

**Griffith University, Gold Coast**

**Stephanie Green**

**Strange dance days**

Biographical note:

Stephanie Green currently teaches Writing, Communications and Literature at Griffith University. She was awarded a doctorate from the University of Western Australia in 1998: a study of nineteenth-century narratives. She has published recent scholarly work in the fields of Cultural Studies and Creative Writing. A former publisher, Stephanie is also a prize-winning author of short fiction, creative non-fiction and poetry. *Too Much Too Soon*, a selection of her short stories, was published by Pandanus Books in 2006.

Keywords:

Creative writing – gothic – narrative – displacement – gender

She had no name that I ever heard. She had a place that she walked, until they put the Sandhope Lunatic Asylum in her way. Sometimes she would disappear for months at a time, but always she came back. At first I thought that there was someone she wanted inside this place. She would come to the gate and stop still in front of it. After a time she walked in a circle around the building, measuring it with her dark bare feet in strange patterns, like a dance. Sometimes she muttered or sang to herself, a sound like the wind trying to make its way through rock. She seemed to believe, if she waited and sang long enough, the Sandhope Lunatic Asylum, for all its enormity, would go away.

We watched her through the grill of the little wooden door between the courtyard and the big front gate when they sent us to walk each day for exercise. She always came back to the same spot by the gate. A black ghost, mostly silent and unafraid. Sometimes she frightened the other inmates, but I welcomed her coming. She showed me that there was another world outside the place they kept me. Soon I began to look for her, to hope for her coming. But as time passed she came less often to our gate, and then she stopped coming altogether.

In the beginning the guard tried to chase her off. I could tell he did not like her. He made fun of her because she looked so strange and dark. Then, after many of the strange dance days, she became hysterical, banging on the gate and crying out in her own way of speaking. That sound was like the fast drumming of a heartbeat, but it was nothing the guard could understand. Her words were not words to us. The guard shook the gate hard and made a fist in her direction so that she was frightened and ran away. I did not see her again for many months.

There is little to tell of my first few weeks in that place. I lay on the hard bed through slow hot summer days, drained of life, barely moving to eat or wash, just as I had lain in the stinking hold of the ship for so many months. Tears slid from my eyes and I could not stop them even when strangers came past my bed. The first keepers I knew in that place were the nurse and a woman known as Matron. They came every day and stood at the foot of my bed until my fever passed, whispering. It was only then, when the hot crawling feeling left me, that I found myself unable to move.

In those first weeks they did not press me to move or to work, but left me alone in the dormitory to weep quietly to myself. The nurse came morning and night. A shapeless figure with a lined yellow face. She stared at me briefly and went away. I was glad when she left me alone.

The women who shared my dwelling place were then barely shadows to me. At night, when they came to bed, I pretended I was asleep so I would not have to know them or let them know me. Sometimes the pillow was soaked with my tears and I had to lay it out on the window sill in the morning to dry in the sun. Blood came as well as tears, for the weeks turned slowly to months. As I bled it was as if the terrible blood on the ship had come back to torment me. I wished that it would never cease flowing from me until it had drained me of my life.

I felt I could not get clean and washed as often I could. They brought me water every day, and that seemed a blessing after the ship. The water was always cold but the days were hot then and I did not mind, although later, in winter, my lips and the skin around my fingernails cracked sorely with the cold.

My one joy in that first time was the light, because I had seen so little of the sun for so long. Each day I watched how the squares of light moved through the day, passing from one side of the dormitory to the other, lapping in over my feet in the late afternoons. After a time I noticed the light reaching further up my bed almost as far my elbows and I grew grateful for the way it warmed my back and my belly as the path of the sun grew softer and lower. The season changed from summer to autumn and eventually I grew impatient with myself that I had lain in bed so long.

Our dormitories were on the second floor of the south west wing. They were long, narrow and very plain with a row of iron beds on each side of the room, placed herringbone fashion, with grey covers and a divided tea chest between each bed to be shared for our few personal items. Above each bed was a high window which we were allowed to have open three inches at night in summer. They were fixed so we could not open them wide and throw ourselves into the courtyard below.

Not many of the beds were occupied in those days. The bed on my right was empty but on my left slept a girl of barely twenty. She was very short with fair hair and a pretty pointed nose. Later, when I could walk, I discovered that she only came up to my chin. One night she came and sat upon my bed and asked me my name. *My name is Jill*, she said. Her arms bore jagged scars which she showed me quickly, then hid under her shawl. *I used a knife*, she whispered closely, as if it were a secret, though I knew it could not be. She put her pale hand on mine, a thin dry claw. *My parents died a long time ago, when I was a child. I was put in the Asylum by my Aunt. She said it were in case I did myself harm, but I know she were more afraid for herself.* In Jill's half of our tea chest she kept a wooden doll, a knitted shawl and an embroidered sampler left to her by her mother. She did not touch the doll or the sampler, only looked at them sometimes at night before she shut the lid.

For much of the day I was left alone while the others went about their appointed duties or lingered outside in the quadrangle below. One day I heard or felt something that caused me to draw myself up and try to look out the window: not the northerly window on my side of the dormitory which overlooked the Asylum's inner courtyard, but the smaller, higher window on the other side which faced a south-westerly direction towards the sea and the town. To do this I had to stand on the rail of a bed and stretch my chin up very high above the sill, which was hardly comfortable even for a tall person. The first time I tried it I fell because my body was so weak from lying down. Somehow I became determined to see properly out that window and when no one was looking I tried it over and over again.

Once you were up, if you turned your head and your eyes hard to the right and pressed your face against the slightly open window you could see the Asylum gate, a big, black complicated piece of ironwork. Beyond the gate you had a narrow view of the sea. This view, I later discovered, was obscured at ground level from the inner courtyard by a wall with a locked wooden gate. The gate was only open once a month

on Visiting Sundays when any of us fortunate to have visitors were permitted to sit or walk in the outer garden, surrounded by thirsty rose bushes and yellowing Sweet Alice beds. On those days the inhabitants would stare and stare through the gate as if nothing else ever occupied their waking thoughts.

It was looking out in this awkward way that I first saw the dark woman. She stayed first beside the little clump of headland trees making her strange dances, then sat cross-legged on the dusty ground beneath a spindly tree. She sat for a very long time facing the iron gate, as if waiting for it to open by some kind of magic. Something more about her than the colour of her skin reminded me of Mr Marakoa. And although she seemed so sad and savage I felt we were alike, for in our different ways we were both imprisoned.

After that I kept watch for the strange dance woman. Sometimes she would come and sometimes she would not. I could never look for very long because my neck became sore as it was turned so far to the right. I wanted to wave or call to her, but I feared that if I made any sound or drew any attention to myself I would never be left alone again. Several times I saw her pass my window as she circled the building, always looking for a way through. Once she looked up and saw me. I stared back. Later I wished I had made some kind of sign, but I only moved away from the window so that I could not be seen.

When the cool weather came, I felt my strength return. I even looked forward to meals and became a little curious about my fellow inmates. They were not bright or rational creatures. Some were strange, talking only to themselves or to invisible companions. One refused to wear clothes and had to have her grey inmate's shift tied with string to her body. Some seemed not mad at all. One woman had been brought forcibly to the asylum for shouting at her son-in-law. I saw theft and jealousy and squabbling amongst them, but sometimes, while I was sick, old Mrs Webby with the squat figure and the eyes with pointed corners would bring me a sprig of mint bush or rosemary from the garden, or if I were shivering from cold young Jill would lend me the knitted shawl she wrapped around herself to hide the long scars on her arms.

The Asylum was an imposing building made from heavy yellow sandstone blocks. It reminded me of places I had seen when I was a child—very large with a roof that curled over and over like a row of disdainful noses. In my time the patients were all women, although in the first few months after it was built they had kept men and women convicts locked up there because there was no prison. Many years after I was gone, they built quarters for male patients as a sideways extension to the east wing linking with the northern block where the dining room and infirmary were housed, facing the inner courtyard as our quarters faced it from the south. In my day the northeast corner was where the kitchen garden stood, although it too was enclosed by a wall.

In the centre of the courtyard there was a bell which hung from a frame. This bell had been carried out from England and once stood in a country church, now supposedly ruined. The bell was rung before meals, before Sunday morning prayers and to raise the alarm should a patient become crazed or violent, or in case of some other emergency. It was then pulled backwards and forwards with a long rope which made

the clapper cause it to ring. The bell-ringer was also the chief warder, Mr William Johnson. He was a strong man but bell-ringing takes a knack which he never completely mastered. Sometimes it would ring for him soundly, at other times he could not do more than cause the clapper to tap thickly against its sides like a cautious traveller knocking against a stranger's door.

My first year in that place there were sometimes only eight or ten patients, besides me, although the numbers rapidly grew, as if the colony somehow bred madness within itself. We knew each other, for how could we avoid it in that place, when we ate and washed and slept together in our dormitory rows.

There was one patient we never saw. She was kept away from the rest of us, whether for our protection or hers we never knew. There was one place, you see, a cell reserved for those whose madness was so extreme that the world must be protected from their horror. No one could ever say that they were glad to see inside that cell. I heard, many years after I became a free woman, that they added padded pallets all over the walls and a soft, stitched kid leather restraint. But in my day, the floor and walls of the cell were uncovered stone where a woman was bound with thick cow-skin straps to an iron-framed bed.

I do not know what she had done or where she came from. We never knew her name. Some said she had murdered the Governor's children, others said she had murdered her own. No one really knew what terrible thing happened to make her so crazed, or why, if she had done something so wicked, she had not been hung. She frightened us, even though we never saw her face. Although we too were afflicted, we called her *The Murderess*. Few felt she could be of our kind. Now I wonder if she had been a murderess at all, or whether that was just one of the warders' stories meant to frighten us. She may not have been wicked, but there was no doubt she was mad.

Generally she was quiet and we forgot her, as we sometimes forgot even our own hardest thoughts. She was not always silent. Sometimes we heard her cries, strange sounds without words as an animal makes when bringing forth its young, or before the slaughter house when the blood of its brethren has been shed. She seemed to us a monster, most of all when her horrible cries stirred our pity. We believed that should she escape her bonds she would not spare any one of us.

One bright afternoon after the midday meal, when the murderess started up her moaning, Jill took me by the arm and led me across the courtyard to the wall. We pressed our ears against the wall so that we could hear her moving on the other side. We could not see the murderess at all for there was no proper window, only a small open square below the eaves. There was only the terrible sadness of her wretched moaning. Sometimes she paused but each time we thought she had stopped, the cry came again. I wanted to block it out but somehow that moaning held us to itself. It was that sound, more than any other thing, which told me that my mind and body were not, after all, driven apart and this earth was still my dwelling-place.

One Sunday morning it was very hot, and those of use who were not restrained or ill were let into the front garden where the beech trees threw their morning shade over the garden benches, leaving roses and carnations bright in raw sunlight.

I sat on a bench staring as far as I could through the narrow gaps in the gate when I saw a shadow standing still in front of the thin trees on the headland. I did not move, just kept watching and after a time I knew that she saw me watching her. I did not know what she thought of me except I fancy she knew I wanted to be able to pass through that gate almost as much as she did.

This time she did not keep her distance as she had done before, all those other times she had jumped up and down on one spot or cried aloud. This time she came right up to the entrance and banged on the gate with her fists, gabbling in her strange language. A guard strode up to his side of the gate and looked angrily at her. She did not pause, so he reached his hand through the bars and pushed her down on the ground. She got up again talking very loud and fast, coming right up to the gate again until, once more, he pushed her down. She ran away a few feet and stood still, her eyes staring. I had never seen a human being keep so still, like the black stalk of a bush on a day without a breeze.

The guard pointed his stick at her and shook it roughly, calling her names I will not repeat and telling her to go away. She simply stayed where she was, looking past him as if he was hardly there. Then he said, *So you want to come in, do you, Blackie?* and he opened the gate with his key, bowing like a gentleman and showing her the way with a motion of his hand.

She did not move at first. We could see her plainly through the entrance archway and I held my breath wondering what she would do. I was afraid for her because I knew what she could not know – that once she came through the gate there was no way out. Therefore I wished she would not come in for her sake. Yet somehow for my sake I wished she would.

Maybe it was the sight of all of us staring at her, and indeed we must have seemed a strange lot with our worn grey uniforms and puzzled eyes. Maybe it was because she was frightened of the guard and sensed a trick. Or maybe it was because she could not see a way through beyond the other side of the building. As it was, she did not come forward through the open gate, but began walking backwards very slowly, then finally turned and went along the yellow path towards the town until I lost her from my sight.

## Research statement

### *Research background*

This work is impelled by a proposition that the Gothic trope of the imprisoned madwoman holds resonance and power as a narrative device for exploring Australia's difficult past. Adapted from 'Bluebeard's Wife', this trope has long held potency for women writers (Williams 1995; Gilbert and Gubar 1979), epitomised by the incarcerated Caribbean wife, of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The setting, a Gothic Revival Lunatic Asylum, is both emblem of power and site of surveillance (Foucault 2001: 37), invoking fears of hybridisation and dissolution.

### *Research contribution*

The entity of the Asylum provides a means to explore the 'inside out' of Australia's difficult past. Part of a grand, unrealised architectural design for a new colonial city, it reproduces displacement, exploitation, repression and constraint, yet offers hope of recovery. The Asylum enables 'an ascending analysis of power' founded upon ideology's 'infinitesimal mechanisms' (Foucault 1980: 99), linking early conventions of Australia as 'uncanny landscape' (Gelder and Jacobs 1998), or 'dungeon of the world' (Turcotte 1986), with later representations of place, identity and transformation. Heteroglossia is also exercised, whereby the 'monological' narrative is interrogated and reconstructed through minor or 'dialogical voices' (Bakhtin 1980).

### *Research significance*

This work extends a significant Gothic trajectory within Australian fiction, from the work of Marcus Clarke and Barbara Baynton to that of Elizabeth Jolley and Amanda Curtin in which alterity is used to interrogate meaning and power. Referencing the premise that all cultures have imaginary zones for what they exclude (Cixous and Clément 1996: ix), the work explores narrative as troubled engagement with an unspoken past.

## Works cited

- Bakhtin, Mikhail 1981 *The dialogical imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas
- Brontë, Charlotte 1996 *Jane Eyre*, London & New York: Penguin
- Cixous, Hélène & Catherine Clément 1996 *Newly born woman* intro. Sandra M Gilbert, London: IB Taurus
- Foucault, Michel 1980 *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf
- Foucault, Michel 2001 *Madness and civilisation: a history of insanity in the age of reason*, intro. David Cooper, Oxon: Routledge Classics.
- Gilbert, Sandra & Susan Gubar 1979 *Madwoman in the attic*, Yale: Yale University Press

Rhys, Jean 1966 *Wide Sargasso sea*, Harmondsworth: Penguin

Williams, Anne 1995 *Art of darkness: a poetics of gothic*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Turcotte, Gerry 1998 'Australian gothic', in Marie Mulvey-Roberts (ed) *Handbook to gothic literature*, Basingstoke: Macmillan