

An Analytic Review of Joan Lindsay's (1967) and Peter Weir's (1975) Picnic at Hanging Rock

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The central idea on my reading of the novel and film, 'Picnic at Hanging Rock', is the passage of childhood into adolescence, in the first instance, and with the revision back to childhood into adolescence upon aging. This central idea is shaped by three thematic layers:

- the historical-mythical character of the story;
- the Freudian psychology which contrasts the repressed sexual attitudes of the Victorian era against an unspoken attitude in the liberated 1960s; and
- the focus on the mathematical order in the natural environment.

The Historical-Mythical Character of the Story

Joan Lindsay was born in 1896 at St Kilda. She would have been four years of age in 1900 when the plot of the novel is set. Lindsay in 1967, the year the book was produced, would have been aged 71 years. The claim is made that the writing of the novel was largely produced by dreams that the author experienced, and here we can suggest a Freudian interpretation that the dreams were nostalgic feelings of her own childhood Edwardian prejudices of fears and hopes. Lindsay attended Clyde Girls Grammar School, originally in St Kilda, but relocated to Woodend in 1919, one of the key sites of the novel. This was five years after Lindsay's final year at the school, and the fictitious Appleyard College was widely accepted to be based on the Clyde school. Lindsay recalled that the inspiration for the novel, during the two-week period of writing, came from the painting *At the Hanging Rock* by William Ford, which had hung in her husband's office at the National Gallery of Victoria.

Lindsay's approach to the writing of the novel was in a pseudo-historical style, that is, to suggest to the reader that the story is a true account of a long-past event, and that there is a mystery upon which the reader is to make up their own mind. In other words, the work is mythological. The novel has made historians, at the very least, uncomfortable; more so for the local historians of the Mount Macedon and Hanging Rock area. The fashionable trend of tourists crying out 'Miranda', on top of the rock, expresses the religious behaviour which the recent myth has produced.

The Freudian Psychology of Sexuality

There is, in the novel and film, an exploration of both the harm and fulfilment of sexual intercourse; the film in the 1970s ethos extenuating the theme. The characters of Tom and Minnie expressed the satisfactory sexual fulfilment. The engaged Mademoiselle de Poitiers, in shared pre-matrimony conversation with Minnie, is the romantic figure. Both the novel and film can be read from both heterosexual and lesbian perspectives. I am more aware of the former as a 16 year old male in 1977, who first saw the Peter Weir film on Sunday night television. The masculine fantasy has never escaped my thinking since, but aging, especially as a parent of young daughters, also shifts judgement into a different mature status, and ethically higher gear. The adolescence is not the adult.

In either case of heterosexual and lesbian perspectives, sexuality is translated by ideas of body image, feminine clothing, and the mystic. At the heart of the theme is being lost in the bushland, a sexual reference. However, the clearer message ties sexuality to the maturing process. Edith Horton, the character who does not enter the rock's chasm but retreats, symbolises childhood. Miranda St. Clare symbolises the developing beauty of adolescence. Marion Quade symbolises the lost character in the novel, whereas Irma Leopold symbolises the re-born adult. At the end of the novel, Irma is setting off on her European tour, a mature adult against the raging and childish antics of the classroom. Following this logic then, Sara Waybourne symbolises lost childhood, one of the many poor and tragic child death of the era.

The Mathematical Order in the Natural Environment

Miss McCraw is the symbol of the mathematical order in the natural environment. The Principal, Mrs Appleyard, had come to rely on her mathematics teacher, as she once relied on her now-deceased husband. The loss of the mathematics teacher is the loss of control in the college order. Appleyard College is doomed to fail in the Australian bushland. Miss McCraw is the adult figure who is liberated in the bushland, having disposed of her outer garment. The event takes place after Miss McCraw pontificated upon the geometric shaping of the local map: the passage of Macedon-based college to the rock via Woodend, forming a right triangle with the hypotenuse being the passage across Mount Macedon. It is this lesson from Miss McCraw which leads Ben Hussey to conclude the impracticality of such knowledge in the Australian bush. Is this challenge to order what lures Miss McCraw into the rock? Something which is geometric hard and millions of years old, order and sexuality combine into evolution.

Concluding Remark

The Victorian era of 1900, soon to be a liberating Edwardian era was when natural philosophy was at its height, bringing mathematics, environmental studies, and the study of the human body, into a unity. Hence, the analysis here has three themes that are interlinked. In dream we have myth, and the aging novelist has brought forth her childhood fantasies on maturing into adolescence and then adulthood, unless childhood- adolescence is lost. The novel and film maps the loss of sexual order against an untamed land. This analysis is not unique of the 'picnic'. Donald Bartlett drew comparisons between Lindsay's treatment of the rock with that of Malabar Hill in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. Kathleen Steele argues in her essay "Fear and Loathing in the Australian Bush: Gothic Landscapes in Bush Studies and Picnic at Hanging Rock" that the novel's treatment of landscape and its missing characters is reflective of Australia's national history. Lindsay herself compared her novel with Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, citing it as the "book about the children in a haunted house with a governess". The comments link the environmental interpretation with the romantic tradition of Gothic literature, particularly through Mary Shelley's natural philosophy of 'Frankenstein'. The message across the literature, including the Australian picnic, is the mechanistic conflict played out on the beauty of the natural landscape, with feminine sexual imagery at the fore of such conquest or loss. It is a passage of childhood, to adolescence, to adulthood, to old age.