le Chef d’Oeuvre inconnu*, about a fictional male portrait painter, Frenhofer, also includes portraits of the seventeenth-century artists Nicholas Poussin and Franz Porbus. As well as writing about the artist, Balzac utilizes images from art history to enhance descriptions of his characters. Balzac describes Frenhofer in terms of “a picture by Rembrandt proceeding silently without a frame, through the darkened atmosphere, which is characteristic of this great painter.”24 This literary technique, which draws on a known work of art, was also used by Patrick White, particularly in relation to German Expressionist art, in *The Vivisector*. As White studied French and German literature at Cambridge it is possible that he read *Le Chef-d’Oeuvre inconnu*, although there are no references to Balzac in White’s published letters or memoirs. Frenhofer’s painting seems to be about decomposition, as pointed out by Byatt, who praises Balzac’s ability to present a verbal equivalent to the technical aspects of painting in descriptions of the relationship between the brush stroke and the portrayal of light. It has been claimed that the dense short brush strokes described by Balzac prefigured the broken brush-stroke of the French Impressionists. The character of Frenhoffer was so true to life that Cezanne identified with him but also thought of him as a real person.25 Frenhofer also fascinated Picasso; he illustrated a bibliophilic edition Balzac’s story and in 1927 produced *La Suite Vollard*, a series of etchings on the artist and the model, to accompany the story.26 It has been argued that Balzac’s story is a forerunner of abstraction in art and also reveals a connection between radical aspects of Romantic theory and modern abstract painting.27 Another study of *Le Chef-d’Oeuvre inconnu* suggests that the final indecipherable portrait is one in which nothing appears; in Balzac’s novel the reader sees nothing but at

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24 Byatt, op.cit. p.23.
the same time sees all: the painter, the painting and the plot. Balzac prefigured Australian writers like Patrick White in the use of visual imagery based on historical works of art, which in both writers was linked to their theoretical knowledge of painting and art history and their friendships with artists.

Emile Zola also knew many of the French Impressionist painters; Cézanne was his childhood friend, and he corresponded with Édouard Manet, who read his fiction and painted his portrait. Zola’s *L’Oeuvre* (1886), the hero of which is Claude Lantier, an unsuccessful painter whose failed masterpiece is a huge female bather rising from the Seine, so upset Cézanne that he severed relations with Zola, even although *L’Oeuvre* had been dedicated to him. Monet also criticized *L’Oeuvre*, as he believed it would harm the reputations of the French Impressionist painters, on whom the characters were based. Monet’s death-bed portrait of his wife Camille (Plate 2) is comparable to Lantier’s painting of his dead son and to Frenhofer’s decomposed portrait of the large nude. It has also been suggested that the grotesque female bather in *L’Oeuvre* was a precursor of the symbolist goddesses of Odilon Redon. Again, there is a comparison with Patrick White’s *The Vivisector*, which he dedicated to a leading Australian artist, Sidney Nolan, who thought the protagonist of the novel, Hurtle Duffield, was based in part on his life, although White denied it. Conversely to the case of *L’Oeuvre*, it was the writer White who severed relations with the artist Nolan. While Zola may have inspired Redon, it was Redon’s symbolist painting of the chariot of Apollo which inspired White to write *Riders in the Chariot* (1961). Due to their intimate knowledge of art and artists, Balzac and Zola were able to construct imaginary artist characters which convinced, not only readers, but also real artists of their power. Among other French novelists later in the century, George du Maurier recalled his youthful art student days in Paris and Antwerp in his novel *Trilby* (1894), in which art students figure prominently although the heroine, who

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2. Claude Monet, *Camille Monet on her deathbed, 1869*

Musée d'Orsay, Paris
first appears as an artists’ model, is the singer, Trilby. Du Maurier himself illustrated his novels.

Although Marcel Proust was not an artist, his artist character was a precurser to the twentieth-century version of the imaginary artist. Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-28) includes the painter Elstir among its characters. Proust projects an interior view of the artist and his thoughts through Swann’s interior monologue. Proust’s version of interior monologue differs from the third person narrative style of the omniscient narrator in earlier French novels about fictional artists which, although occasionally giving an insight into the artist’s ideas, mainly concentrate on descriptions of the artist’s public life with all the trappings of bohemia. Proust’s style comes close to the interior monologue and stream of consciousness used by Joyce in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and later by Patrick White.

**The artist novel in nineteenth-century England**

Many of the most successful English writers who included the artist-as-hero in their novels, were, like their French colleagues, either former art students or art critics, as mentioned above. Jeffares argues that William Hazlitt’s essay, “On the Pleasure of Painting” (1820), did much to establish painting as a respectable medium for ideas in English literature. Through his writing, John Ruskin, the artist and author of *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3), further embedded the idea of the artist as a visionary leader of society who is privy to knowledge withheld from ordinary mortals, thus making the artist a fitting hero for a novel. Hazlitt was a failed artist, as was Henry James. Artist characters appeared in many of James’ novels, for example, *Roderick Hudson* (1876) is the story of a failed American sculptor in Rome, and Isabel Archer, the heroine of *Portait of a Lady* (1881), spends a long time in the museums of Rome. The artist, poet and writer Dante Gabriel Rossetti wrote about a painter Chiaro dell’Erma, very much like himself, in his short story “Hand and Soul”(1850). Rudyard Kipling, the son of an illustrator, included in his enormous oeuvre the novel *The Light that Failed* (1890). Haldar, his Bohemian artist, is extremely cynical about art and the public’s appreciation

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33 Beebe, op.cit., p.148.
of it, a condition caused by his being swindled by a company that published his sketches. George Moore, the art critic, wrote several novels featuring artists, the most developed being the aesthetic young artist in *A Modern Lover* (1883). Oscar Wilde, said to be the founder of an aesthetic cult at Oxford, and satirised in Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Patience* (1881) as ‘a man of culture rare’ and ‘a greenery-yallery, Grosvenor Gallery/ Foot-in-the-grave young man’, wrote one of the most famous and original nineteenth-century novels about an artist, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), although the main focus is on the portrait which magically ages in place of the aging Dorian Gray. The artist, Basil Hallward, remarks that ‘every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist’, which suggests that the novel is a self-portrait of the writer, Oscar Wilde.34 Wilde’s novel is written around the mirror image, which occurs throughout the twentieth-century Australian artist novels analysed in this study.

Another English writer, William Makepeace Thackeray, who had studied drawing in Paris and published caricatures of ballet dancers, presented an old-fashioned version of the artist in *The Newcomes* (1853-55), where the young hero Clive Newcome decides to become an artist, although his family disapproves because they see the profession as a trade.

Many English nineteenth-century novels featuring artists concentrate on the bohemian lifestyle and the way artists behave in society rather than analysing how the artistic character of the individual artist develops. Henry James, in *The Europeans* (1878), introduces Felix Young as the ‘happy youth’, the beautiful young artist who fills the girls in the novel with romantic longing. The handsome looks of many bohemian artists portrayed in nineteenth-century novels reinforce the impression that these characters were identified by their outer appearance rather than their inner feelings, emotions and ideas. Among many examples are Lewis Seymour in George Moore, *A Modern Lover* (1883), and Mr. Theobold, who wears a black velvet jacket and biretta, in Henry James, *The Madonna of the Future* (1873). Bertie Stanhope, the artist in Anthony Trollope, *Barchester Towers* (1857) is almost a comic character, with an untrimmed beard and

34 Byatt, op.cit., p.56.
‘loose’ trousers.\textsuperscript{35} The artist characters in these novels, and others such as Young Jolyn in John Galsworthy, \textit{Forsyte Saga} (1906-21), are not the principal characters but, as bohemian figures, are used as a foil to the very stolid main characters in these works.

\textbf{Women writers on fictional artists in nineteenth-century England and America}

Nineteenth-century women writers created early examples of women artist characters as gentle amateurs, for example Jane in Charlotte Brontë, \textit{Jane Eyre} (1847), Helen Graham in Anne Brontë, \textit{The Tenant of Wildfell Hall} (1848) and Lucy in George Eliot, \textit{The Mill on the Floss} (1860). Of the few nineteenth-century women writers who included male artists as characters in a novel, though not often as the leading character, George Eliot stands out. In her historical novel \textit{Romola} (1862-3), a fictionalised version of the Italian fifteenth-century artist, Piero di Cosimo, appears in the guise of the nineteenth-century Romantic artist. Eliot’s novel appears to be based on the template of art history writing of the time and, although Eliot did not apparently have any special knowledge of art, she was visiting Florence when she wrote this novel. Other women wrote about the circumstances and problems of the artist. Margaret Oliphant’s marriage to a painter and designer of stained glass gave her an insight into such circumstances. She wrote about the problems of the ‘Academy’ and the perils of the artist in \textit{The Three Brothers} (1870), again about male artists. Among other women writers of sentimental novels featuring fictional artists, Ouida (Marie Louise de la Ramée) imagined a competent woman artist with equal skill to that of her male artist counterpart in \textit{Ariadne} (1877).

The early feminist movement inspired women writers in the United States of America.\textsuperscript{36} Kate Chopin (1851-1904) produced what is claimed as the first American novel in this genre, \textit{Awakening} (1899), with a plot that prefigures ideas of vitalism and has similarities to a much later Australian work by Eleanor Dark, \textit{Sun Across the Sky} (1937): Edna Pontellier, whose name has connotations of rejuvenation and Nietzschean philosophy,

\textsuperscript{35} Jeffares, op.cit. passim, and p.44.
\textsuperscript{36} Hahlendorf, op.cit. passim.
while holidaying on the Gulf coast, experiences a spiritual rejuvenation, abandons her life as wife and mother, and takes up painting and a casual love-affair.\footnote{Hahlendorf, op.cit. p.149. Edna is Hebrew for rejuvenation, Pontellier contains ‘pons’ or bridge, which echoes Neitsche’s ‘man as a bridge to the overman’.}

A contributing factor to the personification of fictional women artists may have been the publication of Walter Shaw Sparrow (ed.), \textit{Women Painters of the World} (1905), a very early documentation of women artists. It may be that women writers in the United States of America and Australia, discussed below, introduced the independent woman artist as a character in the novel ahead of English women writers.

It took decades for the female artist to emerge as a developed, independent character in English novels written by women or men, perhaps not until the twentieth century. In one of the first, Virginia Woolf, \textit{To the Lighthouse} (1927), the abstract paintings of the woman artist, Lily Briscoe, were influenced by the art criticism and theories of Roger Fry and Clive Bell.

\textbf{Artist novels in nineteenth-century Australia}

The Australian novel developed from newly arrived European inhabitants’ journals documenting their struggles to settle in a completely foreign land, to fictional tales of new settlers and convicts, accounts of exploration and the gold rush, then to adventures of bushrangers, squatters and battlers of the bush, and later to historicised versions of early settlement.\footnote{Elizabeth Webby, ‘Colonial writers and readers’, pp 50-73 in Elizabeth Webby, ed., \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature}, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000).} The occasional artist character begins to make an appearance in Australian literature when women writers branched out into romance, nationalism and early feminism late in the nineteenth century.\footnote{Kerryn Goldsworthy, ‘Fiction from 1900 to 1970’, pp. 105-133 in Webby, op.cit.} Rosa Praed, \textit{Policy and Passion} (1881) may be the earliest Australian novel featuring an artist character. Mr Ferris, who is an artist, predicts that Angela will be a great artist and will study in Rome.

Mrs Patchett Martin (Harriette Anne Martin) edited an Australian all woman anthology of short stories, \textit{Coo-ee, Tales of Australian Life by Australian Ladies} (London, 1891), in
which she included two stories featuring women artists. Her own story “The Tragedy in the Studio: Part I, The Dead Model; Part II, The Veiled Picture”, is a melodramatic tale of a successful Australian woman artist whose death portrait of a young woman leads to her own death after she has successfully set up a portrait practice in London. The other inclusion, “The Story of a Photograph” is by Margaret Thomas (1843-1929), an author equally well known as an artist and sculptor. This story deals with a woman artist who leaves Australia, sets up a studio in Rome then goes to London, where she paints a portrait of a dead woman from a photograph. Although born at Croydon, Surry, Thomas arrived in Melbourne in 1852 where she trained as a sculptor under Charles Summers. At the time, she was the only woman practicing sculpture in the Australian colonies, and was also known for her oil paintings, drawings and portrait medallions (Plate 3). She exhibited extensively in Australia and, while living in Australia, exhibited at the London International Exhibition of January 1863. She left Australia in c.1867 to work in Rome and then London, where she exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy, the British Institution and other galleries. Having made enough money to live on from her art she turned to writing, producing, among other works, travel books, two manuals on art, How to Judge Pictures (1906) and How to Understand Sculpture (1911), and a book of poetry entitled A Painter’s Pastime (1908). In “The Story of a Photograph”, Margaret Thomas draws on her knowledge of the Australian bush, which is described in painterly terms reminiscent of Australian landscapes painted by the Heidelberg school artists, as well as on her observation of the lack of recognition of artistic talent in the colony and her experience of working as an artist in Rome and London.40

These stories about successful women artists could also have been inspired by the real life of Adelaide Ironside (1831-1867) who left Australia to study in Rome and London as early as 1856. She was the first Australian-born artist of either sex to study in Europe and she also took a vocal and active interest in politics; she died from tuberculosis in Rome at the age of thirty-six. Love and death, a feature of both these stories, were popular themes in Victorian art as shown in the exhibition Love and Death in the Age of

3. Margaret Thomas, *Portrait of Charles Summers*, c.1866

La Trobe Collection, State Library of Victoria
Queen Victoria, which included paintings by Holman Hunt, Millais, Alma Tadema, Rossetti and Leighton. In a slight variation of the theme, Jessie Couvreur, or ‘Tasma’, in The Penance of Portia James (1891) tells of Mr Eames and Harry Tolhurst, both artists, and Portia, who is destined to become an artist’s model in Paris. The emphasis in this novel is on the liberation of women, rather than on the artist figure. All these stories are also obviously related to the first wave of feminism in Australia.

Other nineteenth-century Australian women writers featured male artists, for example Catherine Martin, An Australian Girl (1890) features Mr Vincent, an artist. Ada Cambridge, A Marked Man (1890), describes the Australian Impressionists artists’ camps at Balmoral, and Kathleen Caffyn, A Yellow Aster (1894), deals with the artist character Charles Brydon, said to be based on the artist Charles Condor, who avidly read Mürger’s La Vie de Bohème when he was in Sydney in 1888 and stayed with Kathleen Caffyn in Melbourne in 1889. Late in life Condor drew Self Portrait as Eugène de Rastignac, 1905, (Plate 4) one of Balzac’s heroes with whom Condor identified. The European stereotype of the artist-as-hero also reached Australia through the successful production in 1896 of a play based on de Maurier’s Trilby. In Australia, male writers did not take up the artist figure as a romantic hero, and women writers concentrated on more realistic conditions of the artist’s life than European and English writers who produced the artist as hero.

In the early twentieth century the artist and journalist William Blamire Young wrote a play Art for Art’s Sake (1912). But it was not until the early historical novels of the

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41 Angus Trumble, Love and Death in the Age of Queen Victoria, exhibition catalogue, Art Gallery of South Australia, 2001/2001.
4. Charles Condor, *Self Portrait as Eugène de Rastignac, 1905*

National Portrait Gallery, London
twentieth century, spawned by the nationalism of Federation and World War I, gave way to the introduction of novels of urban life and ideas in the 1930s that the artist figure re-emerged as a substantial character in the Australian novel, although, as mentioned, the artist figure appeared briefly in earlier Australian fiction.

The artist figure in twentieth-century literature

The following short survey of a selection of artist novels of the twentieth century is included because of the sparsity of critical material on the subject. James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which the ‘artist’ Stephen Dedalus is a poet still in formation (not a visual artist), nevertheless presents the archetypal figure of the imaginary artist, which carried on into twentieth-century novels. Characteristics of the archetype, such as sensitivity, passion, egotism, introversion, a sense of divine vocation, aloofness from society and from the everyday self, are part of Stephen’s make up. As already mentioned, the indirect narration, verging on stream-of-consciousness, irony, and the partly autobiographical nature of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* are also distinctive features of some Australian imaginary artist novels, particularly of those by Patrick White, who referred to the novels of Joyce frequently in his correspondence.

A search in any library catalogue will reveal numerous novels in which the visual artist plays a major part, therefore only a selection of these will be referred to. Early in the century authors like Arnold Bennett, *Buried Alive* (1908), and Wilkie Collins, *Hide and Seek or The Mystery of Mary Grice* (1904), wrote popular and not entirely serious novels with an artist as a protagonist. But, as the century progressed, the artist figure changed, often embracing the avant-garde and revealing his or her inner life. In some novels the artist protagonist became the centre of a political, feminist, mystery or other story.

Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* has already been mentioned as a work by a woman about a woman artist. It is well known that Woolf was a key figure in the Bloomsbury

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45 Beebe, op.cit., p. 267.
group of English avant-garde writers and artists, therefore it is not surprising that her artist is au fait with the latest techniques of modern abstraction. Iris Murdoch, who did not appear to have a specialized knowledge of art, writes in one of her first novels, *The Sandcastle* (1957), about a young woman portrait painter whose creative method seems to closely parallel Murdoch’s own, suggesting autobiographical elements in the novel. Rain, the painter, takes the rhythms she finds in a Shiraz carpet as the design for the portrait she paints. Murdoch’s artist is traditional and could be likened to Bonnard. A male art history teacher adds another dimension to this novel. In the 1990s, American women writers have engaged with the problems of the black woman artist. In Rosa Guy, *The Sun, The Sea, A Touch of the Wind* (1995) an African-American woman artist, successful at home, has a crisis of confidence when she goes to Cuba and, in another example, Ntozake Shange, *Lilane: Resurrection of the Daughter* (1994), a black American woman artist reveals her past and inner life through psychoanalysis and thus shapes her future.

Like the nineteenth-century writers in this genre, a number of twentieth-century authors were also artists or art critics. Percy Wyndham Lewis studied at the Slade School, 1898-1901, and became a founding member of the Camden Group in 1911. He produced some of the earliest abstract art in Europe and later became a Vorticist. He moved amongst art groups in England and Europe, fought in World War I and became a war artist. Among his many publications are *Men without Art* (1934) and *The Revenge for Love* (1937), a racy political novel in which the anti-hero is Victor Stamp, a failed artist caught up in the reality of international politics. Aldous Huxley was also knowledgeable about art and wrote the foreword to *The Complete Etchings of Goya* (1945). The hero in Huxley’s *Chrome Yellow* (1921) is an artist who produces super real works of art, disappointing his viewers who had expected a cubist masterpiece.

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47 Byatt, op.cit. p. 84.
Joyce Cary made use of his early training as a painter in creating one of the most convincing artists in twentieth-century fiction, Gully Jimson, the hero of *The Horse’s Mouth* (1944). Jimson is a man obsessed with painting, who lives by his wits, always poor, but an intellect whose thoughts are recorded in vigorous, witty and lively descriptions of his ideas about art and its execution. In a description of how he will paint Eve, Jimson muses, while gazing at his sleeping colleague: “The sweetest elbow I ever saw, and that’s a difficult joint. No fat above the wrist but a smooth fall into the metacarpals. Just enough structure to give the life and the power … Lustful wrists crested like stallions with venus rings”.

As Byatt, herself a writer and teacher in art schools, says: “Brilliant writing about the act of painting, a wonderful bravura display of the perpetual recomposition of the visual world into artwork”. Cary’s Clark Lectures were published as *Art and Reality: Ways of the Creative Process* (1958). John Berger, the widely published art critic and writer, whose *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (1965) was followed by *Ways of Seeing* (1972), which created a sensation, wrote a novel in which an artist was the leading character. Janos Lavin, the hero of *A Painter of our Time* (1958), is a Hungarian who comes to London in 1938, struggles as a painter, but is overcome by the divided loyalty of the expatriate and disappears on the brink of success in 1958. Like Wyndham Lewis’ novel, Berger’s also has a political theme.


Other writers place the artist novel in exotic settings. Salman Rushdie, *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1996), is set in territory somewhat unfamiliar to readers in English at the time it was written, but also draws on world-wide literary and mythical sources. The complicated plot depends on an inverted version of Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in that the main character ages prematurely, and is the subject of his artist mother’s series.

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49 Quoted in Byatt, op.cit., p.71.
50 Byatt, op.cit. p.70.
of portraits of him, which prefigure not his, but her death. Another work set in Asia, with a more contemplative tone, is Kazuo Ishiguro *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), in which a celebrated Japanese painter reviews his life and the effect on it of the rise of Japanese militarism. Robert Irwin, *Exquisite Corpse* (1995) is yet another variation of the artist novel, this one written in a Surrealist style. In the service of his art, the artist protagonist, who denies he is called Caspar, investigates sex, surrealism, hypnagogic imagery, mesmerism and Nazi art. Irwin has also written on Islamic art and history.

In a development related to Post-modernism, writers have returned to the part history, part fiction account of the artist’s life. Peter Robb, *M* (1998), is a version of the life of Caravaggio, with imaginary episodes that fill out what history has obscured. Similarly, Alexandra Lapierre, *Artemisia* (2001), does the same for the life of Artemisia Gentileschi. There are numerous other examples of this popular genre.

In Australian literature the position is similar with many examples other than those chosen for this study. The prolific artist and writer Norman Lindsay wrote a popular lighthearted tale, *The Age of Consent* (1938), about an imaginary artist and his model. Dealing in part with the artist’s struggle to sell his work, the book is pointedly dedicated to the great collector of Australian art, Howard Hinton. Bradley Mudgett, the mature artist looking for new inspiration and subject matter, rents an isolated beach shack where he meets an array of comical characters as well as a young girl. Cora, who becomes his model, is a tribute to Vitalism, a movement which informed much of Lindsay’s art (Plate 5). She appears in the scrub, “For the moment, a very vital phenomenon of a robust girl with a tossed-back mane of hair haloed in silver against the setting sun.” 51 Lindsay used his experience as an artist in many passages of description of the technicalities of art making. Bradley’s contact with the art world is limited to his patrons and his dealer, and he finally succeeds with a painting of a backlit female nude posed on the seashore, reminiscent of Lindsay’s own numerous studies of voluptuous young women.

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5. Norman Lindsay, *Cora, a tribute to Vitalism*, n.d.

From Norman Lindsay, *The Age of Consent*, p.35
Martin Boyd, *The Cardboard Crown* (1952), which features an artist figure, is part of a series concerned with an Australian dynasty, based on Boyd’s own family which included the famous artist Arthur Boyd. Hal Porter, *The Tilted Cross* (1961), has a character, Judas Griffin Vaneleigh, based on the suspected poisoner, forger and artist Thomas Griffin Wainewright. George Johnson, *Clean Straw for Nothing* (1971), features an artist character Tom Kurnan, said to be based on the Australian artist Sidney Nolan. There are many other works in which the artist figure is placed either in an historical tale of family dynasties or a semi-autobiographical but ostensibly fictional account of the author’s life. For example, Hugh Atkinson, *Low Company* (1961), takes a satirical and amusing look at the artist’s life, sends up psychoanalysis and expressionist art, but is really about low life in the Sydney of the fifties.

Recent books by Australian women writers about artists include Marion Halligan, *The Golden Dress* (1998), in which the male artist is the shadowy figure behind the story, surfacing only now and then. Cathie Dunsford, *Song of the Selkies* (2001), set in Scotland, relates the story of a group of women artists. Drusilla Modjeska, *Stravinsky’s Lunch* (1999), is a Post-modern conflation of the real and imaginary histories of two real women artists, Stella Bowen and Grace Cossington Smith in the style referred to above. Janette Turner Hospital, born and educated in Australia but now living in the United States, includes an artist character in *Borderline* (1985). At first it appears that the artist, nicknamed the Old Volcano, a Picasso-like figure of voracious sexual appetites and painterly vitality who exploits his relationships as the subject and inspiration of his art, is only a minor figure in the book. But although the narrator is the artist’s piano-tuner son, who recounts the adventures of his father’s lover Felicity, the artist gradually emerges as the key to the action. However, this is a novel about borders, not just physical or emotional borders, but borders between fact and fiction. In a jokey about-face by the narrator, the author explicitly remarks on the crux of all artist novels. The narrator, musing on his father, the painter, claims the last word: “Someone else is dreaming you,

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old man. I'll say. I've caught the virus, your very own disease. I've got you down on paper. You're just a shadow of my words, your paintings only live in my chapters, you cease to exist once my reader puts you on a shelf, you have to reach past me to touch the world.”

Alex Miller has written two recent books which include artists: *The Ancestor Game* (1992) is set in Australia where a female artist of German origin and a male artist of Chinese origin strive to find their place in society. Miller’s *The Sitters* (1995) is an enigmatic tale of a male portrait painter whose subject may or may not be his lover; or perhaps he is in love with the image he has painted, somewhat in the same way that, in *Le chef-d’oeuvre inconnu*, Frenhoffer is blinded by his love for the painted woman, in reality the model Gillette, of his unnamed masterpiece.

This study concentrates exclusively on fictional artists who are easel painters, but a number of recent books, particularly by women, have leading artist characters who are either craftworkers or photographers, two genres which are today accepted into the world of so-called fine arts. Jessica Anderson, *Tirra Lirra by the River* (1978), has a leading woman character who is an embroiderer and in Kate Grenville, *The Idea of Perfection* (1999), the main woman character weaves her story into her patchwork quilt. Her quilts are works of art, of a high professional and creative standard. Delia Falconer, *The Service of Clouds* (1997) is about a male photographer. An underlying argument of this type of novel is about the professionalism of these arts practices as well as of the artists who engage in them.

**Conclusion**

Therefore it can be seen that the novel of the imaginary artist is thriving. The novel with the artist as romantic hero has changed, but so has the public perception of the artist. The nineteenth-century version of the genre generally presented an exterior view of the artist figure, describing the physical circumstances of the artist and the art, while the tendency in the twentieth century has been to reveal the artist character’s circumstances through his

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or her consciousness. Variations of the theme occur between male and female writers and between writers who are also artists and those who are not. Many artist novels of the twentieth century use the artist character to illustrate other preoccupations of the author. Not all artist novels concentrate exclusively upon the development of the artist, although the works chosen for this study mostly do.
CHAPTER 2

The artist figure in novels by Eleanor Dark and the influence of Vitalism in *Sun Across the Sky* (1937) and *Waterway* (1938)

**Eleanor Dark, visual art and Vitalism**

Eleanor Dark (1901-1985) wrote two novels, *Sun Across the Sky* (1937) and *Waterway* (1938), in which the same woman artist is an important character. Dark had only a general knowledge of art but she was aware of current ideas about creativity, which affected both artists and writers. Dark was brought up in a family whose friends were artists and intellectuals, including Norman and Lionel Lindsay, Julian Ashton, Syd Long and the poet Christopher Brennan. Her step-mother and brother, Kit, were both artists. Topics of discussion among her family may have included Theosophy and spiritualism, in which her mother was interested, and Vitalism which was at the core of Norman Lindsay’s conservative and idiosyncratic ideas about art and life. These ideas, particularly Vitalism, as well as an eclectic selection of the preoccupations of modern society of the nineteen-thirties, are important in both *Sun Across the Sky* and *Waterway*.

One of the most influential small journals of the nineteen-twenties, *Vision* (1923-1924), was inspired by Norman Lindsay and edited by Jack Lindsay. A major theme of contributions to *Vision* was the failure of the creative power of Modernism, which could be overcome through a renaissance of Vitalism and beauty. It would be surprising if Dark were not aware of this journal. Vitalism was a European system of belief, propounded by Hans Driesch (1867-1941) and Henri Bergson (1859-1941). Bergson argued that the creative urge, not natural selection, is at the heart of evolution; the prime

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1 Eleanor Dark, *Sun Across the Sky*, (Collins, London, 1937); *Waterway*, (Collins, London, 1938). All subsequent references to these novels are to these editions and are placed in parenthesis in the text.

material of life is not inert, but is informed with *élan vital* or living energy. The doctrine of Vitalism claimed that the phenomenon of life cannot be fully explained in material terms and some believed that the vital entities survived the dissolution of the body and became immortal. Much of this doctrine was based in Aristotelian philosophy.³ In Europe during the inter-war period, a new interest in the body and sexuality, expressed in much of the art and literature, pointed to the continuing relevance of the beliefs of Vitalism. In Australia, in addition to Norman Lindsay, other artists with a strong interest in Vitalism included the sculptor Raynor Hoff, Mervyn Napier Waller and Arthur Murch.

Besides the family friendship with Norman Lindsay, Dark had indirect connections with him through the publication of her early novels by P.R. (Inky) Stephenson, who was a close associate of Lindsay’s.⁴ Dark was also a member of the Yabber Club, founded by Stephenson; another of the ‘permanent’ members was Norman’s brother, Lionel Lindsay, also noted for his conservative attitude to art.⁵

Dark’s close friends Bert and Mary Alice Evatt, who, apart from their life in politics, were art collectors, were opposed to the ultra conservative Academy of Modern Art set up by R.G. Menzies, which supported the ‘official’ landscape school of art still dominated by Sir Arthur Streeton. On the other hand, the Evatts supported the Contemporary Art Society and Modernist artists, most of whom were women.⁶ Mary Alice Evatt’s own career as a Modernist artist has recently been recognized by a long-overdue retrospective exhibition.⁷ Dark did not mix with the Evatt’s modernist artist friends who were her contemporaries and, although she employed Modernist techniques in her own writing, appears to have known little about Modernist art.⁸ The Evatts remarked on Dark’s lack of understanding of modern art in *Waterway*, which they liked

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⁵ Munro, op.cit., p.173.
6. Elioth Gruner, *Over and Beyond*, 1926

Present owner not known
but which they felt presented views “which are not only erroneous but would in Europe at least suggest a complete lack of touch with the almost universally recognized position of the modern painters”. 9

Dark owned paintings by Elioth Gruner (1882-1939) 10, perhaps like his Over and Beyond (1926), (Plate 6). Gruner was known as a painter of light, which may have attracted Dark because of her interest in Vitalism. Sunlight is a constant presence in Sun Across the Sky, as indicated by the title. Gruner had, early in his career, made some moves towards Modernism but, because he lived from the sale of his work, abandoned this to return to more conservative, realistic, although insipid, landscape and interior compositions, which had a ready market. This move was on the advice of Norman Lindsay who was violently opposed to Modernism, as already noted, but for whom the sun and light were important elements in the creativity and health of the Australian people. 11

The only named artist in either of Dark’s novels is Francisco Goya (1746-1828), the Spanish court painter who produced a series of dark paintings (Plate 7). A print of one of his “furioso” works hangs in the studio of Lois, the artist figure of both novels. Norman Lindsay referred to the savagery of Goya’s dark paintings in his article, “The Inevitable Future” of 1922, written in response to World War I, in which he also asserted that the vital “creative mind” was able to direct savagery to useful and necessary activities. 12 For Australian Modernist artists also, Goya had some significance which Dark may have noted. The doyen of Australian Modernists, Margaret Preston, referred to Goya in her article, “Why I Became a Convert to Modern Art”, published in 1923, and again in her Carnegie Lecture of 1938 when she maintained that Goya’s art was “Akin to modern practice” and that he had a social conscience. 13

9 Brooks, op.cit., p.203.
10 Brooks, op.cit., p.203.
Topliss, op.cit. p.123.
7. Francisco Goya, *Saturn Devouring One of his Children*, 1821-3

Museo del Prado, Madrid
In both *Sun Across the Sky* and *Waterway* Dark made one of the leading characters a woman artist of the nineteen-thirties, a time when the great majority of professional women artists were Modernists. As Dark knew little about Modernism in art, she had to use other devices to portray the character. How did she do this? Dark’s are probably the first Australian novels of the twentieth century by a well-known Australian woman writer to feature a woman artist. How do Dark’s novels relate to earlier Australian novels which feature artist figures?

**Relationship between Dark’s artist novels and nineteenth-century predecessors**

As outlined previously, a number of Australian women writers of the 1890s portrayed strong, intelligent women artists, as for example in the stories of Harriette Patchett Martin and Margaret Thomas. Through their portrayal of the position of women artists in society, these works relate to the first wave of feminism in Australia and are not based on the idea of the Romantic artist-as-genius like the European and English examples discussed.

In *Sun Across the Sky* and *Waterway*, the argument that sustains the novels is related to the place of the creative woman, not necessarily a visual artist, in the society of the nineteen-thirties. Dark’s artist-heroine expresses feminist precepts through her actions rather than by overt discussion. Thus, after a lapse of more than a quarter of a century, a theme explored in the eighteen-nineties re-emerges in the artist novel. However, Dark’s novels are more complex than these earlier examples. In both novels she includes ideas current in the society of the day, which affected not only creative artists and writers, but also intellectuals and thinkers generally. Unlike the straightforward narrative treatment of Australian nineteenth-century stories of the artist, Dark utilizes Modernist precepts in her writing, giving the reader access to the artist’s mind, and manipulating time.

**Development of the artist figure in *Sun Across the Sky* and *Waterway***

The epigraph to *Sun Across the Sky* is from a poem by Christopher Brennan, with stanzas commencing with “What do I know?...What have I done?...What do I seek?”, which
suggests that what follows may be more akin to literary ideas and transcendentalism than to art. 14 Brennan’s basic idea was that mankind, being exiled from Eden, must seek a return to youth, innocence and wholeness. Materialism must be countered by the vitality of sexuality, which was to be found in the bohemian artist.

Characters

Sun Across the Sky is a novel in twenty-six chapters, with a temporal setting of one day and an omniscient narrator who utilizes interior dialogue. Waterway, the sequel, also spans one day. Contemporary reviews both praised and criticized Sun Across the Sky and Waterway for Dark’s Modernist manipulation of time and use of interior dialogue. Recent commentary compares these novels with those of Christina Stead and Virginia Woolf.15

The four principal characters in Sun Across the Sky are: Lois, an intuitive artist, living in a house with a half-wild garden, “slaving and swearing and despairing over her latest picture” (p.18); Kavanagh, an eccentric poet, said to be based on Christopher Brennan; Sir Frederick Gormley, a lascivious property developer; and Dr. Oliver Denning, a doctor in general practice who is interested in philosophy, interprets Lois’s art and appreciates her “greatness”. There are sixteen characters in Waterway, two of whom are Lois and Oliver, who are now married. Oliver’s observations of the visual have suggestions of the painter’s eye. He describes the sunrise in terms of light and colour, “the shadowed parts took on a deeper richness, a purple depth” (p.10), suggesting Arthur Streeton’s Purple Noon’s Transparent Might (1896) in which purple shadows and mauve sky contrast with the lush green landscape and reflected blue of the wide river. In 1937 the ascription of colour to shade was not new; Paul Cezanne (1839-1906) popularized the use of colour to denote light and form in the nineteenth century and, as mentioned, Streeton’s nationalistic landscapes dominated the predominating conservative taste for art in Sydney at the time. However, Denning may have been aware of more recent Australian art, for he sees his

15 Brooks, op.cit. pp.203, 204.
8. Margaret Preston, *Implement Blue*, 1927

Art Gallery of New South Wales
breakfast table as “lovely patches of flat colour in the polished silver of the coffee pot” (p.17), reminiscent of Margaret Preston’s Modernist *Implement Blue* (1927) (Plate 8) in which cups are reflected in silver or glass in a geometrical arrangement of flat shapes and diagonal lines. This painting was well known through its reproduction as the frontispiece to the Margaret Preston number of *Art in Australia* of 1927.16 In *Sun Across the Sky*, Lois, the artist, is identified with nature and intuition. Denning the intellectual has the ability to see with the artist’s eye. It may be that these two characters represent two facets of the artist, the intuitive and the intellectual, and together are meant to project the total persona of the artist. It is noteworthy that neither of these aspects of the artist includes descriptions of the practical process of art.

**Plots**

The plot in *Sun Across the Sky* revolves around the artist Lois, who is a widow. A flashback informs us that her husband had been a writer of pot-boilers, whom she despised for his mechanical writing process, and who died as a result of a short-circuited vacuum cleaner, leaving her financially secure. Two paintings by Lois, ‘The Ant’ and ‘The Gnome in the Cave’, are discussed in the novel. Oliver Denning is the local doctor at the beachside suburb where the characters live. He tries to deter Gormley from developing the beachfront, home of the eccentric but brilliant artist Kavanagh, which he refuses to leave. Oliver has a frigid wife, but is in love with Lois. Oliver is drawn to Kavanagh with whom he has philosophic discussions. Lois feels inferior to Kavanagh whom she regards as a true artist. Gormley engineers a fire which burns Kavanagh’s house and in which he dies. Oliver tries to rescue him but is too late, only succeeding in saving Kavanagh’s archive of his life’s work. The Vitalist element is stronger in this novel than in *Waterway* which recounts the life of a large array of characters on the day of a ferry disaster, based on a real event in Sydney’s history, in which some characters die, some are saved. In *Waterway*, a series of Dark’s ideas relating to society are canvassed, including some discussion of art. Both novels deal with the position of creative women in society.

16 *Art in Australia*, “Margaret Preston Number”, series 3, no.22 (December, 1927).
Character development through opposites

The characters in *Sun Across the Sky*, including Lois, are developed through a series of oppositions of action and situation. As well as the suggestion of Lois and Oliver as two opposite but complimentary sides of the artist, there is the opposition of Lois, the intuitive artist, whom Oliver thinks of as a “strange creative being out of whom beauty vagrantly and mysteriously blossomed” (p.10), to the erudite, intellectual poet Kavanagh. Lois, the unconventional child of nature, whom Oliver lusts after and commits adultery with, is also contrasted with Helen, Oliver’s beautiful, correct and frigid wife; Lois’s wild expressive paintings are the opposite of Helen’s constricted embroidery in pale colours. Characters are paired off in various ways: greedy Sir Fred versus saintly Dr Denning; Sir Fred, the wealthy and vulgar property developer who lives in luxury, versus Kavanagh, the intellectual poet who lives in poverty; Helen’s frigidity versus Oliver’s sexuality. These oppositions suggest a division between the vitality of those who live for art and the intellect, and the sterile, mundane lives of those who are not interested in art or ideas. This division runs through Norman Lindsay’s writing as discussed below.

Machine art: Lois and Oliver in symbiosis

Like later Australian novelists who portray artist figures, for example Patrick White and Barbara Hanrahan, Dark develops the artist character through suggestion and interior monologue, which gives access to the thoughts of the artist, Lois, and of her complementary partner, Oliver. That Lois and Oliver think in tandem, and are both sensitive to the modern preoccupations of the nineteen-thirties, is suggested when Oliver wishes that he “had the power which can set the machinery of craftsmanship in motion” (p.10). Lois observes the “metallic silver blue of the sky through the pine tree branches” (p.24) while mowing the lawn. Later she thinks of “creative force as a vast machine” (p.28). Both characters independently think of machinery and metal which were central to much European art of the early twentieth century. The Italian Futurists adopted a machine ethic, for example Giacomo Balla, *Study for the Materiality of Lights plus Speed* (1913), where a cubist-like repetition of shapes suggests a rushing engine. The French artist Fernand Léger (1881-1955) used assembly line methodology to
9. Ivor Francis, *Speed*, 1931
Colour process woodblock print
Art Gallery of South Australia
construct his paintings from a range of standard metal-like parts. Although there was no movement comparable to Futurism in Australia, artists of the thirties were interested in machines. Margaret Preston, for example, made a woodblock entitled The Aeroplane (1925), Roland Wakelin painted Sewing Machine (1928) and Ivor Francis made a woodblock of a modern train entitled Speed (1931). (Plate 9) Basil Burdett, writing on modern art in 1937, claimed that “modern man sees beauty even in the machine”. Dark uses a machine, the vacuum cleaner, to kill off Lois’s first husband, whom she did not like much. Perhaps the vacuum cleaner was a surrogate for the housewife in Lois, who subconsciously wanted to get rid of her husband.

Through the thoughts of her characters, Dark hints at ideas which both contribute to the formation of the character of Lois, and suggest various preoccupations of the intellects of the day. A further example of symbiosis between Lois and Oliver is found in their thoughts about art and beauty. To Oliver, Lois is “a strange creative being out of whom beauty vagrantly and mysteriously blossomed”(p.10), and later he thinks, “Great art which always mingles elements of terror and beauty can be, after all, nothing but the translation into words, music, colour, form, of man himself.”(p.27) When musing on her husband’s rigid writing style Lois thinks “the very essence of beauty is surely its elusiveness”(p.27), “if only he could sit still sometimes – look and listen and wait… see a fallen feather and pass it by … then one day … its wings might brush his cheek” (p.28). While Oliver’s thoughts about “music, colour and form” suggest the colour-music theories of the artist Roy de Maistre (1894-1968), still current in the nineteen-thirties and which inspired numerous colour references in Patrick White’s The Vivisector, these ideas about art, beauty and intuition, which contrast to the machine ethic discussed above, are rather out of date for the nineteen-thirties. They relate to Brennan’s interest in the late Romantic Aesthetic movement but pave the way for the introduction of Vitalist ideas espoused by Norman Lindsay. In a passage similar to Oliver’s thoughts about music, colour and art, the composer of music in Norman Lindsay’s Madam Life’s Lovers (1929) acquires the artist’s ability to see when transported to heaven: “Delicate forms and colours arrange themselves upon his refined perception. No harsh impact of light is

necessary to call them into reality; they are the whole of its substance and therefore achieve perfected reality … Colour and tones are gradations in light.” 18

It may be that the symbiosis between Lois and Oliver is Dark’s version of telepathy. Oliver sees Lois’ painting of the imp in her studio and is fascinated by the imp’s hand. Although he doesn’t understand the painting, he gazes at it “with the futile instinct of the uninitiated to solve the impenetrable mysteries of artistic creation.” (p.157) He thinks that she has painted what he himself has been thinking of that day, a hand stretched out to light. The idea of mental telepathy or extra sensory perception, an unprovable scientific hypothesis, was popular in the nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties. The carnage of World War I also fostered the idea among parents who could not accept the deaths of their sons. Norman Lindsay is said to have tried to contact his dead brother through spiritualism.

Art, beauty, creativity and procreation
Dark expands the links between art and beauty to include procreation and creativity. Lois is a child of nature, she lies on the grass, she and her daughter run around the garden in the nude (pp.24,43). While, as discussed later, Barbara Hanrahan uses flowers and nature as a metaphor in developing her artist characters, Dark describes Lois, not just as like nature, but as an elemental part of nature. When Lois first began to look after her own child she no longer felt the urge to paint, “Beauty soaked into her – no longer an obscure challenge but a benediction.”(p.74) When she adapted herself to her baby’s timetable for sleep, she “gained a restless tide of energy” (p.74) which forced her back to the easel where she discovered a new confidence. She began to work in a way she had previously secretly wanted to but did not have the courage for. Now, “She let herself go in an orgy of self expression … her canvases flamed into life… the freshness and intensity of her released emotions pervaded them; she painted with a robust enjoyment which translated itself somehow into engaging vigorousness of line and colour”. (p.74) This embrace of female procreation within the realms of art is in direct contrast with the position of Frances in Woolfe’s Painted Woman and the female artists in Hanrahan’s novels, one of

18 Norman Lindsay, Madam Life’s Lovers, (Fanfrolico Press, London, 1929), p.66.

Art Gallery of New South Wales
whom had an abortion because she thought that a child would destroy her art. Dark’s characterization of Lois, the woman artist, is inspired by the same Vitalist ideology taught by Raynor Hoff to the mainly women students of his art school, where the sculpture exhibited “irrational and instinctive energies as related to procreativity and creativity in a sexual radicalism of life”. Dark undoubtedly knew Raynor Hoff’s marble bas relief displayed at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, *Idyll: Love and Life* (1923/26), depicting a Greek god-like male figure kissing and embracing a scantily draped female nude with one hand, whilst with the other holding aloft a robust baby. (Plate 10) Hoff, a prominent figure in Sydney society, was also one of the most conspicuous figures of the Australian art world. In 1932 an issue of *Art and Australia* was devoted to Hoff, the first time a sculptor had been singled out for such an honour, but he also received publicity in a variety of other media. Hoff’s Vitalist creed of a passionate embrace of life extended from art to his own life; he received wide publicity and became a social commentor, speaking publicly on such topics as nude bathing. Although Hoff was not directly associated with the journal *Vision*, he was included in the circle of writers, artists and musicians, including Norman and Jack Lindsay, which centred on *Vision*.

Both Raynor Hoff and Norman Lindsay utilized Vitalist principles in the hope of constructing the role of the artist and art as central to a new social order in Australia, where life and art would be fused into a Vitalist whole. They linked the male artist’s creativity to sexual energy and proclaimed the necessity for the sexual in art in order to provide unique insights to human truth. Both Dark and Hoff emphasized the sun; Dark used the sun in the title of her novel, Hoff placed the memorial sculpture *Sacrifice* (1931-4) at the centre of a circular brass flaming sun in the Anzac Memorial, Hyde Park (Plate 11). In *Sun Across the Sky* Oliver links the sun and creativity in a Vitalist passage, when he looks at the sun’s “mysterious rays (which) were building up in them that ebb

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19 Edwards, op.cit.
20 Lionel Lindsay, “The Sculpture of Raynor Hoff” in *Art in Australia*, Raynor Hoff special issue, series 3, no.46 (1932), p.22.
22 Edwards, op.cit.
11. Raynor Hoff, *Sacrifice*, 1931-4

The Anzac War Memorial, Sydney
and flow of intense emotion … which is the true environment of all great art.”(p.29) In Waterway Lois is saved from drowning in the ferry disaster because she falls asleep at Circular Quay while gazing at the “complicated reflection and refraction” of “the incredibly delicate and beautiful … harmonious” reflected light in the water, as a shaft of sunlight falls across her lap.(p.325) While Hoff and Lindsay emphasised (superior) male sexuality in their version of Vitalism, Dark used similar ideas to create a female character by emphasizing female sexuality and procreation as the key to the artist’s creativity.

**Elves and gnomes**

Elves, imps and gnomes occur throughout Sun Across the Sky. Lois imagines she sees a gnome in her garden; Oliver thinks of Lois and her daughter as “jolly elves”(p.24); he thinks she has “the face of a serious elf”(p.43); later, Lois paints a gnome in a cavern (p.64). Other writers, generally senior to Dark, such as Hugh McCrae (1876-1958), included nymphs and satyrs in their work. McCrae’s collection of poetry, *Satyrs and Sunlight*, published in 1909 (John Sands, Sydney), 1911 (Lothian, Melbourne) and in London in 1928, illustrated by Norman Lindsay, was full of fauns, Pan, dryads and centaurs. Norman Lindsay’s novel *Pan in the Parlor* (1933) outlines his ideas about the connection between sexuality and creativity as does *Madam Life’s Lovers*. Satyrs and magical creatures occur in much of Lindsay’s art including his *Illustration to Tom O’Bedlam* (Plate 12). Vitalism and its Dionysian strain was seen as an antidote to the horrors of World War I.23 Hoff and Dark continued classical and pagan themes found earlier in the art of Sydney Long, D.H. Souter and Ernest Moffit as well as Norman and Lionel Lindsay. Hoff’s bronze *Faun and Nymph* (1924) (Plate 13) is a graphic example of the vital sexuality which he believed was the basis of all art. Faun and nymph are joined, facing each other, he holds her arms while she arches back in ecstasy. Like much of the art produced by Hoff’s school, it was influenced by the *Barberini Faun* which is believed to have been a votive offering at a sanctuary to Dionysis. Therefore, through the seemingly casual introduction of a few elves and gnomes, Dark endows Lois with an artistic credo, admittedly one which largely died out with the early death of Hoff in 1938.

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23 Jack Lindsay, Foreword, *Vision*, no. 2 (August, 1923).
12. Norman Lindsay, *Illustration to Tom O’Bedlam*, n.d.

Owner not known
13. Raynor Hoff, *Faun and nymph*, 1924

Art Gallery of New South Wales
but one linked to well-known figures in the Sydney art scene, including Lindsay and Hoff, who did not espouse any aspects of Modernism in their art.

**Lois as romantic artist**

Although Dark’s Modernist writing technique differs from that of writers of nineteenth-century artist novels, she endows her artist, Lois, with some of the characteristics of the Romantic and bohemian artist-as-genius who figures in most of them. Lois is sensitive to public censure. She worries that people label her with their “quite incomprehensible idea” of the artist as “someone of not quite adequate mentality” (p.93), which may not be surprising since Oliver thinks of her as a “jolly elf”. But Lois also realizes that the act of painting is “imposed upon you by some unrelenting force within yourself”(p.93). Both these ideas tally with the Romantic pairing of genius and madness often attributed to the nineteenth-century stereotype of the artist.

Lois knows that she needs solitude to enable her to work, but she also craves acceptance by “groups” and the companionship of her lover Oliver. Further, she is aware that this caused a “sharp division within herself”(p.93). Solitude was characteristic of the nineteenth-century stereotype of the artist, and the divided self of the artist is another acknowledged characteristic discussed by Beebe in his study of nineteenth-century artist figures. Although Dark does not elaborate on this image of the divided self, she was clearly aware of this characteristic of the artist, perhaps from her own experience as a writer. The idea of the divided self appears in the much more insistent and destructive division in the artist figures portrayed by Barbara Hanrahan, to be discussed later. In Dark’s character, the division is resolved in *Waterway* when Lois marries Oliver, who nurtures her, interprets her work and is in awe of her artistic abilities, a perfect union of the two sides of the artist. However, the idea of the solitary artist did not end with the nineteenth century. The idea of the individualism of the artist was also fostered by Freudian theories of the unconscious in which individuality, creativity and genius were interior characteristics. These Freudian theories were studied in early twentieth-century Australia.  

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24 McQueen, op.cit. p.78.
to Christopher (1934) which focuses on the importance of the unconscious, genius akin to madness, and the special person who cannot be understood, versus the normal individual. Professor H.Tasman Lovell wrote an article in *Art and Australia*, August 1923, on “Psycho-Analysis and Art” in rebuttal of Freud’s theories on Leonardo da Vinci.  


Professor H.Tasman Lovell wrote,

The artist rather insists upon creating for himself. He works from within outward, a reversal of the order followed by the impersonal type … The neurotic symptom, the dream, the poem or artistic creation all make their appearance in overt consciousness. Yet it is by appeal to the suppressed, unacknowledged, forgotten things of the unconscious level that psycho-analysis attempts to explain all three.

The artist and critic Blamire Young also wrote on Freud. Another advocate of Freudian ideas was the widely influential philosopher Professor John Anderson of the University of Sydney. So, by further hints and suggestions linked to current preoccupations of society, Dark elaborates on the artist character, Lois.

Through discussions on art and life with the poet Kavanagh, Oliver develops a theory about the meaning of art. Lois is not a craftsman, he tells her, but a genius. The evolution of the nineteenth-century stereotype of Romantic artist-as-genius from the craftsman of earlier times has been outlined in Chapter 1. In a discussion of the Gnome picture, Lois feels only that the picture tells her that she must continue working. In a passage that conflates the idea of the artist-as-genius with Vitalist ideas, Oliver sees the painting as an inspiration. “It tells me”, he says, “that beauty is beauty only so long as you don’t try to capture it … that everything of good in the world is eternally yours so long as it is – and you remain – free. That sunlight you’ve painted is warmth and power and strength and beauty, but the gnome can’t hold it”.

(p.161) Similar sentiments are expressed more concisely by Pelling in Lindsay’s *Madam Life’s Lovers*: “The real mystery of a work of art is that you can’t exhaust its beauty. That is the stimulus that sends us back to seek beauty in life.”

Oliver then thinks that Lois is a survivor from a


Lindsay, op.cit., p.112.
lost age of simplicity, who followed the call and did the bidding of the life spark that was within her, without question and without fear, ideas which relate directly to those of Christopher Brennan, the model for Kavanagh in the book.

While Oliver is convinced of Lois’ genius, she herself is more prosaic, “I wouldn’t mind if they said it was just their [the viewers’] own idea of the picture. But they make out that I meant it, too, when I didn’t”. (p.158) In response to Oliver’s question about where she gets her ideas from, Lois replies, “Something I see, something I hear, something I feel, something I imagine. It comes to me suddenly as a picture”. (p.158) This statement is remarkable similar to one by Elioth Gruner, the former Modernist and friend of Norman Lindsay, whose paintings hung in Dark’s house, “I go round looking and observing, interested but not moved. Then suddenly, off my guard, I see something. See it only for the flash of a second. … And yet I know that what I want is there, I saw it in that flash.”  

This is in direct contrast to the premeditated planning and design used by the Modernist artist.

**Lois and child art**

Many of the references to Lois as an artist skirt around the edges of ideas which were becoming popular among artist in the nineteen-thirties, although the style and subject matter of her paintings are incompatible with these ideas. The subject of child art is introduced when Lois muses on her daughter’s future as a musician. “One couldn’t expect much feeling from a child”, she thought at first, then recalled her own childhood when she had suffered vividly and “felt an intensity of fury” when her mother showed her drawings to visitors (p.135). In thinking about her own painting, Lois “felt she had won an undeserved reputation for subtlety … actually her work was simplicity in its barest most elemental form.” (p.135) She painted as she had when a child, except for the developed craftsmanship. Lois’s craftsmanship and painting technique, or the lack of it, will be discussed below. John Ruskin’s interest in the child’s mind illustrated the new emphasis on the child in the nineteenth century. The direct expression and neutral attitude to the unfinished surface of the Impressionist artists led to an understanding of

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28 McQueen, op.cit., p.123.
child art. Early twentieth-century artists such as Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso and Marc Chagall were interested in the child’s conception of art. Herbert Read and other critics writing in the nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties also developed this further. So in this respect Dark is again accessing popular and contemporary ideas in the field of art. Lois “painted a thought, an impulse, an emotion, a moment’s observation and she painted it nakedly as it had come to her without suppression or embellishment. It was child’s work – work of someone who had never grown up.”(p.135) All this suggests Clive Bell’s aphorism, supposed to have been spoken by a child, “First I think, then I draw a line around my think”, which was quoted by Margaret Preston in her Carnegie Lecture of 1938.29

**Lois’ paintings**

Lois’ painting “The Ant” is described in retrospect. It has been purchased by the trustees and hangs at the art gallery, where Lois overhears viewers discussing it. “Have you seen “The Ant”? My dear you must, it’s simply marvelous. Just a squashed ant and a huge disappearing foot – dreadful, you know, too dreadful – but marvelous.”(p.92) The description of this painting suggests aspects of the dark paintings of Goya, discussed earlier in relation to Margaret Preston and Norman Lindsay. Although the viewers sought hidden satire or sermons in the work, to Lois it was “just an emotion, translated into paint”.(p.92) In his popular articles on art interpretation and criticism, first published in *The Listener*, Herbert Read wrote extensively on the emotional content of the work of art, which was later a factor in the development of Abstract Expressionist art. 30 We are told that Lois lived the ant’s last moments, “Writhing in the hot sand … something of that horror she had translated … to her canvas, so that people staring at it were at once fascinated and repelled.” (p.92) Although viewers saw “significance”, “symbolism”, “destiny” or “life” in her work, Lois had nothing but pity and horror in her heart, that is – emotion, when she painted “The Ant”.

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29 Margaret Preston, Carnegie lecture, 1938, quoted in McQueen, op.cit., p.145.
30 Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art*, (Faber and Faber, London, 1931), passim.
In Australian art, the most significant exponent of Symbolism, in which initial sensation is transmitted and emotion is perpetuated, was Charles Condor (1868-1909), but Symbolism was not embraced by Australian artists in the nineteen-thirties which is the temporal setting for *Sun Across the Sky*. Ideas related to Symbolism did not re-appear until much later in the mid-twentieth century, in the work of Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd. Symbolism was, however, a component of Modernism in literature, for example in the poetry of T.S. Eliot. Christopher Brennan, who provides the epigraph to *Sun Across the Sky*, from his poem, “Forest of Night”, was a recognized advocate of Symbolism in Australia. His poetry marked the transition between emerging nationalism and Modernism as opposed to earlier Anglocentric colonialist attitudes. Between 1898 and 1903 he gave a series of lectures at the University of Sydney and the Australian Association for the Advancement of Science, outlining his own Symbolist theories of art and literature. Brennan’s theoretical writing and lecturing on Symbolism were partly sourced in the French Symbolism of Mallarmé as well as in English poetry. The theme of Brennan’s “Forest of Night” is a spiritual quest involving psychic drama and introspective thought and dreams, based on a Symbolism of nature, art, language, legend and myth. Temporally the poem advances from dusk to midnight to dawn.31

Therefore, in this reference to Symbolism in “The Ant”, Dark is either referring back to the art she heard discussed in her childhood, or transferring theoretical ideas related to Modernism in literature to contemporary art of the nineteen-thirties. Christopher Brennan, a friend and colleague of Dark’s father, may have been one source for these ideas, and it is interesting to speculate also that Dark transferred Brennan’s temporal span of one night, from dusk to dawn, in “Forest of Night” to one day from dawn to dusk in *Sun Across the Sky*. Was Dark really writing about herself in the character of Lois as Davida Allen did in *The Autobiography of Vicki Myers* (1991) and Barbara Hanrahan in several of her artist novels?

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31 Sturm, op.cit., Introduction passim.

owner not known
When Lois is portrayed in her studio, painting the “Gnome” which shows the gnome hiding in a cavern with his crooked, gnarled hand outstretched to a diagonal beam of sunlight which falls on it like a pool of blood, the description focuses on the subject matter, but ignores the technique and style of the work. The description is full of emotive words, such as “this miracle”, “your own wonder in his awed, blinking, dazzled eyes”, pity for the crooked back of the imp, horror of the grasping hand reaching for the warm, rich sunlight. It was only when Lois put down the palette that she realized that the painting was finished.

In *Waterway*, Lois visits the art gallery to look at her own paintings, which are described through the consciousness of her friend, the philosopher Professor Channon. He comments on these depictions of gum trees: “Thank goodness so much of our work is still – what do they call it? – representational”.(p.283) That he has the paintings of Streeton in mind seems obvious from his subsequent ruminations on gum trees in the Blue Mountains, which could be a description of a Streeton painting: “Bleak ledges halfway down the sandstone cliffs where the crumbling belt of red shale matched their rose-red bark”.(p.283) Lois makes the not very penetrating remark that gum trees have “drama” and later mentions banksias, a favourite subject of Margaret Preston. Perhaps Dark had seen Preston’s *Banksia* of 1927 (Plate 14), and is vacillating between conservatism in the Streeton reference and Modernism in the hint of Preston.

The other painting discussed is entitled “Moonbeam”. This is obviously meant to be a nocturne, many of which were painted by the Heidelberg artists. Professor Channon remarks on the moonbeam on the sand which then “touched the black water with a tracery of silver” and also on “flashes of vision disconnected from reality”(p.285) in the painting. He suggests that her work is like a dream. Disconnection from reality and reference to dreams are two features of Surrealism. Professor Channon’s remarks suggest that, besides the conservatism of the Australian gum tree school, the Symbolism of the eighteen-nineties and the Modernism of Margaret Preston, Dark may have intended to inject an element of Surrealism into Lois’ artworks. Lois’ painting of the gnome in the cave also has suggestions of the surreal.
It is quite likely that Dark read articles on Surrealism published in local journals. Professor Tas Lovell’s remarks on psychoanalysis, with reference to dreams, have already been quoted. George Bell, the artist and teacher, wrote on the Surrealist painter Eric Thake in *Art in Australia* of August 1933, and in 1935 Max Dupain wrote on Man Ray, the Surrealist photographer, in *The Home*. In September 1936, *The Home* published a review of the International Surrealist Exhibition in London. Dark’s novel *Prelude to Christopher* was also reviewed in 1935 in this widely read magazine.33

**Lack of technical detail on Lois’ paintings**

Overall, Lois’ paintings discussed in the novels are an eclectic lot, without much apparent continuity of subject, style or inspiration. Light is one aspect, however, which is common to several of the paintings. This emphasis on light is in tune with Norman Lindsay’s Vitalist view of light as a spiritual entity and the centre of existence. While the feelings of the artist are described, the lack of technical description of the process of painting, or even any mention of the painter’s equipment, except the palette, confirms that Dark was not at all informed about the real processes of art making. The device of using the professor to describe Lois’ paintings at the art gallery allows Dark to present a very generalized version of what is seen. The only comment from Lois which in any way relates to the technicalities of art is one sentence, “Line, pure form, is always dramatic”, followed by the remark that in that year’s exhibition she has been put “among the moderns”(p.284), where she thinks she looks just as funny as she did among the conservatives last year. Again Dark is ambivalent in her portrayal of the artist. The art critic in *Sun Across the Sky* who writes on “The Ant” also suffers from this lack of technical knowledge of art; his critique is written in the same emotive style used to describe Lois when she is painting, referring only to the subject of the painting: “The greatness of this picture … we live in the hot desert of sand … the thing which has destroyed one of our number … Mrs Marshall has … her reasons for thus harrowing our...

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feelings.”(p.92) Although most art criticism of the nineteen-thirties adopted a similar tone in reference to subject matter, critics usually included at least some technical analysis of the work. For instance, Alleyne Zander, in a critique of Matthew Smith’s work, wrote: “Matthew Smith stands alone in his display of the chromatic and emotional possibilities of colour… No thin or ‘charming’ harmonies for him but a sumptuous marshalling of the violence of primary colours.” 34

Lois is questioned by a woman at the art gallery about her philosophy or inspiration and replies that she has neither. In view of the discussion above about the lack of technical description of art, it is ironic that the narrator then states that, although Lois did not know what inspiration was, “She knew a great deal about technique”.(p.320) Here again, Norman Lindsay’s theories seem to underpin the concept of Lois, the artist, although his own ideas are somewhat contradictory. While Lindsay asserts that “Since technical perfection is the Aesthetic definition of Art, all things that have technical perfection will be Art”, in the same essay he proclaims that Creative Vision does not “need to learn a thing in order to know it. It knows it already”, and continues, “We use for such powers the symbols of Intuition, Inspiration, Imagination”.35

Lying in bed with Oliver, Lois becomes aware of their entwined hands as a possible subject for a painting. Her brain becomes active, occupied with the problems of technique, although she thought that she had “none of Oliver’s more sophisticated intelligence, and none of his intellectual passion for analysis”.(p.54) For a writer like Dark, who was so aware of the techniques of writing, an example of which is the temporal arrangement of these books, to suggest that the technical aspects of painting could be achieved without intellectual analysis seems amazing, and reinforces the fact that Dark knew little about art making. The complexity of the narrative technique in this section of Waterway confirms Dark’s own literary technical expertise. The narrator goes on to suggest that Oliver would have understood the operations of the brain by which Lois arrived at a solution to the technical aspects of the picture, but Lois’ individual

35 Norman Lindsay, Creative Effort, published for the author by Art in Australia, Sydney (1920), pp. 72, 77.
consciousness was divorced from such understanding. In this passage the narrative voice quotes Lois’s thoughts direct, but passages relating to Oliver’s knowledge are narrated in the subjunctive, so that the reader is left wondering if the direct thoughts of Lois are part of her ‘non artistic’ persona mediated through Oliver’s supposed thoughts; for example, the direct past tense narrative of Lois’ consciousness in “she never even realized how much hard work she expended on such moments of creative ardour”, opposed to the past subjunctive, narrative voice, “She did not know, as Oliver would have made it his business to know, that it was this quality of generous extravagance, of inspired wastefulness.”(p.55) Is Dark in these passages utilizing Norman Lindsay’s idea that “Only those minds which posses the hidden symbol of intellect know that it exists”? 36 These complementary dual interior dialogues reinforce the suggestion, already discussed, that Lois and Oliver represent two sides of one artist in Dark’s conception.

Whatever her mental processes are, we are assured here, as later in the book, that Lois is “intensely, almost painfully occupied with the problems of technique”(p.54). Again there is no expansion on the practical or mechanical skill of the artist. The subject of the imagined painting is Oliver’s and Lois’ entwined hands. About the concept, symbolic meaning or idea behind the image the reader is told nothing. The subject, which in her mind Lois is copying direct from nature, could just as well be a block of wood. All that is known about her ideas is that she only knew, vaguely, that of all her ideas some “worked” and others didn’t (p.55). Although there is no indication about how Lois’ ideas for paintings worked, when she stopped trying to work out how to paint the hands, she experienced “a flood of mental energy”. To labour the point, again the coincidence between Dark’s narrative and Norman Lindsay’s ideas appears. Lindsay’s ideas on technique in art, of which in visual art he was a master, are quoted above.

Gaps in the development of the artist character

In these novels the reader is required to make several leaps of imagination in understanding the character of Lois. At the beginning of Sun Across the Sky Lois is seen as a fully formed, although immature, artist. Her past domestic situation is discussed, but

36 Lindsay, op.cit., p.168.
not her art training. Suddenly she is musing on her painting “The Ant” which had been purchased by the trustees of the art gallery. As the novel is set in Sydney of the nineteen-thirties, the “trustees” referred to must represent the trustees of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the only art gallery in Sydney with trustees at the time. In this inference, the author has taken a short cut to suggest that Lois’ work had a high profile and that she had achieved some status in the art world, although there is no indication of how this has happened. In the nineteen-thirties, the Art Gallery of New South Wales had restricted funds for purchases, they rarely acquired the work of women artists, and the director Lionel Lindsay and Trustees were largely opposed to modern art, if that is what Lois’ art is meant to represent.37 Lois meets Professor Channon at the art gallery where she tells him that she does not know what to say when people ask her about her art. However, her paintings are hanging in what is assumed to be a leading public art gallery. Paintings do not appear in such galleries without a certain amount of promotion, which suggest that Lois’ modesty is excessive or a front. Later it transpires that this is not the first time her work has been hung in an exhibition at the gallery, and earlier we were told that they had purchased her painting. In spite of this, descriptions of Lois as “this odd little person” (p.133) continue throughout the book.

There is little description of actual painting, scant reference to art history, no contact with other artists, except a poet, and discussion of exhibition and selling the artist’s work is limited to a retrospective action with one public institution; however, the continuing Vitalist theme of creativity released through healthy, natural relationships is typical of some attitudes of society in the nineteen-thirties. Because Dark fudges the technical aspects of art in these novels, due to her limited knowledge of the mechanical aspects of art production, the character Lois appears ambivalent and, rather than specifically portraying an artist figure, the character is used as a vehicle for general ideas related to art, creativity, and the place of women in the society of the nineteen-thirties.

A Place for creative women in society

Initially the character of Lois is set up to appear “quaint and ridiculous” and “cuckoo” (p.25). But it soon becomes apparent that this is a façade which she adopts in order to escape domesticity, have time for herself to make art or cavort in the garden, have love affairs and so on. For example, because Lois appears dependent and childish, her thirteen-year-old daughter gets her breakfast and organizes the housework. When Lois marries Oliver she is conveniently forgiven all the chores of housework because her absent-mindedness is a result of the “otherness” of her artistic temperament. Later Lois has the luxury of a cook, but even then, when discussing the menu with her, Lois’ attention strays to art matters, gazing through the window at the various colours of the garden. The necessity of an independent life for the woman artist, and Lois’ feminist position, is contrasted to the reactionary view of Mrs Trugg, the cook, who mutters, “No, you could be an artist if you ’ad to… But if you were married your duty to your ’usband came first, and an ’ot meal was no more than your duty”, but for Lois, “putting a pie in the oven … irked her almost beyond bearing” (pp.129,130).

Because of Lois’ cuckoo persona, her uninhibited behaviour is accepted in a society bound by rules of etiquette, represented by Helen, Oliver’s inhibited wife. Lois’ interior monologues reveal her as perceptive, particularly of the needs of the creative woman in this type of society. She thinks, “Even now [when] some hidden part of her acknowledged his [her husband’s] death as her own spiritual deliverance.” (p.26) That is, his death left her independent, and financially secure as an artist and a mother. This situation of the artist is in contrast to that of Frances in Sue Woolfe’s *Painted Woman*, who has no money and rejects her lover, and of Barbara Hanranah’s women artists who have to fend for themselves, but not for Vicki Myers in Davida Allen’s *Autobiography of Vicki Myers*, where the woman artist also draws on motherhood and her husband’s financial support.

In *Waterway*, when Lois marries Oliver, she retains the name of “Marshall”, or that is what she is known as at the art gallery, her name when, presumably, her reputation as an artist was formed. While this is a common practice today, in the nineteen-thirties it was
unusual; even one of most liberated artists of the era, Margaret Preston, took her
husband’s surname, but then Mr Preston paid for them to live at the Mosman Hotel so
that she had time to paint. Dark herself adopted her husband’s name as her professional
signature.

During the conversation with the woman at the art gallery, Lois strongly rejects the
suggestion that the Australian environment is stifling or hostile to artists. Lois muses that
much nonsense is talked about culture and tradition, yet she appears to be a traditionalist
in art matters. Lois is happy in her home environment, and spurns the woman’s craving
for overseas experience. On the whole Lois supports traditional art, espoused by
R.G.Menzies, the founder of the reactionary and nationalist Australian Academy of Art
which favoured the gum tree school as a way of promoting Australia Felix, the ‘land of
the golden fleece’, for trade opportunities. Dark was herself a nationalist, although of a
very different kind to Menzies. She was praised for the Australianness of the characters
and setting in both these novels.\textsuperscript{38}

\textbf{Lois as Eleanor Dark}

There are numerous indications that Lois is a self portrait of Eleanor Dark as she would
like to have been. The poetic evocations of Sydney Harbour, which Dark describes
through Lois’ eyes, are the most visual passages in the books. They present a far more
compelling picture than anything Lois paints. For example, “You had the strange
movement of the sea under your feet, and the salty breath of it blowing into your lungs;
you saw gulls and heard their wild crying; for a few minutes as you passed the Heads
there was nothing between you and the edge of the world but blue ocean.” Manly was “a
mere shaving of land; the quiet water of the harbour lapped it on one side, and the vast
breakers of the ocean assaulted it on the other, and something of their magic blew over
the place like a spell.”(p.131) These descriptive passages are out of character with Lois’
other observations, in which she concentrates on details and aspects of light, while these
passages have a panoramic, even sublime quality, suggesting that Dark was tempted to

\textsuperscript{38} Brooks, op.cit.,p.200.
include them because the view described is similar to that from *Benison*, the Vaucluse house where Dark lived in the early nineteen-twenties.

There are other similarities between Lois and Dark. Dark’s husband, like Lois’ second husband Oliver, was a medical doctor, who was interested in music, the arts and politics.\(^{39}\) For Dark, as well as Lois, marriage was a bulwark against “dreadful solitude”, although she knew she needed solitude for her writing.\(^{40}\) Dark resented housework and did not consider it was her responsibility. With almost as much class discrimination as is displayed when Lois speaks to her cook, Dark wrote to Miles Franklin in 1936, “Nearly half-way through a new novel, I have had to shut it away in a drawer and grapple with brooms and pots and pans – but yesterday a hench-wench … arrived.”\(^{41}\) She complained, “My maid is departing next month”, and when her son was at home during school holidays there was “no-one to answer the phone … meals can’t be as sketchy as they are when we’re alone”; she even suspected that housework caused “an almost incessant cramp in my right arm.”\(^{42}\) While Lois escapes domestic duties, Dark obviously felt trapped by them.

Lois notices that Oliver’s body is scarred from burns he suffered in the fire, while rescuing Kavanagh’s archive of poetry, that is, art. Do these scars suggest that Oliver is a Christ-like, or at least saintly, figure? Neither Dark nor her husband were connected with any formal religion, though he had once rejected an opportunity to become a minister of religion.\(^{43}\) Like Lois, Dark was noted for her nationalism, as mentioned above. Lois’ contentment with her own environment may have been a reflection of Dark’s attitude to her retreat in the Blue Mountains. Lois thinks of the various defining characteristics which could be used in a portrait, “A portrait of Mrs Trugg for instance. Wouldn’t further details be worse than unnecessary? Mightn’t they be actually misleading – distracting your attention from the whole essence…?”(p.128) There is no other mention of portraits in these novels; Lois does not paint portraits. Was Dark, perhaps, thinking of the

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39 Brooks, op.cit., passim.
40 ibid., p.223.
42 ibid., pp.92, 105, 205.
43 ibid., p.173.
requirements of the self portrait she was writing, not of a painting at all? Although perhaps the figure of Oliver has some elements of Dark’s real husband, the several indications that Oliver and Lois combined make up one complete artist, may also suggest that Oliver is Dark’s version of an idealized husband.

Other writers examined in this thesis include suggestions of self-portraiture in their work. Barbara Hanrahan, a visual artist as well as a writer, wrote several novels in which the character closely follows the experience of Hanrahan herself although she denied that the characters were self-portraits. Some writers have claimed Patrick White, who was an art collector and informed about art generally, saw himself as Hurtle Duffield in *The Vivisector*.44 Davida Allen, also a visual artist, wrote *The Autobiography of Vicki Myers*, as, among other things, a Postmodern parody of the artistic autobiography. However, all of these writers had an informed knowledge of art, unlike Dark. It has been suggested that another character in *Waterway*, Professor Channon’s daughter Leslie, is a portrait of Dark. The basis of this assertion is that Leslie also disliked housework.45 Dark’s biographer hypothesizes that Dark was mapping the changes in women’s lives between the wars, and “seemed to transfer her ideas about writing to the artist, assuming that the processes were similar”.46 Lois, she thinks, is more like Freud’s idea of a writer than an artist in her naturalness and unselfconsciousness.47 She suggests that Lois’ life, with her studio, private income and daughter who waits on her was Dark’s fantasy for her own life. She also suggests that Lois lacked Dark’s intellectual curiosity, a characteristic found in Leslie, another character in *Waterway*.

To judge from contemporary criticism of these novels, the artist figure was not seen as convincing or important, which probably reflects the general attitude of the day towards women artists. In eight reviews in *The Times Literary Supplement*, the *Bulletin* and the

44 Hewitt, op.cit.,p.81.
46 Brooks, op.cit., p.167.
47 ibid., p.169.
Sydney Morning Herald, the artist figure is given no more than two lines overall, and these are not complimentary.

In Sun Across the Sky and Waterway, Dark creates an artist character who is not entirely convincing, but who is fascinating for the various questions which her characteristics raise. This pair of forerunners of subsequent twentieth-century Australian artist novels open up questions of the position of the artist in society, the writer as concealed autobiographer, and the influence of various current intellectual preoccupations of society in the formation of the artist character.
CHAPTER 3

Patrick White’s artist figures in The Tree of Man (1956) and Riders in the Chariot (1961)

Patrick White and art

Patrick White (1912-1991), unlike Eleanor Dark, had an enthusiastic and active interest in the visual arts and at times was “filled with a yearning for paint”.¹ Over his lifetime he amassed a significant collection of Australian art, which was given and bequeathed to the Art Gallery of New South Wales. He did not inherit this interest from his immediate family although original Australian landscapes and portraits by conservative painters such as Hilda Rix Nicholas and Agnes Goodsir were part of the décor of his mother’s well-furnished Sydney house.² The most distinguished painting that White saw in early childhood was probably Elioth Gruner’s Spring Frost (1919), winner of the Wynn Prize in 1919,³ and owned by White’s uncle, whom the family visited frequently⁴ (Plate 15). Coincidentally, Eleanor Dark also owned paintings by Gruner. The brilliant light effect in Gruner’s paintings, probably associated with theories of Vitalism in which Dark was interested, has been discussed in chapter two. One of the artist figures created by White, Hurtle Duffield in The Vivisector (1970), was also fascinated by light as it shone through a chandelier; however, any connection between this and Gruner’s Spring Frost would be complete speculation.

Through a network branching out from his godmother, Gertrude Morrice, and later her cousin, the artist Roy de Maistre (1894-1968), White was introduced to the European tradition in art and literature, which profoundly influenced his writing and conception of fictional artist figures. Gertrude Morrice’s German mother wrote short stories and had

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¹ Marr, Letters, p.92, letter to Peggy Garland, 15 November 1953.
⁴ Hewitt, op.cit., p.8.
Art Gallery of New South Wales. Gift of F.G. White 1939
studied music in Heidelberg, and her German uncles in Dresden were also writers.⁵  
During schooldays in England, White met his Withycombe cousins: Joyce, a painter, who had studied at the Slade, and Peggy, a successful sculptor.⁶  In 1933 they held an exhibition at the advanced Zwemmer’s Bookshop-Gallery in London, which had shown works on paper by Matisse and Picasso and in 1934 mounted an exhibition by Salvador Dali. Robert Wellington, who ran the bookshop, was a friend of de Maistre.⁷  

While studying French and German at Cambridge University, White frequently visited Europe, staying for weeks with French and German families. In 1934 he studied in Heidelberg and Hanover, returning in succeeding years. He also visited Berlin, Munich and Dresden but, because of the political situation, did not return to Germany after 1936. White finally met de Maistre in 1936 in London. Their association began as a passionate love affair, which later became a close, life-long friendship. De Maistre had left Australia permanently in 1929, in disgust at the critical reaction to his advanced modernist art. His abstract colour-music paintings were beyond the comprehension of Australian critics, but these colour theories, which he continued to work on in London, influenced the formation of White’s imaginary artist figures. In London de Maistre became a minor member of the English modernists, and supported himself through his art. He was popular with the art community and introduced White to key members, including art critic and publisher Herbert Read, Henry Moore, Graham Sutherland, collector Douglas Cooper and Francis Bacon, who was a protégé of de Maistre’s and, for a while, a friend of White’s.⁸  De Maistre painted portraits of White, his mother and sister. White intensely disliked his own portrait, which he gave to the Art Gallery of New South Wales. However, he demonstrated his devotion to de Maistre by dedicating his first published novel *Happy Valley* (1939) to him. White maintained that de Maistre “taught me how to look at paintings … He also taught me to discipline myself as an

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⁵ Marr, *Life*, p.47.  
⁶ Marr, *Life*, p.84.  
artist”, and “I feel he taught me to write by teaching me to look at paintings and get beneath the surface.”

White returned to Australia in 1948, partly because of the “unexpected art world I discovered” in Sydney. White knew William Dobell, on whose painting The Dead Landlord (1936) (Plate 16) he based his play The Ham Funeral (1947). Dobell had told White that he intended paint a series entitled “The Ham Funeral” based on The Dead Landlord, but it was never executed, and White appropriated the title for his play.

White also met painter and sculptor, Margo and Gerry Lewers, who invited him to soirées at their Emu Plains house where the more radical art and intellectual set of Sydney met and, as White wrote,

Ideas hurtled, argument flared, voices shouted, sparks flew. … Along with the paintings and sculpture, the mosaics and the watergarden, an ephemeral dish of food wore the expression of a work of art. As I see it, the house on the Nepean … provided one of the focus points of our still tentative civilization.

There White would have met Margo Lewers’ brother, artist Carl Plate and his wife Jocelyn, whose mother Alleyne Zandher brought the exhibition British Contemporary Art to Australia in 1932-33, and the Lewers’ close friends, Frank Hinder and his American sculptor wife, Margel, two important early Modernist artists.

White brought a number of de Maistre paintings to Australia, and when he was settled began to visit exhibitions and buy artworks. He bought from Macquarie Galleries, whose owners Lucy Swanton and Treania Smith were, at the time, among the few supporters of Australian artists. Later, after the avant garde Watters Gallery opened in 1964, White bought most of his artworks from Frank Watters with whom he became good friends. After meeting him in New York in 1958, White developed a close friendship with Sidney Nolan, who had an international reputation for his art, rare for Australians at the time. They discussed ideas

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9 Johnson, op.cit., pp. 62, 99. For a complete documentation of White’s association with de Maistre, and de Maistre’s career, see Marr and Johnson.
12 Patrick White, “Gerry Lewers has left us”, obituary, Sydney Morning Herald, 18 August 1962, p.12, Lewers papers, Lewers Bequest and Penrith Regional Gallery.
13 Pamela Bell, “Margo Lewers” catalogue essay in Pamela Bell, Margo Lewers Retrospective (Exhibition Catalogue, National Trust of Australia, N.S.W., 2002).

Private Collection
and White commissioned Nolan to paint his book covers, but the friendship ended bitterly with the suicide of Cynthia Nolan.

When the exhibition *French Painting Today*, with work by Matisse and Picasso, was shown at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1953, White wrote, “One forgets really that the average Australian has seen so little.”14 He, of course, had seen much more European art than the average Australian. Twelve years after White returned to Australia, when he would have had time to form an opinion on Australian art, he enumerated the artists who meant most to him.15 Those named were all European: Goya, El Greco, Picasso, and Klee. His favourite painting was Turner’s *Interior at Petworth*16 (Plate 17). This is not surprising as, in the 1960s, Australian art was considered marginal and provincial. The only texts on Australian art were William Moore’s pioneering but non analytical *Story of Australian Art* (2 vols. 1934) and H.E. Badham, *Study of Australian Painting* (1949) which depended on Moore. Bernard Smith’s *Place, Taste and Tradition* (1945) was the first text to relate Australian art to a background of European art and ideas. Smith’s seminal *Australian Painting* (1971) appeared the year after *The Vivisector* was published. Smith codified Australian art history, relating Australian art to international art movements, and using an excerpt from *The Vivisector* to introduce a chapter. There are only five lines on Aboriginal art in Smith’s book, and no reference to it at all in *Place, Taste and Tradition*. When White published *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) which depicts Alf Dubbo, a part-Aboriginal artist, Aboriginal art was the province of anthropology. Nor would White have gained much information about Australian art from exhibition catalogues of the day, as they usually consisted only of a list of artworks on display.17 State Gallery catalogues were also slim and the journal *Art and Australia* did not appear until 1963, *Art in Australia* having ceased publication in 1942. White therefore gained his knowledge of Australian art largely from artists he knew, dealers and

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17 Macquarie Gallery archive, now at Art Gallery of New South Wales, research by the author, 1987.

Tate Gallery, London
exhibitions. While White regarded himself as a patron of Australian art, most of the artists represented in his collection were novices whose careers he tried to boost by acquiring their work.

White saw Australia as something of a cultural wasteland. He wanted to give meaning to “the ugliness, the bags and iron of Australian life”, hoping “There is the possibility that one may be helping to people a barely inhabited country with a race possessed of understanding”. He wanted to “open a window” for all the “unknown Australians”.¹⁸ For White, Australia was a country with little culture or artistic tradition of its own. His aspiration to introduce European culture to Australia explains his heavy reliance on European art history to shape the artist figures in his novels. Since White was not a trained visual artist, unlike other writers discussed in this thesis, such as Barbara Hanrahan and Davida Allen, he included few references to the important processes of painting in the formation of his artist figures. Nevertheless, he had a much more informed position on art than other writers discussed here, such as Eleanor Dark, Sue Woolfe and David Malouf.

White’s artist figures and *The Tree of Man* (1956)

Artists feature in many of White’s novels, including *The Living and the Dead* (1941), *The Aunt’s Story* (1948), *The Tree of Man* (1956), *Voss* (1957), *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) and *The Vivisector* (1970). White’s first depiction of an individual Australian artist as a key character is Mr Gage, in *The Tree of Man*. In this novel White prefigures techniques later employed in the construction of Alf Dubbo, the half-Aboriginal artist in *Riders in the Chariot*. Techniques developed in these two novels prefigure White’s most fully realized artist figure, Hurtle Duffield, whose life story White created in *The Vivisector*.

Mr Gage, whose life is narrated in retrospect by an omniscient narrator, plays a minor but vital part in *The Tree of Man*, which is set in a small Australian rural community. Not until after his death is it discovered that Mr Gage, odd-job man and husband of the post-

mistress, was secretly an artist. After this revelation, Mr Gage is immediately also presented as an eccentric and a seer in passages such as: “Once Mr Gage had thrown himself on the ground and looked so intently at an ant that the eyes bulged in his head, and he was swallowed by fluctuating brown waves.”\(^{19}\) The ant may signify more than Mr Gage’s interest in nature, perhaps representing his search for wisdom, if the Biblical aphorism is taken into account: “Go to the ant, thou sluggard, consider her ways, and be wise”\(^{20}\). The portrait of an ant by Harland, the artist-figure in David Malouf, *Harland’s Half Acre* (1984), may be a reference to this sequence in White. Lois, the artist figure in Dark’s *Sun Across the Sky* also paints an ant, but it is not known if White was familiar with this work. Not only does Mr Gage see the truth of nature in the ant but, looking up at Amy Parker, the heroine of the novel, he penetrates the dark corners of her face as if she also was a mystery he must solve, like the soul of the ant.\(^{21}\) Later Mrs Parker remarks, “It is that that is wrong with the husband of the postmistress. He knows something.” (p.162) Mr Gage’s ability to see further than the ordinary man is a characteristic of the Romantic artist. As already remarked, the artist-as-genius, which grew out of European Romanticism, became a stereotype of the artist in nineteenth-century literature. Hewitt maintains that White is a “romantic modernist” writer\(^{21}\), however, from my observation of this and further examples discussed below, White is a modernist writer who drew on the nineteenth-century stereotype of the artist-as-genius in shaping the artist-figures in his novels, at least in *The Tree of Man, Riders in the Chariot* and *The Vivisector*.

White’s use of suggestion and allusion and the insertion of description between passages of conversation between Mr Gage and Amy Parker suggests that the narrator is describing the way Mr Gage sees her, that is, as an Impressionist nude; “Her thickening arms could lift great weights, … but they were better seen putting up her hair. Then her strong, honey-coloured back with lifted arms was a full vase.”(p.105) This type of

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\(^{19}\) Patrick White, *The Tree of Man*, (Penguin, Mitcham, Victoria, 1956), p. 105. All subsequent references to this novel are to this edition and are placed in parenthesis in the text.


\(^{21}\) Hewitt, op.cit., p.43. Hewitt transfers this category from art to literature, depending on Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, (Thames and Hudson, London, 1975) which presents an idiosyncratic view of the topic, but does not include literature.
18. A. Renoir, *Bather (known as La Coiffure)*, 1885
Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.
image, frequently used by the Impressionists, is exemplified in August Renoir, *Bather (known as La Coiffure)*\(^{22}\) (Plate 18), in which the three-quarter back view of the sturdy nude woman is seen with arms lifted, holding her long hair ready to put it up. This use of imagery, in which the artist’s thoughts are described in terms of well-known paintings, occurs extensively throughout *The Vivisector*.

True to the stereotype of the artist-as-genius, Mr Gage commits suicide, leaving his paintings done in a secret, musty room, reminiscent of a nineteenth-century garret. When Mrs Gage tells her friends that her husband’s paintings are “the story of our life”, they thought he must have been mad.\(^\text{p.281}\) The nineteenth-century stereotype of the artist posits a strong link between genius and madness. Mr Gage’s “madness” adds further credence to White’s use of this stereotype. The story of the artist’s life told through his paintings is an idea continued in *Riders in the Chariot*. Alf Dubbo’s only real life is in his paintings, and when he has finished his masterpiece, he dies. *The Vivisector*, a complete life of an artist figure, is a further development of this idea.

Prefiguring Alf Dubbo’s painting of the deposition of the Christ-like Himmelfarb, tied by the mob to a jacaranda tree, Mr Gage paints a Christ figure in the likeness of a railway fettler, his former occupation. Amy Parker was struck by the tenderness and beauty of the “jewels of blood” painted on the Christ’s hands. Alf Dubbo also depicts jewel-like drops of blood in his paintings, as well as employing other detritus of the human body, a theme fully developed in *The Vivisector*. Mr Gage also paints trees, which in their anthropomorphic configuration predict hurtle Duffield’s anthropomorphic rock and bush paintings. Other paintings by Mr Gage include a nude woman waking from sleep, with her hands reaching out to the sun, and a small painting of the ant’s skeleton containing a flickering flame. It is tempting to compare Dark’s artist’s painting of the hand of a gnome also reaching out to the light, and the Vitalist theme of light, the essence of life, which pervades her books, with the suggested conjunction of light and sex in Mr Gage’s nude, and light and knowledge in his painting of the ant. However there is no evidence

\(^{22}\) August Renoir, *Bather (known as La Coiffure)*, 1885, oil on canvas, 92 x 73 cm, Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.
that White read Dark’s novels. Mrs Parker, whose name Amy means “love”, realizes that even Mr Gage’s painting of a bottle “can express love”. Stan Parker knows that he cannot communicate with his wife as Mr Gage does but, nevertheless, he does not commit suicide like Mr Gage, even when in despair over his wife’s unfaithfulness. In this book the artist enlightens the heroine, sharing his understanding of the meaning of life with her, and saves the hero, Stan Parker, from a premature death, thus becoming a crucial element in the novel.

In this characterization, White does not show the artist working, learning, except for the episode with the ant, or engaging in any of the technicalities of painting. This omission of an important aspect of the artist in real life is achieved through the device of the retrospective narrative of the artist’s life, post death. Mr Gage is an isolated figure who does not appear to have any contact with other artists or art. His thoughts about art are not relayed, except indirectly through suggested imagery, as in the Impressionist-like nude. It is through his indirect thoughts, actions, paintings and the reaction of other characters that White establishes this character as the artist. Mr Gage is an outsider, like Alf Dubbo; he is a seer with a privileged vision, also like Alf Dubbo and Hurtle Duffield, and, like those of these two artist characters, his paintings appear to be in the expressionist mode. Mr Gage, Alf Dubbo and Hurtle Duffield all reveal “the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry” of life as White himself hoped to do in his writing.23

Based on the slim evidence of White’s letter: “I am re-reading the letters of van Gogh to Émile Bernard and the autobiography of Grandma Moses … and am filled with a yearning to paint. Nothing doing there, of course.”24, it has been proposed that Mr Gage is based on Vincent van Gogh.25 While there may be some similarities, such as their common subject matter of bottles and pots, trees and paintings of the Pietà, these subjects are used throughout the history of art. It is possible that White drew on van Gogh’s paintings for passages in The Tree of Man referring to blue, icy and whirling skies, a

23 White, in Flynn and Brennan, p.15.
cornfield and a painful sun, but these passages are related to the thoughts of Stan and Amy Parker, not to Mr Gage.

In *The Tree of Man* White used a number of devices to develop the artist figure which he expanded on in succeeding artist characters. These devices include: sparse detail of the process of painting; suggested imagery based on well-known works of art; the use of light, which reappears in the chandelier imagery in *The Vivisector*; the use of blood and other human excreta in conjunction with art; suggestions of anthropomorphism in the paintings; an expressionist-like mode of the artists’ paintings which are described mainly through concepts, and the repetition of similar subject matter, such as the crucifixions painted by Mr Gage and Alf Dubbo. White also uses free indirect discourse, prefigured in *The Tree of Man* in the passage in which Mrs Parker is described as an Impressionist nude; and finally he employs the model of the nineteenth-century stereotype of the artist figure, including the privileged knowledge and insight of the artist, madness, isolation, outsider status, and working secretly or alone, among other traits, all of which occur in Mr Gage, Alf Dubbo and Hurtle Duffield.

*Riders in the Chariot* (1961) and the development of the artist figure

Introduction

White is the only Australian writer to have included an Aboriginal artist figure as a leading character in a novel.26 The artist, Alf Dubbo, is given superficial attributes of the Indigenous Australian but his character as an Aboriginal is never defined, only hinted at and, throughout the book, references to his Aboriginality become progressively more cosmetic. It seems that, in White’s schema for this novel, his symmetrical arrangement of the four riders needed an observer, an outsider, who nevertheless had an intuitive insight into the lives of others. Alf’s intuitive, artistic inner life is emphasised by contrasting it with the squalor of his outer life and associations. White’s ambivalent attitude to organized religion is demonstrated in the character of the minister, who on the

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one hand ruins Alf’s life through removing him from his family and then sodomising him, and on the other awakens his sensibilities to the possibility of an inner creativity through exposure to books, including the Christian Bible and books on art, and to the basic techniques of art, which Alf learns from the minister’s sister. Hints of Alf’s further efforts at self-education suggest the way his mind and artistic sensibilities are developed; however, White imbues Alf with a surprising amount of knowledge, which would be impressive in the most highly educated artist, without revealing how he acquires it. Alf’s paintings have minimal reference to Aboriginal life or art, but appear to be a combination of Surrealism and Expressionism. The Australian landscape tradition is not even hinted at in relation to Alf’s paintings. This may be a result of White’s antipathy to the Great Australian Emptiness, both literal and spiritual, and his ambition to recover “the mystery and poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of [such] people.”

Although White held the prejudices of his time and class, and does not appear to have investigated the life of the urban Aborigine to any great extent, he touches on issues not discussed at the time the book was written, for example “stolen children” and “sex abuse”, particularly of boys as noted above. He also shows some prescience in designating an Aboriginal artist, however atypical, as a leading character in a novel, at a time when the enormous flowering of Aboriginal art was not even thought of. White may have used the life of Albert Namatjira (1902-1959) as a generalized template for the character of Alf. In Australian art of the late 1950s Namatjira was the only Australian Indigenous artist who painted in anything like European style, as the character Alf Dubbo did. But, in creating the character of Alf, White also drew on aspects of the nineteenth-century stereotype of the artist imbued with privileged insight into society. White’s character, Alf, would not, today, be thought of as a convincing Aboriginal artist. In creating Alf, White also omits reference to most of the physical process of painting, but does create a convincing depiction of the motivation and inspiration for and the conception of a great work of art, a process which could apply to a variety of media: art, music or literature.

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27 Patrick White in Flynn and Brennan, p.15.
Characters

In *Riders in the Chariot*, Alf Dubbo the artist is one of four principal characters, whose interaction White saw in terms of a cantata. The four riders in the chariot are visionaries and outcasts of society: Mary Hare, the strange nature spirit and heiress, a Caucasian land owner as opposed to the dispossessed part-Aborigine Alf Dubbo; Mordecai Himmelfarb, the Jewish intellectual who renounces all for his faith and is the main character in the book; Ruth Godbold, a good Christian English woman, saintly friend, earth mother; and Alf Dubbo, the inspired part-Aboriginal artist. This construction could be seen as schematic since the four characters include two men and two women, all of different racial and socio-economic backgrounds. Miss Hare’s housekeeper Mrs Jolley and her friend Mrs Flak, whose husbands have both disappeared in suspicious circumstances, and Mrs Flak’s illegitimate son, Blue, represent the forces of evil. Various other characters represent betrayal, the laconic and phlegmatic Australian workman and so on. To enter the consciousness of the characters, White uses the technique of free indirect discourse, which gives some flavour of their language, and facilitates switches between characters.

Inspiration of Odilon Redon (1840-1916) and William Blake (1757-1827)

White’s inspiration for the theme of *Riders in the Chariot* came from a painting by Odilon Redon of an “Apollonian chariot” which he saw in a Bond Street window in London. Although White did not specify the painting, it may have been *Apollo’s Sun Chariot with Four White Horses*, shown in London in 1938. Versions of Redon’s series on the Chariot of Apollo can be seen in the collections of the Musée de Petit Palais, and the Musée d’Orsay, Paris (Plates 19 and 20). Redon’s Apollo series, painted in his old age, was possibly inspired by Eugene Delacroix’s *Chariot of Apollo* ceiling mural in the Louvre, Paris, about which Redon wrote, “This is the work he made in the fullness of

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30 Hewitt, op.cit., p.56, the date and present owner are not mentioned.
31 Odilon Redon, *Chariot of Apollo*, c.1912, oil on canvas, 89.5 x 163 cm. *The Chariot of Apollo*, 1905-14, Musée d’Orsay, Paris.
19. Odilon Redon, *Chariot of Apollo*, c.1912
Musée du Petit Palais, Paris

20. Odilon Redon, *Chariot of Apollo*, 1908
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux
his talent and power.”32 Redon’s contribution to the Symbolist movement spanned both its pictorial and literary manifestations. He regularly attended Mallarmé’s weekly salon Les Mardis and they remained friends for life.33 In his art Redon sought “to make improbable beings live, like human beings, according to the laws of probability by putting, in so far as possible, the logic of the visible at the service of the invisible.”34 He formulated a basic law of the Symbolist art movement with his dictum, “Nothing can be created in art by the will alone. All art is the result of submission to the unconscious.”35 Maurice Denis, in a homage to Redon published in La Vie (30 November 1912), described Redon’s importance: “Before the influence of Cézanne, through Gaugin and Bernard it was the thoughts of Redon that … determined in a spiritual sense the evolution of art”.36 While the Symbolists did not completely repudiate nature, they aimed to reinstate the importance of the mind and idea, as opposed to the mere representation of nature. It may not have been only Redon’s painting which inspired White, but also the visionary ideas of the artist himself and the whole Symbolist movement. Writing about Riders in the Chariot, White revealed an interest in the symbolic, “Symbols must certainly work on an ‘imaginative rather than an intellectual level’ as you say. Surely one must deal with any details of a work of art firstly on the ‘imaginative level’.”37

In the novel’s epigraph by William Blake, White also acknowledges the Prophet Ezekial in the Old Testament as a source for descriptions of the “four living creatures” emerging from a great bright cloud, and the horse-drawn wheeled chariot, which will be discussed in relation to Alf’s paintings.38 Blake was another visionary and intuitive artist and writer, whose aim was a precise delineation of ideas developed through his spiritual imagination. He also employed the motif of a chariot in his art, for example God Judging

38 Bible, King James Version, Ezekial 1 and 26:10.
Adam (1759).\(^{39}\) Besides inspiring the theme of Riders in the Chariot, both these artists may have contributed some of the characteristics of the artist-figure, Alf Dubbo. Barbara Hanrahan, whose artist figures are discussed in chapter five, also drew on aspects of the myth of Apollo and was a great admirer of William Blake. White’s interest in these artists is not surprising as he characterised himself as an “intuitive” writer and Redon’s dictum on Symbolist art, in another time and place, could have applied equally to White’s novels. But, in his emphasis on the unconscious as opposed to the intellect, White is the quintessential Modernist.\(^{40}\)

**Alf Dubbo’s Aboriginality**

Although the conception of Alf Dubbo as a part-Aboriginal artist who paints in European style was an original and striking idea, Alf’s Aboriginality plays a decreasingly important part in his characterisation as an artist. In its combination of the artist figure with privileged insight into society, inherited from the nineteenth-century artist-figure stereotype, and the socially alienated, urban, part-Aborigine in early post-war society, the character of Alf perfectly fits White’s schema for the novel, which depended on the sentient but outcast seer. White described the “Australian aboriginal [sic] in contact with civilization [as] a very squalid creature (I have even read an account of aboriginals [sic] in their normal state in the last century eating maggots, and the lice of one another’s heads)”\(^{41}\). To his publisher, White described Alf as “the half-caste aboriginal [sic], who is diseased and degraded as a human being” and hoped that “his creative genius [would be] strong and convincing enough.”\(^{42}\) So Alf’s Aboriginality was a device to reinforce his position as an outcast of society. The character of Alf was created without White ever having met an Aborigine although as a youth he was a jackeroo in Walgett, where there was a large Aboriginal presence.\(^{43}\)

\(^{39}\) William Blake, *God Judging Adam*, colour print relief etching, 43.2 x 53.5 cm. Also known as *Elijah and the Fiery Chariot*.

\(^{40}\) For links between Symbolism and Modernism see Bradbury and McFarlane, p.184.


\(^{43}\) Marr, *Life*, p.108.
White had included a sympathetic and knowledgeable portrayal of Aboriginal characters in his historical novel *Voss* (1957) but these nineteenth-century tribal Aborigines were distanced by time, in contrast to Alf, the twentieth-century part-Aborigine, whose roots had been severed and who lived on the fringe of white urban society. There are many anthropological accounts of Aboriginal tribal life on which White could have drawn for his account of the young Aboriginal boy Jackie, who traveled with Voss. In the end Jackie is the survivor, although he was in thrall to his wife’s tribe, whose elders forced him to behead Voss, the white man who entered their territory and aspired to be their leader. Throughout this novel, Jackie is portrayed as resourceful and knowledgeable about the land, for example he finds the party’s straying stock after the white men had given up searching for them. There are numerous references to tribal life, including descriptions of corroborees, hunting practices, the subservient position of Aboriginal women, myths such as that of the Rainbow Serpent and Aboriginal art in the form of cave painting.44 The part-Aboriginal character Alf Dubbo has none of the generally positive aspects of Aboriginal life attributed to the Aboriginal characters in *Voss*.

Australian literature has produced a number of fictional depictions of Aboriginal people but, as mentioned, White’s is the only portrayal of an Aboriginal visual artist. Of the Aboriginal characters in twentieth-century Australian fiction published before *Riders in the Chariot*, probably the two best known are the heroine of Katharine Susannah Prichard’s *Coonardoo* (1929), a novel of love and rejection between a white man and an Aboriginal woman, and Norman in Xavier Herbert’s *Capricornia* (1938), the great novel of inter-racial conflict and contact in Northern Australia. White was one of the earliest writers to use the Aborigine or part-Aborigine as “outsider”, a theme later taken up by David Ireland in *Burn* (1974). In the character of Alf Dubbo, White also draws attention to the fact that it was not only Aboriginal women who suffered from sexual oppression by white men, including those hiding behind the sanctimonious façade of the church.

It may be that White took Albert Namatjira (1902-1959) as a model for Alf Dubbo. (Plate 21) Although Namatjira painted Australian landscapes and Alf Dubbo’s paintings were


Art Gallery of South Australia
inspired by religious visions, perhaps White, with his sensitivity to art and the nuances of human behaviour, saw more in Namatjira’s art than his contemporaries did, for Namatjira’s art has recently undergone a significant re-evaluation. 45 Like Alf Dubbo, Namatjira had links to Christianity, had a westernized first name, and met a tragic death. In 1961, when *Riders in the Chariot* was published, most Aboriginal art was regarded as “primitive”. Tony Tuckson, then Deputy Director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, had only recently started collecting Aboriginal bark paintings and sculpture for the Gallery. This was regarded as very advanced because previously Aboriginal art had only been collected by natural history museums. In 1962, the year after *Riders in the Chariot* appeared, Ure Smith published *Australian Aboriginal Art*, with an introduction by Berndt, Elkin, McCarthy, Strehlow and Tuckson. All the writers except Tuckson were anthropologists. The only artist actually named in the publication was Albert Namatjira, who was well-known but not respected by the art community, which nevertheless exploited his work. At the time he was the only Aboriginal who painted in a seemingly European style accessible to white viewers. Namatjira was born to Aboriginal parents at Hermannsberg Mission on the Finke River, which was administered by German Lutherans. He was baptized as a Christian, but also initiated as one of the Aranda people. Namatjira read and wrote Aranda and English. It is now thought that these dualities pervaded Namatjira’s paintings, as the Aranda language, codified by the missionaries to teach the scriptures, had different interpretations of meaning to corresponding words in English and this may have allowed Namatjira to think in terms of an exchange of meaning between different ways of picturing nature. It has been argued that, once he had learnt the rudiments of European style painting from Rex Battarbee, Namatjira embarked on a subtle campaign of exploitation. He gave himself a European name, “Albert”, so that his signature would be recognizable to the European buyer. He painted European-style landscapes onto Aboriginal artifacts, thus devaluing them as collector’s pieces while also devaluing the painting, which was attached to a tourist commodity. The pastoral landscapes of the 1930s, by Arthur Streeton and others, signified European possession of the land, depicting harmony between nature and cultivation, and excluding Aborigines.

Namatjira’s success with the pastoral genre upset this concept and asserted an Aboriginal relationship with the land. Close analysis of his paintings also reveals a design and mark making akin to traditional Aboriginal art. He mimicked but subverted Western art, and paved the way for the development of later Aboriginal art, sponsored by government from 1971, in which individual Aboriginal artists became world famous. White may have seen Namatjira’s 1950 exhibition at Anthony Hordern’s Gallery, Sydney, but by 1958, when White was probably writing *Riders in the Chariot*, Namatjira’s life had descended into tragedy; he was jailed for selling alcohol and died the following year.

The comparison with Namatjira raises a number of questions about the character Alf Dubbo. The cultural and social changes in relation to Aboriginality, and developments in Aboriginal art since *Riders in the Chariot* was written, to some extent influence a reading of this book. It is understandable that Alf has few of the characteristics of today’s Aboriginal artists, as Namatjira was the only prototype when White was writing. Alf’s connections to his country are only hinted at but, even in his lifetime, it was obvious that Namatjira was painting his own tribal land, even if other issues discussed above were not generally appreciated. Dubbo’s antecedents are barely mentioned, and there are only the briefest references to traditional Aboriginal life yet, as discussed in relation to *Voss*, White had an adequate knowledge of this. It is Miss Hare who has spiritual links with the land, which suggests that White, whose private income derived from pastoral interests, was, perhaps unconsciously, reinforcing the message of Australian landscape artists like Streeton, that the land of Australia belonged to the European settlers, no longer to the dispossessed Aborigines.

In some aspects of the character Alf Dubbo, White was prescient without quite spelling out the issues. Alf’s vagrant life was ultimately due to his being one of the “stolen generation”, a phrase unknown in the 1960s, but a practice which was condoned by the government and obliquely referred to by White. The young Alf lived in the care of a Caucasian minister of religion. The sexual episode between them may today be called pedophilia. This type of sexual abuse between priests and children in their care,

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46 For a full account of further re-evaluation of Namatjira’s painting see Ian Burn.
concealed by the organized church for decades, has also recently come to wide public attention. Here White showed insight to the shortcomings of organized religion, of which White was not in favour.

All this suggests that Alf’s Aboriginality does not really contribute to his life as a visionary artist. Dubbo’s European-style, Expressionist art, discussed below, is sustained and inspired by his religious visions, although the Christian minister has damaged Alf who says he has abandoned Christianity. Dubbo’s life-affirming visionary art, which transcends his dissolute lifestyle, suggests that he may even be linked to Norman Lindsay’s *Madam Life’s Lovers* as one of the elect of society, as opposed to the crass and pedestrian suburbanites like Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flak whose only interests are destructive and life destroying. Like Namatjira, Dubbo dies as a result of a European disease and European society’s callousness but, unlike Namatjira, Dubbo painted for himself, he kept (or lost) his paintings, while Namatjira tried to support his Aboriginal heritage through his art. Although Namatjira may have been a general prototype for Alf, and there are some superficial points of similarity between them, on the whole Alf’s Aboriginality is used as a cosmetic device to label him as an outsider.

**Alf’s character and education**

In developing Alf’s character as an artist, White gives him certain learning experiences that hint at, but are not explicit about, important movements in the history of art. Alf’s earliest art instruction, which remains with him for life, is from a woman, the minister’s sister, Mrs Pask, who tells him, “Art is first and foremost a moral force”.47 She also introduces him to art history through her book on painting where Alf first sees a reproduction of the French painting that he would never forget. This, of the sun god Apollo riding his chariot containing four passengers, pulled by four horses across a sunlit sky, is obviously by Redon. Alf’s discovery of Redon’s painting highlights his position as the person who is able to produce a visual correlative to the spiritual and visionary ideas of the other three riders. It was the minister, however, who recognized Alf’s innate

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47 Patrick White, *Riders in the Chariot*, (Penguin, Ringwood, 1981), p.315. All subsequent references to this novel are to this edition and are placed in parenthesis in the text.
imagination in his painting of a red tree hung with parcels, which he said were dreams. The combination of bizarre subject matter and dreams is the first example of Surrealism in Alf’s art. Intertwined with these revelations is the passage in which Mr Calderon makes his first sexual advances to the boy, thus establishing in Alf’s mind a link between art, visionary imagination, religion and sex, aspects of life with which White himself was preoccupied. In Alf’s third painting, a combination of European and Aboriginal iconography which gradually disappears from his art, White intuitively prefigures the recently revealed duality in the paintings of Namatjira. (p.326) Calderon’s rape of Alf in the cowshed, while looking at his paintings, precipitates Alf’s escape, establishes his position as an artist and outcast, and confirms the links between sex and art, which White enlarges on in The Vivisector.

Alf the Modernist artist uses junk and human excreta

At the opening of Riders in the Chariot, White links excrement and art in the epigraph from William Blake, “I then asked Ezekial why he eat dung…” The early parameters of Alf’s art are imagination, religion and sex, with some rudimentary experience of watercolour and oil painting combined with his discovery of the Apollo. When Alf meets the prostitute who lives on the rubbish dump, their drinking sessions inspire his vision of a painting of a fiery furnace made in imagination from junk. This indicates that he is now able to enlarge his Biblical visions with experiences from his own life. White’s idea that beauty may be associated with ugliness is exemplified in the character of Alf, whose squalid life is redeemed by his visionary art. “I feel his gift would have been less if he had not experienced the depths. (I am convinced of that in my own case)”, White wrote about Alf. 48 This also tallies with White’s endeavor to find “the extraordinary behind the ordinary”. 49 Use of junk and the detritus of the human body in the production of art is a well-established practice, which is skillfully introduced to Alf’s oeuvre through the seemingly natural situation of life on the dump, and instinctively adopted by Alf, not learned through any art theory or practice. White thought of his own writing in similar terms: “Writing is like shitting … Pushkin … said exactly the same thing. It’s something

48 Marr, Life, p.354.
49 White in Flynn and Brennan, p.15.
you have to get out of you."\(^{50}\) White believed that beauty and ugliness fed off each other, one coming out of the other. Examples of this conjunction of ugliness and beauty occur frequently in Alf’s life particularly when he finds beauty in the detritus of the body and links it to his art; for instance, at the Brighta Bicycle Lamp factory, Alf encounters Himmilfarb with blood pouring out of his hand which has been injured by factory machinery, and he is overcome by the strange and fascinating beauty of the effect; also “a heap of his own steaming vomit could yield its treasure”; and the “jewellery of wounds” Alf associated with his own blood and one of his paintings (pp.217, 350, 434).

Julia Kristeva has noted the association between the detritus of the human body – blood, semen, faeces and so on – and art.\(^{51}\) This movement in modern art also occurs in modernist literature, for example in T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land (1922). The trend towards making art from so-called junk runs throughout modernist art in Europe, the U.S.A., and Australia. Early twentieth-century examples include Russian Constructivists like Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953) who made wall sculpture from junk parts; Dada artists such as Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) whose Fountain (1917) is a commercially produced urinal; Kurt Schwitters’ (1887-1948) Mertzbag (destroyed 1943), a constructivist sculpture of a house made from refuse and discarded junk, which included a bottle of urine amongst its furniture, and the Surrealist, Salvador Dali (1904-1989), The Persistence of Memory (1931) in which limp ant-infested watches are draped over a landscape which includes a distorted profile of a decapitated human head. Australian Surrealist James Gleeson (b.1915) painted The Citadel (1945) (Plate 22) in which a face is composed of intestines.\(^{52}\) Robert Klippel (1920-2001) in his drawings from the 1940s and 50s used bizarre machine-like parts to compose organisms, which could be living.\(^{53}\) With his enthusiasm for contemporary art, White would have been aware of this movement. He owned a painting by Gleeson, Synaptic Displacement (1958). His interest in this phenomenon continued as he purchased three junk assemblages by Jenny Barwell.

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\(^{50}\) White in Flynn and Brennan, p.22.


\(^{52}\) James Gleeson, Citadel, 1945, oil on board, 182.5 x 122 cm. Australian National Gallery.

22. James Gleeson, *The Citadel, 1945*

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
from Frank Watters’ *Ocker Funk* exhibition of 1975 and several constructions by Klippel dated 1979. The inclusion of such artworks in White’s collection demonstrates his interest in junk and the excreta of the human body as viable components of an art work. While this modernist art movement is hinted at in the development of Alf Dubbo as an artist, suggesting that Alf was not only modern but also radical in his ideas, as is usual with White the allusion is not spelt out. This questioning of the idea of beauty, as exemplified in Alf’s art and life, and the device of art made from junk and the detritus of the human body, occurs throughout *Riders in the Chariot* and is continued in *The Vivisector*.

**Alf and the mirror image**
The venereal disease Alf contracts from the prostitute further alienates him from both white and Aboriginal society, and he moves on for fear of being “confined to a reserve, or shut up at a mission to satisfy social conscience” (p.341). From this point Alf’s Aboriginality diminishes and his life on the fringes of white society becomes a dichotomy between his secret art and disease. Besides being endowed with knowledge of Modernist art movements, Alf is also taking on the mantel of the nineteenth-century stereotype artist-as-genius. He is isolated, ill (many heroic nineteenth-century artists died young), and Miss Hare has recognized him as an “apostle[s] of truth” (p.63). But here another Modernist device, the mirror image, is introduced as part of Alf’s persona. When Himmelfarb meets Alf in the washroom, he is staring at himself in the glass “or else using the mirror as an opening through which to escape” (p.217). Alf’s self-doubts, after spending a wet night under a bridge with a prostitute, are conveyed by his image “fluctuating in the glass” (p.344). When Alf sees Hannah, his dishonest landlady, looking at herself in the mirror he knows that the image reflects fears for her future (p.353). The device of the mirror image is common among Modernist writers, prefigured by Lewis Carroll in *Through the Looking Glass* (1872) and appearing more recently White’s own autobiography, *Flaws in the Glass* (1981). The mirror image also has overtones of the self-portrait. In the nineteenth century, artists such as Courbet painted
23. Peter Paul Rubens, *Descent from the Cross*, c.1611-1614

Antwerp Cathedral, Belgium
self-portraits in a manner which emphasised the artist’s difference from other members of society. In the twentieth century artists such as the Surrealists sought to reveal their individual psychological state in the self-portrait. It may be that White was familiar with James Gleeson’s Surrealist self-portrait of 1941, *Structural Emblems of a Friend*. Perhaps the preoccupation with the mirror image suggests that Alf is more interested in the image than reality. White introduces the self-portrait in *The Vivisector*.

**Alf sees life in terms of paintings with art historical and mythological allusions**

Alf does see life in terms of paintings; for example, through a window at Mrs Godbold’s house he sees Himmelfarb being raised on his pillows by a young man; the pair are surrounded by Mrs Godbold’s sleeping children. The window frames the scene which appears to Alf like a Renaissance painting of the deposition, for example Peter Paul Rubens, *Descent from the Cross* (c.1611-14) (Plate 23) at Antwerp Cathedral, in which Christ is being supported by a young man, and is surrounded by mourners, including young women. Watching through the window Alf formulates the final conception of his own painting of the Deposition. While de Maistre’s *Deposition* c.1952 hung above White’s desk, probably at the time he was writing *Riders in the Chariot*, the composition is quite different to that envisaged by Alf for his own painting. White, who owned paintings by James Gleeson, may also have been familiar with his Surrealist *Deposition*, 1939, now held by the Australian National Gallery, but he also would have seen countless versions of the deposition on visits to art galleries round the world. Although Hewitt maintains that it was de Maistre’s painting on which Alf’s was based, it was in reality most likely to have been a combination of numerous images known to White.

White piles up examples of the way Alf views life in terms of art. When he goes to live with Hannah, another prostitute, she reminds him of the “unconvincing colours of Mrs

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54 James Gleeson, *Structural Emblems of a Friend*, 1941, oil on canvasboard, 46 x 35.6 cm, Queensland Art Gallery.
56 Hewitt, op.cit., p.33.

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Pask’s scared prints” (p.346). He paints Hannah and her homosexual boyfriend as a Surrealistic sterile egg. In Sydney’s wartime nightlife he sees “Mouths, glittering with paint, [that] would open up in the night like self-inflicted wounds.” (p.350) This is obviously a reference to Albert Tucker’s series of night time war paintings Images of Modern Evil, (Plate 24) in which good time girls have huge red lips and bulging eyes, seen against a background of glaring lights and inky blackness.57 White knew Tucker’s work, and in a letter to Sidney Nolan of 20 November 1960 he remarked that he was disappointed in all but one or two of the paintings that he had seen at the Tucker Exhibition at David Jones Gallery.58

Alf is portrayed as a deadbeat who sleeps under bridges and has only minimal education and yet, in a leap of intellectual development which is not explained, he continues his own art education in the Public Library. When White was writing Riders in the Chariot, it was not unusual to see a few outcasts of society dozing behind desks among the researchers at the State Library of New South Wales. But Alf goes to the library with the intention of looking at art books. His opinions on art are now quite independent. He is critical of the art in the books he looks at and rejects the experience of other artists, “as if his still incomplete vision would complete itself in time, through revelation” (p.342).

Fortuitously, in one library book, Alf finds a reproduction of the French painting of the Apollian chariot on its trajectory across the sky, which had inspired him as a child. His growth in conceptual understanding is shown in his now different view of the painting. He thinks it limited, and sees how he himself would transcribe the idea, in terms of motion and transcendentalism, which he understands through his own suffering. Alf does not read, he sees words as “weapons of the whites”, words cannot give him what he is looking for and, in the depressed state of his illness, it is only “the physical pleasures of paint” that keep him alive (p.343). While in the Library, Alf picks up another book, in which he finds the story of Christ, whom he had hoped to love when he was a child. But now Christ seems pale and insipid and does not stop his sore throat burning. Christ has

57 Albert Tucker, Image of Modern Evil (Night Image) #14, 1944/5, National Gallery of Australia.
58 Marr, Letters, p.176.
failed him but art remains. Alf now sees his own paintings as proof of the Absolute and his own act of faith.

Other examples of Alf’s sophisticated knowledge of art include the passage where he is imagining his major painting of the chariot, which he knows he is not yet capable of executing (p.353). He draws in the details of his proposed painting, and refers to it as a “cartoon”, the word used by seventeenth-century painters to refer to a full-scale preparatory drawing for a master work such as a fresco, tapestry or very large oil painting. This word is seldom if ever used by modern artists. In putting the word “cartoon” into Alf’s consciousness, it could be argued that White is now placing him in the category of the old master. Alf also appears to be familiar with the most erudite aspects of art history and mythology, even although he does not read. As he travels towards Sarsaparilla in search of the dying Himmelfarb, Alf sees Mrs Khalil’s nubile young daughters, “their mouths burst open like pomegranates, their teeth like the bitter pomegranate seeds”(p.434). Here he is credited with a deep knowledge of Christian and classical symbolism, in which the pomegranate is a Christian symbol of the resurrection, an allusion drawn from the classical legend of Proserpine who returned to regenerate the earth each spring. Pomegranate seeds symbolize chastity but also unity of the many under one authority, either church or secular.  

Alf, the artist who sees into the soul, sees hope for the future in the Khalil girls, in spite of their oppressed living conditions. Alf also remembers wandering in the bush of Sarsaparilla, which caused him to push “deep into his own true nature” and later to draw an “arabesque” of “thinking leaves” (p.434). In artistic representation, the arabesque is an intricate intertwining of leaf, flower, animal and geometrical designs, based on Greco-Roman and Moorish prototypes, and has been used in European painting since the Renaissance. Here, again, we are made aware of Alf’s extensive knowledge of the history and traditions of art. We are not told how he knows of these classical allusions, although we know he looks at art books in the library. In the same passage, Alf remembers that he had tried and failed to paint “the skin of silence nailed to a tree”, an image strongly suggestive of Surrealism. In this way, White gradually but densely builds layer upon layer of art reference into the development of

59 Hall, op.cit., p.249.
Alf’s artistic sensibility. This is a more subtle process that that of any other author examined here, the closest being Barbara Hanrahan with her use of the iconology of flowers and references to art history.

**Alf and the nineteenth-century stereotype**

Alf’s relationship to the nineteenth-century artist stereotype is confirmed in the passage where he watches Himmelfarb trying to escape from the drunken bully, Blue. Alf saw “what he alone was gifted or fated enough to see. Neither the actor, nor the spectator, he [was] that most miserable of human beings, the artist.” (p.407) At Rosetree’s factory, where he takes a menial job, Alf is an outcast, but that meant “he could travel quicker, deeper, into the hunting grounds of his imagination”(p.371). Alf is a gifted artist and seer. He could almost be seen as a religious figure, for, like Peter denying Christ, Alf repeatedly denies the Christ-like Himmelfarb. Among the many examples of Alf’s intuition, which can only be realized in his paintings, we see Alf after the mock crucifixion of Himmelfarb, as “The blackfellow [who] would have run after him to tell what he had seen and understood. But could not. Unless it burst from his fingertips. Never his mouth.”(p.418) Alf is the artist and intuitive seer, and also, as frequently confirmed, the outsider, three of the principal characteristics of the nineteenth-century stereotype. What Alf understands on seeing the mock crucifixion is that, to paint his masterpiece, he must be inspired by art and love. Although he is an isolated figure, Alf sees his paintings as an act of praise, and his own contribution to love. Alf’s realization of the link between art, life and love is one manifestation of White’s mission to improve Australian society, and to inject something more than a purely materialist ethos into Australian life. The only thing that sustains Alf, the degraded and outcast, is this realization.

**Alf’s paintings**

A short survey of Alf’s paintings, some of which have been mentioned already, will add to understanding of his progress in becoming an artist. Alf’s first experiment with oil paint, his inability to mix colour satisfactorily, the mess he created as a result of his inexperienced technique and the final inscription of an “O” with the handle of the paint
brush, is a convincing if simplistic introduction to Alf’s developing Expressionist art. (p.325) The “O” signifies the emptiness the boy feels at his first failed attempt to produce a painting. From this Alf learns that he must first think before starting a painting. The next painting will be “his life”. The content of the second painting, but not the process of painting it, is described in detail (p.326). It contains references to his Aboriginal mother, her lover, Mr Calderon and his penis, and love represented by the skeleton of a goanna and Jesus. In White’s attempted reference to Aboriginal art combined with European iconology, he intuitively prefigures the recently revealed duality in the paintings of Namatjira. Alf’s painting of the dream of a red tree hung with parcels sees him experimenting with another genre, Surrealism (p.317). The next painting is the imaginary Fiery Furnace composed in imagination with junk from the tip (pp.337, 361).

At this early stage, Alf has tried Expressionist, Surreal and Junk art. These modes are repeated in later paintings, for example the Surrealist paintings of Hannah and Norman as a sterile egg, (p.349) and Alf’s final painting of the deposition (p.454). As a dispossessed outcast with a compulsion to paint, Alf steals house paint from station storerooms and paints on any convenient wall. This aspect of Alf’s development is echoed in Frances, the artist figure in Sue Woolfe, *Painted Woman*, to be discussed in Chapter Six, who steals her father’s paints and paints on the inside of cupboard doors. We are told that Alf draws incessantly, refining his technique and ideas constantly. His subject matter, descriptions of his technique and materials are omitted. It is only through Alf’s concepts that we understand his art. Very soon he develops the habit of seeing the world in terms of paintings as discussed in relation to his Expressionist *Images of Modern Evil* views of Sydney wartime night life.60

The last two paintings, inspired by the Christ-like Himmelfarb and his transcendence of persecution, are done just before Alf’s death. In them, all Alf’s knowledge of art styles, love and life experience combine in a visual explanation of Himmelfarb’s apotheosis. Alf instinctively knows these will be his best works, and uses canvas, not his usual cheap board, as supports. The process of painting is described, not in terms of the design and physical application of paint, but as a vast concept carried by “emotional whirlpools”.

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60 Albert Tucker’s *Images of Modern Evil* series depicts Melbourne night-life.

Kunstmuseum, Basel
Even through a paroxysm of swirling paint in blue, crimson and the violently clashing, corrosive green, Alf clings to the structure of his picture, we are told. He pours his love into the work, the wounds of the dead Christ seem to Alf to be enlivened by his own blood, spewed out as a result of his illness. The key figures in the deposition are the four riders in the chariot, although Alf, the painter, is invisible. Alf’s constant retouching of the painting is described as a visual rendering of a procreative wind inside “the transparent weft” of which Miss Hare is portrayed (p.455). The unusual idea of painting the wind leads to speculation as to whether, during his time in Germany, Patrick White saw the German Expressionist artist Oskar Kokoschka’s famous *Bride of the Wind*, 1914, (Plate 25) which has been in the collection of the Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland since 1939, although it may be that this was one of the paintings confiscated by the Nazis as “degenerate art” in the mid thirties. The painting, which has been widely reproduced, shows the artist and his lover Alma Mahler, entwined and resting on a dark blue whirling current of wind in the night sky. Alma Mahler, herself, was a writer whose books White had read.  

Alf surrounds his deposition with details such as flowers, birds, foliage and children in the manner of fifteenth-century religious paintings, like Albrecht Dürer’s late fifteenth-century *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (Plate 26). Here Christ lies in a field surrounded by women and men (with small versions of the donors and children in the foreground) and with a landscape background. White could have seen this in the Pinakothet Museum in Munich. In Alf’s painting, Christ is represented in the likeness of Himmelfarb and workers bear oranges, which in iconographical terms are related to the tree of knowledge.

The success of this painting reminds Alf of the stolen cartoon of the Chariot painting (p.457). Although near death, at last Alf realizes that he could now negotiate this complex work. His disembodied mind takes control of his body, guiding his painting hand, a rare reference to the process of painting. The painting, with a dark blue background, showed an oblique road on which horses pulled the chariot, blazing across the sky. In Odilon Redon’s *Chariot of Apollo*, c.1912, the chariot, containing


Pinakothek, Munich
27. James Gleeson, *The Sower*, 1944

Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1966
only one ill-defined figure, is pulled by four horses diagonally across the canvas from lower right to upper left. Alf’s sketchily painted chariot is contrasted to the four riders or Living Creatures, depicted in “solid paint”. Mrs Godbold as white marble, Himmelfarb represented by barbed wire containing a star, (did Alf instinctively know of the Star of David?), Miss Hare in fox-coloured coat with a pig’s snout and Alf himself constructed of bleeding twigs and leaves with a whirling spectrum for a head, conform to the Surrealist strain suggested throughout descriptions of Alf’s paintings. James Gleesons’s bizarre *The Sower*, 1944 (Plate 27), with its animal-headed humans and marble-like skull stalagmite gouging the Sower’s eye, is reminiscent of Alf’s figures.

**Alf and the colour blue**

When Alf sees Himmelfarb’s mock crucifixion he is overcome with a great love, which he knows he can only express in paint. He conceives a painting in which the crucifixion tree would be painted in a blue of which no-one knew the secret. In Alf’s last painting of the chariot he uses a dark blue as the ground on which the riders in the chariot appear. Is this the same blue that Hurtle Duffield was seeking in his last painting? Why did White choose blue as the dominant colour in important paintings in both *Riders in the Chariot* and *The Vivisector*? There is only occasional reference to colour in the paintings described in these books. Could White’s choice of blue be related to his childhood holidays in the Blue Mountains, where the life-giving blue air was supposed to cure him of his chronic asthma? While blue is the colour of the sky or heaven, in the seventeenth century a blue burning candle was said to represent death, or the presence of the devil.\(^\text{62}\) Although this could account for the name of the evil step son, Blue, it is much more likely that Blue, whose hair is “a red stubble, but red … Blue is what he answers to.” (p.226) is one “of the reds.”\(^\text{63}\) “Blue” has a number of meanings in Australian slang, but in this case it is used as a nickname for a red-headed person.\(^\text{64}\) A youthful association with a young red-haired stockman on a property where White was a jackeroo gave him a life-long aversion to red headed men, from which developed a series of “red seducers” in

\[\text{References:}\]
\[\text{63} \text{Marr, } \textit{Life}, \text{ p.107.}\]
\[\text{64} \text{G.A. Wilkes, } \textit{A Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms}, \text{ (Fontana/Collins, Melbourne, 1978), p.38.}\]

Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1996
the novels. Blue as a colour in paintings in White’s novels is another matter. White knew something about colour symbolism. “The colours blue and yellow are the colours of introverted and extrovert spiritual perception”, he wrote to Ben Huebsch.\footnote{Marr, \textit{Letters}, p.120, letter to Ben Huebsch, 19 August 1957.} Alf and Himmelfarb are both near death when Alf decides to paint heaven and death in the blue draped crucifixion tree. In view of their close association, it is highly likely that White knew of Roy de Maistre’s colour theories. In the forward to the catalogue of de Maistre’s and Roland Wakelin’s \textit{Colour in Art} exhibition, de Maistre wrote, “Colour is a means of talking directly to the soul … the law of colour beauty … is … created by feeling and subconscious experience”.\footnote{Johnson, op.cit., p.31. \textit{Colour in Art} exhibition, 1919, Gayfield Shaw’s New Art Salon, Sydney.} White’s references to blue in both books could be related to de Maistre’s words, as both fictional artists have an intuitive and spiritual dimension.

Roy de Maistre’s painting \textit{Studio, 13 Eccleston Street} (Plate 28), a view of his own studio painted after 1937, donated to the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1996 by Owen Williams in memory of the artist, was in de Maistre’s Eccleston Street studio when White was living with him. The painting shows de Maistre’s colour chart resting inside the lid of an open painting case. The chart consists predominantly of blues on each of two sides of a triangle, with other colours making up the remainder of the triangle. The actual painting chart is also now in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. It cannot be said that de Maistre favoured blue over other colours in his paintings, although the famous abstract \textit{Rhythmic Composition in Yellow Green Minor} (1919)\footnote{Roy de Maistre, \textit{Rhythmic Composition in Yellow Green Minor}, 1919, oil on board, 85 x 115 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales.} is predominantly blue. After World War I de Maistre developed therapeutic colour schemes for hospitals which treated war veterans. He then designed colour schemes for private houses, including a completely blue room at “Summerlees”, Bowral, in which furniture, carpets and walls were different shades of blue.\footnote{Johnson, op.cit., p.27.} The room was said to be a sensation, as was a lilac roof he designed for a house in Moss Vale. This activity did not continue.
The spiritual quality of the colour blue had been remarked upon by Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), who painted what is considered to be the first abstract work in the European canon. In his influential *On the Spiritual in Art* (1911-1912), he wrote:

> The inclination of blue towards depth is so great that it becomes more intense the darker the tone, and has a more characteristic inner effect. The deeper the blue becomes, the more strongly it calls man towards the infinite, awakening in him a desire for the pure and, finally, for the supernatural … Blue is the typical heavenly colour. Blue unfolds in its lowest depths the element of tranquility. As it deepens towards black, it assumes overtones of a superhuman sorrow. It becomes like an infinite self-absorption into that profound state of seriousness which has, and can have have, no end.69

These ideas are so relevant to White’s use of the colour blue in both novels that it is tempting to assume that White’s friend, de Maistre, who was familiar with the work of Kandinsky, passed these ideas on to him. As Kandinsky taught at the Bauhaus at Weimar, Germany from 1922-1933 and subsequently lived in France, it is also possible that White, as a young scholar studying French and German, and interested in art, may have been aware of Kandinsky’s theories through his own studies.

In addition, Kandinsky was involved with theosophy. According to Mary Eagle, the spiritual element in modern art in Australia was influenced by the Theosophical treatises of C.W. Leadbeater, who was in Australia from 1914 to 1920.70 The Theosophical Society was active in Sydney until World War II, so White also may have been aware of its effect on the art scene and even indirectly on his own writing practice. The spiritual and intuitive elements in the paintings, which White ascribes to his fictional artists, are also a feature of his own writing.

**Gaps in Alf’s characterization as an artist**

When Alf paints his last works, he is engulfed in a great creative surge. The progress of the painting is described, not in terms of the design and physical application of paint, but as a vast concept, carried by “emotional whirlpools”. The descriptions of Alf’s paintings


70 Heather Johnson, *Roy de Maistre, the Australian Years*, (Craftsman House, Roseville, Australia, 1988) p. 29.
suggest that on the whole they are in an Expressionist mode, but White almost totally omits description of the vital contribution of the process of painting. In expressionist and abstract art, the process frequently shapes the form of the painting, for example, Darani Lewers, in recalling her mother Margo Lewers, an abstract and intuitive artist, at work, wrote, “The beginnings were often random; after several brushstrokes, an image began to emerge, remaining in a constant state of flux until she thought the painting was resolved. Process was always an integral part of the realized work.”71 Omission of any description of the process of painting makes the concept, intuition and emotion which form Alf’s painting of the deposition, and his other works, similar to the broad concepts which inspire poetry, fiction and music. Although White was familiar with a wide range of imagery drawn from European and Australian art, he does not reveal any knowledge of the physical aspects of creating a painting, in this book at least.

The other obvious question in Alf’s construction as an artist relates to the amount of knowledge which he somehow acquires, with so little formal education or resources. Although he visits the library, he does not read, he does not go to the public art gallery, or other places of exhibition, his only encounter with a dealer, who steals his work, is a disaster and he does not know any other painters, nor does he sell his work.

**Conclusion**

The character of Alf Dubbo as an artist remains an idea, rather than a convincing portrayal of an artist. Nothing of Alf’s art remains after his death, except for a few paintings stolen by the dealer. The other riders in the chariot do not know of his paintings. He does not establish connections with the art world, he does not even visit the state art gallery, although he looks at books in the public library. He never exhibits his work, except at the raunchy party at the prostitute’s house. Although he seems familiar with aspects of art history, the only twentieth-century movements to which his art can be related are European–based, although known in Australia at the time in which the novel is located. But the character is not integrated into the contemporary art world of Sydney. That this was intentional is supported by White’s familiarity with the Sydney art world,

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71 Darani Lewers, “Margo at Work” in Bell, p.51.
which is not mentioned. White’s conviction that out of the ugliness of Australian life could come beauty and truth, when these qualities were filtered through creative art, whether literary or graphic, is well recognized, not only within literary circles. The art historian Bernard Smith commented on “the metamorphosis of the good in its defenceless immersion in evil” in White’s oeuvre. White’s familiarity with European art and his wish to introduce a wider view of culture to what he saw as a desolate intellectual climate in Australia may account for the insistence on aspects of European art in Alf’s formation. This aspect of Alf’s artistic persona overrides his Aboriginality, which appears to be merely a structural prop. Alf’s function in the novel is to observe, interpret and record the workings of intuitive and spiritual forces such as love, which transcend the ugliness and squalor of the lives of the other three riders in the chariot. Through descriptions of Alf’s paintings, White reveals the beauty which can transcend the cruelty of life. Alf is therefore predominantly a device rather than a projection of a character as an artist.

Nevertheless, the character of Alf Dubbo, one of four leading characters in Riders in the Chariot, may have been a rehearsal for Hurtle Duffield, the artist and main character in The Vivisector. Similarities to be discussed in the next chapter in relation to The Vivisector include the sex of the artist, removal of the artists from their mothers at an early age, the saintly character of the washerwomen in both books, the prostitutes which figure in both, child sex abuse, the outsider/observer status of both artists, their common slothful habits, the intuitive nature of their inspiration (the last three traits common to the nineteenth-century artist stereotype) the single status of each artist – neither has a life partner - the mysterious use of blue in each artist’s last paintings, and their use of close associates as subjects of their art.

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CHAPTER 4

White’s development of the artist figure in *The Vivisector* (1970)

Introduction

In White’s novels preceding *The Vivisector*, artist figures become progressively more prominent, as if he had been exploring how to depict a complex artist, such as Hurtle Duffield. Characteristics of both Mr Gage and Alf Dubbo are woven into the ambitious, full-blown artist figure of Hurtle, whose visual art White strives to convey through concepts and purely literary means. “My protagonist is a painter who lives most of his life in Sydney from the end of the last century to the present day,” White wrote, but, prefiguring the conceptual aspect of the character, the protagonist is “determined to protect the secret core out of which he creates.” The literal meaning of the title, *The Vivisector*, only inferred in the text, is the action of cutting or dissecting some part of a living organism. The title and epigraphs to the novel, by four English and European writers, artists and thinkers, Ben Nicholson, William Blake, Saint Augustine and Rimbaud, situate Hurtle and his painting within the ambit of religious experience, the human condition, love and terror.

Hurtle Duffield is convincing as an artist in spite of only the most cursory suggestions of his technique and painting methods, scant descriptions of his paintings, a lack of contact with other artists, exhibitions and the art scene generally, and very little information about his training. Art dealers and Hurtle’s own retrospective art exhibition are the only direct references to the art world outside Hurtle’s studio. The character is almost entirely carried by the conceptual aspect of the artist’s practice. White builds Hurtle’s character by hints and suggestions, via the technique of free indirect discourse, often in the form of imagery only seen mentally by Hurtle, but which comes directly from White’s knowledge.

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of art, particularly European art. From an imaginative child, who sees life in terms of visual images, Hurtle becomes a man with an obsession to record life, and his search for its truth, on canvas. Hurtle’s fascination with objects like the chandelier either disappears or changes; interest in the chandelier becomes a search for light in general. Other imagery, often taken from mythology, leads to a dead end or an unexpected change in direction, when for example, the turd on the altar on the Greek Island alerts Hurtle to his mission in the present in his own land, not in art history. Throughout a long life, the all-seeing and lacerating eye of Hurtle, the vivisector, creates images of death (his first and last paintings), suicide and murder, art made from body parts and more. Hurtle’s art moves through phases, at first self-referential and sexual, then to observed images from life around him, often with cynical and sexual overtones, later to a search for Platonic form inherent in the object, and last into the abstract and sublime. As an artist, Hurtle is an outsider, an observer, non-judgmental yet cynical, curiously naïve, yet aware of the undercurrents of society and life. Hurtle is formed within the parameters of the nineteenth-century stereotype of the artist, with a twentieth-century veneer.

Ideas used in creating this character are diverse and complex. Imagery from German Expressionism, Expressionism and Surrealism, and from artists such as Goya, Beckman, de Maistre, Bonnard, Rouault, and Australians Gleeson and Nolan is invoked, hinted at, and described in Hurtle’s interior monologues as he sees life around him. Colour theories of Kandinsky and the Theosophists, images from classical mythology, the tradition of the self-portrait and the looking glass, the long history of prostitutes as artists’ models and inspiration, sex in various emanations are a catalyst for Hurtle’s art. The infant’s observation of his mother’s “titty bottles” through heterosexuality, homosexuality and finally paedophilia, as well as body parts as art, are all invoked to flesh out the character. White makes full use of his knowledge of art history, but skirts around the technical production of art.

Although there are references to paintings by Roy de Maistre and Sidney Nolan which White owned he makes little reference to his own art collection in the formation of Hurtle, perhaps because when _The Vivisector_ was published in 1970 he appears to have
owned only about forty-five of his final collection of two hundred and forty one artworks, an estimate based on the date of the works, as acquisition dates are not recorded.4 There has been much speculation that artists known to White were models for Hurtle. David Marr asserts that John Passmore and Godfrey Miller were the principal sources, and that the paintings were inspired by Francis Bacon’s work.5 Hewitt argues in favour of Bacon.6 White himself wrote, “All the characters in my books are myself, but they are a kind of disguise”; “The Vivisector … is about a painter, the one I was not destined to become.”8 This study is concerned with the way in which the character of the artist is developed, not with seeking specific models for the character, but past and present artists will necessarily be referred to.

Some critics have thought highly of White’s artist, Brian Keirnan arguing that Hurtle is the most fully presented character in any of White’s novels. He sees Hurtle as the “Artist as demiurge”, but I argue that Hurtle is destroyed by the frailty of his own body, and while his determination remains strong his intellect is damaged. In The Vivisector, the reader is left with an ambiguous and vague description of the last painting by an elderly, physically and mentally damaged artist, which is surely a qualification of the artist as demiurge.9 Few critics have looked specifically at the artist character in White’s oeuvre. Dutton notes that White’s literary style “vivisects reality” and thus creates the character.10 Others suggest that The Vivisector is merely a wider extension of the Ben Nicholson epigraph,11 that Hurtle is really White as he would have been as a visual artist,12 or that the gulf between man and God in The Vivisector is illustrated by the human condition or Dreck as opposed to the artist as creator, and discoverer of truth and beauty. It has also been argued that the narrator is White himself, who knows more about Hurtle than he knows about himself; the technique of free indirect discourse allows the
writer to use more sophisticated language than the artist himself would use, resulting in a narcissistic character.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{The characters}

Hurtle Duffield is the principal character, around whom White created a range of figures to support his development, and outside that a further array of characters who people the scene. Ma Duffield, Hurtle’s natural mother, is an impoverished washerwoman, in a similar mould to Mrs Godbold, the washerwoman in \textit{Riders in the Chariot}. She has a native intelligence and an instinct for survival but disappears early in the text. Because Ma knows that “It’s the edgercation that counts”\textsuperscript{14}, she scrubs the church hall to pay for Hurtle’s lessons from the rector, in a repeat of Alf Dubbo’s early education. Ma proudly introduces Hurtle to the refinements of the Courtneys, where he sees for the first time an oil painting by Boudin (Plate 29) and the chandelier, both important in his development. She cannot resist Mrs Courtney’s offer to buy him for $500: “We did it for the best” she says, “We did it for love”, but Pa Duffield, the indigent bottle-o, shows more honesty in his bitter reply, “We sold ’im like a horse.”(p.73) Alf Dubbo, as a child, was also removed from his mother, albeit in different circumstances. White may have based Hurtle’s sale to the Courtneys on the gift of Joy Hester’s and Albert Tucker’s son, Sweeney, to their patrons, John and Sunday Reid of Heide who, in return, paid Sweeney’s parents separate financial stipends and eventually adopted the boy. Sweeney was brought up as a genius, but grew into a talented, charming, fickle and depressive man, whose life ended in suicide. Hurtle’s life, subsequent to his adoption, is quite different to Sweeney’s.\textsuperscript{15}

Mrs. Courtney, who pretentiously calls herself Maman, Harry, “Father” Courtney and their hunchback daughter, Rhoda, become Hurtle’s new family. Rhoda is “the closest to him of all his ‘family’.”(p.92) Mrs Courtney is an overbearing, vain and mercenary

\textsuperscript{13} Simon During, \textit{Patrick White}, (Oxford University Press, 1996).
\textsuperscript{14} Patrick White, \textit{The Vivisector}, (Vintage, Australia, 1994), p.14. All subsequent references to this novel are to this edition and are placed in parenthesis in the text.
\textsuperscript{15} Marr, \textit{Life}, p.471. For more details see Janine Burke, \textit{Australian Gothic, A Life of Albert Tucker}, (Knopf, Random House, Australia, 2002).

National Gallery, London
society beauty to whom Hurtle is at first attracted but later finds repulsive. She is the first of the vacuous society women satirized in the novel. Harry Courtney is a weak but decent man who, nevertheless, through his connections with the land, has slightly more insight into the meaning of life than his wife does, although he cannot articulate his thoughts. Hurtle is ungrateful for the Courtney’s education, journey to Europe, and exposure to the social life of Sydney. He cannot communicate with Maman or Harry, so escapes via the First World War. Rhoda is a constant presence, either in Hurtle’s thoughts or in the flesh. Because of her deformity, she is, like Hurtle, an outsider and observer. Like Hurtle, she has no life partner, and although White maintained that symbolic references in his writing just “pop[ped] out of the collective unconscious”\textsuperscript{16}, Rhoda, like her Biblical namesake, remains a virgin, whose power of interpreting what is before her is revealed early in the book. When the child Hurtle drools over the Boudin painting in Courtney’s study, Rhoda sees him “giving himself away in front of the painting” and recognizes that he is “a prodigy”.\textsuperscript{(p.62)} Although sexual partners inspire Hurtle’s art throughout his life, it is the virgin Rhoda to whom he is drawn in childhood and old age. Sexual partners and muses include Nance the prostitute, who rescues him but is abandoned and perhaps killed, Olivia, the transvestite occasional sexual partner and patron, Hero, the goddess-like Greek with feet of clay whom he finally rejects, and Kathy the musical child prodigy who seduces him. Cutbush is the comical but pathetic homosexual grocer. All these characters contribute to Hurtle’s development and most become the subject of his art.

**Development of Hurtle’s artistic persona**

Techniques used in the development of Hurtle’s artistic persona were rehearsed in White’s previous artist characters, particularly Alf Dubbo. The complex of allusion, suggestion and innuendo relating to art is expanded in *The Vivisector* and does more to form the character than the narrative of his life, in which there are gaps of time and development. The narrative form of free indirect discourse facilitates the way in which the artist’s, and other’s, interior dialogue is interspersed with narration of the action.

As a child, Hurtle’s precocious statements could be taken at face value, but may also have deeper significance, particularly in the context of the action, for example he decides on his future: “There is drawing. There is bread.”(p.42), that is, his life will be sustained by art. He becomes bored at school so reads the Bible in which bread stands for Christ, the son of God. The epigraph by Ben Nicholson equates painting with religious experience and the search for infinity. Will the search for infinity become the bread of Hurtle’s life? In London, White may have met Nicholson, an associate of Roy de Maistre and a member of Herbert Read’s circle in the 1930s. White’s friend Margo Lewers owned a Nicholson painting, and her brother Carl Plate, whose paintings White collected, sold works by Nicholson at his Notanda Galleries, in Rowe Street, Sydney. Nicholson’s cool abstractions became world famous in the 1950s when he was involved with designing the Festival of Britain. Although his paintings are not at all similar to those produced by Hurtle, the conceptual aspect of his art could be linked to the character. This is an early example of the convoluted symbolism through which White hints at ideas that form the artist character.

**Hurtle thinks in visual images**

It is clear from the beginning that Hurtle understands the world in visual terms, which frequently depend on White’s knowledge of current and historical art. As a child Hurtle describes his father in terms of child art, “The lines looked deeper that ran from his yellow nose almost to his blue chin, … and the chocolate eyes began to flicker.”(p.17) On a more sophisticated level the description is reminiscent of Henri Matisse’s *Portrait of Madame Matisse: The Green Line* (1905)\(^\text{17}\) (Plate 30), in which the face, yellow on one side, and orange and blue on the other, is divided by a green stripe. As a child, the artist Frances, in Sue Woolfe’s *Painted Woman*, to be discussed in chapter six, also describes her father in terms of child art. In James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), the dialogue changes from childish to adult as Stephen matures. Joyce was a significant influence on White, who thought he was “practically God”.\(^\text{18}\)

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\(^\text{17}\) Henri Matisse, *Portrait of Madame Matisse, The Green Line*, 1905, 40.5 x 32.5 cm., Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen.

Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen
As a child, Hurtle sees music in visual terms, “the coloured notes trickled from the darkened shops into the light of day” (p.46); other impressions are transformed by metaphor: “his red fingers working on the veined titty bottle, like some sort of caterpillars trying for a hold on a pale fruit.” (p.47) This is the beginning of Hurtle’s creative imagination. In adolescence, beneath the persona manufactured by his artificial life as a Courtney, his intuition and artistic sensibility develop. He imagines Rhoda’s friend, Boo Holingdrake, later transformed into Olivia, in the bath as “the tropic fruit he had never tasted [who] lolled beneath the circling water” (p.148) in an image like Pierre Bonnard’s series of paintings of bathing women, for example the lush *Nude in the Bath and Small Dog* (1941-6)\(^{19}\) (Plate 31). Here the invitingly rounded pink, orange, mauve and blue nude floats with legs apart in a bath of shimmering cerulean blue with a dog replacing the voyeur.

Situations in which Hurtle finds himself are set up like well-known works of art. Hurtle joins the army, and after the war drifts to Paris then returns to Sydney. Here, roaming around in his old army issue coat he meets Nance, the prostitute, in a scene which suggests the German Expressionists’ graphic depictions of grotesque prostitutes and injured soldiers in wartime Germany, particularly Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* (1915)\(^{20}\) (Plate 32). In this image, the dissolute, wounded and inward looking soldier is shown with a background of a female nude in a seemingly outdoor setting. The lost artist, cared for by that other outcast of society, the prostitute, was rehearsed in *Riders in the Chariot* when Alf Dubbo was taken in by the prostitute Hannah who finally betrayed him, whereas, in *The Vivisector*, it is Nance, the kind prostitute and also the subject of his art, who is ultimately destroyed by Hurtle.

Hurtle’s physical needs, which draw him to Nance, triumph over his intellect so he tries to avoid her by thinking of a “Poussin he had seen in the Louvre” (p.183). Poussin has been described as the complete embodiment in the visual arts of French seventeenth-

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\(^{19}\) Pierre Bonnard, *Nude in the Bath with small Dog*, 1941-46, oil on canvas, 121.9 x 151.1 cm., Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.

\(^{20}\) Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*, 1915, Collection Allen, Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio.
Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh

32. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*, 1915
Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio
century rationalism. But Hurtle gets more than sex from Nance, he gets a subject: “Where there had been golden-pear tones, a matt charcoal had taken over, with the long black shadows of her hair flowing into the deeper shadow of hearth.”(p.187) Again this suggests Pierre Bonnard’s nudes painted in light and shadow like his Large Blue Nude, 1924 (Plate 33), in which the golden pear shaped back is contrasted with the dark spaces beneath the bed and above the window. In the following paragraph, Hurtle sees Nance in another light, and as another visual work of art, “from out of her tent of hair, her chalk-and-charcoal skin, her black lips … Shavings of golden light … on her breasts and thigh through the slats of the decrepit blind; little rosy flames … around the contours of her mouth.”(p.187) Hurtle will not be an artist in the mould of Poussin, who stands for the rationalism Hurtle wants to escape; Hurtle’s secretly sensuous nature is being translated into Expressionist works of art. Bonnard, whose paintings are reminiscent of these descriptive passages, was a forerunner of the French Fauves whose use of wild colour has been associated with Expressionism. Bonnard’s use of colour was intended to deliver an emotional message; likewise, “For Hurtle it was not the consecutive, reasoned grey of intellectual thought, but the bursts of kaleidoscopic imagery, both flowering in his mind, and filtered sensuously through his blood.”(p.188)

Later Hurtle paints Nance “With ’er bum cut in half. And tits hangun”, in her own words (p.195). This brutal image suggests the paintings of prosititutes by George Rouault, such as Circus Woman (1906) (Plate 34), in which the broadly-painted rough-faced woman is seen as a full frontal nude with legs apart, wearing only stockings and garters, while putting up her hair. Here White places Hurtle within the European convention of the prostitute as a common subject in art, stretching back to the Renaissance portrayals of Mary Magdelene. While sometimes cruel, many such images, by Henri Toulouse-Lautrec for example, reveal a sympathetic identification with the subject. Rouault

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22 Pierre Bonnard, Large Blue Nude, 1924, oil on canvas, 101 x 73 cm, private collection.
23 George Rouault, Circus Woman, 1906, watercolour and gouache, 16 1/8 x 9 in., Grenoble Musée de Peinture et Sculpture.
33. Pierre Bonnard, *Large Blue Nude*, 1924

Private Collection
34. Georges Rouault, *Circus Woman (La Saltimbanque)*, 1906

Musée de Peinture et Sculpture, Grenoble
inherited this tradition, but through his paintings of prostitutes and other outcasts of society, he sought to reveal his intensely religious attitude to the tragedy of life.

Rouault’s credo was similar to White’s, expressed in “The Prodigal Son”, and also in the Ben Nicholson epigraph, “As I see it, painting and religious experience are the same thing, and what we are all searching for is the understanding and realization of infinity.” Rouault found the deepest religious experience in painting outcasts of society, where beauty was superseded by ugliness, which revealed the generally unrecognized truth that such outcasts were the results of an uncaring and philistine social system. Was Hurtle following this mould? White’s familiarity with the work of Bonnard and Rouault at the time he wrote *The Vivisector* is not recorded, but he regarded Rouault highly enough to see the *Centenaire de Rouault* exhibition at the Musée d’Art Moderne, Paris in July, 1971, the year after *The Vivisector* was published. He described the show as “magnificent” and in the same letter mentioned that no first-rate Bonnards had been shown in Australia.²⁴ Hurtle’s paintings of Nance are not “exactly pretty” (p.196), and when she asks Hurtle to explain modern art he replies, “If you could put it in words, I wouldn’t want to paint”(p.196), White’s joking reference to what he, as the author, is doing. Nance tells Hurtle that prostitution is her “art”. But Hurtle’s art is based on prostituting his relationships, “he was seducing Nance Lightfoot into giving him, not money, not her actual body so much as its formal vessel, from which to pour his visions of life.”(p.203) Part of White’s technique in developing Hurtle’s character is to suggest ideas fleetingly and later to confirm them in the artist’s unspoken thoughts, as with this quotation.

For a reader familiar with European and Australian art, White’s descriptive language suggests a constant stream of images from art history, and as he was well informed in this area, it must be presumed intentional. In fact he piles it on, leaping from one artist to another, all within the expressionist range. For example, when Nance is gnawing at chicken flesh, Hurtle sees her as “Goya’s Saturn” (p.196). This indirect imagery gradually builds up the impression that Hurtle is indeed an artist.

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**Surreal images**

Early in the construction of Hurtle, his mental images develop overtones of Surrealism. When as a child he sees Mrs Courtney and Rhoda crying, he thinks Maman “looked as though she was about to creep on all fours, to make herself long and thin like some animal children were tormenting”(p.36), suggesting that White may have been familiar with a painting by his friend Sidney Nolan, which includes a long thin goanna in a surreal version of *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, 1952 \(^{25}\) (plate 35). The child Hurtle is unbelievably precocious. While his school mates practice pot-hooks, he draws “Death” as an elephant in a lion’s skin, a forceful image which suggests death as terrifying and impossible to resist. The image also evokes Max Ernst’s Surreal *The Elephant of the Celebes* (1921) \(^{26}\) (Plate 36), perhaps seen by White at the Tate Gallery, London, in which the elephant wears a bull’s head on its trunk, and is beckoned by a headless white female figure in the corner of the picture. In iconographical terms, the elephant represents victory, the Roman chariot of fame is drawn by elephants. The lion’s skin is an attribute of Hercules and the personification of Fortitude.\(^{27}\) Does this image imply that Hurtle would need the strength of Hercules to survive his fame as an artist, or that death would eventually triumph, as it does in Hurtle’s final sublime painting?

Hurtle’s realisation that he has been sold evokes another Surreal image. On the walls of the old shed he draws himself as a foetus in Mumma’s womb, surmounted by a chandelier, denoting light, and what Mumma calls “the Mad Eye”(p.76) which looks through “you” but is at the same time a target. ‘The eye’ may connote ‘the eye of God’ or ‘the evil eye’ but was also a significant symbol for the Surrealists. The catalogue of the exhibition on the origins of modern art, *La rime et la raison* (1984) at the Grand Palais, Paris, features a painting of an eye on the cover: Joseph Sacco, *Oeil de jeune femme* (1844) \(^{28}\) (plate 37), painted as a love token and representing the medieval

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\(^{25}\) Sidney Nolan, *Temptation of St. Anthony*, 1952, ripolin enamel on hardboard, 122 x 96.5 cm, anonymous loan to Art Gallery of South Australia.

\(^{26}\) Max Ernst, *The Elephant of the Celebes*, 1921, oil on canvas, 4 ft 1 ¼ in.x 3 ft.6 in., Tate Gallery, London.

\(^{27}\) Hall, p.193.

\(^{28}\) Joseph Sacco, *Oeil de jeune femme*, 1844, tempera on paper, 3.2 x 3.8 cm. The Ménil Collections (Houston-New York).
Art Gallery of South Australia. Anonymous loan

36. Max Ernst, *The Elephant of the Celebes*, 1921
The Elephant Trust, London
tradition in which the eye is the window of the soul. The miniature painted eye has a tiny window reflected on the iris. The Surrealist photographer Man Ray’s *Object to be Destroyed* (1932) is composed of a metronome with a cut-out photograph of an eye attached to the arm. Salvador Dali also used the eye in his diamond brooch, *The Eye of Time* ²⁹, in the form of an eye-shaped watch. That White is already setting up his character to be the all-seeing international artist is confirmed in the drawing of the ‘great eye’ after Hurtle asks his tutor if he believes in God (p.97). In his old age Hurtle paints the young pianist Kathy Volkov as a “Flowering Rosebush”, in which the face in the painting is reduced to an eye, surrounded by rose jewels, again recalling Dali’s *Eye of Time* and linking this painting to the original eye he drew as a child. When Maman pushes Hurtle into her wardrobe to absorb the “silky scented darkness” of her clothes, his only reaction is that “it was some compensation to know you could see [with his painting eye] inside the faces of people who fail to get behind your own” (p.89).

Even Hurtle’s dreams take the form of Surreal paintings. While visiting Harry Courtney’s sheep station and seeing a sheep butchered, he dreams it is Maman who butchers the sheep; with its blood “clotted amongst the sapphires”, she becomes the colour of the sheep’s intestines which are a “beautiful cave of green and blue, her blood lips opening like the heart itself” (p.106). Here White combines a surreal image of vivisection with the concept of bodily detritus and blood as the subject of art. Hurtle’s dream may have been inspired by a painting in White’s collection by James Gleeson, *Synaptic Displacement* (1958) ³⁰ (plate 38) which depicts a free interpretation of internal organs of a living creature. Gleeson describes his work as “a complete reaction” to the concept of beauty, “ugliness is also a part of life” because, in nature, the division between beauty and ugliness is completely arbitrary. ³¹ *Synaptic Displacement* may be related to Gleeson’s personal search for identity and, by analogy, Hurtle’s dream takes place at the beginning of his own search for identity as an artist. Hurtle’s self portrait, also signifying a search for identity, is described as “sprout…[ing] jagged diagonal teeth, womanly

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37. Joseph Sacco, *Oeil de jeune femme*, 1844
The Ménil Collections, Houston-New York

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Gift of Patrick White 1970
gyrating breasts, the holes for titivation” (p.248) and so on, in a Surreal image like James Gleeson’s *Citadel*, 1945.  

(plate 22) Gleeson’s Surreal figure, not a self portrait, presents a maggot-eaten, one-eyed face with a small hand protruding from a mouth with decayed teeth; this work is regarded by René Free as a milestone in Australian art, representing “the death instincts triumphant”.  

At the end of his life Hurtle returns to Surrealism, in his secret night paintings. The Surreal horror of rotting flesh, rats, his dead mistresses and thoughts of his own death suggest not only Gleeson’s Surrealism, but also the black paintings of Goya, similarly done at the end of his life. (p.519) White himself had a particular enthusiasm for Goya. 

It is possible that White saw *The International Surrealist Exhibition* at the New Burlington Galleries, London, showing from 12 June to 4 July 1936, and he may have discussed Surrealism with de Maistre, whose work exhibited obvious Surrealistic tendencies in the 1930s.  

**Light**  
As discussed in relation to Dark’s formation of the artist figure, light is paramount in visual art. Hurtle’s feeling for light as a visionary entity is similar to that of Dark’s artist although it does not have connotations of Vitalism. Hurtle first sees the chandelier “which blazed up in him” (p.28) at the Courtney’s house. This becomes a private image, which inspires his adult painting. The chandelier he draws at school has wind blowing through it, suggesting light and movement like the wind in Alf Dubbo’s Deposition painting. The light Hurtle notices on a trip to the family sheep station is perhaps a glancing reference to pastoral landscapes endorsed as “official” Australian art by the government of the day, but not taken up by Hurtle. Although Hurtle is preoccupied with light and the search for what he sees as truth, it is the literal light from Nance’s torch, shining on his self portrait, which reveals the truth of its failure as a painting. (p.248) 

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32 James Gleeson, *Citadel*, 1945, oil on composition board, 182.5 x 122 cm. National Gallery of Australia.  
Again, when Hurtle and Hero are leaving the Greek island, the silver blue light shining on the Aegean sea illuminates the wings of an ordinary hen scratching in the dirt, turning them to gold. Hero sees only dirt, but Hurtle, now a mature artist, makes the connection between the artful light of Greece and the ordinary but beautiful hen. He could not explain it but he thought he could paint it (p.392). This light endows Hurtle with White’s own attitude to the extraordinary behind the ordinary36, as “The golden hen flashed her wings: not in flight; she remained consecrated to this earth even while scurrying through illuminated dust.”(p.393) Even after Hurtle has suffered a stroke, he “dare[s] light the fireworks still inside him” (p.562). Through these and other changing allusions, Hurtle’s awareness of light is embedded in his approach to art, not always as light in the actual paintings, but more often light as a concept. White’s method of suggestion and allusion adds richness to the character but also allows the reader to take up these allusions or gloss over them.

**Detritus of the human body as art**

The theme of bodily excretion as art, and its relationship with Modernist practice, which was discussed in the last chapter, is expanded in *The Vivisector*, and appears constantly in Hurtle’s art and consciousness. Rhoda, who may be Hurtle’s true muse, introduces the idea when she impinges on Hurtle’s image of her mother as a lizard (or Sidney Nolan’s goanna), by spitting at her (p.36). A direct link between bodily excretion and art is created when Rhoda sees Hurtle looking at the Boudin painting; he calls her a “turd” but thinks that he would like to draw her.

When Hurtle’s drunken tutor fails to return, Hurtle intuitively knows he has committed suicide. Foreshadowing Frances in *Painted Woman*, he must express himself in the only medium available. He takes red paint from the Courneys’ garage to paint the death of the tutor on his bedroom wall, showing blood running out of his corpse (p.100), like the blood in Alf Dubbo’s Deposition painting. Later, when Hurtle bashes the “bunch of larries” so that their faces are bloodied like tomatoes, he thinks of blood as liquid pencils (p.124), again linking blood and art. This linkage also occurs in the surreal dream of

36 Patrick White in Flynn and Brennan, “The Prodigal Son”, p.15.
Maman as vivisector where, in the use of blood and guts as the subject of a work of art, the idea of making meaning from other than traditional beauty is introduced. In a drunken fury, Hurtle smears his self-portrait with his own faeces, when he realizes the painting is a failure. Although this could be seen as a childish act of loathing for his past, which he has naïvely tried to capture in the portrait, it may also be read as a critique of the self-glorifying painting with a medium which is a real and tactile part of life.

White’s concentration on “shit” in Hurtle’s art is not only a reference to a recognized trend in art making, although White would have been amongst the minority of Australians who recognized this trend in the 1960s, but also relates to White’s belief about his own practice, as already mentioned. After seeing the grocer, Cutbush, masturbating while spying on lovers in the bushes, Hurtle says that he will paint “A great white arse shitting on a pair of lovers – as they swim through a sea of lantana – dislocating themselves.”(p.261) It has been argued that the reference to shit in The Vivisector is related to the paintings of White’s acquaintance, and de Maistre’s protégé, Francis Bacon, whose work has been described as “Painting nourished on all that indicates life, rooted in excess, in the overblown, in what spills out from the body, even excreta. Man vomiting, man slumped on a toilet seat.” The connections between White, de Maistre and Bacon are extensively analysed by Johnson and Marr, who notes that White saw Bacon in London in 1958 and visited his exhibition at Marlborough Fine Art Gallery in 1963. Marr also asserts that Duffield’s paintings are Francis Bacon’s. Johnson is not so convinced, while Hewitt quotes both writers, but agrees with Marr. White may have absorbed some ideas from Bacon’s paintings, but did not like the 1963 show at the Marlborough and, in spite of Bacon’s world renown as an artist, described Bacon as someone “I used to know … in my youth (he once designed a perfect desk for me) but I haven’t seen him recently: any time I have been in London I have felt he was too taken up with other things to want to see anybody from the past.” This does not suggest that White was impressed with Bacon’s painting. When White knew Bacon

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personally in the 1930s, he was still unknown as an artist and engaged primarily in
designing furniture, although also receiving some art instruction from de Maistre. White
did not own paintings by Bacon but did own a major painting by James Gleesoon, which
included human detritus among its subject matter. The subject of excreta in art is
strongly posited in Riders in the Chariot, published before White saw Bacon’s
Marlborough show. As discussed in the previous chapter, use of excreta in art had
become a recognized Modernist practice, particularly in European art, long before
Francis Bacon took it up. Neither Marr nor Hewitt explore the antecedents of this type of
art, assuming that Bacon’s sensational paintings were Hurtle’s on the premise that there
was a slight acquaintance between White and Bacon, and ignoring White’s extensive
knowledge of both modern and historical European art. The following discussion of
Hurtle’s paintings and concepts shows that White endowed him primarily with ideas taken
from the German Expressionists, the Surrealists and, at the end of his life, the American
colour field painters.

Faeces follow Hurtle to the Greek islands, where Hero expects to find representations of
the body and blood of Christ when she and Hurtle visit the chapel of a hermit priest.
Instead they find only a human turd beside the altar in the abandoned chapel. Hurtle does
not find truth or inspiration either in Christianity, antiquity or Greek myths, although they
were seminal sources in the development of Western art. He discovers that God is merely
the “formal necessity on which depended every figure in the afternoon’s iconography”
(p.388). Sustaining the manure metaphor and suggesting that it is in “the turd” that he
finds aspects of “the truth”, he discovers that his own art is “a process of self-fertilization
which germinated more freely in the natural conditions”(p.391) of his own derelict
Sydney house. Hero’s cry “Dreck! Dreck! The Germans express it best. Well I will learn
to live with such Dreck as I am: to find a reason and purpose in this Dreck” (p. 392) may
be an allusion to German Expressionism, which White draws on in this novel, as well as a
reference to the human condition of which she is a part, “earth to earth, ashes to ashes,
dust to dust”.41 Later, in Hurtle’s reminiscence of Hero, whom he thinks he has killed,


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The Menil Collection, Houston
but who really dies of cancer, beauty and excrement are again combined, “The gulls still wheeling in beautiful balance, were diving for something, possibly sewage” (p.403) As Hurtle degenerates into a stroke ridden old age, he paints pot boilers with trite titles such as ‘Old Fool having Bladder Trouble’ (p. 491), while at the same time painting gothic horrors, of rotting flesh, rats and so on, referred to previously. Some references to excrement are White’s jokes, which become more frequent towards the end of this book. As an example, at Hurtle’s retrospective exhibition, he sees the triumphant, “radiant look” on the art gallery director’s face, which makes him think of a face painted on a “human arse”. This is not an original idea. René Magritte’s Surreal *The Rape* (1934)\(^\text{42}\) is a portrait of a woman’s face, composed of a female torso, with pubic hair as the mouth. (plate 39)

### Vivisection

White’s snide satirisation of Sydney society-lady charity workers sees Maman adopting vivisection as her “charity work”. She abhors cruelty to animals, although she doesn’t like dogs, and wishes to save them from “being sacrificed to science – living animals cut up – in experiments” (p.102). Maman confides this to Hurtle after whipping him for destroying the wall paper with his expressionist painting of the dead tutor, thus establishing a link between Hurtle’s art and vivisection and inspiring his Surreal dream of Maman herself as a vivisector. The idea of vivisection is further enforced in the scene in London, where Maman, Hurtle and Rhoda see, in a shop window, a stuffed dog with its guts exposed, clamped to an operating table. The scene is reinforced by Maman’s performance, screeching and attracting a crowd in the street (p.135). Hurtle’s leaning towards vivisection is suggested by his drawing of the vivisected dog on the dinner menu and his remark, “I was trying to work something out”, to which the subtle Rhoda replies, “You’re always trying to work something out – on somebody. I know you”. (p.137)

Although not directly spelled out, it is implied that, from this point, Hurtle himself becomes the vivisector, dissecting the live subjects of his painting, yet it is plain that Hurtle and others are aware of what he is doing. As Nance tells Hurtle her life story, he

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\(^{42}\) René Magritte, *The Rape*, 1934, oil on canvas, 73.4 x 54.6 cm., The Menil Collection, Houston.
realizes how much he has profited from his cruel dissection of her with knives of light, even in his anthropomorphic paintings in which the curvaceous hills resemble her body (p.246). In a review of these paintings, a critic writes about Hurtle’s “meticulous dissection and abstraction of nature” (p.233). This becomes the pattern for Hurtle’s art in which his brutally penetrating eye, searching for the truth, is likened to the vivisector’s blade. Rhoda is the only character who understands Hurtle’s predilection because she “was born vivisected” (p.445). On deciding to live at Hurtle’s house, in their old age, she remarks, “I might be vivisected afresh, in the name of truth – or art.”(p.445)

The mirror image and German Expressionism
The mirror image and its relationship to the self-portrait, which played a part in the formation of Alf Dubbo’s artistic persona in Riders in the Chariot, is expanded in The Vivisector. The ambivalence of the mirror image is foreshadowed in the gilt-framed dining room mirror, when Hurtle and Rhoda dine after seeing the vivisected dog. The ill-assorted pair are reflected as they seem, “rich, protected and overdressed”, not as they are, merely accessories to Maman’s life (p.136). The theme is further developed, when, after a crisis of confidence about his relationship with Nance, his failed painting of her and his unsuccessful self-portrait, Hurtle rushes into the bush, where he sees his image reflected in a swamp near his hut. This image is undeniably that of Narcissus, who repulsed the nymph Echo and was punished by Aphrodite, who caused him to fall in love with his own reflected image. Narcissus’ failed attempts to approach the beautiful object he saw reflected in the water led to his despair and death.43 This reference foreshadows Barbara Hanrahan’s use of the Narcissus myth in her portrayal of the artist. Hurtle concludes that he does not know himself, yet the art dealer sees Hurtle reflected in his anthropomorphic paintings, and hopes he is rewarded by “the sight of himself on display”(p.233), which may be merely White’s play on words but also reveals his method of hints and suggestion in building the character.

The mirror image now plays an increasingly important role in establishing Hurtle’s identity. After a visit to Nance, Hurtle is confronted by his leering Dopplegänger, but it is

unclear whether this is a distorted mirror image or his self portrait. He repaints the portrait, glancing furtively from one mirror (the portrait) to the other. Returning to the self portrait, Hurtle looks into the glass, sees his past, recognizes an “almost voluptuous love” for his own image, but sees that the self-portrait is only partly truthful. Nance’s beam of light confirms the image as “devilish; furtive, ingrown … and worse … bad aesthetically” (p.236). When Nance is killed, falling into the rocks near Hurtle’s hut, he hauls the self portrait into a rocky gully, in an attempt to free himself from the past and Nance. In this intentionally ironic passage, Nance is sacrificed in a vague parallel to the Narcissus myth which, together with the painting and disposal of the self portrait, marks the end of one phase in Hurtle’s development.

The self-portrait is a statement of the identity of the artist and is unique in that the artist has the opportunity to present himself as he wishes to be seen; but it can never be a photographic likeness, because the artist cannot look at his mirror image and paint it at the same time. This interval allows for a variation between what the painter sees and what is painted. Therefore, it may be suggested that Hurtle will never find the truth he is searching for in a self portrait. However, artists do not necessarily present the truth about themselves in a self portrait any more than they do in a commissioned portrait. A graphic example of this is a photograph of the German Expressionist painter George Grosz working on his self-portrait (Plate 40). The portrait shows a strongly muscled Grosz in a commanding pose with his right hand raised in a defiant gesture, while the side view of the painter in the photograph shows a slight stooped man, leaning towards the painting and delicately making a brush stroke. When Hurtle buys Rhoda a fur coat, she remarks that the Jewish furrier, Mrs Grünblatt, “used to be acquainted with a painter … Grosz – or something like it.” In reply, Hurtle snorts “ ‘Grosz’ … if Mrs Grünblatt was of the school of Grosz, he could visualize her mental drawings of Rhoda.”(p.478) Max Beckmann, also a German Expressionist, painted numerous self portraits, but always in disguise, as harlequin, prophet, king or urban socialite for example (plate 41). It is

40. Grosz at work on his self-portrait

41. Max Beckmann, *Self-Portrait in Tuxedo, 1927*

Busch Reisinger Museum, Harvard University
possible that White, a German scholar, saw the exhibition 20th Century German Art in 1938 at the New Burlington Galleries in London, sponsored by Roland Penrose and Herbert Read, whom White had met. The centrepiece of the exhibition was Beckmann’s triptych, Temptation (1936-37). The painting was conceived as an alternative view of “Degenerate” German artists and widely reproduced in the English press. Each panel includes a large single eye, a symbol which White adopted in creating Hurtle’s artistic persona. At that exhibition Beckmann gave a lecture entitled, “On my painting”. He spoke of the purpose of art as “the quest for our own identity which transpires the eternal and obscure path we are bound to travel” and the need to decipher “the self … which is the greatest and obscurest secret in the world”. Hurtle’s aspirations are similar but, while Beckmann did not directly reveal himself through his self portraits, Hurtle, in searching for his identity through his self portrait, was without artifice. Whether White was aware of Beckmann’s lecture or not, he and Beckmann had many ideas in common. Beckmann’s lecture referred to the spiritual realm, the search for the universal that lies beneath surface reality. Like his contemporaries Wassily Kandinsky and Kasimir Malevich, he was interested in Theosophy and owned a copy of Mme. Blavatsky’s The Secret Doctrine (1897). Like the Symbolist painters and writers, he worked by suggestion and indirection and his protest against the status quo was religious. In his self portrait, Hurtle is searching, not for universal truth as later, but for the truth about himself; he does not realize until Nance shows him that he has revealed more than he wanted others to see. In painting the self portrait, White moves Hurtle one more step in his development as an artist. Years later, Hurtle sees a different image in the glass. He is uncharacteristically dressed up to visit Olivia, and on seeing his backview in the glass, he thinks his suit is a masterpiece of cutting. Like Beckmann’s self portraits, now Hurtle’s image is protected by disguise (p.271).

46 Max Beckman, Temptation, 1936-37, oil on canvas, wing panels 215.5 x 100 cm., central panel 200 x 170 cm., Staatsgalerie moderner Kunst, Munich.
49 Selz, op.cit., pp.7,8. This lecture was later published in Centaur, (Amsterdam, 1946), Vol.1, No.6, pp.287-292.
50 Selz, op.cit., p.8.
White’s interest in German Expressionism is confirmed by his remark to David Marr that Bertold Brecht, Frank Wedekind and the German Expressionists influenced his play *The Ham Funeral* (1947).\(^{51}\) The schematic, expressionist *Ham Funeral* centres on the search for identity and artistic independence of the Young Man, a poet.

The mirror image is compounded with hints of symbolism in the passage where Hurtle looks into a mirror and sees Olivia lying behind him on his bed, watching him paint Rhoda as the Pythoness at Tripod (p.302). In one glance, Hurtle sees Olivia, the mirror, himself and the painting of the Pythoness. A mirror with a snake is the attribute of Prudence, denoting her self-knowledge, suggesting Rhoda; the image also denotes “vanity”, and when reflecting Satan’s image, it denotes pride.\(^{52}\) At her next party Hurtle sees Olivia as Satanic. Her “méche had divided, and was standing erect like a pair of horns” (p.309). Hurtle is proud that his portrait of Rhoda was “so translucent”(p.304) suggesting that he still sees “through a glass darkly”.\(^{53}\) Hurtle, still afflicted with vanity and pride, may never find the truth in the mirror image. Still searching, at the end of his life he again sees himself in the mirror, now as a surreal image, “half a vulture half an old buckled umbrella rustily clawing a trembling paintbrush”(p.569), recalling Goya’s *Los Caprichos* (1799), portrayals of madness and aberrant society, in which some of the prints include witches in the shape of predatory birds. The image also suggests the nineteenth-century quotation from Lautréamont, much favoured by the Surrealists, which describes the “chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella”.\(^{54}\) Is this Hurtle’s fate? Although there is no evidence that White read Lautréamont, his bizarre umbrella metaphor suggests this.

White’s autobiography *Flaws in the Glass* (1981) opens with a distorted mirror image of White as the adolescent, isolated from his family. Lacan posits the theory that failure of

\(^{51}\) Marr, *Life*, p.252.  
\(^{52}\) Miller, op.cit., p.172.  
\(^{53}\) Hall’s Dictionary, p.254.  
maternal love leaves a Narcissistic wound. Hurtle’s Narcissistic reflection in the pond after Nance’s death is a turning point in his life, when he loses the earth mother, Nance, through his failure to love her, having earlier lost the love of Mumma who sold him. The mirror images in The Vivisector appear to follow Lacan’s theory of the mirror image as the stage of the formation of self when the infant begins to recognize its own image, a state which anticipates “future mastery”. In some cases the mirror stage is permanent and the identity of the person relies on the continued regard of the reflection of self, which becomes the “desired image”. The mirror image of Hurtle, his reflection in the pond, the mirror image of his self portrait, the reflection of himself painting Rhoda and the self as umbrella may represent his “desired images”, although not, perhaps, the truth which he seeks.

The imagery of German Expressionism appears frequently, beginning with Hurtle’s early painting of the bloody death of the tutor, but also in the imagery of situations in which he finds himself, like his meeting with Nance, the prostitute, in a park. Olivia’s decadent parties, where guests are “hectic, iridescent, fluttering fly-by-nights … rag bag (of gin soaked) snippets … fritters” (p.296) are seen by Hurtle in the same way that Max Beckmann depicts German society, in works such as Portrait de groupe au bar Eden (1923), in which a man’s hand holding a cigarette rests on the bosom of a vacuous looking woman, a man stares into space and another woman knowingly looks over her shoulder. None of the figures looks at each other or out at the viewer. While he was a student in Germany, White may have seen Beckmann’s Dance in Baden-Baden (1923) at the Staatsgalerie in Munich. (plate 42) Yet another image from German Expressionism occurs when Hurtle meets the music critic who has spent a decadent winter in Berlin, with a series of little girls. Via these hints and evocative imagery, both in Hurtle’s thoughts and paintings, White subtly moulds Hurtle’s persona as an artist.

42. Max Beckmann, *Dance in Baden-Baden*, 1923

Staatsgalerie moderner Kunst, Munich
The use of myth and other symbolic imagery

White wrote that he “may have arrived at certain conclusions via other writers” and also referred to “the collective unconscious” of Carl Jung, who he thought had “a lot of answers”. Despite his denial of any intentional use of symbols such as the eye, the chandelier, light, and the mirror in the formation of Hurtle’s persona, still more symbolic images are introduced in Hurtle’s life, some as isolated but quite obvious examples. Hurtle betrays Nance by selling his painting “Marriage of Light”, inspired by their pseudo wedding night and, while sitting in the shade of fig leaves, he gives Nance a ring of two intertwined gilt serpents. The iconography of the snake is extensive. It could represent either Satan, the tempter of Adam and Eve, a phallic symbol, fertility and more. The imagery of snakes in conjunction with the fig leaf suggests these three meanings and perhaps also that Hurtle as well as Nance is a prostitute. Hurtle uses the balance of the money to buy a plot of bush where he can paint and escape from Nance. The ‘gilt’ ring may be a pun on ‘guilt’, but also suggests cheapness. In another isolated example, during a period of brooding inactivity after his stroke, Hurtle sees a rat sitting at the end of his bed. The rat represents decay and thus time passing. The sight of it causes Hurtle to open the shutters and let in the light and life. A young girl comes to the door and he begins to draw her.

White’s informed interest in Greek culture, partly due to his Greek partner, is revealed in a close reading of The Vivisector. The title, “Pythoness at Tripod”, which Hurtle gives his painting of Rhoda before he starts working on it, refers to the Greek myth of the pythoness as a woman possessing a familiar spirit whose words she utters: a soothsayer or witch. The tripod is a three-legged vessel found at the Shrine of Apollo at Delphi, on which the priestess seats herself to deliver oracles. That Hurtle thinks of Rhoda as the mouthpiece of the deity is confirmed later when his painting shows Rhoda’s “dedication to her oracles.”(p.292). Hewitt argues that the Rhoda paintings are based on Francis Bacon’s triptych of the Furies, which contains a tripod; however, this seems unlikely as,

58 Hall, op.cit., p.260.
59 Hall, op.cit., p.285.
although the Furies are sometimes represented with snakes, they are always winged women. Bacon’s Furies are based on de Maistre’s Figure by Bath, c.1937.

Some, but not all, unmistakable references to Greek myths, however, lead to a dead end. The affair between Hurtle and Hero is laden with pseudo mythology. When Olivia is arranging a meeting between Hurtle and the Greek matron Hero, she sends him bottles of Hymettus honey, one of which contains the corpse of a bee, which Hurtle eats. This appears to be dangerous territory. The bee is an attribute of the Greek bishop John Chrysostom, noted for his mellifluous words. Hymettus honey comes from a mountain overlooking Athens, which at times attains a purple glow, said to be when Socrates drank the hemlock. The mythological Hero, a priestess of Aphrodite, threw herself into the sea when her lover drowned in the Hellespont. All these references lead to dead ends while at the same time building up the character of Hurtle, by inferring that he is aware of classical mythology. White does not use mythological references with the high seriousness of Barbara Hanrahan. His doomful hints are extended and mixed with irony and jokiness when Hero’s dog, Flora (the licentious Italian goddess of flowers), is ominously sick (p.310). But when Hero at last meets Hurtle, she fears that “she was intended as a sacrifice” (p.313). Using suggestion and allusion, like Rouault and Beckman did, White is moving Hurtle back into a European scene, but also playing games with the reader, suggesting false leads to a dead end. Hero is described as “a work of art” (p.310), viewed by Hurtle as a terra-cotta figurine (p.311), examples of which White could have seen in the Athens National Archaeological Museum, which displays a wealth of Neolithic clay goddess figurines. White is here taking Hurtle back to the foundations of western art. As Hero approaches Hurtle he sees her as “Cycladic”, but she is “still a myth rather than a name” (p.321). The Cycladic civilization, which was scattered across the Aegean, produced masterpieces of marble sculpture, the flattened and stylized female figures being especially important in their influence on modern sculpture.

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60 Harvey, op.cit., p.181.
61 Johnson, English Years, pp. 22, 24.
62 Hall, op.cit., p.42.
63 Harvey, op.cit., pp.218,205.
43. Cycladic female figure, 2800-2200 B.C.

National Museum, Athens
for example *Female Figure from Arorgos* (2800-2200 BC)\(^{64}\) (Plate 43). This refers to the geneses of both western art and Modernism as well as prefiguring Hurtle’s odyssey to the Greek islands. Various allusions and puns suggest that Hurtle is now in his classical period, implied by Hero’s face becoming a “cast … of an ugliness to rouse the imagination”\(^{p.346}\). Her torso had the proportions “of an archaic sculpture”, and he drew her in the form of “a stone head lying in the dust beside the formal, stone body”\(^{p.346}\). The affair with Hero and journey to Greece, where Hurtle finds that his art is firmly rooted in himself and his own country, is another turning point in Hurtle’s development as an artist. White leads Hurtle (and the reader) down a dead end, which reveals that the ancient myths and religions on which art was founded are no longer relevant to modern art. Hurtle moves from a self-referential concept of art to the more philosophical position that beauty, or art, exists in the ordinary. Instead of remaining in Greece, White himself returned to Sydney in 1947/8, to live in and write about Australia. “I was just fascinated by the idea of returning to one’s origins after exploring the ‘world’ and finding in those origins the perfection for which one had been looking”, he wrote.\(^{65}\)

The symbolic use of blue, its history and connotations, have been discussed in relation to Alf Dubbo’s art. As Hurtle reaches his peak, or death, he has a stroke and sees a vision of the sky, which is an unattainable blue. This blue becomes his ultimate aim. His last painting, a colour field work, because he can no longer control his painting arm, is to be in the same unattainable blue as Alf Dubbo’s last painting. Hurtle is finally able to articulate the name of the unattainable blue, “indigo”. This is the blue that Kandinsky, who was not alone in his attitude to colour, believed “calls man towards the infinite, awakening in him a desire for the pure and finally, for the supernatural,”\(^{66}\) a description with sublime overtones. The Theosophist Annie Besant’s *Thought-Forms* (1901), translated into German in 1908, preceded Kandinsky’s *On the Spiritual in Art* of 1911-12. White may have read her work in which she argued that:

> The different shades of blue all indicate religious feeling, and range through all hues from the dark brown-blue of selfish devotion, or the pallid grey-blue of

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\(^{66}\) Kandinsky in Lindsay and Vergo, op.cit., p.182.
fetish-worship tinged with fear, up to the rich deep clear colour of heartfelt adoration and the beautiful pale azure of that highest form which implies self-renunciation and union with the divine.67

It may be that, in using “indigo” blue for Hurtle’s last painting, White was indulging in another pun. When Hurtle lay on the pavement after falling in a stroke, he gazed at the sky where he recognized “a longstanding secret relationship” (p.616), suggesting that, for Hurtle, the blue sky represents the God he has sought all his life. As he makes his last brush stroke he cries out in his stroke impaired voice, “I-N-D-I-G-O” (p.617) which could be an aphasic version of “In God I” but also suggests “I die”, “I die in God” and “I go”, inferring that the subject of this last blue painting is God, or love, and his own death. Thus the final statement of Hurtle’s art encompasses love and death, the eternal subjects of art.

Although perhaps not considered by White, indigo is associated with manual work, being the Indian cloth dyers’ blue, while ultramarine, the most expensive blue made from lapis lazuli, is used in religious painting for the gown of the virgin, as a sign of the wealth of the patron, and thus signifies power, wealth and organized religion, none of which Hurtle identified with.

**Hurtle’s paintings**

Hurtle is a prolific painter, whom many readers have found convincing. Professor Bernard Smith, in his definitive *Australian Painting* (1971), published a year after *The Vivisector* appeared, used an excerpt from it as the epigraph to Chapter 11, “The Expressive and Symbolic Styles of the 1960s”:

> On the other hand, there were mornings when the mere physical pains throbbed higher, to break into life, or live pain. He dabbed and scratched frantically. He reached out and drew his brush across the hard surface in a broad blaze of conviction and watched the few last drops of fulfillment spurt and trickle and set forever. He was learning to paint: but as he tottered on the crude block groping for some more persuasive ways in which to declare his beliefs, it seemed that he might never master the razor-edge where simplicity unites with subtlety. (p.569)

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67 Gage, op.cit., p.193.
Hewitt drew attention to this passage\textsuperscript{68}, comparing it to Francis Bacon’s painting. However, the passage describes Hurtle trying to paint after suffering a cerebral accident. Was Bernard Smith, whose dislike of abstraction is well documented, suggesting ironically that all abstract expressionist painters were damaged like Hurtle? Or was the passage chosen because it evokes the artist striving to “declare his beliefs” in a “spurt and trickle” style? The excerpt is one of the few passages in \textit{The Vivisector} describing how the artist works. But even here concepts predominate, and it is concepts that White uses to describe Hurtle’s paintings, rather than descriptions of the content of the work or the method of production. Conversations with Sidney Nolan, White’s close friend for many years, doubtless contributed to White’s understanding of the mind of the visual artist. In a letter of 1943 to Sunday Reed, Nolan wrote, “a painting is a thing one is able to make, after things – emotions, mental complexities … are stabilized.”\textsuperscript{69} White consulted Nolan about \textit{The Vivisector}, requesting him “to read it to see how close or remote I am from the workings of a painter’s mind. I should hate to find he is only a painter in a novel like most of the painters in fiction.”\textsuperscript{70} Here White may have been referring to his own characterization of Alf Dubbo, who was more of a cipher than a fully drawn character.

From the start Hurtle is set up as a painter, through his encounter with the Courtneys’ Boudin painting. Examining it avidly, he feels the texture of the paint, and is so engrossed that he would have licked it if it were not out of reach of his tongue.(p.62) The French landscape painter Eugéne Boudin is an undemanding artist whose work would blend with Maman Courtney’s interior decoration, and seems a low key figure to inspire Hurtle’s career, but as in most of White’s allusions, there is more to it. Corot called Boudin the “Master of the skies”\textsuperscript{71}, which links the Boudin, the first painting Hurtle encounters, with his last painting of a celestial blue. When Olivia acquires the Boudin, Hurtle remembers the childish landscape he painted in France, where the “grands peintres” had worked, and how the light on the landscape illuminated Rhoda’s nudity with its “faintest sliver of pink shining in the fork of the estuary” (p.131), his first

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{68} Hewitt, op.cit., p.77.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Marr, \textit{Letters}, p.321, letter to Sidney Nolan, 16 December 1967.
\item \textsuperscript{71} Osborne, op.cit., quoted in Boudin entry, p.152.
\end{itemize}
intimation of the anthropomorphic nature of landscape. That a teenage boy can comprehend this sophisticated concept suggests that Hurtle is being proposed as the artist as genius. It may be that the Boudin is used as a marker in Hurtle’s development. His affair with Nance catalyzed the conjunction between his need to paint, his sexual desire, and his original vision of the chandelier, which is now identified with radiant light. Hurtle’s kaleidoscopic impression of their pseudo-wedding night is the catalyst he has been waiting for. It is an end and a beginning. After the wedding night he dreams of the Boudin, the first real painting he ever saw. Now he is ready to make a real painting, explained in the text through his feelings and concepts. Nance is the muse, “they solved together equations which might have defeated his tentative mind, and which probably never entered Nance’s consciousness”(p.210), but the physical action of painting does not feature.

The intuition of the genius and the search for some god-like entity is also suggested when young Hurtle realizes that his painting of the tutor is not just “a game of his own imagination” but “a wrestling match with someone stronger”( p.100). But Hurtle’s attitude to god fluctuates, as suggested when he explains to Olivia and Hero that, in his painting “The Lantana Lovers”, the masturbating grocer is only mildly rotten in “the light of the Divine Destroyer” (p.345). It is clear that Hurtle understands the concepts of art making from an early age, illustrated by his progress from childish Surreal paintings, which included death as an elephant, the eye, death of the tutor, and Maman as vivisector, to his budding ability to critique his own work, when he realizes that the “live red” of the “dead tutor” painting should be black. White uses Nolan’s idea of “emotions and mental complexities” as the key to Hurtle’s painting and as a way of avoiding physical descriptions of the paintings. A progression through Hurtle’s paintings reveals his growing knowledge of art history. Apparently through instinct he paints his Surreal images, he introduces the sophisticated concept of art made from human detritus, and it is even suggested that he is well read in English literature, when he paints Nance in “vegetable colours”(p.201) in another of White’s puns, referring to the line in Andrew Marvell’s “To his coy mistress”: “My vegetable love should grow/Vaster than empires
44. Francisco Goya, *The sleep of reason produces monsters, Caprichos, 1799*  
engraving
and more slow”. We are told that Hurtle reads, mostly French and German literature (p.157), and that he destroys the drawings he did of the war in France because they resembled Goyas (p.158). In a Goyaesque mode, Hurtle paints his dream of Hero and her tragic, human-looking, writhing and drowning cats, disposed of by her husband in the same way, he dreams, that he was disposed of by Pa Duffield. This image is reminiscent of Goya’s *Los Caprichos* (1799), a series of eighty engravings. The title page, *El sueno de la razon produce monstrous* (The sleep of reason produces monsters), is inscribed by Goya, “the imagination abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters; it is also the mother of the arts and gives birth to their miracles.” (Plate 44) In a note accompanying his preparatory sketch for this engraving, Goya wrote of his intention “to banish harmful thoughts and perpetuate with this work of *Caprices* the solid testimony of truth.”72 White was passionate about Goya, writing “All those Goyas – I feel I want to eat them, and bury my face in them, and sniff them up, they are so good. And now I am filled with a rage to write just like he painted.”73 When Hurtle first saw the Boudin, “he would have liked to lick the tempting paint” (p.61), paralleling Goya’s effect on White. Goya and all the painters with whom Hurtle can be identified had the common stated aim of the search for truth, but when Hero starts simpering about their love, he disparagingly fears she might turn into a Boucher 74 (p.359), an artist with whom Hurtle would not identify, whose painting embodies the frivolity and superficiality of mid-eighteenth century France. For a reader familiar with European and Australian art, White’s descriptive language suggests a constant stream of images from art history.

Hurtle’s paintings and his creation as an artist are only inspired in passing by world shattering political upheavals such as the first World War in which he fights as a soldier. His destruction of his Goyaesque war drawings suggests that he already knows that his art will ultimately be based on private emotion rather than public catastrophe. He is not a theoretical artist, concerned to express intellectual and philosophical argument through his painting although, through expressing his own life in the twentieth century, he

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74 François Boucher (1703-1770).
necessarily expresses aspects of that society, even if not apparently intentionally. At different stages of his life he paints in varying expressionistic styles, but there is no chronological progression through styles, a technique to be discussed in the work of Barbara Hanrahan. Rather, various expressionist styles are adapted to the artist’s development. For example, Hurtle dreams a surreal painting when he is tormented by the adolescent dilemma of establishing an independent personality. He paints Nance austerely because he cannot yet manage to control the wild (fauve?) colours their passion evokes in him. His references to her in visual terms such as “the changing architecture of her face” (p.192) may be an attempt by White to vary the emphasis on the conceptual. Hurtle’s education as an artist is programmed by his life rather than by a rational system of practice and study. Like his creator, Patrick White, he is intuitive rather than reasoned.

Nance visits Hurtle in his bush retreat where he is unsuccessfully attempting to paint rocks on his property. He no longer sees her as the muse. “Ashes of light had begun to fill the gorge … the heaped up branches of the uppermost trees blazed in the last of the bonfire” (p.225) as they part. When Hurtle paints the rocky landscape from memory and imagination, not from observation, the rocks become anthropomorphic, suggesting sleeping animals or Nance’s retreating buttocks, clothed in salmon coloured satin, lit up by a “shower of milky seed or light”. He calls the painting “Animal rock forms”.

White is not specific about time in this novel, but as Hurtle is a soldier in World War I, the rock paintings must be dated in the late 1920s or early 30s, making Hurtle’s painting ahead of its time in relation to Australian art generally. The expansive pastoral works of Arthur Streeton exemplify the prevailing Australian landscape style of the 1920s and 30s. There were also landscape painters engaged with light, such as Elioth Gruner (1882-1939), *Morning Light* (1930)\(^\text{75}\), and others who painted panoramic rocky landscapes in simplified Modernist terms, like Hans Heyson (1877-1968), *The Land of the Oratunga*.

\(^{75}\) Elioth Gruner, *Morning Light*, 1930, oil on wood, 30.3 x 40.4 cm, Bendigo Art Gallery.
45. Roland Wakelin, *The Skillion, Terrigal*, c.1928

Collection J. Murray
(1932)\textsuperscript{76}, but the only Australian paintings anything like Hurtle’s rocks are Roland Wakelin’s \textit{The Skillion, Terrigal} (c.1928)\textsuperscript{77} (plate 45) and Roy de Maistre’s \textit{Nepean River, New South Wales}, c.1926.\textsuperscript{78} Both paintings could be compared to Hurtle’s anthropomorphic rocks in sunlight, but neither of these artists was popular at the time, because they both held advanced Modernist ideas. Wakelin’s painting shows rocky outcrops top-lit by the sun at the brow of a hill, which is shown in strongly contrasting light and shade, with a brilliant blue sky and sea. Paul Cezanne’s late nineteenth-century paintings of rocks are the genesis of these two works, and maybe of Hurtle’s. Although Hurtle’s subject is similar to Wakelin’s, his painting was “done without forethought”, which is quite unlike the working methods of these artists, and more in the expressionist vein. As discussed, it is possible to trace Nolan’s influence in the formation of Hurtle.

James Gleeson, a noted critic as well as Australia’s leading Surrealist artist, commented on Nolan’s technique:

Unlike most artists whose art is based on visual reality, Sidney Nolan rarely works directly from nature … In common with artists like Francis Bacon he uses the photographic image as Proust used the taste of the Madeleine… to unlock the storeroom of memory and stir the imagination into creative life.\textsuperscript{79}

This is how Hurtle paints his series of anthropomorphic rocks. In a caustic review of Hurtle’s rock paintings, the critic refers to the concepts, but not to the actual painting. Hurtle’s two manners are seen as a “meticulous dissection and abstraction of nature”, and “sloppy, self-indulgent anthropomorphic forms” in bestial colour (p.233). This may be White’s joking reference to A.D. Hope’s infamous review of \textit{The Tree of Man} as “pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge.”\textsuperscript{80} Roy de Maistre, White’s mentor, often painted two versions of the same subject, a realistic representation followed by his own version of cubism/expressionism.

\textsuperscript{76} Hans Heyson, \textit{The Land of the Oratunga}, 1932, watercolour, 47.5 x 62.5 cm., Art Gallery of South Australia.
\textsuperscript{77} Roland Wakelin, \textit{The Skillion, Terrigal}, c.1928, oil on canvas, 55 x 65 cm. Collection J.Murray.
\textsuperscript{78} Roy de Maistre, \textit{Nepean River, New South Wales} ,c.1926, oil on board, 43 x 35.7 cm., private collection.
46. Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Three Graces*, 1531

Collection Frau J. Seligmann, Paris
The self portrait and implications of the mirror image which form an important turning point in Hurtle’s development as an artist have already been discussed as have the paintings of Hero. Hurtle’s painting of Rhoda, “Pythoness at Tripod”, described as a hunch back nude figure unsuccessfully defending her modesty with an ephemeral sponge, could be a description of the provocative nudes of the northern European painter Cranach the Elder, for example *The Three Graces* (1531)\(^1\) (plate 46). Here the central Grace, a frontal nude, shows a woman with protruding stomach, veiling herself with transparent fabric, while the left hand Grace presents a back view of a stooped woman with a rounded back. These figures are typical of the Northern European Renaissance nude, seen in earlier fifteenth-century paintings of Jan van Eyck, Hugo van der Goes and other Netherlandish artists, as opposed to Italian Renaissance nudes, which are based on Greek statues. It has been argued by Carter and others that Cranach the Elder’s female nude paintings are pornographic. Does Hurtle’s Pythoness at Tripod indicate that, for him, Rhoda also has a strange yet unapproachable sexual power? In Hurtle’s series of Rhoda paintings, which move through various stages of abstraction, he adopts a mode of working like that of Roy de Maistre, the painter whom White knew best.

White continues to expand Hurtle’s knowledge of European art in various ways. Olivia appears in male evening dress, and is described as “a too facile van Dongen” (p.276). The Dutch painter, Kees van Dongen (1877-1968), was a minor member of the Fauves and a painter of fashionable but eccentric society portraits. Olivia shows Hurtle her art collection, which includes works by Braque, Picasso, Max Ernst, Klee, the Boudin and others, but the only Australian paintings she owns are by Hurtle himself (p.277). Hurtle, it seems, has broken through the cultural cringe which saw Australian paintings as provincial and derivative. As late as the 1950s, a donation of a group of paintings by leading Australian artists, including Russell Drysdale, Ian Fairweather, Justin O’Brien, William Dobell, James Gleeson, Rupert Bunny and other distinguished figures, to the

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University of Sydney, was officially acknowledged as only “a small group of Australian paintings.”\textsuperscript{82} In spite of White’s own small but growing Australian art collection, it is to the European tradition that he refers most frequently in his portrayal of the artist. As White was determined to improve Australia’s intellectual climate, the use of so much European art imagery could be thought of as didactic.

Hurtle moves from the early self-referential paintings to a search for the eternal in the ordinary, suggested by the hen in the sun. Confronted by his mortality, he re-assesses the paintings in his studio and finds he is unsatisfied with his recent work, with its “bravura of technique, the unsolved problems of space, the passages of turgid paint”\textsuperscript{(p.396)}. He now begins a series of paintings of furniture, in which he seeks the “essence of table and chair-ness of chair”\textsuperscript{(p.396)}, obviously related to the theory of the universal or Platonic Form, a philosophical doctrine on ultimate truth. White’s mentor, Herbert Read, refers to Platonic form in \textit{The Meaning of Art}, with which White would have been familiar, as it reproduced work by Roy de Maistre.\textsuperscript{83} In Sydney, the respected art teacher Desiderius Orban also subscribed to the theory.\textsuperscript{84} The idea of the “universal” in the furniture paintings also appears in White’s plays, for example, “This table is love, if you can get to know it”\textsuperscript{85}, and “Are you led to interesting conclusions by what you see? Not exactly. It’s the things themselves. Oh … table, chair, for instance. Or that jug. Even the ugly things have a kind of truth.”\textsuperscript{86}

Now it is suggested that Hurtle is the doyen of Australian painters. At a party an American girl squeals that the lecturer on her cruise ship to Australia talked about Hurtle as well as Dobell and Drysdale. In 1956 the Art Gallery Society of New South Wales organized the \textit{Pacific Loan Exhibition}, which travelled on board the Orient Line SS Orcades to Sydney, Auckland, Honolulu, Vancouver and San Francisco. The

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{82} University of Sydney Archives, Senate minutes, 1953.
\item\textsuperscript{83} Read, op.cit., p.61.
\item\textsuperscript{84} Desiderius Orban, \textit{Understanding Art}, (Ure Smith, Sydney, 1968), passim.
\item\textsuperscript{86} White, \textit{Plays}, \textit{Night on Bald Mountain}, Act 3, Scene 1, p.329.
\end{itemize}
47. Sidney Nolan, *Rosa Mutabilis*, 1945

Private Collection
accompanying art lecturer was James Gleeson. This important exhibition included paintings by Australia’s leading artists. The imaginary Hurtle was also included. Having failed to reach the essence of form in the furniture paintings, Hurtle is inspired to paint a child. The resulting painting of Kathy’s face (or eye), surrounded by flowers, “Flowering Rosebush” (p.408,425) (plate 47), is reminiscent of Sidney Nolan’s portrait of his lover Sunday Reed, Rosa Nutabilis (1945). 87 It is unlikely that White saw this painting, which remained in the Reed collection until 1981, but he may have seen a less resolved version of it, published in Art and Australia, of June 1968. Now Hurtle takes up collage. Sitting on his bed he cuts up coloured paper shapes which he lets fall onto a sheet of white paper (p.457), in a reference to Henri Matisse, who worked in bed in his old age. Matisse’s famous Jazz series of 1941 is composed entirely of paper collage. Hurtle is unsatisfied with the collages, which he refuses to sell. The collages are out of character with the rest of Hurtle’s art, the only link being a reference to “jazz”, as the collages follow discussions about Kathy and the similarity between art and music. Hurtle now enters his “late period” of “transparent lyricism”. The clichéd description often refers to clear, transparent, sweet colour, flowing lines, and large shapes, seen, for example, in the late work of Lloyd Rees. The reference is probably intended merely to suggest that Hurtle is aging, as descriptions of his art do not conform to a general understanding of “transparent lyricism”. Hurtle’s antisocial subjects and meaningless abstracts refer to his own bladder. Kathy’s re-emergence inspires two paintings, a prosaic portrait looking through a blind and an expressionist work in which a girl is engulfed in a spiral of music. Hurtle is still stuck in the representational mode which few artists of his time subscribed to.

White now produces a portrait of the decaying artist, not attempted in any of the other texts examined except for Painted Woman, in which Woolfe’s male artist, a secondary character in the novel, seeks to redress his failing talent through murder. Although Alf Dubbo is shown from youth to death, he did not become a world famous figure and his decline begins in childhood. Hurtle, filled with jealous doubt and self-pity, still seeks to

87 Sidney Nolan, Rosa Mutabilis, 1945, enamel on cardboard, 91.5 x 122.0 cm.
48. Sidney Nolan, Patrick White, and *The Galaxy*, 1957-58

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Gift of Patrick White, 1974

Photograph: Axel Poignant, London
“arrive at the truth … find some formal order behind a moment of chaos and unreason” (p.517) but only succeeds in painting pot-boilers during the day, and Surrealistic Gothic horrors at night. After he suffers a stroke, Hurtle paints it out, in an abstract black painting with white calligraphy. Did Hurtle know about Mark Rothko’s Black on Grey (1970), at the Witney Museum, New York? The exhibition Two Decades of American Art was shown in Sydney in 1966-67. Artists included Mark Rothko (colour field), Mark Tobey (white calligraphic works), Jackson Pollock and other famous abstractionists. However, the only exhibition mentioned in this book is Hurtle’s retrospective. It is also possible that White had an atypical Nolan work in mind, The Galaxy, (1957-58) (Plate 48), a black painting on which is superimposed thin white swirling lines and dots.88

White owned the painting and suggested its title.89

Hurtle’s painting is now interrupted by his grand retrospective exhibition at the State gallery, something which typically occurs when an artist is either dead or dying. The retrospective is loosely based on the Sidney Nolan Retrospective Exhibition.90 Hurtle’s retrospective exhibition sums up his life, “Oh God,” he thinks, “there was no avoiding it now; he was going to be held responsible”(p.571). Rumours fly that Hurtle is painting a series of “God paintings”. Are they self portraits, the rabble asks? (p.595)

Before his stroke Hurtle paints in an apparently representational expressionist manner. Now he can no longer paint figuratively, because he can no longer control his movements, he becomes an Abstract Expressionist. “Occasionally, when his arm failed him, he would slosh the unreceptive board with a stroke [pun?] which, more often meaningless, sometimes pointed straight to the heart of the matter … he might eventually suggest – why not – the soul itself.”(p.566) White leaves open the question of whether Hurtle’s conveniently debilitated state gives him direct access to the truth, which eluded him in his “furniture” paintings. Throughout art history there are many examples of

successful although debilitated artists with mental and physical disabilities, such as Vincent van Gogh and Henri Matisse. Van Gogh’s last painting, *Wheat Field with Crows* (1890), executed when he was confined to a mental asylum, is a powerful evocation of a state of mind and a convincing landscape.

Determined to produce the ultimate painting, through which he hopes to find the truth, Hurtle succeeds in mixing the “never-yet-attainable blue” (p.616) and dies uttering “I-N-D-I-G-O” as he overbalances while straining to reach the highest brush stroke. The heavily symbolic action of reaching up to the heavenly blue concludes Hurtle’s life. It is not possible to determine the subject of Hurtle’s last painting, as the interior monologue in which he describes his ideas is a garbled aphasic discourse, the only clear reference being to loose brush strokes and the colour blue. Yet, in painting this last work Hurtle has various intimations of mortality or immortality. It is a “morning of clearest light”, like the light of the chandelier, which initiated his search for truth and light. He “experienced a curious sense of grace” and is “about to enter a hinterland of infinite prospects” (p.614), suggesting an after life; the large scale of his colour field painting provides “an immensity of space [which] had given him his visual freedom, and more: he was being painted with, and through, and on” (p.614), suggesting some kind of supernatural direction. Whether these insights are Hurtle’s or those of the narrator is not clear. Hurtle’s more direct thoughts indicate that figures from the past emerge to support him in the culmination of his lifelong struggle towards “the summit” and the “archangel”. Don, the student assistant, becomes the archangel who tells Rhoda that although Hurtle dies, the painting will live on (p.617). Here White conflates the sublime spirituality of Hurtle’s reaching towards God with “the sublime” in art.

At the end of his life Hurtle moves into the realm of American Abstract Expressionist and Colour Field painting. Barnett Newman, one of the most prestigious artists working in this field, linked his enormous Colour Field canvasses with the Sublime. In his article “The Sublime is Now”[^91], he denied that “art has any concern with the problem of beauty

and where to find it … We are reasserting man’s natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions”. Newman believed that his paintings, such as *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* (1950)\(^2\), an enormous red painting, divided at irregular intervals by five thin vertical stripes in various colours, had a sublime metaphysical and existential force. Historically, the sublime in art is related to man’s confrontation with God through encountering overwhelming forces of nature, such as towering mountains, snow storms, earthquakes and the like. Hurtle’s last painting, in the divine blue, is undoubtedly sublime.

Throughout Hurtle’s life, sex is an important factor in stimulating his painting. His affair with Nance, who becomes his muse, inspires his first viable paintings and his self portrait; his association with Olivia-Boo awakens his sexuality when they are adolescents, and she later becomes his patron; his affair with Hero, the Greek pseudo goddess with the feet of clay, shows him the route to his true feelings about art; and last, his senile love affair with the thirteen-year-old child, Kathy, reawakens his creativity, and he passes on his aspirations to her. An analysis of Hurtle’s artistic persona would be incomplete without quoting Kathy’s letter to Hurtle, which is generally acknowledged as encapsulating White’s feelings towards de Maistre.\(^3\)

> If I’ve learnt anything of importance, it was you who taught me and I thank you for it … It was you who taught me how to see, to be, to know instinctively. … There was an occasion when I even dared touch one or two of the paintings as I left … I think this was how I began to feel I could reach the truth, if I filtered these sensations through my true self. (pp.539,540)

His final identification with God confirms the character of Hurtle in the mould of the nineteenth-century artist-as-hero. He is isolated, outside society with no life partner, although many lovers including women pamper him, as they did Roy de Maistre. He is an observer, with the penetrating eye of the vivisector, who dissects his subjects; he does not conform to social norms, leading what could be called a bohemian life, living in squalor by choice; his intuitive ability is established early; and Olivia-Boo tells him that he is “not quite man, not quite god … perhaps that’s why we look to artists” (p.419).

\(^3\) Marr, *Life*, p.474.
Gaps

If White’s attempt to create a believable artist in Hurtle is successful, it is in spite of a number of gaps and omissions of evidence, which would be vital to a biography of a real artist. Little is known about Hurtle’s art education, although through hints and sometimes obscure analogies the reader understands that Hurtle is extremely erudite in terms of art and its history. Impressions of his paintings are conveyed through concepts, not through outlining working methods or processes. The ease with which Hurtle had his rock paintings displayed is atypical of the time. The Contemporary Art Society was founded in 1938 in Melbourne (the New South Wales branch was not formed until 1942) in protest against the lack of encouragement of modern art. Gayfield Shaw and Joseph Albers, the only art dealers in Sydney in the 1920s, both dealt in conservative art. Grosvenor, Macquarie and the Fine Arts Gallery were established in the 1920s, but Macquarie Galleries was the only one to sell modern art, leaving the options for exhibition for any artists apart from the gum-tree school very limited. Hurtle is not linked with any group, modernist or conservative. There is no mention of the turgid art politics of the late 1930s in which various artists’ groups split into factions for and against the Australian Academy of Art proposed by the politician R.G. Menzies. Aspects of Hurtle’s life suggest an artist character out of his time. The activities of Hurtle’s 1930s dealer, Caldicott, are more in tune with the dealer scene post World War II. Hurtle takes no part in the art life of Sydney although it appears that he lives in Paddington, the site of whatever art life there was in the 1950s: he “had come across few other painters, and then only sniffed around them” (p.266). The only exhibition referred to besides Hurtle’s own retrospective is the Pacific Loan Exhibition, which is merely hinted at.

Leaps of time and artistic development must be taken on faith. Hurtle is suddenly transformed into a successful, if eccentric artist, who exhibits at the Tate Gallery in London and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He owns a large house, has a good

94 Nancy Borlase, “Three Decades of the Contemporary art Society”, Art and Australia, (vol.6, no.1, June 1968) p.69.
95 For a full account of art dealers and galleries pre World War II, see Johnson, The Sydney Art Patronage System, 1890-1940.
tailor, and invests money, which presumably comes from the sale of his work. White does not reveal how this amazing transformation takes place, from impecunious artist living in a shed, with little formal art education, sparse contact with other artists, and now a dead dealer, to well established, financially secure, internationally recognized artist. Yet this portrait of an imaginary Sydney painter has convinced readers that it is based on one or other real artists.

Conclusion
Hurtle Duffield is cast in the mould of the nineteenth-century artist-as-hero, translated into the twentieth century. There are several suggestions that White is writing about himself; the remark that, although Hurtle distorts the truth, he thinks he gets a better effect than anyone else applies to White; Hurtle is intuitive like White; he seeks the truth like White; Hurtle has chest complaints from which also White suffered. (p.301) Whether Hurtle is a composite of many realities or a complete fabrication is irrelevant. He is enlivened by White's wide knowledge of art history, familiarity with European, particularly German Expressionist, and French art, and to a lesser extent Australian art, particularly James Gleeson’s Surrealist art and Nolan’s expressionist works, and friendship with various European and Australian artists. Hurtle, the male artist, portrayed by the male writer, is aggressively masculine and boldly sexual, the exploitation of sex providing a significant impetus for his art. In contrast, the female artist portrayed by Eleanor Dark is more subtle, she is more manipulative in a less obvious way; sex remains important, but in Dark it frees the artist to create, whereas in White, sex is a subject for the artist. Dark’s artist is more confident than White’s self-doubting figure. There are many indications that Dark was writing about herself and the predicament of a married, creative woman whereas White was more obtuse about including himself in the character of Hurtle although Hurtle’s aims were largely his also. Dark’s female artist represents one aspect of the art scene in the 1930s, whereas White’s scenario is more slippery, with incidents and styles being only vaguely positioned and sometimes quite temporally incongruous. Dark’s artist is very vaguely informed about art, although she is intellectually engaged with the problems of contemporary society, whereas Hurtle rejects any engagement with social problems, for example he fails to act in the case of Hero’s
abandoned adopted daughter. In none of the works discussed is the process of painting or art-making spelled out, although in Dark’s case there is more description of the actual paintings than in White’s, where, as mentioned, the paintings are only described through concepts.

Although not himself a visual artist, through invoking a wide array of references to art history and images from European and to a lesser extent Australian art in the construction of Hurtle Duffield, White expanded the nineteenth-century model of the artist-as-hero into a penetrating portrayal of the conceptual aspects of an imaginary mid-twentieth-century artist’s life.
CHAPTER 5


Introduction

Barbara Hanrahan published four novels in which artist figures play a leading role. The first three, *Sea-Green*, *Kewpie Doll*, and *Michael and Me and the Sun*, are semi-autobiographical and follow the familiar pattern of writers who produce autobiographies at the beginning and end of their writing careers. While Hanrahan kept detailed diaries all her life, she left none for the years 1962 to 1966, which is the approximate time span of *Sea-Green* and *Michael and Me and the Sun*. Although diaries for these years may have existed, it is likely that Hanrahan destroyed them. However, the narrative style, particularly in *Sea-Green*, with its interior dialogue, suggests the intimate revelations of a personal diary and Virginia, the artist figure in *Sea-Green*, refers to her own diaries in a moment of distress. In this thesis the books will be treated as novels. While incidents in these novels could be from Hanrahan’s own life, the artist figures in *Kewpie Doll* and *Michael and Me and the Sun* are anonymous first-person narrators and, in *Sea-Green*, a girl named Virginia, Hanrahan’s salute to her heroine Virginia Woolf. None of these artist figures is a true representation of the author, although they may have been Hanrahan’s means of discovering her own identity. The artist figure in *The Frangipani Gardens*, one of several characters who share equal importance, appears entirely imaginary and could not be compared to any Australian woman artist of the period, particularly in terms of subject matter. In the semi-autobiographical novels, Hanrahan’s artists are printmakers, and descriptions of their prints correspond with Hanrahan’s own prints, which often have feminist overtones and are influenced by German

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Expressionism. In *The Frangipani Gardens* the artist produces oil paintings with grand expressionistic, figurative subjects.

For the sake of clarity, a short précis of the semi-autobiographical novels and *The Frangipani Gardens* follows. *Kewpie Doll* concerns the development of an Adelaide girl, born in 1939, her education from childhood through adolescence and experience as a young art teacher, ending with her embarkation on a ship for London where she hopes to become a real artist. As the girl’s father is dead, she lives in a women’s world of her mother, grandmother, Iris Pearl, and great aunt, Reece who suffers from Down’s syndrome. Although her mother is a commercial artist, the girl’s visual imagination develops through her grandmother’s family photographs and garden. Her first boyfriend buys her a kewpie doll. She leaves school to work in a department store but, dissatisfied, returns to school in order to gain admission to teacher’s college. Her art education is described in detail, she becomes an art teacher with an interest in printmaking but, although deeply committed, she is unsure of her artistic destiny. The emphasis in *Kewpie Doll* is on the process of art rather than the finished art work. Like all Hanrahan’s artist figures, the girl has a divided nature, here between herself as an aspiring artist and as the person her family wants her to be. The girl’s outwardly conventional life in mid-century Adelaide contrasts with the unfolding inner life of the aspiring artist. The artist in *Kewpie Doll* is immature but she confidently participates in the circumscribed, unsophisticated society of suburban Adelaide which she eventually feels driven to leave.

*Sea-Green* deals with a sea voyage and life in London. Virginia, the artist, first appears on board ship where impressions of social life at sea are interrupted by flashbacks, which reveal that in Adelaide she was an art teacher, and lived with her parents, grandmother and great aunt. Faced with a life unlike her safe home environment she becomes confused. Her social and sexual inexperience constitute one side of her double persona, one contrasted with her dreamy, inner, artistic life. In London Virginia becomes totally self absorbed and lonely, limiting her contacts in the art world to a few students, and confining her observations of London to close domestic detail, completely ignoring the wider world. Her interior life is conveyed through wild and secret imagery, but she is
isolated, self-pitying, and suffers from the unresolved struggle between art and sex. She becomes pregnant to a South African, but realizing that she must devote herself totally to art, has an abortion, and finally meets a man with whom she feels safe. The end of the book is ambivalent, with little reference to art, however the abortion suggests a confrontation with reality, which liberates her artistic spirit. Again the emphasis is on the process of art; Virginia produces only a few prints, however her thoughts are overflowing with a progression of imagery that parallels her artistic development, but this artist remains a student.

*Michael and Me and the Sun* also begins aboard a ship bound for London in 1963. The anonymous narrator/artist reveals that she is an art teacher, who lived with her mother, grandmother who is associated with gardens and flowers, and her great aunt Reece. Here there is less emphasis on the voyage than in *Sea-Green*. The artist treats the young men on the ship with a deal of scorn although herself being uncertain of shipboard protocol. Her divided persona, similar to the one in *Kewpie Doll*, is split between the printmaker and the person her mother and her grandmother want her to be. In London she takes in the ‘swinging sixties’ scene, with the Beatles, the Profumo affair and Portobello Road markets, moving from bedsits at Earl’s Court to basement flats; she visits the Tate Gallery, sees Pop Art at the ICA Gallery and Rauchenberg at the Whitechapel. She works in typing pools and as a teacher, but eventually attends the London Central School of Art full time. She falls in and out of relationships, including one with an artist, but printmaking remains the central focus of her life. Swinging London provides subject matter for her prints, which are identified with Hanrahan’s own prints. Although she remains a virgin until the last few weeks of her stay in London, sex is not the problem it is in *Sea-Green*. She sees how to integrate sex and art in her own work when she visits the American Pop Art show. She is offered a place at the Royal College of Art after winning a distinction at the final exhibition at the art school, visits an art dealer and sells some prints. Suddenly she realizes that her place is really in Adelaide. After discarding unwanted prints, she packs the rest, buys mod clothes with her savings, visits Paris and Rome briefly and returns to Adelaide as a fully trained, confident and professional artist, ready to start her own career. This outgoing, successful artist uses her experiences of
London as subjects for her art, and produces prints that are described in the text, in contrast to Virginia, who only makes prints (apart from dreaming about them) to alleviate severe personal distress.

In *The Frangipani Gardens* Aunt Doll, the artist, is one of several leading characters. Doll, the maiden aunt with artistic inclinations and hidden insight, is cowed by her parents, and forced to hide her real artistic persona behind the demure old-world spinsterish façade of an amateur water-colourist. Doll secretly observes the bizarre behaviour of her family, which she hopes to paint in the future. She takes the opportunity to convert a garden shed into a studio in which there is a locked room where she paints wild expressionistic oil paintings at night. Doll becomes the guardian of her niece and nephew who are threatened with child abuse by other characters in the novel. An attractive young man from Doll’s youth turns out to be a remittance man, and later returns to Australia in the form of a prescient tramp. Doll has a nervous breakdown when her niece discovers her secret paintings and only recovers when she is able to speak to the tramp, who through his secret empathy with his fellow humans contacts her own similar feelings, enabling Doll to redeem herself through helping the children. Thus she returns to her real self, as an artist able to see deeply into the meaning of life and to express it through her art. The artist, Doll, is more passionate than Hanrahan’s other artists, she is in the mould of the nineteenth-century artist-as-genius or hero. She is all seeing, modest, apart, and a saviour, having something in common with White’s Alf Dubbo and even Hurtle Duffield as well as with Frances, in Woolfe’s *Painted Woman*.

Like Eleanor Dark, Hanrahan addressed the position of the female artist in society. All her artist figures are female, and all, to some extent, share the characteristic of a dual personality, although this is particularly marked in *Sea-Green* and *The Frangipani Gardens*. In each text, the artist must come to terms with a troubled aspect of her personality before she is able to assume the mantle of a true artist. The problem for the artist character in *The Frangipani Gardens*, Aunt Doll, is imposed on her as a child by the actions of her parents whereas, in *Sea-Geen*, Virginia’s problems are inherent in the nexus between her personality, sex and art. Taken together, these fictitious accounts of
the development of an artist are a study of nature versus nurture. Hanrahan herself had a divided nature, as recorded in her memoir of childhood, *The Scent of Eucalyptus* (1973), “As I grew older I became adept at leaping quick-silver from one of my selves to the other. And as I grew older the split grew deeper.” Although there are certain similarities in Hanrahan’s four artist novels, a different approach is taken to the development of each artist figure.

Before these novels were published Hanrahan had an international reputation as an artist printmaker, trained in Adelaide and at the Central School of Art, London. Exhibitions in Australia and Europe led to her prints being represented in the National Gallery of Australia and all State Galleries. As a writer her subject matter matches that of her prints, which are often self-referential, focusing on the position of women in society as well as “the follies, foibles and truisms of popular culture”. Throughout the 1960s, the temporal setting for these novels, Hanrahan produced pop-art style prints, similar to those of her artist figures, for example the *Buddy Holly* series, heavily influenced by German Expressionism, and in the early 1980s a series on banal advertising. Hanrahan’s prints addressing the condition of women are based on her personal experience, but she rarely referred to the wider aspects of the human condition in her art. The question of whether Hanrahan expanded more in her literary endeavours than in her art will be discussed.

Hanrahan is the only writer so far referred to who was trained in visual art. The following analysis will discuss the influence of her printmaking on her writing in relation to subject matter as well as comparing her approach to the processes of printmaking and writing, and considering how much of the creative process and the conceptual aspect of art are utilized in the formation of her artist figures. Among other issues to be considered are whether Hanrahan’s visual art training led to a different approach to the formation of the artist character from that of writers who had no art training. The provincialism

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5 Barbara Hanrahan, *Buddy Holly and the Mods and Rockers*, 1965, colour linocut, 51 x 41 cm., *Miracle Modess* 1985/6, colour linocut, ed. 35, 76 x 56.8 cm. sheet.
6 Barbara Hanrahan, *Mother1933*, 1977, colour screenprint, ed.14, 75.7 x 57 cm., *Wedding Night*, 1977, colour screenprint, ed.8, 70.5 x 50.00 cm. sheet, *Woman and Herself*, 1986, linocut, ed.35, 76 x 56.8 sheet.
problem in Australian art; violence in relation to the artist figure in both Hanrahan and White; whether Hanrahan’s attitude to the artist figure as ‘chosen’ changes over time, and her use of visual imagery, both floral and allegorical, which is only occasionally like White’s are all discussed.

The most fully developed of Hanrahan’s artist characters, Virginia, will be discussed first, followed by comparisons to the artist figures in *Kewpie Doll, Michael and Me and the Sun*, and *The Frangipani Gardens*.

**Development of the artist character in *Sea-Green***

The artist figure in *Sea-Green* is portrayed as tormented and introverted, full of self-doubt and unresolved conflict between her emerging artistic persona and her need to find a place in society. In Adelaide she is shown as immature, both as an artist and as a member of society. Her technical ability in art is excellent but her conceptual ability is limited. She is inward-looking, preoccupied with the past, parochial in her outlook but ambitious. She displays the colonial mentality still common among Australian artists in the decades immediately after the Second World War, and is convinced that the only way to establish herself as an artist is to go overseas. But she achieves the beginnings of artistic maturity through resolution of her social and sexual personalities, not through her attendance at art school, where she only seems to learn more advanced techniques. To some extent her development is linked to the various eras in art history, and her artistic persona is conveyed through vibrant visual imagery and the language of flowers, a device seldom found in twentieth-century literature. It seems that some of this imagery is based on the allegorical paintings of Poussin. The visual and floral imagery is also, at times, violent and aggressive. There are few references to the subject matter of her art or to what, if any, philosophy or other artists inspire this emerging artist. When the novel closes Virginia appears to have resolved her personal conflicts, broken through a barrier, and to be on the threshold of a career as an artist, but she is not shown as a mature working artist. The familiar story of the female expatriate provincial artist is expanded by Hanrahan’s complex approach to the artist figure.
The narrative voice
The superficially naïve style of *Sea-Green* conceals a sophisticated web of allusion, metaphor, manipulation, contradiction, and humour which can be read on a number of levels. Free indirect discourse, reminiscent of that used by Patrick White, facilitates the interplay of dual narrative voices, where the past tense of the omniscient narrator cuts into and, in filmic mode, flashes back from the present tense discourse of Virginia, the young artist, for example, “A red face hung above them like a balloon; a wide expanse of navy blotted the sun … The Captain bends over our sketch-books. I hide my drawing with my hand.”⁷ The narrator deals with the lesser protagonists and elemental aspects of life: earth, air, fire and water, time present and time past (p.8). He knows more than Virginia does and, like the knowing narrator in *The Vivisector*, sometimes humorously contradicts Virginia’s unreliable voice which is confined to her own immediate concerns. For example when she wafts around the ship’s deck, “in black with sequins … and jet” (p.30), the narrator cuts in to announce that she had removed her brassiere and the jet rasped against her nipples. A further less obvious complexity is Virginia’s dual mode of communication: one, a prosaic everyday voice referring to mundane reality; the other replete with metaphor, floral and mythical allusions, interspersed with violence, representing Virginia the incipient artist. Virginia’s artistic development runs parallel to various eras of art history, but her artistic vision is similar to Hanrahan’s, whose prints can be identified with various sections of the text. Virginia’s struggle to resolve the two sides of her personality, in a quest to find how the dedicated artist can live in the real world, is compounded by the delayed resolution of the questions of sex, love and the complications of childbearing for the aspiring female visual artist.

The divided self
The struggle between the two sides of Virginia’s nature is one of the means utilized by Hanrahan in forming this artist figure. Although when Virginia leaves Adelaide she is an experienced art teacher, asserting, “I bought the ticket (I’d the money saved from

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⁷ Barbara Hanrahan, *Sea-Green*, (Chatto & Windus, London, 1974) p.25. All subsequent references to this novel are to this edition and are placed in parenthesis in the text.

drypoint etching, edition 6
teaching)” (p.21), she is socially naïve and her limited understanding of life is experienced only through art. “She created her own identity; her own companions … lovers with wreaths of pointed leaves in their hair … mermaids and angels”. (pp.34-35)

Virginia’s self-referential art is like Hanrahan’s early prints such as *Floating Girl*, 8 (plate 49) in which a girl, modestly dressed in a Victorian style floral outfit, is surrounded by laurel leaves and birds. Although Virginia questions the saccharine content of her prints, she is satisfied because it is “the only world she had” (p.35), but in the new world of the ship she has “turned into no-one” (p.18). She draws her parents who “sail with me now in my folder … my mother but a 2H shadow” (pp.12-13). Lonely and disoriented, she clutches her sketchbook, asserting that she is faithful to herself. But her unreliable self-assessment is rebutted by the narrator’s questioning, “Why then does she keep to the steel ship’s schedule as strictly as all the rest … [and] close her sketchbook?” (p.23), in an early example of Virginia the incipient artist versus Virginia the young woman seeking social contacts. The incompatibility of art and sex in Virginia’s persona is suggested when her first attempt at sexual union with the ship’s officer is unsuccessful because the light, vital for the visual artist, is turned out. Sex also figures in the formation of Hurtle Duffield, but for him all aspects of sex are fodder for his art.

The duality of Virginia’s narrative voice indicates the deep split in her nature. The imagery-laden inner voice of the artist, at times exacerbated by sexual arousal, is contrasted with passages of flat prosaic description of everyday life. When the captain, crudely described as “so fat … his legs must rub together as he walks” (p.26), entertains Virginia, she declines to tell him about her art, “something precious; something locked behind my tongue. What does it have to do with a fat man … Nothing, is the only answer. So I leave art out … and tell him of a time before it started.” (p.28) A dull description of the superficial mechanics of art school then contrasts with Virginia’s imagined temptation of the captain, bursting with unspoken visual imagery: “I will weave a love-charm of two-leaved clover, apple-pip and thistle-bloom; ash leaf, daisy flower and dandelion”. (p.30) Artistic vision, “locked behind … [her] tongue”, is withheld from

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8 Barbara Hanrahan, *Floating Girl*, 1963, drypoint, ed.6, 50.2 x 37 cm.
the Captain. Not only is Virginia unsure of how to integrate sex and art in her life, she is unsure of her own sexuality. On the ship she thinks, “I am lemon-breasted Kate’s gallant” (p.39), and later one of the ship’s officers with whom they are flirting is described as “girl-boy … lovely” (p.40).

Virginia’s double persona, in which the world is divided between the “false self” which society imposes on the female and the “transcendent self, which can be discovered within” has been related to Lacan’s theory of the mirror image, also discussed in the development of Hurtle Duffield in The Vivisector. While Hurtle gazes in the mirror and creates a self-portrait, Virginia looks in the mirror and her “face becomes a canvas, I draw pictures on its surface” (p.37). She uses powder and mascara as artists’ paints and pencils, but the false image she constructs with peach bloom flesh and rosy cheeks is humorously subverted when she blinks and smudges the mascara. Her transformation into a work of art, seemingly the only way she can adapt to shipboard life, fails. Even when she abandons her artist’s tools, she produces an unsatisfactory work of art which is only a shadow of reality. At the end of this book, Virginia resolves her sexual dilemmas, but her position as an artist remains unresolved.

**Visual quality of the text**

The use of script in many of Hanrahan’s prints creates a concrete link with her writing but there is also a stylistic link between her printmaking and writing. Hanrahan’s printmaking, in which she was a master of technique, was executed without preliminary drawings on which to base the structure. She worked directly onto the etching plate, stone or screen, depending on the medium used, improvising the subject matter as she worked. This technique of free improvisation is comparable to stream of consciousness narration used by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf and emulated by Patrick White and Hanrahan. At one time Hanrahan considered writing a novel in the style of Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*(1916), and *Ulysses* (1922) gave her an idea for

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another book. The stream of consciousness style, also used in Hanrahan’s diaries, appears throughout her fiction in passages such as “they seem more real than the world behind the shower curtain and the bathroom door. Visiting-cards and tightly held emotions are nicer than a circle round the television and words are as cruel as red welts.”(p.166) Hanrahan’s prints were produced in groups of images on the same subject, including her family series, anatomical images, “tarts and stars” satires of American life, and the satirical advertising series. Similar patterns can be seen in the arrangement of her novels, where each chapter could perhaps be likened to one print from a series. The resemblances between Hanrahan’s writing style and her printmaking in “the extraordinary eye … patience for details, texture, smells, shapes and colour” have also been commented on.

Visual imagery, both in descriptive passages and in the artist’s thoughts, is a major device for shaping the artist figure in Sea-Green. Hanrahan’s writing style has a visual quality which derives from her experience as a visual artist. At times, Virginia’s voice has the fluidity of a drawing in which a continuous line describes the scene, articulated by the use of rhythm and alliteration in poetic passages like “Fly with the gull in the swoop of sky, cling in cool greenness with the barnacle, be one with waves that come and go, and come and go, and never cease.”(p.18) The artistic vision is then counterpointed by the static “But I cannot”. This technique, in which the visual quality of the writing, used in passages of high emotion, is followed by a contradiction which brings the artist back to reality, appears repeatedly as in “and saw them strangely beautiful – avid mouths clenching seed-pearl teeth, eyes gleaming like glassy beads, cheeks flushed to fevered poppy hues; [and then] as if they loved not hated” (p.20). Virginia does not translate these mental pictures into prints because she is too artistically immature to project her thoughts into artworks but many of the visual images recall Hanrahan’s prints like Poppy Day 1982 (plate 50), made after she wrote the book. Here four women, wearing poppies on their dresses, bare their teeth in fixed grins, engaging the viewer with glassy

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11 Elaine Lindsay, Diaries, pp. 108, 230.

colour screenprint, edition 23
stares. Behind them are portraits of men, perhaps their lovers or those they hate. Even when abandoning her art making, Virginia still thinks visually; her narrative voice seduces the reader with voluptuous imagery of “a false coil of hair swing[ing] snake-like from the door-knob, pools of underwear shimmer in a corner, chocolates spill from crinkled nests” (p.14). This visuality in Hanrahan’s writing is linked to the way she saw the world as a visual artist.

In contrast, White’s passages of visual imagery in the thoughts of Hurtle Duffield relate to well-known images from art history; the subject matter of Duffield’s art is described in concepts, not through process for, although White was well informed about art, he did not chance criticism by being too specific. On the other hand, Hanrahan rarely uses concepts in relation to Virginia’s art; occasionally her mental images relate to known images from art history, and often to floral and mythical images but, in the main, Hanrahan’s own prints and her diary entries provided a convenient resource of ready made images. For example, Virginia’s critical observations of her table companions on the boat, describing them as, “Faye from Clerical … baby-fine hair, non-existent eyebrows, naked plucked-chicken face: Colin … with a greasy quiff, pitted skin, ruffled shirt and shoe string tie”(p.18), could be compared with Hanrahan’s grotesque portraits such as Diseased Boy14 (plate 51). In this print, a disturbing clash of red and green defines the portrait of a boy with pockmarked skin covered in lesions, revealing pseudo anatomical details. Searing portraits from Hanrahan’s diaries also relate to such passages in Sea-Green, for example her description of a colleague as “A voluptuary. Hair in curls like little horns all over his head. Fleshy bull face, large nostrils.”15 “Faye from clerical” and her friends do not become subjects for Virginia’s sketchbook, but her visual observations are comparable to those of a real artist, Hanrahan herself, thus implying that Virginia is truly an artist in the making.

14 Barbara Hanrahan, Diseased Boy, 1966, colour lithograph, 56 x 40.5 cm.
15 Elaine Lindsay, Diaries, p.138.
51. Barbara Hanrahan, *Diseased Boy*, 1966

colour lithograph, no edition number
The visuality of the text in *Sea-Green* also involves violence, often with floral imagery, varying from mild to explicit. Virginia remembers her garden in Adelaide, “And do the dusky buds of iris burst purply against the wall? … does the yellow dust of shattered wattle still fleck the porch?” (p.22). “Burst” and “shattered” are unlikely words to use in describing a garden, but Virginia escaped from it because of the violence between her parents. At times violence is suggested in ambiguous metaphors, which, as in White, the reader may disregard. As Virginia looks for sex with the ship’s officer, she does “not know, but can feel … the delicious titillation of a presence … I cannot escape it when I climb down to the cabin. It waxes there too … in the obscenely pointed corners of turned-down sheets” (p.17). The imagery of pointed sheet corners clarifies the unspoken sexual innuendoes in the preceding sentences, focusing on the bed and perhaps male sexual organs. Sex and violence are also present when Virginia meets the ship’s officers in a “shard of light” (p.41), like a dangerous splinter of glass. But Hanrahan misleads Virginia and the reader, as White also frequently does in *The Vivisector*, when the search for the sexy officer and a prospect of danger leads to a dead end: “no shard of light; iron rungs lead to a door that’s closed” (p.54). The violence of these passages is comparable to the barely concealed violence of Hanrahan’s highly decorated prints such as *Box of Beauty* 16, where a “judge”, a male figure in a floral suit holding a flower, but revealing beneath his hand well-defined sex organs, is opposed to a boxed-off section crammed with beauty queens, sunflowers and so on; “Wanderers suffer” says the judge while the “Proper lady” floats above.

**Visual imagery**

The complex visual imagery incorporating mythical and allegorical allusions in *Sea-Green* could be missed without a knowledge of the language of flowers, mythology and art history. Gardening and floral imagery, an interest inherited from Hanrahan’s grandmother, Iris, feature in Hanrahan’s diaries 17 and prints, although because the flowers in the prints are stylized it is difficult to identify species, except for the obvious

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16 Barbara Hanrahan, *Box of Beauty*, 1976, lithograph, 61 x 45.6 cm.
17 Elaine Lindsay, *Diaries*, p.361 and many other references.
52. Barbara Hanrahan, *Iris in her Garden*, 1979

hand-coloured etching, edition 35
sunflowers, passionflowers, roses and lilies. *Iris in her Garden* ¹⁸ (plate 52) depicts six images of Iris from childhood to old age surrounded by flowers from her garden. Although people and objects such as the moon are labeled, none of the flowers is identified so, apart from the obvious flowers mentioned above, it is only possible to attribute a general meaning to the flora in this and other prints. The specific floral imagery in *Sea-Green*, however, illuminates key aspects of Virginia’s development.

Aboard ship, Virginia remembers when she read the nineteenth-century American mystic Emily Dickinson’s poetry and befriended a dirty old English painter who sent her carnations when he asked her to live with him. In fifteenth and sixteenth-century Flemish portraiture, a carnation held in a woman’s hand signifies a betrothal. ¹⁹ But when they went to parties, it is implied that he respected her refusal, as she wore a dress with a Puritan collar and carried a Madonna lily and other flowers associated with virginity. This passage is subverted when Virginia begins carrying almond blossom, lilac and a lily as a party trick. While “lily and almond blossom” denote virginity, “lilac” suggests spring. These allusions imply that the narrator knows more than Virginia, suggesting that she is a mystic and knows more about art history than she will admit, hiding her talents behind a party trick.

The floral imagery is also infused with violence. In Adelaide when Virginia rejects a proposal of marriage she is left with “the tinge of cold in the air, [and] the bulldozers that moved closer to the early-morning almond-trees”(p.62). An almond shaped aureole, shown surrounding the Virgin’s head, denotes purity, ²⁰ therefore this allusion suggests an inevitable and violent loss of innocence if not virginity. As Virginia’s artistic character develops, the imagery becomes more complex and it may be possible to read meaning where it is not necessarily intended, for example, sunbaking on the deck, Virginia keeps her skin white with the juice of a lemon, a bitter tasting fruit sometimes associated with failure, but before the proliferation of cosmetics lemon was frequently used for whitening the skin. However, Virginia has failed; she found sex but not love with the ship’s officer.

¹⁸ Barbara Hanrahan, *Iris in her Garden*, 1979, hand-coloured etching, ed. 35, 41.5 x 39.8 (six images).
¹⁹ Hall, op.cit., p.57.
Floral imagery is now combined with mythical allusion and, although Virginia has temporarily abandoned art for sex, her thoughts are still visual in sexually suggestive passages such as “the waves come in – swerve and leap greenly, and the white foam flies” (p.68) and “I will sink with the red apple of the sun – the waves will be our orchard” (p.69). Here references to the sea suggest the birthplace of Venus or Aphrodite, the goddess of love; the apple is the fruit of the tree of knowledge and the temptation of Adam, and in Greek mythology the sun revealed the love affair of Mars and Venus. The usual introduction of violence follows when Virginia realizes she is trapped, “Cruel feelers lash my body, needle-sharp teeth pierce my flesh” (p.69). The narrative is now interrupted by Virginia’s retreat into a poetic musing on Aphrodite, Poseidon, sea monsters and nereids in a technique already mentioned, where ideas are suggested through imagery and later confirmed in inner dialogue.

In Singapore, overwhelmed by the lush, tropical atmosphere, Virginia remembers the real purpose of her voyage, to attend art school in London. An outburst of floral imagery follows, in which her naïve, idealized expectations of England are described in terms of its flora, whose meaning can be expanded by mythical and artistic associations. She dreams of “March, with wet lilacs” (p.74) perhaps referring to springtime; “hawthorn”, a thorny shrub also associated with spring, suggests a thorny beginning to Virginia’s career as an artist; “roses”, an attribute of Venus, goddess of love in Renaissance art (Virginia is looking for love as well as art); “marigold”, the sunflower of the Greek myth in which Clytie, when forsaken by the sun god Apollo in favour of her sister, kills her sister out of jealousy and is turned into a flower which always faces the sun. Apollo in Renaissance art is associated with the nine muses as a source of artistic inspiration. The sun is a frequent image in Hanrahan’s prints, and a later novel, in which the artist figure finds artistic maturity, is entitled *Michael and Me and the Sun*. Other flowers in this passage are “anemones”, associated with death in Greek myth. Anemones sprouted from the ground where Adonis, Venus’s abandoned lover, fell to his death. Here Virginia may be referring to the hoped for death of her love affair with the ship’s officer. The sexual reference is confirmed by the next flower, “catkins”, which have a unisexual

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21 Hall, op.cit., p.29.
inflorescence. The last flower mentioned is “daffodil” of the genus “narcissus”. The god Narcissus broods over his reflection in the same way as Virginia is obsessed with herself, and paints herself in reflection. White also refers to the Narcissus myth in Hurtle Duffield’s development.

While the flowers in this passage are typical of an English garden, since the floral imagery and mythical associations of each species can be linked to aspects of Virginia’s development, the list is not random. The myth of Flora, the goddess of flowers, related by Ovid and Lucretius22, inspired artists including Botticelli and Poussin, whose allegorical Realm of Flora23 (plate 53) contains several of these flowers in their god-like form. In the painting, Flora dances through her garden, surrounded by mythical gods who at death are transformed into flowers. Narcissus gazes at his reflection in an urn; Clytie gazes up at the sun god Apollo, crossing the heavens in his daily journey; Adonis (anemone) lifts his cloak to show his wounded thigh. Similar gods and goddesses also appear in Poussin’s frequently reproduced Triumph of Flora, in the collection of the Louvre. The link between floral imagery and mythical figures in Poussin is proposed in Hall’s Dictionary of Subjects in Art, republished in 1974, the year Sea-Green was published. While all kinds of conclusions can be drawn from this imagery, one wonders whether Hanrahan really expected her readers to understand the archaic language of flowers and associated myths, although perhaps she included this for her own amusement. Occasionally the imagery has touches of humour, for example in the description of her grandmother’s washing on the line, flapping about in the wind at night,

\[\text{\small 22 Ovid, Fasti (5: 193-214); Lucretius, De Rerum Natura (5: 736-9), quoted in Hall, p.125.}\]
\[\text{\small 23 Nicholas Poussin, Realm of Flora, 1631, oil on canvas, 51.5 x 71.25 inches, Dresden Art Gallery.}\]

Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden
“enjoying pirouettes their owner never treated them to in life”, with non-run stockings in colours of “Allure and Caress” and “an Amazon pantie-girdle” (p.180).

Throughout the text, visual imagery, laden with hidden meaning, mirrors and shapes Virginia’s development as an artist, echoing her moods, whether they are fanciful and unreal, depressed, suggested by “balding lawns, sickly conifers, shrivelled leaves” (p.139), violent, or finally optimistic when her social and artistic persona have united and “the tide is coming in” (p.207).

**Progression through art history**

Besides the use of visual imagery, a progression through art history can be traced as a minor theme in the development of Virginia’s persona as an artist. As the young artist matures, she is linked to a succession of art historical styles by hints and allusions that are more tentative than the floral references. This historical progression is chronological, except in several instances where the mature Virginia regresses to her younger self as she withdraws from situations with which she cannot cope. During the particularly disastrous affair with the South African, she dreams of her childhood and “the two little flat white feet (turned sideways in the Egyptian manner)” (p.157), suggesting that she was familiar with Egyptian art as a child. Much of the floral imagery, such as Madonna lilies, almond blossom and carnations, introduced when Virginia is quite young, is taken from Renaissance art. Virginia lives in a dream world based on the art of the past she has read about. Slowly, as she gains more experience and gradually integrates her dual life as an artist and a social being, the art references are brought up to date. On her way to England she thinks of flowers linked to mythical figures in seventeenth-century allegorical paintings by Poussin. By the time she reaches Italy she is seeing in terms of the eighteenth-century picturesque: Naples is “a picture … come to life. The pale city rising up in tiers; the green hills – shadowy now, stretching away to the mountain”. (p.92) The description conforms to conventions of the picturesque landscape, often depicting the Italian campagna, which requires an overlapping of features in recession, fading to a pale shadowy horizon. This is exemplified in Antonio Joli’s eighteenth-century painting
54. Antonio Joli, *The Royal Progression at Piedigrotta (Naples), 18th century*

Museo Nationale di San Martino, Naples
The Royal Progression at Piedigrotta (Naples), (plate 54). Virginia seeks solace in a book with an art nouveau cover from the ship’s library, but its contents are banal. Again she will not find herself in the art of the past.

In London, the art school is near Bloomsbury, “where the other Virginia had lived” (p.111), invoking Hanrahan’s hero, Virginia Woolf, but also bringing her closer to the modern life of the Bloomsbury school of artists. Nearby she visits the grave of William Blake, the visionary artist, poet and printmaker, who, in publishing his own poems and drawings, such as the Songs of Innocence and Experience (1789), invented a new method of printing. Hanrahan’s writing and printmaking has been compared to Blake’s. While Virginia is happy at art school, the imagery has the immediacy of every-day life, “black faces under flossy haloes of hair, lurid red meat … green bananas … humbugs and liquorice”(p.113). She sees a house which reminds her of van Gogh, suggesting she is now closer to modern art and real life, confirmed in the reality of “abandoned tricycles … crooked chalk marks … shriveled dog turds … blobs of phlem”(p.114) in a passage which suggests that, like Hurtle Duffield, she now sees beauty in the ordinary and is abandoning the enclosed narcissistic world of her past.

But the printmaking at art school does not save Virginia. She enters a period like a violent, surreal nightmare. Her vision is blurred, she has strange, violent dreams of her father, “diamond-sharp glass pierced his body”(p.133), her writing is automatic, people stare, teeth gleam cruelly. She meets a shop assistant with a deformed arm that seemed to come alive: “it hated me, took its revenge as it quivered – flaunting raspberry jelly point”(p.134). In a bizarre passage her room is full of hairs, in her food, her bath and clinging to her fingers. Dreams, automatic writing, deformed bodies and, occasionally, hair are all characteristic of surreal art and can be observed in the paintings of Salvador Dali and the Australian Surrealist, James Gleeson, whose Agony in the Garden, 1948, includes swathes of hair. Virginia’s progression into the twentieth century is further suggested when she sees “snow and black twigs like a pattern by Klee”(p.157).

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24 Elaine Lindsay, Diaries, p.145.
25 James Gleeson, Agony in the Garden, 1947-48, oil on canvas, 152.4 x 121.9 cm., University of Sydney Collection.
Regressing again, Virginia sees herself as the Blessed Damozel, “or something from Beardsley (with the spice left out)” (p.165), but while waiting to have an abortion she faces the reality that she is like “a stone statue”(p.187) in the gardens of the past. These barely suggested references imply that Virginia has a useful knowledge of art history and parallel her development as the artist figure.

**Provincialism**

In the formation of Virginia’s artistic persona, Hanrahan touches on the “Provincialism Problem”26, codified by Terry Smith in 1974, referring to decades in which Australian art suffered from “an attitude of subservience to an externally imposed hierarchy of cultural values”.27 Virginia is well trained as an artist in Adelaide, yet is compelled to seek what she sees as her artistic destiny in England. Once on board ship, the concentration on the practical aspect of her art and her artist’s tools, “this scarred pencil, this eraser with its scented crumbling edge, these fluttering sheets of cartridge” (p.23), suggests that Virginia’s only worth as an artist is in her practical training, that her narrow concept of the art world has to be re-invented in an encounter with the wider art scene in Europe. During the voyage Virginia recalls that it is spring in Adelaide, the daffodils are blooming in the street where the bulldozer missed the two almond trees. To get to the “old country” Virginia must negotiate an artificial society which floats above a water garden full of “dead men’s fingers, … in perpetual blackness, razor-fish”(p.73) and fluorescent jelly fish. Such passages imply that Virginia has made a mistake, the bulldozer did not ruin everything, her artistic identity is in Adelaide, not a place where flowers are dormant in winter. Has Virginia traded the reality of sunshine, wattle and birds nesting for a nightmare? Here Hanrahan suggests that the almost obligatory pilgrimage to Europe, which she with many other Australian artists made, was a mistake. Dannie, the South African lover, also exhibits colonial insecurity about himself and Virginia when he takes her to a concert conducted by his American uncle whose relatives, lawyers and doctors with smart polished wives, “treat Dannie like something

27 Ibid. p.46.
colonial” (p.149). In England, Virginia does not meet any artists, does not attend art exhibitions and does not exhibit or sell her work.

At the time this book was written Australian art was still regarded as provincial and Australian artists had little credibility unless they had studied overseas. Most of them returned to Australia but only one or two, such as Sidney Nolan, made any impression on the international art scene. What Hanrahan herself thought of England is suggested in her prints British Aristocrat and British Made.28 The first shows a nude man holding a polo mallet, sitting side-saddle on a spotted horse, and includes the satirical message “astride a dappled pony a young British aristocrat surveys the land and shoulders his polo mallet and prepares to strike hard!” British Made is an image of a woman, scantily dressed like a prostitute with flowers in her hair, on which is superimposed a poker machine screen with various satirical messages.

**Process and concept in Virginia’s art**

Hanrahan’s practical knowledge of printmaking adds credence to the formation of Virginia’s artistic persona but the process of printmaking takes precedence over the conceptual aspect of Virginia’s art making and is inadequate to persuade the reader that Virginia becomes an accomplished artist. The concept of the self-portrait is introduced when Virginia applies facial make-up on the ship; she sees her face as “a canvas, I draw pictures on its surface”(p.37). But this way of painting herself is a misguided perversion of her art, and her painted face fails to attract the ship’s officers. Hanrahan may have intended the misuse of this concept to suggest that Virginia is still artistically immature.

At the London art school, Virginia sits with “A zinc plate sloped into her lap … and drew with a needle … And when it was done, a spatula swished fiercely as she mixed ink. She lay the zinc on a hot-plate; a dabber squelched as she forced French and Frankfort black into the lines.”(p.129) The passage continues in a textbook description of the etching process of inking up, preparing the press and printing the image, leaving no doubt that

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28 Barbara Hanrahan, *British Aristocrat*, 1965, colour lithograph, ed.6, 40.5 x 56 cm; *British Made*, 1966, etching, 56 x 47 cm.
Virginia knows how to make a print, but is that all there is to art? Although Virginia “drew with a needle in a pool of light”, the content of the image is not described.

The occasional glimpses of subject matter in Virginia’s art are included in passages when art is her only redress in an extreme situation. On the ship her drawing of the sea is only “a shadow ocean”. She dreams of her lover as an etching, “incising you with acid backwards on to copper, printing you right side round on hand-made paper”(p.91), but when she makes the print, although “she made him come alive on zinc plates … the aquatint came out too dark; his face was bitten away by acid”(p.148). At the London art school, Virginia makes prints every day, but does not advance in conceptual terms. “The ship made even the prints change … the floating ladies floated away … and little men with penises and faces like Vincenzo’s took their place.”(pp.112-113) Hanrahan’s early prints, such as *Girl with Branches* in which a girl in a leafy dress drifts above a field of flowers, is an example of Virginia’s “floating ladies”, and her versions of Vincenzo could be likened to Hanrahan’s *Adam* (plate 55), a male nude with large floral penis, running through a field of daisies. Virginia’s art materials are listed: “stained glass powder colours (the blues – Oriental, Antwerp, Monastral … ) clinging mistily to their tall glass prisons, gums with their glamorous names of Sandarac and Copal and Dammar and Mastic.” (p.130) What she does with these colours is not revealed but her art, “so beautifully disciplined” (p.131), is used to erase memories of her unhappy love affair.

Virginia dreams that her mother berates her for “drawing those pairs of people together. Always a man and a woman” (p.159), an image comparable to Hanrahan’s *Wedding Night* series (plate 57), a startling image in blood red and black of a grim looking man and a woman, lying side by side but not touching, with genitalia exposed. Again Hanrahan draws on her own printmaking images. When Virginia fears she is pregnant and buys a book on anatomy: “her awareness of the physical … came out in her prints: syringes and artificial legs, elastic supports”(p.159) as in Hanrahan’s *Anatomical Study* (plate 56) which shows three figures in which pseudo anatomical organs are revealed.

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29 Barbara Hanrahan, *Girl with Branches*, 1963, drypoint etching, ed.12, 34 x 17 cm.
30 Barbara Hanrahan, *Adam*, 1964, etching, ed. 20, 60.2 x 30.3 cm.
32 Barbara Hanrahan, *Anatomical Study*, 1966, etching, 26 x 50 cm.

etching, edition 20
Virginia comes to terms with her unwanted pregnancy by thinking of something real: “the etchings she’d brought home to finish – a tight-clenched foetus flying over Kensington Gardens” (p.184). This is one of the few prints in the book where the subject is described, and can be identified with Hanrahan’s birth prints. Hanrahan’s preoccupation with the position of women in society led her to make many prints of women giving birth or pregnant with a baby revealed in utero, including the blood red *Mother and Baby*[^33] and *Woman and Herself*[^34] (plate 58), a savage confronting work strongly influenced by German expressionism, showing a naked woman with genitalia exposed, with a primitive child-like figure on her head. Hanrahan maintained that these prints were not about physical birth. “I think of the woman in *Birth* as giving birth to her


etching, no edition number

[^33]: Barbara Hanrahan, *Mother and Baby*, 1966, colour lithograph and etching, 60.5 x 45.3 cm.
[^34]: Barbara Hanrahan, *Woman and Herself*, 1986, linocut, ed.35, 76 x 56.8 sheet.

colour etching, no edition number
linocut, edition 35
own creativity – it’s not just a mere physical birth … I have a monk friend who meditates upon this print, seeing it as a symbol of his spiritual journey as a monk”. Could it be that Virginia’s foetus print, and not the meeting with her life partner Jem, is the turning point of her life, the point at which, through pain and at last uncompromising honesty, she gives birth to her own creativity, and only then can embark on a successful relationship? Another analysis, not concerned with the development of the artist, suggests that Virginia’s abortion represents the death of her own childhood, releasing her into an adult world. This is Virginia’s only artwork in which there is any suggestion of concept, but the meaning is concealed from readers not aware of Hanrahan’s convoluted philosophical ideas. Virginia’s art is completely self referential, nowhere does she aspire to exhibit or sell her work, which in concept seems to be quite undeveloped.

**Conclusion**

*Sea-Green* ends suddenly with Virginia and her saviour, Jem, lying on the beach “like a Christ”. There are no references to art, either direct or inferred, in the final pages although it is constantly suggested that art lies at the centre of Virginia’s life. Perhaps Hanrahan believed it was impossible to be an artist without a fulfilling personal relationship, but the end of the book does not justify the build up of floral and allegorical imagery, the progression through art history, and other character defining devices which are disregarded for a conventional happy love story ending. Throughout the book Virginia is treated as a student or, at best, when she is an art teacher in Adelaide, as immature in both her art and her grasp of life. She does not sell or exhibit her prints. Her professional associates are either teachers or students. The subject matter of her prints, which is barely mentioned, is entirely subjective. A knowledge of art history is implied through Virginia’s visions of floral imagery, and up to a point, in the linking of her life to an historical progression of art through the ages, but this fades at the end of the book. The book convincingly outlines the development of the student artist but the character is not taken to the full maturity of an independent working and exhibiting artist.

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Artist figures in *Kewpie Doll* and *Michael and Me and the Sun*

**Kewpie Doll**

The development of the artist figure in *Kewpie Doll*, another version of Virginia in *Sea-Green*, is handled in two ways. Firstly, the impressions the artist/narrator absorbs in early adolescence are conveyed obliquely through writing style and content. They include an awareness of visual images as bearers of meaning in the photographs of her family’s history; the understanding of the historical allegories of classical mythology as a link between visual imagery and meaning in the section on Iris and the rainbow; the importance of pattern and texture absorbed through familiarity with her mother’s glamorous clothes; the use of collage, suggested by the narrative technique; horror and the macabre, introduced through Miss Mynell and the hangman; and the nexus between sex and art throughout the latter sections of the text. Secondly, there is seemingly factual narration, including descriptions of art schools attended, which in the section on printmaking classes almost reaches into the sublime, when the narrator is carried away with the realization that she is really an artist.

In *Kewpie Doll*, Hanrahan rarely resorts to the allegorical imagery so lavishly employed in *Sea-Green*, although she once refers to her grandmother Iris as “the goddess of the rainbow”37, a reference to Greek mythology in which Iris is also the messenger of the gods.38 This infers that the budding artist is already familiar with mythological imagery and that Iris is more important than the artist’s mother in stimulating her visual awareness; this occurs through Iris’s family photographs which display an array of quirky characters described in visual terms, such as “The old lady, with the little white crocheted thing on her head, clasps the Jubilee walking-stick” (p.27). Although the characters in the photographs do not become subjects for the young artist, Hanrahan depicted an array of bizarre figures in her own prints related to her family history, such as *Wedding in War-

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37 Barbara Hanrahan, *Kewpie Doll*, (Chatto & Windus, London, 1984), p.28. All subsequent references to this novel are to this edition and are placed in parenthesis in the text.
38 Harvey, op. cit., p.224.
time 1915\textsuperscript{,39} once again linking her own art directly to that of the artist figure in *Kewpie Doll*. In a sequence similar to an experience of the young Hurtle Duffield, this artist finds artistic awareness of texture and shape in her mother’s wardrobe, full of “whispering of silk and lace, the soft burr of velvet, the frosty glimmer of crystal beads”\textsuperscript{(p.41)}. The self-education of the artist narrator continues even at typing school, where she sees pattern in Pittman’s shorthand, “all hooks and strokes and spirals, dots and dashes, secret messages”\textsuperscript{(p.72)}. In comparison to Virginia, this more extroverted artist has better observational skills, of practical use to an artist; Virginia is more consumed by self-consciousness, and dreams of what she has read, rather than what she sees.

The interest in gardens gained from Iris, who also influences Virginia’s love of flowers, takes the artist to Miss Mynell’s garden, where plants are labeled with tags. But the idyllic garden, where “Goldfish swam through scummy water; dragonflies flitted”\textsuperscript{(p.45)}, conceals horror and violence. Miss Mynell goes mad when it is revealed that her father was a hangman; the fascinating garden decays and withers. This sequence adds two more characteristics to the artist’s development: an interest in gardens and botanical species and a preoccupation with the macabre, things which also preoccupy Virginia.

The nexus between art and sex appears in *Kewpie Doll* when the young artist’s prize competition drawing is reproduced in the daily paper. This leads to her first boyfriend and an awakening interest in sex when he takes her to the Show and buys her a kewpie doll. The boy fades out, but the incident is clearly based on Hanrahan’s own print *Doll Kewpie*\textsuperscript{40}(plate 59), which shows two girls in transparent dresses, one with flowers, ribbons, lace and a cross, with an innocent smile, while in the other sexual organs are revealed and the face, with sharp bared teeth, frowns anxiously. Both figures are surrounded by tears, suggesting a loss of innocence, and perhaps foreshadowing the problems to be faced by the artist figure in *Kewpie Doll*.

\textsuperscript{39} Barbara Hanrahan, *Wedding in Wartime, 1915*, 1983, etching, ed.25, 49.7 x 32.2 cm.
\textsuperscript{40} Barbara Hanrahan, *Kewpie Doll*, 1983, etching, ed.25, 49.7 x 32.3 cm.
59. Barbara Hanrahan, *Doll Kewpie*, 1983
etching, edition 25
In *Sea-Green* Hanrahan’s stream of consciousness writing technique can be compared to a linear drawing, but in *Kewpie Doll* she used a verbal equivalent of collage to add another dimension to the education of the young artist. The acute observation of the unsophisticated teen-age artist is shown in sections of visual imagery where kaleidoscopic impressions are piled up like fragments in a collage, for example, at the Christmas Day pageant, “we looked from the fourth-floor window and bells were walking on legs down the road … boys from my school in red, blowing on silver flutes … giant plum puddings … clowns with raspberry noses”(p.15) or, “there was a mad singing in Adelaide … The little city – Beck’s bookshop, Ditters nuts and glace fruits, Balfour’s cakes (all green and pink frog cakes)”(p.134). Collage is a useful technique for the young artist, and although she does not use it in this book, once again it is a technique employed by Hanrahan in many of her prints.

All these techniques provide the budding artist with the necessary conceptual tools. The practical skills she learns are described in more prosaic terms. In *Kewpie Doll* Hanrahan uses the art school to make a point about the archaic syllabus still taught in post-war Adelaide, which involved watercolour, poker work, weaving and lettering. In another reference to provincialism, the smug and narrow-minded headmistress, in the hackneyed old phrase, claims “with a teacher like ours, there was no need to study in Paris”(p.95). The artist studies art history and, in spite of the syllabus, “wanted to draw things out of my head, not copy buckets and flowerpots”(p.98). This artist is much more practical than Virginia.

As in *Sea-Green*, there is little commentary on life outside the art school or teachers’ college, no references to art exhibitions or the Art Gallery of South Australia, although the artist reads in the library. The artist is not as self consumed as Virginia; at least, her observations of her surroundings are more objective, for example, “I came out of the dark city station, up the railway steps that sparkled with silver flecks”(p.106). The young student, who tells the headmistress that her hobbies are reading, gardening and drawing, is being set up as an artist. But she does not escape the problem of sex, which appears in an unconventional and, for the narrator, upsetting way. The Hygiene teacher, who was a
State cricketer (perhaps a sex object, and also a dig at the Adelaide obsession with cricket) shows a film on sex. “It was terrible seeing the diagram of the man’s thing” (p. 108), recalling the morbid attitude to sex in Sea-Green. The most important occurrence at art school is the discovery of a printing press; in the etching class the artist has an artistic epiphany in which her printmaking technique comes together with all she had previously learned about art, in art school, and from her own observation. This liberates her from former sentimental subjects like “girls [who] appeared on the pages of my sketch book” (p. 121): “I made woodcuts. Faces stared out. Springtime lovers to start with, then women in torment. As well, I gouged out earth mothers with moths in their hair” (p. 133). This artist actually produces prints, unlike Virginia who on the whole only dreams about them. The artist remembers Miss Ethel Barringer, the art teacher who had “chosen the press for the Art School” (p. 133), also a hero of Hanrahan’s, and subject of one of her major prints, Dear Miss Ethel Barringer 41 (plate 60) This complex print has been analysed in terms of Gestalt psychology and Hanrahan’s dual personality traits 42, but can also illustrate the nexus between sex and art in Hanrahan’s artist novels. The large joker figure wears a headband engraved “life catcher”. An historical meaning of “catcher” is “deceptive”, suggesting life is deceptive. Miss Barringer, labelled “artist” and “dead”, regards the tightrope spanning the image, which supports a balancing sexy female, holding a banner engraved “balancing act – only Miss Barringer is safe”, suggesting that an artist’s life is a balancing act between art and sex. The book ends with the artist sitting on the lavatory, like Hurtle Duffield in The Vivisector.

The author’s attitude to the development of this artist is positive, the importance of art is introduced in the second sentence and continues throughout the book with ever increasing presence. The components of the artist’s mature style are subtly introduced and gathered together in later chapters, culminating in the epiphany at the printmaking school, where

41 Barbara Hanrahan, Dear Miss Ethel Barringer, 1975, etching, ed. 10, 60.5 x 43.5 cm.
42 Stewart, op. cit., p. 15.
60. Barbara Hanrahan, *Dear Miss Ethel Barringer*, 1975

etching, edition 10
the narrator realizes that she is, in fact, an artist. The theme of this novel is the education of the young artist, still seen in the student environment, not the larger art world, but this artist is more outgoing, better educated and more practical than Virginia, lacking her convoluted thought patterns, her continual self-consciousness and preoccupation with sex.

**Michael and Me and the Sun**

While *Kewpie Doll* follows an emerging artist’s life as a student in Adelaide and ends when she leaves for London, full of hope, the artist in *Sea-Green*, shown during the voyage to London then struggling with life in an unknown, sophisticated city, lacks the confidence of the artist in *Kewpie Doll*. Due to a narcissistic attitude to life and sex, she fails to engage with the London art scene and retains a student’s mentality throughout the book. Hanrahan’s third semi-autobiographical novel, *Michael and Me and the Sun*, named after her much earlier print of the same name, (plate 61) covers the same territory as *Sea-Green*, but this artist figure has the self assurance of the artist in *Kewpie Doll* and, unlike Virginia, transcends the unfamiliar social scene and engages in swinging 1960s London. However, like Hanrahan’s other artist figures, this artist also has a divided personality, but in a slightly different form: “I got sick of pretending, of always being two people. There was the part that made the prints … That part of me was at odds with the person my mother and my grandmother wanted me to be”\(^{43}\). The young art student is strong and sure of her vocation. The character of the artist is supported by specific descriptions of the London art student’s world, including methods, subjects, teachers, students, studios and exhibitions. While at times bothered by would-be sexual encounters, doubts about her inept social skills and worries about finances, she continues to work and learn. In *Sea-Green*, Virginia resolves her problems of sex versus art through a bitter experience of sex, but in *Michael and Me and the Sun* the resolution of the nexus between sex and art results from a visit to an international art exhibition at the “ICA Gallery … the first show in London of the new Pop art from America”\(^{p.132}\). After this the artist sees sex in everything and learns how to introduce it in her prints.

\(^{43}\) Barbara Hanrahan, *Michael and Me and the Sun*, (University of Queensland Press, 1992), p.13. All subsequent references to this novel are to this edition and are placed in parenthesis in the text.

colour etching, no edition number
As the main figure in a straightforward account of the education of an art student, this artist figure is more convincing than the two already discussed. She takes as much as she can from the artistic environment, visiting art exhibitions, discussing art issues with colleagues, making prints using imagery from local and international current affairs, and from her own personal experience. She seeks excellence, buys the best art materials, visits the biggest and best international exhibitions and experiments with all print media. When she cannot absorb any more, she spends all her money on mod clothes, briefly visits Paris and returns home alone with a portfolio of prints, knowledgeable about art and international artistic trends.

This artist figure does not indulge in the interior dialogue and self torment of the artist figure in Sea-Green. The floral imagery in Michael and Me and the Sun, such as “the garden had been full of birds and my grandmother kept tying the tomato plants up higher” (p.11), is used to establish a sense of place, here in contrast to the freezing winter in London. While imagery is often extended with imaginative and poetic touches of the artist’s eye, it is not threatening, indicative of heightened emotions or full of allegorical allusions as it is in Sea-Green. The artist’s awareness of her poetic nature appears in the description of snow which “floated past the window in a weightless bee-buzz”, ending with “the London snow kept seeming poetic, even though when I got out in it my eyes stung” (p.15). This artist is also tougher and more aware than Virginia: despite getting lost she eventually finds her way to the Tate Gallery exhibition, but when she sees it wonders “where all the Australian women painters were” (p.19). Occasionally the allegorical imagery of Sea-Green is sarcastically satirized in this novel, as when the kindergarten teacher who was always tidying up had “a pale saint’s face; she should have carried a lily” (p.24). While printmaking processes are referred to, together with lists of artists’ equipment, the subject matter of the artist’s prints is also discussed, for example, the artist “let go of my moss haired girls and allowed myself to make faces and figures that were ugly and beautiful and bold” (p.53). The “new etching of a politician with rows of stars behind him.” (p.65) recalls Hanrahan’s own print series Tarts and Stars from the 1960s, particularly A Picture of Passion and Desire (1964) (plate 62). Artists referred to

colour etching, no edition number
are mainly twentieth-century figures, like Jackson Pollack, Lowry, and Stanley Spencer. The expatriate problem is also touched on in this artist’s formation. She moves to a flat where her neighbours are all expatriates, including a mad old West Indian woman and an old New Zealand alcoholic. Is this a lesson for the young artist about what happens to expatriates? These figures are contrasted to the effete, mediocre art teacher, and painter of nudes in the style of Sir William Russell Flint, with whom she has a brief affair. The question of sex and her continuing virginity surfaces, but is dealt with as a side issue, in a casual one-night affair which occurs after she decides that her artistic destiny is in Adelaide. The artist returns home, successful, winner of the only distinction at the art school, and confident of her future. This novel was published posthumously and written when Hanrahan knew she was dying. It may be that, when faced with mortality, she focused on the positive rather than the negative aspects of the development of the artist.

The Frangipani Gardens

In *The Frangipani Gardens* Hanrahan departs from the semi-autobiographical mode of the novels already discussed. The theme here is the plight of the dutiful daughter, trapped in the conventional world of the early twentieth-century which approved of the “lady watercolour painter” but could not accommodate a woman artist prepared and able to express violent emotions on canvas. This is a common story in the history of art, one example being Clarice Beckett (1887-1935) who chose to become an artist instead of marrying; although forced to become a housekeeper for her parents, through determined dedication she continued to paint.\(^4\) Aunt Doll, the artist, is another of Hanrahan’s dual characters but in this work the duality is created through two separate artistic personas, the private and the public artist. The novel outlines the way her art practice changes as she becomes liberated. She is portrayed as a visionary who, through her art, first comes to terms with her own life and then is able to influence the lives of others.

Doll’s characteristics are built up through a series of contrasts, first between the expressive and emotional drawings of her childhood, seen by her parents as a

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\(^4\) *Clarice Beckett: politically incorrect*, (Exhibition Catalogue, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 1999).
transgression, and the careful watercolour style she adopts. Her insipid watercolours are then contrasted with what she sees and remembers during her parents’ lifetime, and hopes to paint at some time in the future. Further into the text, the contrast develops between Doll’s daytime innocuous and inoffensive watercolours and her secret night-time oil paintings, showing her inner life and the wild but secret behaviour she observes and feels around her. The outlet of her feelings through the secret night paintings keeps the empathetic side of her personality alive in contrast with the deadness of the feeble daytime watercolours.

Doll’s continuing kindness and generosity are illustrated by her acceptance of responsibility for caring for her abandoned nephew and niece, but the timidity fostered by her feigned daytime persona overcomes her kindness at a crucial time when it may have been possible to resolve the problem of her dual persona. This happens more than once and the second time nearly kills her when she feels that her niece does not recognize her true art. But the empathy that flows from her love of the children ultimately saves her through the tramp’s visions, passed on to her by the hallucinations of her nephew and made concrete in her art. She returns to life and reconciles the duality of her persona, becoming the inspired artist able to paint the truth. Aunt Doll, the visionary, suffering but redemptive artist, isolated from society, is in some ways like White’s artist figure Alf Dubbo, and similar to Frances, the artist who also paints secretly at night and sees the truth, in Sue Woolfe’s *Painted Woman*, to be discussed in chapter six. Certainly, Doll, the all-seeing artist figure, is linked to the artist-as-hero/genius of the nineteenth-century stereotype.

In *The Frangipani Gardens*, Hanrahan does not base Doll’s paintings on her own prints as she does with her other artist figures. Doll’s watercolours could be compared to thousands of amateur watercolour paintings, seen in auction rooms and art shops but her oil paintings have grand expressionistic, figurative subjects, comparable to the early 1940s work of Arthur Boyd,45 such as *The Orchard* (plate 63). There is no Australian

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45 In Arthur Boyd’s 1943/4 paintings, *The Beach*, *The Hammock*, *The Cemetery*, *The Orchard*.  

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National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
woman artist of the period whose subject matter could be compared with Doll’s wild canvasses.

*The Frangipani Gardens* could be classed as a gothic fairy tale, in which Aunt Doll, the artist, is the ugly sister with a heart of gold. Doll’s repressed mode is suggested by the “Tubes of Windsor and Newton in her studio … laid out in rows”\(^{46}\), her subjects are described as “embalmed” and “straight from the taxidermist”\(^{p55}\). Devices such as the studio in the garden with stained glass windows, and locked room with its nearby quince tree, add mystery and the suggestion of redemption. Wild storms, danger of paedophiles, children lost in the bush, and a dashing English remittance man metamorphosed into a visionary tramp lead the reader through the vicissitudes of Doll’s journey to redemption as an artist. Doll’s story reaches a peak when the locked studio door is opened by Lou, Doll’s young niece, and Doll’s secret nature is revealed. The room is full of vibrant, expressionistic paintings of people and wild scenes observed throughout Doll’s life, “the foaming sea dashed in and a boy and girl were pecked at by birds … a man from the Bible with a beard full of bees, and a lady with breasts like roses. She was shameless, splendid with every part of her come alive.”\(^{p143}\) The whole passage vibrates with vivid, wild imagery full of violence and passion. “The paint wriggled in anguish, sometimes it had been put on like worms; other times it lay thick as mud and you saw the marks of her fingers … a brush wouldn’t do”\(^{p143}\). The lady watercolourist becomes a wild expressionistic painter like White’s Hurtle Duffield and, like him, sees into the heart of things: she paints “all those people, acting out their secrets without shame, pushing into the open the unmentionable dreams”\(^{p144}\).

Doll may be the most convincing of Hanrahan’s artist figures, with the emphasis on what she paints, the derivation of her subjects, a mention of her training at the School of Design where she drew Greek gods, reference to her wild expressive style, supported by a rationale for emergence as an artist, although, in artistic as well as social terms, Doll is isolated, having no known contact with other artists or the art world. Against the

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\(^{46}\) Barbara Hanrahan, *The Frangipani Gardens*, (University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1980), p.54. All subsequent references to this novel are to this edition and are placed in parenthesis in the text.
conventions of contemporary society, Hanrahan allows the artist to win success, not through financial enrichment or public acclaim, but in the consolidation of her own identity as an artist, which must be achieved before any other success can accrue.

In the texts examined so far, each writer has created a character of his or her own gender. Hanrahan is the first trained artist whose fictional characters have been discussed. She uses her art training as background for descriptions of the process of printmaking to the detriment of descriptions of the conceptual aspect of art making in her semi-autobiographical novels, where the protagonists are students rather than fully-fledged artists. White, as mentioned, takes the opposite position, omitting descriptions of process in favour of concept. In *The Frangipani Gardens*, in which the artist is one of several leading characters, Hanrahan adopts a more rounded approach, explaining the dual modes of the artist’s painting, the reasons for this, some aspects of the process but, predominantly, the subjects of her work. Doll is an artist in the mode of the nineteenth-century artist-as-hero, being the redemptive spirit in the novel, although she is also of her time. While Hurtle Duffield is also modelled on the stereotype he is not of his time, which in White is less specific. Hanrahan’s other artist figures are not in this mode, and their actions match the temporal settings of the books. To some extent they echo the preoccupations expressed in Hanrahan’s diaries and prints and the artists in *Sea-Green* and *Kewpie Doll* could lend themselves to a psychological interpretation. Of Hanrahan’s artist figures, the artist/student in *Michael and Me and the Sun* is the best informed in terms of art, and all her semi-autobiographical artists demonstrate detailed knowledge of the printmaking process. None of the other works examined so far have this characteristic. White’s Hurtle Duffield has, by inference, the greatest sweep of knowledge of world art, but displays miniscule knowledge of the process of art. Dark’s artist is more closely related to current social trends than to the art world. Perhaps because of her familiarity with art-making, Hanrahan’s writing style has the most affinity with artistic creativity and, especially in *Sea-Green*, suggests the creative process. Hanrahan’s artist figures address social issues in a way not apparent in White’s novels, but touched on by Dark, and reflect the same concerns expressed in her printmaking.
CHAPTER 6

Violence and desire in Sue Woolfe, *Painted Woman* (1989): the female artist figure and her declining male counterpart

**Background**
*Painted Woman* outlines the development from childhood to maturity of the young artist Frances, precipitated through a lifelong confrontation with her aging father, a violent failed artist, and inspired by her murdered mother’s thwarted artistic ability. Frances first appears as an unnamed child watching her father paint in his studio in the Blue Mountains. Her mother, subject to depression probably caused by her husband’s violence, is finally killed by the father, who is gaol for murder. Frances is then cared for by her aunt who is in thrall to her brother and, like Frances, subject to his sexual attention. On his release from gaol the father begins to teach the child to paint, but his lessons are stilted and his outlook old-fashioned. In an effort to regain his waning talent, the father moves to the city but fails and returns to the mountains. Frances begins to “help” her father paint and, when she rejects her lover because of her artistic ambition, her father chases her with an axe. Later he enslaves her as his assistant, who in reality paints his paintings to his demand. Frances steals his paint but is unable to paint for herself until his new mistress, of whom Frances is jealous but who is in reality her saviour, encourages her to paint. She begins to paint in secret using the inside of cupboard doors as a support. She discovers her mother’s portrait of her father, identified by the mistress. The father dies and Frances takes over his painting studio.

**Structure and influences**
*Painted Woman* is structured as if an exhibition, in three sections introduced by a list of untitled paintings, with measurements and details of the medium and support. The narrative is in two voices with the main voice, that of the developing artist from
childhood through to maturity, in the present tense; the second voice is that of the mature artist, who interrupts the main voice occasionally in the past tense, is identified by italics in the text, and comments on an exhibition of paintings which illustrate the artist’s life as related by the first voice. The mature voice holds the clues to interpretation of the novel.

Woolfe, though not trained in the visual arts was, like Eleanor Dark, brought up with painters. Her father was an artist, but she has said that “all painting from Monet on was despised at home”. Before writing this book she visited the Tate Gallery in London every day for six weeks, but there are no references to real artists in the novel, except for a list of three names, nor any reference to art history or famous paintings. Instead, Woolfe has drawn on the theoretical writing of artists, art historians and philosophers whose ideas provide a complex and original framework for the development of the artist figure. The title Painted Woman probably refers to a chapter entitled “Painted Ladies” in Rosita Parker and Griselda Pollock’s feminist text, Old Mistresses, Women, Art and Ideology. Their “Painted Ladies” chapter outlines the background to the repression of women artists, one of the themes of Painted Woman. Until the late eighteenth century the nude figure was predominantly male. While the rare women artists of the Renaissance were acknowledged, when history painting was elevated to the highest genre in art, women were excluded from life painting studios and therefore hampered in painting the necessary, heroic male nude, thus precluding women from any status in the highest artistic genre. In the nineteenth century the preference was for female nudes, disguised as figures of classical antiquity in “passive, available, possessable, powerless” attitudes, now regarded as thinly disguised pornography and a sign of male domination. Women artists, spurred on by the twentieth-century women’s movement, redressed this position. Woolfe’s artist figures follow this pattern; Frances, the young girl who eventually

2 Sue Woolfe and Kate Grenville, op.cit., p.262.
3 Listed in Acknowledgements: Theodor Adorno, Marion Milner (also known as Joanna Field), René Girard, Peter Fuller, Rozika Parker, Griselda Pollock, Eva Hesse, Donald Kuspit, Andrew Brighton, Kerry Johns, Alex Edwards.
5 Parker and Pollock, op.cit., p.116.
becomes an artist, and her mother, who is defeated in her artistic ambitions by her husband, are both subjects of the father’s art. He bullies the daughter, suppressing her artistic ability, and kills his wife. Though subject to domestic slavery and denigration, Frances cannot resist her strong creative drive and eventually succeeds as an artist. Some aspects of the character Frances are reminiscent of Eva Hesse’s life. Although Hesse had a tragic and short life, she produced conceptual art of high standing, resulting from a life-long study of her own psyche and how to best integrate it into her art; her notes and diaries, outlining her close investigation of what it is to be an artist, became an integral part of her work and her ideas may have relevance for the “gap” which so preoccupies Frances.

Although Frances receives some instruction in painting from her father, it is stilted and of little help. She appears to be self-taught, developing her own ideas about how to paint in isolation from other artists and artistic influences. Woolfe found justification for this type of artistic development in the writing of Marion Milner, who published a self-help manual for amateur artists under the name and title of Joanna Field, *On not being able to Paint*. Field advocates a type of automatic drawing to unlock abstract concepts necessary for creativity in art, a technique also used by the Surrealists. She also quotes extensively from Mary Parker Follett, an early contributor to management studies, who argued that integration and coordination are necessary to resolve conflict. Like Eleanor Dark, Follett was also interested in Vitalism, maintaining “we see the *élan vitale* (still a thing-in-itself) as a somewhat crude foreshadowing of a profound truth.” Frances searches for the truth and, in spite of great repression, retains her essential vitality. Field concludes that “Ultimately then it is perhaps ourselves that the artist in us is trying to create; and if ourselves, then also the world.” Field’s ideas will be more extensively discussed in relation to various aspects of Frances’ emerging artistic persona.

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6 Parker and Pollock, op.cit., p.154.
9 Follett, op.cit., p.90, quoted in Field, p.150.
10 Field, op.cit., p.159.
Ideas relating to Woolfe’s other sources will also be discussed in relation to Frances’ development as an artist. But because of their complexity and centrality to the development of the artist figure in *Painted Woman*, the theories of René Girard are briefly outlined here. In discussing *Painted Woman*, Woolfe referred to the conjunction of art and violence, asking “is art a violent act because while it unifies, it also splinters wholeness?” Girard’s theories centre on myth, violence, and the scapegoat in the generation of culture and religion. Woolfe has drawn heavily on Girard to provide a framework for this novel, but while Girard refers to the collective aspect of violence, arguing from the evidence of myth and religion, Woolfe adapts his theories to the individual, substituting art for the notion of culture. Girard has two linking theories; that of the scapegoat or innocent victim, and that of mimetic desire. The resolution of these problems leads to “generation” or creativity. The scapegoat is innocent, vulnerable, unable to retaliate and without champions, but is recognized as the cause of their crisis by the persecutor/s, who act to resolve the “crisis” by destroying the scapegoat. This action concludes the violence and allows the perpetrators to unite and co-operate. The initial cause of the violence, according to Girard, is “the mechanism of mimetic desire”. The value of a desired object lies in the fact that it is desired. A person’s desire for an object is confused with a desire to be like the owner of the object, and leads to the person imitating the owner of the desired thing (or quality, characteristic, talent as I understand it). The imitator does not understand this and assumes “that he does well to value the object of desire”, but as the imitator comes closer to obtaining the desired, the one imitated displays hostility and rejection. While the imitated seems to say “be like me; value the object”, when the imitator comes too close rivalry ensues and the imitated retreats saying, “do not be like me. It’s mine”. Such rivalry, according to Girard, produces the desirer’s “monstrous double” and, when this is not resolved, a “sacrificial crisis” emerges. However, although violence leads to a breakdown in society, it also generates religion and culture through transforming the “monstrous double” into a saviour. This happens through erasing memory of rivalry and remembering only the “beneficial”

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effects of the sacrificial death. It is only by retaining a mythic (or artistic?) account of the killing that the destructive truth can be avoided. The mythic account sees the victim as a saviour and the death as a sacrifice, “Rituals of sacrifice are instituted to substitute for the real thing. Thus the circle closes.”

Development of the artist figures: the success of Frances; the decline of the father; the posthumous recognition of the mother as an artist.

As the formation of the main artist character Frances is intertwined with the development of the father as a declining artist, and the posthumous influence of the mother’s art, the three artists will be discussed as a group. The main themes of violence, oppression, perverted sex, creativity and the mysterious “gap” are all introduced at the beginning of the book. The opening sentence “His arm is above me” suggests violence to the child hiding while watching her father paint. She is crouched and careful not to “show my panties” as she knows that her mother’s panties are revealed during her father’s violent attacks. The father is described in terms of a child’s drawing, “his face slashed between the red protuberances of nose and chin, his lips purple, his teeth flaring like a saw’s edge” (p.3), which also recalls Fauve portraits, such as André Derain, Portrait of Matisse (plate 64) which Woolfe may have seen at the Tate Gallery, an image in violent unrealistic clashing colour. But the father’s arm is raised in an energetic and violent act of painting, described by the child, “his brush is returning to the top curve … looping, twisting”. (p.3) An “A” on its side becomes an eye (the child is literate) and a double portrait emerges, at first apparently the father and mother kissing, then becoming the father kissing the child, in a preview of the replacement of the mother by the child, who is at first loved and later feared but enslaved by the father. The description of the

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15 Sue Woolfe, Painted Woman, (Random House, Australia, 1989), p.3. All subsequent references to this novel are to this edition and are placed in parenthesis in the text.
16 André Derain, Portrait of Matisse, 1905, oil on canvas, 46.6 x 34.00 cm., Tate Gallery, London.
64. André Derain, *Portrait of Matisse*, 1905

Tate Gallery, London
rhythmic action of painting in circles and zig-zags contains elements of violence, the paint “festers” and depicts “spikes”. The circle around the two figures “cuts them off … as a knife would” (p.5). When the painting is done, the father kisses the child on the mouth, but more is implied, “there’s no pain … we’re curving into each other … his warmth seeps into me” (p.4).

**Violence, mimetic desire and the scapegoat**

Sex and violence have been discussed in relation to the formation of artist characters in the novels of White and Hanrahan. In *Painted Woman*, overt and uncontrolled violence between three artists is a catalyst for the development of the young artist figure, and appears in the mature artist’s autobiographical paintings, while in White’s and Hanrahan’s novels, violence, more indirect and part of general life, becomes the artists’ subject matter in a critique of society. Sex in *Painted Woman* is either violent or illicit, and an instrument of oppression, and Frances foregoes sexual relationships in favour of her art, whereas in White’s and Hanrahan’s artist figures, in different ways, sex is a spur and subject matter of their art.

From the beginning, Frances’ artistic sensibility develops through observation, but because of her father’s constraints, like Aunt Doll in *The Frangipani Gardens*, she cannot paint herself. Her knowledge of her parents is incomplete; she knows that her mother was beautiful, but did not pose for the father’s female nude paintings, that he beat her, that she is repressed, and “only knows about washing clothes, and love” (p.12). The barren aunt, who fails to plant anything in the holes she digs in her garden, reveals that the father is past his prime, “He used to be famous … exhibitions in Paz, Athens, Mysore, London” (p.10). Frances learns that her mother never wore her taffeta ball gown because the father took his model to the ball, here linking the nude model, betrayal, sex, cruelty and art in the child’s mind. Frances does not find out that her mother was a better artist than her father until the end of the book, after years of slavery. While Frances intuitively learns about concepts of cruelty and violence indirectly from her father, ironically, she thinks he is “a master of illusion, who knows” (p.16). She imitates her father’s stance, while the mother observes that she is already tainted with violence. Frances refuses to
leave with her mother because she wants to be an artist like her father, but as his limited attempts to teach her principles of painting such as composition progress so does the horror. The father shows her how to bisect faces “as if we’re using an axe”. Shavings from his pencil sharpening lie “dead on the floor”; there is a description of a hen with its head chopped off; the child draws the house where she and her father will live alone; the father’s portrait of the child is composed of slashes of paint, and the child thinks it looks like the mother. All this becomes subject matter for the mature artist who comments on it in her asides. Because the child wants the father to herself she invents a spell involving the death of her mother, conditional upon her being able to fit a certain number of faces on the sheet of paper. When the mother is found dead in a night of stillness and silence, in an anticlimax to the build-up of horror, Frances fills her mother’s empty diary with repeated drawings of her. The father disappears and is sentenced to life imprisonment, but the child rejoices because she thinks that she and her father are united in killing the mother and “he will escort me into meaning” (p. 29).

Girard’s linked theories of mimetic desire and the scapegoat are recalled in this sequence in *Painted Woman*. The mother is the scapegoat, seen by the father as a threat, because, as Frances discovers at the end of the book, her one remaining painting is a masterpiece, better than any of his work. It is “the only painting by my mother … A masterpiece stashed under a wardrobe for forty years, the only extant work of a young, unknown but brilliant artist, the victim of a cruel murder.” (p. 211) The father sees the mother as the cause of his troubles. She is downtrodden, depressed, friendless and despised by her young daughter who imitates the father, characteristics of Girard’s scapegoat. Following Girard’s thesis, the mother must be removed. The father’s waning artistic ability is the true cause of the crisis in which the mother is murdered. The father is the killer, but the young artist thinks that she was complicit in the murder because of the magic spell and, now, she and her father will be united; as Girard says, members are now able to cooperate. Although the child’s sexual involvement with the father suggests Freud’s Oedipal complex and that she wants to be an artist because she wants to be like him,
Freud's theory does not seem to involve creativity, and Girard concluded that Freud's Oedipal order was mistaken.17

Girard’s theories applied to the development of the child artist suggest that it is the reverse, the child wants to be like her father because she wants to be an artist. “Dad wouldn’t want me to leave him, I say. He’s teaching me to be an artist”(p.12), Frances tells her mother when she wants to take her away. The ability to be an artist is Girard’s object of desire. Through wishing for her father’s artistic ability, the child exchanges desire for the father’s artistic ability for desire to be like the father. This starts before the mother’s death, when Frances thinks, “This is the house where Dad and I will live …And here’s our bed.”(p.13) Some time after the murder the father admits to the child that he is not sure what he has done, “I have a dim sense of events, but not their intention or purpose … let alone their meaning”(p.47) he says. Girard postulates, “Those who are caught in its [the drama of death and violence] vicious cycle, both killers and victims, do no know what they are doing.”18 When the father instructs Frances in “a classic composition … The horizon one-third of the way down … Don’t overdraw.”(p.51), Frances cannot paint that way, “my white canvas laughs at me like teeth” and “Stop lagging, he shouts”(p.52). The mature artist comments that in spite of this it meant a great deal to her then that he was her confidant. But here he is drawing away, displaying hostility and rejection, in parallel with Girard’s theory.

The father’s behavior and art now deteriorate; the former world famous artist now resorts to country landscapes and still life paintings of eggs. The city dealers reject him. In desperation he tries religion, taking Frances with him to church and carrying a furled umbrella to identify himself as one who “knows the ceremonies”(p.59) but also maintaining that love is not important, thus rejecting the possibility of mythologising his violent act of murder and perpetuating his cycle of violence. This recalls Girard’s theory that Judeo-Christian religion, in which the crucifixion is central, is based on violence, but

that “by retaining a fictional or mythic [or artistic?] account of the event ... the community [can] avoid the truth about itself, which would destroy it.”

Violence continues when the father begins to beat the young girl who takes it for granted because for her violence is normal, and condoned by Auntie, who “always waits outside the door while he hits me ... but doesn’t come in” (p.62). The beatings indicate that the father fears Frances’ artistic talent, she is coming too close to the object of her desire, to being an artist. Girard postulates that “whenever he [the disciple] sees himself closest to the supreme goal, he comes into violent conflict with a rival ... he convinces himself that the violence itself is the most distinctive attribute of this supreme goal! Ever afterward, violence and desire will be linked in his mind”. The father is unknowingly showing Frances one way of becoming an artist and it is not through his stilted painting lessons. The girl is assimilating violence, which will lead eventually to her realization of herself as an artist. This is established quite early when the mature voice, lecturing on her paintings based on her life at her final exhibition, breaks into the narrative, saying:

I’ve had to admit many things and this is just one more: violence, in its terror, once seemed to me not just a simple means to an end, but behind that the realisation of what is. The discovery of a secret. ... it seems to me now that violence can be both: it can be death and it can be, ladies and gentlemen, what you see around you in this room. (p.24)

Frances is now slipping away from her father towards the memory of her dead mother. Late at night she dresses up in her mother’s ball gown; she paints her face, not with cosmetics like Virginia does in *Sea-Green*, but with her father’s oil paints. She remembers her mother, “On my lips I paint her lips as she sings, on my eyes I paint her half-shut eyes ... I’m not trying to be her, to bring her back, I just want to remember.” (p.61) The process of mythologizing is beginning. She is moving towards healing and artistic redemption, instinctively approaching her destiny as an artist, not through her father’s stilted art lectures, but intuitively, in the way suggested by Field, who wrote, “In trying to re-make the object of one’s love, surely one was also remaking the desire for it, trying to turn the desire into something which did not destroy, by its

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19 Burkett, Girard, Smith, op.cit., p.9.
20 Burkert, Girard, Smith, op.cit., p.16.
possessiveness, the very thing one loved”.\textsuperscript{21} However, Frances is still in thrall to her father with whom she believes she was responsible for her mother’s murder.

Frances again approaches the father. While he tries to paint she copies his work, but this is as close as he will allow her. “If he allowed me to paint … my own paintings, I couldn’t even begin.”(p.59) she believes. The father thrusts her away when she asks about the meaning in his paintings. “You invade. You cling. You cloy”(59) he says in an exact mirror of Girard. But he is finished as an artist, “You’re a dead man” (p.60) they hear from a television set as they walk past a house. Nevertheless, she tries to placate him because she still believes he has what she needs to be an artist. She reminisces that he was gentler when they lived in the mountains although this is untrue, he murdered his wife there. But Frances continues her quest while mythologising the death, “You want too much, he says. But I’m not going to stop wanting, I can’t, that’s why she died.”(p.61) In a reference to Girard’s ‘monstrous double’ the father breaks the mirror in his studio and tells Frances that she is his mirror now, “You’re in, shouts a boy in the street”(p.57) but not quite, “No I’m not, shouts a girl.”(p.57)

Her schoolteacher boyfriend encourages Frances to paint, but she feels she needs her father’s permission, however when he does not even say goodbye to her as she leaves to clean up the dead aunt’s house, she suspects that her aunt told her the truth, he alone was the murderer. Now she is almost free but lacks confidence. When she reaches the altar at their proposed marriage, she realizes she cannot sacrifice the hope of finding the key to her art that she still thinks the father can supply. The teacher’s love is not enough. She runs through the bush, chased by the father with a meat axe in a return of violence when the threat of her dedication to art reappears. Now for twenty years she paints her father’s paintings for him, signing with his name. Frances becomes Girard’s ‘monstrous double’. The father proudly tells his new girlfriend Molly that there is “One painting, two artists. I tell my daughter what to do.”(p.133) Frances is only set free when she herself resorts to violence, setting fire to the house when she discovers a portrait of her father and a newspaper cutting confirming that he strangled his wife. She is saved by Molly who

\textsuperscript{21} Field, op.cit., p.159.
reveals that the portrait was painted by the mother. “My mother” (p.172), Frances whispers, finally realizing that the mother is her redeemer, Girard’s scapegoat. When the father dies, Frances appears, painting for herself in his studio, attaining the final goal of Girard’s mimetic desire.

The Gap

The idea of the Gap was included in this novel from the earliest drafts. It is referred to throughout the novel, first appearing when the child describes the finished painting as being cut away from the wall and drifting out of the window “away from the Gap” (p.4). The Gap on the wall closes as “paint closes on itself in the pot”. The mature voice now comments on the Gap, relating it to the childish violence of breaking a doll’s head, the disappointment of empty Christmas present wrappings and “the distance between the breast and me” (p.5) suggesting the psychoanalytical theories of Melanie Klein who extended the work of Freud, particularly in the area of child psychology. While the Gap may represent a Freudian lack of phallic power, Klein’s view was that the infant fears the loss of the loved object, the mother’s body, particularly the breast, due to its own violent attacks, and aims to restore the lost love object within the ego. Hanna Segel sees in Klein’s theory of reparative impulses “the wish and capacity for restoration of the good object, internal and external”, held to be “a fundamental drive in all artistic creativity”. The mature artist’s intervention closes with the admission of her lifelong wish to find “a place where there was no Gap. A place incandescent with meaning … so it would close behind me.” (p.5) This suggests that the closure of the Gap was the necessary fulfilment of the artist’s artistic destiny and recalls the theories of Theodor Adorno, which posit

An endless process in which fluid concepts are constantly reformed to fit the object; and in this way the unattainable goal of integration of subject and object, word and thing, is asymptotically approached, while a lapse into the ‘reifying’ tendencies of the false search for ‘primacy’ is avoided.
And yet separation from the father when he goes to gaol causes the Gap to re-appear, but the father has caused the mother’s disappearance. Girard’s theories also have resonance in relation to the Gap. When the victim is mythologised as the saviour, rituals of sacrifice “are instituted to substitute for the real thing. Thus the circle closes.”26 Frances begins to ritualize the murder when she paints her face. The Gap comes and goes, returning with Molly, the father’s girl friend who Frances sees as taking her mother’s place. Her mother whom she has almost mythologised is now resurrected in the form of another woman. The Gap re-appears when, after years of doing her father’s paintings, Francis is told that she is no longer wanted, he will resume painting himself. With the discovery of the mother’s portrait, which is a penetrating insight into the character of the husband, the mother returns in mythological form allowing the Gap to close. In revenge, Frances burns her father’s house, thus completing the circle of violence. In taking over the power of violence from the father, and in the implied closure of the Gap, she attains her artistic maturity. Field points out, in a quotation from M.P.Follett, that “reality is in the relating, in the activity-between,”27 and sums up:

The function of the creative arts … [is to] provide a half-way house to external reality, that function by which they carry on, throughout our lives, the role that in our infancy had to be filled by a person, their function [is] in providing a perpetual well for the renewal and expansion of our psychic powers.28

**Structure Painting**

The story of Frances’ developing life provides the subject matter for the exhibition of paintings being commented upon by her older self. This subject matter is only hinted at by the commentator and is often a summary, in conceptual form, of part of the younger Frances’ life. For example, the commentator interrupts the narrative when Frances and her father are at the department store in town where they see his early portrait of the mother. It is implied that Frances’ own portrait of her mother is part of the mature artist’s exhibition, “I’ve only given you a few glimpses of my mother … All I’ve shown is how she existed in the story I’ve lived.”(p.33) In another section, when the young Frances tries to find a boyfriend to love her, the older artist paints “this woman here, see, she

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26 Burkitt, Girard, Smith, op.cit., p.9.
27 Field, op.cit., p.150.
28 Field, op.cit., p.162.
wants to be possessed. … Like an Old Testament prophet, dancing in the light of God … with eyes that split surfaces apart.”(p.92) Towards the end of the novel she comments, “I’ve painted here my pantheon, in a row like schoolyard figures fixed for a moment by the camera … I’ve painted violence as a wanton schoolboy. And that’s my father in the schoolboy’s hands.”(p.155)

The part played by violence, the gap and the way they become artistic concepts has been discussed. Other necessary skills for the developing artist are also gradually acquired. Even as a young child it is established that Frances has sharp observational skills and a sophisticated ability to describe colour and shape, when she describes her father and his double portrait of them both. She learns about texture from the dresses in her mother’s wardrobe, a sequence found in the development of both Hurtle Duffield in *The Vivisector* and Virginia in *Sea-Green*. The father gives her art lessons about rules of composition, not about feelings or intuition, “All things recede. And while they recede, they seem to come towards each other … It’s an illusion. Artists have taught this illusion”, he tells her, so that she sees the chook shed looming “wide at the front and narrow at the back, like an ancient pyramid on its side pointing silently to infinity”(p.11), indicating that she also knows about pyramids. The father takes her landscape painting; she must follow his stilted instruction, based on principles of the golden mean, favoured by nineteenth-century landscape painters. She must paint exactly what he paints, “The horizon one-third of the way down, the river one-third across. The river turning back on itself three-quarters of the way down the diagonal.”(p.39) Her awareness of colour is noted when she describes the handkerchief her father wears to spruce up his old suit as “a wintry fierce yellow the blue’s shivering in it”(p.49). The mature voice then points out the use of yellow in her exhibition painting. Frances learns about light when beating eggs with her aunt, “the sun inside the bowl leaps high … and may splash on the lino … the sun may splash dribbles of light on Auntie”(p.51). She observes shapes when her father throws a can of linseed oil at a mirror, and it runs down in “a hundred gentle parabolas”(p.57). By the time she reaches puberty Frances has these skills, as well as a growing ability to see life in abstract terms. For example, when her father beats her then tries to appease her with a gift of a bicycle, she sees him stretched out as if on a crucifix. This turning point is
marked by the first use of the artist’s name ‘Frances’ and confirmed by the mature voice recalling “but that’s the point, violence was an indrawn breath behind the deepest things and with that breath there was death and with that breath there was life” (p.64).

The father’s painting declines from the first double portrait described as an expressionist work, and his youthful portrait of his wife, “as if she’d been cut out of cellophane with a lamp behind her” (p.33) which he defaces, to mannered landscape, still life and over painted muddy portraits, eventually ceasing until he is able to prevail on Frances to paint in his name. The mother’s only painting is a portrait which reveals the father’s true nature: “this is the way his eyes fit into their sockets … there’s his squared jaw … It’s a mean, dishonest, ignorant face. A face that knows nothing.”(p.168) The mature voice claims it is a masterpiece.

Frances’ first painting, done at school, does not follow her father’s technical instruction, but results from violence. She plans out the drawing as she has seen her father do, but as a tormenting child calls her father a murderer the drawing becomes wild and expressionistic, the house blue and purple like fear, a skeleton woman holds up the roof, growing larger until everything erupts inside her. She draws her mother’s murder and is later beaten by the father. As a child Frances paints brushstroke for brushstroke after the father but cannot work alone. She stops painting when they return to the mountains, where she is her father’s housekeeper, living downstairs while he lives upstairs, but pathetically she steals scrapings from his palette and empty paint tubes from the dustbin, which she gloats over alone at night. Her teacher-boyfriend buys paints and she does a painting at his house, but knows it is derivative, displaying a developed critical capacity of some sophistication: “The painting was full of pre-conceived and consciously controlled lines, over-explicit in a wish to be something more … filled with other people’s lines, Modigliani, Munch, Matisse, Dad. Mainly Dad.”(p.108) Time passes and Frances is now engaged in faking her father’s work. While his brushstrokes seem to her “inert, grim … mine seem filled with promise”(p.127) but when he stands behind her the paint itself mocks her, “the brush leaves a shining trail … like a grimace”(p.127). But she now questions his instructions, “Shouldn’t the painting, I ask, decide for itself”
(p.127) how it will develop? She is waiting for him to die but still defers to his judgement although she prefers earth colours to his discordant magenta and cyanine blue. Suddenly another factor is introduced. The father meets Molly, who is more perceptive than she seems. She reads Frances as if she were a painting and explains that she “came to art” through the birth of her son, like Eleanor Dark’s artist. Frances paints parts of Molly into her painting, disregarding the father’s instructions. Molly encourages Frances to paint alone.

She steals a basic palette of colours and paints at night, on the inside of kitchen cupboard doors, but the first painting of an onion fails. This liberation through solitary night painting in an expressionist style is similar to Aunt Doll’s secret night painting in Hanrahan’s *The Frangipani Gardens*. In an effort to placate Frances, the father dances with her in the moonlight in a frenetic dizzying whirl, which makes her sick. She realizes that “he is as insubstantial as moonlight” (p.146). Later she suggests their dance as an idea for a painting, which she will do, signing his name. While he is out of the house, she is carried away with the painting, “my head seethes with shapes that have never been there before, colours and shadows startle, I’m proud, victorious” (p.153). At last it is a painting of her imagination, a picture of dancing hands, like a Surrealist work, but the father cannot bear her closeness, “it’s as if I painted it … As if you’re me”. (p.154)

Seeing it is successful, he takes over the painting in a reprise of Girard’s theories. The painting wins the Biennale Prize. When he again criticizes her work, she realizes that his words are only platitudes from old art teaching manuals, not “words out of an incandescence” (p.163). The father tries to paint on his own, leaving Frances free to paint the story of her life on the walls, ceilings and doors of her section of the house. She pays an unseen visit to the schoolteacher who is now married and the memory of love frees her further. After discovering her mother’s painting, she paints portraits of her father and his death all over her parents’ bedroom. When he dies, she takes possession of his studio and as she paints imagines joining a chorus of all the other artists throughout the world.
An enclosed world

*Painted Woman* is confined to the enclosed world of the artist’s consciousness. This artist knows no other artists except her father, she visits an art gallery only once with her father, does not attend art school, or exhibitions, does not sell her work and the only exhibition mentioned is the one on which the novel is based. There is little reference to world affairs, limited only to the minor figure, Auntie’s interest in world politics, no reference to world art, except for naming of three artists but without reference to their work. Occasional humorous passages break the tension, for example, when the truck driver who takes their furniture to Sydney teaches his young mate to “jump the gun” at intersections and tells them, “This is an art. I’m teaching the boy an art.” (p.52) There are some references to artists’ colours, paintbrushes swishing across canvasses, palettes and other attributes of art, but the emphasis is heavily upon concepts. Frances’ observation of city advertising, such as the huge lips on the advertising billboard telling viewers that they want a Coke (p.53), recalls Virginia’s, and Hanrahan’s, prints satirizing advertising in *Sea-Green.*

*Painted Woman* is based on research not on practical experience, unlike other novels already discussed. It does not appear to be at all autobiographical, while all the other novels examined so far have autobiographical elements: Dark’s artist has many characteristics attributable to the author, White has said that Hurtle Duffield is the artist he himself was not able to be, if one can believe such statements, and Hanrahan’s first three artist novels are based on her own experiences as an artist, although *The Frangipani Gardens* is more imaginary. Woolfe appears to have little contact with the art world.

Woolfe’s artist is not cast in the mould of the nineteenth-century stereotype, except that she is all-seeing, a quality which may originate in the writing of Field, who believed that “the artist is not only one who refuses to deny his inner reality, but also and because of this, is potentially capable of seeing more of the external reality than other people.” 29 Woolfe’s isolated figure has more in common with Aunt Doll in *The Frangipani Gardens* than with other artist figures discussed, although Frances is more oppressed and isolated even than Aunt Doll. The reader is not told whether Frances is informed about art, she

29 Field, op.cit., p.150.
appears to be self-taught in the mode of amateur artists who were intended to be the readers of Field. This is a trend of art making which gained some popularity between the end of the Second World War and the emergence of the women’s movement in the late 1970s, when women were to some extent excluded from the work force and had the leisure to indulge in hobbies. Like Hanrahan’s and Dark’s artist figures, Woolfe’s artist figures present a strong feminist argument. In contrast with Hanrahan, Woolfe’s prose cannot be compared with the act of painting, although both describe circular sweeping movements for example. The creative process in Woolfe’s novel is closely related to the theoretical texts she quotes in her Acknowledgements and therefore the work appears to be tightly planned, and not written in the stream of consciousness manner of White and, to some extent, Hanrahan. Without a close study of René Girard’s theories, Painted Woman may lose some of its interest, nevertheless it seems to me to be an original portrayal of a female artist in isolation and an unusual exploration of creativity in both literature and art.
CHAPTER 7


The story of Frank Harland, the largely untutored artistic genius, in David Malouf’s *Harland’s Half Acre* (1984), is interwoven with the life of his family, and that of his friend Phil, who is perhaps his surrogate son. The story also chronicles the affairs of social groups and communities in Brisbane and its hinterland in south-eastern Queensland, all covering the span of Harland’s lifetime from about 1917. It has been argued that imagination, language, and memory are the principal concerns of Malouf’s writing.¹ In this novel, the way Harland sees the South Queensland environment is described in poetic prose that brings the landscape to life. For example, when reminiscing about Childers, Harland

> did know, because he had been on the road through all that part of the state: rolling canefields under a ceiling of cloud, a wash of blue between caneflowers of a cloudy white-pink and the feathery bloom of clouds, with red-dirt tracks, often greasy, and banks of coarse green grass.²

Because Harland is a solitary figure, yet one whose life is complicated by and interpreted through the lives of other characters in the novel, his development as a character is difficult to separate from the network of associations surrounding him. Frank Harland is one of a number of children born on a run-down Queensland dairy farm. Early in life he is parted from his mother when he goes to live with his affluent aunt and uncle, who nurture him in place of their own dead son. His mother dies during the boy’s absence, although he later returns to the farm and the increasingly squalid life led by his unstable

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² David Malouf, *Harland’s Half Acre*, (Vintage, London, 1999), p.108. All subsequent references to this novel are to this edition and are placed in parenthesis in the text.
father who eventually loses the property. Harland has a prodigious natural talent for art and his life-long quest is to buy back the land owned by generations of his family. Initially, he takes a job as a commercial artist. After becoming a bagman in outback Queensland during the depression, he eventually becomes a successful artist, but when his nephew, who is designated to inherit the family property, commits suicide, he abandons the idea of buying his family’s former land and retreats to an island off the Queensland coast. There he leads a hermit-like existence at one with nature, becomes one of Australia’s greatest artists, is given a grand retrospective exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and dies a hero. The echoes of White’s *The Vivisector* and the coincidence of the later parts of Harland’s life with that of the artist Ian Fairweather are discussed below.

A complex double narrative structure is used to shape Harland’s character. The first voice, that of a subjective, third person narrator, moves in and out of Harland’s perspective, switching between interpretation of Harland’s thoughts and feelings, revealing his inner life and vision, and outlining Harland’s family history. The second narrator, Phil, is a lawyer who meets Harland when, as a child, he goes to Harland’s studio with his father; as an adult he manages Harland’s finances, becoming more like a son than a friend. As Harland himself rarely speaks, it may be that Phil is his surrogate voice. Phil presents an external view of the artist, recounting Harland’s actions, and interpreting Harland’s paintings. The novel has a six-part structure, alternately dealing with Harland’s solitary, inner life, and the life of the world at large, from which he isolates himself. The story of Phil and his family, with whose life Harland’s is enmeshed, alternates with Harland’s life and his own family story. Time in this novel does not follow a chronological sequence, switching back and forward according to whichever narrative is in play.

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3 For a structuralist analysis of *Harland’s Half Acre*, see Robert Ross, “*Harland’s Half Acre: A Portrait of the Artist as a young Australian*”, in *World Literature Today*, vol.74, no.4, pp. 733-738.
The overall effect of Malouf’s double narrative is similar to that of the free indirect discourse technique in White’s *The Vivisector*, but the double narrative offers the added dimension of an outside view of the artist figure. In *Harland’s Half Acre* Phil is the interpreter of Harland’s life and art, while in White’s novel the reader alone is the interpreter.

**Development of the artist figure**

The development of this artist figure to some extent depends on Malouf’s poetic rendering of the environment, which is projected as Harland’s vision of the Australian landscape. Harland is an idiosyncratic figure, whose portrayal does not appear to depend on any philosophical or art historical theory or art movement. Neither real artists nor famous artworks are referred to in the course of Harland’s development, except indirectly, when at the end of his life Harland takes on many of the characteristics of Ian Fairweather.

Harland’s innate artistic ability is developed in parallel with his deep attachment to his family’s farm, both stimulated by his father’s incessant and highly embroidered stories of his own life; in this way the boy learns about imagination and the relationship between “story and painting”, implying a conceptual link. It could be argued that, in a retreat from his father’s loquacity, Frank, whose speech is rarely recorded in the novel, speaks through his paintings; while the self-centred father indulges in ephemeral and elaborate story telling; in contrast Frank permanently records life in South-Eastern Queensland in paint. Frank learns about pain and sorrow through his aunt’s grief for her dead son, later gaining understanding of the “depth of the human spirit” through his life as a tramp during the 1930s Depression. As an adult musing on Harland’s ambition to recover his family’s lost land, Phil confirms much of this: “Measurements, deed numbers, names were a form of code through which Frank Harland could express what he might otherwise admit to only in loving encounters with paint and canvas or in a rage of silence.”(p.156)
Frank’s talent is first revealed while he lives with his aunt. His uncle instructs him in making elaborate match-stick models but Frank prefers drawing, teaching himself by copying newspaper advertisements, “He loved the precision it took to recreate, detail by detail, and with delicate strokes for shading, the professionalism of the newspaper ads, and was delighted when his aunt accused him of tracing.”(p.11) He learns about light in a brilliant thunderstorm, “It was the light. The granite outcrops and enormous stone eggs were also changed by it. They showed their fault lines going back into the earth. The light was inside things. He thought of the stained-glass window of St. Michael’s when there was a night service.” (p.14) However, unlike Duffield’s light-filled chandelier image, which continues throughout The Vivisector, Frank’s discovery of light does not provide a continuing motif throughout his development. During the thunderstorm Frank first observes “shape or colour”, the “brilliant blue” of the bee-boxes, and the “rusty blood-redness” (p.15) of the chicken shed, perhaps forecasting the addition of Knack’s bloody red entrails to Harland’s painting later in his life. Frank continues drawing when he returns home, while listening to his father’s “tales, woven out of his life, out of the countryside and the past of their family, [which] went down into the boy’s imagination, and … his hand moved on now from the heads of his sleeping brothers to freer landscapes of grass and cloud (p.22). Throughout his childhood, Frank draws, “each night he drew what was in front of him”(p.29), but gradually moves from representation of reality to a conceptualization of how marks on a white sheet of paper become a work of art. “He smoothed the sheet of paper … Whiteness … It was the source of all possibility … he intervened, he acted … made a line. The page was transformed.”(p.29) Frank progresses rapidly, discovering how to project two, then three, dimensions on paper, and realizing that his own mind makes a fourth dimension. The sophistication of Frank’s ability to grasp abstract concepts of this kind, when the only formal education he receives is from a one-teacher school in the bush, indicates that he is rapidly progressing towards the status of artistic genius, which Phil later claims for him.

Soon Frank, presumably self-taught, is painting in watercolour, “he would try to catch a line, he loved that, and in thin wash, the long undulation of the land under a sky that was
filled with happenings.” Frank’s outstanding innate artistic ability is confirmed in his painting of this remarkably complex view:

such lyrical, slow tumblings and transformings in ice-blue or in opening mushrooms of black all ablaze at the edge – that the earth seemed a sphere where nothing happened at all, unless the slope of a hill was made active with running shadows or the stale surface of a lake, broken only by lily-pads, was touched at a distance by a storm that might have been blowing up below its hand-span of real depth out of aeons of mud. (p.30)

On a trip to Brisbane, Harland, aged about sixteen, makes his first visit to an art gallery, and is directed to an art teacher who is so impressed with his drawings that he finds him a job in the art department of an advertising agency. This is how many Australian artists of Harland’s time started their careers, including Lloyd Rees, Norman Lindsay and Margaret Preston. The old art teacher also gives him free lessons in which his academic teaching methods involve drawing from plaster casts, and painting in “oils on burnt sienna, using white to indicate lights and blacks for shadows … a trace of terre verte under the chin”(p.40), probably the standard art teaching available in Brisbane pre World War II. Then, the principal art school was the Central Technical School, established in 1915, whose teachers were not, on the whole, well-known practising artists. This is Harland’s only exposure to formal art education. The tricks with colour he learned, such as modifying primary colour with its complement and other “dodges and deceptions”, enable him to continue painting in his own style, but there is no reference to the Modernist ideas which inspired the famous artists of his generation, such as Sidney Nolan, born in 1917, about the same year as Harland.

Harland next appears as a tramp, having lost his job in the Depression, but still able to paint and sell his work through anonymous art dealers in the city. How Harland came to be associated with an art dealer is not explained, but his ability to sell paintings during the Depression implies that he has great talent and is therefore bought by discerning art lovers. The difficulty of selling paintings during the Depression is addressed in Norman Lindsay’s Age of Consent (1938). This novel is dedicated to the collector Howard Hinton, who bought paintings by Streeton, Hilder, Lambert, Roberts and Ashton in the 1930s. By implication, then, Harland’s paintings must have been of a quality comparable
to the work of these famous artists. In this period Harland abandons documentation of the land and paints portraits of his fellow tramps, which are not described, though there is some reference to materials: “thick ochres and greys with just a touch of scarlet and expensive, ordinary blue” (p.45).

When the European émigré and junk shop proprietor Knack and his girlfriend introduce Harland to European culture, and music by Liszt and Beethoven, Harland’s emotional response to the light and shade of the music inspires his painting.⁴ Knack’s real name is Nestorius, and his family coat of arms bears a porcupine, details which suggest links with the Homeric legend in which Nestor is a wise and indulgent prince⁵, with the porcupine perhaps alluding to alternative ways of fighting⁶. Hanrahan and White use such allusions to expand meaning in their artist novels; however, here, the metaphor is not expanded. Through Knack and his partner’s violent suicide/murder, Harland’s painting becomes besmirched with “feathery red explosions” (p.126) of their blood and entrails, showing Harland how the colour red can add a new dimension of “terror and beauty” to his art. The conjunction of blood, entrails and art recalls Alf Dubbo’s paintings in Riders in the Chariot and could also be compared to the use of the detritus of the human body in Hurtle Duffield’s paintings in The Vivisector. Harland, the onlooker in this episode of violence and murder, is not as personally involved as is Frances in Painted Woman. Although the violence produces blood, which is a catalyst in the formation of Harland’s art, there is no suggestion that this episode is linked with the theories of Girard, as in Painted Woman. Nevertheless, there are three episodes of violence which contribute to Harland’s character as an artist, firstly, his epiphany during a fever in a car dump in his tramp phase, then Knack’s murder/suicide, and later a cyclone on the island where he lives near the end of his life.

The mature artist figure is also established through description of his working conditions, some of his painting materials, and workshops in various places, such as the Pier Picture Palace studio, painting spaces in an old house in Brisbane and on the island.

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⁴ Ross, op.cit., pp.733-738.
⁵ Harvey, op.cit., p.237.
⁶ Hall, op.cit., p.250.
Occasionally his paintings are described, not in great detail and never by the artist himself. Phil remembers the painting his father bought:

It was all green trees or bluish-green clouds – it was difficult to tell which – with a chink of brilliant light under them that was the horizon and another stroke of light, in a jagged diagonal, that might have been a thunderbolt, but could also have been a figure diving. (p.59)

Phil’s non-specific description allows the reader to put his or her own construction on this painting, which may be an abstracted landscape. He muses, “later … when Harland was famous, I would understand that it was a masterpiece”(p.58). The word ‘masterpiece’ and Phil’s father’s reference to Harland as a “bohemian sponger”, links the character with the nineteenth-century stereotype artist-as-outsider and genius. In a further reference to the nineteenth-century artist figure, Harland himself suggests that the artist is like god the creator, a position also hinted at in White’s formation of Hurtle Duffield, in The Vivisector. However, when Phil’s grandfather talks about the National Gallery in London, Harland “seemed out of his depth” (p.79), revealing a perhaps not surprising ignorance of the art world as, when young, Harland “had to do without education” (p.42) but later claims that “I educated myself” (p.153). Harland’s last appearance is as a mature artist at the height of his power, a hermit, living and painting on an island near Brisbane.

Harland moves from place to place and is seen at various times throughout his life but, while his early development as an artist is described, much of his later development, the way he paints and his artistic concepts must be taken on trust.

**Harland’s paintings**

The credibility of Harland as an artist depends on acceptance that Malouf’s prose is a verbal version of what Harland paints. The significance of Harland’s later paintings is conveyed through Phil, the early drawings and paintings, including the “masterpiece”.

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Formerly Mertz Collection, now unknown
having already been discussed. The passage “Outside all weather and the chain of public
events that had brought them together, and which their bodies, in passionate throes like
the great coils and curves of the serpent, entirely threw off, they stood beyond words in
their own occasion.” (p.127) is one of the few passages in Harland’s Half Acre in which
Harland’s thoughts convincingly suggest the imagery of a well-known painting, by an
artist perhaps known to Malouf, Jon Molvig. His The Lovers, 1957\(^8\), (plate 65) painted in
Brisbane, shows a pair of lovers intertwined in an upright position, their bodies
represented by rope-like coils suggesting the flayed nude of Renaissance art.

Harland paints several portraits at key points in his life. His sketch portrait, in “line and
wash” (p.107), of Edna, Knack’s girlfriend, sitting in a striped deck chair, is described in
terms of mood and Edna’s appearance, which Frank thinks “he would have to catch”.
This is the painting that Phil, as a young boy, sees at the Picture Palace studio when his
father buys the masterpiece. Phil also describes the painting: “It was her attitude I
recognized rather than the face, which was barely suggested by two or three pen strokes
under a stack of wispy straw – the way she was settled in the striped deckchair.” (p.60)
The portrait forges a link between Phil and Harland because Phil recognizes the woman
in the portrait as the one in Knack’s junk shop where he bought knick knacks. Phil also
comments on the picture Harland is currently working on at the Picture Palace studio, but
again the description is vague: “It was a big picture, mostly red, but splashed all over
with feathery blue. There were figures in it, two of them.” (p.57) After seeing the portrait
Phil partly understands this other picture, which later as “Untitled 14”, Harland’s tribute
to Knack and Edna, is borrowed from the Kunsthalle in Wiesbaden for Frank’s
retrospective exhibition (p.224). Phil sees what the “linked figures were doing, what the
red was, and the madness and pathos of those streaks of blue”. He thinks the red
represents something “other than blood”, perhaps life or passion? This takes place after
Knack’s suicide/murder, when the “grey-blue” landscape (p.115) Harland gave Knack is
splattered with blood and entrails, gruesomely showing Harland that red is what his
paintings lack. The subject of the landscape that Harland gives Knack is “this

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\(^8\) Jon Molvig, The Lovers, oil on composition board, 214.0 x 122.0 cm. private collection.
country” (p.116), that is Harland’s country, he tells Knack, but Knack disagrees, suggesting that it is an Edenic paradise.

No Frank, I don’t think it is this country. Not yet, anyway. It has not been discovered, this place. The people for it have not yet come into existence, I think, or seen they could go there – that there is space and light enough – *in themselves*. And darkness. Only you have been there. You are the first. (p.116)

Besides suggesting the addition of red to Harland’s palette, the spattering of this landscape with the blood of a murderer may be intended to have a metaphysical significance in relation to Harland’s concept of the land he paints. Although Frank paints his land as a paradise, it is brought to life by the addition of blood, suggesting that it needs the dimension of the dark side of humanity, which Knack and Edna know so well, to make Frank’s vision real. This is what Knack really teaches Frank and is one example of the complexity and interweaving of themes in this novel, where a painting may not only depict the landscape, but also act as a metaphor for Harland’s attitude to the land.

Harland becomes a close friend of Phil’s family after the boy’s father buys the masterpiece. Women dominate this family, the males, except Phil, being depicted as weak, ineffectual or figures of fun. The significance of Harland’s association with this family, particularly with the strongest of Phil’s aunts, Ollie, who nicknames him The Iceman, and later his enduring association with Phil, is confirmed by one of the few passages in which Harland’s direct speech is quoted. He partly reveals his philosophy, implying that for him, God is an artist: “I mean, the creator doesn’t go on brooding over one work forever. He does what he can and moves on” (p.83). Elaborating on this idea, Harland says that God is not responsible for others’ interpretation of his works, and he, Harland, believes that in spite of the horrors of the world we should be happy, a state much harder to achieve than suffering. As Harland sketches Aunt Ollie, he tries to explain what he wants to catch, but becomes inarticulate. The finished portrait, not described until later, is a disappointment to all but Ollie, who agrees that “It’s the real me” (p.85). Here it is suggested that Frank may be in love with Ollie, but Phil’s question about this is met with scorn. Later Phil describes the figure in the painting, in a pose so typical of Aunt Ollie that it reveals the eternal “weight and stability” (p.96) which he
remembers her for. Again, the attitude of the figure and the way Aunt Ollie’s essence is captured is described but somehow it seems to be the person not the painting that is referred to.

Like Hurtle Duffield in *The Vivisector*, Harland paints a self-portrait, which he jokingly calls “The Iceman … as Heavenly Bridegroom” (p.149), “the suitor who called but did not propose”(p.150), but this also hints at a transcendental meaning, suggesting that Harland may see himself as God. Phil describes the portrait:

> It was a self-portrait, the face all fragments. A force from ‘out there’ that was irresistible but might not, in the end, be destructive had struck it to splinters that met the flat board at every angle, so that the figure emerged simultaneously in many planes. (p.149)

The use of a layman to describe the painting avoids employment of technical terms such as ‘cubist’, as well as facilitating omission of any conceptualization of the portrait by the artist himself and excluding the possibility of critical assessment of Harland’s paintings.

Harland’s meditation on his life and environment, which occurs before he goes to the island, and after the suicide of his nephew when Harland abandons his plan to buy back his land, sums up his life and even extends into the future, but it takes the form of dreams with voices, describing people and places associated with the Half Acre on which he grew up. Harland cannot put these visions into words, he can only express them in paint: “The words in my head won’t do it, only the paintings could tell the whole of it and they are in a language you don’t read.” (p.178) Scenes of the countryside of his youth appear to him like a patchwork quilt of greens overlaid by darker colours, stitched together by the inhabitants. This becomes a metaphor for Harland’s painting of his world, just half an acre, but it was, he thought, “as much as one man might catch sight of”. This short section encapsulates the central themes of the novel.

**Harland and Ian Fairweather**

Harland appears again in old age as a fully formed, famous artist, living as a hermit on an island off the Queensland coast. Malouf’s statement that he used the Scottish artist Ian Fairweather (1891-1974) as a model for this phase of Harland’s life as an artist has been
66. Ian Fairweather painting *Night life* at Bribie Island, 1962

Courtesy of Queensland Newspapers
discussed by various writers. Harland, like Fairweather, signed his paintings with a monogram: “his initials [made] into a curious and beautiful monogram … the two letters beautifully entwined”(p.59). In old age Harland, like Fairweather, lives in a tent: “He had strung up a hammock for sleeping, and at the back, under a canopy of bark-slabs upheld by poles, had his work bench, knocked up as usual from whatever was to hand.”(p.184) (plate 66). Again, like Fairweather, Harland paints with any type of paint available, on any backing, such as “piles of newspaper [which] he collected each fortnight from the local store, on which he puddled thick house paint”(p.186). These works sell very well in Sydney, “Museum directors dreamed of hauling them into houses of culture.”(p.189) Ian Fairweather’s paintings were sold in Sydney by Macquarie Galleries, whose owners Treania Smith and Lucy Swanton, supported him with advances of cash and food parcels. In 2003, Fairweather’s paintings sell for up to $200,000, so through the device of a comparison with Fairweather, Harland’s work is placed at the forefront of Australian art. But Fairweather had a philosophical and intellectual basis to his work. He was an accomplished student and translator of Chinese language and culture, assimilated influences of Aboriginal art and culture in his painting, and studied at Oxford and the Slade School, London, as well as in Holland and Munich. Fairweather’s style is a complex of abstracted figurative images overlaid with a calligraphic grid. On the other hand, Harland’s art is primarily engaged with landscape, particularly in his last phase on the island where, surrounded by natural bush, he paints the landscape on material like old newspapers that are ultimately a product of the trees which surround him. In Harland’s formation there is no suggestion of any style, philosophy or concept of art. He is self-educated and parochial, never venturing away from Queensland except perhaps during his war service. And yet by the end of his life it is claimed that Harland’s paintings “could be seen … to proclaim a people’s newly-discovered identity”(p.189). Harland is not given a depth or breadth of art education and exposure to other cultures comparable to Fairweather’s, yet he achieves a success similar to Fairweather’s with a limited art training and intellectual background. Although details of some of Harland’s

9 Neilsen, op.cit., pp.136-166. See also Annette Stewart, “Art and the Australian Artist in White, Malouf, Murnane and Bail”, Quadrant August, 1987, pp.52-59, in which she analyses Malouf’s use of Murray Bail’s biography of Fairweather as a pattern for Harland.
10 Neilson, op.cit., pp.136-166.
paintings are described at the beginning of the novel, overall, neither the content nor style is described precisely, so there is little opportunity to compare Harland’s paintings with those of Fairweather.

**Harland’s Half Acre and The Vivisector**

The similarities between *Harland’s Half Acre* and the novels of Patrick White, especially *The Vivisector*, are striking but there are also significant differences. Both novels examine the life of a male artist who does not have a life partner. Both artists start life in poverty-stricken circumstances, Harland on a run-down diary farm and Duffield in an inner city slum where his mother is a washerwoman and his father a bottle-o. Both poor families keep “chooks” although in *The Vivisector* these creatures assume a metaphysical role while in *Harland’s Half Acre* they are merely part of the scene setting, as are the mother’s chairs, which do not in this novel assume the importance of Platonic entities as they do in *The Vivisector*. Each protagonist is removed from his parents when a child, as is Alf Dubbo in *Riders in the Chariot*, to a family living in more affluent circumstances, although Harland’s is only a temporary arrangement lasting several years. In all instances the education of the young boy is expanded in various ways through this displacement although the main skill Harland acquires is making matchstick models and some rudimentary drawing. None of these artists sees his mother again, through death in Harland’s case, adoption in Duffield’s, and alienation in Dubbo’s. Both Duffield and Harland serve in the Australian military forces, Duffield in World War I and Harland in the Second World War. In both novels this experience is glossed over, more so in *Harland’s Half Acre* when Harland’s war service is only mentioned in his letter to one of his brothers (p.122) and the only specific description of the European war appears via a newsreel film, which enlightens Harland’s understanding of Knack’s background. War does not appear to have any effect on the development of either Duffield or Harland. Neither associates with other artists. Both paint self-portraits, Duffield smears his with excrement in revulsion at what he sees but the description of Harland’s portrait by the lawyer Phil excludes the artist’s ideas about, and attitude to, his mirror image. Alf Dubbo finds material for his art in a dump; Harland also has an enlightening experience at a rubbish dump when he comes to his senses after a fever and finds that even the ants
accept him, recalling Mr. Gage’s engagement with the ant in White’s *The Tree of Man*. As mentioned, Harland, Dubbo and Duffield (and Frances in *Painted Woman*) are linked by blood and images of violence.

Both Harland and Duffield make money through selling their paintings, but neither adopts a pretentious life style. Both artists are given a retrospective exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. To Duffield the exhibition represents the horror of his life laid out before him, causing him to leave before his Sydney socialite ‘friends’ indulge in a riotous party. Harland does not survive to see his retrospective, which is described by Phil as a progression through Harland’s life. Harland’s exhibition is followed by a party at Phil’s aunt’s house, and although set up to appear wild, with “a couple of art dealers from Melbourne … a girl in castoffs from Tempe Tip [and] Hector [who is] so pissed”(p.225), it is not in the same league as the bitchy and wildly funny descriptions of the party at Duffield’s retrospective, conveyed through snatches of overheard conversations. It may be that in *Harland’s Half Acre* the portrayal of Sydney ‘society’ is intended as a contrast to Harland’s world of Brisbane and its surrounds, to show the integrity of that world in comparison with the ritzy and brittle Sydney world. Phil is dismayed by the contrast, preferring Brisbane which he thinks of as “a place more coherent than this, more settled, and for all its tropical realities of heat and storm, more English”(p.202). Characteristics of both Hurtle Duffield and Alf Dubbo can be found in the construction of Harland.

The variation between narrative styles adopted by Malouf and White constitutes the most striking difference between these novels; the additional narrative voice in *Harland’s Half Acre* gives an exterior view of the artist and his paintings not available in *The Vivisector*, though the thoughts and feelings of Harland, conveyed by the objective third person narration, create a similar impression to the narrative style of *The Vivisector*.

A second difference between these artist figures is in their sexuality. From his adolescence to his dotage Hurtle Duffield engages in a variety of sexual activities, which inspire his art. Sex also initially provides the solace, inspiration and encouragement
which allows Alf Dubbo to paint. A superficial reading of the character Frank Harland suggests a peculiarly sexless being, “imbued with the habits of singularity and a lifelong solitude” (p.41). Yet there are hints of a feminine sensibility about Harland and even about his raunchy father. When he was a motherless child Harland thought “he had been born out of some aspect of his father that was itself feminine” (p.12). The boy thinks of himself “as existing in a unique relationship to his father that ought not to be spoken of … They shared a secret, perhaps even a crime.” (p.12) After both his mother and stepmother die, Frank returns to his father’s all male household where, due to limited accommodation, he sleeps with his father until he is sixteen, “the physical closeness in his father’s bed made up for any chill he may have felt in his soul.” (p.18) Later, when Harland becomes acquainted with Phil’s family, ‘Uncle Haro’, a doctor, questions Harland about unexplained “sexual matters” (p.81) and goes on to tell the story of an androgynous child. For a time Frank lives in Brisbane with his “womanish” brother Tam (p.145). His nephew Gerald, with whom he has an undefined relationship, tells Phil that Frank

creeps right up to the bed, and squats down with his face close to mine … and sort of moans. He doesn’t actually touch me. … He wants to love me. … and I haven’t even been touched, that’s the thing. I have to sleep in the idea of filth.” (p.160)

This may be Gerald’s problem as he himself declares he wants to be “straight and open” (p.161), but when he commits suicide Frank comforts Tam with a “warm and feminine” hug. There is an absence of overt sexual expression in Frank’s character, although he does appear to be sexually attracted to Edna, Knack’s girl friend, and Aunt Ollie, both of whom he paints.

It is not clear how Harland’s ill-defined sexuality contributes to his character as an artist, except perhaps to suggest that he has a feminine sensibility, traditionally credited with insight, which is also a characteristic of the nineteenth-century artist stereotype on which Harland is partly based. However the absence of overt sexual expression may contribute to a certain flatness in Harland as a character. Every other artist figure discussed has a direct engagement with sexuality that affects his or her development as an artist.
**Romantic stereotype**
Harland is remarkably talented, achieving great success while at the same time withdrawing from society. He has no partner or fixed home except at last on the island where he is a hermit. He is an outsider and observer, usually only communicating with his family by letter, yet he knows instinctively about people’s inner lives, like that of Phil’s aunt, who admits that Harland’s portrait of her is “the real me” (p.85), although no-one else could understand it. Phil’s father considers Harland’s landscape painting good enough to buy but refers to him as a ‘bohemian sponger’. That Malouf had the nineteenth-century artist stereotype in mind in the formation of Harland is made clear by Phil’s comment on newspaper reports about Harland:

> Onto the popular figure of the artist in the garret, the misfit and man apart, they grafted a local image; that of the bush hatter, the old-timer still panning for gold in exhausted creeks or pursuing a vision so unique … as to put him permanently, but sentimentally, beyond the company of men. (p.188)

In *Harland’s Half Acre* the similarity to nineteenth-century artist-as-genius novels, which usually only portray the exterior view of the artist, is reinforced not only by the artist-in-the-garret stereotype, but also by the somewhat limited access to Harland’s inner life.

**Other considerations of the novel**
Harland is the main character in this novel, remaining true to his boyhood ambition to record his own countryside in his art, confirmed when Phil looks at the paintings in the retrospective exhibition, and realizes that they are all “evocations of Killarney”.

Harland’s acute awareness of his environment, conveyed through insights into his thoughts provided by the narrator, is given a rhapsodic quality thanks to Malouf’s poetic descriptions. The novel leaves gaps in Harland’s development as an artist, so that his progress to the status of national icon must to some extent be taken on trust. Though it is implied that Harland paints everything in his life, there are episodes in the novel that do not seem to have a direct relationship to Harland’s development, but which suggest that this novelist is concerned with other issues in addition to the development of the artist figure. These episodes contribute to the overall picture of a certain piece of Queensland
at a certain time in history and include general descriptions of the contrasting life of the dairy farmer and the fruit grower, the search for Harland’s brother in the jail, the students’ political protests which another brother takes part in and the story of Phil’s grandmother and her survival, as well as the description of the rackety life of Sydney society in contrast to the more sincere, true and conservative life of Brisbane, to mention only a few such episodes. The centre of the novel, the section entitled “Harland’s Half Acre”, Frank’s reverie on his country, places a great deal of emphasis on the evocation of place. This, together with the title of the novel and the frontispiece of a map of the country to be painted by Harland, indicates that codifying the area of South-Eastern Queensland over the lifetime of the artist figure was of equal importance with the development of the artist figure, and one of the primary aims of this novel which is, overall, a tribute to Queensland.


Davida Allen is an Australian artist who has published two books, a novel *The Autobiography of Vicki Myers: Close to the Bone* (1991) and its companion volume *What is a Portrait?* (1991), in which reproductions of Allen’s own artworks illustrate the text of *The Autobiography of Vicki Myers*. Allen has also written serious art criticism published in *Art and Australia*. Her literary interests are indicated by the inclusion of an epigraph by John Keats to *The Autobiography of Vicki Myers*: “Real grievances are displacers of passion. The imaginary nails a man down for a sufferer, as on a cross; the real spurs him into action.” Allen has said that she based her novel on Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933). Toklas was Stein’s secretary and companion, but the book, in fact, is Stein’s own autobiography, and includes her ideas about art and theories of writing. As in the semi-autobiographical novels of the artist and writer Barbara Hanrahan, the similarities between Allen’s own life and the life described in *The Autobiography of Vicki Myers* have caused most critics to regard it as an autobiography of the author, however in many ways the book is not what it seems. Allen’s internationally acknowledged achievements in art indicate that she is highly aware of the way the world works and is anything but the slightly daffy and poorly read person she portrays herself as in answering questions in Alison Bartlett’s *Jamming the*
Machinery (1998). Unlike other authors discussed by Bartlett, Allen protected her privacy by not agreeing to a verbal interview. In a slightly patronizing written reply to Bartlett, she maintained that she wrote the book because of her “excitement at telling a story Alison”.\(^{11}\) She obviously had other considerations, as discussed below, but for this thesis the issue is whether the character Vicki Myers is a convincing portrayal of an artist.

Allen has an international reputation as an expressionist artist, her work being included in all major public collections in Australia, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Her work has been shown in Japan, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Musée d’Art Moderne, Paris. In The Autobiography of Vicki Myers, Allen transferred the working method used in her art practice to writing. Elwyn Lynn, the artist, critic and art curator, wrote of Allen, “she does what innumerable painters have done; she transforms life into painting, but she makes of the transformation a personal ritual with the audience as observers rather than participants.”\(^{12}\)

**Structure**

This short novel is written in the present tense, and like Malouf’s *Harland’s Half Acre*, Hanrahan’s *Sea Green* and Woolfe’s *Painted Woman*, employs two narrative methods. One takes the form of a voice over or instructions for a film script (the book was initially written as a film script\(^ {13}\)), for example, “A bedroom: the curtains at the large window are aqua-checked and hang from a white rod.”\(^ {14}\) This narrative refers to Vicki, the artist figure, as “she” and its script is printed in bold; the other, told in the first person by Vicki, beginning with her early childhood, finishes just after the birth of her fourth child and infatuation with a film actor. The style of Vicki’s narrative, which includes passages of slap-stick humour, changes from that of a child to an adolescent, a young adult, a mature

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wife, mother and artist, a technique used by James Joyce in *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, by Virginia Woolf, by Bernard Smith in his autobiography *The Boy Adeodatis* and to some extent by Patrick White and Sue Woolfe.

This fast moving, pseudo slap-stick and very funny novel also has underlying social themes relating to the place of women, particularly artists, in society, also a preoccupation in Eleanor Dark’s and Sue Woolfe’s artist novels. It traces the life and development of the artist figure, Vicki, living in Brisbane with her family who are also part of the rural squattocracy. Like Hurtle Duffield’s parents, and also Patrick White’s, they own a grazing property in the bush. Vicki goes to boarding school, leaves and goes to art school, where she discovers sex, marries a well-set-up medico who she exploits while establishing herself as an artist, at the same time producing four children. The book leaves no doubt that outrageous and blatant sex is the inspiration for Vicki’s art. The family lives in constant chaos, particularly when Vicki takes a teaching job where she also poses as a life model and seduces a student. She paints her own life and manufactures crises, such as an embarrassing crush on the local priest, as fodder for her art. Accompanied by her husband and dealer (her “art husband”), she takes up an offer to paint in Paris, discovers that her true subject is her family life, returns to Brisbane, develops a crush on the New Zealand actor Sam Neill, and while painting his portrait steals his book on writing for film which, it could be inferred, leads to this book, although in real life Allen undoubtedly had other reasons for its publication.

*What is a Portrait: the images of Vicki Myers*, the companion volume to *The Autobiography of Vicki Myers*, contains reproductions of thirty of Allen’s artworks in various media, juxtaposed with quotes from *The Autobiography*. Commentary on these illustrations will be included in the following analysis of *The Autobiography of Vicki Myers*.

**Development of the artist figure in *The Autobiography of Vicki Myers***

The opening paragraph of *The Autobiography of Vicki Myers*, in which Vicki is sitting for her portrait, asks “What is a portrait?”, thus setting the scene firmly in the art world. This
is a gentler and more quizzical portrait painting session than that of the child Frances at the beginning of *Painted Woman*. The question is also a teasing word play on the title of the book, the jokiness of an autobiography being written by someone else, and the portrait in art. It also establishes the child’s interest in painting. Although Vicki’s repressed and correct mother is good at flower arrangement, and therefore, Vicki thinks, “very, very artistic” (p.4), Vicki does not inherit her introverted traits. While the garden is the site of her favourite Saturday afternoon occupation, it is drowning ants not flowers that interest her, as seen in *Your Favourite Thing*, Etching No.1 (plate 67) in *What is a Portrait*, which shows a tough child, a snake-like hose, dead ants, with the only flowers in a vase seen through a window. Is this a sly reference to ants in White’s *Tree of Man*, and Malouf’s *Harland’s Half Acre*? In Hanrahan’s artist novels, her own prints are referred to by unmistakable description, but only reproduced in an edition of *Michael and Me and the Sun*. With Allen, the prints and paintings in *What is a Portrait* are specific illustrations to the text of *The Autobiography*. Although many of Hanrahan’s prints have tough, German Expressionist-like content, her garden images include flowers, unlike Allen’s.

At boarding school, Vicki’s art teacher, probably Betty Churcher in real life, explains how to “REALLY look at something to see it properly” (p.21). The chair, Patrick White’s metaphysical element, appears again in this novel, and although Vicki’s drawing of it does not look like a chair, the teacher liked its passion, something every expressionist artist seeks. Vicki swaps the Convent’s version of Jesus Christ for the art teacher’s Matisse, Kirchner, Picasso and Nolde, making art her religion and starting to learn art history. For a school assignment which will push back the boundaries of the expected, Vicki paints her own nude body green and transfers the paint by rolling on the canvas,

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15 McCulloch, op.cit., p. 30. Churcher was Allen’s art teacher at Sturt Holme Convent, Qld.
etching, artist’s proof

68. Davida Allen, *These Parties are all the same*, 1991
drawing
“like a wild animal” (p.26), a reference to the early twentieth-century French Fauves, or wild animals as critics of the day called them. Here she is also exploring the nature of paint, canvas and the subject, as Guy Warren did in a series of impressions of the painted live nude body transferred to canvas by the model lying on it. Vicki is self motivated and determined to become an artist, although “neither of [her parents] has grasped my vision of my future in art” (p.28). The only rules she obeys are rules of perspective, which she must learn to be admitted to art school. Her nickname is “Picasso of the Downs” and she frequently refers to her unique creative mind. The imperatives of teen-age sexual desire drive the young art student into a frenzy, and here again Hanrahan’s prints of party girls could be compared to Allen’s *These Parties are all the Same* (Drawing no.9) (plate 68) which shows Vicki isolated on one side of the picture plane, staring out to the viewer, whilst being sneered at by others at the party. She meets a medical student who affects her as if “something wonderful is appearing on the canvas … One part of me becomes the victim – or the vehicle … while the other part stands back.” (p.36) For a wedding present the art teacher gives her the most expensive oil paints, thus consolidating the link between sex and art. Unlike the artist figures in Hanrahan who endure endless self-torture due to sex, Vicki blatantly seeks it because she knows she needs it for herself and for her art. She states her belief that “Art is quite simply the most INTIMATE medium, it is the supreme refuge of the self in its pure arrogance.” (p.55)

Soon Vicki acquires a child and an art dealer, who may be based on Ray Hughes, Allen’s dealer at the time the book was written. Barry, her “art husband” visits her regularly, culls her work and buys art materials for her. She agrees when Barry says that “the artist’s need is to say things that on-one else dare say. It was so close to the bone, [she] … felt utterly naked in his presence.” (p.50) Vicki is not a feminist although Allen’s concern for the plight of the wife and mother who is also an artist is apparent through the book. Although she sells her paintings, she is also happy to let her husband support her. She thinks she is in a mess because she married him, yet the mess is the subject of her art. When she tells her husband that she has seduced a student after posing nude for the art class, he rapes her and buys a bull terrier and another child is born. Allen’s gentle image

lithograph, artist’s proof
of childbirth, *The Distress of Space and Barbed Wire*, Lithograph No.2, could be compared to the violent and aggressive childbirth images by Barbara Hanrahan. Allen’s image, in pastel blues, pinks and yellows, shows an expressionist, somewhat abstract image of a mother on a bed with a mattress of barbed wire, reaching for a pink baby just beyond her grasp at the end of the bed. In Hanrahan’s confronting images, which show a child emerging from the uterus, the birth is imaginary and according to Hanrahan represents the birth of her artistic inspiration. In Allen’s image, the birth is real, but her babies are part of her artistic stimulus. In most of the texts examined, except for Malouf, sex is linked to art, but in Allen’s book, as in Dark’s, all sex has a positive result, unlike sex in Hanrahan and Woolfe, while in White sex is a catalyst for the artist, although sometimes also related to brutality.

Interspersed among the slapstick and drama are small, but erudite, observations which show that Vicki knows what she is doing:

> Thus the artist uses the most banal of images – and is able to transform these images into other ones because even the most banal aspects of life carry with them some possibilities which as yet have been unthinkable. That is why all true art is “shocking”. (p.83)

Further on she writes, “When your audience has been captured it’s your duty to surprise them with a sudden twist to your story.” (p.83), which indicates that she also knows something about writing.

The narrative romps on with seductions now taking place on canvas instead of in bed, victims being invited to view images of themselves in compromising situations, graphically illustrated in *I’m just like a priest when I paint* Lithograph No.7, a glaring yellow work, which includes the artist, the priest she is infatuated with, the bull terrier, a baby and an indeterminate nude figure. When her father dies Vicki copes with her grief in paint. She is the bandmaster, conducting everyone to her tune, and using them for her art. The episode in Paris, which has already been mentioned, also appears as an etching, *This is not an old, long colonial bath*, Etching No.8, (plate 70) which shows Vicki in a hip bath in Paris, with a golden shaft of light, that is, inspiration, from the Eiffel Tower...
70. Davida Allen, *This is not an old, long, colonial bath*, 1991

etching, artist’s proof
shining down on her. The book closes with another portrait, this time of Sam Neill; she is not upset when he is unimpressed by her, and steals a manual on script writing from his movie set, which may become her next project.

This short novel, written in a lively and faux-naïve style, portrays convincingly the young, brash, expressionist artist, ambitious and energetic. Driven by sex and love, in the service of her art she willingly exploits all and any, even those on whose support she relies. It takes the reader through the education of the artist, her method of painting, her canvas, paints and crayons, her inspirations, relationships with her family and dealer, his method of selling, her subject matter and exhibitions.

**Rationale for writing the book**

Although Davida Allen continues to paint, she has not written any novels since *The Autobiography of Vicki Myers*, which was well received. In her remarks to Alison Bartlett she said she just wanted to write a story, but her true purpose could have been to provide a marketing strategy for her art. On the fly leaf of *The Autobiography of Vicki Myers* there is a modest reference to the companion work *Close to the Bone: The drawings of Vicki Myers*. On the title page of *What is a Portrait: the images of Vicki Myers* (the final title of *Close to the Bone*) is a boxed notice stating that the ten etchings and eleven lithographs illustrated, plus three more lithographs, are available in a boxed edition, while a limited edition of fifty copies of the Davida Allen lithograph *Close to the Bone* would be sold for a special price which included specially bound and numbered copies of the two books. Each book has a reproduction of a painting by Allen on the cover, and on the back cover lists of her achievements as an artist. The suggestion that the drawings are by Vicki Myers is, of course, a joke. Allen’s then agent, Ray Hughes, is regarded as one of the most accomplished art salesmen in the business. In an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* weekend supplement, Nicki Barrowclough wrote that the manuscript was rejected by Queensland University Press and Ray Hughes took it to Ross Campbell who wrote in a report that it had “concrete and intense realism – an unusual manuscript. It reminded me of naïve art, it was so impressive”.16 In 1991 Allen’s

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relationship with Ray Hughes ended and he suggested that perhaps literature was Allen’s new “affair” and that the autobiography is a “long winded obituary to painting”, a remark typical of the politics of the art world.

In 1992 *Art and Australia* published a full-page advertisement for the combined sale of lithographs and the two books.\(^{17}\) There were reproductions of Allen’s lithographs on p.41, and p.142, with a full page review of the books by Joe Airo-Farulla, a Brisbane visual arts lecturer. He comments that the book states in print what Allen has been painting for years, and suffers from a “too facile intensity”. However, other reviews have remarked on the vitality of Allen’s prose.\(^{18}\)

A number of comparisons have been drawn between Frances in *Painted Woman* and Vicki in *The Autobiography of Vicki Myers*. Vicki charts the procession of men through her life, while Frances is subject to a progression of women through her father’s life. Frances chooses to “be a man”, or rather lead a celibate life, while Vicki’s vitality is centered on her womanliness. Frances is poorly taught by her father, Vicki has a first class art education, Frances has one exhibition while Vicki exhibits widely and has an agent. Both artists take the stuff of their lives as subject matter. Vicki is wholly supported by her family, Frances can only paint freely after her father dies.\(^{19}\)

**Conclusion**

Both novels discussed in this chapter differ from other works examined because, although both *Harland’s Half Acre* and *The Autobiography of Vicki Myers* have artist figures as leading characters, in each case the prime interest of the author is other than the development of the artist figure. Harland is an amalgamation of various ideas and models, based on previous artist figures and one real life artist. Malouf is not an artist, and appears to have only a general educated knowledge of art. Vicki is obviously based

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\(^{17}\) *Art and Australia*, vol.30, no.1 Spring, 1992, p.18.


\(^{19}\) Bartlett, op.cit., passim.
on Allen’s own life as a highly trained and successful professional artist, exaggerated for
dramatic effect; as Vicki says, the audience has to be surprised by a twist in the plot.
In Harland’s Half Acre, Malouf chronicles the life of South Eastern Queensland at a
certain time, seen through the eyes of the painter. Frank Harland records the essence of
the half acre where he is born which he sees as a piece of paradise, while coming to
accept that it also encompasses a darker side. This novel was written as a tribute to a
particular part of Queensland as recorded by the artist figure. Allen appears to have used
her novel as a marketing ploy for her art. These two artist figures make a dramatic
contrast; the male Harland, depicted by a male author, is a pale, largely asexual and
introverted figure, while the female writer produces the female artist, Vicki, who is
outrageous, sexy, extroverted, bossy and demanding. Vicki is well informed about art,
and confident in her expression of her ideas, while Harland is to some extent hidden
behind other people’s ideas about him, and little is revealed about his concepts or
knowledge. While Harland is loosely based on the idea of the all-seeing artist as genius,
Vicki is shown as a late twentieth-century individual woman, independent in her intellect
but, in that she cleverly manipulates her compliant husband in his support of her career,
not a feminist. The style of each of these novels reveals the writers’ preoccupations and
interests. Malouf’s prose is poetic as already noted, and Allen adopts a pseudo naïve
style, calculated to draw attention, and easy to read.
CONCLUSION

The artist as a leading character in Australian novels became increasingly prevalent during the twentieth century. Although the novel dealing with the artist’s life from childhood to death, as exemplified by White’s *The Vivisector*, produces the most striking artist figure, other types of novels, such as crime and mystery stories now have artists as heroes. Lack of a background in art has not deterred authors from developing artist characters, although throughout the century writers who are also artists or who are well informed about art have produced the most convincing artist characters.

Two of the writers considered in this thesis, Hanrahan and Allen, are also well-known artists, and another, White, maintained that he would like to have been a visual artist; he had a wide-ranging knowledge of contemporary and historical art, and owned a sizeable art collection. The link between the disciplines of art and literature suggests possible autobiographical aspects to the novels of these particular writers, although this has not a major concern of my thesis.

In three out of the four of Hanrahan’s novels considered, although the female artist figure exhibits characteristics of Hanrahan herself, each character is different, perhaps portraying varying sides of Hanrahan’s own character, or maybe portrayed as she would like to have been. Because Hanrahan was a highly trained artist, specializing in printmaking, she was able to confidently describe the process of printmaking, which she does in detail, particularly in *Sea-Green*, and to a lesser extent in *Kewpie Doll* and *Michael and Me and the Sun*. In all three novels, the artist figure is a printmaker. These descriptions, of textbook accuracy, add credibility to the artist figure. Hanrahan used her own published prints as templates for the art-work of these three printmaker figures, although only in *Michael and Me and the Sun* are the artist figure’s own prints described. In other cases, descriptions of the life of the artists contain scenarios directly related to Hanrahan’s own prints. These three artist figures are depicted as students, and left on the
cusp of their individual careers as more or less mature artists. Allen’s female artist figure is, like Allen, an expressionist painter. Allen does not resile from using her own artwork as the supposed creation of her artist figure, publishing, as a companion to the novel, a book of reproductions of her own paintings and prints, purportedly done by the artist figure, and labeled with quotes from the novel. The 1992 edition of Hanrahan’s *Michael and Me and the Sun* contains an inset of a number of Hanrahan’s well-known artworks, which also illustrate the text. Many of Hanrahan’s personal preoccupations as an artist are taken up by her artist figures. Hanrahan also drew on her wide knowledge of art history, myths and legends in shaping her artist figures. Both Allen and Hanrahan had personal experience of the difficulties of the woman artist, but each approached this from a different aspect in their artist figures. Dark was also concerned with the position in society of the creative woman, visual artists included. Hanrahan’s semi-autobiographical printmakers are independent, in two cases severely introverted, wary of sex and procreation, believing children would be a hindrance to their careers, whereas Allen’s artist, like Allen herself, capitalizes on her sexuality, making procreation and family life a source of creativity. Hanrahan’s fourth artist figure in *The Frangipani Gardens* has a double persona as an artist, firstly as a demure watercolourist and then as a wild expressionist, and although Hanrahan did not specialize in either, she was able to produce convincing descriptions of the process of making the artwork in each case. The metaphysical and other qualities of this artist figure could be compared to some aspects of White’s artists, who also partly rely on myth in their formation, although White takes a more satirical view of myth than Hanrahan does. Because Hanrahan and Allen both have personal experience as artists, their figures are more realistic than others in this study and are not based on the nineteenth-century stereotype of the artist-as-genius. Hanrahan rehearsed the artist figure in her first two novels, *Sea-Green* and *Kewpie Doll*, before creating the expressionist artist, not in any way autobiographical as are the other two, following these with her last book, *Michael and Me and the Sun*, in which the artist figure is more complete than in the other novels based on her own experience.

The artist figures in Hanrahan’s first two novels are formulated partly through graphic descriptions of the process of printmaking, and although their thoughts suggest concepts
which Hanrahan herself actually used in creating her own prints, these two artists produce few of their own prints, do not engage with other artists, except students, do not attend exhibitions or try to sell their work. The artist in *Kewpie Doll* regards herself as still a student although she has been a successful art teacher. *Sea-Green* ends with the artist having resolved her emotional problems, and now, it is implied, free to become an artist. The young art student in Hanrahan’s last book, *Michael and Me and the Sun*, while also concerned with her own sexuality, is not obsessed by it as the two earlier semi-autobiographical artist figures are. While the process of printmaking is described in this novel, the artist also engages with the art scene and excitement of swinging London, visits art galleries, discusses her work with an art dealer, and makes a series of prints which are referred to by name, taking a folio of them with her back to Adelaide after she has won the only distinction at the final exhibition at the art school. At the end of the novel she returns home as a young professional artist, confident of a successful career.

White utilized aspects of expressionist and avant-garde art, of which he had an informed understanding, in the formation of Alf Dubbo. Although he is not the hero of *Riders in the Chariot*, Dubbo is a redemptive figure, the outcast who sees all, and purifies it through his art, a figure based on the nineteenth-century stereotype artist. In *The Vivisector* White brings a great swathe of examples from art history to the formation of the character of Hurtle Duffield. This is done through concepts, hints and descriptions of situations taken from historical art images, particularly from German Expressionism, colour theory, Surrealism, avant-garde art practice, and from various traditional subjects, such as the prostitute. Only rarely in the formation of these two characters does White describe the process of painting and the artists’ paintings are only vaguely described. White had a deep understanding of the concepts of art and the credibility of these characters is established through access to their inner lives, and the concepts and ideas that inspire their art. Only in rare cases did White use examples from his own art collection in the formation of these artist figures.

Malouf, a poet as well as a novelist, could be defined as an artist in the widest sense of the word. His approach to the artist figure is linked to Malouf’s own poetic vision of the
Australian landscape, which is a strong element of this novel. On the other hand, Malouf has only an informed layman’s knowledge of visual art, and therefore relied on the life of the artist Ian Fairweather in formation of his mature artist figure although, in view of the limited art education and intellectual preoccupations of Malouf’s artist figure, Fairweather appears to be a somewhat incongruous model.

Neither Woolfe nor Dark had a great knowledge of art; both had close relations who were artists and in childhood both were exposed to intellectual circles in which art had a place, but in each case this was limited to dated academic art styles. Dark’s artist figure could also be a writer and has some of Dark’s own preoccupations. Tentative descriptions of her paintings suggest that perhaps the most generous characterization of them could be ‘Surreal’, although the paintings and much of the action is informed by Vitalism, a popular enthusiasm of the 1930s, expounded by Norman Lindsay and Raynor Hoff. Dark’s artist is given the ideal situation for the creative woman of her day, perhaps written to encourage society to find such a place for the creative woman. Vitalism and the place of the creative woman are the main aspects of this artist figure and outweigh the tentative descriptions of process and finished artwork in Dark’s novel. Perhaps the most painterly passages are the evocative and striking descriptions of Sydney Harbour in Waterway. Woolfe used research into the history of women’s art, French theory, writings on creativity and psychology to bolster her layman’s knowledge of art. The father and daughter artist figures, he in decline, she in ascent, are based on a complex of the results of research undertaken by the author, and together present an analysis of aspects of creativity, although descriptions of the paintings and process of art-making are vague. Again the position of the creative woman is a facet of these characters, with a positive bias towards the woman and a negative emphasis on the male artist. Understanding the development of Woolfe’s characters depends on a knowledge of the theory involved, and a reading of Painted Woman without this knowledge may find the characters obscure.

All the writers considered create characters of the same gender as themselves, except for Woolfe, whose two artist characters are male and female. The women writers are generally concerned with the position of the creative artist in society, the benefits or
otherwise of procreation and its effect on creativity. In all cases, except Malouf, overt sexual expression is a major factor in the formation of the artists. Hanrahan’s and Allen’s artists have opposite views of the benefits or drawbacks of procreation, Hanrahan’s artists being attracted and then repelled by sex, and frightened that giving birth would inhibit their creativity. Allen’s artist revels in sex, and uses all aspects of it as an inspiration for her art, much in the same way as Dark’s female artist does. Both these figures are manipulative, using their partners and children in every way possible to support and also inspire their art. Woolfe’s artists have abnormal attitudes to sex, the father indulging in sadistic sex and murder to sustain his art, and the daughter shunning sex and procreation in favour of complete devotion to art. White’s artists are caught up with sexuality also, Alf Dubbo at first comforted then betrayed by prostitutes, the only sexual partners of his lonely life. Hurtle Duffield exploits many aspects of sexuality in the service of his art. He is sustained by sex and is inspired by heterosexual, homosexual and pedophilic sexual acts; he has no permanent sexual partner, but a series of lovers who are destroyed by his emotional withdrawal in favour of his dedication to art. White takes a definite male view of the sexual inspiration of the artist, the ideas of the female artist figures about creativity and procreation do not figure in the make up of his character, although Duffield’s last sexual encounter with the young female musician is couched in terms of a substitute for the daughter the artist never had, or maybe the inheritor of his artistic soul. Although Malouf’s artist figure, Harland, does not appear to engage in overt sexual activity, there are hints of sexual attraction between him and Edna, Knack’s girlfriend, and Aunt Ollie, both of whom he paints, as well as an undefined relationship between Harland and his nephew. Harland’s dependence on Phil to arrange his financial affairs, and Phil’s empathetic understanding of Frank’s personality, aims and paintings suggests a surrogate father/son relationship, although Harland remains the withdrawn, isolated artist figure of romantic imagination.

Artist figures considered in this study are more or less informed about art according to the writer’s own knowledge. Some, such as Malouf’s and Dark’s artists, skip over the practicalities of the art market, and display little knowledge of art other than their own. None of them, except Allen’s and then only minimally, associates with other artists.
White’s and Malouf’s portraits are informed by the legendary Retrospective Exhibition at the end of an artist’s life, but this is public knowledge. Hanrahan’s and White’s artists each display indirectly a wide knowledge of art, which is utilized in the development of their characters as artists. Allen’s artist figure is in many ways a satire of the artist, sending up Allen’s own life and including humorous barbs directed towards the art market. Nevertheless, the occasional erudite comment reveals that this artist figure knows just how the art world operates, and is *au fait* with many aspects of art and art history. *The Autobiography of Vicki Myers* is the most recent book included, and its link with the sale of the writer’s own art work illustrates the trend towards the market-oriented climate of the art world at the end of the twentieth century. Woolfe’s theory laden novel also confirms the theory-oriented approach to art of the 1980s and 1990s, although this is usually associated with conceptual art, rather than with the expressionist style adopted by Woolfe’s artist.

In some of these novels the creative process is mirrored by the writing style, especially in the case of Hanrahan. Her passages of description, particularly to do with the sea, articulated through the thoughts of Virginia in *Sea-Green*, and recorded in a present-tense, first person narration, could be compared to the painting process. This is achieved largely through repetition, alliteration and onomatopeia, and is linked directly to the artist’s thoughts. Malouf also includes poetic description, concentrating on an interpretation of the visual in his novel, but although these passages are often linked to the artist’s actions and thoughts it is difficult to identify Malouf’s writing style with the process of painting, perhaps because sound is often integral to his descriptions of landscape, and at times these evocations of landscape digress into other thoughts and ideas. The occasional poetic descriptions of landscape and Sydney harbour by Dark are not linked to the art works in the book, although they also have a visual quality. White’s stream of consciousness descriptions of situations that later become paintings evoke famous images from art history and frequently take the place of actual descriptions of the art works produced by Hurtle Duffield. In White’s artists, the concept of yet to be developed paintings is stronger than the description of the actual paintings, nevertheless creating the overall illusion of the creative process and execution of a work of art. In
most cases, Woolfe is more interested in an analytical approach to the artists’ psyche than in reflecting the creative process in her writing style.

The nineteenth-century stereotype of the artist-as-hero retains some currency in the artist figures discussed, particularly in the artists created by male writers: Alf Dubbo in *Riders in the Chariot*, Hurtle Duffield in *The Vivisector*, and Harland in *Harland’s Half Acre* are all examples of the stereotype. Some artists created by women novelists, for example Dark’s Lois in *Sun Across the Sky* and *Waterway* also have elements of the stereotype, combined with feminist characteristics, which also occur in Hanrahan’s *The Fragipani Gardens* and Woolfe’s *Painted Woman*. All the female artist figures are used to explore the place of the creative woman in society, and all exhibit a feminist bent except Allen’s artist. Although some artists today manufacture personas based on this romantic stereotype for publicity reasons, in reality they are more practical, hardworking, intellectual and realistic, although still poverty stricken, than the nineteenth-century model.

In conclusion, this study has confirmed that in the development of the artist figure in the novel, the link between the creative processes of visual art and writing lies in the conceptual. The necessary lack of visuality in showing what the artists do is most successfully filled by writers, particularly White, who draw on a wide range of imagery from art history, and are able to integrate these images with the thoughts and concepts of the artist figures. Descriptions of the processes of visual art add weight to the characters, but where this appears, the conceptual process is not explored to the extent that White was able to do.

The visual art scene in general is now more diverse than ever, but artists are still seen as individuals who have a quality that sets them apart. The nineteenth-century stereotype lingers in life and in fiction. A generally more affluent reading public can afford an interest in art, or aspires to an interest if they cannot afford the real thing. In this climate, the artist makes a desirable figure as a leading character in the novel. Novels with artist
characters are proliferating in the twenty-first century. A future study may encompass the general influence of art, not just artist figures, on Australian literature.
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