

**CARMEL BIRD'S *THE WHITE GARDEN*:
SYMBOLS AND IMAGES IN A SPACE OF THEIR OWN**

M.^a DEL CARMEN RODRÍGUEZ FERNÁNDEZ
Universidad de Oviedo

ABSTRACT. The White Garden shows the most worked, formal and contained use of the language existing in the chasm between the conscious and the unconscious. This is the territory that the novel explores because the female characters adopt different personifications and they subvert the personalities of the women they stand for enjoying the status of deluded women. The boundary between the conscious, the symbolic order superimposed by Goddard, and the unconscious, the pre-Oedipal phase in which the dreams strive to appear from the subconscious in the privacy of the cell becomes the mainstay of the novel. The outcome of all this is a rich and profuse web of influences and cross-referencing; a transposition of systems of signs that results in a dense and complex relationship whose imagery is achieved by means of the white garden, a representation of female freedom and triumph.

There has been a resurgence of women's writing in Australia since the 1960s and we can account for it in a number of ways since there was, first of all, the rise of feminism and an accompanying appreciation of women's writing, then a proliferation of publishers and the appearance of women's studies courses in universities that helped to promote their writing. This coincides with the stage termed "female" by Showalter which, in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), she defines as a stage of self-discovery as women free themselves from reacting to patriarchal values and turn inward, searching for their own independent female identity. The articulation of subjectivity is one of the fields that women have felt the need to explore in their works since their thoughts and most

intimate feelings had been silenced and inarticulated for so long a time. Their awareness of the complexity of relationships in the modern world and the nuances of power in all relationships distinguishes them skilfully in the use of experimental techniques to convey their insights in these matters.

Postmodernism and metafiction, as experimental narrative strategies, serve the purpose of allowing the plurality of new voices and heterogeneities to be subject writers that command over their own existences and experiences. These have favoured all the minorities and since feminism had always been marginal with respect to the literary canon, the new trends have helped women's writing to gain a solid position in the literary studies of the last third of the 20th. century.

One of the main difficulties women had to face in their struggle to be subjects of their lives and not the objects of male definitions was precisely this: to assert their own right to be mistresses of their existences and of their experiences, to be able to see through their own eyes/ I's and to reject being the outcome of the male gaze. The wordplay that these two terms create enriches the meaning of "seeing through". The identification of the subject "I" and "eyes" enables women to articulate and construct their identities by codifying what they have seen and how they have assimilated it.

Claiming authority over one's own life has not been an easy task either in literature or in life. Along the 20th. century women had to face constantly the risk of becoming trapped by the engendered social construct of "the angel in the house" and the desire to be sympathetic, tender and deceitful, so as not to show a mind of one's own and to conciliate men's ideas. It is only when women writers kill that fictitious ghost¹ -the centered understanding that patronising writing has been inflicting on women and on women's writing- that women have been able to exert authority over their own experiences.

Postmodernism theory has played a decisive role as regards women's studies. One to one have favoured and enriched their scopes: the difference and excentricity that epitomise postmodernism have replaced homogeneity and centrality, that the canonical literature had as its mainstay, and has allowed women to have the command of their own lives and of their life-stories. As Hutcheon says:

Feminisms have transformed art practice: through new forms, new self-consciousness about representation, and new awareness of both contexts and particularities of gendered experience. They have made women artists more aware of themselves as women and as artists (...) feminisms have also refocused attention on the politics of representation and knowledge- and therefore also on power. (Hutcheon 1989: 143)

1. V. Woolf in "Professions for Women", *The Death of the Moth and other Essays*. Pp. 237-238.

Carmel Bird (*The White Garden*, 1994), Elizabeth Jolley (*Miss Peabody's Inheritance*, 1983) and Drusilla Modjeska's (*The Orchard*, 1995) are some of the contemporary Australian writers whose novels deal with the unfulfilled and lonely lives of women. Their works offer a wide range of possibilities by decentralising the strict notion of novel as the piece of narrative with a central and unique plot, one story line and the hierarchisation of main and secondary characters. These writers, however differently, stretch to the utmost the possibilities of their texts and of their protagonists and stories. They are at times self-reflective and provide their narrative structures with a meaningful figurative language and a richness that postmodernism and feminism exploit successfully.

The French school of Psychoanalysis is one of the mainstays for the study of Bird's novel, since the proposed analysis of symbols and images has its basis on the estrangement produced on the girl child when the acquisition of language marks her entry into the social world. Professor Walker (1996: 17) referring to the French feminists, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva says that: "[they] all consider that this entry into the social world, the World of the Father, involves some crippling effect on the female psyche". Psychoanalysis has produced some powerful and original ways of thinking about language -the symbolic order- and has studied how it has imposed its grid of meaning in the form of a system of binary oppositions: masculine and feminine, self and other, good and evil. By this means language continually reproduces "reality" as a hierarchy of values which sustains the interests of dominant power whereas the unconscious disrupts, then, any attempts to control social meaning, being condensed and displaced in language in what Kristeva calls "the semiotic modality", or rhythmic semiotic traces that provide and remain the foundation of all language. A psychoanalytical approach is of much help if we want to analyse the importance of the internalisation of religious education in the characters and if we wish to interpret the *white garden* as that space in the novel in which characters free themselves from the symbolic order to outpour their unfulfilled desires.

Carmel Bird published *Cherry Ripe* (1985) and *The Blackbird Café* (1990) before writing her ambitious novel *The White Garden* (1994); this has Mandala Psychiatric Clinic as the backdrop of the hidden desires, frustrations and the internalised religious anxieties that women need to release after centuries of patriarchal discourse. The surface of the story tells us the investigation that Vickie's sister, Laura, reconstructs in order to find out the circumstances of her sister's death, but as Sharkey (1995: 8) said: "you can enter through various doors ... [the novel] is an exposé of a monomaniacal doctor's deep-sleep clinic; a critique of psychiatric institutions in the 1960s; a detective fiction; a study in religious mania; a lyrical celebration of the power of sibling affection." What lies behind the murder mystery is the rich world of the female with a profuse use of symbols and images that tells us how women survive in a world of men by creating and tendering

their own *gardens* and developing a worldwide web of sisterhood that expands through history. This is a story where the semiotic outgrows the symbolic order by letting the subconscious of the characters arise out of the urgency of their drives in the privacy of their cell. Bird gives the female characters provenance, voices and personalities that enable them to struggle for the articulation of their selves in the small and contained world of the hospital, in a hostile environment that puts into practice with the patients the most inappropriate psychiatric methods.

Carmel Bird wrote *The White Garden* out of a series of events that happened in Australia and shocked Australian society in 1991.² She wrote the stories of some women at Mandala Psychiatric Clinic, in what she called “Faction”, that is fiction which is closely based on fact. As Bird (1993: 10) has commented in her article “Fact or Fiction,” “Life is a crude invention; fiction will only be convincing if it is more artful than life.”³ For Walker (1996: 95) *The White Garden* is considered as:

[a] more interesting example in that it is a fictional and poetic construction based not on one story, as is autobiography, but on a number, from Australia, medieval Spain, nineteenth century France and the bohemian world of Bloomsbury set in aristocratic England. All these sources are interwoven and interconnected in a complex and dramatic world.

By means of adopting the surrogate selves of Catholic saints in some examples, or the persona of a well-known girl actress and a modernist writer in others, the characters in *The White Garden* subvert the personalities of the women they stand for and enjoy the status of deluded women; this enables them to develop the possibility of articulating their selves in the shadowlands of delusion, in the privacy of the cell and in the open-air white garden, without showing any overt signs of assertiveness. The outcome of all this is a rich and profuse web of influences and cross-referencing; a transposition of systems of signs that together with hagiography and its religious exaltation and the modernist sexual freedom, that the referential characters convey, results in a dense and complex relationship whose imagery is well achieved by the skillful embroidery of lacemaking, as an exhibition of the importance of creativity and of sisterhood in a deprived female world.

Mandala Psychiatric Clinic is the place where the women considered insane by their husbands or by their parents are brought in order to receive the therapy that Ambrose

2. In that year Brian Bromberger and Janet Fife-Yeoman published *Deep Sleep: Harry Bailey and the Scandal of Chelmsford*. The research is based upon the psychiatrist Harry Bailey and the medical treatments he tested on his patients. As a result it had several judicial enquiries and a Royal Commission.

3. Faction is often applied to autobiography which, it is generally acknowledged, is an imaginative and slanted reconstruction of the writer's life-story. No matter how straightforward autobiography seems to be, it invariably contains an element of selection, of rearrangement and omission of facts which might conflict with the writer's self-image. (Walker 1996: 94-95).

[God]dard, the medical controller provides for them. This is achieved by means of pills, drugs and all sort of harmful deeds. The not so innocent husbands and the victimised mothers rely on him and on his methods and Goddard commits himself to bringing them back to the world as “right as rain” since, in his own words, they only need “a good fuck” (Bird 1995: 24). Wives driven half-mad and young girls with a strange behaviour will find in Mandala a place where they are put aside for a time. From the patriarchal point of view they are protected in that contained world; they will recover and give up the suspicious attitudes they had shown in front of parents and husbands, and after the treatment they will go back to the outer world submitted and humiliated by Goddard’s therapy, ready to behave according to the hierarchical patterns.

The overcharged symbolism of the mental house as place of seclusion, where a lot of women are tied to their beds in their own urine and defecations, and where the power is enforced by the jargon of psychiatry and the mystery surrounding the medical practices, is embodied and carried out by Goddard who controls their lives. This symbolic order which tries to structure all their “thoughts, intellect and visions to conform with patriarchal values and power” (Walker 1996: 91) opposes to the limitless possibilities that the female characters show, once they construct their own defiant language system and feel free from the patriarch’s clutches in their *white garden*. The deluded embodiments allow them to develop their own creative worlds in the privacy that the cell convey or in the white garden, built on the premises of the clinic. In addition to these meaningful settings, there also exists a kinship of sorority developed by all the characters throughout the novel that constitutes the main thread on which to link the filigree that finely knitted and webbed provides the backdrop for an immense tissue of siblings, friends and internalised models, all of them part of the fragmented history of women. The main ideas on which the interpretation of the *white garden* as the metaphorical space for creativity and sisterhood is grounded arise from approaching this novel from, the already mentioned, psychoanalytical perspectives, since there exists in the novel a double plane, that of the semiotics referring to the actual organisation or disposition within the body of instinctual drives under the domain of position and judgement, that of the symbolic.

Julia Kristeva read Jacques Lacan’s *Écrits* when it was first published, the year she arrived in Paris and together with Marxism and linguistics, psychoanalysis was to have a determining influence in the development of her theories (Roudiez in Introduction to Kristeva 1980: 4). Lacan and Kristeva agreed in their linking of language to the unconscious. Lacan referred to the dual planes on which language operates to the possibility we have “of using it in order to signify *something quite other* than what it says” (Lacan in Kristeva 1980: 4). According to Kristeva’s theory of language and to the construction of subject identity, there exists a language in the pre-Oedipal relationship

between mother and child which provides and remains the foundation of all language. In this preverbal semiotic phase, “the child has acquired no sense of separate identity; its physical experience is part of a continuum with the maternal body” (Kristeva in Morris 1995: 144). Once the language is acquired the child enters the symbolic order, which is the aspect of language that the child directs towards the object world of other people and things. Morris (1995: 145) continues saying: “however the symbolic disposition is also driven by an urge to master and control, through the act of defining, what is other and potentially threatening to the self.”

Kristeva’s theory offers then the clue for this reading as there exists a confrontation between Goddard and the female characters. The symbolic order is imposed by Goddard through the different therapies and myriads of different pills, all of them encoded with letters and colours,

Ambrose fished into the pocket of his jacket and brought out a handful of capsules. They lay in his open palm like the eggs of sinister and exotic spiders. Their shiny skins were marked with small letters and numbers- F63 on the ones that were half orange half blue. LOL5 on the pink and green, F33 on the blue. R365C on the violet and fawn- their colours and symbols part of a secret, powerful and deadly language. (Bird 1995 : 28)

or when he is making his own mind on Therese’s behaviour and goes on developing his particular encoded language: “makes bad sense. Won’t eat, won’t talk, won’t anything. Fading away. Needs to be taken in hand. Needs thrashing. Needs ECT (Electro- Convulsive Therapy), DST (Deep Sleep Therapy). Needs fuck.” (Bird 1995: 51). Goddard’s discourse identifies openly with the symbolic, with the urge to master and control the lives of women; consequently this imposed order fractures even more the already fragmented selves of the women under his care: “After a while, behind the tall doors of Mandala, behind the windows locked and barred, within the mist, beyond the veil, beyond the light, beyond the darkness, the women ceased to exist in any ordinary way.” (Bird 1995: 21)

The female world in the novel identifies with the semiotic modality, in so far as it shows to what extent the women characters need to bind and nurture on the link that they, as girls, had established with their mothers and elder sisters in the premises of the house; these ties of complete and uninhibited pleasures clash with the order imposed in the next field of influence, the school, and turn into a psychological struggle between the unbound physical experience that they had enjoyed in the pre-Oedipal phase and the models that they internalised after years of a repressive and hierarchichal education. The struggle between the scopes of wishes and impulses and that of rules and control gives as a result the profuse and meaningful outpourings of the characters. The subjects arriving at Mandala find a superimposed order to which some of them submit and are defeated, whereas other characters overcome the urge for fixity that Goddard tries to exert upon them and become embodiments of the female triumph that the novel inspires.

Bird builds up her novel around a white garden following the real one made by Vita Sackville-West in England fifty years before. The narrator explains what a White Garden is at the beginning of the novel, one of the few times that Ambrose Goddard's wife, Abigail, articulates her voice:

'A White Garden doesn't mean you just go mad with the white flowers,' she said. 'It's all a matter of light and shade and dark greens and light greens and silvers and greys. The overall impression is a sort of shimmering whiteness (...) The white ones seem to linger and hover - even when you think there was no light at all to reflect. It is almost as if they store up light. And because they depend on insects that come out in the early evening they have strong fragrances that haunt the night air. I realise you won't be seeing all this, but it is good to know about it.' (Bird 1995: 18)

This quotation is of paramount importance for the understanding of the symbolism and imagery implied; it catches the attention of the alert readers at the time that it gives the explanation and semiotic connotations that the images and metaphors of the garden convey.

Vita Sackville-West had created a White Garden in Sissinghurst after the II World War out of an aesthetic principle and as a response to a series of events, and had related them all to her situation as a woman in a masculine world. Some years before, in 1929, her friend and writer, Virginia Woolf had written the paradigmatic essay in the field of Women's Studies *A Room of One's Own*: an encouragement to all the women to have, not just, the physical room, but the space in life to develop the authority of the self and the articulation of the voice by means of one's creation, distinctive and different from the hierarchical voice heard and proclaimed for centuries. What Woolf explained clearly in her essay, Vita did literally and metaphorically at Sissinghurst. She found her space in the physical premises of the garden, outside the constrained limits of the house, although in a world considered feminine. When speaking of her source, Bird lets us know that Vita enjoyed going out in the moonlight and planting until midnight sometimes. She enjoyed the evenings and the nights, mostly. The combination that the moon and the garden exerted upon the socially controverted spirit of Vita fulfills the meaning that the use of these words imply as metaphors. By means of the effect of the moonlight over her garden, she found her identity as a woman in that space. The result of the shadows at twilight reflected her hazardous and socially unaccepted bisexuality, and the upshot of whiteness at night showed her own inarticulated position in a male dominant society.

Bird did the same in her novel following and achieving the same aim: she made the female characters partake of the creation and the tendering of the White Garden, that physical area where the characters tendered their flowers and that metaphorical space where they solaced, took refuge, or made themselves strong and assertive by delusion: a representation of female freedom and triumph. The White Garden becomes then the

ruling metaphor on which the novel is articulated. Goddard agrees to its construction because from a patriarchal approach it is closely related to the social construction of the feminine: he considers it a metaphorical extension of the cultural engenderment of values and virtues that society must foster in women; the whiteness being the reference to purity and to the internalised model of the Virgin Mary, whereas the garden, still in the premises of the house, is the extension of the house where women can authorise as a complement or a substitute to motherhood.

From feminist views and according to postmodernist principles this backdrop is a self-referential setting of freedom, an epitome of what Kristeva calls “jouissance”: “[it] is sexual, spiritual, conceptual at one and the same time ... In Kristeva’s vocabulary, sensual, sexual pleasure is conveyed by plaisir, jouissance is total joy or ecstasy” (Roudiez in Kristeva 1980: 16). This place of female freedom and triumph holds plural connotations. What Goddard cannot imagine is that the garden does not symbolise the feminine but the female world meaningfully. For these characters it becomes a representation of the semiotics, a space beyond the symbolic. It is the place where the women subjects disport themselves, far from the male gaze, and where they try to find their articulation and identity, away from the gender construction the patriarchal world provides.

Bird (1995: 18) gives us hints for the understanding of the *white garden* as the place of female disinhibition when Goddard’s wife, Abigail, says: “It’s all a matter of light and shade and dark greens and light greens and silvers and greys.” According to Kristeva’s interpretations of the colours (1980: 220-221): “colour might therefore be the space where the prohibition foresees and gives rise to its own immediate transgression ... it is through colour -colours- that the subject escapes its alienation within a code.” The writer insists on the importance of the pre-Oedipal phase when, giving the voice to Abigail, she says: “even when you think there was no light at all to reflect. It is almost as if they store up light” (Bird 1995: 18), meaning the importance of the first thoughts in a child’s mind. The associative references between the *white garden* and the attitudes shown by the characters continue throughout the novel when Therese Gillis outpours her thoughts and refers to the sexual rapes that occur in the deep sleep chamber: “I was pierced by a sharp and terrible point, slashed between the legs” Bird (1995: 82) and when Abigail says that “they depend on insects that come out in the early evening” (Bird 1995: 18). The dialectic interaction of the symbolic and the semiotic modalities appears in the text by means of the drives of the protagonists and the superimposed order fixed by Goddard.

Therefore the *white garden* offers the female characters a space of their own at the patronising world of Mandala. The clinic is full of patients, in the strictest sense of the word, and the outstanding characters have all embodied the personalities of women that struggled in their real or fictitious lives for an articulation of the self and were victims of their times, of the internalised Catholic models and of the gender construction. Teresa

of Ávila, the Spanish mystic, the writer Vita Sackville-West, the fictitious Molly Bloom, Therese de Lissieux, the French saint, and Shirley Temple, the actress from Hollywood, surrogate selves of some characters, appear victimised and are examples of the internalisation of models that the patriarchy has inflicted upon women through their education after centuries of domination.

The strong kinship that the characters establish among themselves and in the relations with their sisters and surrogate selves makes the reader think that there exists an attachment that goes beyond the physical and psychological relationship and refers to the different levels of the conscious and the unconscious. As Paulina Palmer explains in *Sisterhoods* “other representations are also possible ... a character living in the present is represented forming a close involvement with a woman from an earlier age-group or era..” (Cartmell et al. eds. 1998: 81)

The study of sisterly devotion in *The White Garden*, as part of the semiotic modality, implies the analysis of the multiple meanings and interpretations that the concept of sorority or sisterhood poses from a feminist approach. The sisterly affection relates to a literal and a metaphorical bound among women; that fondness goes from the blood-relation to the internalisation of patterns that the characters have incorporated as to become part of their attitudes, and this kinship appears as the network that Carmel Bird has webbed in time and in place by means of intertextuality.

According to Kristeva's definition of intertextuality, which she defines “[as] the transposition of one or more systems of signs into another accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position” (Kristeva 1980: 14) and to the afore-mentioned concept of the semiotic modality acquired in the pre-Oedipal phase, the characters outpour their own experiences as dreams, visions and delusions. Cultural influences and unconscious desires mingle in their imagination in what Kristeva calls “the boundary between the conscious and unconscious. It is on this threshold site that the social and the psychic interact in a dialogue or dialectic which produces communicative utterance.” (quoted by Morris 1995: 145)

The White Garden, with its highly defiant system of metaphors and imagery epitomises the devotion and the commitment that all the women in the novel feel to one another and conforms the dialectic interaction of the symbolic and semiotic modalities. There are three central images that explain the notion of sisterhood and the multiplicity of connotations that this concept brings forth. The idea of sorority is presented as the image of the sisters swimming in the sea:

I swam in the sea with my sisters; there was Bridie and Frankie and Loulou And Margaret and Rosie-Posie and they took me by the hands, by the legs, by the love and by the waves that broke on the edge of the shining sand. (Bird 1995: 59).

It is also embodied as the pattern composition in a broad piece of lace and represented by the design of a honeycomb that appears as an icon of the book to divide sections and discourses. In any of these images the idea of a strong attachment among women appears fully developed and it is reinforced by the continuous flux between the conscious and the unconscious that the characters utter in their drives:

Time and tone and tense and significance flatten out, and an event in one century lies side by side with an event in another, and another and another until something resembling a design in a broad piece of lace is formed. A cloth on a table, thread by thread, knot by knot, loop by loop. The centrepiece is not the body of the woman in the garden, but the image of two honey-bees. (Bird 1995: 3).

As Kristeva maintains in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, the semiotics must always retain the ordering presence of the symbolic. Without this control such language is completely overwhelmed by the force of unconscious drives and becomes psychotic utterances. Bird creates the necessary equilibrium between the symbolic and the semiotic, since the different experiences and outpourings of the characters appear always framed by an imposed order. When Therese Gillis enters *Mandala* suffering from depression and starts her treatment, she outpours utterances from her memories and interacts her dialectic with that of her internalised model Therese Martin. These remembrances from their early childhoods appear as dreams of the pre-Oedipal phase that Therese Gillis evokes in the manner of a playful enjoyment when she is with her sisters or out of heart-breaking drives when she remembers by means of her surrogate self the painful separation from her mother when she died: “At that moment her naturally happy disposition deserted her, the sun in her spirit was blotted out by a terrible darkness which came and went throughout her life” (Bird 1995: 56). She feels the same violent severance when she recalls the saddening estrangement from Violetta, Therese Martin’s beloved friend:

Me and You makes Double-you, Double-Me. Trouble me. This was friendship, but this was trouble, big trouble. Double Trouble. We gave each other small mirrors, and when we were apart and lonely, we could look into the mirrors and know that the Double-You was there. (Bird 1995: 78-79)

The uninhibited impulses of Therese Gillis/ Therese Martin are in both cases framed by the social construct of the house and the family, as a nuclear group. Throughout history patriarchy has established and constrained the importance of women to that of reproduction as opposed to the creative one that men have owned as theirs. Within that cultural engenderment of roles, men and also women, subordinated and resilient to the acquired patterns, have fostered sensitivity and love as important values to enrichen the virtues of young girls in the families. This, on the one hand, and the sympathy that is always found among groups that endure the same experiences on the other, has webbed a network of devotion among women that was, at the same time, accepted and supporting.

All the women subjects in this novel hold strong family ties, understood as part of the education that the restricted, and at times unfriendly, space of the house offered and also as their longings and unfulfilled desires in the hostile setting of Mandala. The mental house relates clearly to the representation of patriarchal dominance: from its iconicity either as the symbol of Mandala representing man as its centrepiece, or as the Christian iconography of Mandorla that has the Pantocrator centrally positioned, the setting of this novel shows the power that patriarchy, science and religion have inflicted on women and subsequently on their lack of construction.

The commitment to sisterhood is very well woven in the novel: starting with Laura –a teenager when Vickie died- who is trying to find a meaning to her sister's death and will provide the readers with the final explanation that gives sense to the novel; following with Therese Gillis and Therese Martin, who figure as main protagonist and corresponding alter-ego, both of them belonging to big families and whose relationships with their sisters appear soundly developed; continuing with Dorothy Gillis, Marjorie Bartlett and other minor characters, and ending with Rosamund Pryce-Jones and her surrogate self, Teresa of Ávila, the notion of sisterhood appears solidly grounded. The characters constantly recall their memories and longings as part of a heritage they do not want to lose. The only exception to the whole group of women subjects is Abigail: uprooted out of her marriage to Ambrose Goddard, her links with the past are lost, but like the rest of the characters, looks forward to building up a White Garden and enjoying it. Her share in the novel is short but interesting, since from her voiceless part she confirms that all women need to construct their own space to give way to the suppressed creativity that patriarchy has exercised for centuries.

The importance of “water” and “swimming” for Therese Gillis is meaningfully emphasised. Water, an element closely related to women and to the pre-Oedipal phase, appears as the reverse of the male-dominated world, which is earth-bound. The use of the word “swam” increases the disporting and playful notion of the activity that the Gillis sisters enjoyed together in their early childhood, still far from the symbolic modality. The devotion they felt may be taken, then, literally or metaphorically; as it appears in the sentences: “they took me by the hands, by the legs” (Bird 1995: 59), implying the role of the older sisters that lead and teach Therese, and how the relationship they held was of a complete freedom and playfulness. At the same time the commitment they felt was also nourished by the impulses of love, that is by the affection of blood fostered by the women in the female world of uninhibited desires. Nothing is mentioned about the men in that family group; however, the feeling of love and devotion was not stimulated in boys and girls likewise and the classical dyad mind/body that applied to man and woman, worked similarly when referring to the intelligible/ sensitive dichotomy, as Cixous traces in *Sorties*. The reference to “the waves” in this passage

accomplishes the role that the semiotic modality offers. The rhythmical waves with their movement provide the blurring frontier between those first unbound feelings and the symbolic world, acquired, as soon as they trespass the female circle, in their second scope of influence: the education and imitation models that the characters internalise in their childhood. Consequently these images of water and waves strengthen the importance and the manner in which the semiotic level of Therese Gillis works and offer the clue to understanding the dialogue between unconscious desire and the social.

A very important aspect of the sisterly devotion that all the subjects are prone to feel is the meanings associated to the word “sister,” not just referring to the blood link of women born of the same mother, but also as references to its enunciative meaning of “nun in the convent life” and to its connotative notion of sister as a “soul mate” or as “model to imitate.” The three denominations describe the sort of attachment that appears in *The White Garden* and they are all important to understand the fragmentation and displacement of women since, as part of the male dominance throughout history, they were not subjects of their lives and could not develop their discourses. Religion played a decisive role in this fracture and, as Anderson and Zinser have studied in *A History of Their Own*, patriarchy insisted on presenting The Virgin Mary as an example to be followed by all the women and urged into cultivating the virtue that had distinguished The Virgin Mary as unique among all the women: virginity. The concept of uniqueness made the model impossible to imitate and this is exactly what Bird rejects when she presents the pluralised subjects with their permutability, multiplicity and mobility in the historical tissue of the novel.

Out of an earnestness and fervour in trying to imitate the utopian model that the engenderment fixed, many girls abandoned their homes and entered the religious life that was offered by the Church. The difficulty of embodying a similar model to The Virgin’s as presented by Christianity, made girls impose serious renunciations and punish their bodies as part of that eagerness. After periods of abnegation these young women developed psychosomatic symptoms that are currently recognised as hysteria, following the definition that Evans gave to this illness: “A pathological personality structure resulting from inner psychic conflicts” (Evans in Showalter 1997: 44). In agreement with this definition Rosamund Pryce-Jones and Therese Gillis suffer from hysteria. The former displays the psychosomatic conflict out of the education she received and the influence she internalised by the proximity to the carmelite convent in Wales. The latter has internalised as her own the exemplification of the French saint, Therese Martin. The values she received as part of her education at home and at the school of the Immaculate Heart caused a clash within her inner self. The friendship she and/or her surrogate self enjoyed with Violetta is to be taken as another example of sisterhood: so similar were they and such an understanding existed among them that when they were so severely estranged Therese Gillis turned her positioning from being a joyful girl, who played with

her sisters and enjoyed the company of Violetta, into a criptic girl who punished her body and ate the pages of *The Imitation of Christ* at the peak of her anxiety to assume a Christian model:

I am Violetta, she inhabits me, she is my habit, I am her heart. When I smile I smile with Violetta's glossy eyes. I touch her cheeks with my fingerips and I feel the bloom of peaches, the flutter of the butterflies of her lashes. Into my butterfly, her butterfly, fly her swift sweet fingers. My little soldier fingers march ten thousand men up and then march them down again. Our bodies in and out of each other are joined in a long long kiss, a shivering kiss so hot on the cold of the gravestone, a kiss from the twining twins of our toes, this little piggie, from our toes to the blood red blobs of blood of our blood-silk lips. (Bird 1995: 61-62)

Related to the idea of sisterhood as an internalisation and imitation of patterns, Bird draws the readers' attention to the image of the honeycomb, the bees and the composition of the swarm. The bees, as part of the novel, constitute another illustration of the same embodiment: that of sisterly attachment. All the terms related to this collective intensify the notion of commitment. The design of the honeycomb finds its equal on the floor tiles of the veranda, close to the cells where both nuns live. In this way Bird shows how solidly grounded the notion of sisterhood must be considered in the "contained" and "uncontained" world of Mandala. Even the active Sister Therese and Sister Teresa build up the composition of their White Garden by following patterns, and the notion of mimesis is also pointed out through their behaviour: they appear as industrious and active bees, that know what their different missions in the swarm are according to the genetically internalised codes.

The third reference to sisterly devotion referring to "soul mate" implies intertextuality as another connotation of sisterhood; its corresponding image in the novel makes clear reference to the craftsmanship of writing a novel of this sort. The quotation speaks of a skillful design on a cloth in which "thread by thread, knot by knot, loop by loop" (Bird 1995: 3) everything is finely knitted. According to Morris (1995: 138): "No writer comes to words or literary forms that are newly minted; multiple previous uses and meanings remain active to some extent within each new arrangement." The stories that build up the plot are finely knitted as lace-making and filigree. All of them are part of that fragmented and biased history of women. The metaphors evoke how carefully and subtly the artificer of the novel has moved the different threads so as to compound a fine piece of lace. Multiple meanings and intentions appear in the novel, unconscious desires speak through the words of all the characters. All their outpourings are preciously and carefully intertwined in order to shape plots or knots; in the end the outcome will be a piece of tapestry or novel. Its artisan is Carmel Bird and the thread that articulates the plot will be Vickie who, together with her sister Laura reconstructing the circumstances

of her sister's death, will mark the textual frame. Within and part of that piece of cloth there are the lives and discourses of the women who out of a patriarchal attitude have tried to adapt to already made models; the internal conflicts suffered make them look for that site between the conscious and unconscious boundary that allows them to have a place of their own, their *white gardens*, where they can accomplish the notion of "jouissance," and reach female triumph by articulating their own discourses and constructing their heterogeneous identities, a result from the clash of two different phases in their lives.

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