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The haunting power of dreamscapes within Tim Winton's gothic novella In the Winter Dark

Abstract:

Nightmares and their aesthetics of terror have been linked to Gothic literature since the birth of the genre during the pre-Romantic era. Indeed, many early authors of the form, including Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley, were driven to articulate the content of disturbing dreams via their literary work. Significantly, dark literary dream sequences continue to be a cornerstone feature of many contemporary Gothic texts. In this paper, I reflect upon some of the uniquely Australian Gothic tropes on display within Tim Winton's 1988 novella, *In the Winter Dark*, while also discussing the various functions performed by dreamscapes within this work. In addition, and with occasional reference to Freudian concepts, I explore the use of Winton's nightmare sequences to re-present, in recurring fashion, the fragmented sense of self to which his protagonists are subject as they struggle to recover from traumatic events (or not recover, as the case may be). Finally, I discuss the capacity of dreamscapes within this novella to contribute to narrational and structural strategies in ways that are aesthetically powerful and innovative.

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Dark dreamscapes have long been a hallmark feature of Gothic narrative, serving as powerful and highly malleable literary devices with which to explore the darker side of human nature. Dream sequences in Gothic literature often provide an intensely focalised – yet, possibly distorted – lens through which characters might view and re-live traumatic experiences, while simultaneously dredging their psyches for unpleasant, even terrifying realisations. Such dynamics are on display within Tim Winton’s 1988 novella *In the Winter Dark*, in which disturbing dream sequences capture uncanny instances indicative of tormented psyches: of the known yet unknown, the familiar yet unfamiliar, the forgotten yet somehow remembered; the use of dreams therefore intensifies the text’s aesthetics of mystery and melancholy.

Before discussing Winton’s deeply psychoemotional exploration of individual and shared trauma, it’s worth considering a description of what might be accounted for as traumatic experience/s. Gibbs (2013) provides the following insights:

Trauma involves a shattering of self, that complex structure both relatively stable and yet of necessity open to ongoing transformation... The shattering of self on a small scale can be caused by something minor like a communicative disjunction between therapist and patient, created when a patient feels they are not understood. We might describe this as traumatic stress rather than trauma per se, which implies that the shattering is not total, but that there is a tendency towards the fragmentation of self when subject to particular stimulus... Trauma *tout court* would seem to mean, rather, a shattering without repair in which an abyss of vertiginous terror and perplexity threatens to open at any minute. Perhaps there is no cure for trauma in this sense. (Gibbs, 2013, p. 131)

Keeping the above parameters in mind, it’s reasonable to conclude that the propensity of true trauma to disrupt and conceivably destroy lives, is an overriding theme running through Winton’s novella. Each character is shadowed by terrible experiences and painful regrets; their torment is re-lived not only in the waking world, but also within their dreams. Winton leverages literary dreamscapes in ways that excavate the buried anxieties and haunting memories endured by his characters. By providing a site for the re-enactment of traumatic events, his dream sequences highlight the potential of the human psyche to become a space for the illumination and re-illumination of terrible truths such that characters remain trapped within loops of existential suffering. This approach to the exhumation and/or re-activation of disturbing memories and experiences via dreams also echoes contemporary psychoanalytic perspectives on trauma:

Traumatic memories come in flashbacks or nightmares. They come in the memories of the body and its somatic enactments. Traumatic memories entrap us in the prison house of repetition compulsion. (Schwab, 2010, p. 2)

In fiction, as in real life, disturbing dreamscapes and troubling recollections can be powerful conduits for the activation of traumatic residue and its potentially devastating effects. Relatedly, Winton's narrative complements Freudian theories concerning repression and the tendency of dreams to shed light upon neurotic disturbances, obsessions, fears, and distressing memories. In his articulation of principles behind dream interpretation, Freud asserts that – as mental phenomena – dreams serve three vital functions: to integrate past and current experiences (Freud, 2016, p. 14, 179); to act as pathways between the conscious and unconscious (pp. 108–115); and to serve as a form of wish-fulfillment that culminates in dreamt experience/s (p. 100). With regards to the latter point, Freud asserts that many wishes are subjugated by facets of the psyche but often force their way to realisation through dream activity. He notes that “even our painful and terrifying dreams may, upon interpretation, prove to be wish fulfillments” (p. 109). Thus, he famously theorises about “dream-distortion” stating: “in every human being there exist, as the primary cause of dream-formation, two psychic forces ... one of which forms the wish expressed by the dream, while the other exercises a censorship over this dream wish, thereby enforcing on it a distortion” (p. 114). Dream-distortion is therefore related to psychoanalytic notions of repression:

We shall have included everything which the analysis of disagreeable dreams has brought to light if we reword our formula thus: The dream is the disguised fulfillment of a suppressed, repressed wish. (Freud, 2016, p. 126)

Connections between repression, trauma and dreams continue to be an area of substantial inquiry within the fields of psychology and dream research. Links between dark dreams, the workings of the unconscious and the re-living of trauma – as famously recognised by Freud – have been established by numerous psychoanalytic studies. Consider the findings articulated within a 2010 study concerning the positive correlation between nightmares and trauma:

Exposure to traumatic events can give rise to a range of dream-related disturbances, nightmares, bad dreams and recurrent dreams. The emergence and frequency of dream-related disturbances can be mediated by characteristics associated with the traumatic event itself as well as to the individual exposed to it. (Duval & Zadra, 2010, p. 252)

The authors go on to state that traumatic experiences might manifest within dream content to varying effects. For example, nightmares could serve to replicate a traumatic event directly, causing the dreamer to re-visit the circumstances of trauma in vivid and exact detail (Duval & Zadra, 2010, p. 253). Alternatively, dreams might be described as more symbolic and not clearly linked to a particular event, yet still able to affect feelings of severe emotional distress associated with the original source of trauma (p. 253). This second instance points to the capacity of dreamt experience to permeate the human psyche in ways that defy forces of repression.

The complex ties between trauma and oneiric experiences have long been explored in Gothic narrative. As Baines (2011, p. 76) asserts, “The Gothic as a genre, similarly to psychoanalysis,

puts special emphasis on the unconscious – dreams, memories, repression, anxieties, darkness and the Other”. Literary Gothic dreams often reflect a deliberate exploration of the unconscious along with its links to the unfamiliar and unknown, disturbances of the past, and anxieties about the future. Note, for instance, the dark dreamscapes that permeate classic Gothic texts such as *Frankenstein* (Shelley, 1818), *Wuthering Heights* (Bronte, 1847), and *Dracula* (Stoker, 1897), all of which illuminate the severity of psychological conflict and emotional turmoil experienced by central characters. The re-living of traumatic experiences via dreams underscores key conventions of the Gothic form whereby echoes of the past continually interpenetrate the present, often with catastrophic results. Such is the case within Winton’s novella, where dreamscapes and memories access the harrowing internal terrain of his characters, continually pulling the past into the present and overshadowing the future.

Significantly, Winton has expressed a fascination with dreamt experiences and the intensely evocative and relatable material with which they equip writers. In an interview with Elizabeth Guy (1996-1997) – conducted for *Southerly* – he reflects upon the versatility of literary dreams, along with their potential to generate impactful aesthetics:

Just from a writerly position, you can get a hell of a lot done with dreams, they can create their own context and anything can happen. Dreams can or don’t have to refer to whatever is happening in the text. I think there’s a lot of lyrical things you can do and I guess I’ve always written from a lyrical perspective. (Guy, 1996-1997, pp. 127–128)

Given Winton’s openness towards using the dream sequence as a literary tool, it’s not surprising to find that dreamscapes within *In the Winter Dark* perform a variety of functions including to: inform narrative design and structure; illuminate complex interpersonal networks and relationships; explore the impact upon characters of shared painful experience/s; tap the Australian landscape to conjure both historical and present day shadows that hearken to a past littered with communal wounds; and invoke poetic, sensory-based expression, which captures the psychological and emotional aftermath of trauma. A more in-depth analysis of the above literary effects within Winton’s text will follow soon; first it is apt to briefly discuss the historical roots of Australian Gothic and its sustained tropes as exhibited in contemporary fiction.

The Australian Gothic emerged in conjunction with the growing popularity of the genre in Britain and Europe in the late 1800s; but the great southern land provided fertile fields for the propagation of a specifically Australian take on the form. Early Australian Gothic works, such as Lawson’s ‘The Drover’s Wife’, originally published in 1894, Bayton’s ‘The Chosen Vessel’ from 1902, or Clarke’s *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1870) capture the hardship intrinsic to convict and settler conditions that entailed facing a hostile environment in which unseen presences seemed to hum. Such texts evoke Gothic sensibilities that identify the Australian landscape as an arid, desolate, dangerous place that lends itself to the “Grotesque, the Weird, the Strange” (Clarke, 1893, n.p.). These features reflect socio-cultural dynamics inherent to a newly established colony imbued with contradictions: a land supposedly empty of human

habitation before colonisation, yet clearly inhabited; a land of the settled, yet unsettled; a land of the familiar, yet unfamiliar. As such, it was a place that provided a distorted reflection of its “civilised” counterparts, Britain and Europe. As Baines (2011, p. 82) notes, the Antipodes was regarded as a region where “...the rules about what is considered to be normal are constantly broken ... generating anxieties and a feeling of uncanniness”. Which brings me back to *In the Winter Dark*, a text that presents a distinctly Australian mode of Gothic, one that portrays the darkness and anxiety typically associated with the “unknowable” bush, while simultaneously acknowledging the long shadow of communal trauma inflicted by the settler-colonial invasion.

Set in the isolated and densely-forested valley of Sink, *In the Winter Dark* revolves around the experiences of four neighbours – old sheep farmer Maurice (the first-person narrator) and his wife Ida, a drug-addicted, pregnant young woman named Ronnie, and Murray Jacob who’s sold his mowing business in the city to move to the bush. All are damaged by traumatic events from long ago and the relatively recent past. Lingering anxieties are made even more acute when a mysterious creature begins to prowl about their properties, killing livestock and pets. Importantly, the identity of the mysterious predator is never discovered: notions of a beastly presence skulking through the landscape serve to represent the fears and trauma/s stalking each character. It follows that Winton offers a psychologically driven exploration of the Australian bush as Gothic entity and an agent of Otherness, as a hostile force of its own accord that manifests as a direct yet unidentifiable threat to the survival of those who inhabit it.

Thus, Winton presents the Australian landscape as a place of isolation and loneliness that harbours dangerous forces; this use of setting resonates with the country’s (post)-colonial situation, along with its bloody and dark history, which – to some degree – remains repressed within the collective Australian psyche. These thematic issues are flagged in a significant exchange between Maurice and Ida:

“You think we’ve done something?” she asked. “Like the ‘sins of the father’ and everything?”

He stopped the car. Right there. Right then.

“I’ve tried to tell you. The answer is yes.”

He drove on and she felt all breathless and confused... (Winton, 1988, p. 133)

Winton’s narrative therefore highlights the traumatic residue of Australia’s socio-cultural wounds, including those caused by the dispossession and dislocation of Aboriginal people and the attempted annihilation of their race (along with efforts to airbrush them from the landscape via the egregious falsehood that was *terra nullius*). In addition, Winton’s text echoes anxieties associated with the settler condition that saw the country’s harshness as indicative of a deeper social malaise: the experiences of exile and hardship that unfolded parallel with the processes of convictism. Furthermore, Winton’s depiction of the Australian bush as a place of Otherness underscores British/European notions that positioned the colony as the antithesis of life in the Northern Hemisphere. Winton’s text therefore offers a subtle, yet powerful reading of a country

steeped in colonial violence; it presents perspicuous insights into the impact of a traumatic and bloody past, the stains of which have arguably seeped into the Australian zeitgeist. Such wounds, it would seem, threaten to erupt at any time, haunting the conscience of both individuals and society as a whole.

In the Winter Dark incorporates several conventions and literary features consistent with an Australian mode of Gothic that looks to the past, as well as the present, for evidence of lingering trauma. The emphasis Winton places on setting, for instance – particularly in relation to generating an eerie atmosphere – positions the reader to perceive the landscape as a place of isolation and potential entrapment. This effect dovetails with early notions of Australia as a place at the end of the earth to which many were sent in acts of exile, punishment, and incarceration. As Turcotte (1998, p. 1) reminds us: “The Antipodes was a world of reversals, the dark subconscious of Britain. It was, for all intents and purposes, Gothic par excellence, the dungeon of the world”. Winton speaks to such perspectives through the use of discerning symbolism and evocative descriptive details that conjure a setting imbued by unseen and, at times, ghostly presences. Consider the following observations presented through Jacob’s focalising (narrational) lens as he surveys the landscape:

Between the trees he saw something. A movement. A silhouette. It was travelling. Loping, that was the word that came to him. He squinted. All round him, birds were roosting, or stirring, or something. He heard the tick of his own body. The shadow seemed to stop, slip sideways between apple rows. And then there was nothing. (Winton, 1988, p. 8)

Such ambiguity prompts the reader to fill in the gaps for themselves about what such shadowy presences might be or represent, deepening engagement with the text. In addition, Winton’s description of the landscape (and the importance placed upon setting in terms of generating Gothic undertones) highlights the isolated, dangerous and austere circumstances that typically accompany life in the Australian bush. Again, this approach highlights issues concerning the impact of colonial settlement / invasion times, foregrounding experiences of loss, anxiety, grief and guilt. This sort of discourse generates important conversations around Aboriginal sovereignty (or lack thereof). As Gelder (2007, p. 118) asserts, “No matter how casual an act of colonial violence might be – all settlers are implicated”. Indeed, Maurice is the quintessential unsettled “settler”, whose “monster” is his own inner darkness and the burden of past misdeeds. Cordier (2018) reflects upon Winton’s use of this Gothic trope:

By showing how easily the most entrenched settler-farmer can give way to fear and irrational behaviour, this narrative reveals the fragility of settler society. The settling myths that hold the nation together are not enough to hold back the violence of present-day collective and personal trauma. (Cordier, 2018, p. 60)

This observation draws attention to ongoing questions that surround the legitimacy of land ownership acquired through acts of invasion and dispossession. Eventually, traumatic

experiences revolving around communal suffering see Winton's characters come completely undone. There is no surviving the repressed collective trauma that, in the end, refuses to be contained; nor is there any escaping the guilt for past crimes. These thematic ideas engage with contemporary ideas concerning transgenerational trauma:

Violent histories generate psychic deformations passed on from generation to generation across the divide of victims and perpetrators... The damages of violent histories can hibernate in the unconscious, only to be transmitted to the next generation like an undetected disease. (Schwab, 2010, p. 3)

Winton's text explores the tendency of violent histories and repressed trauma to rise to the surface of the human psyche – on an individual and collective basis – again and again. Dreams become sites of trauma recurrence, of history coming back to bite, morphing into strange psychical zones in which characters are tormented by a shared sense of grief and guilt. In this way, and primarily through the eyes of his first-person narrator, Winton portrays the propensity of the present to continually resurrect ghosts of the past, along with the unshakeable fears and vulnerabilities it often holds:

History. Yes, that was when history started in on me. The day after the dog was taken, the day Jacob found Ronnie half-crazed down the river. If only we hadn't had so many things to hide, so many opportunities for fear to get us. You can keep it all firm and tidy in you for a time but, Godalmighty, when the continents begin to shift in you, you can't tell tomorrow from yesterday, you run just like that herd of pigs, over the cliff and into the water. (Winton, 1988, pp. 47–48)

Maurice's despondent worldview is rooted in the corrosive effects of past trauma. When the narrator was young, for example, his brother was shot by their neighbour for stealing apples (a "crime" that could surely be associated with loss of innocence) and became blind as a result. In a brutal act of revenge, Maurice burnt the neighbour's cat and the fire spread to her house. Other characters are also emotionally and psychologically wounded to varying degrees. Before moving to the bush, Jacob experienced the break-down of his marriage after he and his wife lost their daughter to cot-death. Meanwhile, physically abused by her father as a child, the pregnant Ronnie has developed a drug addiction and been abandoned by her boyfriend. As for Ida, she has struggled over the years with a sense of isolation, of "not really belonging", that clings to her psyche and threatens her sense of self-worth (Winton, 1988, p. 32).

Throughout the novella, trouble strikes all in equally terrible measure. While Winton's characters must contend with separate sources of malaise and discontent, they also share a dreadful source of anguish; this can be traced to events that occur roughly a year before the present-day narrative. One night, while all four characters are planning to hunt down the elusive beast killing local animals, Ida becomes upset with the group and tries to run away; she seems determined to uncover the nature of the mystery on her own. Soon after, Maurice, Ronnie and Jacob set off looking for her. Driving in a panicked state, Maurice rolls the car and confusion

ensues as the men exit the vehicle. Nearby in the dark, something is moving, and the men assume it's the beast: "Stubbs was pointing the gun into the dark where the low, throaty grunt was coming from. Yes, it was coming, yes" (Winton, 1988, p. 149). In the mayhem, the past and present converge in Maurice's mind as he seeks to reconcile the awful memories that plague him. This confusion results in the accidental shooting of Ida:

I heard it breathe and I knew I had a moment to kill the past, to fight it and wipe it away. The gun was all buck and flash and I was still strong... Up in the mud and furrows of light, my Ida drowned. She felt the heat and wind in her throat. Blood was her only voice. For perhaps a second she had hold of a thought, a memory. (Winton, 1988, pp. 150–151)

Later that same night, the men watch as Ronnie gives birth to a still-born child. Maurice and Jacob collude to bury Ida and the dead infant in the forest, then drop an unconscious Ronnie outside the local hospital before driving away. These disturbing events are not revealed until the end of the narrative, generating a structural "sting in the tail" that allows Winton to deliver a powerful climactic finale. Given this timely revelation, the reader – in retrospect – is able to fully understand the primary source of melancholic regret that underscores the entire story.

It is perhaps in the land of sleep, though, that Winton's characters most keenly experience and re-experience their torment. The author's dreamscapes facilitate the return of past trauma/s, working to produce uncanny and terrifying experiences that deepen characterisation, raise tension levels, and generate strong undercurrents of gloom. Consider how Maurice describes the taunting nature of his dreamt experiences:

I have these dreams. Dead people, broken people bleed things into you, like there's some pressure point because they can't get it out anymore, can't get it told. It's as though the things which need telling seep across to you in your sleep. (Winton, 1988, p. 2)

Winton's dreamscapes serve as connection points to subterranean layers within his characters' psyches, unearthing their darkest fears and deepest anxieties. The eruption of such emotions during dreamt experience is conveyed to powerful effect throughout the text. Winton's work therefore capitalises upon the dramatic intensity of the recurring Gothic nightmare, which sees traumatic wounds rupture through the unconscious to harrow protagonists. This relentless dynamic is on display in the following excerpt as narrated by Maurice:

When a man dreams things from the past, you'd think he'd be able to arrange them in new sequences to please himself. You'd think your unconscious mind would want to do it for you, to spare you the grief and shame. But no. In my dreams, it all happens as it happened, and I see it and be it again and again and the confusion never wears off. (Winton, 1988, p. 120)

It follows that Winton's characters are pitted against tumultuous, troubling forces and memories that constantly interrupt and distort their perceptions. In this respect, the author

deploys dreams to explore discourses of subjectivity, especially as they relate to the disintegration of identity and subsequent battles to maintain and/or reclaim self-control. As Charles (1999) suggests, such an approach is an important Gothic convention:

States of dream, trance, madness, and possession provide the appropriate psychological conditions to investigate (or explain away) this problem. Typically, this approach and the strategic use of dreams as literary devices serves to deepen characterisation by tapping buried psychological disturbances ... providing deep insights into complex subjectivities. (Charles, 1999, p. 78)

Along such lines, Winton's dream sequences serve to carve out complex, three dimensional and relatable characters, all of whom are forced to confront internal demons and persistent fears. Consider the passage below, in which Maurice's nightmare is recounted in graphic detail, scouring his psyche so as to resurrect the spectre of lamentable past actions:

I dreamt I ran downhill full of holes in the creeping blindness of night, aflame and screaming. I lit up the valley like a torch and everything saw, everything knew I was being punished. I found the river, dived in, but it was just fuel to the flames. My mouth was a hole. There was nowhere to go. (Winton, 1988, p. 21)

In context, this dream clearly refers to traumatic recollections from Maurice's childhood and the burden of associated guilt. The use of dreams in this way sharpens the reader's insights regarding the threat of self-fragmentation with which Maurice and others must wrestle. But dreamscapes within *In the Winter Dark* do more than shed light upon the extent to which existential crises threaten to bring each character undone. Interestingly, the use of dream sequences complements Winton's unusual approach to narration. In this respect, Maurice is endowed with a "supernatural" facility for accessing the dreams, memories and repressed trauma of others. The author's deployment of dreams mimics a process of mental osmosis whereby the weight of collective trauma bleeds into individual minds. This demonstrates the power of Gothic dreamscapes to exploit mental connections shared between characters, highlighting the potential permeability of the human psyche; it also enables Winton to establish a network of human relationships knitted together by communal disturbances, a network that sees the dreadful dreams of one character transplanted into the psyche of another, compounding trauma. Such strange occurrences and their effects are described by Maurice as follows:

We all dreamt that night – the four of us – though our insides were all tight and grinding with rent chunks of secrecy shivering up to the surface. I remember every dream from that night: Ronnie's floating nightmare, Jacob's terrible memory, I even know what Ida dreamt. (Winton, 1988, pp. 21–22)

Maurice's ability to experience the oneiric processes of others exemplifies a type of omniscient first-person narration. This approach enables Winton to avoid restrictions typically associated with this point of view, such as the ability to access only the experiences, recollections and

observations of the focalising narrator. In short, Winton's retrospective first-person narrator is endowed with unrestricted field of perception, accessing knowledge he could never have known. The narrator can effectively present other characters – and even re-construct their inner experiences – from his vantage point in the present-day narrative.

This is Ronnie's dream, though it might as well be mine nowadays. I have it so often. It's quite short, and like the others always the same. There is firelight. There are voices raised. They are hammering in the nails and the tree is soft and the cat is mad with pain as they dance... When I dream this, I get up and find Ida's old bible and the stuff about demons and spirits and miracles will make sense to me for a few minutes on end until the fear wears off. (Winton, 1988, p. 107)

This strategy allows Winton's narrator to shed light upon the state of his own interiority as well as that of others. This narrational technique not only minimises the psychic distance between the reader and the entire *dramatis persona* but also highlights intersubjectivities threaded throughout the novella that see characters trade confronting internal wounds and scars of trauma. Consider the next excerpt in which Maurice recounts a dream of Ida's that he experiences, while reflecting upon the vulnerability of his own sense of self:

I have an Ida dream all the time. Some nights I have it so bad it has me waking up thinking I *am* Ida. In the dream she stands at the last rise before those thickets which web the hills just beyond here. The children are there, picking mushrooms... She holds their cardigans and watches them play, but in an instant she imagines them being drawn into the thicket, snagged deep beyond the light, as though the place will not yield... She stands there shuddering with apprehension... I am not there, not anywhere in the picture. She never told me about this fear. Maybe I wouldn't have listened. You understand yourself late enough to discover you're the sorriest bastard who ever was. (Winton, 1988, pp. 34–35, emphasis in original)

Broadening the potential psychological and emotional reach of the first-person narrator achieves multifarious effects throughout the narrative. In particular, this approach draws attention to the possibility of a pervious consciousness shared amongst collective subjectivities, generating dramatic gravitas while also deepening characterisation in ways that would otherwise be unachievable. The disturbing dreams featured within *In the Winter Dark* therefore underscore the accretive nature of collective trauma, along with its capacity to ensnare individuals within apparently incessant recurrences of anxiety, fear, and despair. Additionally, dreamscapes within the novella contribute to aesthetics of textual spatialisation; the dream sequences resemble a rhizomatic structure whereby human relationships are depicted as a tangled network of individual and communal points of suffering that lurk in the underground of psyches, threatening to erupt within anyone at any time.

In an interview subsequently published within *Tim Winton: The Writer* (McGirr, 1999), Winton reflects upon the omniscient power of dream sequences within his novella, together with their ability to capture the often permeable nature of shared experiences:

The dream stuff interests me, how Maurice has other people's dreams. He tries to separate himself all this time but people force their way into his life. People are connected to one another, like it or not, dead or alive, asleep or awake. (McGirr, 1999, p. 67)

The above observation underscores the complexity of structural elements at play within Winton's work. The discerning use of dreamscapes allows the author to manipulate the story's overriding architecture and/or structural form. The re-living of trauma – as frequently conjured by dreamt experience/s – creates recursive patterns whereby events of the past repeatedly somersault forward into the present. As Juranovszky (2014) explains, these structural formations are known as Gothic loops:

the Gothic loop could be defined as a discursive element, a fictional time and space of various suspensions when/where certain past or present traumas must be continuously re-experienced and finally resolved – with horror and suffering involved on the part of the protagonists – in order to produce an improved (re)starting point in the narrative. Within the frame of the Gothic loop a previously repressed event of the past suddenly imposes itself upon the present and refuses to leave in an attempt to haunt the mind of the protagonist until they submit to face the challenge which the processing of the past memory has to offer. (Juranovszky, 2014, n.p.)

Similarly, Gothic loops within Winton's narrative shed light upon the internal battles faced by his characters, all of whom seem incapable of escaping their past. It follows that such loops are infused with psychological significance and meaning: the return of the past via personal recollections and dreams taunts characters such that they must either resolve their traumatic experiences or forever be at their mercy. This creates a sense of claustrophobic entrapment, further feeding Gothic conventions. Consider the structural back-flips at play – and the subsequent recurring torment – in the following passage where Maurice re-lives the waking and dreamt pain endured by Jacob as a result of finding his deceased child:

There was a dream he had, an old one flashing the colour of lightning in him. A yowl of grief, the panic rising in his chest like locusts on the wing as, in another life again, he threw the newspaper aside and began to run for the nursery door. Now Marjorie was screaming, shaking the cot as he came. I knew this dream. It's Jacob's, but I have it too, these days. (Winton, 1988, p. 106)

Dream sequences in Winton's text, and the Gothic loops they facilitate, allow for the repeated and communal recollection of distressing memories with which the characters struggle: they cannot escape horrors of the past which regularly jettison into the present and loom over the future. Time itself becomes blurred and seemingly boundless as dreams and memories coalesce

with one another. The manipulation of temporality effectively highlights the tendency of trauma (and its ongoing effects) to transcend time. The timelessness of trauma is addressed by Nadal and Calvo (2014, p. 3) who assert that trauma tends to “disrupt the mind’s experience of time ...[and] implies a recurrent tension between the traumatic impact and its response”. Winton captures the paradoxical temporality of trauma in the passage below where it’s unclear whether Maurice is relaying a current event, a dreamt experience, a disturbing memory, or an amplified (yet replayed) affective response to that terrible act of revenge committed so many years earlier:

The Minchinbury house roars. The sky drinks it up, the noise and light, the smells of cooking flesh and fur. It’s the sound of hell, you know. She’s burning and her cats are burning, and he’s running, that farmboy, the silhouette, the flat shadow boy, he’s running. There I am, here I am, with my chest fat with panic. A silhouette. Light and heat behind. (Winton, 1988, p. 124)

The conveyance of such “timeless” experience echoes the non-temporal structure of trauma, while simultaneously feeding the novella’s fragmented structure. While Winton’s narrative is clearly non-linear, there is an unshakeable sense of peering down into a vortex where the heart of the story’s traumatic roots lay swirling. The retrospective, repetitive, and circular nature of dreams and memories draw the reader ever closer to the original sources of trauma hounding its characters; a terrible reckoning of some sort seems inevitable. Crawford (2010, n.p.) explains such Gothic structural patterns as follows:

at the heart of almost all such fiction lies a scene of fear, a traumatic encounter with the terrible, and in literature and film alike these scenes are often marked with characteristics redolent of the experience of nightmare: the dilation of time, the rupture of linear experience, and feelings of helplessness, horror, and dread.

Crawford’s observations draw attention to the aesthetics and nature of fear. In this respect, much of what is to be feared within Winton’s text is left unidentified and obscure: the mysterious cat that his characters speculate may be behind the killing of local animals and pets is considered to be a potent symbol of that which is Other, as well as foreign and invasive. In addition, cats are regularly referenced throughout the novella, especially in the traumatic memories and dreams to which each character is subject. As Cordier (2018, pp. 61–62) asserts, Winton’s characters “are prisoners of time and their efforts to break free from traumatic memories that breed physical monsters – always in the form of a cat”. But the true nature of the beast out in the bush remains a mystery. This ambiguity amplifies terror-related aesthetics; it also brings to mind reflections offered by Burke who, like Radcliffe, stresses the importance of uncertainty in generating fear. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Burke observes that, “To make anything terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes” (Burke as cited in Baines 2011, p. 75). In addition, the ambiguity with which the story reverberates is redolent of the absences and losses

that haunt Winton's characters: Maurice laments the accidental murder of his wife for which he can never be redeemed; Jacob grieves for the loss of his infant child as well as the breakdown of his marriage; Ronnie struggles to find a place for herself in the world, eventually loses her baby and is abandoned yet again; while Ida, before she is killed, must face the sense of purposelessness and "unbelonging" that plagues her. Winton's use of uncertainty, character disorientation and psychological fragmentation reinforces worldviews concerning the universal source/s of human fear as presented by Oates (1998, p. 185) who states that, "What we fear ... is not death; not even physical anguish, mental decay, disintegration. We fear most the loss of meaning. To lose meaning is to lose one's humanity, and this is more terrifying than death".

The strange dreamscapes, recurring nightmares and disturbing memories depicted throughout Winton's narrative – together with terrible events endured by characters in the waking world – serve to lure the reader through a complex, recursive, looping storyline that moves inexorably towards a terrible climactic revelation. These structural manoeuvres encapsulate the recurring nature of deep trauma such that characters are forced to re-live disturbing circumstances and/or events, exacerbating their pain. Furthermore, the book-ended structure of Winton's text underscores the role that traumatic experience, re-experience and repression serve in terms of feeding meaning, while pulling taut thematic threads drawn throughout the narrative. Consider the opening of *In the Winter Dark* (1988, p. 1) that sees Maurice sitting out in the dark "listening to his own voice, like every other night this past year... I just sit here and tell the story as though I can't help it". In a looping back to this opening scene, the novella closes with a return to Maurice sitting in the darkness, confessing the following: "I can't redeem myself. That's why I confess to you, Darkness. You don't listen. You don't care, though sometimes I suspect you are more than you seem" (p. 156). This resolution brings the reader back to the present-day narrative in which – far from delivering "resolved" circumstances – the aftermath of trauma seems to have become even more intensified.

Ultimately, Winton's narrative, and the dreamscapes embedded therein, point to the potentially irreparable effects of traumatic events, positioning characters firmly in a space of endless torment. This is a fitting outcome for such a dark narrative and one that encapsulates a strong convention of the Gothic form: it depicts characters who face a future in which there is absolutely no – or at least very little – hope of personal recovery. Traumatic experiential loops, recurrences and regressions are inescapable for Winton's characters, especially during sleep. Anxieties and uncertainties persist for Maurice and Jacob and, in an ironic twist, they both stand to be dispossessed of their land due to the discovery of Bauxite in the nearby forest. This scenario reinforces themes concerning dislocation and dispossession that pervade the text. Significantly, such themes underscore the concept of "unsettlement" or "unsettled" settlement, raising questions about the legitimacy of Australia's nationhood. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Winton's novel was published in 1988, the year of the bicentenary, when the potency of the text's political resonance would be assured. Suffice it to say, Winton engages with lingering anxieties generated as a result of the nation's colonial past.

The inability to evade the destabilising aftermath of trauma points to the thematic heart of Winton's novella. Maurice alludes to this message at the end of the story:

My dreams are not symbols, they are history. Even the ones I don't understand, the ones I don't even know the characters in, they are all full of the most terrible truths. They settle on me, the guilty running their silhouette. (Winton, 1988, p. 156)

Given their versatility as tools for character development, structural manipulation, and narrational flexibility, Winton's dark dreamscapes are a literary feat of notable proportions. Thinking more broadly, it seems reasonable to assume the haunting power of dreamscapes will continue to be an important feature of the Gothic genre – one that appeals to terror-hungry audiences. For dreams are, in and of themselves, quintessentially Other in nature: they are neither in the physical world as we know it, nor situated completely beyond it; they are neither real, nor entirely unreal. They exist somewhere in-between such dichotomies, occupying strange, liminal spaces where uncertainty, longing and fear are common, and where the Gothic – not least of all Australian expressions of the form – is most at home.

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