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'The wolf bane is blooming again': Gothic desire in R. H. Morrieson's *The Scarecrow*

Abstract:

R.H. Morrieson's fiction has received little scholarly analysis in New Zealand, but when it has, it has been common to consider it as part of a tradition emerging during the middle decades of the twentieth century that sought new modes of writing with which to best express the realities of a post-World War II world. Peter Simpson argues that as a post-provincial novel, Morrieson's *The Scarecrow* (1963) 'turns the typical pattern of provincial fiction – sympathetic individual versus hostile society – upside down. The isolated individual – the Scarecrow – is viewed as a threat to the community from outside' (1982: 59). Yet the pattern that Simpson notes here as belonging to the post-provincial novel belongs to another mode of fiction: the Gothic, which frequently involves a communal effort to vanquish an evil threat, such as in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). By considering *The Scarecrow* as a Gothic novel, post-provincial writing in New Zealand can be seen as not just building on a local tradition of literary realism, but as engaging with a popular international tradition as well.

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Keywords:

Creative writing – Gothic – Morrieson, R.H.

When New Zealand writer R. H. Morrieson died in 1972 at the age of fifty, the two novels he published during his lifetime – *The Scarecrow* (1963) and *Came a Hot Friday* (1964) – were out of print. Morrieson's fiction failed to find a significant readership during his lifetime, despite some good reviews in British, Australian and New Zealand periodicals, nor did it receive adequate attention from New Zealand literary critics. Frank Sargeson was one of Morrieson's few early champions (along with Maurice Shadbolt) and he insisted that Morrieson's work 'deserves more attention than I suspect it has so far received' (1983: 188). It would not be until the 1980s that Morrieson's novels were re-issued, with Peter Simpson publishing a critical commentary of Morrieson's work in 1982, and Julia Millen's *Ronald Hugh Morrieson: A Biography* appearing in 1996. The marginalisation of Morrieson's work was such that on its republication following two decades of being out of print it was common to figure Morrieson's writing in terms of unfair neglect, with the author's early death frequently being attributed to the heavy drinking he indulged in as a way of coping with his disappointment (McLauchlan 1980: 36).

Attempts to explain the delayed appreciation of Morrieson's work in New Zealand tend to focus on the limitations of publication and distribution, as well as the idiosyncratic nature of the novels themselves. In a letter to one of Morrieson's supporters, Arnold Wall suggests that *The Scarecrow*'s publishers – Australian firm Angus & Robertson – is 'an excellent firm' but they 'happened to be most ineffectually represented in New Zealand at the time and seem to have done *nothing* to promote the sale' of Morrieson's books (Wall 1973: n.p.). Morrieson similarly blamed his publishers for his lack of success, penning a letter to Douglas Stewart that the publisher termed 'ferocious' (Stewart 1972: n.p.). Although it is easy to pin the blame on a publishing house that perhaps did not know how to market Morrieson's novels, or who expended little effort doing so, Stewart points out in his response to Morrieson's attack that 'Your quarrel is with the public who wouldn't buy your novels though they were favourably reviewed all over Australia and New Zealand, not with your publishers' (1972: n.p.).

If it is not surprising that the popular readership of 1960s New Zealand failed to embrace a novel defined by lasciviousness and deviant sexuality, then the failure of *The Scarecrow* to be taken seriously by the literary establishment in New Zealand is hardly a shock either. In a period when *Coal Flat* (1963) – Bill Pearson's soberly realist study of the Depression-era West Coast – was hailed as an exemplary model of the Great New Zealand novel, then Morrieson's exuberant blending of thriller and comedy modes was bound to confuse or alienate critics more accustomed to the literary realism that defined New Zealand literature during the middle decades of the twentieth century. As Lawrence Jones points out, *The Scarecrow*'s 'quirky mix of anarchic energies and moralism, realism and grotesque melodrama' means that it is 'certainly different from the prevailing critical realism of the writers of his generation' (1991: 212). It is thus not surprising that *The Scarecrow* was not reviewed in New Zealand's influential literary journal *Landfall* and, although M.H. Holcroft had some positive comments to make about it in a series of lectures delivered at Victoria University in 1964, he also described *The Scarecrow* as suffering from 'obvious crudities' such as 'vigorous but undisciplined' writing, weak construction,

‘heavy-handed vernacular’ and the ‘alternation of uproarious farce and black melodrama’ (quoted in Millen 1996: 182). Joan Stevens is similarly dismissive of Morrieson’s craft in her 1966 discussion, characterising *The Scarecrow* as ‘a jerky and unpredictable mixture between a comedy of errors and a sexual melodrama’ (1966: 118). An elite literary establishment accustomed to the sort of realism associated with canonical writers such as Sargeson was ill-equipped to deal with the idiosyncratic style of Morrieson, who was not a part of local literary culture due to living his entire life in the small Taranaki town of Hawera.

Morrieson rarely left Hawera, with Simpson observing that this meant ‘he worked in almost complete isolation from any sustaining *literary* community and exacerbated the prejudice and condescension that he encountered from some publishers and critics’ (1982: 4). Morrieson was outside the literary establishment, well-read but not university educated, and his literary influences were far more popular than those influencing New Zealand literary culture. Writers such as Sargeson looked to American writers, particularly Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway, for models, with a new generation of writers emerging from the 1950s developing the realist tradition established by Sargeson. As Millen points out, Morrieson, however, eagerly devoured popular thrillers by Peter Carter Brown and John Creasy, with the sensational crimes of *New Zealand Truth* being another favourite. Morrieson’s popular influences are melded with more literary ones, such as the often mentioned debt *The Scarecrow* owes to Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* and R.L. Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, meaning that *The Scarecrow* exists in a liminal space between the popular and the literary, with Millen describing it as sitting ‘between the clichés of popular-fiction and the novel of social purpose’ (1996:164-5).

Although Holcroft and Stevens interpret Morrieson’s blending of genres as sign of a lack of technical control, in the first sustained critical evaluation of Morrieson’s fiction, Simpson argues that he ‘was not a failed provincial realist’; rather, ‘a strong case can be made that he initiated a new phase in New Zealand fiction which can be called *post-provincial*’ (1982:155). According to Simpson,

Morrieson, drawing from the local scene – people, places, events, idioms, situations – and from the heterodox cultural data that poured into his consciousness from books, radio, films and newspapers, wrote his novels not according to any reductive concept of realism by which reality is tamely copied [...] nor to any other received fictional model, but according to his own idiosyncratic conception. (1982: 57)

Morrieson’s deviation from the accustomed realist mode in New Zealand literature of the middle decades of the twentieth century, Simpson concludes, means that his situation was akin to that of Edgar Allan Poe, as described by William Carlos Williams: ‘Invent that which is new, even if it be made of pine from your own yard, and there’s none to know what you have done. It is because there’s no *name*’ (quoted in Simpson 1982: 60).

It is certainly true that Morrieson’s novels appeared at a time when a new generation of writers such as David Ballantyne, Maurice Duggan and Janet Frame were seeking new modes of writing with which to best express the realities of their post-World War II world, with Millen noting the significance of the publication in the late 1950s (as

Morrieson was approaching the writing of *The Scarecrow*) of Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *Spinster*, Ian Cross's *The God Boy* and Frame's *Owls Do Cry*. It is also true, as Simpson argues, that as a post-provincial novel *The Scarecrow* 'turns the typical pattern of provincial fiction – sympathetic individual versus hostile society – upside down. The isolated individual – the Scarecrow – is viewed as a threat to the community from outside' (1982: 59). Yet the pattern that Simpson notes here belongs to another mode of fiction that *The Scarecrow* can just as easily belong to: the Gothic, which frequently involves a communal effort to vanquish an evil threat, such as in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). By considering *The Scarecrow* as a Gothic novel, post-provincial writing in New Zealand can be seen as not just building on a local tradition of literary realism, but as engaging with a popular international tradition as well.

The 'elements of Gothic melodrama' in *The Scarecrow* were noted on its publication by the *Christchurch Press*, and in 1998 William Schafer deemed the novel a 'full-scale gothic' (1998: 122) containing a 'demonic and dreadful' figure 'who appears at the crossroads, where criminals were executed and vampires buried' (1998: 125). Certainly, the novel's eponymous villain – a murderous necrophiliac – is the stuff of Gothic nightmare, but the Gothic is also a form particularly suited to considerations of Morrieson's work since there is something Gothic about the writer himself. Morrieson lived almost his entire life in his childhood home in Hawera, cohabiting with his mother and elderly aunt, eventually becoming an alcoholic and local eccentric. After the death of his mother in 1968, Morrieson became increasingly despondent, drinking even more heavily, and he and his aunt lived in increasing poverty and decrepitude until Morrieson died following a heavy drinking binge. The Gothic tropes surrounding Morrieson's life – isolation, entrapment, excess, psychological disarray, decay – encouraged Shadbolt to align him with the deviant, calling him the 'Hermit of Hawera' (1973: 9), with Millen succumbing to a similar impulse to Gothicise when she describes Morrieson's house as 'haunted' (1996: 170). Millen cites the responses of two young cousins who occasionally visited Morrieson's home, which was deemed to be 'dark and spooky' with 'hideous' wallpaper. In addition to the unsettling tendency of the house to creak, one of the cousins relates that 'she once saw a strange figure standing at the top of the stairs' (Millen 1996: 99).

While it is always dangerous to conflate a writer's biography with their fiction, Morrieson's life (like that of Poe with whom Simpson compares him in terms of innovation) has Gothic elements that arguably make that mode an attractive one through which to explore his central concerns. As an unmarried man living in his childhood home with two older female relatives, rarely leaving the small provincial town of his birth and slowly drinking himself to death, we might well understand Morrieson's preoccupation with sexuality, particularly when repressed, and the goings on (frequently sordid) of small town communities. As Simpson's exploration of *The Scarecrow* makes abundantly clear, the novel represents the bogeyman figure of Salter, aka the Scarecrow, as an embodiment of the violent sexual urges that are latent not only in the schoolboy gang that terrorizes local girls, but also in the adolescent narrator Neddy Poindexter. Salter arrives in Klynham after fleeing police pursuit following the murder of a young girl, but the way he spends time 'skulking in a back

street, concealing himself in the shadows' (Morrieson 1963: 37) suggests his intimacy with the town. This is further borne out by the way that Salter first appears in Klynham as a reflection in a puddle that is said to be the town's distinguishing feature. The large pool of water in the middle of the main street is 'always there, even in the heart of summer' (1963: 36) and its existence 'has nothing to do with rain,' but is the result of 'subterranean forces' (1963: 36). The body of water that lies in the heart of the town is a manifestation of the uncanny; a site where material previously buried beneath the town's ordinary surface is released. At the start of the narrative the return of the repressed is associated most explicitly with the inebriated clientele of the Federal Hotel, for which it serves as 'the looking glass of many dissolute visages' (1963: 36), but while these reflections reify antisocial elements, the faces of drunken locals are nowhere near as threatening as the one that appears when the puddle serves as a mirror for the 'evil face' (1973: 36) of a rapist, murderer and necrophiliac.

Salter's first appearance in Klynham as a reflection in its distinguishing puddle suggests that he represents an irruption from *within* the community, with his sexual violence acting as a Gothicised version of the desires represented by Klynham's local gang of school boys who terrorise Neddy's sister Prudence and her friend Angela, and who 'practice' sexual acts on another boy. Moreover, the twisted desires that characterize Salter and, to a lesser degree, the Lynch gang are also experienced by Neddy as he navigates adolescence. The connection between the monstrously corrupt Salter and innocent young Neddy is most obvious in their feelings towards Prudence who acts as a locus of sexual desire throughout the novel. Salter has Prudence in his sights as his next victim, just as the Lynch gang makes two attempts to sexually assault her, while Neddy's emerging sexuality increasingly focuses on his older sister. Prudence is thus not only a potential victim of sexual violence whom Neddy strives to protect, but also a desired female body that connects Klynham's bogeyman and the novel's narrator. As Salter's appearance in the puddle attests, the desires he makes so horribly apparent are desires that similarly mark the good people of Klynham, and the connection between Salter and Neddy can be viewed as an analogy expressive of masculine subjectivities of desire while also expressing some of the difficulties associated with sexual maturation in provincial New Zealand.

The strange, sword-swallowing magician and necrophiliac who 'lurks in the shadows bearing a long knife' (Stead 1981: 102) is a figure representing the complex range of experiences associated with sexual desire experienced by Neddy as he comes of age. As Simpson notes, sexuality is a vital aspect of Morrieson's fiction and each of his novels 'focuses on a separate phase in the development of male sexuality', with *The Scarecrow* being 'a profound study of puberty' (1982: 8), Neddy is aware for the first time of sexual desire and his chief reason for going to the cinema is that 'There was always a chance of my bare arm brushing against the electrically charged flesh of Josephine McClinton' (1963: 6). Neddy's emerging desire causes him to begin to see his sister in a different way and he is 'coming around gradually to admitting she was ornamental in her own way' (1963: 18). As the narrative progresses, Neddy's sexual desires become more overt. In one episode, he gazes at Prudence as she attempts an acrobatic act in the local barn:

Prudence had stepped out of her skirt and, in tight, black knickers and blouse, was still attempting to swing over the beam. [...] Prudence's legs were gorgeous, full, curving, dusky. Because she was my sister I was a real skeleton at the feast, but I began to get the same feeling I experienced sitting naked in the Lucerne hay the night before (1963: 19).

Even though Prudence is his sister, Neddy appreciates her as a woman as well as a sibling, but the desire he experiences at the sight of her thighs nevertheless provokes feelings of guilt. After the arousing episode in the shed, Neddy returns home feeling 'unhappy and apprehensive', so much so that he is only able to eat half a sausage at dinner 'whereas I usually wolfed everything they gave me' (1963: 19).

It is in the midst of this sexual turmoil that Salter makes his appearance in Klynham bearing a knife that is emblematic of phallic power. His alarming appearance – he is 'a tall gaunt man' who is 'thin to the point of emaciation' (1963: 26) – is represented explicitly in terms of death when he is likened to 'the walking dead' (1963: 29) and 'a zombie' (1963: 31). As C. K. Stead notes, the figure of the Scarecrow acquires 'a symbolic quality. He is Death the magician, clever and fascinating as well as horrible, stalking in the shadows and savaging his victims' (Stead 1981: 103). The death that Salter is associated with is a violent death experienced predominantly by women and Morrieson provides sufficient psychological detail so that Salter can be diagnosed as a passive necrophiliac whose motivation for killing is to have an unresisting female to engage in sexual intercourse with. As Salter lurks in the back streets, he mutters to himself, 'The wolf bane is blooming again' (1963: 37), referring to a plant the name of which translates as 'without struggle' in Greek. This is key to Salter's pathology since his crimes are fuelled by sexual desire that requires a passive corpse and his arousal at the idea of an unresisting female body is not too different from the desires of the pubescent Neddy and Les. Thus, in spite of the monstrosity of Salter's crimes, Neddy and Les experience titillation when imagining them. They do not yet associate the murderer described in the newspapers with the weird magician who arrives in their town, but both are compelling in uncanny ways. Bringing up the subject of Salter's most recent crime, Les notes,

The one thing you can say about living in a sleepy hole like Klynham – yuh don't meet real bad sods like that. I wonder what those kids felt like when they saw her floating on the pond with her throat cut from ear to ear? Water as red as ink like as not. Can't yuh just imagine what that poor shiela must a looked like, Neddy, floating there with her throat gaping open from ear to ear, in the nood, and the water red as ink all around. Can'tcha just see the sorta bubbles (1963: 55).

After listening to this reverie, Neddy interrupts his friend, noting that 'the way you're going on you'd think we *had* found her. I've had just about a gutzfull uv the way you go on and on about things. Honestly yud think nothing would please you more than if yuh did find a nood shiela with her throat cut – floating on the lake' (1963: 55-6). Les's response to this accusation is not denial, but the echo 'In the nood' (1963: 56). Les then pretends to be dead, informing Neddy 'I'm conked [...] Root me'. Neddy's response takes a different turn from his previous disapproval of Les's titillation: 'I'll

root you awright,' he hisses, pouncing on his friend, 'and I'll cut yuh throat and chuck yuh in the lake too' (1963: 56).

Salter's perversion is a Gothicised rendition of the young boys' desires for available female bodies in the 'nood'. This desire similarly characterises the Lynch gang who practise on a boy called Peachy in anticipation of 'the great day when they could procure the genuine article – girls' (1963: 79). For Neddy, Peachy represents the 'depths of depravity' (1963: 80), but the real depravity of the situation comes when the gang demands that Prudence become a member. Neddy comes to realize that they wish her to be 'the genuine article' that Peachy is merely a substitute for and although he is outraged by this possibility, there is nevertheless a fascination involved as well, as evidenced by the following exchange between Les and Neddy when they realize what the gang wanted:

"The dirty sods," Les said, horrified. "What were they gunna do to her, Ned?"

"You-know," I told him, thinking of Josephine McClinton.

"The dirty sods," said Les. "You mean they were gunna you-know?" (1963: 97)

Both boys are certainly outraged yet their horror is accompanied by arousal, as highlighted by the conflation in Neddy's mind between the intended assault of Prudence and the sexual fantasies he indulges in about his crush Josephine.

When Les begins to visit Neddy nearly every night in order to have one of their 'increasingly ignorant and filthy (but delightful) bedside chats about 'you-know' Neddy realizes that his friend is 'carrying a torch' for his sister (1963: 97). Prudence is thus a loci for sexual desire in the novel since in addition to receiving the attentions of Les, Neddy, the Lynch gang and Salter, she also experiences the husband of her employer making a pass at her and the local constable launching a more invested attempt at courtship. The possible dangers that Prudence faces as a result of her sexual appeal are documented through Salter's desire, most noticeably in a sword-swallowing scene that Simpson describes as 'heavy with sexual suggestiveness' (Simpson 1982: 21). After Salter is invited into the Poindexter home, he stages a display of his circus skills that also involves hypnotism. Under the helpless and 'appalled gaze' of the family Salter produces from under his coat 'the longest-bladed knife' (1963: 119) that Neddy has ever seen and proceeds to lower it down his throat. Following this unnerving display, Salter's performance focuses on Prudence:

Slowly he withdrew the fearsome knife and passed it to Prudence. She fingered the steel in awe. He retrieved it from her, but instead of returning it to its place of concealment under his coat, he pressed the hilt against Prudence's chin so that the blade glittered down between her breasts, reaching to the pit of her stomach.

"Behold, my child," said Salter, "its length. Behold how far that razor-sharp edge would sink into your lush and virginal body" (1963: 122-23).

This explicit threat to Prudence's virginity occurs at the heart of the most homely space, the kitchen, which adds to its horror but which also provides protection since Neddy summons his courage and calls on the familiarity of home to break the spell and protect his sister from harm. 'To do what I did,' Neddy explains, 'I had to remind

myself that this was our own kitchen [...] I coughed and the evil spell he was weaving shattered' (1963: 123).

Salter's power is occult *and* ordinary since his unnerving magic tricks occur in the domestic realm and are thwarted by something as simple as a cough. This suggests that the threats Prudence faces are not only foreign, but are all too familiar. While it is Salter's 'great height, the vulture-like face, the strange eyes and the long knife' that arouse 'terror' (1963: 126) in Prudence and Neddy, his leering advances towards Prudence are not dissimilar from those she already experiences from Uncle Athol who exposes himself to her, the husband of her employer who attempts to kiss her and unbutton her blouse, and Mr Dabney who is so excited by the sight of Prudence trying on stockings that he 'practically had to be held down' (1963: 65). Even Neddy's lustful feelings for his sister take a more disquieting turn following a less than satisfactory experiment with Les in which they drunkenly attempt 'what the Lynchites must be doing with Peachy' (1963: 128). This episode fills Neddy with shame and he finds himself 'sick with desire for a girl':

In my bedroom, thinking feverishly about Josephine McClinton and heaven knows how many other girls and even grown women I had seen about the town, a sudden twist in my apple-jack-clouded mental processes set me shaking all over. Ousting every favourite erotic image from my mind was now the vivid picture of Prudence, in her tight and skimpy black knickers, swinging from the beam in the twilight, musky-smelling shed. I was obsessed with the recollection of her legs and the coppery glow beneath the soft skin. I shook from head to toe with a delicious desire. I hung around the washhouse waiting for Prudence, listening, above my hammering blood, for her footfalls, and planning for her to catch me exposed, so that her blood would race as mysteriously as mine (1963: 128).

Here Neddy becomes as predatory as the adults who desire Prudence, with the novel suggesting that the qualities of Salter, who murders, rapes and defiles women, are also qualities found to a certain extent in the most familiar faces of the community, even innocent Neddy who imagines exposing himself to his sister in precisely the same way as does his drunken Uncle.

The connection between Salter's transgressive desires and Neddy's burgeoning sexuality is made particularly explicit when the young narrator experiences a horrifying series of images as he falls asleep. Beginning with the image of kissing Josephine, Neddy suddenly becomes afraid of death, feeling his 'skin tautening' over his cheekbones and his 'blood running cold.' This is no sleep, Neddy realises: 'Josephine was a corpse; I was dying in her blackening arms' (1963: 142-43). When Neddy rouses himself from this necrophiliac fantasy, he hears Prudence's footsteps approaching and he soon learns that she has only narrowly escaped Salter's clutches. It is thus precisely when Salter is stalking Prudence through the dark streets of Klynham that Neddy imagines himself to be in the arms of a dead female.

When Angela disappears following an encounter with the Lynch gang, who rip her dress from her as she attempts to flee, Neddy's awareness of the fine line between his natural sexual desires and those represented by predators such as the Lynch gang and Salter becomes more pronounced. Previously, Neddy had indulged in plans to corner

Angela and kiss her, knowing that she is likely to comply. Interestingly, Angela's perceived availability is figured by Neddy as a problem: he is 'very anxious to steer Angela off somewhere and try out kissing her' but 'the trouble with Angela was that she was such a sweet-natured girl [...] She was not the sort of person you envisaged having any trouble kissing once you could corner her' (1963: 136). Angela's compliance should be a positive for Neddy, who is dying to experience some sort of physical connection with a girl, but by positioning her good-naturedness as something of a problem, Neddy seems to imply that he would rather his attempt at kissing involve some sort of resistance.

The ambiguity of Neddy's desire for Angela takes a terrible turn when she is discovered dead following her disappearance. The murder and rape of Angela 'froze Klynham in its tracks' (1963: 202) and it has a similarly shocking effect for Neddy:

The recollection of wishing to kiss Angela distressed me. That my shell could have ever harboured even a distant cousin of the frenzy which had raged in some murderous fiend seemed unbelievable. Les and I had very little to say. The memory of a thousand conversations about sex hung over us like a pall. We had found and discussed with great animation a beautiful flower in a beautiful garden and now its stench had knocked us flat (1963: 203).

Here Neddy recognizes that the terrible perversions that have resulted in Angela's death are not unrelated to the natural desires he feels. On some level, he is aware that the desires of the 'murderous fiend' responsible for Angela's death are deviations of his own rather than something entirely other.

Yet, of course, Neddy is not a necrophiliac and murderer, and while his desires might seem out of control it is Salter who is the real threat to the safety of the town and it is the Poindexter family who band together in order to eradicate it. Prudence is kidnapped by Salter, but she is eventually rescued by her boyfriend Len and her brothers, and Salter is killed accidentally when he hits his head after being punched. This encourages Simpson to argue that the novel 'ends "happily"', with Angela being a 'substitute victim' in place of Prudence (1982: 21). Comedy, Simpson concludes, 'is transformed into tragicomedy, as it were, but not into tragedy', with Angela's death confirming 'that the evil represented by the Scarecrow is real and powerful but not absolute. The survival of Prudence is an affirmation of goodness and vitality; the victory of life over death' (Simpson 1982: 21). Yet Simpson is wrong to read the ending as entirely reassuring. Neddy and Les do indeed experience their first longed-for sexual encounter on the very night that Prudence is kidnapped by Salter, which Simpson argues modifies 'Neddy's pessimism over the 'stench' of sexuality' (1982: 21), but even Neddy's thrill at receiving a kiss cannot fully give the novel the upbeat ending Simpson insists on. Prudence is rescued and set to marry her constable beau, and the threat embodied by the diabolical Scarecrow is eradicated, but there is still a disquieting element to the text in that Klynham remains terrorized by the Lynch gang who threatened to take turns with Prudence against her will, and who chased and terrorized Angela, as well as haunted by the lecherous drunk Uncle Athol. Furthermore, the novel's opening image of Salter's face reflected in the puddle on

Klynham's main street remains a troubling reminder of the way the text represents evil as a force emerging from the depths of the town. Les's innocent, yet oddly chilling comment as he watches Prudence carried to safety after her kidnapping and beating by Salter (during which she loses her front teeth) suggests that masculine desire in the small town continues to contain an element of disregard to female subjectivity:

“Well, Neddy,” he said to me after we had watched Len Ramsbottom carrying my sister away with her arms around his neck, “I love Prudence so much that I'd uv died if anything had happened to her, but after Marjorie Headley last night sticking her tongue down muh throat and everything, I can't help feeling maybe yuh sister is too old for me. Thas zactly what I thought, Neddy, as soon as Marjorie started this tongue business. I thought, well, Prudence Poindexter is certainly the prettiest girl in town, but I guess she's just too old for me and too dern set in her ways” (1963: 231).

Neddy's response to this comment following his sister's narrow escape is more than apt: ‘I lacked the energy to make a suitable reply. My stomach was too empty to tolerate such feeble chatter’ (1963: 231).

Sargeson draws attention to the ‘real’ threats of Klynham that are made manifest in the figure of the Scarecrow when he notes that ‘it is the children, in particular the narrator, who first become aware that a kind of complementary ‘real life horror’ is very much alive in the community’ (1983: 188). The main subject of *The Scarecrow* then is less the nightmarish bogeyman figure of the title than the sexual desires that reverberate throughout Klynham, and this is perhaps part of the reason why the novel did not enjoy more success on its publication. A murderous necrophiliac is certainly horrifying, but it can more easily be relegated to the realms of Gothic fantasy than a realistically rendered small town thrumming with sexual desire only tenuously held in check. The Scarecrow is thus the threat in the foreground, while what Martin Edmond terms the ‘psychic underbelly of the community as a whole’ (2006: 37) is the threat in the background. Ultimately, Prudence is at risk not just from a monstrous necrophiliac, but also from the array of men who seek to use her for their own gratification. Edmond argues that all of Morrieson's novels are ‘lurid’ and that his sexual imagination is ‘prurient and adolescent and revolves almost exclusively around fantasy’ (2006: 33), which is certainly true, but this comment overlooks Morrieson's clear-eyed account of masculine desire and the awareness of the potential dangers such desires pose to those who are vulnerable.

There is an important question to consider in light of Morrieson's concerns and that is to what extent *The Scarecrow* makes the reader complicit with the very things it purports to condemn. As Edmond's use of the term ‘prurient’ suggests, there is an element of voyeurism in the text that complicates the more obvious elements of social critique. On the one hand, Neddy's sympathies with Prudence and Angela invite the reader to interrogate the assumptions that see them figured largely in terms of victims of male desire, but on the other hand, the narrative point of view frequently forces the reader into taking on the very perspective the novel is working to, at least in part, condemn. When Prudence finds herself alone in the back alleys and becomes aware of

'being watched from behind one of the chapel windows' (1963: 152), the reader registers this as yet another example of Salter's gaze that sees Prudence in terms of a sexualised female body, but in other episodes the reader is forced into seeing her in those very terms. As Prudence relates her tipsy fumbling with a suitor at the beach, Neddy's perspective, which the reader shares, focuses on Prudence in a way not dissimilar from Salter's voyeurism:

She looked so pretty, it made me feel sick. Now I was getting that sitting in the hay feeling. With sickening clarity, I saw the scene in those desolate sandhills. Wine! You-know! Pru! With those eyelashes! Sometimes I think passion can be compared to a magnifying glass with a lens in direct ratio to blood heat, or specific gravity, or whatever it is that nature has evolved to ensure the propagation of the species. Under her dress, her slim thighs became an acre of pulsating mystery (1963: 147).

Here the reader veers between seeing Prudence as a young woman beginning to explore her sexuality and as an objectified figure cut up into portions, such as eyelashes and thighs. Thus the first person narrative perspective simultaneously offers a critique of the dark elements underlying the town's ordinary surface and is also complicit in those violent currents.

The novel's ambivalence springs in large part from its narrative perspective, which Simpson discusses in some detail. While much of the narrative suggests the viewpoint of a young adolescent, the musings in the first two pages of the novel about how to tell a story suggest a far more mature Neddy who is not a naïve recorder of events but a sophisticated writer. Although Neddy attempts to present himself as a naïve chronicler of actual events by suggesting that his attempt to relate Klynham's recent history might involve him 'biting off more than I can chew' since his only recommendations for the task is that he was present for many of the events and he is 'a keen reader' whose school essays were thought to be 'quite good' (1963: 1), Neddy's representation of himself as a reporter of fact with only childish literary skills is undercut when he admits that there are some elements of the story that are closer to fiction than fact:

So it looks like it is over to me to go ahead and, in retrospect, piece together the entire grisly and dramatic episode. Nearly all should turn out to be a genuine blow-by-blow account. Some of it will have been told to me, of course, and some extra elusive bits and pieces may force me to use my imagination; but surely I get some licence if I am really going to blow the top off that strange affair at last. Grant me a little licence, then, is my plea (1963: 2).

Neddy's plea for dramatic licence and his admission that 'nearly all' of the account is genuine points to the fact that some of the narrative's episodes, such as Salter violating a corpse in the funeral home – an event witnessed only by a young man who is then killed – are entirely invented by Neddy. This means that in addition to the 'factual' reportage of disturbing events and its attendant social critique, a significant element of the text relies on the imagination of an older Neddy and its attendant subjectivity of masculine desires.

As a genre, the Gothic frequently focuses on the subject's repressed fears and desires and in *The Scarecrow* the monstrous figure of Salter stands for sexual desires that the

young Neddy both feels and longs to disavow. In spite of his older brother's advice regarding the harmlessness of masturbation, Neddy's fantasies about 'being very naughty' with Josephine continue to leave him 'miserable and contrite' (1963: 108). Neddy's sexual desires remain very much repressed and, just as he highlights the uncanny nature of the events that unfolded in Klynham by describing them as constituting the 'darkest chapter in the whole history of the town, and, just like I have heard said that 'Murder will out', it seems to me that the true story is bursting to be told' (1963: 11), Neddy's desires are bound to be 'outed' as well, with the figure of the Scarecrow becoming, in Simpson's words, 'a nightmarish intensification of what Neddy fears about himself.' Salter's 'weirdly compelling gaze' (1963: 46) and extraordinarily large knife are forms of power that Neddy both longs for and fears. On the one hand, such power can be wielded to obtain one's desires, but on the other hand, the damage to others that this power can cause is made all too apparent in the string of corpses Salter leaves in his wake.

The most compelling aspect of the text, however, is the return of repressed desires attributable to the older Neddy, such as the imagined scene representing the desecration of Mabel Collinson's corpse as witnessed solely by Sam Finn. This scene is the product of the older version of Neddy and its register is very different to the innocent lust young Neddy experiences watching girls playing netball. Young Neddy's titillation over Josephine's skimpy gym frock stands in stark contrast to the older narrative voice describing Mabel's 'nylon-sheathed legs' and 'high heels' (1963: 105), which set up the scene of desecration – in which Mabel's head is 'oddly askew' and her body is naked save for 'a nightdress pulled up above her breasts' (1963: 105) – in a disturbingly erotic way. This is similarly true for the description of Daphne Moran's 'ravished, nude body' (1963: 33) and the 'ravished, sneering body' (1963: 38) of Salter's murdered circus assistant Zita. The repetition of the phrase 'ravished body' suggests that the text is expressing a certain compulsion attributable to the older version of Neddy, and it is significant that he has little difficulty imagining the way that 'Ecstasy flooded [Salter's] loins and genitals' (1963: 37) when remembering Daphne's murder or the 'mad exhilaration' (1963: 38) aroused by Zita's. Although the novel certainly works towards a happy ending with Prudence's deliverance and the eradication of the Scarecrow, these moments of dark eroticism suggest that the desires associated with the novel's eponymous villain are, to some degree, in existence within the psyche of Neddy, both as a boy and as a man.

Morrieson's insistence on uncovering the darker aspects of sexual desire, coupled with the uncomfortable narrative perspective that forces the reader to take on voyeuristic and predatory viewpoints, is what makes *The Scarecrow* a compelling novel worthy of republication, just as it is more than likely the reason for its initial neglect. The existence of a necrophiliac murderer is disturbing enough, but the irruption in the text of an eroticism seemingly shared by the Scarecrow and adult Neddy is extremely unsettling, and is certainly what encouraged one reader's outraged response to Morrieson's work: 'The is certainly not the New Zealand that I know' (quoted in Simpson 1982: 12). If some readers longed to disavow the version of New Zealand to be found in Morrieson's novel, the author himself remains intent on confessing its reality. Living in an increasingly decrepit house in a small provincial

town, accompanied by elderly female relatives and gradually drinking himself to death, Morrieson turns to the Gothic mode as the ideal form through which to express his vision of New Zealand life. This version of New Zealand does not deny the potentially violent and uncontrollable nature of human desire and insists that the Scarecrow is not other at all but, as his appearance in the puddle suggests, is actually a part of ordinary life that can never be completely eradicated. Certainly *The Scarecrow* contains significant elements of comedy and ends with Prudence rescued and Salter killed, but as a Gothic the ending is far more troubling in that the desires embodied by Salter are expressed by the adult Neddy and, on some level, experienced by the reader. It is this quality that supports Morrieson's descriptions of *The Scarecrow* as 'a kind of thriller I suppose, but I think it's also a work of art' (quoted in Millen 1996: 176).

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