Three Readings of Sargeson's 'The Hole that Jack Dug'

This article brings together substantial excerpts from three articles by Joost Daalder, Simon During and Peter Simpson respectively which all coincidentally centre on Frank Sargeson's story 'The Hole that Jack Dug' (1945), and offer readings which differ from each other as widely in what they find in Sargeson's story as in the critical methods used for the purposes of excavation.

1. 'The Hole . . .' as Romantic

In the first part of his article entitled 'Frank Sargeson's Romantic Short Stories: An Approach' Joost Daalder develops the argument that Sargeson's short fiction is popularly but inadequately described as 'realism' or 'imaginative realism', if by 'realism' we are to understand writing which aims 'to give the illusion that it reflects life as it seems to the common reader' (Abrams). Sargeson's language is too selective to be 'realistic', Daalder argues, and the events in his stories are generally 'highly uncommon and improbable'. The attitudes embodied in the stories are 'predominantly those of a romantic': Wordsworthian in 'Cats by the Tail', Blakeian in 'Good Samaritan'. Furthermore, Sargeson 'takes' sides in a way which is not necessarily supported by the reality most of us think we know', as, for example, against puritanism in stories like 'A Good Boy'. Sargeson tends to idealise the characters towards whom he is sympathetic, usually underdogs or social outsiders who are often seen against a 'negative romantic version of society'.

One would need a great deal of space to give a detailed account of Sargeson's romantic values, but I am at present more concerned with a way of reading him which will lead us to see them. It seems to me that one reason for the acceptance of the stores as realistic is that there have been no close analyses of any of them, and I have therefore chosen 'The Hole that Jack Dug' for a reading which I hope will further my argument.¹ My principal purpose is to show that such a mature Sargeson story is indeed romantic, but I also hope to throw light on the way it is put together.
Jack himself is presented as some sort of 'noble savage'. It is significant that when we first see him, through the eyes of the narrator, he is almost naked. His physical force is emphasized, and the narrator points out that 'he's browned a darker colour than you'd ever believe possible on a white man'. Even the narrator perceives that Jack's darkness is some sort of an asset, for in the company of his wife's friends, he does not look 'too naked on account of his dark colour'. There is some mild irony here and elsewhere at the expense of the narrator, in that Jack's darkness makes him superior to whiter men in a way the narrator does not realize. Similarly with the narrator's comments on Jack's 'sky-blue' eyes. These, we are aware even at the beginning of the story, are to be contrasted with the artificiality of Jack's teeth. The narrator does sense that the teeth 'somehow don't fit in', but thinks of the eyes as doing so since they 'always have a bit of a crazy look about them'. What needs stressing against the narrator is that everything about Jack except for his teeth is admirably natural, and that his eyes have the colour of the sky because of the superiority of his vision.

That vision is manifest not only in the major action of the story, but also in details commonly overlooked. In calling him some sort of noble savage, I must put considerable stress on 'noble'. As a result of society's battering, chiefly through his wife, Jack has literally and metaphorically lost his teeth, but, together with much physical strength, he has refinement and potency of culture and imagination. A telling contrast with his wife is that she expresses her literary taste, such as it is, the wrong way. She is an admirer of Hugh Walpole, presumably in part simply because although born in New Zealand he turned to England, was the son of a clergyman and wrote a great many books, of which she has read more than ten. We are presumably meant to sympathize with the narrator, who once started a book by Walpole and 'never got past the first chapter'. When it comes to a real test of literary understanding, Jack's wife fails. She many have the training of a governess, but Jack's cultural appreciation is more genuine: as the narrator says, Jack is 'a good-natured cuss, always wanting everything in the garden to be lovely for everybody that walks the earth, and he'll spout little pieces of poetry to show what he means'. In other words, Jack may not read much, but he is so 'good-natured' as to sense the close harmony between the wish to create paradise and the urge to produce poetry. His culture is not second-hand, life his wife's, but creative, and in close touch with God's own creation. She does not understand this and tries to interrupt him when he recites one of 'his pieces' before her social gathering. Furthermore, the narrator observes that she and her friends never mention Henry Lawson, whom Sargeson admires. And last but not least we must consider her reaction to the story about the blowfly.
The narrator says that 'Jack mightn't have the brains that his missis has but he isn't dumb'. In fact, however, it is Jack who has true intelligence as opposed to his wife's superficial education. This intelligence, which is of a creatively artistic and social as well as intellectual kind, is put to effective use in a story which resembles Sargeson's own pieces in these characteristics and its reliance on a tellingly pointed ending. Jack's wife is grossly materialistic, and therefore 'one thing she's always on about is a refrigerator'. We must remember that the story is set in New Zealand, and before what was called the 'Jap scare'. A refrigerator is seen as an unnecessary modern luxury at that time, and Sargeson accentuates the contrast between its death-like coldness and the lively little fly that wouldn't even go into a safe. The reason that Jack offers is that 'it knew it was no good flying inside'. The meaning, which totally escapes Jack's wife, is of course that the blowfly felt no inclination to fly in because Jack's mother was so poor that there was no food in the safe. Materialism is characteristic, in Sargeson's view, of modern women, like Jack's wife who in contrast to Jack, represents the bad values of her society.

The supreme instance of Jack's non-materialistic creativity is the central action of the digging of the hole, while his wife's reaction to this is the supreme instance of her total misunderstanding and perversion of such values.

Jack's digging of the hole is by no means to be seen chiefly as 'absurd', as it seems at least two commentators would have us believe. It appears that way to Jack's wife, and in part to the narrator, who thinks with her that Jack may end up 'in the lunatic asylum'. In Sargeson's own view, any absurdity or madness is to be found in the society which Jack opposes rather than in Jack. It is society, and notably people like Jack's wife, which is responsible for Jack's first working in the quarry, then digging the hole, and then air raid shelters. The materialistic demands of his wife necessitate Jack's having his 'senseless and stupid' job, and he abandons all such pleasures as smoking and drinking in order that his wife won't miss a cent, while at the same time he cannot satisfy his wife by finding a way of 'being in the big money'. The digging of the hole is of course basically a well-justified protest against unreasonable demands, while as it happens, through irony of fate, Jack can later also get his own back on society by the digging of shelters at a good remuneration. His wife, who first objects to Jack not earning enough in the quarry, and then to his digging the hole, ultimately wants him to dig a shelter against some supposed danger which he realizes does not exist anyway. There is, in short, nothing unlogical or unreasonable about Jack. We must see that it is not the digging of holes that is absurd, but what such digging sometimes wrongly may be for.
It is the nagging of his wife about such things as refrigerators which, so it seems, causes Jack to dig his hole. It is the act of the Romantic who (not building a 'house' according to the nursery rhyme) can only in a negative way express his frustration, though that negative way is not meaningless. We come to understand that it is in fact the very way his wife tries to destroy him which necessitates Jack's attempting to eradicate her kind of attitude by an action which at first sight may seem destructive but which could ultimately do justice to the Romantic who wants 'everything in the garden to be lovely for everybody that walks the earth'.

The value of Jack's action thus lies primarily in what it shows, not in what, physically, it does. Jack himself, like Sargeson, rightly refuses to explain what he is digging the hole for. One answer which he supposedly provides is, 'what would we ever have if we didn't work?' It is at the most a half-truth, something to fob off his wife, like when he later says that rather than work in the garden 'there are other things for Tom and me to do'. That is, Jack, using his wife's kind of language, suggests there is some terribly important material reason for his activity. His final comment on it, however, although superficially somewhat similar, points in the direction of the truth:

*You see dear, he said, we have more important things to do than those boys flying up there. Or at any rate, he went on, just as important.*

The 'boys flying up there' are engaged in a real, physically destructive act. Jack's action, however, is more akin to that of the artist. He has no such purpose as the men in the planes, for there is nothing practical to be achieved; for that reason, his filling the hole again could be considered no more or less purposeless than his digging it. This second major action, too, is important for what it reveals: in the end Jack cannot sustain his protest and gives in to his wife, who had been complaining for some time that in the garden 'there was plenty just crying out to be done'.

The digging of the hole is either more important than the world of grand heroic action or at least as important. Sargeson is careful in his claim about the value of Romantic art and protest. Possibly it is superior to the kind of material activity valued by society, possibly it just has its own but different value. We may now briefly consider our own reaction to that matter, which appears to be raised by the author himself.
What value is there in digging a hole or imagining such act in art? Does Sargeson achieve something sufficiently positive? To me it seems that he does succeed in presenting a case for a more intense imaginative life than embodied by Jack's wife. However, one may perhaps complain that Jack's action is, in some respects, as negative or mad as his wife and others may find it. In terms of what can actually be done within society, Jack's action seems less valuable than it is on an imaginative plane. For example, it is true that his wife's nagging about the refrigerator is irritating, but so is Jack's persistent digging in the direction of something as trivial as the wash-house as a butt for attack. Insofar as the author obviously supports Jack, one might object that he is in his own way as preoccupied with trivial objects as he judges his society to be. And apart from giving us a somewhat better sense of true values, the author really has no very positive message. We do not learn, essentially, how a better state of things might be brought about. Viewed even as an act of protest alone, the undermining of New Zealand society which Jack or his creator temporarily engages in does not amount to much, for after a point against society has been made the hole is quietly filled up again.

This last action, the filling of the hole, is a quite realistic conclusion to what is otherwise a Romantic tale. It does indeed seem likely enough that in the end Jack could not have mustered sufficient courage to go on attacking the foundations of New Zealand society. 'Realistic' appears to be exactly the right word to use in that his creator, at least, is not a fictional character and can by us be observed in his action as an author to avoid anything like a drastic solution. To this extent, then, Sargeson's Romanticism appears to be modified by an awareness of limits to what either his society or he himself can accept, even if only in literature.

REFERENCES


2 The expression is not infrequently used by critics of Sargeson, without much awareness, however, that the very notion of the 'noble savage' is essentially Romantic, idealizing something imagined rather than known in reality. I do not suggest, incidentally, that Sargeson romanticizes about the true 'noble savage' in New Zealand, if ever there was one, for he is, as many have observed, remarkably uninterested in the Maori. That, whether we like it or not, is another symptom of an attitude hardly indicative of a grasp of the reality, the facts, of New Zealand society.

I remain somewhat uncertain in my own mind as to whether or not Sargeon has to some extent based his tale on 'Jack and the Beanstalk' and possibly wants us to bear this in mind. An added complication is in this instance the nature of the source-versions: I have seen quite different ones, and cannot feel confident that Sargeon has one specific version in mind rather than another, while in any case he may have heard the tale rather than read it. Even so, one may discern a pattern common to for example the versions in *The Red Fairy Book* (ed. Andrew Lang, originally for Longmans in London in 1890; now reprinted by Dover Publications Inc. in New York (1966 ff.)) and *English Fairy Tales* (ed. Joseph Jacobs, originally for David Nutt in London in 1998; reprinted by The Bodley Head, London, 1968) which seem relevant to Sargeon's story. Jack's mother gives him a materialistic instruction, which he ignores. Although he seems foolish in this, the beanstalk which he is responsible for (and which in its tremendously energetic development somewhat reminds one of Jack's hole) miraculously and ironically (as in Sargeon) makes him wealthy after all. Jack's wisdom appears to be that of a noble savage morally and ultimately intellectually superior to the woman in the story, although Sargeon's Jack is more consciously intelligent.


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2. Overreading 'The Hole . . .'

Let me begin by asking a question. Is New Zealand literature underread? It's a sweeping question and perhaps not even a clear one. What is underreading? Simply a way of reading texts within rather than outside the assumptions that constitute literature. It supposes, for instance, that the text is in immediate contact with a real, and that the reader, the writer, and the characters in the text all belong to one community or share identical values. There are degrees of underreading, of course: there are people who send letters to Coronation Street (and thereby underread *Coronation Street*), and there are highly skilled professional critics who praise works for their faithfulness to 'experience'. And of course underreading is a moment in all responses to all