The University of Melbourne

Bridget Haylock

Emerging from Entrapment: Sue Woolfe's modern Gothic *Painted Woman*

Abstract:

In this article, I examine the Gothic generic, narrative and conceptual strategies Sue Woolfe uses to describe creative emergence from the effects of intergenerational trauma and the impact on modalities of subjectivity in *Painted Woman* (1990), a tale of incest and disavowed artistry. The deployment of the Gothic subverts expectations of power relations, engenders the development of new paradigmatic writing forms, and shows the presence/lack of agency from within the traumatic space. Woolfe reframes embodied experience through experimentation with assumptions around signifying practices, generates radical language through which to testify to trauma and suggest that from abjective experience, empowerment and transformation are not only possible, but also essential.

Biographical Note:

Dr Bridget Haylock is a writer who holds a PhD in Creative Writing from The University of Melbourne, which examines the literary representation of post-traumatic creative emergence through a critical feminist analysis of selected Australian women's novels, *Women Writing Traumatic Times,* and a creative exploration in *The Saltbush Thing.* Her current research interests include writing for performance, twentieth and twenty-first century women's literature, trauma studies, literary studies, and creative writing as research practice. Recent publication of critical work includes: *Hecate* (2015), *"The Strangled Cry": The Communication and Experience of Trauma* (2013), *Voicing Trauma & Truth: Narratives of Disruption & Transformation* (2013), I*s this a Culture of Trauma?* (2012), and *Traumatic Imprints: Performance, Art, Literature and Theoretical Practice* (2011). She co-edited *Traumatic Imprints: Performance, Art, Literature and Theoretical Practice* (2011) and is co-editor of *TEXT Journal* Special Issue: 'Writing Trauma'.

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Creative Writing – Trauma – Feminine Gothic – Female embodiment – Creative emergence

'I paint the story of my longing, my waiting, on the stairs and the stairwell wall and the stairwell ceiling and, step by step, at last I gain his studio' (Woolfe 1989: 213).

Introduction

Here, I critically examine Sue Woolfe's *Painted Woman* (1990), particularly the feminine Gothic sensibilities, and how the protagonist's traumatic constitution advances Woolfe's argument for feminist intervention in the sociosymbolic order. Her work describes incest and gynecide; it interrogates the role of the artist within society, and demonstrates that an empowering outcome of the creative practice of artmaking is emergence from a traumatic paradigm. The novel elucidates through its themes, syntax and narratology creative emergence, and posits a future wherein the heroine defies gynecidal suppression and wilfully enacts desire. Allowing her creativity to flourish performs many functions for a woman: a realisation of subjecthood, a declaration of artistic agency and a painting in of the artist's life through an uncompromising disruption of a deadly regime of phallocratic power. In the narrative Woolfe conceives a conversion of the painted, slain and objectified woman into the artist as active subject of her own gaze.

Frances, abused daughter of a violent male artist who murders his artist wife and subjugates his daughter, is the narrator of *Painted Woman*. The novel was inspired by a real life newspaper article: after acquitting a man of a murder involving family violence, a (presumably male) judge said any man could kill his wife in bed at the moment of passion. Woolfe adds that such an acquittal is 'not uncommon' (Preface). In *Painted Woman*, she explores intra-familial dynamics by thematically utilising Shuli Barzilai's *Bluebeard Syndrome*, and Griselda Pollock's *Homme Fatal* tradition (Barzilai 2005; Pollock 2009). Like Angela Carter in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), and Tracy Ryan in *Bluebeard in Drag* (1996), Woolfe reverses the 'cultural mytheme of the femme fatale', exemplified in Charles Perrault's pre-Gothic *La Barbe Bleu* (1697), reworking it from a feminist perspective: her painting women are victims of dangerous masculinity (Pollock: xxviii).

Woolfe enlists the radical feminine Gothic corresponding with Kate Ferguson Ellis's argument that in the Gothic 'the safety of the home is *not* a given, nor can it ever be considered permanently achieved. At best it must be restored by women's *activity*' (xvi). Additional narratological devices employed mirror tales from pre-seventeenth century European oral traditions wherein 'the girl is the heroine ... she is resourceful and independent and defeats the evildoer alone' (Anderson: 7). Woolfe's key themes: violence, incest, female subjugation, denial of feminine subjectivity and creativity, and questioning the right to artistic production, are not new to traumatic female experience. *Painted Woman* makes a sound case for intervention; the contemporary Australian setting wherein women are accorded significant freedom, especially the ultimate death of the patriarch, uphold the imperative that woman self-signify.

Painted Woman is written as Self Portraits One, Two and Three, highlighting aspects of woman's experience, the *self-portrait*, instead of an imposed portrayal. They show the trauma that results from masculine violence attempting to repress feminine energy and progressive liberation as desire contests definition and enacts expression. Ellis argues the feminine Gothic novel can be 'distinguished by the presence of houses in which people are locked in and locked out. They are concerned with violence done to familial bonds that is frequently directed against women' (3). The first two sections of *Painted Woman* closely mirror a traditional romantic Gothic plot. The first depicts Frances' early life where she is imprisoned by an 'emphasis on the returning past'and the repetitive trauma of family violence in her abusive father's remote house in the Blue Mountains (Spooner & McEvoy 2007: 1). This mise-en-scène suggests

Australian Gothic tropes, where landscape is endowed as a place of 'enclosure and entrapment' (Gelder 2007: 122). It alludes to early female-authored works, such as Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's novella, *Mathilda* (1820), a story of incest and suicide.[(1)] The isolated domestic space conceals the secret of Frances' mother's death, wherein she 'must confront the ... violence in the fortress-home of her [father], which is itself an allegory for a modern, anxious masculinity' (Pollock: xxii).

The second section introduces suitor, Tim, promising Frances freedom from tyranny. Ellis argues it is in the choice of spouse that 'the rebellion of Gothic children is confined' (4). Woolfe subverts this conventional resolution to the Gothic plot: Frances declines matrimony and becomes her father's amanuensis, as Shelley was before she married Percy Bysshe Shelley. Frances' flight from the altar is a 'journey to another gendered role traditionally occupied over the centuries by talented daughters', symbolising the control over his daughter that the father in Woolfe's narrative wields (Bartlett: 142).

While the third section aligns with parodies of feminine Gothic, such as Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), *Painted Woman* is no satire; it embraces aspects of early oral stories wherein the heroine reveals her fortitude and contravention of the Bluebeard narrative. Here, the woman transgresses the prohibition of ascending to the artist's studio. Creativity allows the subject to re-associate with herself. She is compelled to admit her own desire, resistance and agency emerges: empowered, she embraces her artistic self.

Frances could be overwhelmed by traumatic memory, but with her father's death her choice is clear: either continue silenced like her mother or seize autonomy and oppose the prescribed role. As Alison Milbank attests, 'Gothic heroines always cause the downfall of the patriarchal figures or institutions that seek to entrap them, and their fears are never merely imagined' (155). Frances does not kill her father, but her preference threatens the status quo and Woolfe subverts the Gothic romance plot from a female-centred perspective.

Self Portrait One: the gynecidal silencing of incest

'Father the artist' dominates Frances via an un-narrativised incestuous relationship that she contains in 'The Gap', Cathy Caruth's aporia, an inaccessible traumatic memory, 'because the mind cannot confront the possibility of its death directly' (1993: 25). Frances is 'enchanted, though it's hard to pin down exactly what with'; repressed trauma bewitches expression (Woolfe: 20).

Frances describes home as 'purple and blue like fear', wherein Bluebeard, the male artist, threatens violence, 'his teeth flaring like a saw's edge' (Woolfe: 38, 3). She expects brutality, 'his arm is above me. I'm thinking he may hit me the way he hits my mother' (3); Frances exists in a Gothic atmosphere, scared to move because 'he might not know I'm here' (3). Conflation of art/violence represses longing, consequent anxiety excises creativity. Father paints a blue bow; Frances thinks the painting is of mother, then herself.

Barbara Bolt argues that within Cartesian representation, 'there is an assumption of a gap between the thing or referent and its representation ... [which] stands in the place of the absent object' (16). In the symbolic order, women are instructed to present a masculine-defined femininity. The blue bow is gendered masculine, and the knot: the feminine tied and tongue-tied to masculinist representation. Frances identifies with his

strength rather than replicating mother's foreclosed, male-gaze-defined weakness: femininity. The daughter witnesses her victimised mother: 'I reel in her screams, that she should be so exposed, and when we fall down, I fall down with her', powerless to intervene 'and all I can do is watch' as her silent mother falls 'decorously' even if 'the material of her dress shrieked in his hands' as she 'noisily' falls (9; 3).

Frances describes how she pulls her 'skirt tightly over my crouched knees, because if I'm knocked over I must not show my panties' (3). As Herman argues 'the mother in the incestuous family [is] unusually oppressed', her clothing screams her defiance and her oppositional silence betrays ironic compliance (1981: 49). The realisation of the gap may not kill the feminine. She can survive in the symbolic by aligning with the masculine-prescribed role—the mother dismisses a bruise as the husband/artist's passion—otherwise she must fight for autonomy. Frances feels 'The Gap', when denied agency, her mother shows a never-worn dress, and reveals herself 'for such a short time' before receding from violence-induced trauma (Woolfe: 14). Paradoxically, mature Frances speaks of 'the dreaded, awesome distance' between 'the breast and me' that she also includes in 'The Gap' (Woolfe: 5). She longs to go beyond that it close behind and she might find herself or her mother within.

With her father, Frances forgets 'The Gap' and identifies with him, 'I put my hands behind my back like he does. I make my knuckles white like his' (16). Michelle Massé argues 'some characters do not survive recognition of the gap between experience and gender ideology' (41). 'The Gap' represents many things for Frances: female identity as the absent mother, the atrocity of the murder, and her own abuse. It is also the psychic 'crypt' within that holds inherited, foreclosed traumatic female experience. Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok theorise this as like a black hole in a subject's psyche that can only be approached obliquely as in nightmares and flashbacks (141).

Mature Frances sees 'tension between art and violence' and links her father's behaviour with his identity as knowledgeable artist (Woolfe 20). After the father/artist finishes painting he 'drains the brush, lays it carefully across the top of the pot, wipes his hands on his trousers, comes towards me' (Woolfe: 5). The daughter cannot gauge his behaviour, 'I stand to take the blow' (5). The female object can masquerade as masculine or acquiesce to masculine desire, even if it transgresses taboo. 'It hurts but he's kissing me, my father's lips are kissing me, pushing onto my lips' the dominant male terrorises the females into being (sexually) available (5). He controls them:

> there are many things woman must and must not be … she must never speak until the men in the room have their say … a woman must be an audience … she must never compete. (48)

His behaviour becomes unpredictable, he seduces his daughter until 'the knot in [her] stomach unties … and not a tear shed for [her] mother' (5). This 'knot' repeats the image of the more 'decorous bow', here silently somatised. Frances becomes complicit in her own imprisonment. Pollock accords the Gothic house as representing a phallic fortress, 'untamed and brutal, and selfish, a kind of primitive ego', the mirror of the masculine psyche, it houses evidence of sadistic sexual violence (Pollock: 111). Herman asserts 'perpetrators of domestic battery demand that their victims prove complete obedience and loyalty by sacrificing all other relationships' (1981: 76).

Reluctant participant, the mother stitches crosses of 'abnegation' on doilies, her inevitable death becomes the only resistance possible as each cross-stitch indicts from the grave and signifies uncanny Gothic repetition compulsion of being trapped by

trauma (Woolfe: 31). Frances seeks connection with her broken mother who concedes that washing and love are all a woman has; death is the only respectable exit 'whatever else, she's hoped for' (9). The husband/father's violence compromises the mother/daughter bond and the female genealogy lesson transmitted is of survival in the masculine world through personal subjugation, attachment and capitulation to a man. Or the fatal Gothic alternative.

To survive, Frances' mother emotionally withdraws, evident in her detachment. By necessity Frances identifies with her father as he offers the self-esteem that her mother cannot. As she says '[b]eauty is all a woman needs … [i]t takes pains to be pretty' (7). Alluding to Herman's contention that conventional femininity necessitates the schooling of females 'in the complicated art of pleasing a man and knowing virtually nothing about how to please themselves' (1981: 118). Frances counters that looks do not matter: her femininity is foreclosed. She refuses identification with her abject mother, 'No … I'm not like Mum' knowledge is paramount (Woolfe: 11). 'On the other hand, Mum knows nothing' useful for Frances negotiating the symbolic world (16). The mother promises 'we'll go away, she says. Somewhere he can't follow', but Frances refuses, '[n]o! I yell'–she would lose the identity fostered through dysfunctional connection with her father (Woolfe: 12).

Her paternal Aunt disappoints Frances saying that love is not important for men '[i]t's different for men. He looks to God, a woman looks to God in him' in the traditional family, husbands expect obedience from wives (10). Frances aligns with Auntie '[w]e are both his queens' as they serve the man (13). The Auntie warns against transgression:

> A man's daughter ran away from him, she tried to escape in a boat but she drowned.
>
> The waters wild
>
> Went o'er his child
>
> And he was left lamenting.
>
> My daughter, O, my daughter.
>
> I watch the O of her mouth. O my daughter. My father's lips would make the same sad shape if I went away with Mum. O my daughter. I hurt with the pain he'd suffer (13).

One of two Gothically-inspired supernatural invocations occurs early in the novel when Frances creates a magical drawing of twenty oval faces—her mother's. 'There were circles, twenty circles, all over a page. I drew twenty faces' (97). The father teaches Frances to draw oval faces, which Woolfe violently signifies as 'gashes for eyes, nostrils, lips. The gash for the lips just a little longer' (18). Frances wishes her mother dead so she might attract her father's knowledge, desire, and gaze, and reduces her to 'a corpse like a cage with the animal gone' (97).

Frances' father wants her to know what is useful, which she interprets as 'what's important'; he says love isn't important (15). The mother's artistic desire is thwarted, her husband murders her and destroys her work, 'in the gunpowder night, paintings begin to explode' (32). Judith Herman argues 'maternal absence … is always found in the background of the incest romance' (1981: 44). Frances cannot conceive being separate from her unthinkable mother. Amber Jacobs contends the mother/daughter relationship is characterised by 'collapsed identifications, lack of boundaries, and murderous and suicidal fantasies deriving from primitive anxieties about engulfment

inside the mother and separation from her' (2007: 175). Frances denies herself agency, her mother is absent, so without a role model, and unable to self-signify, expression in the symbolic world is fraught.

As Alison Bartlett argues, Frances rejects female identification to align with her father, the only way that she may have 'agency in his highly desirable world' (134). Frances rejects her abject mother to form an identity with her father, 'we killed Mum together'—she identifies with the artist/god, her abuser and saviour (Woolfe: 33). The effect of the repeated experience of terror and reprieve Herman argues:

> may result in a feeling of intense, almost worshipful dependence upon an all-powerful, godlike authority. The victim may live in terror of his wrath, but she may also view him as the source of strength, guidance and life itself. (1992: 92)

Eva Figes contends that the traditional Gothic heroine's condition illustrates the powerlessness of her abused state and offers 'a dark world of the psyche in which women were the imprisoned victims of men' (57). This scenario enables the Gothic mode to become 'an imaginative vehicle for feminism', positing a different view of the societal position of women (57). The heroine is submitted to humiliation, domination, terror or physical violence—which Massé argues is all 'in the name of love' (1). Traumatic experience is a Gothic mode of being: the subject is imprisoned in internal terror, the cause of the originary traumatic experience may be external, but the subject's own mechanisms may perpetuate trauma, the engendering of woman for example. Massé argues that Gothic repetition functions like other psychic traumas, where 'the reactivation of trauma is an attempt to recognize, not relish the incredible and unspeakable that nonetheless happened' (12).

At Frances' school 'the tic started'; a traumatic memory surfaces when she is instructed to draw home (Woolfe: 37). As she holds the black crayon she finds:

> the black inside … but as it rushes out it's so voluptuous I feel its taste, smell, the space it takes up, I'm dragging out more blackness as it drags at me, that night when secrets and bones collided, the stench of it, the rotting. (39)

Memory is encrypted somatically, here the sense memory of her mother's death arises, which Frances has incorrectly encoded as 'Dad and me, murdering Mum' (39). The drawing enrages her father who beats Frances until she 'can still hear the red grinding' (40). She wakes to bedside toast and tea, the same apologetic ritual he enacted with the mother. He terrifyingly conflates the mother and daughter, '[a] good woman is a helpmate and a friend, he says into my ear. And a companion' as Frances acquiesces 'I will be all these things, I promise' (50).

Confronted with her mother's body, Frances draws the profile through her father's gaze. Detached from the reality that her mother is dead, she thinks she has caused it. This speaks to Kristeva's matricidal theory: 'the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity' so that in order to become subjects within a patriarchal culture, the maternal body must be abjected (1989: 27). It is problematic for women to abject the maternal body with which they identify. Kristeva contends a depressive sexuality results as women are conflicted by rejecting themselves, 'in order to protect mother, I kill myself' (28).

As women in the sociosymbolic order have no intrinsic value, Jacobs argues that 'the dominant (patriarchal) symbolic order is founded on the exclusion of the subject position of the mother … and the foreclosure of the symbolically meditated mother-daughter relation' (2007: 6). Woolfe illustrates this schism in female relationships

when Frances says, '[i]t's the maddening sense that something is being withheld. Like the words Mum didn't say. The withholding silence' (Woolfe: 6). Within this paradigm there is collusion as her father's sister, Auntie, repeats, 'there are some things best not seen … and if you do see them, they're best not said' (32).

Woolfe creates the sublime horror of this narrative with short sentences and the juxtaposition of banal and dark imagery. Frances washes her hands, 'making the soap into gloves, and washing them off'; her father enters the bathroom, his hand is puffy and purple, it 'twists like a painting twists in searing heat' (33). She wears white gloves she could 'flaunt at a ball', but like a grotesque Francis Bacon image, he has an 'animal hand' (33). Into the silence between them that together they killed, Frances's 'voice that is not quite mine' says '[t]he soup will be ready by now' (33). Woolfe describes, 'the township where there are lights and people drinking tea and chatting' and in the very next sentence Frances asks her Aunt '[w]ill he kill us?' (30). Frances unites with her father so he can neither leave nor hurt her as they both 'did it'; thus assured, she jumps between sunshine and shadows among the wild flowers that spray pollen on her (29).

Frances represses the truth and believes she can depend on her father for sustenance. They move to the city where he hopes for artistic success and she goes to school, where she encounters sexual violence, perpetrated by young, well-engendered males. Frances experiences menarche and as taught by her father, denies she is embodied as female. Auntie living in denial of her own feminine power tells her that women's status is negligible and that her mother wished for more. Auntie, disappointed by the treatment from her brother, disturbs the world that Frances has constructed to be able to cope with 'The Gap'. 'You know your father killed your mother' she says to her niece, who 'struggles' to repress the eruption threatening from within (98). Frances counters the threat by asserting that her father 'didn't do it alone' (98). The fragility of Frances's worldview goes unheeded, she is too young to understand as the aunt presses on with the truth, explaining that the girl's mother 'wanted to go off and remember who she was' (99). Frances argues that her mother 'knew she had to stay', she refuses to hear her father denigrated and leaves her aunt to go back to her father despite warnings about his view of women, 'me, your mother, you. That's how your father sees us. The ground to blast off from' (101). Daughters involved in an incestuous family romance are often compelled to adopt a 'little mother' role; so whilst the father's behaviour is dominant, this can screen an immature personality that the daughter then 'parents'.

This section ends with Frances longing to paint. She returns to her father, saying '[h]e needed understanding. It was enough that I was near him. It had to be. Or else my mother would have died for nothing' (101). She knows that by staying she is honouring her mother and ensuring her own survival.

Self Portrait Two: **(un)acceptable sociocultural options**

This section describes Frances' silence, '*where words can't reach*' how she is muted by trauma that signifies itself through silence. Massé contends that the Gothic heroine is a female masochist, absent from her own subjectivity, whose predicament revolves around a controlling male character. She argues against a binary analysis, which would cite woman herself or an other as the exclusive cause of her powerlessness (Massé: 44). Frances grows into a woman in a town that remembers her as 'the

murderer's daughter' (Woolfe: 106). She has to 'walk far away where words can't reach … the sand is too hard for footprints' (106). This is a re-erasure, a privileging of her father's desire over her own. She is invisible to herself and the truth is too traumatic. Kristeva argues that lack of speech denotes a process of: '"learned helplessness," ... when all escape routes are blocked ... [wo]men learn to withdraw rather than flee or fight' (1989: 34). As her father withdraws, Frances matures, ignorant of her own desire and enslaved in domesticity. She says 'we live this dreadful li[f]e, pretending all that concerns us is that the tea towels dry ... we postpone that other voice, the voice from inside that orders: now' (105).

Frances repeats throughout the novel, 'my purpose is the rooms of my father's house' that any change 'would be too difficult' (107, 110). Massé contends that 'masochism is a reification of early trauma in which pain becomes associated with pleasure' (43). Masochism registers the paradoxical relations between women and culture brought about by early, continuing trauma, and is an adaptation to a circumscribed life. Frances lives for the luminous moments when her father acknowledges her. His overt physical violation of his daughter ceases as she matures. She muses, 'perhaps it was I that changed, that when he turned around, there was no one there' (Woolfe: 144). His treatment of her has meant that Frances is so identified with her father that her own subjectivity is suffocated.

Woolfe writes of the importance of words to delineate a life. The paintings of the mature Frances 'have many open mouths ... that terrifying moment before the words are hurled out', conditioned as she is to the unpredictability of her father's utterances (106). They make her feel incandescent, abandoned or terrified, as were Auntie and her mother, or abject: 'words, they disgorge death now' (107). Woolfe alludes to the constitution of subjectivity through words. Her textual practice is replete with reference to representation and the language for that articulation. Silence and words emerge speaking truth from the semiotic realm. Woolfe questions whether words are enough of a language for the feminine experience of the symbolic and asks, by extension, whose language is being expressed? The father's language is not Frances': she needs other words for her different experience. Woolfe asserts that female language is different from male language, but it is foreclosed and is a condition of the social contract that must be disavowed.

This accords with Laura Mulvey's argument that under patriarchy woman is rendered mute and masculine language symbolises domination. Mulvey exposes the problem when she asks 'how [is a woman] to fight the unconscious structured like a language ... while still caught within the language of patriarchy [?]' (834). This contention is not new to feminist argument and continues to be relevant to contemporary female experience, but because so rooted within culture, desire for autonomous expression is inaudible. Each generation of women face the same obstacle, as Elaine Showalter observes in 'the recurrence of certain patterns, themes, problems and images from generation to generation' (11), but are offered the choice to tolerate or to challenge.

The mature artist Frances describes a painting that symbolises truth and life. When young, on her weekly walk to the butcher, she overhears a man say to his students, *'[t]here's certainly life in outer space'* (Woolfe: 105). The teacher, Tim, and Frances begin a clandestine sexual relationship, within which she has a chance to escape her isolated traumatised life. He offers a new vocabulary and a chance to define herself with him. Their courtship is enacted through the exchange of written notes—words—handled by the butcher, who 'knows about flesh', as a cipher for patriarchal gender

relations in a mediation he makes the word flesh (113). Carter alludes to a similar theme in the short story 'The Erl King' from *The Bloody Chamber*, where the predator is described as the 'tender butcher' (1979: 87). Frances realises later that Tim 'often uses unnecessary words, but kind' ones (Woolfe: 108). As she has been made mute by trauma, her words are untrustworthy; they betray, 'as usual there were no words to explain' (118). Frances believes her father will forbid her to see another man, so she masochistically polices her own imprisonment.

When Tim professes love, Frances denies her female identity. She reveals foreclosure from sexual love for which she has no language: 'love doesn't matter to me' (125). She has aligned herself with her father from an early age to survive, which means repression of an emotional life. Its release would necessitate alignment with her mother and hence acknowledging the murder at Frances's father's hands. The traumatic return would threaten Frances's existence in her father's world. 'I feel into that space inside me, that history of me I can't touch', for that would transgress the law of the father (137).

Tim, as subversive, enabling character, urges Frances to embrace her own creativity, but suppressed and ignorant of her female power she says, 'I feel I have to wait for permission' (131). He, being male, knows the power wielded by the law of the father, 'your father will never give you permission', he will not grant the words she needs (131). Power is recognised as held by those it subjugates. Frances thinks it would take all her energy to challenge her father, 'if I conjured up the bravery without him, from where I don't know ... there might be none of me left over for anything else' (131). She exemplifies the silenced, fearful woman: successful product of patriarchal Gothic dominance. Tim is a man who questions the power wielded by those more domineering. In his declaration of love he shows he is capable of empathy with her trauma and offers to facilitate her creative emergence. He buys her art materials. She creates one work, but feels fraudulent, 'it rebukes me with my temerity', so she hides it (135). Personal expression threatens with the horror it must reveal, it is Woolfe who gives herself words to enable Frances' expression.

From the position of trauma and the often-accompanying masochism, as Massé asserts, 'the aim is not to deny or resist the self-destructive aims of gender ideology but to close the gap between self and dominant other ... by full merger' (43). Frances identifies strongly with her oppressor so the deterioration of her ego affects her dealings with others. Tim offers a new understanding of her place in the world, but she rejects this, 'I can't be an Us with you ... I merge with my past ... all I can hope is that I'll merge with Dad' (137).

The shop assistant where Frances buys light bulbs enlightens her about her artist mother: 'everything around us is fierce with light' (121). It is the female characters in *Painted Woman* who, while Frances mistrusts them, articulate feminine truth. 'I'll ask Auntie about Mum', she tells herself, but Auntie dies before Frances can get past being preoccupied with the men who distract her from verifying her feminine heritage (121). Identification with her father forecloses the privilege of autonomous speech. She cannot ask him directly for his opinion of her mother's work as their communication is entirely on his terms. A traumatised subject can reclaim memories and emerge from the trauma if provided with access to safety. It is with Tim, in her deceased Aunt's house within the matrix of her aunt's erasure from agency and subjecthood in her own life, that Frances recognises 'at last that he killed her ... he killed my mother'; before the memory recedes once more to The Gap (132).

With the first note from Tim—'this passport'—Frances has the opportunity to flee the traumatic repetition of her prison home through the traditional Gothic escape route—marriage (114). She eventually rejects a reprisal of this feminine role, mindful as Adrienne Rich writes, that traditionally 'within wedlock, women have been legally powerless to prevent their husbands' use of their bodies' and colonisation of their minds (Rich: 1986 260). Frances flees the altar. She rejects her sexuality to remain subjugated by her father when he tempts her with an amanuensis/housekeeper role. Thus does the novel's politics make it transgress the generic convention exemplified in the romantic Gothic. With Woolfe's Künstlerinromanesque intervention, the Gothic is subverted to explore how woman is subjugated in marriage and tricked into submission.

Being her father's amanuensis was a traditional path for a female artist from an artistic family. Germaine Greer writes of daughters in similar circumstances, for 'however much her talent for painting might be valued, her other contributions to the nurturing activities of the family were deemed more important'; and that many women painters, being more praised for their virtue than their talent, 'devalued their talent accordingly' (Greer: 2001 14). Women are taught to be self-destructive and in female artists' work she finds evidence of ignorance and dependency upon men. What Greer sees in women's painting is a cipher to their world, 'the impoverishment of the oppressed personality, the sterile archetypes of self-censorship, the grimace of narcissistic introversion or the occasional flicker of rebellion in its latent content' (7). Departing from Greer, Woolfe presents women painting as radical. Although Frances follows her father's instruction, her effort to please is a survival strategy and she does not challenge the role. It is through the act of painting that she finds a semblance of agency and can enact her rebellion. Frances strays 'outside the lines', and invites her father's censure, but rather than stall her progress this serves to incite her desire.

As Pollock asserts, in rejecting marriage the Gothic heroine exhibits those moral qualities deemed disobedient by a patriarchal culture, but essential for subjecthood, 'decision, risk-taking, the search for knowledge as confirmation that the person is a subject not an object or a mere body for use and exploitation' (Pollock: 110). Pollock elaborates on Lévi-Strauss's discussion of kinship systems. She shows how men's relationships are centred round their exchange of property, specifically women, who are denied subjectivity and agency. She argues that 'the compliance of women is necessary to the stability of masculinity' (Pollock: 129).

This second section ends as Frances flees the wedding. She is so enmeshed that as she moves towards the altar she is moving '[a]way from my hope, my incandescent father. Towards an ordinary life, towards The Gap' (Woolfe: 151). She cannot countenance this for it would mean self-annihilation, as Massé argues: '[m]asochism, the learned behaviour of the oppressed, cannot be ... easily sloughed off even should such a utopian opportunity present itself' (45). It is a coping strategy to defend the internalised ego and modification is painfully slow. Mature Frances paints a transparent bride running, and 'for a moment the transparency is noisy, shouting as she hurls herself into the haze of light'; she has found a voice previously concealed (Woolfe: 151). By agreeing to become his amanuensis, Frances achieves her father's acknowledgement that she exists: he grants her a role in his artmaking; which for her is a lifeline.

Self Portrait Three: **the question of a self-determined future**

The third section mirrors the first with countering themes and images that support the feminine Gothic and the subversion of the *Bluebeard/Homme Fatal* narrative. Like 'Self Portrait One' it begins with painting, though Frances holds the brush, '[s]weat rises from my confidence ... I'm no-one's pleasure, only mine. Like him' (166), Woolfe shows a woman emergent from the traumatic paradigm taking back power and creating her own future. Initially Frances performs her role as amanuensis and also to subvert her father's commands. 'I gauge the angle of descent, it's his angle, not mine, it seems inert, grim and mine seems filled with promise' (155). The father, standing behind, controls Frances, whose own desire remains suppressed, 'I can't oppose' (155). Ross Chambers argues for the oppositionality within creative practice:

> the ground rules are defined by those who have power ... the powerless must work within the situation thus defined and develop an art which is the art of inhabiting a space possessed by the other. (1991: 65)

The opening scene leads to violation, here the father enacts emotional violence and 'trudges away' (Woolfe: 155). He abandons Frances, who lingers for a compliment, triggering 'an ancient worry' and the traumatic memory of running 'into a room and [finding] no one there. Only a corpse', like when she discovered her mother's body (157). Frances masochistically waits, 'an ancient habit', for her father, and describes how 'the waiting has itself become a kind of pleasure', for the rare brightness of his firmament of greatness, 'is always about to break' (157). Woolfe emphasises how this psychically crippled woman remains mired in traumatic repetition by the terror of 'when there is to be no more waiting' (157). Frances' past is too terrible to remember for there is her mother. Her present is too oppressive to confront for here is her father. And her future is too frightening to imagine for this is when she must confront the truth.

When the father develops a romantic attachment with Molly, an aspiring painter, Frances finally comprehends that he did murder her mother. Molly facilitates for the father *and* the daughter and occupies the void left by the absent mother. Molly offers Frances access to feminine power, 'you have strength ... you don't know it, but you are strong' (169). She praises her painting, which allows Frances to tenuously connect as she holds 'onto the brush as if it's an anchor' (169). Frances understands that creativity enables the hope 'to find what's possible in you ... what's inevitable. What must emerge' (170). Kristeva argues that desire for language serves 'as a restructuring (writing, art)' and constructs a language for the unrepresentable, inaccessible trauma within, through creativity, and so Frances enacts the return of the repressed (1980: x). She paints downstairs, where she keeps her paintings hidden on makeshift surfaces. Frances' painting erupts like desire over every surface as she makes the invisible visible, increasingly transgressive of the domestic space.

Ellis argues that the Gothic novel subverts traditional gender relations, presenting the paradoxical idea of home as offering security and its literary depiction as 'a place of danger and imprisonment' (x). It creates in the female readership 'a resistance to an ideology that imprisons them even as it posits a sphere of safety for them' (x). Frances subverts domestic ideology under the oppressor's gaze, by refusing to remain in her domestic amanuensis role, which subjugates her creativity and instead enacting her own impulse. Frances paints her own subject—the death of her father, which mirrors the magical drawing that predicted the death of her mother. When Frances tells her father that she will paint on her own, his response is '[o]ver my dead body' (200). It is

only through enacting metaphoric patricide that Frances is enabled to fulfil her potential.

To embrace her creative self, Frances must recognise her silent mother, re-present her mother's work, and usurp the father's role. Frances reclaims her power by resurrecting the mother and embodies what Marianne Hirsch argues is the evolution of the maternal from absent referent to speaking subject.

> The heroine who wants to write, or who wants in any way to be productive and creative, then, must break from her mother, so as not to be identified with maternal silence. (45)

This paradoxically allows the disallowed relationship, 'the passionate attachment between mother and daughter', to exist and for Frances to acknowledge her own female-ness (96). This illustrates Jacob's radical attempt to formulate 'a maternal structural function that would allow for a symbolisation of potential female genealogies and thus work toward the creation of a sociality, inheritance and transgenerational transmission between women' (2007 31).

As Frances paints through the house's interiors, she at last gains her father's studio, as she paints:

> labyrinths within labyrinths, not just my own, but everyone who's spent their lives waiting, I hear them joining in, I hear the swishing of their brushes, millions of them, an orchestra of brushes. (Woolfe: 213)

Here, she is absorbed in the creative process and journeys into those unthought places of her being and represents the experience into her now dynamic world.

Conclusion: Painting for her life

> I'm painting, I know, in a frenzy. The paint argues with me. I work against its argument. It says: you have no right. I argue back, timid, determined. I say: I am painting to save my life. (Woolfe: 203)

By showing the conflict inherent in the choice between amanuensis or realised subjecthood and female artistry, Woolfe creates a radical and compelling argument for the inevitability of a tortured emergence through creative expression. She shows the necessity for a female genealogy that imagines and nurtures the strengths of women. Woolfe succeeds in performing the coming to agency in artistic practice through subversion of the feminine Gothic. It is within this narratological dynamic that the writing challenges not only genre conventions, but also political orthodoxy. The novel creates an intervention and signifies the narrator's artistic and creative emergence through the 'passport' of language (Woolfe: 114).

Endnotes

1. Written between 1819 and 1820, it remained unpublished during her lifetime.

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