

1987

## Myths and Masks in Two of Janet Frame's Novels

Carol MacLennan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

MacLennan, Carol, Myths and Masks in Two of Janet Frame's Novels, *Kunapipi*, 9(2), 1987.  
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol9/iss2/17>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: [research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

## Myths and Masks in Two of Janet Frame's Novels

### Abstract

The unifying principle behind all Janet Frame's novels is the theme of fiction building which is central to human life. In each of her novels, a distinct but related aspect of these, acknowledged and unacknowledged, fictions is examined.

## Myths and Masks in Two of Janet Frame's Novels

The unifying principle behind all Janet Frame's novels is the theme of fiction building which is central to human life. In each of her novels, a distinct but related aspect of these, acknowledged and unacknowledged, fictions is examined.

Two of these positions, for example, are considered in the novels *The Adaptable Man*<sup>1</sup> and *Yellow Flowers in the Antipodean Room*.<sup>2</sup> In these works the biblical and classical myths of the past are shown to cast light on the fictions of the present and the future.

With the development of a structured rationality, modern human beings can no longer be myth-makers in the true sense of the term. They no longer possess the 'abstracting, god-making, fluid, kaleidoscopic world view of the ancients'.<sup>3</sup> For this reason writers must revisit 'the fabulous to probe beyond the phenomenological, beyond appearances, beyond randomly perceived events, beyond mere history',<sup>4</sup> to challenge the assumptions of ages which have passed and to set the Poetic Imagination on new journeys of exploration towards new worlds. It is this process of probing and this function of challenging, that Frame engages in through the use of myth in her fiction.

People today have retreated so far from their mythic beginnings, according to Jorge Luis Borges, that in place of the myth-making tools which allowed for the apprehension of a multi-faceted world view, combined in endless variety, only one tune, endlessly repeated, remains. Having lost 'the mentality that doubts the validity of its own constructs',<sup>5</sup> which enabled myth-making to occur in its fluid form, modern mankind has reduced its scope to one choric chant, which it plays and replays without variation.

Frame's re-exploration of our mythic heritage demonstrates the accuracy of Borges' contention. In *The Adaptable Man*, Alwyn Maude, the representative twentieth century man, is engaged in unwittingly re-enacting the roles of Icarus, Phaethon and Oedipus, while firmly

believing that he is creating the universe anew. In this novel the modern age is regarded as over-confident, wilful and arrogant, traits which are also characteristic of the above mentioned mythic figures. In his emphatic espousal of the twentieth century, Alwyn displays attributes of all three. Alwyn is a descendant of Icarus, with all the apparent skill and cunning of that fabled ancestor. He can programme his flight through life to a lofty orbit, but his journey is headed towards disaster, for twentieth century adaptable mankind, in Frame's view, is no more likely to heed warnings than did his high flying original. Consequences similarly unfortunate await modern human beings if they persist in their attempts, like Icarus, to 'fly too close to the sun', harnessing powers beyond their control.

Across the centuries human beings have orchestrated another recurring fiction, envisaging themselves as supreme commanders of the universe, in control, finally, not only of the physical world which contains them but also of worlds beyond which embrace the stars. Alwyn visualises himself as a space-age Phaethon commanding the chariot of his father, Phoebus, the sun. This image has both physical and psychological relevance, for the contention is that Alwyn, alias present day humanity, is repeating the follies of the past by fantasising that he is truly in control of the universe. Alwyn, for example, believes that his place in the scheme of things is a major advance on the position of any previous age. He likens the progress of mankind in the twentieth century to its 'emergence from the mud' of ignorance. In other words, to the emergence of human beings from that state of benightedness in which he believes all previous centuries have lived right up until the present.

Alwyn compares the new state of enlightenment, which he believes he enjoys, to that of moving into what he calls 'the white darkness' of the twentieth century. He is exhilarated by the feeling 'as if he were responsible for building a new world.... His adaptability positively rippled with power' (p. 149). This point calls attention to the fact that each generation not only invents and re-invents itself anew, but is constantly engaged in defining and redefining the universe also.

The use of myth in this work reminds us that each generation of human beings is only the latest version cast from the mould of the past. It emphasises that humanity cannot escape its fictional heritage, for it is endlessly engaged in a process of multifaceted image-building. Not only artists, as Yeats points out, poets, painters and musicians,<sup>6</sup> but all human beings, individually and collectively, consciously and otherwise, make and remake themselves continually, but only in terms of what has gone before.

Myth is used here to point out that mankind has, perhaps, less vision to see beyond the past than it is commonly aware of, for what appears innovative and revelatory to each generation is often no more than the new generation's discovery for itself of knowledge already common to its ancestors. But revisiting our mythic heritage also has an aspect more positive than this. While it demonstrates that humanity is less progressive than it imagines, it also indicates that it is not entirely static. An advancing movement is clearly evident, but this is spiral in development, rather than following the rapid vertical progression which Alwyn, as representative of youthful Everyman, mistakenly imagines.

Alwyn's contention is that the present age is intellectually superior to the previous one because it has discarded the past's preoccupation with emotion. Referring to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, for example, Alwyn considers that two pages, rather than a whole novel, would be enough to describe a twentieth century Raskolnikov's emotions after killing, for genocide, in Alwyn's view, is the basis of survival in the modern world. He seizes the opportunity provided by a chance encounter with a stranger on a lonely road to test his ability to kill with the casual unconcern which, he believes, is a basic survival skill for twentieth century man. This act, along with the incestuous relationship which he forms with his mother, identifies him as a latter-day Oedipus. Oedipus, like Alwyn, was known for being 'too complacent in prosperity [and] too confident in sufficiency'.<sup>7</sup> Oedipus, however, was capable of experiencing human passion at its widest range and highest intensity, while Alwyn, epitomising the new cosmic citizen, scorns such emotions as extravagance. He sets out to exert the strongest possible control over his feelings, believing that by doing so, both the pangs of guilt and the torments of conscience will be avoided.

After outlining the external aspects of global adaptable man, characterising him as confident and energetic, but also as amoral, emotionless and concerned only with the present, the narrator also reveals him as a very different kind of character. Alwyn points out that his own perspectives on the eternal happiness with which everyone credits him only partly match the perceptions of others. Modern adaptable mankind wears a mask of happiness and behind that mask lurks a creature 'exposed and alone against the buffetings of time' (p. 150). Faust-like, he feels threatened, 'almost as if he has sold his soul to time instead of to the devil so that he could act the Complete Contemporary The Adaptable Man' (p. 152).

In his doctrine of the mask, Yeats contends that human beings yearn for their opposite, so seek to present their outer selves in forms distinctly

different from the selves through which they live their inner lives. This relates to the outward projections of inner fictions which people, often unconsciously, generate to mask those traits of character which they would, were they aware of them, least wish to acknowledge either to themselves or to others.

The point is that human beings, as Alwyn demonstrates in dramatic form, are frequently unaware that their images of themselves, both inner and outer, are self-created, and therefore, fictions. They, like Alwyn, mistake their fantasies for that elusive something — that unobtainable illusion — they believe to be 'reality'. Alwyn's outwardly confident Phaethon-like behaviour is a mask which he adopts unconsciously, believing it to be a true reflection of his character. In fact the mask is exposed as such in the dreams that come to him during sleep. In the fiction he builds for presentation to the world, he sees himself controlling the globe in the manner of Phoebus himself, an image which, of course, Alwyn clearly hopes is accurate. But the dreams which emerge from his subconscious mind while he sleeps are less assured. In these instances he sees himself piloting a space craft, burdened with a monstrous, aching, encephalitic head.

Although Alwyn imagines he is cultivating God-like qualities he also inwardly fears that he is going mad, 'he was enclosed; sewn up in the present time, as a body is sewn at sea in a canvas shroud before burial' (p. 12). The immortalising self image which Alwyn, the modern cosmic citizen, fabricates is clearly only another disguise. Mankind yearns for its opposite as Yeats contends, and this desire is patently evident in Alwyn's behaviour. His persistent attempts to learn 'the furious adaption of his age' conclude with him concealing his true nature not only from others, but also from himself. Behind the fiction of the confident man of action, which is the mask Alwyn desires, there exists a less adventurous creature, anxious and uncertain, who shuns experience for fear of being overwhelmed by it. 'If you lived experience,' Alwyn declares, 'you were too easily drowned in it. Writing about it you could flail and splash your way to the shore' (p. 14). This viewpoint reflects his attempts to avoid emotion, but indicates that his rejection of feelings is motivated more by fear of them than by the scorn with which he claims to regard them.

The circularity of the mythic process is confirmed by Alwyn's alternative version of himself as controller of the cosmos, for the apparently over-confident cosmic Phaethon is little different from his mythical ancestor. Both suffer from swollen-headedness, lose control of their chariots and pivot helplessly among the stars, threatening the whole universe with destruction.

Frame's use of myth in this novel points up that in spite of their absence of myth-making tools, twentieth century human beings are still a fictionalising species who unconsciously search for their opposite by constructing personal fictions. Unaware that their interpretations of 'reality' are only fictional, they are often deceived by their own imaginings.

Until they become conscious of, and face up to, the fictions and fantasies they spin around themselves, human beings will remain incapable of much originality. Susan Langer explains why mythic beliefs and processes are so important. 'They are pregnant,' she writes, 'and carry an unformulated idea. Myth is a figure of THOUGHT, not merely of speech and to destroy it is to destroy an idea in its pristine phase, just when it dawns on people.'<sup>8</sup> Thus myth-making in its original micro-cosmic sense is intellectually liberating in function and kaleidoscopic in process. It encapsulates the very act of concept formation at its inception. But personal, microscopic aspects of myth-making can be reductive and imaginatively deadening. This consequence is exemplified by the personal fiction building of characters in *The Adaptable Man* such as Muriel Baldry and Aisley and Russell Maude, who seriously limit their lives as a result of the private myths they construct. Alwyn's mythic apprehensions lead him to destructive and dangerous behaviour, while the fictions constructed by Russell, his father, cause him to live like a modern Dis, presiding over Little Burgelstatham, a twentieth century village of the dead.

It is only by becoming newly aware of the unacknowledged and unquestioned limitations which constrict it, that the human race can learn to destroy its self-inflicted confining mould. The mythic world view is spiral at best and epitomised by stasis rather than vertical and essentially novel as each generation, like Alwyn, fondly believes. By re-examining classical and biblical mythic themes, and setting them alongside those contemporary fictions of modern mankind which pass for, and are hailed as, daringly innovative additions to the sum of human knowledge, Frame exposes the self-deceptive fictions of collective humanity, illustrating anew the circularity of most human endeavour.

What her novels also contend, however, is that there are periods, during the cyclic sweep of history, when the human mind genuinely shakes off the self-inflicted, psychic strait-jacket of now lifeless myths and the meaningless habits and rituals which cling to them. During these recurrent cycles of intellectual evolution the mind breaks free from the restrictions of its accumulated social and cultural patterning. These landmarks in the history of human intellectual development open the way for the mind to surge beyond past and present concepts and ideologies

and to enter upon new realms of thought. When this happens, the latent potential of the human intellect for initiating new physical and mental constructs about the universe is released and the way is prepared for further authentic contributions to be made to the advancement of human knowledge.

The inspiration which Frame draws from mythic themes is further developed in her novel *Yellow Flowers in the Antipodean Room*. This work explores the two boundaries of conscious adult existence, death the physical termination of living, and the subconscious which presents an equally impenetrable psychic boundary to life. In this novel Frame continues to emphasise the far from simple truth that life is made up of a series of fictions. Our ideologies are fictions for we create them. Our philosophies and the beliefs and values that emerge from them are fictions, for we alter them as we see fit.

Godfrey Rainbird, the central character in *Yellow Flowers*, is linked symbolically with Dante and Orpheus as well as with Christ and Lazarus, all figures who have been associated in some way with death and a return to life. *Yellow Flowers* points out that knowledge of death gleaned from the past comes from our biblical and literary heritage. The myths and pseudo-histories on which this information is based are 'fictions'; stories, narratives, parables or figurative interpretations of these, put together by artists, seers or believers of former ages. Godfrey Rainbird's death and strange resurrection form the basis of the narrative in which Christian metaphor and Greek myth are linked.

Godfrey's role as a questing Orpheus is indicated near the conclusion of the work when he states that he, like Orpheus, has attempted to lead Beatrice, his wife, through life from the world of darkness to the world of light. Referring to Beatrice's hand he comments that 'It is a wife's hand ... I have shown it the way in the dark; I have picked it up and set it down — there, and there, and there' (p. 210). The mythical Orpheus finally fails to lead Eurydice out of the underworld back to the land of the living, while this twentieth century Orpheus, because of his brief and inadvertent entry into the country of death, himself becomes trapped in a Lethe-like state suspended between living and dying.

In a reverse analogy to the Orpheus myth it is Beatrice, by her suicide, who frees Godfrey to return, not to THIS world, the human, apparently physical world of light, which Plato shows to be no more than an illusory world of shadows in which deluded human beings exist, but to THAT world, the world of the mind and imagination. Ironically, by taking her life, Beatrice releases Godfrey from his state of limbo and his imprisoning



love for her. Her death thus allows the process of Godfrey's self integration to begin.

Godfrey's identity as a contemporary Christ figure is signified by a whole series of allusive material. His name GODfrey, for example, indicates his divine associations, while the fact of his death and resurrection is underlined by the detailed account of his return to consciousness. At that time he feels as if 'with great effort ... he hauled two stones from the mouth of an unfathomable cave' (p. 125), a description which links him to New Testament accounts of events subsequent to Christ's death and return to life.

Godfrey's status as a neo-Christ is extended through a collection of small allusions. The comparison of Dunedin to the new Jerusalem of Revelations associates him with the visionary images of that Christian text. The local minister's reference to 'this biblical happening in Dunedin' (p. 40), and the special relationship he forms with the children who are mysteriously attracted to him, all combine to develop the figure.

Classical myth and biblical metaphor are carefully but loosely intertwined as Godfrey gazes across the harbour at Dunedin, his modern Jerusalem, enjoying particularly the view when sheltered behind the windows. It is only his occasional awareness of fly dirt on the glass which reminds him that this barrier stands between him and his vision of the symbolic city. The New Testament premise that humans are beings of limited vision, who see only through a glass darkly, is rather sardonically reiterated in this allusion which also incorporates Plato's convictions regarding the narrowly confined boundaries of human awareness.<sup>9</sup> Plato's metaphor of the cave is also used by Frame in *The Adaptable Man* where it is identified with the chandelier, which represents it symbolically in that novel. Those imprisoned in Plato's cave assume that the shadows they see are in all respects real things. The inhabitants of Little Burgelstatham are also imprisoned in a cave, cavern or cavity, for the village is literally known as the burial place of the heathen, a title suggesting a subterranean resting place; and it is metaphorically associated with the underworld of the dead, through Russel Maude's allusive position as an imitation Dis, king of that realm.

Those who live in Little Burgelstatham are analogous to the prisoners in the cave referred to by Plato: the latter mistake the shadows of reality for their living forms, whereas the former are unaware that the realities they live by are only self-created fictions.

Returning once more to *Yellow Flowers* it is found that the configuration of mythico-historical figures again converges, as the modern scribes and

Pharisees, represented by the townspeople of Dunedin, begin to stone Godfrey's house. The symbolism relates to the rejection and crucifixion of Christ on the one hand, and to the stoning of Orpheus by the maenads, on the other.

Recollections of the story from his childhood bible class connect Godfrey physically with Lazarus, the man whom Christ chose to raise from the dead. In this modern fiction where he is depicted as a Lazarus revenant, Godfrey's return is less enthusiastically greeted than in the biblical version of the tale. Considering the pragmatic consequences of his predecessor's situation, he notes that Lazarus would have had to pay for his shroud and his funeral, items with which Godfrey himself will have to contend.

The modern setting adds to his confusion, for death and resurrection, he believes, are easier to accept in their familiar biblical environment, 'a remote time in deserts and streets of dust', than in twentieth century Dunedin with 'shop windows full of electric frypans, electric heaters (and) televisions'. The mind enjoys the predictability of known and well-tried fictions and resists attempts to transpose the setting or outcome to a modern environment. The simpler life-style of biblical times may be part of the attraction these fictions hold for modern people, for Godfrey points out that even plague could seem paradisaical when viewed from the entanglements of the twentieth century (p. 125).

Godfrey's Dante persona emerges most strongly when he is involuntarily being pulled back to that concealed territory from which he has so recently escaped. His love for Beatrice, to whom he is married, is frankly acknowledged and constitutes a limiting fiction from which he must free himself before he can find peace. His regard for her is tinged with a belief in her perfection, reflecting the admiration of Dante Alighieri for his earlier Beatrice.

By examining these modern rituals, and placing them alongside their mythic source, *Yellow Flowers* sets the apprehensions of our earlier ancestors in ironic counterpoint to the perceptions of human beings today. Death, for example, is an unknown entity around which our forebears built many fictions. In spite of their continuing preoccupation with mortality, modern sophisticated human beings still rely on the fictions of the past for their knowledge of the subject. Over the centuries mankind has invented a series of fictions to ease the pain of knowing it will die. The fictions surrounding Christ and Lazarus come into this category, for they assure human beings that death is not entirely invincible, but that, very occasionally, and only with great difficulty, it can be overcome, at least in figurative form.

The subconscious mind is a newer concept, or perhaps an old one that until recently has been forgotten. The fictions pertaining to Dante and Orpheus are associated with the human desire to understand that concealed aspect of the mind. The fictions surrounding both concepts, death and the subconscious, must allow for them to be held in awe, while offering comfort in face of our mortality and providing means to control our still inborn primitivity.

A separation has taken place between our basic human instincts and what is imagined to be our civilised consciousness; the division can plainly be detected in the prevalent attitude to rituals, festivals and ceremonies, an issue of some significance in *Yellow Flowers*. Through the use of mythic allusions *Yellow Flowers* is pointing out that the behaviour of modern social groups exhibits the outward manifestations of ancient rituals. Modern peoples, just like their early ancestors, create fictions to help them control the material world, their ideas, each other, and lastly themselves.

The message of these two novels, if they can be said to have one, is simply to urge human beings to make better use of their minds. By calling attention to the unacknowledged fictions people indulge in and live by, Frame encourages them to become more logical and aware but also more intellectually adventurous and imaginative.

## NOTES

1. Janet Frame, *The Adaptable Man* (Pegasus Press, New Zealand, 1965). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
2. Janet Frame, *Yellow Flowers in the Antipodean Room* (George Braziller, New York, 1969). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
3. Carter Wheelock, *The Myth Maker, A Study of Motif and Symbol in the Short Stories of Jorge Luis Borges* (University of Texas Press, Austin & London, 1969), p. 4.
4. Robert Coover, *Pricksongs and Descants* (Dutton, New York, 1969), p. 78.
5. Wheelock, p. 12.
6. W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (Macmillan, London, 1961), p. 157.
7. Sophocles, *The Theban Plays*, transl. E.F. Watling (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1947), p. 15.
8. Susan Langer, *Feeling and Form* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1953), p. 81.
9. Francis MacDonald Cornford, ed., *The Republic of Plato* (OUP, London, 1979), p. 227.