

# REPRESENTATION OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE BODIES IN THE WRITTEN AND VISUAL WORK OF BARBARA HANRAHAN

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In both her written and her visual work, Barbara Hanrahan is concerned with the division between the public and the private aspects of women's lives, and the strict division maintained by the woman artist between her art and her social life. In this paper I will talk about the occurrence in Hanrahan's work of a split in the characters between the social body and the private body, and the importance, for the artist, of keeping these two aspects of her life separate.

The women in Hanrahan's novels often find themselves in a restrictive social role which discourages anything 'ugly' or unsavoury. The artists in Hanrahan's work are expected to portray a nice, safe view of life, and the women who are conventionally attractive are presented for the public gaze while those less attractive are ignored or hidden away. The repressed, dark side of the woman's mind manifests itself in other ways, leading to a split in the character between the public role and the repressed, private side.

Often the figure of the doll appears in Hanrahan's work, signifying concealment, and the division between what is seen and what must remain hidden. The doll bears fixed features – it is impassive, knowledgeable and secretive. It won't reveal what it has seen, and is unaffected by what is done to it. It becomes a mask behind which the character can conceal her secret passions.

The split in Hanrahan's women characters between the socially-inscribed body and the body that they explore privately is brought about by the tension between 'public' and 'private'. Hanrahan avoids any definitive division between 'public' and 'private', instead exploring various influences on the body and how these result in what is revealed or hidden. There are degrees of revelation, though, and this is one of the reasons public and private become problematic as Hanrahan questions what is seen or revealed, and the relationships between people that allow these views.

Representation of the body is not always straightforward in Hanrahan's work. There are various means by which the body can be seen and exposed, and the figure of the doll is often a means of masking another body. Paul Patton writes that while the biological view of the body is of

a relatively autonomous thing, separated off from other bits of the world by an epidermal surface . . . it may be argued that a body cannot be conceived independently of the kinds of relation it has with the world external to it. (45)

This idea that a body is related to its environment is also expressed by Mary Douglas, who writes that

the human body is always treated as an image of society and . . . there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension . . . If there is no concern to preserve social boundaries, I would not expect to find concern with bodily boundaries. (98-99)

This relation between bodily and social boundaries is closely linked to the relation between public and private, and the boundaries associated with these. Hanrahan's work explores the relation between public/social expectations and the private expression of the body. She explores the effect of the public arena on what would otherwise be seen as the private body, and illustrates the effect of societal concerns on women's bodies.

In Hanrahan's work, the doll is used to represent the public body. The relation between bodily and social boundaries can be traced in the figure of the doll. The doll's genitals are hinted at but never detailed. Concerns over the shape of women's bodies are reflected in the figures of some dolls, for example the Barbie Doll. The Kewpie Doll, on the other hand, is an unattractive, almost comical character. Her body is powerless as her legs are joined together and moulded in one piece with her body. She is fastened to a stick, and becomes a prisoner, unable to move or be played with. She is captured, naked but for a see-through tulle dress, on display on a stick. The stick is shaped like a shepherd's crook from which she can never stray. Her overly made-up features with her pouting mouth are the brave face she must bear under such circumstances. Hanrahan often refers to the figure of the Kewpie Doll in her visual and her written work, and I will talk about this figure later.

While the doll can be seen as representing the body, Hanrahan also uses it in her work to hold secrets or conceal something. While the doll's outward appearance is calm and unflustered, this is quite often a ploy to hide a secret aspect of the woman's life. Hence the doll represents doubleness – the outward, public exterior hiding the inner, secret life.

In Hanrahan's novels, many women feel restricted in their public role, which is often the role of the doll, and feel the need to explore a private, more intimate body. This is the body explored by the character called Doll in *The Frangipani Gardens*, and by Tempe in *The Peach Groves*. In *The Frangipani Gardens*, Doll is a spinster artist who paints dreary water colours by day and passionate oil paintings by night. Hanrahan describes the difference between Doll's two forms of painting:

In the studio [where she does her water colours] her brush twanged coolly as she swilled it in water and the paint was diluted, muted; it went on the paper tasteful and pale. But in here [the secret room where she does her oil paintings] she used canvas, and there were worms and mud – the paint was different, it smelled excited. And the colours were vulgar; they didn't beg pardon as they assaulted your eyes. (144)

The muted life that Doll lives in public is contrasted vividly with the vulgar, passionate part of her that comes to life in her secret room, and manifests itself in her oil paintings. While the water colours are two-dimensional, the oils are three-dimensional and have a reality and a passion for life which Doll is unable to convey in her water colours. Her name describes this duality – she lives as a doll and few people are able to see beyond this disguise to her secret, true life beneath.

When Doll was a child, her mother was concerned that her paintings weren't pretty. Hanrahan writes:

So Doll's pictures started to be careful – the teeth kept inside the mouths. But people could always be dangerous; pimples and wrinkles crept in, and Mother cried 'How dare you – that isn't my profile'. So the people were buried in landscape, and Doll had instant success. (149)

Doll's name refers to the facade of water-colour paintings that conceal the people she later reveals in her oil paintings, and to her strict division of time between day and night, so that her daytime, public occupation seems irreconcilable with her night time painting.

Tension between opposing bodies is also illustrated in *The Peach Groves*. In this novel, Tempe, whose mother was a Maori, is brought up with a white family and her mother dies. Although she is half Maori, Tempe is unable to remember her mother's Maori name, or the language of her mother. She has some knowledge of herbs and potions that her mother shows to her in her imagination, but the loss of her language constantly worries Tempe. There is one scene in the novel where Tempe floats in a secret forest pool, and feels that she comes closer to her mother. Hanrahan writes that when Tempe was in the pool she felt

you left your identity behind, you looked up at the sky and everything merged. All your problems were solved; you knew who you were. (39)

While floating in the pool, Tempe 'was the Lady [of Shalott] and she was Linda [her mother] and she was also herself'. While she is in the pool, Tempe experiences a sense of becoming one with other women – the Lady of Shalott from a romantic past, and her own mother whom she otherwise has trouble remembering. While she is in the pool, Tempe sings a Maori song that her mother had sung to her. She is able to remember the words, yet when she leaves the pool she forgets them again. While she is in the pool she is connected with her mother. The pool represents Kristeva's semiotic choric state in which Tempe is connected with her mother in a state of jouissance. Tempe sings the songs of her mother, yet the words have no linguistic meaning for her. Tempe is unable to remember her mother's name or her songs when she is not in the pool, as her mother can't be represented in the patriarchal, symbolic order. After her mother dies and she comes to live with Harry and Cissy (her half sister), Tempe feels her mother accusing her of forgetting, as she tries to live in the new world. Hanrahan writes:

for a while she would keep to the house, practise the soothing pianoforte airs, construe another world from books in Father's library. But she could not forget entirely. There was always a time when she walked under the trees again. (21)

Tempe tries to construct a world from masculine influences: a world where words have meaning and the world can be constructed from them. This is in opposition to the world of her mother, which is constructed from memories and sensations. She is closest to her mother when she is in the pool, or in the forest gathering berries barefoot. Her mother is connected to the elements – to earth and water. This world is in opposition to the other one that Tempe occupies – that of houses and books. Her mother's world is pre-linguistic – one of tactile sensations. Her mother can only be found through communion with the natural world. The forest represents her mother's body, as Tempe feels her mother with her, showing her which berries to pick and which to leave alone. The pool represents Tempe's unconscious, in which she returns to, and becomes one with, the mother she seeks. She shares her mother's mind as she floats, and the songs come back to her. Hanrahan writes

It didn't matter that, as she waded from the pool, the words drifted away; that, as she came out from the shadow of the pines, they were quite gone. In a sense, the forgetting was good. Her secret world stayed separate from Cissy's smug kingdom of teacup and crumb cloth. (39)

Like Doll, Tempe's two worlds are separate. Like the opposition of day and night that Doll maintains, Tempe's opposition is between the father, and a world constructed by words, and the mother, and a world of sensation.

While presenting the examples of Doll and Tempe as women who recognise the necessity for a division between public and private, Hanrahan at the same time rejects any simplified distinction, so that the reader or viewer of her work must question their own position in relation to what they witness in regard to her work. In Hanrahan's print 'Doll Kewpie', there are multiple boundaries between public and private. The transparent clothing reveals the naked yet clothed body, forcing the eye to move between the clothing and the body. One of the characters has the typical Kewpie Doll body – no breasts or genitalia, while the other one has prominent breasts and genitalia, and is showing her teeth in a grimace. The two characters appear to be in a cave, sheltering from the public view, yet the writing across their bodies 'Doll Kewpie' suggests public display. The Kewpie Doll is meant for display rather than intimacy, as are these Kewpie Dolls. Instead of the simple baby-faced appearance of the Kewpie Doll, however, these characters look apprehensive. One embraced the other, as if to protect her – possibly from the public gaze. In this print, Hanrahan has various layers of revelation – the clothing, the writing, and the shelter. The characters are on display yet hidden.

In *The Peach Groves*, when the young girl Ida watches Tempe in the pool, Hanrahan again questions the boundaries between public and private. Tempe's actions, observed by Ida, are not as private as she believes. Tempe imagines she is Tennyson's Lady of Shalott as she floats in the pool. When Ida watches Tempe, she observes what is, for Tempe, a private moment. Tempe is observed by the reader through the eyes of Ida, as the object of the view. Hanrahan writes

Ida wanted to laugh. Tempe floated there, beautiful but ridiculous . . . And she lay in a dress so thinly transparent that it provided a regular peep show. (34)

There are various portrayals of public and private in this scene. Tempe wears the thin muslin dress because it would be cheating to float naked – the Lady of Shalott was dressed in snowy white – and the dress is ideal because it dries quickly. Tempe's floating is not private, because she has an audience, although Ida is not able to understand what Tempe experiences, so Tempe still has this level of privacy. Tempe believes she is alone, but Ida, and through her the reader, knows that she is not. Tempe is clothed, yet in a dress that provides Ida with a 'peep show', where she can get a glimpse of the naked body that is not naked. Tempe herself doesn't know what she experiences, as she loses her knowledge once she leaves the pool. Hanrahan shows that the boundary between public and private is not static, and it is this constantly moving boundary that she explores. This can be compared to Doll's division between public and private which, even when she exposes it to her niece Lou, remains because Lou refuses to acknowledge this other side of Doll.

Through the scene with Tempe, the print 'Doll Kewpie', and Doll's unreconciled division, Hanrahan illustrates the constantly shifting boundary between public and private. She raises questions about what is public and what is private, and whether the two can be separated, suggesting through her work that 'public' and 'private' are indistinct positions, with her characters taking on positions that challenge and confuse this dichotomy. The division between the two is present, though, and is something that must be questioned and worked through by these characters.

The distinction between public and private can be associated with the process of printmaking. The art of the printmaker embraces the division between public and private. The plate is the private body of the print, harbouring the secrets of the process. It bears all the marks of the etching and the acid, yet it is not seen publicly. The print is the public body which disguises the plate. The printed image is reversed, further disguising the relationship between the plate and the print. The process of printmaking

can be related to that of writing and publishing. Like a book, once the plate has been committed to the printing process it can't be altered, and is committed to public scrutiny.

Because of the inherently commercial nature of printmaking, there is a sense in which the personal nature of producing the image on the plate is out of the artist's control once the printing process begins. In the novel *Sea-green*, Hanrahan describes the process from the point of view of Virginia, who has gone to London to study printmaking. She writes

she pushed hard and the bed moved forward; she turned the handle relentlessly, until she heard a metallic sigh and knew it was through. She lifted the print, bore it away; looked at it where no one could see. (129)

There is a contrast between the physical, mechanical process of making the print, and the private enjoyment when it is taken away and studied out of view of anyone else. The artist sees the result of their effort when the print moves off the press and into their hands. All that has gone beforehand is divorced from the final product, which doesn't bear the outward signs of the techniques that have gone into producing it.

While Virginia enjoys the privacy of her work, prints are inherently public by virtue of the way they are produced in numbers. The print is the public manifestation of the plate which produces it; the plate remains private, but the print becomes public when it leaves the plate and is reproduced a number of times.

In *Sea-green*, Hanrahan writes of Virginia's time spent at art school:

it was all so beautifully disciplined. From half past nine to four o'clock, surrounded by French chalk and resin, gum arabic and Victory-etch, she knew who she was. (131)

This discipline allows Virginia to work at her prints during the day, and deal with her personal life outside these hours. Like Doll, who must distinguish between her public facade and her real art, Virginia must divide her time, allocating time for both representations of herself.

The division between the public and private lives of the artist is portrayed in Hanrahan's print of an Adelaide artist, 'Dear Miss Ethel Barringer'. Alison Carroll writes that this image

refers to the particular balances which have to be handled by artists, especially by women artists: in *Dear Miss Barringer*, the doll figure, with the crown of 'Artist' in her hair is literally split by the acrobat's tightrope between the Joker in the foreground and the acrobat herself holding the banner 'balancing Act'. . . The balance of private and professional life, especially the problems of women artists in feeling comfortable about their roles as artists, is a theme close to Hanrahan herself. She acknowledges this balance of her own life: the desire to remain 'safe', inside approving society, and the necessity of being an artist. (14)

The acrobatic figures in the painting represent the risks and the leaps the artist must take with her work. They are not safe, floating around with no stable base beneath them. The Joker in the print represents the contradiction in the life of the artist – the balance between the need to feel free to move around and take risks, and the need for stability provided by the Life Catcher figure of the Joker. This is a precarious stability, though, as the artist balances perilously on the shoulder of the Joker. As long as the balance can be maintained, Miss Barringer will remain safe behind her doll-like appearance, concealing the acrobatics involved in maintaining the division between her public and private lives. While the Life Catcher is the figure who provides the artist with the stability of the social world, it is also this figure who can deprive the artist of her life as artist by catching

her and holding her in the social world.

Carroll refers to the 'doll figure' in this print with the crown of 'artist' in her hair. This figure bears the name Miss Ethel Barringer, and the word 'dead' is written on her shoulder. Hanrahan seems to be suggesting that when confronted with these oppositions, the artist is required to take on the doll's persona and become 'dead' in appearance, as did the character Doll. The 'dead' doll-like figure has a smile and large, staring eyes, but they look fake, like a doll's physiognomy. The smile is fixed, and the face, the pretty dress, the dainty posture and the flowers in her hand all contribute to disguise the balancing and tumbling that is going on in her head. As the banner proclaims, 'Only Miss Barringer is safe' because only Miss Barringer appears 'dead' – a doll-like representation who is able to conceal her inner conflict.

Like the artist who hides behind the doll-like appearance, Ida in *The Peach Groves* uses her doll Queechy to conceal her fears. The doll provides security for the character as it holds knowledge without needing to question what it knows. Ida tells Queechy her secrets and her troubles. When Ida hears Uncle Harry tell Tempe that he is 'worthless', Ida is afraid, unable to know what to do with this information. She turns to her doll to unburden herself: 'Only porcelain and calico, she told Ida what to do. It turned into a joke', Hanrahan writes. Ida embroiders the word on her doll's chest, and the fear is diminished. Queechy will present her usual 'porcelain and calico' appearance to the public gaze, disguising, as the doll-like appearance always does, the turmoil beneath. The 'worthless' will go unobserved, and Ida will keep the secret.

Hanrahan writes

The doll sat propped against a cushion, simpering, and Ida felt safe. Because of Queechy and what was hidden under her petticoat, the grownups were diminished. (63)

Using her doll, Ida is able to remove herself from the things that upset or confuse her.

In conclusion I would like to use the print 'Pin-up' as an example of a woman who needs to adopt the pose of the doll to conceal her inner conflicts. Although the figure in 'Pin-up' is supposedly a real woman, I would argue that the way she is represented suggests a doll. Like the doll, her genitals are invisible – the genital area has actually been removed. Her facial features lack definition so that she is as expressionless as a doll. While the lower half of her body is thrust towards the stage, and therefore the public view, the top half leans away, and her blank eyes look downwards, out of the picture. The expressionless face conceals whatever she may be feeling about her exposure. In looking out of the picture, she doesn't challenge the gaze that views her. She is a passive figure, like the doll, and her refusal to meet the audience's gaze suggests that, like a doll, she is concealing something. Her blank, mask-like face will not reveal what she is thinking.

This print illustrates the contradiction Hanrahan explores in her work of the way in which women are required to repress, for the public gaze, anything that is not pretty and pleasant or attractive to the eye. As the figure looks away to what the picture does not reveal, it represents the way in which women in Hanrahan's novels look away to something that is not for the public gaze. The print portrays the division between public and private, with the woman's body arranged to suggest endless possibilities of both revealing and concealing of adopting the doll-like facade to conceal what is not intended for the public gaze.

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