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“People Connected to the Sky in Their Mind”: Chaos and Mental Illness in Janet Frame and Patricia Grace

Abstract:

Two women writers in New Zealand literature have offered an impressive representation of mental disease: Janet Frame and Patricia Grace. Both view the chaos in their characters' mind as a gift which enables them to have a deeper insight into time and space or be “Sky People”, in Grace's terms. The “mentally ill” also come to symbolize the outcasts, those who do not fit in a reality dominated by monological inflections of identity and ruled by the principle of rationality, which treats imagination as chaos or an infection. This paper will focus on a comparative analysis of some of their fictions in order to show how the different cultural and ethnic background of the two writers (European for Frame and Maori for Grace) affects the characters' perception of insanity and chaos. Frame's account of mental illness is pervaded by deep sorrow, isolation and sense of guilt – a peculiar version of Christian martyrdom often ending up in lobotomy, that is, the sacrifice of imagination (chaos) to the god of reason (order). On the contrary, in Grace the chaos of insanity can turn into a vital and creative force, which reflects Maori cosmogony.

Keywords: Janet Frame, Patricia Grace, chaos, mental illness, holistic medicine, Greek cosmogony, Maori cosmogony, psychiatry.

Paola Della Valle completed her doctorate in English at the University of Torino in 2008, specializing in New Zealand literature. Her articles appeared in *English Studies*, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *NZSA Bulletin of New Zealand Studies*, *Il Castello di Elsinore* and *Quaderni del '900*. She has published the monograph *From Silence to Voice: The Rise of Maori Literature* (Oratia Media, Auckland 2010) and an essay on the use of Italian melodrama in Witi Ihimaera's *The Matriarch* in the volume *Experiences of Freedom in Postcolonial Literatures and Cultures* (S. Bassi and A. Oboe eds, Routledge, London & New York 2011).