Understanding Janet Frame: Introduction

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... Grave as gravity denied
supremacy in outer space,
tall metaphor, explain me
describe my shape   (Question, The Pocket Mirror)

Abstract

New Zealand writer and poet Janet Frame, considered one of the genius writers of the 20th century, but one of the least well read (Stead, 1981), received many literary awards and honors throughout her lifetime both in New Zealand and abroad, and yet, to my knowledge, her works are rarely chosen for study in English literature courses in Japan. This introductory paper will address this contradiction. In addition to introducing her life and works, and exploring the supposed difficulties of her writing style, I will offer some suggestions suitable for study in an intermediate level Japanese university English literature course. A comprehensive thematic and theoretical analysis, and recommendations for advanced study will follow in a forthcoming paper.
Introduction

Frame, a Member of the Order of New Zealand, a Commander of the British Empire, Honorary Foreign Member of the American Institute of Arts and letters, a woman who received honorary doctorates from Otago and Waikato Universities and who was twice short-listed for the Nobel Prize for Literature, produced 11 novels, four collections of short stories, a children’s book, a volume of poetry, and a three volume autobiography so poignantly and charmingly written, moving by impressions rather than milestones, it ushered in a new dimension for autobiographical narration. The series, scripted for a movie and directed by fellow New Zealander, Janet Champion, under the title of the second book “An Angel at my Table”, won critical international acclaim, but remains perhaps Frame’s only generally well-known work.

Through her writing, Frame sought to express the inner depths of the inner self, often using fluid, poetic, surrealistic and dream-like language to do so. She explored identity, otherness, marginality and the unfathomableness of death, and used her characters to muse in a metafictional way on the tension between art and life, and the duality of language; words being both the instrument of the imagination, and yet representations of deception and elusive reality. In The Carpathians (1988), a novel that muses on the creating, annihilating and memory-making properties of words, Frame has her protagonist, Mattina, say

.... I have seized control of all points of view... I speak now. I ”tell”.
Generously I give the point of view of others. It is words that take care of the telling. (Mattina, Carpathians:52)

Frame’s writing, with the protagonist often being the inner-self of her characters and the antagonist being death, frequently leads to aporia - a complexity which ‘creates an impasse, in which an inner contradiction lying at the heart of the text renders the meaning indeterminate’ (Quinn, 1999:23), leaving the reader to reconstruct the meaning. Using interior monologue, or stream of con-
sciousness, metaphor, satire and humor, and a duality of dense and lyrical plain and sparse sequences, Frame so successfully creates complexity, her biographer, the late Dr. Michael King (2000), called her, "the Laureate of the musing inner-self".

.... And then he took his folding suitcase that sank, when empty like a concertina; that had belonged to Uncle Louis who died of cancer in the small upstairs room of lanoline and yellow skin and the smell, in the early spring when he died, of raspberry cordial flowing through the air colored blue and too sweet for tasting, put his pyjamas, hairbrush, brilliantine, soap, electric shaver, jersey; snapped shut the worn empty-of music suitcase and left his sister's house, and crossed by the ferry to the city they called a jungle. (Owls do Cry:114)

**Background**

Since Frame was an intensely personal writer, extensively using her own life and experiences, the first place to visit on attempting to decipher her works is her background.

Unlike her famous and well-read compatriot Katherine Mansfield, a financially privileged writer who died the year before Frame's birth, Frame was born into the depression generation and grew up on "the wrong side of the tracks" in severe poverty. Despite the family's socially debilitating impoverishment, Frame and her siblings lived a chaotic but creative and intellectually stimulating home life, full of well-encouraged personal literary expression. This had significant impact on her personality, contributing equally to her extraordinary ability to transfer her creative imagination to paper, and to her famously reported public shyness.

Frame's family was beset with several life-transforming tragedies, the deaths of two of her sisters in separate drowning incidents early in her life clearly
being pivotal, and remaining re-occurring influences throughout most of her writings. Frame trained to be a teacher, but was incarcerated in and out of "mental" institutions over an 8 year period during her twenties, after a breakdown and a misdiagnosis of schizophrenia, later found to be excessive shyness, mild depression and a severe aversion to social interaction. Frame maintained that writing saved her, literally from a scheduled leucotomy when the doctor realized she was the author of a published book of short stories, and more generally when she was encouraged to "write to survive", and given logistical support to do so; first by fellow N.Z. writer, Frank Sargeson in New Zealand, and later after traveling to Europe on a State Literary Fund Grant for her 'overseas experience', by psychiatric doctors in England who diagnosed her as "simply different" and told her, "go, write; write about your hospital years, and then keep on writing" (Beginnings 1980:33).

Indeed Frame did just that. During her remaining fours years in England under the "freedom" of a National Assistance Grant, she wrote, *Faces in the Water, The Edge of the Alphabet*, two volumes of stories, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, and an autobiographical essay *Towards Another Summer*, all of which are biographical to some extent and carry the influences of her hospital experiences (ibid.33). Clearly, Frame did well on being released from previously given advice to "mix and conform - as if I were a pudding" (King, 2001); being accepted on her own terms allowing for a prodigious creative outburst.

After a brief spell back in New Zealand, Frame then left to spend time in a culturally stimulating writer's retreat in the USA where she penned more novels, mainly on themes of death and identity, now with dual locations and protagonists moving between USA and N.Z. On returning to N.Z., she moved frequently, writing, and avoiding publicity. Her last novel was *The Carpathians* (1988), a personal favorite of mine for its combination of the lucid and lyrical, limpid and complex, and for its eloquent use of symbols, image, metaphor and humor. Frame died of acute myeloid leukemia in January 2004 at aged 80.
Frame’s writing has been described as brilliant, lyrical, imaginative and eloquent, but also as dense, obscure, unconventional and excessively wordy (D. Callahan 2003). Frame did not help to dispel this duality of response to her works, her almost obsessive reticence keeping her well away from her reading public and from critics whom she said produce:

“works of art with my own book lying as a shrivelled skin beside the newly-sprung essay” (King, 2001)

Theories of understanding

Frame’s works defy any clear literary definition although they show elements of modernism, postmodernism and poststructuralism. Literary perspectives will be taken up in my forthcoming paper, but here it will suffice to comment briefly on some of the aspects accessible to intermediate level students.

Although she did use symbolism and focused on the inner-self without historical backgrounding or classically crafted plots, and she did engage in a degree of ”myth-making”, Frame relied more on metaphor and poetic prose, and the postmodern elements of metafiction and incoherence to achieve her results. She extensively used literary dualism, but not always conventionally as in dualities of, for example, dark versus light, as she sometimes chose to highlight similarities rather than opposites; as seen in her novel Living in the Maniototo (1979) where duality mirrors the features of the mythological Maniototo plane of the imagination with the actual geographical Maniototo Plain in Otago, N.Z.

Frame often engaged in word play, as in Daughter Buffalo (1972, chpt. 12) where she writes a humorously confusing word play between dual, jewel and duel, which she then references throughout the rest of the novel, creating a unique sense of cohesion. This kind of word play and repetition appears in other works; stacks on the mill, more on still, appearing in Swans (Lagoon, 1951), Owls do Cry (1957) the poems Nouns and The Mountain (The Pocket Mirror,
1967), and *Daughter Buffalo* (1972), at least. Other examples of repetition include sequences on cherry flowers, blue-fly, plum trees, lawnmowers, and a word play in *the Carpathians* where Mattina, the protagonist, muses on the local people's "hunger for goods" as being more than buying products ....

.... here the shoppers stared in the windows as if appraising works of art, things of beauty; the gleam of the 'goods' was hypnotic - washing machines draped with blue and red satin ribbons, other appliances labelled 'award winning' - for smoothness, freshness, fingertip control.... (p.47)

Frame was concerned with the way in which words create frameworks of conception, and by recycling images, phrases, word play and life experiences, she provides a conceptual framework linking all her works thus contributing to an overall sense of cohesion, and to her own identifiable and distinctive writing character.

Long stretches of a distinctive prose poetry also appear in most of her novels, often adjunct to the story, and creating coherence in structure, as for example in *Owls do Cry*, where prose poetry in italics start each section, key words are worked throughout the section and then appear again as a conclusion. In *Daughter Buffalo*, prose poetry, again in italics, not only appears within the chapters, but is used as a bridge between chapters and then near the end as a summary in a plot that has moved alternatively between two characters and over several time periods for both. Thus although the prose sequences seem to stand outside the main story, they in fact work as points of cohesion in stories that often seem disconnected in structure, and deliberately lacking in discourse markers. In *Carpathians* Frame again uses her protagonist in a metafictional way to comment:

...Mattina thought of all those words tired by use; and all that had often seemed useless, the words that propped up speech — after all, no doubt, you know, indeed, I guess, tacked on in a luxury of traversing a momen-
tary desert of thought ... all the he-said, she-said, he—thought, she-
worondereds of print. (p. 120)

Frame writes frequently in a stream of consciousness, in long run-on un-
grammatical sentences with little in the way of print formatting. For example
on p. 70 of Owls do Cry there is a sentence 15 lines long. However, these se-
quenues are interspersed with paragraphs of lucid, direct, plain writing in more
conventional format, often communicating highly amusing sequences by con-
trast in content and structure to the more lyrical sections that are such deep
explorations of the inner-self of the protagonist that it seems as if the inner-self
is, itself, the subject.

...and the gabbling jabbering forest-quiet women wait in crocodile for the
switch that abandons them from seeing
and fear
and no struggle to leave for in seeing they inhabit a room of blind where
doors are molded lockless, and those who enter from the corridor may
cleave the wall with their bodies, and the same wall closes behind them in
a velvet mass like a wave in the wake of a journeying saint or ship. (Owls
do Cry:38)

The stream of consciousness sequences give a hurried, pulsating effect and
help, despite their length, to move the script along, although one is often left
quite breathless in the reading, even wondering where one is expected to pause
for sense-making. In fact the wording is often so condensed it almost seems
like note form, and this highlights the intensely personal, private nature of her
work.

Another typical element that invariably occurs in her longer works are dream
sequences. These are clever, masterly episodes very effectively providing the
reader with hitherto withheld backgrounding. Thus dream-telling adds to the
exploration of the inner-self at the core of most of her works.
Understanding Janet Frame

Frame skillfully references the moment, using the local words, words of popular songs, games, social attitudes and behavior prevalent at the time of writing. Thus her novels fit (but are not limited to) the timeframes in which they are written. There is much humor and delight to be found in the sequences of the fumbling jumbled recollections of the unformed images typical of childhood.

... They repeated then, the Lord’s Prayer, not looking, with a special word added in case there’s a war, to make the soldiers not afraid; and they sing a long hymn, conducted by the music mistress who is deaf and lipreads and is related to Beethoven. (Owls do Cry, 1957:16)

And there is much delight in finding the familiar:

...an elderly man appeared holding a pair of elongated shears like giant hair-clippers, trailing a bright orange electrical cord. Suddenly the air was filled with a high-pitched whining (...) then (...) the neighbour wheeled a motormower from his garage and with a rising and falling wail pitched above its bass drone, the mower chewed at the lawn, not always completely controlled by its driver, with the blades of grass flying out at both sides like green snowflakes in a blizzard. (Carpathians:37)

The image of the lawnmower also appears in Owls do Cry (p.29) and is a quintessential weekend experience familiar to anyone living in N. Z. The inclusion of such realistic events in such poetic description and appearing across her works, brings a comfortable feelings of familiarity and connection to her writing.

Frame’s novels, explorations as she preferred to call them (King, 2001), are replete with small town New Zealand images, and this may lead to some difficulty in accessing her works; not just for non-New Zealanders, but also for the younger generation of New Zealanders, whose knowledge of such images may
now reside in the words and memories of their elders and not in their own consciousness and sensibilities: the locality of the writing. There is no doubt Frame writes in and of N.Z. and that her images are bound to the environment. Any class engaging her works would benefit by having some familiarity with the background and with specific vocabulary and concepts related to it. This is an issue not just for N.Z. or postcolonial literature: anyone wishing to fully understand Lawrence, or Joyce, for example, whose works Frame’s writing greatly resembles, would benefit from having ‘native’ input. Unfamiliarity with New Zealand should not be a stumbling block to exploring such wonderful works. It helps to note that Frame is an incredibly honest writer — she writes only as she sees and knows it, and her impressions of New York in *Daughter Buffalo*, or *the Carpathians*, for example, are as detailed and language specific to the location as anything she writes about New Zealand.

It is odd perhaps that a writer so reticent she would not turn up to accept awards, and who hung in the background of functions held to honor her would write of such intimate matters from her own life. She was clearly not attempting to set morals or give advice on dealing with tragedies since her writing is rarely transmissive or transactional. Thus her purpose was never to give instruction or impart information, and those expecting to read transmissively or transactionally will find themselves proverbially "lost at sea". Rather, her writing is so intimate it creates a transformational effect allowing readers to negotiate meaning on their own terms in light of their own life experiences. Frame wrote personally because she had to; it gave her life, and it is in this sense that it can really be said that writing saved her.

Frame’s works provide interest to sociopolitical, gender, psychological, psychiatric, and postcolonial studies, as well as to language and literature. Although more will be said about these specific perspectives in my forthcoming paper, to enjoy Frame’s work generally, one needs to read according to one’s own personal experience and perspective. I do not sense that she deliberately
addressed any of the above issues, although no one can know for sure since she did not discuss her works and their meanings and gave no hints as to the process or purpose of her writing. In an essay on how she began as a writer for the New Zealand journal *Beginnings* (1980), she focused home factors such as her mother’s influence, and the winning of a library card at school, which enabled her to enter the world of other writers. However, she did not say what she hoped to achieve by writing, or how she approached it; whether she was a Mozartian type, writing straight to the page in almost finished form, or if she were a Beethovenian type, drafting and re-writing. Reading both her autobiography and biography I get the impression that she was a Mozartian type, turning out her writing rather rapidly indicating little time for much revision. This would suggest that Frame wrote as it came to her without excessive external crafting or manipulation. And yet her work is beautifully crafted, and therein lies her genius as a wordsmith. Thus it is to the language she used that we turn next to find ways to understand and relate to her work.

**Language**

Frame’s prose is frequently surrealistic; reading it one feels swamped into it much in the same way one is left rudderless in the lyrics of a Bjorn or Bob Dylan song. One can almost catch what she means, but it doesn’t quite stand up to logic ... only by feeling, sensing, does meaning seem to appear. Although Frame does not guide you on how to read her work and certainly never compromises her writing for the lucid, direct narrative of a clear plot line that her publishers once asked of her (Stead, 1981), she does exploit some characteristic language features that can be very much enjoyed, and which create what I have come to see as distinctive Frame structures; for example,

1. **a repetitive structure that creates very poetic images.**
   - Grave as gravity denied  
   Question (*Pocket Mirror*)
• Tomorrow there’ll be a ripe plum on the plum tree The Secret (Lagoon)
• That night, in the middle of the night
• it was the greyist river Winnie had ever seen. And the sky was grey too with a tiny dot of sun. The grey of the sky seemed to swim into the grey of the river.
• Like secret sad ships, secret and silent Swan (Lagoon)
• Hush-shh the water said; rush-hush the wind passed over the top of the water
• It seemed like the roar of the sea like a secret sea
• the rose in the rose arch and the ferns in the fernery; (Owls do Cry)
• the grieving hush-hush of the trees; The Bull Calf (Reservoir)

2. elusive metaphors are beautifully described, in length; also frequent use of simile and personification
• house filled with rooms and carpets that soaked up footsteps like coloured moss... (Owls do Cry:25)
• it was Mrs. Peterson (...) and she was flat and dark, like a blackboard, with horror chalked on her face....(Owls do Cry:33)
• And Albert will not mind, for he wears a false heart; his other heart was eaten up by corrosive ink and typewritten upon like a form to be filled in. (Owls do Cry:65)

3. frequent use of metonym to increase narrative familiarity and authenticity
You have to go through there to visit Daphne because she’s a special
—a what?
—a special
To Bob Withers a special was some line of food or clothing put cheap in the shops ... (Owls do Cry:158)
Themes

Frame’s themes are outwardly about life and death, but while most critics seem to focus on death and darker images, I think this focus is misplaced, and that her work is less concerned with death per se and more about dealing with life after “a death in the family”, or when death is imminent or sensed; a finding of life through death. Her novels draw heavily on her own experiences and she re-cycles the theme of family death (her sisters’) frequently. Chapter 9 of Daughter Buffalo for example is word similar to the episode of the death of her second sister in her autobiography, which, as one of her last works (1982–5), contains the life experiences she had long been using in other works. Thus, having read the autobiographies, the reader feels a great familiarity with the subjects of her novels and a great similarity between them.

This makes her novels on one level accessible to students. They can look for the themes dealing with death in respect to Frame’s life: How does one talk about death? What does death mean to those who remain? How does one deal with the knowing, the constant reminders of lost ones? How does memory of them continue? What is the role of language? Frame’s themes arise around the concept of death, rather than around fear and foreboding, and for the most part she takes the opportunity to explore the relationship between the life-giving qualities, and thus life-robbing qualities of words; affirming in a way that her primary interest is in working consciousness as a subject of literature.

Works suitable for intermediate students

Owls do Cry, much quoted in this paper, is perhaps too challenging a work for students, but it does have several sub-sections that can be read as contained short stories with distinct themes on the life situations of people in N.Z. in this time period, that are excellent and easily accessible to students of English. I would recommend section 26 p.84 The hollow house will never be filled, which
covers in miniature all the quintessential Frame characteristics I have thus far mentioned in this paper; and the diary entry, January 25th I am afraid for tomorrow night, which is an interior monologue on conforming to social pretension.

As mentioned earlier, Frame’s autobiography is her most well known work. It is accessible to students language-wise, but at three volumes is not appropriate unless forming the basis of a whole course. Better recommended is to show the movie and to discuss Frame’s life and the possible influences in her works. Since the death of Frame’s sisters has so deeply influenced her writing, I would suggest that chapter 9 of Daughter Buffalo, which gives the story of her second sister’s death to one of her characters, as a good introduction to this significant event, and one that could offer a transition to a deeper study of the themes of death, which would more appropriately make up the content of an advanced class working with her full length novels.

Not all of Frame’s works are so deeply involved in the workings of the inner-self, but some rather just hint at it, and it is from this work that I would like to suggest some of her short stories as suitable for a general introduction to her writing for students at the intermediate level: Swan, The Secret, Dossy, and Miss Gibson and the Lumber-room, from Lagoon and other stories (1951), are stories offering childhood impressions and awakenings, as are The Reservoir (reminiscent of S. King’s “the Body”), Stink-pot (containing the quintessential Frame theme of childhood innocence of death), and The Linesman (a very short story, rather nastily, but humanly anticipating tragedy), from The Reservoir, stories and sketches (1963), a collection also offering poignant stories on the themes of alienation and difference, although perhaps more suitable for advanced students. Snowman Snowman, fables and fantasies (1963) offers myth-making short stories more challenging in content, but The Terrible Screaming, The Mythmaker’s Office, and An Interlude in Hell may prove appealing to more motivated students. These selected stories are indeed short — some are no more than a few pages long, but they each contain enough essential “Frameian”
sentences and themes to challenge the students, and yet enough "storyline" for the students to ascertain a meaningful interaction with the text.

Students may recognize that many of the prose poetry-like sequences are, despite their length, rather Tanku and Haiku-like in how the unusual words and sentence structures are arranged to evoke a deeper sense, and how it is necessary to enter emotionally into an interaction with the script in order to relate to it. Another good introduction to Frame's writing is her poetry. Some poems are very challenging, appearing to have no meaning in the logical sense we are accustomed to from the written word: these difficult poems illustrate the power of words in making art, and of art making meaning by rhymes and expectation in the absence of logic, and would be better suited for study at a more advanced level.

Many of her other poems, however, are very accessible. The following two examples from Pocket Mirror are light and funny, but each ends hinting at a darker side of life, thus taking a first step into the depths of Frame's inner musings.

**L- Driver**

An L- Driver through poetry
he swerved to avoid a homily
and struck a metaphor; nothing
could save it; he drove on in shame
leaving no address and a false name

And now his obsession is
the miraculous escape; he asks, what if
I swerve again, but having no murdered metaphor
to support me I plunge to my death over the cliff?
The Poet

Though the wheat is so beautifully puffed
the rice is ballooned and stuffed
and the world seems so much bigger
from a few to a marvellous crowd
of supers, the pushing and proud
with more push and pride and the prig growing prigger
The poet still brethes with one lung
climbs a ladder of only one rung
shoots at stars with his hand off the trigger

Some poems are beautiful, and suggest lyrics for a song. For example;

**When the Sun Shines More Years Than Fear**

When the sun shines more years than fear
when the birds fly more miles than anger
when sky holds more birds
sails more cloud
shines more sun
than the palm of love carries hate,
even then shall I in this weary
seventy-year banquet say, Sunwaiter,
Birdwaiter, Skywaiter,
I have no hunger,
remove my plate

As teachers know, classes develop their own personalities. For a more pragmatic group less likely to appreciate the working of the inner mind on such heavy topics as life and death, I would suggest a combination of the poem *Unemployment* (Pocket Mirror) followed by the short story *Insulation* (Islands 33)
— both of which show a poignant, but possibly more realistic view relevant to the students’ lives.

**Unemployment (sections)**

Each Tuesday at ten o’clock I go to the Employment Exchange, fill in the form they give me, (...) I’m sorry we cannot place you.

And therefore I am not placed, not in this or that (...) I have experience and knowledge tied in a waiting bundle in the corner of my mind nearest the door but no one knocks and the door is never opened (...)

*Inclusion* tells of a woman musing on three unemployed people looking for jobs, who is asked by one of them to buy a product she doesn’t really want in a door-to-door sales. The three are a young man, unrealistically looking for a band to be the lead singer of, a young woman who has just finished her schooling and whose crowning achievement is 1000 hours of training, and a middle-aged man who has been rendered unemployed and who is trying to establish his own door-to-door sales business. Although this story was published in 1984 New Zealand, it is imminently transferable to the present Japanese milieu.

**Conclusion**

As a New Zealander living for many years on the margins and the otherness of society, both abroad and in N.Z., I find there is much I can relate to in the situations and themes prevalent in Frames writing. Although Frame is of my mother’s generation and I was at primary school when she was first being pub-
lished, I find many of her places, details and sequences, especially those filtered through small town New Zealand, to be the haunts and muddled memories of my own childhood. Thus rather than being depressed or overwhelmed by her work, I often find myself chuckling aloud in sheer enjoyment. It is my hope that others may come to find an equal enjoyment in, and connection with, her works.

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