

# Elizabeth jolley's 'the well': a reading on gender



A traditional aspect of rural Australian society was the ordered role of gender. Stereotypically, men were the titleholders, landowners and accumulators of wealth from agriculture, whereas it was the role of women to fulfil expectations of their being wives, mothers and homemakers (Neville, 1997). Within Elizabeth Jolley's 1986 novel *The Well*, these conventions are simultaneously conformed to and subverted by characters, particularly in the case of main characters Hester and Katherine. The Bordens, husband and wife respectively, embody rural gender stereotypes and are thus free of the consequences awaiting those who defy them. As the novel progresses, Hester and Katherine lose control over their ordered lives and their behaviour becomes increasingly unconventional, ultimately serving as a demonstration of the so-called natural order in restoring them to their natural roles as females. This idea may be interpreted by the reader through literary conventions such as characterisation.

Hester Harper is the protagonist of Jolley's novel *The Well*. At the beginning of the text Hester is described as being a wealthy landowner, an uncharacteristic quality of a traditional female at the time of the novel's conception. She is described as being distinctly unfeminine, lacking any maternal instincts and having 'rather flat breasts' and a 'lame foot'. This contributes to the perception that Hester is markedly deviating from the stereotypical norm; she does not possess attributes that denote her as being traditionally desirable as a female (Renes, n. d.). In addition to this, Hester's wealth due to her acquiring her father's property after his death affords her a great deal of power, which also serves to subvert gender norms and establish the character as resistant to stereotype (Renes, n. d.). A marked

change occurs in Hester with the arrival of Kathy, a young orphan teen who encourages Hester to embrace some of the qualities of being female. Under her urging, Hester partakes in frivolous spending sprees and partaking in baking and sewing, somewhat returning her to the gender norm. However, as Hester's nature of control takes over and leads to her increasing urge to dominate Kathy, a sequence of events occur to derail Hester's acquisition of power; the dumping of the body in the well serves to remove Hester's male desire to control Kathy as Kathy gains a form of power through the discovery of her untapped sexuality, one which Hester has barred from her own life. Her spending in order to keep Katherine complacent and controllable eventually leads to her being forced to sell her house to Mr Borden. At the end of the novel Hester is left without fortune and property or social standing as a result from her spending habits, and her actions in contributing to this ultimately serve to reestablish the gender norm - in this case, women being afforded less power than men. In saying this, the reader may interpret the arrival of Kathy and the resulting amplification of Hester's male desire for control as a narrative device that ultimately serves to reinstate rural gender stereotypes in *The Well*.

The events that serve to derail Hester's circumvention of rural gender stereotypes are triggered by the arrival of Katherine, an orphan girl Hester takes in. Katherine is demonstrated to be the epitome of feminine qualities at the commencement of the novel, possessing a 'piping voice' and dancing prettily. Her heterosexual nature is shaped by a range of popular texts and patriarchal fictions (Goddard, 1993), thus allowing her to be representative of the female ideal of rural gender stereotype of heterosexuality and female

conduct. However, her conforming to gender roles undergoes change upon the event of her running over the creature, man or otherwise. Over the course of the novel, she becomes increasingly convinced that the creature she and Hester dumped down the well is a man, and he is alive. She converses with him; he becomes increasingly forward with her, making sexually suggestive comments and proposing marriage. This triggers the awakening of her own sexuality (Wiley, 1996). She accepts his marriage proposal, and even remarks upon stocking up for baby clothes. However, it is never made clear to the reader whether or not this man is a figment of her own imagination; as a result, Katherine appears to lose her mind, eventually ceasing eating. Her descent into madness is representative of the reader idea that departing from the cultural norm leads to consequences that serve to return the situation to conventionality. Katherine goes against the cultural norm for females in being chaste before marriage through her receptiveness to the supposed man's openly sexual commentary. This ultimately leads to her insanity and anorexia, which may be viewed by the reader as the society within the novel repressing the divergent and returning it to a form of normality by eliminating deviants. Therefore, the characterisation of Kathy as eventually displaying open sexuality and then going insane serves to demonstrate the return of the society in *The Well* to its ordered state in adhering to gender roles.

The relationship between Hester and Katherine within this context may be seen as unnatural and deviating from the cultural norms of Australian rural gender stereotypes. Within a relationship that should conventionally be a facsimile of a mother-daughter partnership, Hester takes a patriarchal role of

possession over Katherine, demonstrated in the epigraph in which, when her father enquires after Katherine's new presence in his household, she states that Katherine 'is for me' (Goddard, 1993). It is implied at several junctions in the novel that Hester's fascination with Katherine may not be entirely platonic; her focus as protagonist upon the movements of Katherine dancing or the tone of her voice when speaking implies a lesbian sexual fantasy of Katherine. Also, Katherine's behaviour is conventionally viewed to be innocent; the reader may choose to view her instead as an opportunist, using her youthful female sexuality to entice Hester and encourage her spending habits to keep her in a life of good fortune. It is stated in the novel that Katherine is a good actress, noted several times by Mr Bird that she ought not to be trusted, and her erratic behaviour towards the end of the novel serves to unveil her as a truly unpleasant individual (whether or not this be out of insanity). Therefore, Hester and Katherine's relationship may be established as not conforming to gender roles, as lesbianism and considerable age differences to their varying extents are not considered socially acceptable behaviour. The events that follow therefore may prove, within this context, to destroy the pseudo-lesbian relationship existent between the two characters and ultimately restore Katherine's heterosexuality and Hester's apparent lack of sexuality. The destruction of their relationship as a result of the presence of the creature in the well serves to restore the natural order of female heterosexuality. Therefore, the construction of Hester and Katherine's relationship and its resulting destruction can be considered as a narrative return to conventional rural stereotypes pertaining to gender roles.

The Bordens are supporting characters that may lend credence to the reader interpretation of Jolley's text *The Well*. Both characters may be seen to uphold gender stereotype, and their resulting narrative, especially in comparison to Hester and Kathy's serves to highlight the concept of the natural order. As both Hester and Kathy - as individuals and as a collective pair - are unconventional they are 'punished' by the natural order, to the result of Hester's re-repression of her own sexuality and her loss of good standing, as well as Kathy's seeming descent into madness and eventual detachment from Hester. However, the narrative only serves to elevate the married couple. Mr Borden is denoted as a farmer of relative wealth whom first appears in the novel to buy Hester's farm from her. The moment she agrees, the Borden family sees an elevation in social status, becoming wealthy landowners in place of the outcast, reclusive Hester. Ultimately, the narrative serves to completely shift Hester's societal power into the hands of the Bordens. This may be read as Hester losing power due to the natural order restoring the female to a place of powerlessness and the male - Mr Borden - being elevated to that position of power. This is because Mr Borden embodies all that is expected of a man; he is hardworking, broad-shouldered and virile, as emphasised by the growing number of children he has. This also serves to demonstrate Mrs Borden as conformist, as she is denoted to be 'constantly pregnant', and female fertility in marriage is stereotypically seen favourably. The fact that they end up elevated into the upper echelons of rural Australian society by the end of the novel serves to demonstrate the fact that conforming to gender stereotype incurs favour with the natural order. The Bordens' construction as conformist, particularly in relation to the lack of confirming present in both Katherine and Hester, serves to

demonstrate the natural order and its reinforcement of rural Australian gender stereotypes.

The utilisation of characterisation in Jolley's novel *The Well* enables the reader exploring gender to determine that the natural order reinforces traditional gender roles in rural Australian society, particularly in regards to the role of women as heterosexual wives, mothers and homemakers (Neville, 1997). Hester's possession of patriarchal characteristics leads to her attempting to assume control over Katherine through excessive spending; it is this device that may be considered to be utilised by the narrative as a means of removing power from her and lowering her social status in the rural context of the novel. Katherine is initially the perfect example of femininity, which is ultimately derailed by the presence of the creature in the well and her descent into madness; this serves as a means for the natural order to eliminate deviants. Katherine and Hester's unbalanced relationship defies gender norms, and the so-called natural order ultimately destroys their ordered lives. By contrast, the Bordens are conformists to gender traditions; their elevation in class within the duration of the narrative emphasises the role of the natural order in ensuring the maintenance of correct conduct pertaining to each gender. Ultimately, the novel as interpreted by the reader seeks to reinforce the importance of gender roles within the context of the time period of the text's production, and may ultimately serve as a criticism for harsh punishments placed on those deviating from the social norm.

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