

‘Not at all afraid’: Queer Temporality and the School Detective Story

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Abstract: Kate Haffey has recently argued that if queer time can be seen as a turning away from narrative coherence, it suggests new possibilities for considering narrative structures more generally. Combining the narratively rigid structures of the school story and the detective novel, the four novels discussed in this article – Gladys Mitchell’s *Laurels are Poison* (1942), Josephine Tey’s *Miss Pym Disposes* (1946), Shirley Jackson’s *Hangsamán* (1951), and Joan Lindsay’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967) – disrupt conventional understandings of linear time. Depicting not only queer, or potentially queer, characters, but a queer phenomenological perspective, they challenge reader expectations with a focus on aporias and gaps, whether in terms of trauma (Jackson), the blurring of fact and fiction (Lindsay), or the prolonged delay of both crime and resolution (Tey). These novels draw attention to the insufficiency of texts to capture experience, and the inadequacy of textual authority. As such, they reveal the extent to which mid-twentieth-century women’s fiction was able to challenge the genres and narrative structures with which it was most closely associated.

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Introduction

Near the start of *Laurels are Poison* (1942), Gladys Mitchell describes the librarian of Athelstan Hall, the girls’ training college where the novel takes place, as one of the ‘sort of women who are found chiefly in vicarages, Girl Guide camps, mixed schools, some country houses’, and girls’ schools such as this one (10). The list resembles W.H. Auden’s definition of the milieu of the detective story several years later, where he identifies the importance of a ‘closed society [... that] must appear to be an innocent society in a state of grace’ (Auden). The detective story and the girls’ school story are two of the most rigidly codified generic forms in mid-twentieth-century fiction, sharing many aspects of setting and narrative structure. In particular they share a focus on temporality, whether in the emphasis on seasons and term structures of the school story, or the patterns of crime and resolution in the detective novel. The four novels discussed below – Josephine Tey’s *Miss Pym Disposes* (1946), Shirley

Jackson's *Hangsaman* (1951), and Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967), as well as Mitchell's – combine elements of the detective novel and the school story not only to emphasise these temporal qualities, but in order to disrupt conventional understandings of linear time. As Kate Haffey has recently argued, drawing on the work of Jack Halberstam, queer temporality 'jam[s] the mechanisms that produce conventional narratives that reinforce traditional social relations', and suggests new possibilities for considering narrative structures more generally (Haffey 3). Reading these four novels in terms of queer temporality and phenomenology highlights not only their depiction of queer, or potentially queer, characters, but the way they challenge readerly expectations with a focus on aporias and gaps, whether in terms of trauma, the blurring of fact and fiction, or the prolonged delay of both crime and resolution. These novels draw attention to the insufficiency of texts to capture experience, and the inadequacy of textual authority: the combination of school story and crime narrative allows for a discussion of freedom, whether from associations between women and domestic space, from heteronormative relationality, or from the confines of generic expectations. The novels suggest a turn from biological family structures to communities based on affinity. As such, they reveal the extent to which mid-twentieth-century women's fiction was able to challenge the genres with which it was most closely associated, as well as the experimental possibilities of combining multiple genres.

Examples of both the girls' school story and the detective novel can be found in the nineteenth-century work of L.T. Meade, but the former genre is cemented in the work of Angela Brazil at the beginning of the twentieth century and, like the Golden Age detective novel, rose to prominence between the wars, especially in the writings of Elinor Brent-Dyer, whose Chalet School stories began in 1925 and reflected the

exponential growth of women's education. For Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig, girls' school stories, and girls' own experiences, can be viewed 'in terms of freedom from the home as well as a later freedom of choice' (Cadogan and Craig 178). This is, however, a very cautious approach to freedom; although in classic school stories each girl is given a distinctive attribute, whether in character or background, each strives not to stand out as an individual: the school ethos dampens personal aspirations. A similar tension can be found in the lives of boarding-school students themselves, who often enjoyed the lovable eccentricity they found in school stories, but in reality longed 'to be exactly the same as everybody else' (Maxtone Graham 43). The structure of the tales enforces this homogeneity: while Brent-Dyer's titles often single out a particular character, e.g. *Jo of the Chalet School* (1926) or *Eustasia Goes to the Chalet School* (1930), the temporal appellations of Antonia Forest (*Autumn Term* [1948]) and especially Enid Blyton (*First Term at Malory Towers* [1946]) will be more familiar to modern readers. The familiar, repetitive structure of the school term as ordering principle anchors more recent school stories from J.K. Rowling to Jenny Colgan: schools demand a linear, progressive temporality. School stories, according to Beverly Lyon Clark, 'lend themselves to didacticism [...]. School is, in part, a metaphor for the effect that the book is supposed to have' (Clark 7). As such, the school story is not a tale of innocence restored so much as innocence created: the school creates, through principles of temporal repetition, a community of equals, set apart from the world but ultimately poised to enter it.

Detective novelists returning to the school story in their work for adults might then be assumed to be using the school as a particularly harmonious state where good can be restored: it is a place where, in Mary Evans's words, 'the "bad apple" in the barrel is removed, and the calm of the social world is once more in place' (Evans 19).

This redemptive function that Evans argues is essential to the Golden Age detective novel is already intrinsic to the school story, where any number of high jinks, misapprehensions, and petty jealousies are conveniently resolved just in time for the students to return to their homes at the end of term. Even the title of Agatha Christie's *Cat Among the Pigeons* (1959), which focuses on class and ethnic disparities in a school setting, reflects the idea of a normalcy that is disrupted and then set right. The combination of genres may also hold personal appeal for the authors: Alison Hennegan writes in her introduction to Nancy Spain's extraordinarily camp *Poison for Teacher* (1949), for instance, that the genre of 'Murder Goes to School' reflects the author's obsession with her own schooldays (Hennegan ix). Mitchell and Tey also, however, highlight the value of a place apart. Comparing Mitchell's work with Dorothy Sayers's *Gaudy Night* (1935), the most famous Golden Age novel to combine single-sex education and crime, albeit in a university setting, Samantha Walton notes both authors' 'support for all-women environments and meaningful work as an antidote to traditional female roles' (Walton 88). The 'new sense of freedom' (Evans 17) that Evans sees as the endpoint of the classic detective novel is, crucially, already built into the structure of the girls' school story. As much as the school story reinforces ideas of social structure, it also points to the advantages of removal from patriarchal constructions of social and family life. As will be discussed below, this accounts for the peculiar melancholy that underlies these novels: even when, as in the two earlier novels, some resolution is found, it is not restorative; instead, it indicates the contamination of a place of possibility.

The focus on single-sex environments, and varying degrees of female friendship, has led to all four of these authors being discussed in relation to queer theory. Although none of the novels includes an explicitly lesbian relationship, they

can be seen as queer in their focus on what José Esteban Muñoz calls a ‘forward-dawning futurity’: queerness, he writes ‘is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing’ (Muñoz 1). Focusing on ideas of queer temporality allows criticism to move past questions of representation to examine narrative structure. These texts highlight a tension between freedom and conformity, a drive to futurity combined with ‘the failure of gathering to keep things in their place’, that points to the disorientation that Sara Ahmed sees as essential to queer phenomenology (Ahmed, *Queer* 165). The very remove from a social, heteronormative world that is intrinsic to the school story allows for a queer critique of linear time. The appearance of a crime – or its significant absence – is world-shattering; it causes the students and detective figures both to realise that the standard ordering of the world, including crime and resolution, is insufficient. Caught between an ever-lasting present and a sense of the future, normative or otherwise, between the linear movement of the academic year and a sense of suspension in time, between a push towards uniformity and an increasing sense of individual and collective displacement, these novels combine multiple genres in an implicit critique of generic norms.

‘A great beatitude’: Mitchell and Tey

At the level of narrative structure, *Laurels are Poison* and *Miss Pym Disposes* are remarkably similar novels. In each, a lone older woman (the psychoanalyst-detective Mrs Bradley and the French teacher-turned-popular psychologist Miss Lucy Pym) arrives at a girls’ training college and stays for an unexpectedly long period of time. While a mysterious disappearance before the beginning of Mitchell’s novel is the reason for Mrs Bradley’s invitation, and the central crime of Tey’s novel only occurs

three-quarters through the text, both novels share a similar lack of urgency: the bulk of the narrative is devoted to the outsider's encounters with student and staff, and their immersion in the girls' world. The novels share an emphasis on intertextual reference common to both authors' other works: in Mitchell's novel there is even a two-page discussion of *Richard of Bordeaux*, Tey's most famous play, written under the name of Gordon Daviot. Yet while Mitchell's more traditional novel foregrounds the pleasures of generic constraints, Tey's upends them to reveal their limitations.

Throughout *Laurels are Poison* – and much more than in her earlier school story *St Peter's Finger* (1938) – Mitchell draws attention to the similarities between the detective novel and the school story. For much of the novel, the crimes depicted would be unsurprising in a girls' story, although they are portrayed with slightly more malice: although the girls are distressed to find their clothes slashed, or their hair cut while they sleep, Mrs Bradley's belief that these incidents reveal 'a devilish agency which it was not very pretty to brood on' seems potentially exaggerated (Mitchell 73). Even as the tale grows more macabre, with skeletons in cupboards and, ultimately, grave robbing, the tone remains relatively light-hearted. Detection is discussed as a 'schoolgirl gambit' (60), while the potential crimes are always contextualised in relation to familiar spatial and temporal rhythms. In a series of fragmentary passages depicting the students' return home over Christmas, Mitchell depicts the extent to which both serious and mundane concerns are equally dismissed as fancy:

'Any adventures?' enquired Kitty's eleven-year-old brother.
'Stacks! Ghosts, murder, old Dog nearly getting pneumonia, somebody slashing up coats and breaking open trunks and tins of disinfectant, School Prac., all sorts of rumours that the last Warden disappeared at the end of last term, although some only say she was ill, and...'
'What was that about Laura getting pneumonia, dear,' asked her mother, detaching from this welter of rhetoric the one accessible and assimilable fact.
(148)

The adult world of crime and murder is so enmeshed in the school world – indeed, the chapter depicting malicious meddling with disinfectant is titled ‘High Jinks with a Tin-Opener’ – that it is easily dismissed by the adult listener, although not, presumably, the adult reader. Rather than using the school setting to evoke nostalgia, then, Mitchell implies that the crises and dramas of school life are themselves worth taking seriously. The novel opens a space for girls to be listened to: what happens at school is indeed a matter of life and death.

The series of crimes depicted through the novel are neatly resolved at its end. Miss Murchan, the English teacher whose disappearance Mrs Bradley is called to investigate, is revealed to have been hiding on school grounds, attempting to avoid discovery over a presumed accident at a previous school where a child was killed due to a loose boom in a gymnasium – the same manner of death that appears in Tey’s novel. Miss Murchan is a vengeful ghost, haunting the school, and ultimately a murderer. Yet her discovery, and the novel’s resolution, is perplexing. Mitchell states that the explanations are ‘inadequate and, on the whole, ill-informed’ (195). Murchan herself appears only briefly, bound and quoting Swinburne, and Mrs Bradley discusses her as ‘a person of a type familiar to all students of the morbid psychology of sex’ (197), while a reporter has earlier called her a ““queer stick”” (136). The immediate explanation is that Murchan had loved the same man as her half-sister, and been driven mad, and while the rushed engagement of two secondary characters at the novel’s end appears to reinstate a degree of heteronormativity, Murchan herself is readable as a queer figure. Murchan is simultaneously in the world of the novel and outside it: her actions fit both the school story and the detective novel, and yet she is never incorporated into the tale. She is, at the very least, queer in the sense of ‘not following a straight line’ (Ahmed, *Queer* 70). She is a force of both narrative and

intertextual disruption who haunts the other characters, even when she is revealed to be alive.

Tyler Bradway has argued that ‘queer spectrality remakes the aesthetic into a force of queer becoming’, and certainly the appearance of a ghost figure who can barely speak for herself, but instead recites stanzas of Swinburne, indicates the familiar notion of queerness as tied to melancholia and loss (Bradway 29). ‘Itylus’, the poem Murchan quotes at length, has been described as a work of ‘interminable mourning: a feminized position enacting the aesthetic abandonment of a residual masculinity’ (Gonsalves 6). Likewise, Natalie Prizel has examined Swinburne’s work in terms of ‘perverse sympathy and intersubjectivity’ that are foundational to an imagined world of specifically lesbian repair and discovery (Prizel 271). Crucially, after quoting four stanzas of the poem, Murchan retreats into silence; the police, says Bradley, cannot hurt her, ““for she has disappeared again”” (Mitchell 194). That Murchan cannot speak for herself, except to be interpreted as mad, but rather appears as a spectral force of intertextuality, creates difficulty for any clear resolution. She is precisely that figure ‘clinging to ruined identities and to histories of injury’ that Heather Love associates with the defiance of ‘the call of gay normalization’ (Love 30). Murchan cannot be integrated into the world of the novel, but at the same time, indicates the potentiality of texts to exceed familiar conceptions of linear time.

The links between time, loss, and queer identities are presented more clearly in *Miss Pym Disposes*. In Mitchell’s work, as Walton argues, Bradley’s ‘right to interpret’, as a woman, can be seen as a fusion of feminism and psychoanalysis (Walton 65). Tey’s Pym, coming a few years later, is introduced as having dazzled a world simultaneously tired of fiction and Freud; she has developed her own theories of psychology – which are never detailed in the novel – in response to what she sees

as misguided predecessors, and been launched to public fame. Although like Bradley Pym functions as a psychological detective, however, she is ultimately unable to apply her theories adequately: in the final pages of the novel she discovers that the murder of Barbara Rouse, a student who had cheated on her examinations in order to be rewarded with a prominent scholarship, was not committed by Mary Innes, the student who was expected to win the scholarship, and who takes responsibility for the crime, but by Innes's close friend Beau Nash. There is no retribution or resolution: Pym simply leaves the school, reflecting that '[a]s a psychologist she was a first-rate teacher of French' (Tey 249). Innes and Nash are described as 'mutually devoted' (238) in a way that allows the story to be read as 'a hidden parable of inversion' (Redmond 111), but which avoids any explicit mention of lesbianism. If Mrs Bradley's psychoanalytic approach is capable of recognising the queer outlier, while not permitting integration, Miss Pym's fundamentally fails.

The shock of the novel's ending is enhanced by the school's isolation from the world. Throughout the novel the girls display 'a morning-of-the-world youngness' and have, in Nash's words, "[n]o time to think of an outside world" (Tey 48, 41). Leys Physical Training College is a world almost entirely removed from quotidian life, as is highlighted by the campus's removal from linear, measured time. Almost all of Tey's detective novels begin with an explicit declaration of time: *The Man in the Queue* (1929) for instance, the first Inspector Grant novel, begins 'It was between seven and eight o'clock on a March evening' (Tey, *Man* 1), and Tey maintains the pattern in subsequent work. In *Miss Pym Disposes*, however, while a bell tolls in the first sentence, the time is not identified for a page, as Miss Pym cannot find her watch. In the opening chapters she repeatedly considers catching the 2.41 train from Larborough, and yet finds herself at peace in a world where the only measure of time

is the ringing of bells. In the peaceful setting of the school, untroubled by external demands, Pym finds a 'great beatitude' (Tey, *Pym* 38). Unlike Mitchell's world, where crimes echo school life, this is a world removed from crime entirely. As Henrietta Hodge, the principal, declares, "when a human being works as hard as these girls do, it has neither the spare interest to devise a crime nor the energy to undertake it" (40). The only crime is the pilfering of food. Instead, the isolated setting allows the students to focus on their own professional development. Each of the girls is motivated by their hopes for future success, largely philanthropic: not only are very few of them involved in romantic encounters, but marriage and family life are not mentioned as possible goals.

The training college is repeatedly presented as a world that relies on contingency, unlike the linear movement of the outside world. Midway through, enjoying her crumpets, Miss Pym reflects on the circumstances that brought her there:

If I had gone back to London, Lucy thought, I would have had no share in this. What would I be doing? Eleven o'clock. Going for a walk in the Park, and deciding how to get out of being guest of honour at some literary dinner. Instead I have this. And all because Dr Knight wanted to go to a medical conference tomorrow. No, because once long ago Henrietta stood up for me at school. It was odd to think that this sun-lit moment in an English June began to take shape thirty years ago in a dark crowded school cloakroom filled with little girls putting on their goloshes. What were first causes, anyhow? (83)

Friendship between women allows a different approach to time and history and, for the majority of the novel, allows both Pym and the students to envisage themselves not as the world would have them be, but as they themselves could be happiest. If queer time, as defined by Jack Halberstam, Carolyn Dinshaw, Elizabeth Freeman, and others, can be seen as 'non-linear, anti-familial, non-reproductive, anti-historical, non-normative, and anachronistic' (Rohy 139), Tey's novel highlights the value of this temporality for thinking of women's lives. More particularly, the novel highlights

what Freeman terms chrononormativity, or the way ‘naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation’ (Freeman 3). The schools’ own sense of time binds the students together, physically and emotionally. At the same time, the degree to which the temporal structure of the school, and the novel, is offset from heteronormative society allows for a particular focus on homosocial communities. The story centres on female friendship, both between and across generations: Miss Pym comes to love the students as they love each other, in a wholly contingent manner. As Tey has one character defend ‘unrelated families’ in her comedy *The Expensive Halo* (1931), “‘Most families are [unrelated] nowadays. I think they probably always were, only until now they didn’t have the freedom to make it obvious’” (Tey, *Expensive* 190-191). Almost the entirety of *Miss Pym Disposes* is devoted to the creation of such an unrelated family, and the possibilities it allows.

When the crime occurs, it brings with it both individual psychology and the return of externally-measured time. Pym hastily denies a visiting actor’s claim that Innes has the face both of a Borgia and a ‘young man’, but acknowledges that she is ‘exceptional, oddly fine, out of her century, and potentially tragic’ (211). From an external perspective, Innes is precisely the ‘type’ associated with crime in Mitchell’s novel. Yet as Pym lies awake at night, listening to the clocks, she decides not to betray Innes, on the grounds that the crime itself is unthinkable: ‘slick detective stories’ have taught her that heroines should be innocent, and more importantly, she cannot countenance the guilt of someone she has ‘liked and admired, shared a communal life with’ (232). If, as Walton writes, there is ‘nothing quite so reassuring as a good golden age dénouement’ (Walton 94), Tey complicates it not by evoking sympathy towards the villain because of their mental illness, as happens in many of

Mitchell's novels, but by making the resolution unthinkable. While there is certainly a logic to the determination of Innes's guilt, and she offers herself for punishment, the world of the novel thus far still does not allow either the reader or Pym to believe this account. Innes's self-appointed punishment, crucially, is the rejection of her future: rather than going into the world, she returns home to do medical work alongside her father, as her town has no orthopaedic clinic. Her 'living death' (234) is a return to biological family structures. By the time the true villain is revealed – shortly after Nash and Innes dissolve their friendship – it is too late: the idyll of the school world, and the futures it allows, have been proven impossible to sustain, and Pym must hurry for the London train.

Reading Pym's and Mitchell's novels in connection with ideas of queer temporality suggests that the novel's endings are, perhaps, necessarily unsatisfying. Both novels raise the possibility of freedom only to see it diminished by a return to the mundane, heterosocial world. The engagement of minor characters in the final pages of both novels highlights this: neither novel has depicted a developing romance at any length, and yet characters must marry all the same, for this is the way of the world. The world of the school is placed outside of time – indeed, current events are so rarely mentioned that, with the exception of a few modern technologies, the stories could easily take place thirty years earlier – and yet time continues to intrude. Female, queer liberation can only exist within a novel, and yet cannot be sustained even there. They are works of cruel optimism in terms of both setting and structure. As Lauren Berlant defines the term, 'optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving' (Berlant 2). Because school life cannot continue, and because the detective novel must have both crime and resolution, the

sense of personal and collective freedom towards which the novels hint must be quashed. In Jackson's and Lindsay's novels, on the other hand, the dramatic rupturing of time, and the refusal to adhere to linear narrative, allows a far greater sense of personal freedom.

'Immeasurable by ordinary standards of time': Jackson and Lindsay

Shirley Jackson's *Hangsaman* operates as both a combination of genres and a contestation of generic norms. It includes elements of the campus novel and school story, the detective novel, the trauma text, and the ghost story, and has many scenes that simply defy categorisation. In few novels is the reader so continuously disorientated, reflecting the protagonist Natalie Waite's own inability to understand or contextualise her life. At the opening of the novel, 'at nine-thirty of a Sunday morning', the Waite family breakfast together but Natalie, who 'visit[s] strange countries', places herself in the milieu of Golden Age Crime:

Natalie, fascinated, was listening to the secret voice which followed her. It was the police detective and he spoke sharply, incisively, through the gentle movement of her mother's voice. 'How,' he asked pointedly, 'Miss Waite, *how* do you account for the gap in time between your visit to the rose garden and your discovery of the body?' (Jackson 4-5)

The intrusion of a crime scenario is initially disruptive: while the family, anchored in domestic space and emphasising patriarchal control, appears to reproduce a normative social structure, Natalie's envisioning of herself as potential murderer, and potential victim, over the following pages is chaotic and unintegrated. The novel immediately contrasts the oppressive elements of domestic space and time with Natalie's own mythic, folkloric, and intertextual imagination, which centres on gaps and absences. Later the same day she finds herself in conversation with an unnamed man, who talks

to her about literature and her future ambitions while her head is filled with the detective's interrogation and lines from the folk song 'Green Grow the Rushes, O':

'Come along,' the man told Natalie. 'This I intend to hear more about.'
'And the blood?' the detective said fiercely. 'What about the blood, Miss Waite? *How* do you account for the blood?'
'*One is one and all alone and evermore will be so.*'
'You will not escape this, the detective said. He dropped his voice and said, so quietly that she barely heard him, '*This* you will not escape.'
The strange man led Natalie away from the crowd on the lawn and across the grass. (40-41)

Natalie worries that the man is going to touch her, after which there is a break in the narrative, and Natalie wakes up the next morning, trying to convince herself that nothing happened. The man and the detective are not explicitly referred to again. As James Dobson writes, the interweaving of these elements can be read in terms of post-traumatic stress disorder and trauma: Natalie 'struggle[s] to exercise control over her own narrative' while removing herself from the realities of the domestic scene and repressing her sexual assault (Dobson 133).

As much the novel supports this reading, where the traumatic event in the woods, although never integrated into the novel, is the cause of Natalie's own fractured selfhood in the later sections, and can be linked to the appearance of Tony, Natalie's spectral friend/lover/other self, the intertextual allusions and literary structures can also be seen as a loss of control. Indeed, if the appearance of these tropes signals Natalie's response to trauma, it is notable that they begin not in relation to the strange man, but to her own father, whose psychological abuse of Natalie is made clear throughout the novel, while other forms of abuse are hinted at: it is, it seems, her father whom Natalie has murdered in her imagined scenario. Both the song and the detective framework, like later discussions of Tarot, Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and other references, introduce a notion of linear time and explanatory structure that Natalie cannot find in her own life. As Haffey writes,

‘within queer temporality, the moment is not merely “enough”; it is the opening to a future that is not yet decided’ (Haffey 62). Each moment of intertextual allusion gestures towards one of Natalie’s possible futures, but to choose any one of them would be to adapt herself to a pre-existing structure: instead, freedom consists of keeping all moments in play simultaneously, and refusing explanation. To read the story solely in terms of psychoanalytic explanation or trauma reinforces external authority, whereas Natalie is invested in trying to establish her own.

Natalie’s ontological freedom becomes more apparent when she makes a ‘new start’ at college (Jackson 50). Although the college is closely modelled on Bennington College, where Jackson’s husband Stanley Hyman taught, the early scenes are reminiscent of school stories as well: the rites of initiation, the high jinks – in particular a series of thefts for which Natalie may be responsible – and the moments of mass hysteria are a heightened form of the events found in girls’ stories of the previous generation. When Jackson revisited the same story six years later in ‘The Missing Girl’, she moved the setting to a girls’ summer camp (Dobson 127); the story is less about the rituals of university life than the divide between an apparently innocent homosocial world and an external world filled with threat. Caught between the arcane communal world of the students and the domestic miseries of her lecherous teacher Arthur Langdon and his younger wife Elizabeth, whose relationship mirrors that of Natalie’s parents, Natalie is poised between childhood and adulthood and finds neither satisfying. The solution arrives in the form of Tony, who seemingly emerges from Natalie’s diaries and letters home, where she wishes for a friend. Tony is witnessed by other characters, but does not consistently exist in any external reality. An early account of the novel by Jeanette H. Foster highlights the eeriness of its ‘references to [sexual] variance’ at the same time that it concludes that Tony is ‘only

the other half of [Natalie's] own split personality', and that the drama of the novel 'is that of an abnormally sensitive girls' narrow escape from schizophrenia' (Foster 332). Although Foster's reading is far more cautious than later critics, who are quicker to identify lesbian connotations (Newman 176), Foster's account enraged Jackson. Whether or not the relationship between the two figures can be construed as homosexual, however, its final resolution is certainly readable as queer.

In the novel's final section Tony and Natalie escape the college and go first to the local town, where they eat at a drugstore. Their embodiment is indeterminate – 'the one on the right *was* Natalie?' asks the narrator – despite the drugstore's devotion to 'nostrums for controlling the human body' (Jackson 186). Tony and Natalie fade in and out of existence, and in and out of each other. The girls engage in a free-flowing discussion ripe with literary and folkloric allusions, and appear to live in a world of their own, unbound by conventional society. They board a bus to an abandoned amusement park called Paradise Park, which Natalie believes is 'the reasonable consequence of all her life' (200): she is brought to the woods by Tony as a sacrificial victim, in a mythic re-enactment of her earlier assault in the woods by the unnamed man. Time, place, and character are all confused: Tony is present and absent, continually disappearing, while the setting is real and fantastical, both paradise and hell. Natalie, at the last, defies Tony, who disappears, and Natalie returns to the town, 'alone, and grown-up, and powerful, and not at all afraid' (218). While earlier critics approached the scene as one of thwarted lesbian seduction, it is more often read 'as Natalie's reintegration into the outside world, where she deals with the trauma of abuse and irrevocably rejects magic for adulthood' (Ingram 63). In this reading, *Hangsaman* can be seen as part of a tradition of women's writing that finds 'a correspondence in postmodern aesthetics and in the feminist habit of putting in

question the alphabet of accepted meanings and laws' (Curti 30). Natalie rejects every explanatory story, including those she has created, in order to emerge in a new form of freedom: her embrace of, and challenge to, textual and social structures allows her to find her own voice.

As Ingram and others recognise, the story remains ambiguous: the final scene of Natalie standing on a bridge in a moment of self-realisation is interpretable as a suicide, while if Tony is part of Natalie, as most critics now read the story, then Natalie's defeat of Tony cannot easily be seen as a repudiation of the external, patriarchal, traumatic world. Indeed while Natalie believes she 'had defeated her own enemy' (Jackson 215), her final words to Tony are a plea for Tony to return, which Tony does not answer: Natalie is victorious only in abandonment. The novel's conclusion can be seen not as resolution, but as a way of embracing rupture. As Ahmed writes, '[t]o revolt is to be undone – it is not to reproduce an inheritance' (Ahmed, *Promise* 197). Natalie's revolt against patriarchal and textual authority, against misogyny and abuse, and against her own self does not lead to a familiar sense of linear progression, as might be found in a more traditional *bildungsroman*, but to the freedom that is found when one is no longer subservient to external forms of interpretation. Given Natalie's father's fondness for Freud, her revolt can be related to Catherine Clément's reading of Freud and Breuer's case studies, where the therapeutic uncovering of a story of early seduction becomes itself a form of seduction that emphasises the 'gap between the real and the fictive' (Cixous and Clément 46). Natalie's emergence from the mythical wood, itself a lost Eden, becomes a way of refusing interpretation, including her own self-interpretation. Natalie's final act is to refuse integration or explanation: rather than offering a linear resolution, Jackson implies that true resolution, true selfhood, is only possible when

an anachronistic, chaotic, unexplained temporality is embraced by the self. Natalie is not afraid not because she has rejected her past, or because she has, in re-enacting her trauma, resolved it, but because she no longer requires explanation.

As Muñoz concludes *Cruising Utopia*, however, '[i]ndividual transports are insufficient. We need to engage in a collective temporal distortion' (Muñoz 185). Few novels have portrayed a collective temporal distortion, and refusal of all explanation, as successfully as Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, which depicts the mysterious and unresolved disappearance of students and staff from Mrs Appleyard's College for Young Ladies. From its opening pages, the novel combines historical precision with a claim to its irrelevance. The opening disclaimer reads:

Whether *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is fact or fiction, my readers must decide for themselves. As the fateful picnic took place in the year nineteen hundred, and all the characters who appear in this book are long since dead, it hardly seems important. (Lindsay, n.p.)

Victoria Stewart has drawn attention to the narrative similarities between fictional and factual crime writing in the interwar period; in setting her novel in a particular but distant past, Lindsay collapses such distinctions entirely. Her work might be thought of in relation to the notion of the 'perfect' crime that 'links factual and fictional representations of crime' in order to raise 'the possibility of such hidden, invisible crime in the world beyond the text' (Stewart 101); indeed, the 'crime' is so perfect that readers may be unsure that any crime takes place. If there is a crime, perhaps, it is in the students' refusal to submit to linear conceptions of time and, like Natalie Waite, to adhere to any clear separation between fact and fiction.

From the opening pages the novel is bound in time and place, a 'shimmering summer morning' on Valentine's Day, where the boarders 'had been up and scanning the bright unclouded sky since six o'clock' (Lindsay 1). The world of the girls' college is exceedingly normative, so much so that Lindsay clarifies that, despite the

girls' excitement, there is no possibility of same-sex attraction. Whereas in Tey's novel the boarding school is separated from the world of metropolitan society, however, in Lindsay's the separation is between human and non-human worlds. The human world of the picnic, with its 'chicken pie, angel cake, jellies and tepid bananas', is tawdry in comparison to the 'unheard rustlings and twitterings, scufflings, scratchings, the light brush of unseen wings' in the forest surrounding the students (15-16). The chrononormative human world falters in comparison to the 'outcrops of prehistoric rock and giant boulders [that] forced their way to the surface above layers of rotting vegetation and animal decay' (75). Hanging Rock is not a pastoral idyll, but a universe that operates on its own temporal logic, oblivious to human demands. As Lindsay writes:

There is no single instant on this spinning globe that is not, for millions of individuals, immeasurable by ordinary standards of time: a fragment of eternity forever unrelated to the calendar or the striking clock. (120)

While such sentiments are familiar from the Modernist writings of Woolf and Bergson, here they take on a particular narrative power. The violence in the novel is not only between humans, but even more between competing conceptualisations of time. Normative human temporality, as measured externally, cannot peacefully exist with either experiential temporality or the temporality of non-human others. The easiest explanation for the disappearance at the heart of the novel, where two students and a teacher simply never return from the picnic, and are never heard from again, is that the missing characters have abandoned human time altogether.

Lindsay repeatedly emphasises the inability of traditional generic norms to encompass the events of the novel, and in particular the non-event at its centre. Although journalists term the case 'the College Mystery' (196), there is no crime, no body, and no detective. Instead, as Lindsay writes in explicitly self-reflexive passages,

there is a pattern. ‘In the previous chapter we witnessed a segment of the pattern begun at Hanging Rock literally burning itself out’, she writes, while characters are dismissed as ‘only minor threads in the pattern of the College Mystery’ (156, 165). The pattern is opaque: what matters is that it supersedes other literary and social ideas of progression. Unlike the texts discussed above, there are few depictions of school activities, while the investigation is fractured and inconclusive. Lindsay employs the setting of the school story, and the form of the detective novel, to entirely upend them: the story surpasses ideas of fact and fiction to indicate that there is something faulty in human conceptions of time.

Although the novel is famed for its ambiguity, an initially withheld final chapter, published on its own twenty years later, does offer some very peculiar explanations, including an alien monolith and the transformation of the girls into strange creatures that scuttle under the ground. The opening of the chapter, however, clarifies Lindsay’s approach to time:

It is happening now. As it has been happening ever since Edith Horton ran stumbling and screaming towards the plain. As it will go on happening until the end of time. The scene is never varied by so much as a falling of a leaf or the flight of a bird. To the four people on the Rock it is always acted out in the tepid twilight of a present without a past. Their joys and agonies are forever new. (Lindsay, *Secret* 13).

This sense of a continual present is emphasised in the 2018 Australian television adaptation, where flashbacks to the girls’ disappearance frequently reappear in increasingly distorted fashion, while Mrs Appleyard’s suicide at the story’s end possibly serves as a catalyst for the original disappearance. The disappearance is present and absent; it is all times and no times. While the television adaptation implies that the disappearance is inevitable because there is no space for female freedom in the external world, in Lindsay’s novel there is not even that explanation: there is simply disappearance. Yet Lindsay’s very refusal to ground the novel in any certainty

can be seen as the further extension of the queer revolt found in each of the novels discussed above. As Ahmed clarifies, ‘queer lives are about the potentiality of not following certain conventional scripts of family, inheritance, and child rearing, whereby “not following” involves disorientation: it makes things oblique’ (Ahmed, *Queer* 178). This oblique disorientation becomes a space for freedom from generic and social norms. In each of the novels, characters are distinguished by their failure to be integrated into the world of linear time, and of heteronormative relations. Combining these generic forms highlights the arbitrary qualities of conventional narratives.

Conclusion

Early in *Gaudy Night* an irritating minor character tells the detective novelist Harriet Vane that she

suppose[s] all mystery-writers must feel a strong personal interest in clocks, as so many alibis turned upon clocks and time-signals. There had been a curious incident one day at the school where she taught; it would, she thought, make a splendid plot for a detective-story, for anybody who was clever enough to work such things out. (Sayers 18)

Vane immediately dismisses the possibility. Yet while Sayers’s own novel largely hinges on establishing new possibilities for heterosexual relations, despite critical interpretations that see its deconstruction of gender and sexuality as potentially queer (McFadden 356), the combination of school stories and linear temporality acts as a catalyst for these later writers. While Jackson’s portrayal of Natalie Waite specifically echoes Sayers’s depiction of Miss Newland, an overwrought scholarship student who is briefly considered as being responsible for the series of thefts, cruel letters, and wanton destruction that occupy most of the novel, until her eventual suicide attempt and subsequent disappearance from the narrative, all four novelists are particularly

concerned with what, or whom, is left out of both the classic detective story and the school story. They make space for the queer, the contingent, and the unexplained.

The enduring appeal of school stories is their microcosmic presentation of an orderly world. In Tey's novel especially, that world has a clear promise: it is more knowable than the outside world, and can foster homosocial friendships and intimacies that all parties value. Like the classic detective story, the school story depends on the existence of a community that is, at heart, innocent. Yet for all four novelists, integration with the outside world is almost inevitable. The only way to resist it is to leave time and structure behind and embrace the rupture at the heart of queer becoming. This libratory refusal might be momentary and individual, or collective and permanent, but in each case demonstrates that the demands of time, with its repeated insistence of progressive, reproductive futurity, can still be resisted. There may be no permanent safe haven from the heteronormative world, but the combination of narrative forms allows for a productive confusion and a sense of libratory possibility.

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