

# EXEGESIS

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Year of Lodgement: 2018

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submitted to Auckland University of Technology  
in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Creative Writing



## INTRODUCTION

Mother Nature is a creative-work or practice-led Masters project. The film script is the creative component and embodies my 'research outcomes'. This exegesis provides a context for this 'research', which has largely centred on concepts of genre, maternal response, masculinity, and moral horror. It frames my thinking as 'writer's notes', a convention belonging to the film industry.

The objective of the MCW programme is a second draft. Hence my script is a second draft, as per industry standards: a draft in which the structure has been of a focus than the dialogue, scene-writing and details of characterization. This exegesis therefore reflects on my thinking mostly about the structure of my story.

My objective in writing Mother Nature has been to write a sophisticated genre movie – a crime drama which creates suspense from its moral tensions as much as its emotional & situational tensions. The development process has been aimed at one overall goal: a climax which evokes 'moral horror'. I have attempted to reach this goal by focusing on two key questions:

- how might a story be structured around the suspense question of whether or not a mother could develop maternal feeling for her abandoned son?
- how could the relationship between audience and character be built so that the audience simultaneously desired and feared the climactic action needed to resolve the story?

## THE WESTERN

In considering these two questions, I have turned again and again to the plot dynamics and iconography of the Western. For example, my starting-point for the action line which primarily unifies *Mother Nature* is essentially that of a retired bandit reluctantly drawn into an epic confrontation with a present-day bandit threatening a community.

(In referring to ‘action line’ and ‘relationship line’, I am using terms made familiar by Linda Aaronson in *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Screenplay*. My understanding of how she uses these terms is:

- the relationship line encompasses how the feelings and attitude between two people change over the course of the narrative
- the action line refers to practical/logistical goals and challenges negotiated by the protagonist

The ‘retired killer brought out of retirement’ is a common plot from crime dramas, such as *Carlito’s Way* [Koepp, 1993]. However, I modelled this action line on one of the plots from the classic era of Western films. Critic and novelist Frank Gruber identified seven plots from this era, the second of which is the ‘Ranch story. The plot concerns threats to the ranch from rustlers or large landowners attempting to force out the proper owners.’ [Gruber, 1967, p32]. Classic examples of this plot include *Shane* [Stevens, 1947] and *Seven Samurai* [Kurosawa, 1954].

Its articulation in *Mother Nature* is Janis versus the Resident. Although perhaps a son of this town, as he inherited the farm from his father, Lawrence Burne behaves as an outsider who attempts to change the community with aspirations of bourgeois sophistication – paradoxically enforced with the brutality that characterised his tenure as a police officer in a town ‘up north’ some years earlier. In addition, his nickname ‘the Resident’ evokes New Zealand’s colonial era in which representatives of the Crown were implicated in Maori (the ‘proper owners’) being alienated from their land.

A second key aspect of classic Westerns is anachronism – characters that do not fit or are unable to adapt to changing times. For example, the gunslinger finds that the skills that enabled him to survive in the West are no longer required in the modern, ‘civilised’ era being ferried in by the railroad. Both the Resident and Janis have elements of this generic anachronism: Mr Burne’s police brutality must be held to account in the current era, and the militant feminism which lent an air of justification to Janis’s murderous rampage feels like something from a less complex (or less bourgeois, more grassroots) past.

However, *Mother Nature*’s owes as much to revisionist Westerns, a sub-genre that deconstructs Westerns and is commonly held to contain such films as *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* [Altman, 1971], *Unforgiven* [Peoples, 1992] and *Django Unchained* [Tarantino, 2012]. *Mother Nature* is obviously revisionist in that a woman is in the pivotal role; more so in that the woman is a mother; and especially because the ambiguity characteristic of revisionist films here centres on what constitutes a ‘mother’s nature’.

#### ‘MOTHER NATURE’

The term ‘mother nature’ has a number of connotations. It is used as often to connote a benevolent natural world, as it is to characterise a destructive force like a hurricane. This ambivalence is germane to how I intend *Mother Nature* to be read - a story which questions what ‘a mother’s nature’ is and whether it can be expressed in unconventional, even catastrophic ways.

As the story unfolds, the audience is encouraged to conclude that Janis, as a result of betrayal by an older man she trusted, was overtaken by some kind of madness which resulted in her leading a group of women called the Bon Ton Gang on a brief, homicidal outlaw rampage. However, that exposition comes relatively late: in the meantime, the audience is encouraged to consider whether Janis is capable of empathy.

The first third of the story (encompassing the prison, escape and first conversation with Jordan) is intended to offer a range of conflicting signals. Janis anaesthetises pets while the other women nurture them; feels anger and resentment toward her victims' ghosts; and seeks to deter her son from a life of crime more out of obligation than feeling. At the same time, the contrast with violent Jet, ambitious psychologist, the victims that she describes, and the visions which we suspect are manifestations of remorse, plus the risk she takes in escaping prison, open the possibility that Janis is capable of 'redemption'.

My intention is that the audience conceives of redemption as: she accesses that part of her nature which is that of a 'mother'. This is the suspense or dramatic question which underlies the story: we will watch to see if Janis is able to feel toward Jordan what we feel a mother ought to feel, in which case we will feel that she has grown evolved, and achieved redemption.

My aim is to continually challenge the audience's expectation that this is the inevitable arc of the story. Janis fails to demonstrate any compassion toward Jordan and he in turn is not interested in his mother. Her self-interest remains paramount – not only is warning Jordan presented as an obligation reluctantly undertaken, but her poor mental health (feverishness) and the challenge presented by these ghosts she is convinced have come to attack her, occupy her attention so fully as to render her self-obsessed.

In addition to 'will she be a mother?' there arises the pressing question of who or what will stop persecution by Alaric, Boys and Resident. This is the action line mirrored in the classic Western, which in a cine-literate audience cannot help but give rise to the expectation that Janis is the only one who might have the abilities required to confront the Resident. This sets up a basic conflict in audience expectations – if Janis is to 'return' or 'regress' to her former self to confront this threat, it will take her farther from evolving the kind of empathetic qualities we expect in a mother's nature.

This changes at the turning-point that is the vision in which Janis hallucinates a shark – a symbolic encounter with, or insight into, her own nature. A recognition and definition of herself as predator seems to answer the question: there is no hope that

she will develop a mother's nature. And yet almost immediately she offers to deploy her skills to protect Jordan and MT; soon after, she seems to build a bond with Jordan through teaching him about the use of guns. This is intended to be a classic 'second act low-point' in that the moral confusion experienced by the audience about what is 'good' for mother and son – what they 'need' in order for the story arc to progress and resolve – reaches a peak: surely nothing good can come from bonding over the use of guns, least of all a mother's nature.

Ultimately the climax is intended to confront the audience with the question: will her violent actions impede her 'mother nature', or can the motive of vengeance be interpreted as evidence of a mother's nature?

## PARENT-CHILD DYNAMICS

To build this theme, I have looked for opportunities to support and echo this dilemma. In fact, in every key relationship in the story, I have worked to inscribe a parent-child dynamic: the Resident's role as father-figure to Jordan, as well as to the Boys; the Resident's ambivalent relationship with his own daughter, Helena; the insidious parent-child relationship that the prison psychologist imposes on Janis; policewoman Eva's confusion over what it means to be 'mother of the town' as father-figure Resident compels her to be; and the impact of parent-child dynamics in the relationship between Eva and Jordan, Jordan and MT, and Eva and whanau. A key image is the faces of Jordan and MT 'upturned, like children' as they watch Janis execute Alaric.

My aim is that as many key plot events as possible are generated by the tensions from these parent-child dynamics. Jordan awakens to the consequences of his blind pursuit of paternal approval from the Resident. Eva redefines her 'mother of the town' role by allowing Janis to vanquish the Resident. MT stops demanding that Jordan be his protective parent. And the way that the Resident inflames a violent mob mentality in the Boys is intended to resonate with all sorts of nightmarish parenting-gone-wrong notes.

## MASCULINITY

Mother Nature seeks to question modes of masculinity as well as femininity and motherhood. Jordan, while disinterested in his mother, exhibits a need to know who his father is, and actively casts the Resident in a father-figure role. His efforts to be 'more of a man' (by arming himself against Alaric and co) is as much 'against his nature', as MT repeatedly intimates, as being a nurturing mother seems to be against Janis's nature.

While Eva celebrates that he 'is not more of a man', it is not until Jordan enacts the kind of traditionally masculine violence to which he aspires (shooting William) that he encounters his true nature as non-violent, which is non-masculine in terms of how masculinity is defined in this milieu (and this genre). Immediately after, he is shocked again when he witnesses Janis methodically execute Alaric. My model here is *Unforgiven*: on the film's 25th anniversary, critic Chuck Bowen wrote that the film has 'moments of violence that shatter the younger generation's illusions of the masculine grandeur of killing.' [Bowen, 2017, p1] My aim is that Jordan's recognition of his 'true nature' is as deeply felt as Janis's shark vision.

Recognising Jordan's true nature, Janis tries to free him from and clarify his confusion by means of a 'confession' about killing his father. This is intended to be the most 'maternal' action she has undertaken to date. Needless to say, a grim humour is required of the audience to grasp these plot-points – another characteristic of revisionist Westerns.

The key structural notion here is to enable both characters, and the audience, to feel that their 'true natures' place them on opposite sides of divide which (typical of second-act climaxes) the audience can see no way of resolving.

## THE TRUE NATURE OF THE ANTAGONIST

This ‘revealing of true nature’ is echoed in the revelation of the Resident as the film’s true antagonist. At the start, the Resident is plausibly a father figure for the entire community, and his viticulture might be seen as a progressive enterprise. Yet this role is not one that he can sustain, owing to his own ‘true nature’ which reveals itself in sadistic cruelty and corrupt leadership as the story unfolds. To facilitate this reveal, I have modelled the escalation of confrontations on David Cronenberg’s crime film *History of Violence* [Olson, 2005]. The title refers not only to the protagonist’s past, but also to the way the story is structured around what Kent Jones describes as ‘a hierarchy of violence’ [Jones, 2007, p96]. Both Alaric and consequently Jordan aspire to rise up this hierarchy; the Boys debate whether the Resident or Desmond will be at the top; the resident is revealed to be at the top; until deposed by... a mother.

To some extent it is execution-dependent (dependent on the choices of the actor playing Janis), but my aim is to create beats throughout the post-shark section which suggest to the audience that a maternal nature is finally emerging in Janis, but in untraditional ways which polite society might not affirm. In this last section, the narrative pattern varies in that the suspense question shifts from ‘will Janis demonstrate a mother’s nature?’ to ‘will Jordan see it?’ The role of the climactic sequence is to open Jordan’s eyes.

## SEEING

Seeing has been a useful motif in dramatizing this story. It is Jordan seeing how Janis behaves that provides as much if not more of an awakening for him than in reactively shooting William. It is Eva seeing Jordan’s protective rage in the headlights at the end of the film that suggests transformation for both of them. And quite literally, it is the repeated shot-reverse sequence of ECUs (extreme close-ups) of eyes that signals Janis’s recognition of vulnerability in Jet, Eva and finally Jordan, and indicates her incremental but fundamental steps toward empathy.

What we, the audience, see is ultimately a climactic encounter resembling many a climactic confrontation between protagonist and antagonist. Anticipation has built up through the narrative; and yet what is at stake is precisely the quality of empathy that has (right from the pet-therapy room at the start) been identified with a mother's nature. This dissonance is designed to produce a moral horror.

## MORAL HORROR

Conventional drama (especially classic Westerns) is designed to build suspense via anticipation of a climactic encounter between protagonist and antagonist. Implicit in this is that the audience will enjoy the spectacle of this confrontation. Revisionist genre films such as *Unforgiven* aim to invoke in the audience a conflict between wanting this confrontation and fearing it in case it results in disastrous and degrading moral/ethical and emotional/psychological consequences for the main character. This conflict is the defining attribute of what I mean by moral horror.

A similarly well-executed version of this can be found in *History of Violence*. In the final scene of film, a man who is both father and husband returns home to a family meal with a family who have realised that he has a past as a violent criminal. He has extinguished the threat to his family which that past represents, but in so doing he has irreversibly altered their perception of his true nature. The question of whether the family can integrate this morally challenging knowledge, so as to remain a family, is the question on which the climactic moment hangs.

In *Mother Nature*, my aim is that the audience will increasingly associate (cinematic) violence with psychological, spiritual and moral decay. Alaric's slashing of MT, and the Resident's treatment of Desmond, are intended to shock the audience with a callous and brutal display of power. The Resident's return from aspirational vintner to his former violent self is intended to evoke dread.

I also intend that the audience gains the impression that Janis does not feel remorse for the men she murdered – yet also that the audience suspects that the psychologist is right and the spectral figures she imagines to be haunting her are subconscious

stirrings of remorse. This dissonance further draws attention to the deeply corrupting qualities of violence.

Janis evolves toward empathy – a movement which is minimal compared to how mothers (if not women) on-screen are typically viewed, but which is significant in how action-genre protagonists are viewed. So the suspense question, which the action line aims to evoke, is: how can Janis combat the Resident without regressing to the rage and madness of her former self? Is she motivated by a targeted rage which is generated by empathy for the youngsters, a rage with which we can identify? Or is her own irrational, inner wound re-opening and dragging her back into the repellent state of mind which destroyed her adult life? This is not just dramatic irony: the violence of the climax is designed to evoke a moral horror in the audience from the sense that this is (for Janis) both progressive and regressive.

## THE ANTI-HERO

Researching this dynamic has led me to a deeper appreciation of how the empathetic relationship between audience and character is not just a core element of any dramatic work, but that its effectiveness is determined by the ‘distance’ between audience and character.

For example, the historical development of the anti-hero created opportunities for the dramatist to ‘close’ the distance (an anti-hero is ‘more like me’) and to expand the distance (‘I do not approve of how this character is behaving’). The regulation of this distance, and specifically the variation of it, is a craft and therefore an aesthetic available to the dramatist.

Morally ambiguous characterisation is prevalent in various genres. In noir, the moral ambiguity of the Chandler-esque protagonist arises from the question of how far this anti-hero can go down a path of morally questionable behaviour before his/her character loses the quality (the humanity) that sets them apart in streets that are ‘dark

with something more than night' [Chandler, 1944, p19]. Similarly, in developing Mother Nature, I sought the line between an audience 'judging' (being repelled by) a character's morally ambiguous actions, and 'identifying' (empathising) with that character precisely because of the complex moral response that character arouses (because they are both 'good and bad').

How can a character's moral 'failings' arouse forgiveness rather than condemnation? I believe an audience that is actively working to decide between these two responses is an audience actively engaged with a story. Or: the more an audience is forced to work out whether and how they identify with a character, the more engaged that audience will be. Consider the power and therefore the cultural legacy of the character Hannibal Lector, who overshadowed Jodie Foster's far less ambiguous character in Silence of the Lambs [Tally, 1991].

## CHALLENGES OF THE CRIME STORY

I have found that, when describing an 'action movie' climax on paper, it is hard to foreground those elements which will on-screen evoke this ambiguity. To some extent, this effect of 'moral horror' is execution-dependent – such scenes can be staged and filmed in a way which uses the iconography of the genre in its conventional unambiguous form, as well as in a way which evokes a conflicted response in the viewer.

Another challenge I have encountered is the tension between anticipation and surprise. The plot structure of the classic Western depends on the expectation that the outcome is inevitable – there will be a climactic confrontation between protagonist and antagonist at the end. This inevitability is celebrated or built up within the narrative – the characters refer to it. For example, in Mother Nature, the Boys, waiting outside the Brasserie in which Desmond sits, speculate about what will happen when the Resident faces 'a hard man from the city.'

On the other hand, any narrative demands a certain element of surprise. So the events that lead to this climactic confrontation must be less predictable – technically, a series

of sudden reversals is needed. In *Mother Nature*, I aim to provide this through the deaths of Alaric and William, then the events at the cliff top where Jordan's car is knocked off the edge, including Eva's unexpected 'permitting' of Janis to go the winery and do what must be done.

Another challenge I have encountered in writing about characters in this milieu is that they cannot access the kind of articulateness and self-awareness displayed by middle-class characters in contemporary cinema and television. Like the heroes of classic Westerns, they are constantly frustrated by the lack of a framework in which to interpret the conflicting emotional and psychological forces are within them. The challenge for the scriptwriter is that the only tools available are behaviour, and dialogue in which the sub-text is constantly stressing the text.

However, this has the advantage that it suits cinema, where the focus can be kept on the emotions compelling the characters to act rather than the ways in which they rationalise their behaviour. It can also escalate suspense, as, like a minor chord in music aching to be resolved into a major chord, conscious integration being just out of reach creates a greater uncertainty as to whether the character will make good choices, and whether they will gain insight and achieve psychic wholeness.

## COUNTRY NOIR

'Are you the good guy?' Stevie asked.

'I'm the only guy,' the sheriff said.

Scott Wolven, *Controlled Burn: Stories of Prison, Crime, and Men* [Wolven, 2005, p151]

A case could be made for *Mother Nature*'s place in the tradition of New Zealand Gothic art. However, my researched has been more concerned with the literary sub-genre 'country noir'. This is a term coined by U.S. author Daniel Woodrell when titling his novel *Give us A Kiss: a Country Noir*. It has since been widely used by

critics to characterise his writing and those of many others, right back to Hawthorne and Melville. An evocative definition of this term is provided by Woodrell's character Doyle Redmond: 'Back behind the smiles and homespun manners, and classic American hokum, there's a whole 'nother side of life, a darker, semi-lawless, hillbilly side.' [Woodrell, 1996]

Jordan, MT, Smudge and Eva's whanau have something of this 'hillbilly' quality. Interestingly, Woodrell has since refused to be defined by this genre (Murphy, 2013, p1), because 'noir has to have a tragic ending'. Whether the ending of *Mother Nature* is tragic or not is, as I have suggested, open to interpretation. For example, my perception is that in genres such as 'action movies', the story is structured not to facilitate a transformational character arc, but instead to compel the character to become ever more 'themselves'. That is to say, a test of mettle doubles as a revelation of 'true' character. My intention is that the character of Janis could be seen to embody either form: the climactic violence is both a return to a defining aspect of character (character is destiny) and confirmation that she has developed empathy toward her son (a transformational arc).

Daniel Woodrell, in rejecting the term 'country noir' which he coined, prefers now to see his writing as 'social realist.' [Woodrell, 2011, p1] I doubt that these concepts can be so easily distinguished, as crime stories have, from Dashiell Hammett's novels to TV's *The Wire*, have been vehicles for incisive social commentary. In addition, the works typically included in the canon of 'country noir' can also be seen as social realist. Perhaps Woodrell's position may be in response to frustration at the status afforded 'literary fiction' at the expense of 'crime fiction'.

In any case, *Mother Nature* is, in addition to the archetypal mythology of the Western, intended to have one foot grounded in social realism - the status of tangata whenua in farming communities dominated by white landowners, the historical legacy of which is hinted at in Mr Burne's nickname as the Resident (the British empire's representative in NZ before governors); the economic and dubious social benefits of gentrification brought about by viticulture; and the prevalence of violence in masculine codes. While the story is an opportunity to depict these concerns, it is not of course a social realist drama; reflective of the social realist crime-thriller genre

exemplified Hammett and James M Cain, these issues justify their presence in the narrative by helping to generate suspense.

## TRAGEDY

I have often heard writers and story developers observe that drama is built from ‘the simple things that complex people do.’ Inarticulate characters encourage this discipline because the luxury and the trap of characters over-analysing themselves is forestalled. This seems to me to be especially useful in writing tragedy. Although *Mother Nature* is not explicitly a tragedy, any more than it is a classic noir - it offers at least in part a redemptive, generative ending – the plot points described above share much in common with the tragic form, here outlined by US novelist David Vann in this interview:

Q. Are all your novels Greek tragedies?

A. Yes. In all my novels, the two main characters are not enemies. They love and need each other, but are destroying each other because they're acting unconsciously and out of control, caught up in the momentum of their selves and lives and histories. They do something awful that breaks a taboo, and afterward it's difficult to know or re-establish the rules for whom a self should be, what a family should be and what a society should be. They're put under pressure because of this break in the rules, and that pressure is unrelenting until they themselves break and are revealed, and this is when readers (and the writer) test and see themselves, who they are or might be. [Vann, 2017, p1]

In *Mother Nature*, my approach to characterization is that the main characters are driven by impulses they do not, choose not to, and/or possibly cannot consciously grasp. This includes the nature of MT's attraction to Jordan; Eva's weight of obligation; Janis's misinterpretation of the spectre that is haunting her; the Resident's sadism; and above all the conflict in Jordan between seeking macho manhood and the

need for family/belonging, between narrowly defined masculinity and his own authentic self.

My aim in the narrative design is that the disruptions - the 'taboo' or 'the break in the rules' referred to by David Vann – involve, as often as possible, ambiguities to do with gender. A female gang leader and convicted murderer is an obvious starting point; then there is the temperament and limited self-awareness typical of male protagonists in action movies; and the constant subversion of expectations around a 'mother nature'. In addition, MTs provocative (disruptive) seduction of William is the inciting incident, and the ensuing macho hysteria highlights the issue of Eva's gender in her role as town constable. Yet even before that, there is the challenge from prisoner Jet that, by euthanizing a baby-substitute, Janis is betraying her gender and therefore her maternal nature.

My intention is that the audience experiences Jordan as the character who suffers the greatest confusion of gender role. Here I am taking aim squarely at a New Zealand compulsion to define, lionise and eroticise masculinity in a particularly narrow form. The common element between masculinity represented by the media/culture surrounding the All Blacks, the Bogan values celebrated in *Outrageous Fortune*, and the social media celebrity of figures like Johnny 'Danger' Bennett, is a masculinity which excludes sexual fluidity, creativity, and alternatives to macho posturing and competitiveness. Yet there are of course chinks in this culture of machismo. For example, chefs (like Jordan) are permitted to transcend gender stereotypes in a way that is similar to rock stars who strut the stage with big hair, make up, and hip-swinging.

## CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

You know, a dame with a rod is like a guy with a knitting needle.

- *Out of the Past* [Mainwaring, 1947]

The fact that a woman enacts the climactic confrontation might aid in evoking moral horror, but it is also my response to an interesting moment in the history of cinema.

Since the turn of the millennium, many female action heroes have appeared on screens. The stellar success of *The Hunger Games*, *Wonder Woman*, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, and TV's *Killing Eve* interests me for the relatively uncomplicated presentation of the female characters who enact the violence in these films. While the critique of violence and scopophilic pleasure in *Unforgiven* and *History of Violence* reflect a cultural moment of 'masculinity in crisis', these films have cheerfully sailed into the territory they vacate.

It is ironic to me that in an era in which on-screen violence has been so widely criticised, female action heroes have become the purveyor of these voyeuristic thrills. However, film genres typically progress from classical to revisionist modes, and I anticipate that the female action film will go this way as well. For example, just as has been asked of genre films with male protagonists aimed at male audiences, what does it mean that women can enjoy empathetic identification with both victim (for example, victim of male domination) and violent aggressor (for example, violent avenger of male transgression)?

The difficulty in rationalizing and integrating these two impulses can be evidenced in the recent *Wonder Woman* [Heinberg, 2017], a film of huge success and cultural impact. The character of Diana Prince is intended to be both an 'ass-kicker' and a paragon of selflessness who identifies with victims of... whatever. Adolescents may be at ease when swinging between two extremes of victimhood and aggression, but, in my estimation, the contradiction proved insurmountable for adult viewers and resulted in the male character of Steve Trevor becoming the 'point of view' character for much of the film. His efforts to 'manage' the unpredictable (or non-aware or non-integrated) Prince became the POV of the narrative, and his choices and decisions were the ones with which the audience was invited to identify.

If, however, this contradiction had become problematic for Diana Prince, so that her personal story was at least partly an effort to integrate these two extremes, my guess is that she would have become more of an identification figure. Yet this would have opened the story to a debate around whether violent or authoritarian modes of

behaviour, traditionally associated with masculinity, are worthy aspirations for women.

This is a debate which Western culture may not be ready to have right now but which, if the traditional movement of film genres from classical to revisionist is anything to go by, is probably coming. I feel that the perplexing character of Janis in *Mother Nature* anticipates this.

When completing the second draft, I began to sense that Eva might be the character best suited to embody this dichotomy. For one thing, it is she who makes the decision at the end to facilitate Janis's bloodletting. Also, Eva is the common element in all of the key triangular relationship dynamics in the story, not least because she is also a mother (to be). This encourages me to explore her point-of-view more thoroughly in future drafts, including testing her viability as the 'identification figure'.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PROTAGONIST AND ANTAGONIST

In genre terms, Janis and the Resident function as protagonist and antagonist of their action line – and are deliberately constructed as mirror images. They each seek to escape their pasts. The Resident is attempting to reinvent himself as a vintner and paragon of 'civilisation' in this rough 'n' ready rural environment, and not only outrun his past as a brutal police officer, but also to suppress and outrun that aspect of his psyche. Similarly, Janis is burdened by the murderous past that landed her a life sentence: her hallucinations and her militant, unrepentant response to them are evidence of a psyche struggling to integrate her past self.

The action of the plot draws both Janis and the Resident back to the past – Janis's motive is ultimately maternal revenge, while the Resident's is pure sadism, but the climactic action presents them as equals.

In dramatic theory, it is common to interpret protagonist and antagonist as mirrors of one another. Their characters, in being structured so deliberately as opposites, can be seen as being linked on some deeper level, or are complimentary, or are polarities at

either end of a single continuum, if not two halves of a whole. A common example is held to be the romcom, which typically demonstrates the notion that ‘opposites attract’ – while the first rule of romcom construction being that: ‘they hate each other at first sight’. Thus the action of plot enacts the view that a successful relationship is balance of opposites, and the hackneyed phrase ‘you complete me’ indicates that the qualities of the other can help make the protagonist whole. Or: consider the trope in crime films in which the detective must learn to ‘think like the criminal’ in order to catch him/her.

What interests me about this are the possibilities for the audience’s empathetic identification with the characters. Whether in the ancient Roman gladiatorial arena, or the modern multiplex, what does it mean that we are capable of identifying or empathising with both the victim and the aggressor?

My own research into this has led me to Jung’s concept of the ‘shadow’. According to Jungian analyst Aniela Jaffe, the shadow is the “‘sum of all personal and collective psychic elements which, because of their incompatibility with the chosen conscious attitude, are denied expression in life” [Jaffe, 2017, p88]. The Jungian path of mental health involves integration of the shadow into the conscious self. The total defeat of the antagonist (the ‘monster from the id’) in simplistic drama implies a fantasy of abolition of the shadow; but the morally ambiguous relationship between audience and antagonist, and protagonist and antagonist, in complex drama, implies something resembling integration.

Of course a movie is not psychotherapy. Yet this kind of story structure might enact or imaginatively depict the process of psychic integration, even if it doesn’t necessarily facilitate it.

History of Violence and Unforgiven may have been financially successful movies but they also encountered a storm of controversy from those who expect clearer lines of demarcation between morally objectionable behaviour (for example, on-screen violence) and it’s opposite. Jungian philosophy suggests to me that this resistance, especially in genre movies, is shadow-making in action. In writing Mother Nature, I have felt the pressure; the dramatist must work the genre elements skilfully to escape

the gravity of the simplistic morality. I am under no illusions: identifying with a protagonist at the same time as consciously recognizing the destructive tendencies within them may be a powerful tool of psychic integration, but no matter how skilful, it's not everyone's cup of tea and still requires a sophisticated audience.

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