

Down under: *Ressentiment* in the work of Frank Sargeson

JOHN HORROCKS

Abstract

Frank Sargeson's stories and novels often contain violent episodes. These have generally been interpreted as responses to the suffocating influence of Puritanism in New Zealand society. They are also expressions of *ressentiment*, an emotional stance in which a person is consumed by feelings of anger, jealousy and helplessness. *Ressentiment* provides the psychological dynamics for much of Sargeson's writing. This article traces the role of *ressentiment* in Sargeson's works and assesses the extent to which it enhances or takes away from their quality.

The author and journalist Elsie K. Morton argued at Authors' Week in 1936 that "all N.Z. books should be impregnated with the good and beautiful," and that she "feared the school of so-called realists drew their inspiration from sewers, prisons, madhouses and Soviet Russia."¹ Her comment might seem ludicrous today, but it says something about the time at which Frank Sargeson began his career. By contrast with the fastidious E. K. Morton, he wrote about itinerant workers, brutal relationships, homoerotic feelings, jealousy, perjury, petty thieving and fraud; all of which feature in the short novel *That Summer*. Murder is the central event in the stories "A Great Day" and "I've Lost my Pal," while in the latter story George also strangles a dog and deliberately slashes a lamb across the belly while shearing it. Sargeson's short fiction can also include more tender episodes and a subtle understanding of human yearnings and disappointments, but the "good and the beautiful" are absent, at least as Morton understood them.²

In his introduction to the 1964 collection of Sargeson's stories, Bill Pearson argued for a more positive interpretation of these works. He said that the stories repeatedly presented a "conflict between the beauty of the human spirit and some doctrine or dogma that inhibits it and contorts its expression."³ Like Pearson, Mark Williams has also suggested that this conflict derives from the life-denying and repressive values of middle-class New Zealand. Sargeson saw the members of this class as lacking the authenticity and instinctive generosity of the people that he himself once described as the "odds-and-ends kinds of people I naturally tend to cherish."⁴ Just as Pearson placed the human spirit at the centre of Sargeson's fiction, Williams contends that love is its primary impulse. It is the corruption or blocking of love that accounts for the violence and self-wounding in some of the stories.⁵

It is not hard to find instances in Sargeson's writing when frustrated love turns to revenge or self-wounding. The latter is seen in the suicide of Bandy in "Old Man's Story," the result of an innocent relationship with a young girl. Revenge is at the centre of the short story, "A Good Boy," in which a young man kills a girl when he finds out she is going out with someone else. The distorting effect of a restrictive notion of what is good and bad allows him to think that the murder was not only the right thing to do, but also leaves him feeling cleaner and better than at any other time in his life. The "good boy's" rationalisations for his actions and the death in "Old Man's Story" can certainly be ascribed to the perverse effects of Puritanism. They can also, however, be regarded as expressions of a related tendency in Sargeson's works. This is his demonstration of the power of *ressentiment*, a psychological stance in which a person in an inferior or embattled position is consumed by feelings of anger, jealousy, or helplessness. It goes together with unrealised dreams

and the violence that can follow from this lack of fulfilment. Puritanism might often be the enemy, but *ressentiment* provides the psychological dynamics for a great deal of Sargeson's writing.

Much has been written about the oppressive grip of puritan values in New Zealand. These values were summed up by Winston Rhodes as a morbid attitude to sexual behaviour, a suspicion of artistic interests, a reverence for work and suspicion about all forms of leisure that do not involve strenuous physical activity.⁶ Apart from Bill Pearson, another of Sargeson's contemporaries, Robert Chapman, also identified Puritanism as a dominant cultural pattern in New Zealand.⁷ *Ressentiment* is a useful term for describing some of the responses to such restrictive sets of values. It is as much a sociological as a psychological concept.⁸ This reflects the way the term was first used by Søren Kierkegaard in 1846 in his essay, *The Present Age*. He saw *ressentiment* as a feature of an era that lacked genuine passion or enthusiasm, a reflective age.⁹

Like any complex concept, *ressentiment* has had different meanings in the hands of its various interpreters. Nietzsche, for example, argued in *Towards a Genealogy of Morals* that a *ressentiment* morality was one that repudiated power, beauty and self-affirmation. It was an expression of a decadent spirit whose motive force was reactive rather than creative.¹⁰ Deleuze agreed, describing Nietzsche's notion of *ressentiment* as the spirit of revenge:

The instinct of revenge is the force that constitutes the essence of what we call psychology, history, metaphysics, and morality. The spirit of revenge is the genealogical element of our [i.e., modern] thought, the transcendental principle of our way of thinking.¹¹

When Nietzsche first came across Dostoevsky's *Letters from the Underworld*, he immediately recognized the kinship between his ideas and the novelist's fictional presentation of *ressentiment*.¹² Dostoevsky's nameless clerk is tormented by frustration and jealousy. He recognizes that his own emotional responses are extreme and says, "Not only is excess of sensibility, but also sensibility of any kind whatsoever, a malady."¹³ *Ressentiment* is one expression of a sensibility that registers that something is awry in people's relationships, or that society has caused such a failure. Sargeson is an expert in demonstrating the destructive effects of the excesses of this feeling, the times when it verges on a malady.

Ressentiment often motivates the drifters and alienated characters in Sargeson's earliest stories. One example is "I've Lost my Pal," in which the camaraderie of a shearing shed is disrupted by George's needling of Tom, a good-looking young man who looks forward to getting a steady job so that he can be married. In typically indirect fashion, Sargeson indicates that George, a shearer, hates Tom because of the contrast between the artless conventionality of Tom's ambitions and his own damaged past without a mother. George is "not too shook on women,"¹⁴ an attitude he explains by saying he was the "pet" of a Sunday school teacher.¹⁵ This suggestion of past sexual abuse, together with his incessant grooming and his narcissistic attention to his own dress and body, makes his murder of Tom more credible. Like Dostoevsky's clerk in *Letters from the Underworld*, his pathological self-preoccupation goes along with the loathing and violence associated with *ressentiment*. At the same time, his behaviour is partly validated by the first-person narrator. He not only appreciates George's "corker body," but his admiration goes as far as mimicry of George's action in tossing logs at a dog.¹⁶ He then finds excuses for George when he throws a lamb across the woolshed and tears its belly during shearing. If not an actual accomplice, the narrator is psychologically identified with him and finds him attractive. In a chilling finale,

Sargeson takes this instance of *folie à deux* further, as the narrator implies that the reader or listener might have also felt the same rage that led to Tom's murder:

I'm sore at losing Tom. I am that. But I have to admit that he'd sometimes get on your nerves and make you feel tired by arguing silly. Haven't you felt like that with anyone? Own up. I bet you have.¹⁷

"I've Lost My Pal," a story only four pages long, has multiple layerings of motivation. In the story "A Great Day" *ressentiment* also has murderous consequences, but the story is simpler and with a more linear plot. Two men go fishing in a dinghy and as they row out to a reef to collect mussels, one of them, Fred, makes a number of remarks that indicate how jealous he is of the other man, Ken. This accumulation of resentful comments provides the psychological preparation for the murder itself, in which Ken is left on a reef to drown as the tide comes in. Unlike the impulsive violence of George in "I've Lost My Pal," Fred's actions are the calculated outcome of *ressentiment* that is more long-standing:

Gee, I wish I had your body, Fred said. It's no wonder the girls chase you. But look at the sort of joker I am.

Well, he wasn't much to look at. There was so little of him. And the old clothes he wore had belonged to someone considerably bigger than he was.¹⁸

Fred cannot even keep the boat straight, as his legs are too short to reach the stern seat while he is rowing. He is not only out of work, but grumbles that Ken has the advantages of education and of savings, while he has to pay rent for a squalid bach. Furthermore, it seems that Ken is enjoying some kind of relationship with Mary, to whom Fred was also once close. On their way to the reef there are a number of indications that Fred intends to leave Ken there. He says:

You'll die someday, and where'll that big frame of yours be there then?

That's an easy one. Pushing up the daisies.

It might as well be now as anytime, mightn't it?¹⁹

Fred stuffs cotton wool in his ears, claiming that it protects them from salt spray. After he leaves Ken on the reef, where the tide is already above his knees, he rows away without looking back. The cotton wool makes it difficult for him to hear, which is the only detail that suggests that there are desperate cries from the drowning man. Ken's existence is satisfactorily erased. It is truly a "great day," a revenge of the weaker man over the stronger. Fred's final words to Ken contain a sinister and self-deprecating irony. Before he takes over control of the dinghy and leaves Ken to collect the mussels in the water, he says that it is tough work, "You can see what a weak joker I am."²⁰

In "The Hole that Jack Dug," the resistance to Mrs Parker, Jack's wife, by the two "cobbers" who dig a hole in the garden takes a milder, more symbolic form. This is based upon the excavation itself, as the hole threatens to undercut the wash-house, part of the domain of Jack's ex-governess wife and her friends. Jack's own part of the house is the little room off the back veranda where he sleeps on a camp stretcher, another indicator of his resentment of his wife and her bourgeois values. It is a detail that also reinforces the suggestion of homoerotic elements in the relationship with his friend. The story ends with the filling-in of the hole, which accentuates the futility of Jack's attempt at independence and the failure to understand his own emotions. His friend agrees with Jack's missus that some day Jack will end up in a lunatic asylum.

These early stories illustrate how well Sargeson understood the dynamics of *ressentiment*. Others in which this emotional condition has a leading part are “A Pair of Socks,” “Sale Day,” “A Good Boy,” and “City and Suburban.” In an analysis of “Sale Day,” “The Hole that Jack Dug,” and “City and Suburban,” Peter Limbrick concludes that they reference a version of masculinity that is threatened by a feminine world, a world in which puritan values are maintained by castrating female figures. The solution for Sargeson’s male characters is either to step outside this symbolic order or to seek the company of other “whole men.”²¹ The place of *ressentiment* in this scenario is that it appears to provide the motive force for characters to make such decisions, even if they take a destructive form.

In “The Hole that Jack Dug,” it is significant that it is Jack’s wife who judges that he will end up in a lunatic asylum. He is already half-demented, digging his hole in the garden, remaining outside the house like the blowfly in the story that could not be bothered to fly into a food safe. His wife is not unlike the asylum attendants she predicts will one day manage him in her stead. The final image of containment in an asylum reinforces the claustrophobic sense that this physically impressive and active man is trapped in a world for which he is ill-fitted, the refined domain of a wife whose goals are characterised by her wish for a refrigerator. If any story fits the formula that *ressentiment* arises from the suffocating presence of puritan values, it is this.

It is going too far, however, to argue that the characters in all these stories are expressing various forms of resistance to puritan values or demonstrating that they are crippled by them. In “A Great Day,” in particular, the murder appears to be motivated by *ressentiment* alone. Fred hates Ken because he is stronger, has a job, a decent place to live and, most damning of all, is in competition for the same woman. It is the spirit of revenge that drives him, just as Iago explains his plotting against Cassio by saying, “He hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly” (*Othello*, V, i). Sargeson’s achievement in this story about *ressentiment* is the manner in which he reveals the extremity of Fred’s feelings, yet at the same time keeps intact that other element of a successful murder plot, the unsuspecting victim.

In Sargeson’s novels, especially those published in the 1970s, the role of *ressentiment* takes a different form. It is determined in part by the stylistic changes that began in the novel *I Saw in My Dream* (1949), when he moved away from the understated realism of his short fiction.²² The introduction of more educated middle-class characters and narrators, as well as the florid style that is part of the satire, in the novels *Memoirs of a Peon* (1965), *The Hangover* (1967), and *Joy of the Worm* (1969) enabled him to deal with a wider range of subjects and articulate social criticisms that were expressed only indirectly in his short stories.²³ Lawrence Jones, in his article “Frank Sargeson and the Great New Zealand Novel,” suggests that after 1950 Sargeson appeared to have given up his project to write a major novel that definitively analysed Puritanism in New Zealand. He embraced, instead, an approach that contained “quirkier expressions of his own sensibility” and was “openly and sometimes magnificently eccentric and idiosyncratic.”²⁴

The playful treatment of his subject-matter through satire allowed Sargeson to present a more detached critique of society, but at the risk of flattening out the presentation of the characters and their motivations. *Ressentiment* in these situations becomes more a matter of authorial stance, the way characters and situations are presented, though there can still be occasions for the type of frustrated emotion that drives characters’ actions within the short stories.

One of the photos in Dennis McEldowney’s book, *Frank Sargeson in his Time*, shows three young men in 1913 working on a road into Oakley Sargeson’s farm.²⁵ Sargeson particularly liked this photo and said that Jeremy, one of the men, was the inspiration for the character of the same

name in *Joy of the Worm*.²⁶ As in the photo, the novel starts as Jeremy and two workmates cut back a pumice bank along a creek. The chapter is like a masterful short story, simply written, with an ending in typical Sargeson fashion, as it leaves the reader with a question about the decision of Geoff, the young farmer they work for, to get married. In the very next chapter Jeremy Bohun has returned home. The eccentric and idiosyncratic features that Jones identified as elements in Sargeson's late fiction are displayed in full in this chapter. After breakfast, Jeremy's clergyman father asks him to read Gibbon's account of the Council of Constance. The description of old man's pedantry – he checks each footnote and corrects his son's Latin – is itself written in an elaborate style with Latinate words such as “extraneous,” “salacious,” and “latitude.”²⁷ The Reverend Bohun's subsequent letters to Jeremy are in the same vein. The two worlds of satirically-presented scholarship and working-class labour are brought into ironic contrast as Jeremy talks of his time on the farm: “That was great, father – good mates, a fire at night and a comfortable bunk.”²⁸ More than in any other of the late novels, this episode from *Joy of the Worm* demonstrates the transition in Sargeson's writing between a style of extreme economy and the satirical productions of the years after 1960.

The emotional transition represented by this stylistic change contrasts with the progression of Henry/Dave in *I Saw in my Dream*. In this earlier novel the young protagonist struggles through the entire first part to break free from his parents and their middle-class values. It is only after he has spent some time working on a farm that he is confident to say that he wants to do something, “In his own way. Something special.”²⁹ Jeremy Bohun's rebellion, on the other hand, is short-lived and the farm experience, placed in this case at the beginning of the novel, fails to be transformative. His wish to become his own self, separate from his father, is set aside, so that for the remainder of the novel he is reduced, like his father, to the role of a satirically-presented obsessive and incorrigible pedant. He says of himself: “I am my father's son. I am a scoundrel but I am a scholar.”³⁰ Sargeson himself was proud of what he saw as the sophisticated style of this novel.³¹ He vehemently rejected the comments made about it in a radio review by R. A. Copeland, rejoicing that he had tried to write a novel that was “intellectually acceptable” and the attempt by Copeland to trace some of the sources in *Joy of the Worm* was an example of a “typical academic showing himself off to a popular audience.”³²

Like the Reverend Bohun, people in the novels are often caricatures of members of middle-class society. In *Memoirs of a Peon*, for instance, there is the Remuera businessman Mr Gower-Johnson, a self-made man who is proud to show off a collection of nondescript paintings which still have the price tags attached. He is as innocently vulgar as the industrialist Bounderby in Dickens' *Hard Times*. The comic representation of Mr Gower-Johnson is part of the critique in this novel of a whole social class. The vacancy of its members is repeatedly emphasised, as in the episode when an oafish friend of Mr Gower-Johnson's daughter is applauded for mispronouncing Chekhov's name.

Sargeson's comic vision is at its most mellow in *Memoirs of a Peon*. The subversive behaviour of the character Michael Newhouse (aka Casanova) allows Sargeson to mock the banal pieties and restrictive values of middle-class New Zealand. It is a novel that has been widely admired, possibly because it was the first New Zealand work to present a sustained satire of this kind and was the long-awaited major production of its author.³³ Carl Stead acknowledged its quality,³⁴ while Winston Rhodes described it as “an hilarious adaptation of the picaresque form to material derived from a local and twentieth-century setting in New Zealand.”³⁵ Rhodes defended the bookish style of the narration as a virtuoso creation of a literary pastiche which emphasised in

comic fashion the alienation of the character Michael Newhouse from his environment. Some readers, he suggested somewhat patronisingly, might be unaware of this demonstration of literary skill.³⁶ Fifty years later, its labyrinthine ironies and deliberately mannered eighteenth-century style seem less amusing, a falling-off from the quality of the short stories and the completed version of the novel, *I saw in my Dream*.³⁷ Though *Memoirs of a Peon* contains many brilliant individual episodes, such as the description of Newhouse's life in a hostel when he first comes to study in Auckland, the relentless satirical attention to the petty hypocrisies and ambitions of respectable society comes close to a case-study of *ressentiment* in operation. Even Newhouse's sexual adventures are passionless and rather mechanical operations, formulaic rather than rollicking.³⁸ They seem there largely to satisfy the literary equivalence between Newhouse and his notorious predecessor.

Sargeson's satirical treatment of Mr Gower-Johnson and his family exemplifies one of the features of *ressentiment* that Kierkegaard saw as characteristic of a reflective age, an age lacking in genuine passionate feeling. This is the process he called "levelling," in which the frailties of the powerful or respectable are laid bare.³⁹ "Levelling" often takes place when characters find out others' secrets. An instance in *Memoirs of a Peon* is when the narrator, Michael Newhouse, discovers that Mr Gower-Johnson has been surreptitiously watching him in the shower. Newhouse is simply amused, in line with the tolerant acceptance of the varieties of sexual attraction that allows him to enjoy a number of erotic situations. The incident, however, further establishes the weakness of Mr Gower-Smith's pretensions to respectability.

A more extended incident when "levelling" takes place is in *Joy of the Worm*. In this novel Maisie Bohun approaches the local county chairman in order to plead for her husband, who has been stealing petty cash from his office. She finds the chairman in his kitchen, where he is wearing only a nightdress as he does the ironing. The cross-dressing dairy farmer admits that there is a complete role reversal in his family. He not only has to restrain himself from boasting about his skill at sewing, but admits that New Zealand has been a place where he has been freed from the expectation that a man needs sex. The two strike a bargain. Maisie's husband has been caught taking money. The chairman, Mr Lavender, has been caught out in his matrimonial arrangements. Nothing will be said.

The scene is elaborately described. There is the husband in his nightdress with its square-cut neck and smocking and his large-breasted wife in grubby men's pyjamas and gumboots. Even the name Lavender is redolent of fresh-smelling propriety. There is, however, a predictability about the way Sargeson exposes the weaknesses of characters who appear to be eminent or respectable, or visits violence on them. There is a long list of such people. Apart from Mr Lavender in *Joy of the Worm*, examples in this novel alone include Jeremy Bohun's mother, who is said to shave regularly; Jeremy's wife Maisie and his daughter, who drown (for no particular reason); Jeremy himself, who seems indifferent to the discovery of his wife's body, and Jeremy's clergyman father, who neglects his wives and defrauds one of them, as well as molesting his housekeeper, Angela Bonnie.

This "levelling" process applies to many of the women in Sargeson's later works. Many, like Mrs Bohun, have physical defects. Sally in *Man of England Now* becomes grossly obese and denies her husband sex,⁴⁰ while the narrator's mother in *A Game of Hide and Seek* has the "hands wrists and ankles of a man."⁴¹ Apart from the number with some form of disability, women are at risk from dismemberment by machete, drowning, marital neglect when they are ill or, in *En Route*, a

whack on the bottom with a frying pan.⁴² The Māori servant-girl Ella in *Memoirs of a Peon* infects Newhouse with venereal disease.

Sargeson's male characters, on the other hand, are inevitably fated to undergo some form of "levelling" if they are strong or handsome. This process begins in his stories and continues in the novels. Jack, the "big specimen of a bloke" in "The Hole that Jack Dug," is likely to end up in a lunatic asylum;⁴³ George, in "I've Lost my Pal," who has a "corker body," turns out to be a sadist and a killer;⁴⁴ Tom, a "good-looking young chap," is one of George's victims;⁴⁵ Ken in "A Great Day" is left to drown by his puny fishing companion; Victor, the "rather fine-looking young chap" in "Sale Day" is a narcissistic and violent bully who is conflicted over his own responses to sexuality;⁴⁶ while the "tall strong and far too handsome" Geoffrey in *The Hangover* turns out to be a paedophile, wanted by the police over an incident with a young girl.⁴⁷ The strangest fate experienced by an attractive male is seen in the short novel *A Game of Hide and Seek*. Derek, a friend of the narrator, is described as "very tough to look at, short and muscular, very masculine."⁴⁸ He is possibly sterile, however, because his testicles are undescended. In the story "City and Suburban," the theme of emasculation is symbolised by a severed and limp finger. In *A Game of Hide and Seek* the reality is more literal.

In the course of the narrator's description of how he helps Derek to provide a smallish sample of sperm for a fertility test, he observes the effect of Derek's condition on the latter's feelings for a mutual friend, Lucy:

And love which runs into an obstacle may be transformed into its opposite. Hatred and revenge are sweet too. Derek would like to see Lucy crippled ... we are all of us more or less crippled.... [I]t is a distressing and dangerous illusion to expect any created thing to exhibit a perfection beyond flaw.⁴⁹

Not only is Derek well and truly levelled by his disability, but he experiences the classic symptom of *ressentiment*, the desire for revenge. Lucy's husband is limited in another way, as his miniscule penis means that the couple's five children have been conceived by artificial insemination, the bizarre details of which are spelt out by Sargeson. It is hard to see the evidence for R. A. Copland's judgement that one can repeatedly find in *A Game of Hide and Seek*, that "comedy prevails over bitterness in what is clearly a work of satire."⁵⁰

There is an uneasy relationship between instances such as these in which "levelling" is a component of Sargeson's satire and other occasions where *ressentiment* drives the characters themselves. In *A Game of Hide and Seek* David exemplifies this dual process of authorial "levelling" and his own domination by *ressentiment*. It is a pattern that is found at other times in Sargeson's late novels.

Perhaps the clearest instance of this type is in *Sunset Village*, a novel based around the characters in a housing settlement for pensioners. The novel ends as a magistrate collapses in court. He has realised that the accused in a case of indecent exposure is Brixton Blake, a man whom he had paid for sexual assignations when they met for a "private occasion in the makeshift privacy of the Town Belt."⁵¹

Brixton Blake goes about in soft-soled rubber shoes and carries a pair of binoculars. He also adopts another and somewhat unlikely identity for his sexual encounters. He turns his jacket inside out to expose a "mother-of-peal sheen" and combs up his hair into a fuzz that makes him into "a kind of honorary Polynesian."⁵² This voyeuristic figure is obsessed by his resentments of women and the other residents of Sunset Village. He also dislikes New Zealand people who go overseas

and get big ideas. Like many of the characters in Sargeson's early stories, he is limited by his lack of education. Yet he does read, he goes to lectures and he has a half-formed sense of the injustice that can be visited upon someone who, like himself, might be seen by most people as a deviant. He is a lowbrow version of the isolated autodidacts that recur in Sargeson's work – Ernie in *Memoirs of a Peon*, Lennie in *The Hangover*, and the narrator Ivan in *A Game of Hide and Seek*.

As Brixton Blake is more thoughtful than the characters in Sargeson's early fiction, his interior monologues provide Sargeson with a method for approaching issues about social mores and who sets the rules for them. In the court, however, Brixton Blake reverts to being like a character from an early Sargeson story, described by the narrator as, "that sort of Kiwi, who has the most embarrassing difficulty with the word, and on that account inclines to settle for something reduced."⁵³ In a review in *The Listener*, James Bertram suggested that *Sunset Village* not only demonstrated Sargeson's gift for satirical comedy, but revealed the mature voice of the "shrewd, tolerant, all-seeing but seldom-judging censor of our time and place."⁵⁴ It is true that Sargeson's narrative technique distances him from the frustrated speculations and bigotry of characters such as Blake and the apoplectic and incompetent policeman Detective-Inspector Tupstall. A further layer of ironic detachment comes from his choice of the repellent Blake and his client, the magistrate, as the victims of society's homophobia. *Sunset Village* is, however, hardly an Olympian late-career survey of human foibles. When we learn, for example, that Mrs Trigger's husband "died in the saddle," the Wild West imagery is an indicator that the comedy will be feeble. It is also hard to discover any character for whom one can feel any empathy. Far from indicating the hand of a seldom-judging author, the novel seems better characterized as a sustained exercise in *ressentiment*, an unrelenting exposé of society's hypocrisy, especially that of people in authority in the judicial system. Brixton Blake certainly feels the force of *ressentiment* himself, but is unable to act on it. It is Sargeson who arranges the plot so as to humiliate the authority figure, the magistrate, and by extension, his perfect middle-class family.

Humiliation, a powerful form of "levelling," is also the fate of a character in Sargeson's final work, *En Route*. This is the farmer, Mac, who suffers the embarrassment of being abandoned by his sprightly and much younger wife, whose liveliness is emphasised by the way she treats their bed like a trampoline. In his haste to chase after her, he mounts the wrong horse and there is a vivid description of his discomfort on a makeshift saddle: "... oh, oh, oh, his poor backside, already he would be suffering raw agonies from the sore patches he called his two half-crowns."⁵⁵ This short novel is a strangely contemporary work which celebrates liberated women in the form of the "rakes" Connie and Kirsten who take a road trip, as well as mentions of pyramid selling, birth control, trauma, and gadgets such as transistor radios. Despite the ingenious introduction of these elements, comic spectacles such as Mac's discomfort seem forced, occasions merely to make fun of him or other figures.

The degree to which the characters in the late novels tend towards caricature can mask any sense of genuine feeling. It is as if Sargeson shied away in most of these novels from presenting his more complex and educated characters in any way except satirically. There are occasions, however, when the satire eases and characters can emerge as fuller people. One such figure is Dick Lennie in *The Hangover*, the cleaner/philosopher who becomes an informal mentor to a university student, Alan. Dick Lennie is a participant in the story, unlike similar figures in other novels by Sargeson, characters such as Ernie Clayton in *Memoirs of a Peon*, who gives advice to a younger Michael Newhouse but never leaves the confines of his confectionery shop and its back room lined with books. Lennie's relationship with his lover Dottie provides a counterpoint to the romantic

misadventures of Alan. The older couple's complex erotic life climaxes in a scene in which Lennie's reflections on life are skilfully interwoven with the progress of a sexual encounter, a local equivalent of the final scene in Joyce's *Ulysses*. Alan also emerges at times from the distorting effects of satire, though he is driven by an ill-focussed sense of *ressentiment* to commit a series of murders. Of all the people in the novel, he is the least certain about what he is doing, unlike the student in *Memoirs of a Peon*, the suave and self-regarding Michael Newhouse. Alan's casting-about for meaning once he rejects his mother's wish that he become an engineer is treated sympathetically by Sargeson. *The Hangover* is a coming-of-age work, but Alan's struggle to cast off the puritan ideals inherited from his mother ends in failure. He is like a character from the early stories who never overcomes his own limited self-understanding and respect for propriety. His final rebellion takes the form of extreme violence, in which realism gives way to the gothic extravagance of the murders themselves, for which he has prepared himself by buying a plastic raincoat and a machete.

The *ressentiment*-laden tone of much of Sargeson's late fiction seems very much at odds with the Sargeson of his autobiographical works, in which there are generous and thoughtful recollections about his many friends and his long-time lover, Harry. Even "M," the Kaukapakapa farmer who was the model for Mac in *En Route*, is treated warmly and provides Sargeson with the concluding observation in his autobiography, the thought that this man might be the boy that he could have seen from a train fifty years earlier when he travelled with Frank Gadd to the Bay of Islands.⁵⁶ The many tributes by fellow-writers in the volume produced to celebrate Sargeson's centenary also record the kindness and help they experienced from him.⁵⁷ The overwhelming presence of *ressentiment* in the stories and novels appears, by contrast, to be the expression of another side of Sargeson, the writer who was an isolated and defensive figure, never quite free from a desire to challenge not just the crippling restrictions of puritan values in New Zealand, but also to expose the weaknesses of those figures in society who might be confident, powerful, or physically attractive. In terms of the relationship between an author and his works, this is an aspect of Sargeson that may need more consideration.

Like Ivan's conclusion in *A Game of Hide and Seek*, the presence of *ressentiment* in so much of Sargeson's fiction makes it appear to be very much the work of a man who believed it was "a distressing and dangerous illusion to expect any created thing to exhibit a perfection beyond flaw."

¹ Robin Hyde, letter to John A. Lee, 29 April, 1936 (Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Public Library, NZMS828, F2). Quoted with the permission of the copyright holder, Derek Challis.

² All references to Sargeson's stories are from *Frank Sargeson's Stories*, intr. Janet Wilson (Auckland: Cape Catley, 2010).

³ Bill Pearson, intr. to *Frank Sargeson, Collected Stories* (Auckland: Blackwood and Janet Paul, 1964), 11.

⁴ Frank Sargeson, *Sargeson* (Auckland: Penguin, 1981), 365. This edition brings together the autobiographical writings, *Once is Enough, More than Enough, and Never Enough*.

⁵ Mark Williams, "Frank Sargeson, Apostle of Love." *Landfall* 192 (1996): 202-21. His view is shared by Janet Wilson, in her introduction to *Frank Sargeson's Stories*, 9-20 (14); Sargeson, *Sargeson*, 365.

⁶ H. Winston Rhodes, *New Zealand Novels: A Thematic Approach*, Studies in New Zealand Literature (Wellington: NZ University Press/Price Milburn, 1969), 40-44.

⁷ Lawrence Jones, "Puritanism," in *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*, ed. Roger Robinson and Nelson Wattie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 455-56.

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- ⁸ The sociological dimensions of this concept may explain why research within academic psychology has focussed on related terms such as jealousy and envy, rather than *ressentiment* itself. See, for example, the review of psychological research on envy and its relationship to hostility by R. H. Smith & S. H. Kim, “Comprehending Envy” *Psychological Bulletin* 133, no. 1 (2007): 46-64, and Richard Smith’s *Envy: Theory and Research* (New York: OUP, 2008).
- ⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, trans. & intr. Alexander Dru (London: Fontana, 1962). Kierkegaard’s adoption of the French word *ressentiment* has enabled this term to denote more than simple envy or resentment.
- ¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Towards a Genealogy of Morals*, ed. T. N. R. Rogers and trans. Horace B. Samuel (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2003), 19-20. For an extended study of Nietzsche’s views on *ressentiment*, see Mathias Risse’s “Origins of *Ressentiment* and Sources of Normativity,” *Nietzsche-Studien* 32 (2003): 142-70.
- ¹¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (London: Althone Press, 1983), 35.
- ¹² “My joy was extraordinary” is how Nietzsche described this discovery in a letter of 23 February, 1887. Cited in Frederick Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. & intr. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 202.
- ¹³ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Letters from the Underworld*, intr. C.J. Hogarth (London: Dent, 1968), 9.
- ¹⁴ Sargeson, “I’ve Lost my Pal,” 43.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.
- ¹⁸ Sargeson, “A Great Day,” 77.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.
- ²¹ Peter Limbrick, “‘Whole Men’? Re-reading Masculinity in Frank Sargeson’s Stories,” *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 14 (1996): 4-23 (13).
- ²² Frank Sargeson, *I Saw in my Dream*, ed. and intr. H. Winston Rhodes (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1974). First published in 1949.
- ²³ Dan Davin suggests that Sargeson needed to make this change in order to convey greater intensity of feeling: the characters in the early stories were not only inarticulate but “even if they could speak there would be no one to understand them” (“The Narrative Technique of Frank Sargeson,” in *The Puritan and the Waif: A Symposium of Critical Essays on the Work of Frank Sargeson*, ed. Helen Shaw (Auckland: H.L. Hoffman, 1954), 58).
- ²⁴ Lawrence Jones, “Frank Sargeson and the Great New Zealand Novel,” *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 16 (1998): 72-85 (82).
- ²⁵ Dennis McEldowney, *Frank Sargeson in his Time* (Dunedin: John McIndoe, 1976), 63.
- ²⁶ Frank Sargeson, *Joy of the Worm* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1969).
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ²⁹ Sargeson, *I Saw*, 269.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.
- ³¹ Frank Sargeson, letter to M. I. Aldred, 29 August, 1974, in *Letters of Frank Sargeson*, sel. by Sarah Shieff (Auckland: Vintage, 2012), 525-27 (527).
- ³² Frank Sargeson, letter to Michael Beveridge, 3 February, 1970, in *Letters of Frank Sargeson*, sel. by Sarah Shieff (Auckland: Vintage, 2012), 428. The comment about university lecturers is one of the politer remarks about Copeland in this letter.
- ³³ See, for example, R. A. Copeland, who described it as “a comic novel of serious proportions” (R. A. Copeland, *Frank Sargeson* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1976), 35). Alex Calder also admires

Sargeson's comic talent and his mastery of a faux-period style (Alex Calder, *The Settler's Plot: How Stories Take Place in New Zealand* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2011), 179-83).

³⁴ Carl Stead, "Sargeson's *Peon*," *Kin of Place: Essays on 20 New Zealand Writers* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2002), 51-64 (51).

³⁵ Rhodes, *New Zealand Novels*, 67.

³⁶ H. Winston Rhodes, *Frank Sargeson*, Twayne's World Authors Series 75 (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969), 155.

³⁷ Sargeson himself denied that he had consciously modeled his prose on that of authors such as Smollett or Sterne, arguing that he had known people who talked like his characters in *Memoirs of a Peon*. Letter to R. A. Copeland, 10 October, 1976, in *Letters of Frank Sargeson*, sel. by Sarah Shieff (Auckland: Vintage, 2012), 551-52.

³⁸ Stead, "Sargeson's *Peon*," 44. Stead points out that the men in the novel are treated with "affectionate speculation."

³⁹ Kierkegaard, *Present Age*, 56-57. He saw "levelling" as a dragging down, an attack on individuality and passionate action, corresponding to the role of fate in antiquity.

⁴⁰ Frank Sargeson, *Man of England Now* (London: Martin Brian & O'Keefe; Christchurch: Caxton, 1972).

⁴¹ Frank Sargeson, *A Game of Hide and Seek*, in *Man of England Now* (London: Brian & O'Keefe. Christchurch: Caxton, 1972), 151-233 (154).

⁴² Frank Sargeson, *En Route. In Tandem with Edith Campion – The Chain* (Wellington: A. H. & A. W. Reed, 1979).

⁴³ Sargeson, "The Hole," 223.

⁴⁴ Sargeson, "I've Lost," 41.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁶ Sargeson, "Sale Day," 100.

⁴⁷ Sargeson, *The Hangover*, 144.

⁴⁸ Sargeson, *A Game*, 175.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁵⁰ Copeland, *Sargeson*, 42.

⁵¹ Frank Sargeson, *Sunset Village* (Wellington: A. H. & A. W. Reed, 1976), 82-83.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 89-90.

⁵⁴ James Bertram, "Indian Summer," review of *Sunset Village*, by Frank Sargeson, *NZ Listener* (22 May, 1976): 50. Bertram goes so far as to compare *Sunset Village* with Thomas Mann's final novel, *Felix Krull*. This is unfortunate, as the lightness and urbanity of Mann's satire only emphasises the contrast with Sargeson's ponderous attempts at humour. A closer parallel to Mann's novel and its hero, Felix Krull, is the character Michael Newhouse in *Memoirs of a Peon*, particularly the double attraction the latter has for the mother/daughter pair of the Gower-Johnson family.

⁵⁵ Sargeson, *En Route*, 167. According to Michael King, "M's" marriage to a young woman destroyed Sargeson's expectations that he would look after him in old age, despite having received gifts from the author of several thousand pounds (Michael King, *Frank Sargeson: A Life* (Auckland: Viking, 1995), 403-04). The representation of Mac in *En Route* is hard to see as anything but an act of revenge on Sargeson's part.

⁵⁶ Sargeson, *Sargeson*, 490.

⁵⁷ Graeme Lay and Stephen Stratford, ed., *An Affair of the Heart: A Celebration of Frank Sargeson's Centenary* (North Shore City: Cape Catley, 2003).