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A study of the representation of marriage and the family in the film Muriel's wedding

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A study of the representation of marriage and the family in the film *Muriel’s Wedding.*

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Submitted: April 2003
ABSTRACT

Representations of the family in the Australian popular media in recent years appear to have shifted from a traditional nuclear family form to more diverse constructions, and the family has become an institution that is more often associated with dysfunction rather than the idealised notions of caring and support. This study will examine this re-evaluation of the nuclear family through a close analysis of the film Muriel’s Wedding (1994). How the discourses of gender and nationalism intersect with those of marriage and family will be studied, in an attempt to understand this reappraisal of the Australian family.
DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

(i) incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

(ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or

(iii) contain any defamatory material.

Signed

28/10/03
I would like to thank my supervisor Robyn Quin and Alan McKee for getting me started. I would also like to thank Judy and Andrew for their support.
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INTRODUCTION

This study will examine, through the use of detailed textual analysis, the representation of the family in the film *Muriel's Wedding* (1994). Its concern is with both heterosexual marriage (and its function as a sign of the traditional family) and the relationship between marriage and gender identity. This latter point will be discussed in relation to Australian national identity in an attempt to chart the intersections between discourses of the family, gender and nationalism.

The impetus for this paper first came when I noticed that a number of representations of families in Australian cinema during the 1990s appeared to contradict traditional notions of the ideal nuclear family. Pringle (1998) defines the traditional nuclear family as being two parents (male and female) and their children living together in an environment of caring and support. The families in *Muriel’s Wedding*, *The Sum of Us* (1994), *Bad Boy Bubby* (1994), and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) were either structurally different – a single father and his gay son in *The Sum of Us*; and a drag queen father, his lesbian ex-wife and their son in *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* – or they presented the family as a dysfunctional and destructive institution – the infidelity of the father, Bill, his daughter Muriel’s deception of her mother Betty, and Betty’s suicide in *Muriel’s Wedding* and the nightmarish abuse of her son by the deserted mother in *Bad Boy Bubby*.

Coincidentally the year in which these films were released, 1994, was also the United Nations International Year of the Family. According to Pringle (1998) this was a time when “it was virtually impossible to take an ‘anti-family’ position” (p. 98). The
1990s was a period, Farrer claims, when the family was being reconstructed as a "site of social well-being" (cited in Pringle, 1998, p. 99). The foreword written by then prime minister Paul Keating to the report, *An Agenda for Families*, released by the federal government in 1995, captures this popular discourse:

Families are the basic building blocks of our national life. They provide care like no governmental or any other agency ever can. They are the most important providers of education, health, welfare and personal development. Families nourish our potential, and nurture our individual and collective aspirations. They shape our character and pass on our values. They create a sense of belonging and continuity. They tell us who we are and what we might be. They teach us how to live with one another.

It is interesting that the representations of the family in these films released during 1994 appear to run counter to the celebration of the institution reflected in the International Year of the Family. This led me to question what it is about the institution of the family that these films challenge? What statements are being made about the family and family values? Is this an anti-family discourse in a period when this was considered ‘virtually impossible’?

**The family**

The Heslop family in *Muriel’s Wedding* will be the focus of this investigation, as it most resembles the traditional nuclear family in form, with two parents, Bill and Betty, and their children living together in suburbia. Although there are other ways of defining the social institution of the family, the traditional nuclear family remains the norm in popular discourse. “The nuclear family remains the ideal against which other groupings are judged and found lacking” (Pringle, 1998, 99), and “[a]nything else is a variation of this arrangement, and is usually inferior” (Gilding, 1997, p. 3). This definition of the family, as nuclear in form, is derived from essentialist notions of the family being biologically determined and a natural unit of social organisation.
This position is reflected in this statement by Mount (1982) summing up his study of the family, “it is difficult to resist the conclusion that a way of living which is both so intense and so enduring must somehow come naturally to us, that it is part of being human” (p. 256). In response to definitions of the nuclear family as a universalising norm, as professed by Mount, it is claimed that:

The ‘normal’ or ‘traditional’ family is largely an illusion. This model of the family is scarcely more than 150 years old, and stems only from the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution. Prior to this period, a husband and wife used to be equal partners in an agrarian economy. The later industrial division of labour meant that the father had to go out to the burgeoning factories and offices of the industrial age while the woman had to stay at home to care for the children. This family model was quite different from that which prevailed thousands of years before it. (Conway cited in Gray, 1991, p. 88)

By historicising the institution, and hence refuting its biological essentialism, social constructionist approaches to the family present the family as the product of social forces specific to a particular time and place. Within such a framework diversity in family structure can be incorporated, such as the families noted in The Sum of Us and Priscilla, however, the nuclear family remains the norm from which these constructions are seen to deviate. For example, a single-parent family is defined by the lack of a parent, signifying its difference from the nuclear norm. Pringle (1998) states, “[c]elebrating family diversity does little to challenge this situation, for it still leaves the family in place as a ‘natural’ and free-standing unit” (p. 99).

Marriage

Accepting that the traditional nuclear family is the social norm, this study will examine the way in which the nuclear family constructs the gender roles of the husband, wife, mother and father. Feminist critiques of the nuclear family have highlighted the way in which it separates the public world of work from the private
domestic realm, with the “the isolated nuclear family household as the central institution of patriarchy and primary site of women’s oppression” (Pringle, 1998, p. 98). I have singled out the role of marriage as a defining feature in order to investigate how the family acts to normalise these gender roles. Marriage is seen, in a traditional sense, as the precursor to family formation, the foundation upon which the traditional nuclear family unit is built. It is also an institution that is codified in law, and as such is prescriptive of an officially sanctioned norm. The Marriage Act 1961 defines the relationship as “the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others voluntarily entered into for life” (Attorney General’s Department, 2001). The Act also prescribes those relationships that are excluded; with de facto, homosexual and Aboriginal customary marriages not recognised as legal marriages (Attorney General’s Department, 2001). This study uses marriage as a useful way of distinguishing between the traditional nuclear family and that which disrupts that tradition.

This study is limited in its focus. It is not an investigation into the ways in which the family has been historically defined in the Australian context. Rather it is a study of how the family has been represented in a specific Australian film. The study, based on an understanding of representation as “the process of putting into concrete forms . . . an abstract ideological concept” (O’Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery, Fiske, 1994, p. 265), seeks to examine how a family based upon heterosexual marriage is an “ideological concept” circulated in a particular national context. It employs a study of the “concrete forms”, that is the film Muriel’s Wedding, and an examination of “statements” made about marriage and the family in media texts. I will be looking at the gaps between these representations and how
they act to establish what is privileged, what is ‘normal’ and what is othered or ‘abnormal’.

My approach draws upon Foucault’s notion of discourse, in that I treat marriage and the family as discursive formations. A discursive formation Foucault defines in the following terms:

> Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such as system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a discursive formation. (1972, p. 38)

Foucault’s concept of discursive formations allows for discontinuity and conflict:

> [W]e must grasp the statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence; determine its conditions of existence, fix at least its limits, establish its correlations with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statement it excludes. (1972, p. 28)

The discourses of marriage and the family specifically reference those of gender and sexuality as points of contestation. The heterosexual nuclear family in which the roles of wife, husband, mother and father are prescribed along gender lines is in opposition to families that do not fit, or somehow transgress, these norms.

As an institution, marriage effectively acts to regulate and normalise heterosexuality, as evidenced in the Marriage Act 1961. However marriage as a signifier of the family is now a site of contest demonstrated by its varied forms represented in the media and the drop in the number of those participating in marriage – “The family in the sense of the married couple and children is unambiguously in decline” (Gilding, 1997, p. 252). This ‘decline’ in marriages has been met with calls for its protection by conservative organisations such as the Australian Family Association and
marriage education programs implemented by the Howard Liberal government. Despite this I would argue that traditional notions of the nuclear family based upon heterosexual marriage remains the dominant discourse of the family currently circulating in the Australian cultural context. Due to the focus of this study on what has been represented in the contemporary media-sphere as the social norm, this paper will not be delving too deeply into the way in which marriage acts to normalise heterosexuality.

The institution of marriage in a traditional/dominant sense, as defined by the Marriage Act 1967 (by establishing that participants must be of different biological sex), acts to affirm biological sex as the primary marker of the way in which individuals experience the institution. In this regard I shall be focussing on the way in which the institution of marriage acts to construct and reinforce different roles for men and women within the family. The question to be asked is, how in Muriel's Wedding is this gendered behaviour represented, what is privileged and what is othered? And how do the discourses of marriage and the family represented in Muriel's Wedding relate to other discourses circulating in the Australian media about marriage and the family?

The Australian family

In relation to the discourses that are informing this study I would add to the list that of national identity, the discourses of Australian-ness. As Muriel's Wedding is an Australian production, which at times plays particularly upon traditional Australian iconography, this is important to state. Despite the fact that the film was relatively successful overseas, there are aspects of mise-en-scene and narrative that have
particular resonance to a culturally informed Australian audience. This, however, leads to the need to define what is implied by a national identity. By talking of an Australian national identity I would employ Benedict Anderson’s notion of an imagined community, which sees nationality/nation-ness as “cultural artefacts of a particular kind” rather than a phenomenon open to one discrete definition (1983, p. 13). In the Australian context these historically constructed notions of Australian-ness have been documented in regard to literature and film in Graeme Turner’s work *National Fictions* (1986), which provides a useful resource here for the examination of representations of marriage and the family in *Muriel’s Wedding* within a national context. Again the parameters of this study are limited to those images that are represented as the dominant discourses of marriage and the family circulating in the Australian media, and hence this acts to exclude those forms that do not fit within the tight definitions outlined earlier – different religious, cultural and ethnic understandings of marriage and family. It is understood that this tends to limit the examination to an Anglo-centric, western understanding of Australian national identity.

In relation to national identity there is also a need to establish what is implied by Australian cinema, as this is a study that relies on films produced within the Australian national context to inform an understanding of how marriage and the family are conceived within that culture. “An Australian film industry, it is argued, enables Australia to talk to itself, recognise itself, and engage the attention of the world in doing so” (Dermody & Jacka, 1987, p. 17). This is not, however, to dismiss the role of externally produced media on Australian culture, and in this regard reference will also be made to Hollywood cinema.
The Heslop family

In establishing what is to be studied and the reasons for doing so, it is now timely to undertake some discussion of how the texts will be approached. In examining *Muriel's Wedding* it is the intersections between discourses of marriage and the family with those of gender and national identity that are of interest, and as such there is no definitive reading of the text that is being sought. Rather the text is to be 'unpacked' in order to determine the different positions with regard to gender roles within the family as defined by marriage that it affords. I will argue that *Muriel's Wedding* presents multiple positions on these discourses – some privileging dominant traditional family structures and some that challenge them. The film is a product of popular culture in that it, like popular culture, “has a contradictory nature – it contains ‘dominant’, ‘negotiated’ and ‘oppositional’ meanings, often blended in the same text” (Horrocks, 1995, p. 27). In order to accommodate such a range of possible meanings Horrocks presents the idea of unpacking a text to “arrive at a set of relationships between texts and audiences, relationships which by their nature are various and variable” (1995, p. 178).

In order to unpack *Muriel's Wedding* I shall be employing textual analysis, in particular, the construction of characters and their development with the narrative. Character is seen here not as a structural component of dramatic representation, but as a moral object which is read in light of the viewers own moral self and identity; as a projection of self that informs identity through the act of reading character (Hunter, 1983, p. 230). The privileging of characters within the narrative will be looked at in terms of the binary oppositions that are created and how these are resolved. A binary opposition understood as, “an analytical category . . . used to show how meanings
can be generated out of two-term systems” (O'Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, et al, 1994, p. 30). As this study is dealing with gender roles, masculinity and femininity, and what is perceived as traditional or transgressive in the family, what is the normal and the abnormal family in the Australian context, the usefulness of examining systems of opposition is evident. The way in which these oppositions are narratively resolved is not being read as presenting a definitive ‘truth’ about representations of the family, rather what will be examined are the different ways in which the family is understood and the competing discourses that underscore these positions.

Firstly, the way in which the spectacle of the wedding ceremony as a signifier of marriage and family formation is represented in *Muriel's Wedding* will be examined. This will then lead to a discussion of the roles available to women within the family as constructed by marriage, the bride, the wife and the mother, and the way that these roles can be read in relation to feminist discourses. Finally, the roles ascribed to men will be examined for the way in which male characters are seen to interact with the discourses of the wedding, marriage and the family.
CHAPTER ONE: THE WEDDING

Specifically, the stereotypical white wedding is a spectacle featuring a bride in a formal white wedding gown, combined with some combination of attendants and witnesses, religious ceremony, wedding reception, and honeymoon. (Ingraham, 1999, p. 3)

In the film *Muriel’s Wedding* the audience is invited to two weddings, that of the protagonist, Muriel, and that of her antagonist, Tania. The way that the signifiers of the traditional wedding ceremony, as outlined by Ingraham, are represented in each of the wedding sequences is a useful starting point for the examination of how the film negotiates discourses of marriage. These discourses are structured into a hierarchy within the narrative through the characters of Muriel and Tania, and offer both a contestation and reaffirmation of traditional notions of the wedding ceremony, a ceremony ultimately rejected by Muriel.

The discourses that will be discussed are: the bride as a symbol of beauty and success; marriage as a relationship based upon fidelity and romantic love; the wedding ceremony as coded romantic and feminine; and the wedding as a naturalised and normalised outcome for heterosexual couples. The signifiers of the traditional wedding – the bride, the bridesmaids, the wedding ceremony and the honeymoon - will be analysed in order to examine what representations and what discourse are being privileged in *Muriel’s Wedding*.

**The beautiful bride: the public ideal**

“Who do you think you are to call me that? I’m married!” snarls the pink lipsticked mouth of Tania in response to being called a cocksucker in the closing scenes of *Muriel’s Wedding*. In Tania’s view of marriage, brides and cock sucking are not
compatible. She is however adamant that marriage does equate with beauty as she strides after the camera to add, “and I’m beautiful.” Beauty then is compatible with brides and cock sucking is something that is not. The character of Tania is clearly operating within well-defined parameters of what it is to be a bride and how a bride should be treated. What then constitutes this bride? Even the most cursory scan of representations of the bride in the Australian media would tend to support Tania’s interpretation - the bride is more often associated with youth, beauty and romance than with overt sexuality. In television programs such as *Weddings* (which debuted on Nine in 1995), the less successful game show *I Do I Do* (produced by Channel Ten), and the plethora of glossy bridal magazines such as *Modern Bride*, and *Australian Bride* (the latter was the first specialist magazine to be published in Australia, in 1955), romance and beauty reign supreme as signifiers. Catherine Driscoll (1998) claims, “this bride of bridal magazines is a public ideal” (p.148), and although not without her critics, this representation has remained an enduring one.

The character of Tania appears as a representation of this bride, the public ideal, and her construction as such is central to the exploration of the wedding ceremony and the institution of marriage in *Muriel’s Wedding*. The film creates a gap between the representation of the “public ideal” referred to by Driscoll (1998) and the narrative positioning and construction of the characters destined to be brides, Tania and Muriel. A binary opposition is established between the romantic and the pragmatic, the magazine fairytale and the lived experience. This opposition can be traced in the construction of difference between the characters Tania and Muriel, and between Muriel and her alter ego Mariel, and the way in which these characters are presented in the narrative.
The bride as an image of success: Tania as a bride

The bridal ideal is one that not only signifies beauty and romance for the young female characters in *Muriel’s Wedding*, it is one that also confers power and status upon the holder. Tania defends her position as a married woman, and hence her superiority over the single women Rhonda and Muriel, in the aforementioned closing scenes. Her position of privilege is one that she has maintained through her marriage to Chook, and a position that she acknowledges Muriel has relinquished by breaking up with the swimming star, when she smirks to her friends, “I knew it wouldn’t last.” However, as Tania is momentarily allowed to revel in a moment of triumph she is simultaneously undermined by the camera, caught in an array of unflattering poses. Her face is twisted and contorted into the grotesque as she protests, “I’m beautiful”, to which the retort is a close-up of Rhonda and Muriel laughing at her protestations.

Tania is initially set up as a success in *Muriel’s Wedding*, it is her wedding that we as an audience are first invited to and it is Tania’s group of friends from which Muriel is expelled. It is Tania and the success she represents that drives the protagonist Muriel throughout much of the film, her own success consolidated, if briefly, when she too achieves the role of bride in her own fairytale wedding. For it is the fairytale wedding that Muriel strives for, not the relationship with a suitable partner and establishment of a family, it is “a white dress, flashing cameras, and the admiring looks of friends; she wants to become a wedding photo in a glossy magazine” (Morris cited in Driscoll, 1998, p. 149). The throwing of the wedding bouquet at Tania’s wedding provides an example of the young female characters in the film’s preoccupation with the role of the bride as a signifier of success. After being thrust the re-thrown bouquet, a look of grief and desperation descends across the
bridesmaid Cheryl's face and tears swiftly follow as she is forced to confess that her six-week-old relationship has ended. This codes her, like Muriel, as unfit to take on the role of the bridal magazine ideal, and unlikely to be the next to walk down the aisle.

Here again lies the contradiction between the romantic and the pragmatic, of the media representation of the wedding and the values ascribed to it as a social institution. The institution of "marriage is not the primary focus of the wedding as we practise it" (Driscoll cited in Kyriakopoulos, 1998, p. 33). *Muriel's Wedding* through the focus on the bridal journey of the protagonist, Muriel, would seem to reinforce this position, however the film also uses, in that journey, many of the tropes of the wedding - the bride in the formal white wedding gown being the most frequently referenced. Muriel's desire to perform the role of the bride articulates the discourse of marriage, a wedding, as equating to social success. This is played out in the film through the opposition of Muriel to the character Tania. The narrative resolution of this opposition presents conflicting outcomes to the possibilities of being a bride. On the one hand, the wedding is read as an empowering performance liberating the young woman and marking a transition into adulthood. A point Driscoll raises when she writes, "[n]othing else is given the same weight in the social order. It's one of the few spaces in which young women get to be all important; where it's not only completely OK to be completely selfish and the centre of attention, it's demanded of you" (Driscoll cited in Kyriakopoulos, 1998, p.33). On the other hand, the role of the bride is one that positions young women as subordinate and restricted to the traditional gender roles of wife and mother. Both Muriel and Tania in their construction as brides display the possibilities of both sides
of this argument, a debate that can be transposed into the public sphere to the positions taken towards the institution of marriage.

As well as revealing how popular and public discourses reproduce and privilege culturally and socially normative behaviour such as heterosexuality and prescribed gender roles, weddings reinforce a range of other discourses and ideas including Australianness, the ‘nuclear family’ and the ‘couple’. (Bambacas, 2002, p. 193)

Bambacas, although acknowledging the restrictive social function of the wedding, goes on to present the discourse, (somewhat akin to Driscoll (1998)), as an institution that enables the bride to gain a position of empowerment in the public sphere. Be it only briefly, the bride is validated through “their special day and their public appearance” (2002, p. 195). The role of bride here is still envisaged as one conferring upon the participant a degree of social power and desirability, and hence those unable to achieve that role are positioned as undesirable. Muriel is initially constructed outside of the wedding discourse as unattractive and unworthy. Her positioning as such acts to reinforce the desirability of the bridal ideal and the notion that with it is conferred social status. The validity of these claims of empowerment through the bridal discourse will be examined in relation to the construction of the character of Muriel and her representation of what a bride shouldn’t be – her construction as a failure.

**Muriel’s failure to be a bride**

Muriel, her inevitable wedding implicit in the film’s title, is introduced to the audience in an opening sequence that presages the events that follow. The cartoon-like sound of a descending projectile is heard before the bride’s bouquet falls into shot and into the polished talons of a pack of single, young women clutching the air in hope of being the next one walking down the aisle. Here we first see Muriel. She
is in the centre of the pack and one would assume as likely as any of the other brides-to-be to claim the bouquet. This, in fact, she does do. However the reaction from the other wannabes immediately places her outside of the wedding fantasy, a fantasy it is quickly explained, she has no right to take part in. “What’s the use of you having it Muriel? No-one will ever marry you, you’ve never even had a boyfriend” one of the bridesmaids taunts. Muriel is coded as unworthy of the role of bride and of the right to take part in a wedding of her own. Later in the film as they seek also to eject her from their social circle, the deserving bridesmaids reinforce their reasons for this attack on Muriel. She is too fat, doesn’t dress correctly, has bad hair and doesn’t listen to the right music. In a discussion of the film *The Wedding Singer* (1998) Ingraham uses a monologue from the recently jilted character of Robbie to highlight the way that she sees films about weddings as “coding those who don’t marry as deviant, ugly, unworthy, and resentful. By contrast, those who marry and have the traditional white wedding are constructed as superior” (1999, p. 148).

Some of us will never ever find true love. Take for instance . . . me! And take, for instance, that guy right there. And that lady with the sideburns, and basically, everybody at table 9. And the interesting thing is . . . me, fatty, the lady with the sideburns, and the mutants at table 9 will never ever find a way to better our situation because apparently we have absolutely nothing to offer the opposite sex. (*The Wedding Singer* [Film] cited in Ingraham, 1999, p.148)

With Muriel obviously a candidate for the “mutants table” there is a re-throw of the wedding bouquet, with the flowers literally thrust into the arms of a deserving candidate, one with a boyfriend and thus proven desirability and a chance at marriage. However Muriel’s dreams are not to be completely destroyed, as she is next seen being given a piece of wedding cake by a motherly figure and told to “put it under your pillow and you will dream of your future husband”. Dreams reaffirmed, Muriel walks through the reception guests eagerly eyeing the couples
forming around her, yet reassured by the cake she clutches in her hand that she too will find a partner and become a bride. Unfortunately for her, on this occasion she catches the attention of one of her father’s associates and his comments signal her physical removal from the scene. For it is Muriel’s dress, deemed inappropriate for the occasion by the bridesmaids, who taunt her with “She didn’t even buy a new dress”, that proves to be her downfall.

The leopard-skin print mini dress is emblematic of the scale of Muriel’s failure. A crony of her father’s, himself with an arrestingly alcoholic sun-damaged nose, tells Muriel that she is wearing an ‘eye-catching’ dress, the ambiguity of his comment further mobilising spectator anxiety about Muriel’s choice. (Landman, 1996, p. 114)

The anxiety raised is quickly brought to climax in the form of the bespectacled store detective who confronts Muriel with a charge of shoplifting. Muriel’s attendance as counterfeit performance at the wedding is further reinforced by her departure in the back of a police car.

Muriel’s positioning as outside of the wedding ceremony and outside the group of friends could be seen as positioning her as an alternative to the conventional discourse of weddings. However this is not the case, as it is Muriel’s overwhelming desire to take her place in the ritual of the wedding that drives her throughout the narrative. Muriel does not occupy an alternative space in opposition to the discourses of the bride; rather she is incapable of gaining access to that discourse.

Muriel’s construction outside of the wedding discourse sets up a good-bad binary opposition between her and Tania that is similar to a fairytale narrative. Many critiques of the film draw upon fairytale motifs: “It contains elements of Cinderella stories of persecution and transformation” (Landman, 1996, p. 111); “[t]he ugly-
duckling-into-a-swam saga” (Brown, 1995); “Muriel’s Wedding is a fairytale” (Williams, 1994); “Muriel is an ugly duckling who dreams that bridal plumage will turn her into a swan (Jillett, 1994). Ingraham also notes the strong relationship between fairytale imagery and weddings, “In bridal magazines and in children’s toys, references to fairy tales and princesses dominate” (1999, p. 98). The opposition between the characters of Tania and Muriel, the former having achieved a position of desirability and success, (at least for Muriel), would seem to be reliant on fairytale imagery. Muriel as the ugly duckling or the transformed Cinderella is no doubt more deserving of the lofty status of the bride than Tania, who fits more into the ‘evil stepsister’ mould. The way that Muriel attempts to climb up to the lofty position she sees Tania holding, by the construction of her own alter ego Mariel, while perhaps reinforcing the ugly duckling motif, does lead to a traditional fairy tale ‘happily ever after’ ending. The actions of Muriel as Mariel, although reliant on the dominant imagery of the bride, in fact challenge the fairytale status of the wedding. The contradictory way that Muriel engages with the discourses of the wedding and the bride will now be examined in relation to her transformation from Muriel to Mariel.

**Mariel as a bride: a construction of success**

“Since I came to Sydney and became Mariel my life has been as good as an ABBA song.” These words of Muriel’s sum up her process of self-reconstruction, she no longer dreams and fantasises her life away listening to the lyrics of ABBA songs, she now lives out those dreams and fantasies. Muriel’s transition to Mariel and her relocation from Porpoise Spit to Sydney also reflects a shift from simply dreaming of becoming a bride to actively constructing herself as a bride. A comparison of two scenes in which Muriel and then Mariel are seen fantasising about being a bride
charts this transition. In the early scene Muriel is pictured in front of her bedroom mirror in Porpoise Spit passively dreaming of becoming a bride and staring at pictures from bridal magazines. In the later scene she has renamed herself Mariel and is sitting on her bed in her Sydney flat looking at images of herself as a bride. The scenes are linked through their employment of the same ABBA song, *Dancing Queen*. In the first instance Muriel listens to the song and mouths the lyrics, in the second scene the song is transformed into bells and chimes, into wedding music, as Mariel looks at herself in wedding gowns in her bridal album.

The scene in Muriel’s Porpoise Spit bedroom takes place following her embarrassing removal from Tania’s wedding party. She enters her room, closing off the negotiations her father is undertaking to get her off the shoplifting charge, presses play on her pink stereo and ABBA’s *Dancing Queen* begins. The camera lingers on the room’s pale pink walls, plastered with ABBA posters and then settles on Muriel in a medium close-up. She mouths the words to the song, “She can dance, she can jive, having the time of her life”, with a deadpan expression. The fantasy of being the ‘Dancing Queen’ is then replaced with the fantasy of being a bride, through a point of view shot in which Muriel scans an array of bridal magazine cut-outs that frame her image in the mirror. She lifts the bouquet undeservingly caught at Tania’s wedding and poses in the mirror, surveying herself against the bridal magazine ideal. The juxtaposition of Muriel’s clown-like face - over made up and frowning with a look of despair - with the faces of the young and beautiful brides that surround her reasserts her position as outside such an ideal, outside the bridal discourse. The scene acts to establish Muriel’s desire and to again highlight her inability to conform to what is required to fulfill that desire. Muriel is visually coded as unattractive,
undesirable, as “terrible” (as her equally unattractive sister Joanie continually taunts her).

The *Dancing Queen* soundtrack switches to non-diegetic as Muriel leaves her bedroom still holding her bouquet, and is framed in the window behind her father, who stands outside waving off the two policemen, their bribe of a carton of beer to dismiss the charges in hand. Muriel’s fantasy and desire for a wedding is positioned against the reason given for that desire – an escape from her family, significantly her father. Ironically, in wanting to escape her family Muriel chooses marriage, the ritual precursor to family formation. The institution of marriage here is clearly not working as a social discourse of family formation; instead it is specifically the role of the bride that Muriel considers to be of value to her. Interestingly, it is a goal that she achieves by following her father’s example of fraudulent behaviour, his bribing of the policemen. Muriel takes this one step further through the construction of a new fraudulent image of herself.

Whereas Muriel would stare longingly at images of brides surrounding her mirror, Mariel actively constructs herself as a bride. She enters wedding shops and spins tales of chronically ill sisters and other misfortunes in order to enrobe herself in bridal gowns and have the image captured on film. Using these fraudulent images she then compiles her own solo wedding album. Accompanied by the bridal version of *Dancing Queen*, Muriel contemplates her progress from a poor reflection of bride to a physical representation complete with gown and flowers. Photographs of Mariel in bridal gowns have replaced the magazine cut-outs and her act of self re-creation has on the surface been achieved. Mariel has become a bride wedded to herself, her
own image of herself as a bride. However the visual image of herself as bride does not prove to be sufficient for Mariel, she needs the whole ceremony, the flowers, the bridesmaids and the groom to secure for herself the position of success she seeks. Here a pragmatic Mariel succeeds where the romantic Muriel had failed, she manages to snare a groom. Rather than opting for a true love, as the young parking inspector Bryce hints he may be, Mariel goes for the sure thing of a young, good-looking sportsman desperate for a wife to provide him with a passport and Olympic glory.

Muriel as Mariel's achieves the success she desires in the spectacle of her own wedding ceremony. For this wedding a fraudulent bride is matched with an equally duplicitous groom – Muriel’s achievement of becoming a bride is therefore a false spectacle. Due to the counterfeit nature of the marriage between Mariel and David, the opposition between Tania and Muriel and between Muriel and Mariel remain unresolved. The ugly duckling has truly had her day as a swan, however her feathers are clearly phoney and therefore her success in devalued. The role of bride as a signifier of success and the binary opposition that this constructs between Tania and Muriel by not being fully resolved, undermines the film’s potential to challenge traditional discourses of the bride and the wedding. By wholeheartedly engaging with these discourses Muriel/Mariel cannot be read as simply rejecting the role of bride as success that Tania represents. Muriel/Mariel’s engagement with bridal discourse is contradictory and relates to the way in which bridal and wedding discourses interact with the discourse of marriage. This will now be examined in relation to the representation of the bridesmaids.
The role of the bridesmaids: marriage and fidelity

One of the most surprising findings of research commissioned by Relationships Australia for its 50th anniversary... was that the group holding most to the belief marriage is a lifelong commitment is the 18-24s. (Bagnall, 1999, p. 32)

As evidenced by the above statistics, fidelity has maintained a significant position in the discourse of marriage in Australian public consciousness despite the fears of licentiousness and moral decay purported by pro-family agencies. Muriel’s Wedding engages with this discourse of fidelity in the early scenes, in which one of Tania’s bridesmaids, Nicole, is caught by Muriel, having sex with the groom at the reception. A point of view shot, obscured by the laundry door, sets up Muriel and the audience as illicit observers of the couple, of having knowledge and insight into the spurious nature of the union between Tania and Chook. Armed with this information Muriel exacts revenge upon her antagonist Tania later in the film, although it is her friend Rhonda who delivers the actual blow of informing Tania of Nicole’s betrayal. Despite witnessing such an act of infidelity, Muriel’s desire for marriage, and her belief in its currency as a sign of success, remains steadfast. This unwavering commitment to the bridal ideal implies that the wedding discourse has been separated from that of marriage. By her denial of a link between the discourse of the wedding and the discourse of marriage (fidelity), Muriel is also able to separate the negative experience of her parents from the idealised wedding ceremony she desires. Although she can see the infidelity committed by Chook with Nicole (signified by the use of a point of view shot), Muriel is incapable of recognising the infidelity that is taking place within her family home, the relationship between her father and Deirdre Chambers. The traditional association of marriage with life-long monogamy and its apparent lack in the marriage relationships around her, is clearly not of concern to Muriel. It is not the relationship she aspires to, but rather the spectacle of the
wedding and connotations of success that this spectacle allows, which motivates her. She re-configures the marriage discourse for her own needs, from traditional notions of love and fidelity, to ones of success and social standing.

The character of Nicole is quickly dispatched from the narrative following the discovery of her transgression with the groom, however in contrast, Chook’s other partner in infidelity, Rose Biggs, (a character who is never seen), is rehabilitated by the close of the film. Whereas Nicole was caught having sex with the groom on his wedding day, Rose Biggs was accused of sucking the groom’s cock during an assignation between the wedding day and the honeymoon. Her redemption in Tania’s eyes is voiced during a conversation with Rhonda:

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Rhonda: Rose Biggs, are you friends with her?
Tania: Once we got to know her, we found out she was just like us.
Rhonda: But Rose Biggs sucked your husband’s cock.
Tania: I know, but I sucked her husband’s cock and it made me realise we all make mistakes.
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By her inclusion back into the fold, Rose Biggs acts to reinforce Nicole’s positioning on the outside of the group of friends and of the wedding discourse. Committing an infidelity that disrupts the wedding day is clearly a more heinous crime than an act of infidelity after the vows have been said. The narrative treatment of the character Nicole reinforces the female characters’ reverence for the wedding ceremony as an act, a spectacle, rather than as an institution based on values such as fidelity.

The construction of the bridesmaids at the two wedding ceremonies creates a binary opposition based on class. Mariel’s success is consolidated not only by her ability to participate in her own wedding but by the style of wedding ceremony she undertakes. Mariel imports those who rejected her from their social group on the grounds of her
inability to fit in with their “party, party, party” image, to be her bridesmaids. Tania, who once had the starring role of the bride, is demoted to the role of bridesmaid at Mariel’s wedding. The different context in which the wedding ceremony takes places is perhaps the reason for the reassessment of her status. Mariel’s wedding is in metropolitan Sydney not the suburban Porpoise Spit and the ceremony is being conducted in a church not the family’s backyard. The costuming of the young women in the film - the bright colours, high hems, low necklines, abundance of hairspray and vivid eye make up - connotes the suburban, the lower middle class. The interior of the Heslop family home with its bright green lounge suite and dark wooden furniture reminiscent of the 1970s also reinforces this image. There is not a lack of wealth but a lack of taste, of refinement and thus of social status. Mariel with her Sydney church wedding has achieved a success in social status that has not only placed her equal to, but in her ability to recreate the idealised tasteful wedding display of bridal magazines, above the status of her Porpoise Spit friends. Full-skirted, pastel chiffon dresses have accordingly replaced the tight, bright pink satin numbers the bridesmaids wore at Tania’s wedding. The bridesmaids themselves acknowledge the lofty status Mariel has achieved. “I knew she would come good” one of them remarks to the gathered media at the wedding, and Mariel informs Rhonda that she did not have to ask them to be a part of her wedding, they contacted her.

Mariel’s wedding results not only in her entering into the social position of being a married woman, (being in a couple as opposed to single), but also of marrying up - she has moved into the social elite. This is reinforced if one compares the working lives of Muriel, Rhonda and Muriel’s friends and family. Sitting at dinner Bill
Heslop derides all of his offspring as “useless”, they are all unemployed and all on the dole. Muriel in particular has even failed to gain an apprenticeship – “a bit old for an apprenticeship aren’t you?”, her father comments when she informs him of her application to become an apprentice locksmith. Later Bill praises his daughter for, as he believes, making a success of her life selling cosmetics for his mistress, “Muriel has really impressed me. I used to think she was the most useless of the lot of you”. In her father’s eyes and in the public world he represents her social position is elevated by her newfound status as employed.

The success that Muriel, Tania and her entourage, associate with marriage and the material success that Mariel achieves through her union with David, although not forwarded as a motivation for marriage, can be seen as one of few options open to these characters. What is presented as a possible future for single Mariel? She and Rhonda are seen in low paid service jobs in a video store and a drycleaner respectively. For Mariel, her job is not one that is likely to provide her with a bridal magazine wedding. The fascination with finding a mate and consolidating that union in the fantasy display of the wedding may have waned in the educated middle classes of the urban centre. For example, Lake (2000) claims, “If you look at women with great careers, they are typically childless and often unmarried” (cited in Callaghan, 2000, p. 16). But is the representation of the suburban Muriel and her peers so unrealistic? Is it no longer a “financial necessity for women to get married” (Cox cited in Fraser, 1999, p.9)? Or is there a class-based distinction in both the belief in the bridal ideal and in marriage as a symbol of success that continues to be circulated? Is the discourse of marriage fractured along lines of class and access to paid employment/financial security? Is the discourse of marriage differently
perceived by different classes? Kyriakopoulos writing on the changing face of weddings in Australia refers to the comments of a marriage celebrant, Martyn Newman, who relates: “If you go out to the suburbs where people tend to marry younger, the troubadour mythology of the bride being rescued is very much alive and well” (1998, p. 33). Although only a personal account, this is one that would seem to correlate to the experiences of Muriel and her peers. Their desire is for the spectacle of the wedding rather than the institution of marriage as a system of values, such as fidelity, companionship and loyalty.

The construction of the bridesmaids and the roles ascribed to them in the two wedding ceremonies of the film add a new dimension to the oppositions established between the characters of Tania and Muriel, Muriel and Mariel. A simple positioning of those within and those who are outside the bridal discourse is extended to an opposition between bridal discourses, the tasteful success of Mariel contrasted to the suburban tasteless excess of Tania. Muriel who was initially positioned as inferior to Tania, as outside the bridal discourse, has her status elevated through not only her ability to take on the role of bride but the kind of bride she represents, urban, tasteful and wealthy. Tania in her demoted role of bridesmaid acknowledges Mariel’s success. Caught in a close-up reminiscent of her opening scream as her own bridal bouquet was thrown, she greets Mariel on the steps of the church and with a look wide-eyed wonder declares, “You’re beautiful”.

The use of Tania and her cohorts as bridesmaids by Mariel functions to highlight her own success, however this choice acts to simultaneously undermine values of friendship and loyalty traditionally associated with the role of the bridesmaid. Just as
Chook and Nicole undermined the discourse of marriage as based on fidelity in the opening scenes, the wedding as a celebration of friends and family is reworked through Mariel’s choice of bridesmaids. The character of Rhonda, established as Muriel’s one true friend, is relegated to the back of the church for the ceremony. She discloses to her mother that she had rejected the role of bridesmaid offered to her. Rhonda’s presence is a visual reminder of the sham wedding that is about to take place, and acts to reassert perhaps a more traditional discourse of marriage as an institution of values rather than spectacle. The presence at the wedding of the character Bryce, with whom Mariel had a brief romantic liaison, reinforces this position. Looking dishevelled with messed up hair and rumpled clothing, Bryce jars with the immaculate assembly of wedding guests. This dissonant position is emphasised when he takes his seat in the church, where he struggles to fit physically within the space assigned to him, squashed between two guests who afford him no room. As Mariel enters the church Bryce and Rhonda are linked in the same shot, Bryce remains seated as those around him rise to welcome the bride and Rhonda confined to her wheelchair cannot stand. Bryce and Rhonda and the values that they are seen to represent – friendship and romantic love – are signalled as absent from the wedding ceremony about to take place. Their presence at Mariel’s wedding acts to reinforce traditional values of marriage – love, friendship, and support – and highlight the ceremony’s lack in this regard. The value of the ceremony as a family celebration is also contested and simultaneously reinforced by the absence during most of the ceremony of Mariel’s mother Betty. The representation of the wedding ceremony in Muriel’s Wedding is riddled with oppositions that both reinforce and contest traditional views of marriage as an institution based on value systems. That a
wedding signifies a union based upon romantic love will now be examined in relation to the representation of David, the groom.

The role of the groom: marriage as a union based upon romantic love

“What women want – a question Freud asked and feminists are still trying to answer – is obviously love and romance” (Bell, 1992, p.55). Such a generous assumption on behalf of a vastly over generalised female population is not such a strange one to make on reading the desires of the characters in *Muriel’s Wedding*. This is witnessed in the advertising poster for the film that plays upon romantic imagery, with an image of Muriel showered in confetti and roses. Such imagery reflects the strong link between weddings and romance, even, as is the case with *Muriel’s Wedding*, when aspects of narrative and character construction can be seen to undermine such values. The wedding ceremony staged by Muriel as Mariel is false spectacle on a number of levels, not the least the premise for the union, a marriage of convenience on the part of the South African swimmer David van Arkle.

Romantic love is presented as the foundation for the creation of the couple, for marriage and for family formation, but “In a world where romantic longing blares from every radio, television set and movie screen, the real reasons for choosing a partner are far more prosaic” (Kissane, 1991, p.45). These two ways of approaching institution of marriage encapsulate a binary opposition between romance and pragmatism discussed earlier. The marriage that Muriel desires is one tied up with traditional romantic signifiers, (white dress, bridesmaids, flowers and church ceremony), however the courtship she undertakes is one based on more pragmatic principles and individual desires.
In summary, sharing a close couple relationship is highly valued by most Australian adults, they aspire to be in such a relationship, and the vast majority of people believe being in such a relationship is good for them. The pervasiveness of the valuing of couple relationships across cultures and recorded history is striking, and this suggests that in the foreseeable future such relationships will continue to be valued. (Halford, 2000, pp.3-4)

Mariel’s quest for a partner through the pages of the personal ads is not a search for a “close couple relationship”. As she scans the ads she sits in front of a television screen on which a video of the royal wedding of Charles and Diana is being played. The layering of these images works to establish an opposition between fairytale romanticism and the functional practicalities of forming a couple, an opposition exemplified by Goode, “Popular culture in contemporary western societies celebrates romantic love, alone and beyond parental and community interests” (cited in Gilding, 1997, p.15). The motivations for Mariel’s wedding blur the boundaries between the romantic symbolism of the wedding and the practical functions of creating a couple, of creating a family. The ironic use of the royal wedding, inherent with connotations of arranged marriage and community interest yet constructed as the ultimate Cinderella story without the ‘and they lived happily ever after’, as the template for Mariel’s desire emphasises this opposition. “Princess Diana’s wedding, the most retold of all celebrity weddings, serves as the ideal” (Ingraham, 1999, pp. 105-6). The role of traditional romantic imagery can be read as masking the institutional arrangements and power relationships of the marriage discourse; “Through the use of nostalgia, romance renarrates history and naturalizes tradition. Tradition, then, is left unquestioned, providing a vehicle for ruling-class interests to be both emulated and legitimized” (Ingraham, 1999, p. 88).
By seeking a husband in the lonely-hearts column Mariel Heslop appears to reaffirm the positioning outside of the bridal discourse that she occupied as Muriel. The use of go-betweens, such as personal ads and dating agencies, does not sit easily with romantic notions of 'love at first sight'. The naturalised role of romance in couple/family formation is challenged when the union is undertaken through third parties. The film *The Sum of Us* also negotiates the opposition of romance and pragmatism through the character of Harry Mitchell. I would argue that in this text the narrative is resolved to privilege romantic unions over the computer-dating agency alternative that it presents. Harry, a widower, seeks to fill a sense of lack in his life, the lack of a female partner, by engaging the services of Desiree’s Introduction Agency. Like Mariel, Harry’s motivations are to find a suitable marriage partner not a casual relationship or relationships. This is asserted early in the narrative as Harry is shown in his local pub contemplating engaging the services of the agency. He asks the barmaid her opinion as to whether he should give it a go, to which she replies “Planning on getting hitched again Harry”. His search for partner is immediately linked to matrimony. This is contrasted in the following scene, when in an address to camera Harry describes his son Jeff’s night out as a search for true love. “He must think he is meeting Mr Right tonight”, he says. The juxtaposition of Harry and his son Jeff’s attempts at courtship constructs a binary opposition of pragmatic versus romantic love. Ultimately, this opposition is resolved to privilege Jeff’s relationship as he is left with some possibility of a future true love relationship while Harry’s attempts at courtship fail.

Harry is positioned in the foreground in shadow, with the bright 1950s style kitchen complete with checked linoleum floor, brightly painted cupboards and kitsch
furniture highlighted behind him as he espouses what he considers to be true love as
he reminisces about his own experience:

A regular ladies man me . . . till I met his mum that is. No more fooling
around after that. I was faithful to her from the day I met her because I
knew I was one of the lucky ones I knew it was love.

The brightly lit 1950s kitchen with the connotations of traditional values,
wholesomeness and family is linked with a belief in romance and true love. This
acts to construct an opposition between Harry’s generation and values and those of
his son. Whereas Harry acknowledges Jeff’s homosexuality as aberrant, “some of
you will be tutting at that”, he goes on to incorporate him within the traditional
discourse of romantic love through his references to Mr Right, and love being “the
greatest adventure of all” something his son should go out and explore. The grainy
images of Harry’s mother and her partner Mary together act to provide a link
between the generations and establish the discourse of romantic love as traditional
and natural. This is reflected in the way Harry frames his memories of his mother
and her partner as a relationship that was “All for love”. Harry’s reluctance to
interpellate his son as gay, preferring his own term ‘cheerful’ presents true love as
able to transcend socially constructed boundaries of gender and sexuality. His anger
at Jeff calling his mother a dyke (eventually conceding to her being labelled lesbian)
also acts to normalise their relationships through the discourse of romantic love. The
value of relationships based on true love is further privileged through the failure of
Harry’s relationship with Joyce.

Much like Mariel’s wedding, on the surface Harry’s relationship with Joyce begins
with all the necessary traditional signifiers of romance. Harry arrives at her door
with flowers to a backing soundtrack of Life Could be a Dream. The music
continues over a montage of the couple dating which ends with the two discussing their future and a subsequent marriage proposal from Harry on bended knee. The proposal comes with a proviso that Joyce meets and gets along with his son. When Joyce accepts his proposal, with the condition that they wait three months, Harry responds by saying, “I can’t say I’m the happiest I’ve ever been in my life, but I can say I am the happiest I’ve been in a very long time.” Harry clearly places this relationship with Joyce as a second to the true love he experienced with Jeff’s mother, and despite the romantic symbolism (bended knee, moonlight and flowers), the union is presented as one that is pragmatic and functional.

Harry’s unromantic desires had been outlined in his first telephone conversation with Joyce. “The most important thing to me is companionship” is the way he introduced himself to her. However the motivation presented in the narrative for his marriage proposal, is Harry’s need to fulfill his sexual desires not his need for female companionship. He confides to Jeff, “You’re not the only one who gets lonely son, I like women, I like having women, I’m fed up of living in sin with my own right hand”. The motivation to get married in order to legitimise sex is understood by Joyce. She “puts her cards on the table” when the couple discusses their future, claiming that she “never said no to her husband”. With true love out of the picture the union between Harry and Joyce can be read as a marriage based on mutual needs for companionship, for family obligations and for sex.

These pragmatic motivations are presented in the narrative as inferior to couples formed through romance and love. The look across the bar between Jeff and Greg which establishes them as a couple is privileged over the parody of love at first sight.
enacted between Harry and Joyce as she views his smiling face on a computer screen. The latter is constructed as an unnatural union and ultimately fails, as Joyce is shown to be intolerant of Jeff's sexuality and Harry is struck down by a stroke. "Is it love Dad?" Jeff asks his father upon finding out about his relationship. "I can't honestly say that it is, but it might be the next best thing" Harry replies. The next best thing in this case is clearly not enough. The relationship between Jeff and Greg as being the 'real thing' is presented as a possibility at the end of the narrative, in the closing scenes the two are reunited. By doing so the narrative allows space for the acceptance of homosexual couples operating within the discourse of romantic love, a process of incorporation that ultimately does more to reinforce the discourse of true love than it does to promote the legitimacy of same-sex relationships. This privileging of love is witnessed in critical readings of the film: "[T]he 'family ties' in The Sum of Us are not necessarily blood ties. They're ties of love, the sort that hold when it's inconvenient, when disaster strikes" (Mortimer, 1994/5, p. 22).

The Sum of Us reverses the relationship between romance and pragmatism operating in Muriel's Wedding. Whereas Mariel undertakes a pragmatic search for a romantic display, Harry desires a pragmatic union that he pursues by using romantic motifs. Despite the use of romantic signifiers, champagne, roses and suitor down on bended knee, Harry's proposal appears functional and cold rather than emotional. This is reinforced by the fact he needs to discuss the possibilities of a new marriage with his son and gain his approval before things can progress further. In stark contrast to this is the way that Mariel pragmatically searches for a husband. For Mariel the romantic display of the wedding is what is important, not notions of love and romance or marriage as a social institution. The wedding is a vehicle for romantic display.
The wedding ceremony as a romantic display: Mariel’s Wedding

The financial inducements to comply with the marriage are of no interest to Muriel, however they do stand as symbols of the unemotional union she is about to launch into. The reading of *Muriel’s Wedding* as a Cinderella story is perhaps a little flawed here, as the South African swimmer, although handsome, is not a determined and committed Prince Charming. His motives, like Muriel’s, are purely pragmatic and completely unromantic. “[H]er romantic object is not the man she marries, Muriel desperately desires a white dress, flashing cameras, and the admiring looks of friends; she wants to become a wedding photo in a glossy magazine” (Morris cited in Driscoll, 1998, p. 149). In contrast to the perception of the bridal magazine bride and her union founded on true love, (“marriage is the institutionalization of love in language” (Massumi, cited in Driscoll, 1998 p. 142), Muriel’s wedding is reliant upon practical mutual gain.

The contradictions inherent in the marriage between ‘Mariel’ Heslop and David van Arkle come to the fore with the wedding ceremony. A ceremony in which Muriel’s delight is again in the acclaim she receives as a bride, not in the union she is making with a man she is supposed to love and be committed to. Landman (1996) discusses the role of the wedding ceremony as false spectacle in *Muriel’s Wedding*. She claims, “[t]he pleasures of the wedding, the pinnacle spectacle of romance, are set alongside the marks of its inauthenticity – the questions from the press, the best-man coach’s cynicism, the import of the fickle friends as bridesmaids” (1996, p. 119). Landman goes on to argue that Muriel remains trapped by a need to act out the role of bride in order to achieve a feminine identity, that “her identity becomes a ritualised production” (p. 119). The Muriel walking down the aisle is the debut
performance of the Muriel who had rehearsed this role in front of the mirror in Porpoise Spit and in the bridal shops of Sydney. However while Muriel fully engages with the bridal fantasy when she constructs herself in rehearsal, when it comes to her performance for an audience she inserts herself into the proceedings and as such subverts the bridal performance - her “ritualised production” as bride. For as she enters the church surrounded by artifice – her false friends, her fraudulent father and financially committed fiancée – the music by which Muriel identifies herself, ABBA, interrupts the scene. Mariel charges down the aisle greeted by looks of shock and disbelief from guests and grins blissfully unaware of the spectacle she is producing. She is not the refined, elegant, beautiful bride of the wedding videos, (her staple diet whilst working in Sydney), instead she is a garish impostor at the ceremony. The close-ups of Muriel’s face as she progresses to the altar highlight her lack of self-consciousness; her mouth is open with her teeth protruding and her eyes are half-closed, making it impossible for her to see her guests’ looks of horror. It is as if Muriel has managed to invade Mariel’s wedding, and by doing so subvert the process, the ritual of the wedding.

The pragmatic construction of the perfect wedding, the success, the revenge, the media coverage, becomes momentarily an expression of Muriel’s positive affirmation of herself. Muriel reverts to her bridal creation (Mariel), after her position as Mrs van Arkle, as a success, has been cemented by the wedding ceremony. Leaving the church Mariel proudly gushes past guests, including her mother Betty. Betty stands expectantly at the rear of the church clutching a gift-wrapped package, her position as mother-of-the-bride already having been supplanted by Deirdre Chambers who is ensconced next to Bill at the forefront of the
proceedings. Suitable nostalgic connotations of the wedding ceremony as a celebration of friends and family is given a further battering by the positioning of Rhonda, perhaps Muriel’s one true friend, again at the back of the church. She is cast to the sidelines, as those who earlier expelled Muriel from their social circle court TV cameras and give insider interviews on the South African swimmer’s new bride.

Betty is neither seen, nor does her daughter miss her presence as she embarks on her new life. This is can be read as representative of Muriel’s inability to construct her fantasy beyond the role of bride, because she does not include in that fantasy the role of wife that the bride becomes after the ceremony. Betty, the wife, is read as pitiful. She is described in reviews as a “doormat” (Keneally, 1998, p.5); “delud[ing] herself that her life is not a hell of boredom, frustration and disappointment” (Jillett, 1994, p. 19); and “a mother whose hold on existence is precarious and who models for Muriel the position of being nothing” (Landman, 1996, p. 115). By completely ignoring her mother, Muriel is avoiding the fact that her mother was also once a bride and that the fate that has befallen her can hardly be described as a fairy tale. So what is in store for Muriel as she marches back up the aisle? What happens now that the ceremony is over and Muriel/Mariel is no longer a bride?

The honeymoon: reaffirming the heterosexual couple

Both of the brides in Muriel’s Wedding embark on somewhat unorthodox honeymoons; Tania journeys to Hibiscus Island with her bridesmaids but without her groom and Mariel spends the night virtually alone. Implicit in the way that these two brides consolidate their marriages are the contradictions between the romantic
display and the social function of marriage that the film presents. With the romantic
display over, what are Tania and Muriel left with? Have they successfully embarked
on mature womanhood, or do both Tania and Muriel through their reworking of the
honeymoon, resist this role and hence open a space for the renegotiation or rejection
of the traditional marriage discourse?

Tania’s honeymoon

“Bride’s magazine reports that 99 per cent of its readers take a honeymoon trip” and
that “[g]enerally, islands are ‘in’ for honeymoons” (cited in Ingraham, 1999, p. 59).
Fidelity and sexual exclusivity having been undermined at Tania’s wedding
ceremony by the actions of the groom and the bridesmaid, the possibilities of a
romantic honeymoon for the newlyweds are denied. Sitting in a nightclub, aptly
named “Breakers”, Tania informs her cohorts of her discovery of Chook’s infidelity
with Rose Biggs. “What am I supposed to do? I’m a bride, I’m supposed to be
euphoric,” she laments. With these words she acknowledges the role she should be
playing as bride and the degree to which her own experience falls short of that ideal.
Upon the urging of her bridesmaids, she then decides to spend her honeymoon with
them rather than with her disgraced husband. Although defiantly asserting her status
as a bride throughout the narrative, in her actions here, Tania is undermining the
institution she is seen to hold in such high regard. Through her decision to pursue
her own individual needs and go on holiday with her friends after her wedding, she is
relegating the relationship she has with Chook into second place. For her the value
of the marriage lies in the status it affords her rather than the relationship between the
couple that it has formed. The relationship between Tania and her friends, justified
or not, is presented through her actions as of greater importance than the relationship with her husband.

This privileging of the relationship between friends over that between husband and wife is communicated through the mis-en-scene and cinematography. There are few scenes after her wedding where Tania is seen without her entourage and no scenes where she is seen with her husband Chook. Tania and her friends are repeatedly presented as a single entity and their physical appearance acts to create an image of uniformity. Seated inside Breakers, wearing equally tacky attire and extravagant hairstyles, the three bridesmaids and the bride are consistently placed together in the one frame in opposition to the intruder Muriel. Her outsider status is consolidated by her positioning at the end of the table separated from the group, and in the dialogue exchange which culminates in the request that she no longer hang around with them and “find friends more on her own level”. During this sequence the camera pans across the faces of Tania and her friends and then slowly zooms in on Muriel’s look of devastation. Reverse shots from Muriel’s point of view frame three of her accusers, leaving deviant bridesmaid Nicole who is seated next to her out of the picture. The hierarchy of the group is presented with Tania as the central focus, Muriel on the fringes and Nicole positioned between the two. During the honeymoon on Hibiscus Island, Nicole is also banished from this group for her part in the infidelity. Interestingly, her transgression is punished more severely than her fellow participant Chook, the implication is that her betrayal of Tania and their friendship is more heinous than the actions of an unfaithful husband. Again this reinforces friendship as a superior relationship to marriage, yet not without their own dysfunction.
This privileging of friendship over marriage in the case of Tania and her bridesmaids is difficult to accept on face value due to the unflattering light in which their characters are presented in the narrative, “the film consistently parodies and undermines both their characters and the terms of their claims to success” (Landman, 1996, p.116). For example, as the group enacts a musical routine for the island talent quest, their costuming sets them up as figures of fun bordering on the grotesque. The vividly coloured plastic tropical fruit headdresses and grass skirts are taken a step too far. In Tania’s case, she performs with plastic crabs across her breasts and a lobster perched on her head. “They are ‘hyperfemme’ caricatures – drawing on a pastiche of Medusa-like wobbling headdresses, plastic fruit Carmen Miranda dress-ups or overplayed femme fatale personae and the femininity they perform is narcissistic, envious, insincere, unjust and interested only in being loved” (Landman, 1996, p.116). The establishment on Hibiscus Island of a parallel relationship between Muriel and former schoolmate Rhonda further complicates the rejection of the values of friendship such a portrayal implies. Muriel remains positioned outside of Tania’s inner circle, as an intruder, and acts as a point of contrast to the group’s negative construction. Muriel and Rhonda’s performance in the talent contest is a useful point of comparison to further examine the way these two groups of friends are represented.

The performances are initially established as different through setting, outside during the day versus inside at night, and through costuming bright and tropical versus black and white. More importantly the two performances are also seen to be addressing different audiences. Whereas Tania’s group are seen to directly address the four
Hawaiian shirted young men who follow them on stage, Muriel and Rhonda are seen to be performing for each other through a number of close-ups of eye-contact and shared smiles. These shots are contrasted with spiteful looks between Tania and Nicole and the latter’s black eye. The shared success of Muriel and Rhonda is juxtaposed against the disarray of Tania’s group of friends as they come to blows at the end of the performance. Through the ambiguous treatment of relationships based on friendship, the narrative stops short of privileging the discourse over the institutional discourse of marriage. However, as will be examined in the context of Muriel’s honeymoon, the film’s ending does seem to revert back to the privileging of friendship, of the chosen family. Just as the film acknowledges the display of the fairy tale wedding ceremony as the focus for Muriel’s desire whilst at the same time this discourse is undermined, the discourse of ‘chosen family’/friendship is treated ambiguously.

Muriel’s honeymoon

“How can you write about marriage and hardly mention children, how can you write about wedding and barely mention sex? Whatever happened to the honeymoon?” (Arndt, 1994, p.1).

The romantic idealism Muriel ascribes to the wedding is stripped away when she returns to her husband’s home. Instead of being carried across the threshold and indulged in a romantic honeymoon, Muriel is confronted with the practical realities of her situation. The rooms and possessions are divided up, more like a divorce settlement than a wedding night, and her husband departs to pursue his true love, swimming. Muriel is left to console herself with a video of the ultimate romantic
nuptials, the royal wedding of Charles and Diana, itself with its own inherent contradictions. The wedding ceremony may have fulfilled Muriel’s requirements for romantic display, however after the ceremony Muriel and David’s relationship is presented as over, not as the starting point for a shared life together. The traditional discourse of marriage as “the sacred and life-long union of a man and a woman who give themselves to each other in love and trust” (Uniting Church in Australia cited in Blombery & Hughes, 1994, p. 2), is disrupted by Muriel and David. Their wedding night is spent undertaking solitary and individual pursuits, not consummating the love between two people. David, clearly acknowledging the norm from which he and his new wife have transgressed, asks as they enter the apartment: “Who marries someone they don’t know?” “You did”, Muriel replies. The motivation for the union is then stated in solely individual terms:

David: I have wanted to win. All my life I have wanted to win.
Muriel: Me too.

“The whole point of being in love and being married is that you are the most important person to that other” (Edgar cited in Kissane, 1991, p. 41). Instead of the connotations of mutual goals and individual sacrifice traditionally ascribed to the union of marriage through vows and statements such as this one, the relationship between Muriel and David is one placed in solely individual terms. They are David’s ability to swim at the Olympics and Muriel’s belief that to be married is to be a success.

The mutual concerns and desires of the couple versus those of the individual are represented in the film’s portrayal of the honeymoon. The traditional discourse of marriage as the legitimate forum for sexual relations, although foundering since the sexual revolution and increased access to birth control, implies that a married couple
consummates their relationship through sexual relations. In the example of Muriel and David this is contested through a lack of sex rather than the timing of sex. It is not that they are presented as sexless characters, rather it is that there is no sexual chemistry created between them. This is exemplified through mis-en-scene and lighting during their first night as husband and wife. The scene of David swimming alone is bathed in an icy blue light whilst above him in the shared apartment Muriel sits in a modern and sterile room watching the wedding video. The emotional and sexual connotations that can be attributed to water are clearly a solo endeavour here. If David van Arkle's presence throughout the film in or around water is read to symbolise an emotional/sexual dimension, it is there to reinforce Muriel’s lack rather than her fulfillment.

In an interesting twist in the narrative, Muriel does eventually consummate her relationship with her husband. However, this comes after she has informed him of her desire to end the union. Both parties profess a mutual admiration, yet this is restricted to liking each other not loving each other. A more self-assured young woman replaces the comically grotesque Muriel, who has featured throughout the film, in the closing stages of the film she no longer requires a romantic lead and can now engage with another on an emotional level.

Muriel’s relation to the bridal ideal is a measure of her autonomy and self-worth. Muriel becomes Mariel (who will be a bride) and then a new Muriel, with both autonomy and self-worth to the extent that she has rejected the bridal ideal. (Driscoll, 1998, p. 149)

Unable to do so prior to the self-realisation she undergoes following her mother’s death, Muriel finally confesses to her husband, “I can’t stay married to you David, I’ve got to stop lying. I tell so many lies, one day I won’t know I’m doing it”.
The progression of Muriel to Mariel and back to a new and an emotionally improved Muriel can be read as privileging a pragmatic individualist discourse against the romantic idealism of true love and marriage. Through the consummation of the relationship between Muriel and David however, the film does not completely dismiss the possibility of the couple. The film, it will be argued later, also posits alternative couplings, yet it can be read as a fairly negative critique of the discourses of marriage and the bride and the discourse of heterosexual marriage as the basis for the formation of the family.
CHAPTER TWO: THE WOMEN

“It’s all so 1950s,” Jane Fraser (1999) complains writing about the wedding ceremony and the traditions of the wedding reception in Australia in the late 1990s. Her reference to the 1950s appears to be a recurring trope in public discourse when discussing marriage and the family. On the one hand the decade is seen as representative of traditional family values, of idealised family life, and on the other as epitomising repressive gender inequality - “a very 1950s gender bias” (Cox, 1995, p. 35). It is either an age to be recreated, revisited and learnt from, or one to be challenged and left well behind. Callaghan claims the 1950s idealised vision of marriage, family and child rearing as the dominant discourse in television media has been replaced by a plurality of images and discourses in the contemporary media sphere:

In the “Leave it to Beaver” and “Father Knows Best” world of the 1950s, the family and childcare were wrapped in a serene reassuring idealism. By the 1990s this had metamorphosed into guilt-free sex (“Melrose Place”, “Sex and the City”), withering satires on the family (“Married with Children”, “The Simpsons”) and new-wave cohabitation (“Will and Grace”, “Dharma and Greg”). (2000, p. 19)

In the Australian cultural context the film Muriel’s Wedding functions as a counter discourse to the fifties ideal:

But “Priscilla”, “Muriel” and the other films of that ilk are the ultimate gesture of revenge against this zoned-out, uneventful self-image – a self-image which in Australian cultural history, had its origins in the sleepy, self-satisfied, consumerist suburban ethos of the 50s. (Martin, 1995, p. 32)

In Muriel’s Wedding the opposition between the past and the present – the 1950s, ‘traditional values’ ideal and the progressive enlightened 1990s – is made evident in the construction of the character Muriel and her mother Betty. The relationship
between mothers and daughters is also one often used to frame debates about changes within feminist discourses, between first and second, and second and third wave feminists (Spongberg, 1997, p.262). Hence, the mother-daughter relationship in *Muriel's Wedding* is useful for the examination of both the generational shift in the construction and representation of gender roles within the family and the changes within the discourse most notable for examining those changes; feminist debates.

The wife and the mother are the dominant roles constructed for women by the institution of marriage. The former is implicitly referred to in traditional wedding vows – “husband and wife”, the latter is a product more of cultural expectation. The ways in which Muriel, Betty and the other female characters represent the roles of the wife and the mother in the film will be investigated in order to examine how these constructions relate to traditional discourses. The way that feminist discourse has problematised the roles of wife and mother will also be discussed. Has this media representation of marriage, the family and child rearing transgressed the ‘1950s ideal’ or have those regressive/idealised ‘traditional values’ been maintained?

**Betty as the 1950s wife**

That of course was ‘yesterday’s woman’. ‘Yesterday’s woman’ says Anne Hollands, CEO of Relationships Australia . . . was far more stoic. She had different values, the traditions of the 50s; she had been told that she should sacrifice her own life to fulfil the needs of others and so she did. (Fraser, 1998)

“A wedding represents a moment, a return to a time when everything will be beautiful,” writes Wolcott a researcher for the Institute of Family Studies on the nostalgic connotations of the wedding (cited in Bell 1992, p. 54). Returning to *Muriel’s Wedding*, a binary opposition is established between Muriel and her mother
based on the generation to which they belong. In the scene where the 1990s bride, Muriel, is filmed leaving the church she walks past her mother standing on the sidelines. Betty here can be read as a representative of ‘yesterday’s woman’, the 1950s bride defined in the quotation above, and of the traditional discourse of marriage. Her costuming in the scene reinforces this construction. She is dressed in an unfashionable, even frumpy, print dress accessorised with dated, matching white hat and gloves. In contrast Muriel is read as representative of the next generation of young women empowered by the discourses of feminism, capable of conceiving for herself an existence outside of the traditional discourse of the wife her mother is seen to represent. The wedding ceremony as conceived by Muriel is one representing more a rupture with traditional discourses of marriage than of nostalgic continuity. By ignoring the role of the wife her mother is seen to represent, Muriel can be read as rejecting the traditional discourses which construct her role too, as that of a wife, after the wedding ceremony. Her individual identity as a woman, as Muriel, is subsumed to that of the ubiquitous wife. This is in opposition to the individual identity ‘man’ referred to in the marriage service’s ‘man and wife’, (Pringle, 1998, p. 99). “[Wife] refers to the particular social position of women as subordinates of individual men” (Van Every, 1996, p. 48).

An explanation along generational lines of the differences in the experiences of Muriel and her mother align with feminist discourses of the liberation of women’s roles:

In the 1950s there was evidently one acceptable and nearly ubiquitous way of being an adult woman in Australia – being a married mother in a nuclear family. In the 1990s there are evidently a range of acceptable ways, including being unmarried and being childless. (Richards, 1997, p. 162)
The positive alternatives available to contemporary femininity are privileged in *Muriel's Wedding*, not through a triumphant Muriel but rather through the brutal representation of her mother Betty. Betty is seen to have succumbed to her role as the traditional wife and is presented as a victim of her circumstances. Even at her funeral her life is summed up in relation to the needs of her husband Bill. Bill’s behaviour at the funeral; his revelling in his manipulation of his wife’s final moments for his own political ends – the fax received from the former prime minister and the attendant media’s response to it – continues for Betty the subsidiary role she has performed throughout the film. “Betty’s story remains Bill’s story, even in death” (Landman, 1996, p. 115). This is summed up by Deirdre Chambers as she ‘consoles’ Muriel following the funeral: “At least she can be happy her life amounted to something in the end.”

The portrayal of Betty as a simple-minded victim is not one that inspires much sympathy. She is more often displayed as a figure of ridicule – making tea in the microwave, clinging to the belief that her husband is merely showing Deirdre Chambers his ‘developments’ (not conducting an affair with her) and signing away blank cheques to her daughter without question. As noted of her character by Landman, “[Betty] models for Muriel the position of being nothing,” her character “is prompted into movement by the demands of other characters, otherwise she lapses into inertia” (1996, p. 115). When first introduced to Betty she is standing in the kitchen staring blankly into space until called upon to make her husband a cup of tea. Her youngest daughter Penelope acts as a go-between delivering the request and in effect reproducing her mother’s role as a domestic servant of her father. The message delivered, Betty completes the task. She places a cup into the microwave
and then falls back into a catatonic state, only prompted into action again by the beeping microwave. Similarly when Muriel is brought home on shoplifting charges, Betty stands silently beside Bill as he engages the policemen in conversation only moving when he orders her “to get the boys a drink.”

In contrast to these harshly comic portrayals early in the film towards the end Betty is presented as more of a tragic figure. The sequence in which Betty is apprehended for shoplifting, by the same store detective who caused Muriel’s shame at Tania’s wedding, is perhaps the only time she is treated with a degree of pathos rather than ridicule. The close-up shots of Betty’s red and blistered feet in her ill-fitting shoes as she dreamily trundles down the aisles of the supermarket doing the family grocery shopping are uncomfortable to watch. These are the aisles of the wife not the bride, and the experience is constructed as one that is painful. Betty’s feet could somewhat dramatically be read as shackled, as a radical feminist interpretation of family as a prison (Pringle, 1998, p. 98). In seeking comfort for herself by taking from the shelf a pair of comfortable shoes she acts to alleviate her pain, at the same time alerting the store detective and leading to her arrest for shoplifting. Deviating from her role, acting for herself and not solely for others, is swiftly punished in Betty’s case. Muriel had managed to avoid further embarrassment from her arrest by the intervention of her father; Betty no longer has this course of action as Bill has left to be with his mistress Deirdre.

The scene in which Betty is arrested is her final in the film, however her presence remains after her death in a number of capacities. Perhaps the most striking reference to Betty is the burnt backyard complete with iconic Hills hoist she leaves
behind. The motivation for her actions is attributed to the release of pent up frustration with her son Perry, who she continually requested to cut the grass. Her youngest son explains the devastation to Muriel, “she got sick and tired of waiting for Perry to mow it.” Taking Landman’s position that Betty exists throughout the film merely as a puppet prompted into action by others, the burning of the back yard can be read as a sign of an acknowledgement by Betty of her own inability to prompt the actions of others. Her life has been one completely given to the fulfilment of the needs of others, her family, while her own desires have gone unfulfilled. As Deirdre winks to her at dinner and says “I bet you were a terror when you were twenty-two”, we are all sure that Betty, if she ever had a life outside of her dismal family existence, it was only a brief one and most certainly not wild.

Betty’s inability to carry out actions other than those prompted by others supports her characterisation as “nothing” (Landman 1996, p. 115). The lack of individual motivation and identity in the character is further reinforced in the film by the lack of explanation of her final actions, the burning of the back yard. The only point where an emotional dimension of Betty’s character is revealed is when Muriel posthumously discovers her scrapbook of family photos and news clippings of her wedding. As in life however, Betty is not given her own voice to explain her actions; these are left to be interpreted by her daughter.

**Betty’s legacy as the victim wife**

The negative characterisation of Betty as the victim wife is concurrent with second wave feminist assertions about the repressive nature of the nuclear family and the roles of wife and mother that it ascribes to women (Richards, 1997). Implicit within
this is the belief that feminist discourse has enabled a break from this tradition, and hence the use of a mother/daughter paradigm to express a generational shift and a sense of progression with regard to women's rights and representation. The gains of the 1970s second wave feminists to liberate women from the "prison of the family", (Pringle, 1998, p. 98) and provide alternatives to traditional roles implies a continuity between generations and a positive inheritance. "We could feel with some satisfaction that you, the daughters of our revolution, would find the world a more hospitable place for women than we had" (Summers, in Spongberg, 1997, p. 258).

Feminists unhappy with the negative portrayal of women as passive victims, of the type of Betty Heslop have revisited the blanket categorisation of the roles for women within the family as powerless. This includes Summers, quoted above, who having once advocated the use of a generational link between mothers and daughters to reinforce feminist gains, has since taken a more critical view of the feminist legacy:

But unlike mothers 25 years ago, who watched with alarm as their daughters forswore marriage and motherhood in favour of feminism, this mother worries that feminism had created a batch of women who were fearful, prone to victimhood, and require law enforcement officers to protect them from unwanted male advances (cited in Spongberg, 1997, p. 259).

So where does this legacy leave Betty's daughter Muriel? Or for that matter any of her daughters? How does Muriel's Wedding present the relationship between generations of women? As defying the role of victim to patriarchy – and as such reinforcing a positioning of women within the family as powerless and having to look outside that institution to become empowered – or enabling the possibility for power within the family for women.
Whereas Muriel and her mother construct a neat opposition between generations, the opposition between Muriel and her sibling Joanie enables one to examine the range of possibilities available for young women presented in the film. The binary opposition between Muriel and her mother as generational relies upon a notion of universal change for all women, and of shared experience by all women. This thesis does not adequately explain the different experiences of Muriel and her sister Joanie – both of the same generation; the former challenging a role ascribed by gender, the latter remaining complicit with it. Changes in legal status [Family Law Act 1974], medical advances in birth control and access to paid employment have greatly changed the range of possibilities available for women in both public and private realms, and they have lessened the rigid gender division of roles within the home and family associated with the 1950s model. These changes are viewed as universally positive and remain based upon a primary identification with an individual’s gender; hence the opposition between generations as represented by Muriel and Betty is one that implies the restrictive roles of the past are just that ‘past’, and all women now have access to multiple roles and possibilities within families and within the public sphere.

Although the pattern of victimhood exemplified by Betty appears to have been broken by Muriel when she chooses to leave her family, despite her father’s request that she stay and look after the kids, her sister Joanie acts to reaffirm the tradition of ‘domestic servant’. Following Muriel’s insistence that it is now time for Bill to take responsibility for the care of his children, Bill calls to Joanie to get him a beer. In her dutiful compliance with his request the role of wife is conferred upon her and the possibilities of change and a renegotiation of roles within the family are limited.
"The identity of 'wife' connoted specifically service" (Lake, 1999, p. 121) and this is affirmed through the character of Joanie. However, Muriel challenges traditional gender norms within the family by her rejection of the role of wife, and instead she focuses her desires solely on the romantic role of the bride. The structural positioning of the characters Joanie and Muriel in the narrative privileges the discourse of the latter. Joanie is perhaps the most unattractive of all of Muriel's unattractive siblings; spotty, overweight and constantly wearing a grotesque image of her father emblazoned across her chest on a campaign t-shirt. The connotation of domestic service implicit in the role of the 1950s wife is placed within the contemporary context through Joanie, yet the rejection of this role is privileged through the character of Muriel and her 'escape' from the family 'prison'.

The negative construction of Joanie indicates another possibility for the interpretation of her mother's role as a wife. The line of inheritance between Betty and Joanie appears to be presented in the film as one of shared incompetence and unattractiveness. This leaves individual agency rather than the discourse of the wife as the reason for Betty's sad existence.

**Betty as the bad wife**

"A happy marriage, he said, was based on a benevolent, industrious, trustworthy wife . . . a wife who made an effort to look attractive and keep the house clean" (Graham in Hilliard, 1997, p. 18). The traditional discourse of roles within marriage divided by gender, as outlined by preacher Billy Graham in the 1950s, although stemming from a religious essentialism and outdated, is none-the-less still traceable in media representations of married life circulating today. In relation to *Muriel's*


*Wedding* the recognition of these traditional ideals of married life can be traced not through their representation, but rather in their parody. The role of the good wife outlined by Graham is represented in the film by the construction of Betty as the bad wife. Betty is incapable of performing the duties of the wife.

Betty’s husband Bill reinforces her construction as a bad wife. As Bill surveys his family seated in the plush crimson of the Chinese restaurant his words, “You’re all useless” are directed at both his wife and his children. “The pan of the camera represents father Bill Heslop’s contemptuous gaze over his family who he dismisses as ‘useless no-hopers’” (Landman, 1996, p. 114). On leaving his family, Bill later laments his failure to gain a seat in state politics. He blames his family, they weren’t good enough and they held him back. A final embarrassment for Bill comes when Betty is arrested for shoplifting. He rejects her cries for help by remarking, “I think she’s not right in the head.” The ideal characteristics of benevolence, industriousness and trustworthiness are absent in the characterisation of Betty; she is even labelled a criminal in her final scenes.

Betty’s inability to carry out the duties of the ideal wife – looking good and keeping the house clean – results in her being blamed for the failings of her family. Bill berates her, “Look at this place, I never stood a bloody chance” as he departs the family home to set up with his mistress. Bill’s mistress, Deirdre, acts as a counterpoint to Betty through her dress and appearance. Deirdre ‘maintains’ herself and continually surveys her physical construction, her make-up and excessively coordinated clothing. In contrast Betty is never seen taking an interest in her appearance. She is usually attired in misshapen housedresses or tracksuits that seem
to serve the sole purpose of covering her bulk, her hair is often unkempt and she wears very little make-up except lipstick on occasions, such as her daughter’s wedding.

The character of Deirdre serves not only to highlight Betty’s inadequacies in personal grooming, she also acts to reinforce Bill’s charge that Betty was incapable of maintaining the family home. Following Betty’s death Deirdre and a friend are enlisted to clean up the Heslop’s house. In order to undertake the duties of the housewife Deirdre’s usual costume of gaudy outfits and tacky jewellery is coated with a layer of protective plastic, a see-through apron and rubber gloves. In a scene reminiscent of the introduction to the Heslop family home, a shot of Deirdre scrubbing out kitchen cupboards pans across to capture Muriel walking into a neat and tidy lounge room. Whereas once her siblings were lounging around in disarray watching television they are now sombrely perched in a scene of domestic order in which they do not seem to belong. Betty’s lack as a housekeeper is represented by this transformation and is further reinforced by the dialogue exchange between Deirdre and her helper:

Helper: I finished up in the bathroom. You were right about those cupboards.
Deirdre: Let’s start on the laundry then, it’s a big job.

The implication of this exchange is that Betty had failed to keep the house clean and in effect to carry out the duties of the ideal wife. Deirdre, meanwhile, can rectify this situation with her superior skills and still maintain her appearance under her coating of clear plastic.
Betty's construction as a bad wife in relation to a traditional ideal does not however automatically confer on Deirdre the status of good wife. For as much as Betty is found to be lacking in regard to the traditional discourse of the wife, it is the discourse which ultimately comes under fire in *Muriel's Wedding* not the characters' competence in the role of wife. For despite the appearance of abilities in the domestic sphere, Deirdre Chambers is presented more as a figure of ridicule than as an example for positive comparison. Her construction, outside the marriage discourse, as a single woman, as a home wrecker, and as a working woman is neither sympathetic nor positive. Nonetheless, she does represent two of the alternatives available for Muriel through her rejection of the traditional role of wife - the sexually liberated single woman and the woman in the workforce. The latter reflects the gendered division of public and domestic spheres traditionally associated with the institution of marriage.

**Deirdre as the anti-wife: the working woman**

The character of Deirdre Chambers is useful for examining how *Muriel's Wedding* portrays not only the alternatives to the traditional role of wife available to the young female characters, but also the ways in which these alternatives have been interpreted by feminist discourses. The division of domestic and public roles within the family along gender lines has long been the site of feminist debates about the family:

Feminist responses have included both personal rejection of the nuclear family household . . . and the advocacy of policies enabling women to escape that household – childcare services, job and pay equality, and increased possibilities for childlessness. (Curthoys, 1985, p.110)

This outright rejection of the domestic sphere as represented by the nuclear family led to a polarisation of positions, whereby one could only be for the family if one was against women in the public sphere and vice versa. “It became a cliché of public
discourse in the seventies that women who stayed at home with their children were mindless ‘cabbages’ (Sullivan, 1996, p. 12). The focus of feminist debate around equality and access to the public sphere undoubtedly allowed for the reassessment of women’s roles within society. However by focussing solely on access to the public sphere, without a corresponding reassessment of the domestic, this has produced an imbalance upon which the relevance of these feminist arguments to women in contemporary Australia is being questioned (Curthoys, 1985; Sullivan, 1996; Wearing, 1990). Although there has been a reassessment of women’s roles in the domestic sphere (Wearing, 1990; Pringle, 1988), the arguments raised have tended to remain divided on a simple domestic-public opposition. Polarised between the conservative position that a woman’s place is in the home and the feminist stance that it is the right of all women to have equal access to the workforce. These positions are reflected in the arguments for and against childcare. The need for working women to access childcare is, on the one hand, accused of producing children with “personality disorders” (Sullivan, 1996, p. 12). On the other, women in the work force with children have been presented as the unobtainable ideal of the hybrid career mum. “The woman dressed in a suit with a mobile telephone in one hand and in the other, the latest trendy accessory – a beautiful perfect child” (Gough, 1996 p. 30). While attempting to acknowledge a desire to undertake the traditional roles of the wife and the mother such feminist debates still maintain the hierarchy of discourse whereby access and involvement in the public sphere overshadows participation in the domestic. This is a position that continues to locate power and agency in the public sphere, in the role of the working woman/mother, at the expense of domestic roles which are seen as repressive and located within the constricted parameters of patriarchy.
The mother-daughter paradigm as represented by the relationship between Betty and Muriel implies a shift in generational consciousness solely for the good. Muriel signifying the contemporary woman with access to the public sphere is in a privileged position to that of her mother, for whom such access was unavailable. This is akin to 1970s feminist discourse – in which public roles are seen to be good for women and domestic roles are bad. How then does this allow women in domestic roles to view their position in society – as prescribed by both patriarchy and feminism? And how is this simplistic opposition of public role good, domestic role bad reflected in the film’s characterisation of the independent working woman, Deirdre? Is it all that simple?

Enlightened and emancipated by feminism from the restrictive domestic role of wife, the “woman’s separate sphere” (Allen, 1983) is no longer relevant to Muriel’s generation. The film appears to privilege women in the workplace over those in the domestic sphere. However through an examination of the way in which Deirdre Chambers as a self-made woman is represented in the film this conclusion appears to be somewhat ambiguous. One would assume that in light of the negative and destructive portrayal of the traditional/ideal wife witnessed in the character of Betty any alternatives to this role would have been given a positive status in the film. Which in turn would be seen to allow Muriel to be read as representative of a rupture with the traditional discourse of marriage, her mother’s generation and a gendered position in the family. Deirdre Chambers however is presented as one of the more scathing parodies in the film. She is in many ways reminiscent of the overblown character of Tania. Betty as signifying the traditional discourse of the wife, be it more through her lack than successful execution of the role, provides a useful point
of opposition for assessing the representation of women operating within the public sphere, as signified by Deirdre Chambers. The two characters are also placed in opposition due to their relationships with Bill Heslop, one as his legitimate wife and other as his mistress.

Initially Deirdre is constructed, although not sympathetically, as successful in the public sphere. She introduces herself to Bill’s Japanese investors at dinner as a beauty consultant because, as she states, “sales assistant sounds so cheap”. “I advise women on lipstick, base and blush”, she continues before neatly placing her pedicured foot into her glossed mouth by asking if any of the men’s wives are geishas. Deirdre Chambers is the only female character in *Muriel’s Wedding* that is consistently associated with her work, however her characterisation is constructed as a parody of the professional woman. For a start, her area of expertise is firmly coded as feminine, she is a purveyor of beauty products and cosmetics, and her appearance is of an exaggerated femininity that is read as comic and tasteless. The film does not celebrate Deirdre’s place in the workforce, and surprisingly her lack of interest in the domestic sphere is also presented negatively. Whereas Bill Heslop is given a way to improve his pitiful characterisation at the end of the film, Deirdre after acting as a catalyst for his marriage break-up is condemned again through her rejection of Bill and the domestic role of caring for his home and children. The character of Deirdre does not conform to the traditional role of homemaker, she is also not the later incarnation of the working wife, rather she appears to reject both of these discourses.

In her refusal of the domestic Deirdre appears to be aligned with the feminist position that advocates engagement with the public world of work as the path to
women's emancipation from patriarchy. However through her ridiculous and unsympathetic portrayal in the film this agency is negated. The ridiculing of the working woman combined with the discrediting of the role of the wife, (through the tragic demise of Betty), one is left to ask what choices are left for Muriel? Is her only option to reject both of these roles?

Throughout the narrative Muriel is positioned as outside of the workforce, and this is supplied as one of the reasons for her sense of personal failure. An example of this is when her father rebukes her at dinner as "being a bit old for an apprenticeship". In Bill's eyes, the only glimmer of hope for Muriel is when she is recruited by Deirdre Chambers to sell cosmetics, "She's made something of herself . . . she's really impressed me", he says. Betty also manages to perceive some hope for her daughter in her new job, stating that it is the best thing ever to have happened to Muriel. Muriel however does not wish to follow the working woman model provided by Bill's mistress, instead her desires remain firmly focussed on the role of bride as the pathway to success.

Despite the fact that she ultimately rejects the role of the bride, by abandoning her family home and leaving her husband, Muriel stillembarks on a future in which she will be providing domestic support for another, her friend Rhonda, whom she promises to support. This caring role is in addition to paid employment - during her initial stint in Sydney Muriel also undertook paid employment in a video store. Muriel's negotiation of the domestic-public opposition appears to be a combination of both domestic and public spheres - just without men. "When Muriel keeps her
vows to Rhonda . . . instead of her husband, the couple riding off to the horizon continues to be the only ending for a girl” (Driscoll, 1998, p. 150).

But is this what the girl wants? Although undertaking a sexless marriage, (only consummating the union following her decision to end it), and breezing past the visibly heartbroken Bryce during her wedding ceremony, Muriel is presented in the narrative as heterosexually active. She engages in a manhunt with Rhonda during her time in Sydney – they eye up suitable young male customers for each other. While her interaction with men was ultimately driven by the part they could play in her desire to become a bride, her friend Rhonda is very much a sexually active woman. Whereas Muriel needs men to achieve her desire to be a bride – a heterosexual bride – Rhonda uses men for her own pleasure. This binary opposition also relates to the older women Betty and Deirdre. Betty aligns with Muriel – the man defining her position in the world, the domestic – and Deirdre lines up with Rhonda – the assertive sexual woman.

**Rhonda as the anti-wife: the sexual single woman**

“Driscoll’s theory is that a day as a bride is a trade-off for a young woman giving up her status as an object of desire” (Kyriakopoulos, 1998, p. 33). Although calling for a reappraisal of the role of the bride as one in which a ‘young’ woman is instilled with a degree of power, this statement possesses two implied assumptions - that the desire that is negated is heterosexual and that women are unable to hold that desire. There are two ways that these assumptions are challenged in *Muriel’s Wedding*. Firstly this is done through the way that the character of David Van Arkle is filmed as an object of desire, (this will be dealt with later), and secondly Muriel’s belief that
being a bride equates to success is established in relation to her female counterparts. Muriel does not construct herself as an object of desire for a male gaze, but for the gaze of Tania and her friends. Although she clearly requires a man to fulfil her desires, Muriel does not require that man to desire her. In fact David Van Arkle is shown to be less than enamoured by his bride-to-be. For example, during their first meeting he desperately tries to convince his matchmaker coach that any of the other young women interviewed would be more suitable than Muriel. Again during the wedding ceremony it is a look of despair and bewilderment that is seen on the groom’s face as his bride proceeds down the aisle towards him. At the wedding the looks of desire are not from a male gaze, but from the bridesmaids. They spout praise on what the ugly-duckling Muriel has become, “We always knew Mariel would come good.” The moment when this feminine desire is most explicitly portrayed is when Tania, who with a look of exaggerated wonder declares, “You’re beautiful Muriel”, greets Muriel at the church door. The woman who expelled Muriel from her clique, and hence played a role in coalescing her desire to succeed through marriage, has now bestowed on her the mantle of desirability. Approval that Muriel does not require from the male spectators at the wedding, not even her husband.

The subversion of the dominant discourse of marriage enacted by Muriel through her constructed wedding is not the only way in which women in the film transcend the traditional gender binary that positions them as disempowered. One example of this is the way in which both Muriel and Rhonda actively pursue male partners whilst living in Sydney. In seeking out male partners, Rhonda is more often the instigator of action than Muriel is. However in her relationship with Bryce, Muriel is presented
as the one in control. Although it is Bryce who invites Muriel on their first date, his bumbling ineptness in the asking her out hardly constructs him as an authority figure. Later during the almost slapstick scenes back at Muriel and Rhonda's flat, it is also Muriel who instigates sexual contact, albeit by accident. In her attempt to distract Bryce from seeing her father on the news bulletin pleading for her to return home, Muriel changes the television to a porn channel - the connotations of her own sexual desire that this transmits to Bryce results in him enthusiastically engaging in disrobing her. During this sequence not only is Muriel's sexual desire represented, but also the desires of her friend Rhonda. Rhonda's rapturous cries can be heard throughout the scene, as can those of her two male friends. Interestingly, surrounded by these visual and aural representations of female desire the scene ends with tragedy - the discovery of Rhonda's cancer. It is as if Rhonda is being reproached for her desires. While Muriel's desire is safely encapsulated within a relationship that can be read as possibly romantic, Rhonda's behaviour is seen to transgress traditional femininity by actively satisfying her own desires, for pleasure not romance. The character of Rhonda can be seen as a marker of how far Muriel can take her transgression of traditional gender roles. She can disrupt the gender hierarchy in the traditional discourses of the wedding, marriage and the family, but she should not go as far as Rhonda does.

Rhonda is not a success as Tania defines it. She ends up with cancer and in a wheelchair for life. Even though she is presented as a positive character throughout much of the narrative, Rhonda seems to be the most harshly dealt with after Betty. I would argue the reasons for her unfortunate end can be attributed to the kind of femininity she is seen to represent. Consistently in reviews of the film Rhonda is
perceived as overtly sexual: "a good-time girl with firm opinions" (Crayford, 1994), "[h]er friendship offers Muriel a world of freedoms – one of which is sex" (Byrnes, 1994), "her lusty crippled friend" (Keneally, 1998), "her adventurous, promiscuous soul mate" (Jillett, 1994). In fact it is Rhonda’s ‘deviant’ sexual exploits – taking home two American sailors – that sets the scene for the discovery of her cancer. Rhonda herself appears to be aware of her transgression of gender and sexual roles, inquiring with the doctor if her injury is the result of too much sex. Although she does not die (the fate in store for Betty Heslop), the good-time girl gets cancer. The behaviours of Betty as domestic doormat and Rhonda as defiantly sexual are two poles of femininity not seen to be endorsed by the narrative of *Muriel’s Wedding*.

Other than the fact that they both encounter adversity, there is very little that Betty and Rhonda have in common. Betty is more often than not presented as a figure of ridicule, whereas Rhonda is given a more sympathetic characterisation. Rhonda’s plight is one that she is seen to have some control over, unlike Betty who is merely a puppet prompted into action by others. The scene in which she is preparing to leave for a rehabilitation session at hospital is an example of where Rhonda is presented as accountable for her actions. Her departure is preceded by a frantic search for a packet of cigarettes. For a media public well rehearsed in the links between smoking and cancer, a connection can be made between Rhonda’s actions and her illness, even her complicity in that illness. Despite this, Rhonda is still presented in a positive way throughout the scene. An attractive young male taxi driver greets her at the door, and she is seen to take pleasure in eyeing him up - the looks of the young man indicate he too is enjoying the encounter. Here both of Ronda’s sins, cigarettes and sexual appetite, are presented without judgement. She is not being blamed for
actions that may in fact be damaging her health. She remains the author of her own
destiny, unlike Betty’s less empathetic treatment.

However Rhonda’s search for cigarettes does end badly. She uncovers the photo
album constructed by Muriel in the bridal shops of Sydney, which leads to Muriel
confessing her plans to marry David and to leave her. Rhonda inadvertently
uncovers Muriel’s addiction, weddings, which by association are presented as
perhaps as life threatening as her own, cigarettes. The life-threatening potential of
weddings and marriage perhaps also demonstrated by the sad demise of Betty
Heslop.

It could be argued that the character of Rhonda remains in the narrative because of
the femininity she is seen to represent. This is also the case with the character of
Deirdre Chambers, who as the working woman is placed in opposition to domestic
femininity in the role of wife. As much as Deirdre’s characterisation limits the
possibilities for the affirmation of career and work as a legitimate and desirable
alternative to the bridal discourse, Rhonda’s characterisation as a sexually active
single woman is also reproached. The sexually aggressive woman that Rhonda
represents is rejected by the narrative, which instead opts for the possibility of future
romantic unions. Be that a romantic reunion between Muriel and Bryce or a
relationship with another like him. In this way the film appears as somewhat
regressive in its lack of acceptance of alternatives to a heterosexual romantic union
and the traditional gender roles that that constructs. For example, in the scenes in
which Rhonda takes part in her last fling she is presented as very much in control,
she is not being exploited and she is not presented for the visual pleasure of men
alone. The characterisation of Rhonda as the single woman, (positive construction, negative narrative journey), and that of Deirdre Chambers as a working woman are not resolved in the narrative to provide alternatives to the gendered roles of bride, wife and mother. Accepting this, it could be argued that *Muriel’s Wedding* offers little in the way of feminine identities outside of the discourses of marriage and the family? Through the treatment of the character of Betty Heslop the wife is presented in the narrative as a role that is ultimately destructive, yet the treatment of those who are not wives, except for Muriel, is hardly sympathetic. In terms of traditional family discourse the film appears to challenge the feminine role of the wife ascribed through marriage, yet also to critique alternatives to that discourse – the working woman and the single woman. In order to further ascertain what family discourses are circulated in this text I shall now examine the role of mother. Though not prescribed by marriage, as the role of the wife is, the mother is a role culturally attributed to married women.

**The mothers**

The media have also decided mothers are sexless – how often have you seen in the media a sexy woman with a child. Consider a recent comment regarding Madonna’s pregnancy. The reporter said no-one could imagine Madonna as a mum – staying home and knitting booties! (Gough, 1996, p. 30)

This comment on a woman who has saturated the contemporary mediasphere seems to imply that motherhood is a role that has no place in the public sphere – “staying home and knitting booties”. At the point when Madonna takes on the mantle of mother she relinquishes all other possible roles and identities. Motherhood however is not a role conferred in a pejorative sense, it is instilled with a degree of reverence. For example, in a study of Australian advertising Lumby (1997) notes the way in
which an image of a pregnant woman’s stomach in a Toyota advertisement caused public outrage. “The image was ‘insulting and dehumanising, firstly because it ridiculed pregnancy’” (p. 18). Lumby highlights the correlation between the way in which the pregnant woman’s body is presented as requiring protection from exploitation and profanation and the way it produces an alliance between conservative religious and political groups, and feminists. Between conservatives who want to keep women confined to the domestic sphere and feminists who supposedly strive for the opposite (p. 20).

The generational binary opposition between Muriel and her mother, as discussed earlier, can be paralleled to differences in feminist discourses on the role of the wife. This opposition can also be seen to exist in relation to the discourse of motherhood. However, whereas the role of the wife is implicitly constructed through the institution of marriage, (a relationship that is being redefined in contemporary discourse), the role of mother is one that is not necessarily prescribed by marriage. However the discourses of marriage and motherhood remain explicitly linked. “Caring for husband, children and home was implicitly seen as the job a woman undertakes by marrying” (Pringle, 1998, pp. 99-100). “Women’s behaviour shouts of their biological constraints: women are expected to bear and nurture children, to take caring roles (Richards, 1997, p. 162). The dominance of this traditional discourse becomes evident when one examines the alternatives to the role of mother within the family for women.

For women to decide not to have children is still very risky for it flies in the face of some of the most central patriarchal concepts of what it means to be a woman. How can we find an identity which is not simply being a non-mother? (Wishart cited in Horin, 1982, p. 16)
The “selfish non-mother” is presented in popular culture as a woman who cares “more for her own comforts than for nurturing” (Kaplan, 1992, p. 193). Such a characterisation is perhaps exemplified by Deirdre Chambers’s unflattering representation in *Muriel’s Wedding*. In their final scene together Bill tells Muriel that he and Deirdre are unlikely to continue their relationship now that the children are a part of the deal. In contrast to the now seemingly repentant father, Deirdre is presented as cold and uncaring in her rejection of the now motherless children. If Bill Heslop is perceived as reprehensible for his actions throughout the narrative, Deirdre is constructed as even more so.

The “career mum” (Gough, 1996), or the “super mom” (Kaplan, 1992), is another incarnation of contemporary femininity which has emerged in public discourse reinterpreting the role of the traditional mother. In her examination of the representation of motherhood in popular culture, Kaplan (1992) notes how by the late 1980s the representation of the working mother had degenerated to one of satire. She cites the film *Baby Boom* (1988) as an example where the female protagonist as successful career woman is not fulfilled until she combines her business role with motherhood by launching a designer baby food line (p. 189). Although the working woman, the “selfish non-mother” is represented in *Muriel’s Wedding* in the guise of Deirdre, there is no character that fulfils the role of working mother as such. The working mother is, however, present in another film released in the same year as *Muriel, The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. The character of Mitzi’s wife appears in a minor role, yet it is her decision to relinquish custody of her son that drives the narrative journey of her former husband and the boy’s father. Although *Priscilla* presents sexualities and family formations that oppose traditional
heterosexual marriage, the portrayal of the working mother appears to align with the conservative position of the working woman as selfish, putting personal career fulfilment before the needs of her child. The health of the child, an argument that has often been cited by conservatives campaigning against the provision of child care for working mothers (Sullivan, 1996), is used as a marker of maternal responsibility. The reason given for the return of the boy to his father in *Priscilla* is that his mother needs time and space to pursue her career. The narrative concludes with Mitzi and his son living happily back in Sydney with no sign of the career-minded mother. Although this ending would appear to redefine caring roles within the family, it also maintains elements of a more traditional discourse. Berry (1995) writes of the relationship between father and son in *Priscilla*, “it is stretching credulity to picture mum happily sending her boy off with the drag queens, and without anyone calling social services” (p. 14). By presenting the family relationships in *Priscilla* as belonging to a marginalised minority, drag queens, the transgressive potential of the representations could be seen to be negated. Mitzi’s family is constructed in opposition to the ‘normal’ traditional family, which I would argue remains the dominant point of identification for contemporary Australian audiences, as witnessed in the quote by Berry. As an extraordinary family, the reassessment of care-giving roles witnessed in *Priscilla* can be distanced from an audience’s identification with what is considered the ‘normal’ family, where the maternal role as primary carer remains unchallenged.

In *Muriel’s Wedding* the seemingly ubiquitous recognition of the maternal discourse as one which both follows naturally from the wedding discourse and requires total commitment of the mother to her child/children is evident. But the mothers in
Muriel’s Wedding are not valorised. Instead they are constructed in negative terms as bad mothers. Like the bad wife, the bad mother acts to reassert the ideal, the good mother – “As always, it is because of prevailing mother-constructs that we expect, or indeed demand, that mothers be gentle and self-sacrificing. Their deviation in then all the more reprehensible” (Kaplan, 1992, p. 192).

Betty and Rhonda’s Mum as bad mothers

As with the investigation of the role of the wife, the character of Betty is the most obviously identifiable with the discourse of motherhood, she is a mother after all. Like her construction as a wife, Betty’s construction as a mother is almost entirely negative. Her failings are again compared to an ideal form, constructing a binary opposition of the good versus the bad mother. The representation of the mother differs from the representation of the wife in Muriel’s Wedding in that alternatives to the dominant discourse of motherhood are explored. In the film’s treatment of the role of the wife Betty’s failings in the role act to reinforce an ideal representation, and any alternatives to that ideal are reined in by the narrative treatment of Rhonda and Deirdre. This leaves the centre, the traditional discourse of the wife unchallenged. The film’s treatment of the role of the mother, although an equally unflattering portrait, does allow space for a renegotiation of the motherhood discourse. Before examining how the motherhood discourse is renegotiated by the text, I will first examine the representation of the two traditional mothers, Betty and Rhonda’s Mum.

Rhonda’s Mum as the out-dated mother

If women are defined first in our society as mothers, then it is to be expected that they will lose social value with the end of the stage of
physical ability for child-bearing, coinciding as it usually does in our society as the end of child-rearing. This expectation is incorporated in many critical accounts of society’s images of midlife. These images are said to be universally negative; stereotypes of sexless, unattractive, overweight, foolish and forgetful, depressed and depressing midlife women dominating the discourse. (Richards, 1997, p. 180)

The construction of the traditional mother in *Muriel’s Wedding* is simply one of incapacity, hopelessness and exploitation. The possible futures given to Tania, Bill as a family man, and Muriel and Rhonda are denied the traditional mothers Betty and Rhonda’s Mum are either killed off or left standing alone and helpless. Both characters are constructed with the characteristics of the depiction of midlife cited above, and neither of them receives any form of sympathy in their characterisation – excluding perhaps Betty’s supermarket scene discussed earlier.

Rhonda’s mother makes her first appearance at Mariel’s wedding, pushing her daughter down the aisle in her wheelchair. Her costuming reinforces her construction as out-of-date. She wears a floral dress with a matching blue hat, short white gloves and an oversized white handbag slung over her shoulder. Under the influence of her mother, Rhonda is also seen to be wearing a retro, print dress complete with a silly looking bow in her hair. She is again a little girl under her mother’s tutelage. Although placed in a position where she has control over Rhonda, signified by Rhonda’s childish attire and her pushing of her wheelchair, Rhonda’s mother is given little power in the narrative. She is presented as an incompetent and simple-minded in the way that she cannot comprehend her daughter’s discomfort in attending the ceremony. Her dialogue exchange with her daughter as they proceed up the aisle reinforces this. When Rhonda insists her mother place her at the side of the church her mother replies, “But you won’t be seen there.” Later, she reprimands he daughter for wanting to be left alone, “If this is your attitude, I don’t know why
you bothered coming.” Rhonda does not respond to these remarks, yet her mother is adequately condemned for her lack of understanding by the pained looks that are captured on her face. When confronted by the newly married Muriel following the ceremony, it is again the delivery of the line that confers the dissatisfaction Rhonda feels about having her mother in her life. When asked by Muriel where she is going, she replies, “Where do you think? Back to Porpoise Spit with Mum.” The words are literally snarled at Muriel and are used to reinforce an accusation of neglect. It is Muriel’s betrayal that is responsible for her having to return home. “I needed help. I needed a friend”, Rhonda says. She obviously did not need her mother.

Rhonda’s disdain for her mother, and consequently her mother’s inability to understand her daughter, is revisited in the final scenes of the film. Rhonda is held captive in her mother’s home, which with its retro seascapes and galloping horses on the walls and kitsch furnishings further acts to reinforce her construction as old fashioned and out-of-date. In these scenes Rhonda is again positioned under this influence through her own retro patterned dress and her dour expression. This is far from the gregarious woman first encountered in the film. Rhonda’s entrapment in this dated domestic abode is completed by the presence of Tania and her cohorts, with whom she and her mother are having tea. Just as they promised her mother at Mariel’s wedding when taking charge of Rhonda’s wheelchair - “Don’t worry Mrs E, we’ll push her around.” - Tania and her friends have ensconced themselves in Rhonda’s life. At tea a complete turnaround in the power relationship between Rhonda and the bridesmaids is witnessed. Rhonda, who once bluntly rejected the ‘friendship’ of Tania with the remark, “I’d rather eat razorblades than have a drink with you”, is now sitting dutifully sipping tea with her. This change in the
relationship between Rhonda and Tania is not blamed on her illness or the departure of Muriel, but rather falls on the shoulders of her uncomprehending mother. Her mother should have known better than to allow these women into her life. Rhonda’s construction in the scene as disempowered and childish is further demonstrated by the way in which mother and daughter interact. She rebukes her for swearing and treats her like an idiot. “Look Rhonda, Mariel, Muriel has come to visit you”, she says pointing out the obvious whilst sitting beside her daughter when Muriel enters the room.

Her daughter is clearly the defining point of Rhonda’s mother’s identity. This is most obviously presented in the film through her lack of a name. She is just Rhonda’s Mum, or one occasion she is referred to by Tania and the other bridesmaids as Mrs E. In either case she is not an individual, she is a mother or a wife, constructed in relation to her child or her husband. As the title wife ascribes a status to the married woman, so too does the title of mother - the obligations in the latter not only to a husband but also to any offspring. The lack of a husband in Mrs E’s life sees her focus her energies on her role as a mother, her daughter’s need for her, defining her existence. The implication being that her daughter’s wild and transgressive behaviour now restrained by her cancer and need for a wheelchair has given her mother’s life new meaning. She is again required to care for another and is hence firmly inserted into the narrative as Rhonda’s mother. For as a character she was not seen in the film nor was any reference made to her prior to Muriel’s abandonment of Rhonda at her wedding.
Despite her neglect of her friend, Muriel is presented in the closing sequence as a preferable option for Rhonda than the mother who is presented as so incapable. When Muriel enters the room and states her desire for Rhonda to leave Porpoise Spit with her, she is met with distrust from her former friend. "What makes you think I'd go anywhere with you?" Rhonda asks her. This exchange is followed by a reverse shot of Muriel that also includes Rhonda's Mum in the foreground. Muriel is dressed in black and is in sharp focus, while Rhonda's Mum, wearing a patterned sundress and apron, is slightly out of focus. The audience is then presented with a point-of-view shot of Rhonda surveying Tania and her friends. This is accompanied by a voice-over from her mother, "Muriel you can't come barging in here without warning and try to turn Rhonda against the people who love her. Against the people who were there for her when she needed them." Rhonda's Mum is aligned with Tania and both are placed in opposition to Muriel, with Rhonda left to decide between the two. Her rejection of her mother - "Mum, I love you, but you drive me crazy." - and subsequent departure in a taxi with Muriel leaves the woman standing on the roadside looking "lost, depressed and hopeless". The woman in midlife is no longer required and the younger woman, Muriel, takes on her role as caregiver. The traditional discourse of motherhood in this instance is given a particularly negative representation. It is better to be looked after by a friend than an incompetent and outdated old woman who just doesn't understand. Even though there is a brief flutter of recognition of her mother's plight as Rhonda gives a pathetic wave and says goodbye to her; the blame for the falling out is clearly left at the older woman's feet. There is no space given for the case that Mrs E's daughter failed to understand her.
Betty as the powerless mother

Despite Rhonda’s Mum’s negative portrayal, at least she is alive at the end of the narrative. This is unlike Betty Heslop, whose failings as both a wife and a mother can only be reprieved by her taking her own life. Just as Betty is seen to have no existence outside of her family, it can also be concluded that her role within her family has led to her demise. More so than Rhonda’s mother, Betty is constructed as the “stereotypical midlife woman” described by Richards (1997). She is overweight, unattractive, depressed (as the pills she overdoses on are evidence), hopeless and ineffectual. Even in death Betty receives little attention from her family. Although all seem dutifully glum following her suicide, none of Betty’s offspring, (except perhaps Joanie), display any great depth of emotion at her passing. The youngest son uses his mother’s last action of burning of the backyard to score points on his older sibling Perry. He explains his mother’s actions to Muriel, saying, “She did it because she got tired of asking Perry to mow it.” He implies that it is Perry’s fault that their mother is dead. Similarly, Muriel remains oblivious to any possible warning to her own life in Betty’s actions. While she appears to be suitably glum at her mother’s funeral, Muriel is not prompted into leaving the church and the process of acknowledging her own failings, (ultimately breaking up her false marriage), because of the example shown by her mother. Rather Muriel resolves to change her life in response to an example of her father’s blatant politicking and her own recognition of the corrupt lineage he has passed on to her. The possibility of reading Betty’s character as tragic and precautionary, providing her daughter with behaviour to reject rather than model is denied. Ultimately it is not Betty’s tragic existence that enlightens Muriel, even though that enlightenment is seen to take place at her funeral, it is her acknowledgement of her father’s negative influence over her that
prompts her to re-evaluate her life. As Muriel states first to her husband and then to her father, “I tell too many lies. It has to stop. One day I won’t know when I’m doing it anymore.” Bill Heslop is presented throughout the film as engaging in corrupt behaviour, including the bribing of police officers, conducting an affair with Deirdre Chambers and undertaking shonky business deals. It is the recognition of this corruption that compels Muriel to reject both her biological family and her fraudulent relationship with David. Muriel leaves to take on a caring role, coded feminine, in her relationship with Rhonda, however, she does not wish to step into her mother’s shoes and take on this role in relation to her own siblings. She tells Bill in their final scene together, “No, dad. It’s your turn to look after them now.”

Returning to the mother-daughter paradigm that was used to examine Betty and Muriel as signifiers of change in the construction of the role of the wife, the narrative construction of Betty in the role of mother can be read as devoid of any power to influence her daughters. It is Bill’s legacy that Muriel ultimately turns her back on, not Betty’s. By considering the generational positions of Betty and Muriel in relation to feminist discourses of motherhood, shifts in the interpretation of the role of the mother can be paralleled. The initial movement from first to second wave feminist interpretations of the maternal role is seen as one from reverence to refutation. “First wave feminism offers a stark contrast to second wave feminism in its unambiguous idealisation of the mother” (Spongberg, 1997, pp. 262-3). From this polarised positions emerged in which one was either for or against motherhood. Those idealising the role of the mother are seen to align with conservative voices calling for the protection of mothers and representations of the maternal (Lumby,
This interpretation of motherhood reinforces the relegation of the women to the domestic sphere in the primary, ‘natural’ role of caring for children.

In response to the adulation of motherhood, second wave feminism asserted the need for women to engage with the public sphere. The positions taken ranged from radical feminists who focussed on the oppression seen to be implicit in the roles of wife and mother, to socialist feminists who stressed the inequality of the relationship between domestic labour of motherhood and the paid workforce (Pringle, 1998, p. 99). In effect these approaches positioned the role of mother, of the woman in the domestic sphere, as secondary and inferior to those who engaged with the public sphere, a public sphere coded masculine. This stance is exemplified in the debate surrounding the ability for women with children to access paid employment, in particular debates surrounding state-sponsored childcare. For example, in relation to family support payments Eva Cox writes:

So it looks as though there is official support for the small group of militant defenders of women’s rights to be paid stay-home money out of the public purse. This is because there is still a broad public perception that children are better off when their mothers are not in jobs and that women should be at home, anyway, as it is good for the community. Research findings that counter this belief are often overlooked. (1995, p. 36)

An attempt to redress societal inequality along gender lines by advocating engagement with the public sphere, thus presenting the traditional role of mother as undesirable for women, has for many, merely acted to reinforce patriarchal hegemony. The continued privileging of the public over the domestic, the repeated representation of the mother within the family as a powerless victim and the construction of unrealistic hybrids such as the career mum have generated a general disaffection with feminist discourse. Horin (1982) makes a link between the anti-
motherhood stances made by some second wave feminists and the dominant patriarchal view of motherhood, claiming both concur to produce “a negative, desexualised, patriarchal view of mothers” (p. 16). This alignment of conservative and feminist discourses on motherhood can be seen to have maintained a traditional gender binary opposition. The role of the mother being constructed as either a natural given in need of defence within a patriarchal system or a role which, again due to its subjugation to patriarchy, requires women to walk away from it as empowerment is only seen to be accessible through the public sphere.

The impact of these competing yet strangely aligned discourses has led to a reinterpretation of the degree to which women conforming to the traditional role of mother can be understood in terms of their relationship to power. Wearing (1990) sums up the disempowerment implicit in both second wave feminist discourse and traditional patriarchal discourse, “I would go so far as to claim that such a victim mentality has become an ideology in itself with enormously repressive potential” (p. 36). The acknowledgment by Wearing (1990) of the repressive potential in the anti-motherhood stance of some feminist discourse, akin to that ascribed to patriarchy by the same feminist discourse, represents a shift towards a feminist reinterpretation of the role of the mother. Rather than operating within a simple binary opposition of pro- and anti-motherhood stances, the point of contention for feminist discourse can now be seen as one of agency and power that can be afforded to women within the domestic sphere. Applied to Betty Heslop the question can then be asked, is she completely powerless?
Reflexive feminism suggest that structural views of gender power relationships which present all men as opposed to all women in a total war of ‘them against us’, in which men are always the winners and women the losers are both politically inadequate and empirically inaccurate. (Wearing, 1990, p. 41)

Other than perhaps arguing that Betty is empowered in her ability to end her own suffering by choosing to take her own life. Her characterisation in Muriel’s Wedding is one that is one akin to the second wave feminist anti-motherhood of Wearing’s quote cited above. However it is read, the outcome for Betty is dire to put it mildly. The narrative of Muriel’s Wedding appears to maintain an alignment of gender with either the domestic or the public, empowering those operating within the latter. Betty is a victim due to her structural positioning within the family and the domestic sphere, and her only possible response to this is to remove herself completely by taking her own life. Muriel’s Wedding can therefore be read as presenting a construction of maternity aligned to second wave feminist interpretations of the mother as victim, and as such motherhood as a role that her daughter Muriel is better off without. As discussed, even the power to act as a precautionary function is denied Betty, with Muriel in her flight from the family responding to paternal influence rather than any maternal warning.

Throughout the film Betty is presented as functioning only to fulfil the needs of others, except perhaps in her final scenes, and does not act to fulfil any needs of her own. She possesses no power to act for herself or her express her own needs and even in death her one fatal act is covered up in order to gain sympathy for her corrupt husband to get him off fraud charges. Yes, as Deirdre states, “her life did amount to something in the end”. The only fragment of an inner life the character of Betty possesses is limited to the scrapbook of images she leaves behind for two of her
daughters, Joanie and Muriel. The scrapbook contains photographs and press clippings of her daughter Muriel’s wedding as well as faded family photos. These collected images in a scrapbook operate to reaffirm Betty’s commitment to the traditional discourse of the family, despite this discourse being presented in the narrative as the reason for her rather pitiful existence. In compiling a nostalgic record of her family life, Betty is not even given an awareness of the restrictive role that her positioning within the family has been. Again she is disempowered and victimised.

**Joanie, following in her mother’s footsteps**

The characterisation of Betty’s daughter Joanie provides the film’s final inditement of the roles available to the female characters. She is the next in line so it seems to inherit her mother’s legacy, after Muriel’s ‘enlightenment’ and departure from the family. Joanie, one presumes in her early twenties, is characterised as Richard’s (1997) midlife woman way before her time. She is overweight, unattractive and presented as a simpleton who lazes around smoking cigarettes and spying on her sister. His catchcry, “You’re terrible Muriel” highlights everything that she is not. Joanie is also the recipient of Betty’s family album and she is the one who informs Muriel, and the audience, that Betty’s death was not by natural causes. Joanie is also presented as the least likely to succeed in life outside of her role within the family. Unlike Muriel she defers to Bill and in her final scenes, still wearing his blurred image across her chest, she offers to open a beer for him.
Muriel’s rejection of the roles of wife and mother

Of the role and representation of the mother in Hollywood features during the period in which *Muriel’s Wedding* was produced, Kaplan (1992) states:

> A summary glance at popular materials from 1970 to 1990 reveals a plethora of heterogeneous and contradictory motherhood discourses . . . . Something that all the discourses have in common is anxiety . . . . But the fact that women should only bear and nurture children was simply a given prior to our own period . . . . It is this ‘given’ that recent developments have irrevocably called into question. (pp. 181-182)

The character of Muriel in rejecting the roles available to her within the family, prescribed by gender (the wife and the mother), is calling into question the assumed naturalness of those roles. Muriel’s narrative progression acts to highlight the anxiety Kaplan refers to above. She negotiates the role of bride and wife to ultimately dismiss the two of them, and then when presented with the role of natural caregiver to her siblings after her mother’s death, (a pseudo-maternal role), she turns her back on this too. However by eliminating the rigid confines of these gendered roles, Muriel does not present the audience with any clearly defined alternatives. She is not, as in the work of second wave feminist media analysts (Artel & Wengraf, 1990) presenting the audience with a “positive image” for women to model. She is instead merely dismissing the traditional positions that have been offered to her. In this sense *Muriel’s Wedding* can be seen as challenging perceived notions of gender exclusivity in roles within the family. Instead of promoting the “images of sexual women, who are mothers, and who, in addition, have fulfilling careers” that Kaplan (1992) claims are required to redress the patriarchal representation of motherhood (p. 183), Muriel merely offers the audience a flight from the family. Her flight from the family could be read as aligned with feminist claims against the family due to its role in reaffirming gender inequality - an inequality that is seen only to be redressed by the rejection or reformulation of the institution of the family. However I would
argue, that by turning her back on the institution of family the character of Muriel is not necessarily challenging the way in which gender determines the availability of access to positions within the family; rather she is making visible the role that gender plays in the division of roles within that institution. For Muriel’s actions, by rejecting the traditional nuclear family, do not really challenge the traditional family and she does not present any alternative to the roles of wife and mother, she merely rejects them as the traditional discourse available to women. So where does that leave Muriel? What then are the possibilities that the character of Muriel offers in terms of the discourses of gender, marriage and the family?

Andy Medhurst argues that *Muriel’s Wedding* is “one of the great lesbian love stories in film history” (2002, p.32). Such a reading of the film tends to support the position that Muriel represents a rejection of the discourses of marriage and the family as much for their heterosexual exclusivity as for the restrictive gender roles they impose. Medhurst’s claim that *Muriel’s Wedding* is a lesbian love story is based on what he cites as evidence available in the film to “creatively skewed eyes”. In particular, he cites the “sizzling eye contact” made between Rhonda and Muriel - they “lock eyes and hardly relinquish that eye contact for the rest of the film” (p. 32). An examination of the scene in which Muriel and Rhonda are first reunited appears to support Medhurst’s reading of the film. Rhonda is seated behind Muriel at the bar, both characters are wearing dark sunglasses despite the fact it is evening. The sunglasses as symbolic of altered vision or perhaps of obscured vision, are slowly removed as the pair engages in a conversation. Rhonda on recognising Muriel Heslop, pulls her glasses down her nose and peers closely at her. Muriel, initially denying her identity, responds to Rhonda’s second inquiry about her identity and
confirms that she is indeed whom Rhonda thinks she is. Muriel’s denial of identity leads Rhonda to ask if she is married – why else would she deny responding to the name Muriel Heslop? The traditional discourse of marriage and the adoption of the husband’s surname is one reason why Rhonda asks of Muriel’s marital status. Medhurst (2002) however sees Rhonda’s question - “Are you married?” - as more than a response to Muriel’s denial of her name. He reads the question as one of availability, a question that is answered in a following scene when Rhonda declares to Tania, “I’m not alone. I’m with Muriel.” The construction of Rhonda and Muriel as a couple is then asserted in their performance of Abba’s *Waterloo* at the resort talent night, “It’s the line ‘knowing my fate is to be with you’ which accompanies their sauntering swagger up stage, arms around each other” (Medhurst, 2002, pp. 32-32).

Medhurst’s reading of Muriel and Rhonda as a lesbian couple is in opposition to the dysfunctional heterosexual relationships of other characters in the narrative. In particular the marital relationship of Tania and Chook. As Muriel and Rhonda receive applause for their rendition of *Waterloo*, Tania launches into another attack on her errant bridesmaid Nicole, whom she now knows slept with her husband. Medhurst sums up the scene as one “where heterosexuality leads only to trauma while women who stick with women get to celebrate on stage and win prizes” (2002, p. 33). The privileging of Muriel and Rhonda as a lesbian couple in this scene is further supported by an examination of the couples that are formed at the conclusion of the narrative. While acknowledging possible disquiet with such a reading, Medhurst believes that the ending of the film, where Muriel and Rhonda depart Porpoise Spit to embark upon a life together, supports his view that a lesbian couple
is formed and importantly privileged by the narrative. “How could you possibly see it otherwise?” he claims (2002, p. 33). The relationship between Muriel and Rhonda is viewed in opposition to the heterosexual dysfunction represented by Tania, her husband and her friends. Prior to Muriel’s intrusion upon afternoon tea at Rhonda’s family home, Tania has informed the gathered group that she and Chook are giving marriage another try. To Tania her status as a married woman has been reinstated. However as Muriel and Rhonda leave together, Tania is filmed in an unflattering close-up chasing after their taxi, shrieking, “I’m beautiful. I’m a bride.” Akin to their scene of triumph in the talent contest on Hibiscus Island, the coupling of Muriel and Rhonda is privileged over that of Tania. Departing in the taxi Muriel and Rhonda exchange looks and, Medhurst claims, fall just short of declaring love for each other (2002, p. 33).

The scene of Muriel and Rhonda farewelling Porpoise Spit from the back of a taxi is reminiscent of the final scenes in *Thelma and Louise* (1991), for the way in which a female couple is created, and the interpretation of that couple as lesbian (Griggers, 1993, Kabir, 1998). The departure point for both is the rejection of socially prescribed gender roles, the roles of bride, wife and mother. In the case of *Thelma and Louise* (1991) the transgression of prescribed gender roles is seen to take them beyond the accepted norms to “the familiar death sentence demanded of characters when the subversive narrative generating them threatens to go too far” (Griggers, 1993, p. 133). Where Thelma and Louise go too far according to Griggers is with their final kiss. This read in conjunction with the film’s denial of a death scene (instead holding the car careering over the cliff in a freeze frame), Griggers claims authorises her reading of the film as a lesbian love story (1993, p. 134).
Muriel and Rhonda don't kiss. They do look longingly at each other and affirm their friendship, but they don’t kiss and they don’t die. However the ending that is offered to Muriel and Rhonda remains open-ended and allows for multiple interpretations. Medhurst, for example, constructs a scene after Muriel and Rhonda’s farewell to Porpoise Spit in which they return to Sydney as a couple. “[R]ealising at last that all heterosexuality has ever brought them is disappointment, distress or a consolation sex bout, and that the most sustaining relationship they’ll ever have is with each other (2002, p. 34). By stating that an equally plausible scene following the ending that is presented in the narrative could see Muriel and Rhonda continuing their man-hunting in Sydney, Medhurst acknowledges that his reading of the film is oppositional, one that, as he states, is available for creatively skewed eyes. Griggers likewise describes her reading of the ending of *Thelma and Louise* as “aberrant” (1993, p. 134).

I would suggest that rather than speculating on the possible merit of reading *Muriel’s Wedding* as a lesbian love story, (which Medhurst’s analysis of the film clearly provides), a more useful platform for the analysis of the way in which the discourses of marriage and the family are represented in the film is to examine how Muriel and Rhonda are seen to represent a privileged femininity. A reading of Muriel and Rhonda as a lesbian couple would imply a rejection of the traditional discourses of marriage and family rather than allowing for the possibility of a renegotiation of the gender roles within those discourses. Like Thelma and Louise are they merely enacting a flight from these traditional institutions and prescribed gender roles? Although their narrative resolution is not as final as Thelma and Louise’s, they are
still operating on a totalising binary that simply rejects the traditional patriarchal structures associated with marriage and the family as oppressive and characters operating within them as somehow victimised, like Betty Heslop.

This is does not, however, discredit the possibility of reading the film in terms of a binary opposition constructed between homosexuality and heterosexuality, with the narrative providing a transgressive privileging of the former. It is however working with the text as it stands rather than eliciting possible conclusions from it as Medhurst does. Instead of seeing Muriel and Rhonda as a lesbian couple in opposition to Tania and Chook and the other dysfunctional heterosexual pairings within the narrative, I would view Muriel and Rhonda as representations of a femininity that is privileged over the female participants in those heterosexual couplings. To this I would bring Griggers’s (1993) notion of the butch-femme, in which she claims the femininity enacted by Thelma and Louise is a response to the patriarchal context in which they find themselves, “the traps of the dependent housewife, the bad marriage, the innocent victim, and the single-working woman who’s going it alone and not getting enough” (p. 140). The farewelling of Porpoise Spit that Muriel and Rhonda undertake, is not as final a rejection of such roles as the plummeting of Thelma and Louise over a cliff face; it indicates that the ‘new’ femininity they represent is capable of operating within existing patriarchal structures. Muriel and Rhonda do not transgress gender norms to the extent that Thelma and Louise do. This could be the result of the pulling back from a declaration of desire for each other, or perhaps they embody a femininity that is more easily incorporated into dominant social discourses. The “sombre message” of the ending of Thelma and Louise that “we must learn from it to avoid the snares of a
symbolic order that would like to see women entrapped and disempowered” (Kabir, 1998, p. 211), is not repeated in *Muriel’s Wedding*. The cheerful goodbyes Muriel and Rhonda dispatch to their former home town provide the film with an uplifting ending, promising that these two will in fact live happily ever after.

The reasons why these characters can be incorporated back into the dominant patriarchal discourse, would I suggest, relate to the way in which they can be read in relation to the Australian social context in which they are presented. It is the adoption of characteristics, coded as masculine in the Australian national context, that enables the femininity enacted by Muriel and Rhonda to be privileged. As Muriel undresses the conventions of the bride and the performance of the wedding, she and Rhonda also draw attention to the constructedness of gendered performance. It is this aspect of the discussion of *Thelma and Louise* that appears as most useful in relation to *Muriel’s Wedding*. That “[t]he film’s depiction of women adopting ‘masculine’ behaviours exposes the ‘performativity’ of gender, but it also reinforces masculinity as agency and aggression” (Kabir, 1998, p. 227). How then do Muriel and Rhonda negotiate gender roles, and how are the male character in *Muriel’s Wedding* represented?
CHAPTER THREE: THE MEN

What about the men? The wedding ceremony, the institution of marriage and the formation of the family that it implies, constructs roles for men as it does for women - the bride/wife/mother are partnered with the groom/husband/father. These pairings point to the simplicity of the gendered binary that denies formulations outside of a male/female coupling. However, while acknowledging that this analysis can itself be seen to be reinforcing a heterosexual norm, currently there is very little opportunity to examine the way in which the public discourse of marriage ceremonies and its popular culture manifestations construct relations within same sex couples, other than as an alienating device to reinforce the heterosexual norm.

This chapter will examine the multiple representations of masculinity in *Muriel's Wedding* in the roles of the groom, husband and father. These will be examined in opposition to the representations of femininity (the bride, wife and mother) in order to ascertain how power is distributed and if these representations challenge or reinforce traditional notions of patriarchy. The representations of masculinity will also be analysed for the way in which they are organised into a hierarchy, privileging some forms and devaluing others. This will be done in relation to the notion of an Australian national identity, and discussed with regard to the tradition of gender representation in Australian cinema.

"Masculinity, which once seemed simple to understand, has been politicised by feminism" (Moore, 1998, p.1). The politicisation of masculinity has resulted in the problematising of the representation of men in popular culture where once such
images were left unquestioned, and thus normalised and naturalised. In the 1980s and 1990s feminist analysis of cinema, such as Clover (1992), Williams (1989) and Modleski (1988), have “broken up the apparent surface coherence of patriarchy, and [each] has explored in greater depth the contradictions of masculinity” (Horrocks, 1995, p. 9). In an Australian context, the prevailing representations of masculinity prior to the period under examination include the popular national icons/fictions (Turner, 1986) of the bushman, the ocker, the mate, the battler, and the Anzac. A shift away from this cast of stock Australian male roles, as witnessed in the films *The Man from Snowy River* (1982), *Gallipoli* (1981), *Breaker Morant* (1980) and *Sunday Too Far Away* (1975), mirrored the emergent interest in questioning masculinity as a constructed social category and a changing conception of what it is to be Australian. Lucas (1998) writing on the changes in the representation of masculinity in Australian cinema writes:

> Shifting notions about Australia’s relationship with its colonial forebears, about what might constitute an emergent nationalist aesthetic, about definitions of ethnicity and difference, particularly in relation to indigenous Australians, and most crucially, an increasing awareness of the culturally forged nature of gender and its myriad representations – all inevitably influence the ways in which Australian males and the category of masculinity are represented within the visual narratives of the cinema. (p. 138)

The relationship between representation, social change and the rethinking of the naturalness and normalness of masculinity is debatable and becomes somewhat of a chicken and egg problem, however what is of importance is the fact that the three are intricately entwined. The question is not so much why these changes have arisen, but rather, how these ‘new’ concepts of masculinity are represented and what they say about Australian men/masculinity, and national identity – “the problematising of the previously immutable categories of ‘Australian’ and the ‘masculine” (Lucas,
Lucas sees the outcomes of this problematising of Australian masculinity as twofold, reinforcing traditional ideals of masculinity and allowing space for challenges to those dominant representations. I will argue that the construction of the men in *Muriel's Wedding* acts in both of these ways yet ultimately reinforces masculinity in a position of privilege. As with the construction of women in the film, the men will be examined as representations of social categories constructed through the discourse of marriage in the figures of the groom, the husband and the father. These categories act to set up a generational change between the young men, Chook, David and Bryce, and the older Bill Heslop, in much the same way as Muriel’s experiences could be contrasted to those of her mother. There is also a shift in what it means to be masculine occurring in the narrative progression of the character of Bill Heslop. He transforms from an avowedly ‘old’ masculinity to a ‘new’ form, which incorporates the role of parental carer vacated by his wife.

**The grooms: princes Charming and Not-so-Charming**

The wedding fantasy in *Muriel's Wedding* belongs to Muriel, Tania and her group of friends. Chook and David van Arkle are not presented as valuing their roles as grooms in the way that Muriel and Tania deify the role of bride. The actions of the two grooms devalue both that desire for marriage, (a wedding anyway), and the status that it is perceived to ascribe to the young women. For example, Chook is caught downstairs with one of the bridesmaids during his own wedding reception and David clearly states his only motivation to marry Muriel, (or anyone for that matter), is to obtain a useful passport to further his swimming career. Their lack of respect for the institution of marriage (on Chook’s part by engaging in adultery before even
reaching the marital bed; in using the union for individual gain on David’s) is paralleled in the disregard they both have for the wedding ceremony. Accepting that Muriel is complicit with David in the falsehood of their marriage, her desire is for the display of the wedding ceremony and the status she sees ascribed to the role of the bride and not the institution of marriage. David’s lack of interest in the wedding ceremony and the role of the groom therefore devalues that desire and labels it as feminine. David is dismissive of the pomp and ceremony Muriel has produced for their nuptials saying to his coach and best man, “You told me it would be a quick civil ceremony”. His remark is greeted with the reassurance that it will all go down well with the press and help validate the counterfeit union, “It’s good she wanted a church wedding, it’s romantic, looks like you mean it”. In Chook’s case the feminisation of the ceremony is effected through mise en scene with an abundance of frothy pink decorations and an enormous photographic image of his bride, Tania. Even Chook’s groomsmen are styled to fit in, bestowed with pink bowties and cummerbunds.

Through their disregard for the importance placed upon the wedding ceremony by their brides-to-be Chook and David are, in effect, disavowing the status that Muriel and Tania ascribe to the role of bride, and that which the women in turn ascribe to themselves. Not withstanding the assertion by Driscoll (1998) that the young women in the film are allowed the space to be elevated to a position of reverence by the traditions of the wedding ceremony as a pay-off for future subservience, the pay-off for Muriel and Tania appears slight. For whom is the image of the bride seen as a position of privilege? Surely not the recalcitrant grooms? Their peers, their female friends, but not their male counterparts indulge the status ascribed by the young
women to the ceremony, and bridal ideal. For example, it is Tania and fellow bridesmaids who cry “You’re beautiful Muriel”, and it is for them that the display was intended as Muriel later relates to Rhonda, “I showed them. I showed them I’m as good as they are.” Similarly, appreciation of the floral decorations and elaborate bridal attire are hardly comments to be heard from the male guests in attendance at the wedding ceremonies, rather, as in the case of Bill Heslop’s red-nosed colleague eying up Muriel’s leopard-skin dress, the only statements heard tend to be of a salacious nature. If, as claimed by Baber and Allen (1992), love can be read as feminised – the wedding ceremony here presented as the height of romantic display – there is really little space to assert feminine privilege over an arena that is already devalued as feminine.

Examining studies of gendered approaches to marriage carried out at the University of Tasmania in June 1993, Briggs (1994) concludes that a majority of young women tend to prioritise love and marriage as life goals whereas young men place these much further down their list of expectations. In popular film, for example, it is overwhelmingly the female character concerned with matters marital, it is also not likely that ‘Muriel’s Brother’s Wedding’ or a film of such ilk will be appearing on cinema screens in the near future. It is not surprising then that in a feminine narrative, with a female protagonist Muriel’s Wedding appears to exclude men from its primary concern with marriage and weddings; or rather they exclude themselves. This ‘anti-romanticism’ of the male characters, wherein they act to devalue the status of the wedding – the thematic concern of the film –represents Australian masculinity as unromantic.
However, whether they like it or not the male characters, David and Chook, are constructed in relation to traditional social norms, into the role of groom. Even though both grooms are seen to reject and devalue this construction, their characterisation can be seen to portray more than just an unromantic masculinity. The multiple permutations of masculinity that the film allows are constructed within a hierarchy of privilege; representations that are sanctioned and those that are rejected:

[Like feminine identities they are multiple, complex, quite unstable constructions, even within one culture or one time. Masculine identities certainly relate to men’s dominant social power and to an evolved social system which privileges men over women. (Moore, 1998, p. 8)]

By dispelling the ‘monolithic’ mantle, the masculinities represented in *Muriel’s Wedding* appear as contradictory, flawed and negative while at the same time determinedly hanging on to a position of power.

**Chook: Prince Not-so-Charming**

Perhaps the most unflattering representation of masculinity is witnessed in the character of Chook, Tania’s errant groom and all-round nasty piece of work. He is accused of infidelity, rape and violence. I will argue that Chook is a representation of ‘protest masculinity’ (Butterss, 1998, p. 42). His role in the film’s narrative is as a foil representing the dark side of a ‘Prince Charming’ mythology in which a young woman is rescued into the arms of a dashing, handsome and good prince to whom she ultimately weds and lives happily ever after.

“I’m already taken love.” Chook shouts at Muriel, the would-be-bride clutching the wedding bouquet and the promise that she will be next. His dialogue acts to affirm the position he holds, as groom, as desirable to the young woman. At the same time,
the sarcastic tone and thrusting forward of his ring finger as if making an offensive
gesture deflects that desire, instead mocking it. He, and the pack of young men that
surround him, are off-limits to the likes of Muriel and, as such, they are all the more
desirable. The point being that although feminine desire, such as Muriel’s, reinforces
the position of groom, the groom himself, and the would-be-grooms that accompany
him, do not seem to share that reverence for the role and therefore act to negate the
value of that feminine desire.

From the outset Chook is positioned outside of the wedding discourse and in
opposition to the ‘feminine’ traits it is seen to connote. Similarly, the construction of
his character presents him as recognisably Australian – if nothing else the name
‘Chook’ is one that places the character within a social context coded as Australian.
In a tradition of representation of Australian masculinity Chook’s character is akin to
that of the young ‘surfie’, such as those in the early 1980s film Puberty Blues (1979).
I acknowledge that this is somewhat of a presumption, for after Chook’s first
appearance at his wedding the character is not seen on screen for the rest of the film,
although we are privy to some of his actions through his wife, Tania. Nevertheless,
even in the brief screen time he occupies there are signs that position Chook as a
‘surfie’. These include his blonde ‘sun-bleached’ curls, his tan and the leather
‘ethnic’ neckpiece he wears. His open-necked shirt in contrast to his groomsmen’s
pink bow ties implies a sense of rebellion and relaxed casualness associated with this
representation and the setting of the film in a coastal tourist town complete with local
nightclub, Breakers, also acts to reinforce this construction.
Puberty Blues is referred to by O'Regan (1989) as an “ocker production” (p. 77), a kind of Australian film in which “uncomplimentary images did not portray Australia or Australians in a good light. Its insistence on signs of disunity and difference, rather than unity and accord, of vulgarity and obtuseness rather than sensitivity and sophistication” (O'Regan, 1989, p. 96). It is a filmmaking tradition that involves “holding figures up to be surveyed and identified, which places them at a distance, and virtually calls upon the audience to play anthropologist to their own culture” (Morris in, O'Regan, 1989, p. 81). So what does the negative construction of the character of Chook divulge about Australian culture, and specifically Australian masculinity in relation to the discourses of weddings and marriage? I will argue that what is interesting about the character of Chook is the rationale presented in the narrative for his anti-social behaviour, which is best examined in the light of more recent filmic constructions of Australian masculinity.

In contrast to the national icon of the ‘surf lifesaver’ (Saunders, 1998) the image of the young ‘surfie’ has been presented in an unflattering light in the Australian media. The ‘surfie’ is often constructed by populist current affairs programmes as a lazy, self-interested, dole-bludger who wastes his life and taxpayers’ money, or associated with drugs and antisocial behaviour in films, such as Puberty Blues and Blackrock (1997). The image, however, is polysemic; with the addition of the terms ‘professional’ or ‘recreational’ the negative connotations of ‘surfie’ are dispelled and the image is transformed to one of a respectable member of society, the connotations of man contesting the forces of nature becoming a heroic one. Of interest for this discussion of the character Chook, is the way in which the identity ‘surfie’ is one that is constructed as outside of mainstream society – if not a rebel, a representative of
dangerous or negative masculinity. In his examination of the representation of masculinity in the films Romper Stomper (1992), Idiot Box (1996), Blackrock and The Boys (1999) Philip Butterss refers to the male characters as representing marginalised masculinity. Masculinity, he claims, that is marginalised through class position. Young, often unemployed and possessing limited prospects these characters are seen to respond to their positioning by enacting a kind of hyper-masculinity Butterss refers to as protest masculinity, “which involves exerting physical force over those with less power than themselves – women, gays, and ethnic minorities” (1998, p. 40). “Being a man is pretty much all they’ve got” (Butterss, 1998, p. 40). Chook’s reported behaviour, his attitude towards his first affair with Rose Biggs as meaningless, his indiscretion at his own wedding and later reports of violence and the rape of a Japanese tourist that lands him in a correctional centre, (an act Tania claims as false due to the fact: “Chook hates the Japanese”), combine to position him as an example of this ‘protest masculinity’.

As an articulation of the young male marginalisation, protest masculinity is rationalised in the films examined by Butterss as resulting from the breakdown of the nuclear family in which absent and “monstrous” fathers bear the brunt of the blame, or on the errant individual’s own psychosis (1998, pp. 42-3). Although Muriel’s Wedding provides limited access to the motivations and background of Chook, it does provide one possible reason for his behaviour, namely Tania. Tania and Chook are two of a kind. If he is the uncharming prince, she is a more-wicked stepsister. Rhonda says of the couple: “Oh, I remember them. What a pair of arseholes, they deserve each other.” The two are visually constructed to look the same - blonde curls, tanned skin and a slim build - and both are placed in a position of leadership.
over their respective groups of friends. In effect they appear as a parody of the idea of the popular couple, the beautiful people. On the one hand they operate within a position of privilege and power over their friends, whilst on the other, the camera presents them as parodies, overblown and offensive - Tania in her exaggerated facial contortions and screeching speech and Chook in his ridiculous 'playboy' antics with the bridesmaid; the overly-obvious sly looks shared by the two and the setting of their liaison in the laundry, halfway through which Chook must stop to slam shut the open door. Although both characters are presented in a negative light, Tania's role in Chook's life is presented as a motivating factor for his wayward behaviour. In response to Chook's statement, "Sorry love I'm taken" there is a cutaway to a close-up of Tania's face caught mid-scream in a very unflattering portrait. Yes he has been taken and it is by a monster. Similarly, there is very little sympathy shown for Tania later in the narrative when Chook's indiscretion with Rose Biggs is brought to light. Her dramatic sobbing and self-interest present her as deserving of such an indiscretion, as Tania herself states at the film's conclusion, "Well, I sucked Rose Biggs's husband's cock and realised we can all make mistakes".

The abolition of Chook from onscreen to a character in absentia whose actions are reported through his spouse devalues him as a character – he becomes spoken about, incapable of speaking for himself. Tania has, in effect, disempowered Chook. Through his marriage Chook has lost the power to speak for himself, his wife emasculates him, the result of which is, that like the characters examined by Butterss, Chook's behaviour becomes more and more aggressive, culminating in the report of his rape of a Japanese tourist and subsequent incarceration. Unlike the young men in Romper Stomper, Idiot Box, Blackrock and The Boys the 'love of a good woman' is
not seen as a solution to the violent excesses of protest masculinity (Butterss, 1998), rather in *Muriel’s Wedding*, the emasculation of Chook by his wife is presented as a reason for that protest.

The character of Chook can be aligned with that of Bill Heslop in the way in which the narrative positions them as adulterers. However, whereas Bill is given a kind of redemption at the film’s conclusion, by taking on the mantle of primary caregiver to his children, Chook is not given such as easy way out, he is seen to be on his way to gaol. The narrative placement of Bill and Chook on a generational timeline indicates shifts in the construction of Australian masculinity. Bill, as an outmoded ‘ocker’ masculinity that is corrupt, unfaithful and uncaring towards his family hands the baton to Chook. Both are presented as negative characters, in Chook’s case typified as leading to physical violence. So why is the character Bill let off the hook while the character of Chook is completely rejected? What is it that makes Chook so reprehensible? The obvious answer here is the physical and sexual violence that he is reported to have enacted against the Japanese tourist. Another significant factor is the relationship he has with his wife. Unlike Bill who exerts control over Betty, his word is her command so to speak and she in return is almost powerless except in her ability to end her own life, Chook is the one rendered powerless by his spouse. Tania speaks for him and is often shown to dismiss his impact on her life – choosing to honeymoon with her friends instead of him. With a generational shift, so too has come a shift in power between the partners within the marriage, and interestingly, it is the ‘traditional’ older masculinity of Bill that is privileged in this instance. The disempowered Chook, meanwhile, is vilified and unceremoniously discarded by the narrative. In addition to the labels of ‘marginalised’ and ‘protest’ masculinity in
regard to Chook one could also include ‘invalid’. His representation and actions are safely negated and thus distanced from the Australian masculine norm - a position that he occupies as a result of his marriage and the role that his wife plays in disempowering him.

If the generational shift between Betty and Tania is paralleled with that of Bill and Chook this transfer of power can again be traced. Tania for all her unflattering portrayal is in control of not only her desire for marriage, but also her husband’s very existence in the narrative. The fact that her portrayal is so negative can be explained by reactionary attitudes to social changes brought on by feminism. In a British context this backlash or protest masculinity has been witnessed in the phenomenon of the ‘lad’:

The new lad was a throwback to a time when men had been able to behave badly and not worry about censure. Laddism was a reaction to both the 1980s men’s style press and a reaction to the growing assertiveness of women. (Beynon, 2002, p. 111)

As a representation in popular culture, particularly men’s magazines such as Loaded and television programmes such a *Men Behaving Badly*, and with Australian consumers exposed to British media products, the ‘lad’ as aggressive backlash to feminist gains is a transferable image to the Australian media culture. But Tania is not a career woman; her desires are coded as domestic, and she is active in controlling them, unlike Betty who became their victim. Tania, in her ability to direct and control her desire, is also aligned with Deirdre Chambers who is the workingwoman. The former controls the progression of Chook through the narrative, the latter blamed for the actions of Bill Heslop and labelled callous in her rejection of the, unattractive yet still nuclear, family she is seen to have disrupted. Together Tania and Deirdre can be read as women hazardous to men. They are the
empowered, controlling women challenging men, the catch-cry of much of the men's movement as summed up on the back cover of one of the many 1990s publications on Australian masculinity - "In the wake of the feminist revolution, Australian men find themselves floundering in a sea of doubt" (Colling, 1992). These 'floundering' men in *Muriel's Wedding* are constructed as exaggerated parodies with their flaws writ large and there is no attempt to evoke sympathy for their position, except for one character, Bill Heslop, who is given a chance for redemption.

Although invested with a modicum of power over the men in their lives, and over their own desires, the characterisation of both Tania and Deirdre is negative; they too are comic parodies presented without sympathy. By contrast the representation of Betty as one inviting sympathy in her final moments can be read as privileged by the narrative. Somewhat pessimistically, it can therefore be extrapolated that the empowerment of the female characters is not able to alter the inequalities within the marriage and the family, it is dependent upon the male participant to implement change. In this narrative, Bill Heslop has the power to make changes. Feminine agency is negated, instead a traditional masculinity is re-established in the form of the character of Bill Heslop who has been enlightened to the needs of the domestic. Bill's masculinity is that of a traditional Australian representation, as will be discussed later, and he as a result, has the ability to transform. Chook, on the other hand, is a masculinity that has evolved from a changed social environment, one in which a position in the public sphere, in the workplace, is less certain, and one in which women are not the docile victims, (as characterised by Betty), but rather perceived as controlling and demanding, (as characterised by Tania). If in the discussion of this binary opposition the conclusion can be made that on generational
lines the ‘old’ traditional masculinity of Bill is privileged over that of Chook, how are the other male characters positioned in relation to the discourse of marriage? Does the film represent a nostalgic and reactionary vision of the past that although requiring a few modifications, is ultimately redeemable? Or does the narrative construct alternatives to that traditional masculinity?

**David: Prince Charming**

David van Arkle is Muriel’s Prince Charming, yet he does not enter the narrative in the traditional fairy tale fashion and he and Muriel do not conclude the film with the lifelong promise of living happily ever after, at least not together. The role David plays in the narrative is as a conduit for feminine desire of the idealised romantic partner, a Prince Charming as conceived by Muriel. His characterisation is not, however, played straight; David does not conform to the ‘ideal’ he is structured to represent, and in doing so he acts to devalue his position as an object of desire and correspondingly the feminine desire that constructs him as such.

As discussed Chook as object of desire, a groom, deflects that desire through the distance placed between himself and the wedding ceremony, David, on the other hand, is initially presented as an object of visual pleasure. He is first filmed swimming laps as Muriel and his coach/matchmaker Ken introduce themselves. David is then seen emerging from the pool in lingering full shot accompanied by the ‘romantic’ bells and chimes version of *Dancing Queen*. The shot of the nearly naked, wet David is then cut to a side-on shot of a stunned Muriel looking towards him as if all her prayers have been answered. Muriel’s desire for the possible groom she sees before her to complete her wedding fantasy is reinforced by the camera’s
focus on Muriel watching David; she is filmed seated as he extends his hand in greeting, only his hand is seen as Muriel looks up at him, a look of awe on her face. David here is not at all important, it is his symbolic role as possible groom and object of Muriel’s desire that is foregrounded, his ability to conform to the wedding fantasy she has constructed for herself. Throughout the sequence in which Ken explains David’s need for a bride the camera moves from Muriel’s to David’s perspective, each kept in the corner of the frame; the effect is one of the audience watching the two characters looking at each other, sizing each other up. Muriel maintains a dumbstruck look of awe throughout the proceedings whilst David’s face is seen to become more and more concerned as she makes faces at him, poking out her tongue, and asks incredibly stupid questions – “Are you black?” The concern on David’s face culminates in his requests for the “black haired one”, “the blonde” to be reconsidered. During these exchanges between David and his coach the camera moves to exclude Muriel from the frame, despite her presence in the scene she remains oblivious to David’s lack of desire for her - David’s desire, or lack of, is not important, only his ability to fulfil Muriel’s construction of him in the role of groom. This lack of concern is also displayed in Muriel’s disinterest in the money offered by Ken for her part in the wedding scam.

After his initial introduction as an object of desire, the character of David is next seen standing at the altar. He is presented as a very uncomfortable groom, a trickle of sweat running down his face, which is fixed with a look of disgust. In fact for most of his appearance in the wedding scenes David’s face is set in a similar look, curled lip and blank stare. He needs to be prompted into action during the ceremony to deliver his lines and as he walks back up the aisle as a newlywed he is seen to roll
his eyes in despair. As Prince Charming, David certainly is not visually constructed to look, or take on, the part. By disallowing his sexual objectification through his looks of contempt, David is acknowledging the possibility of such a gaze and refuting it.

The disgust he bears on his face is put into words as he and Muriel return from the ceremony to his Sydney flat, “Who marries someone they don’t know?” he questions her. Still with confetti in his hair, the contradiction of this remark is met by Muriel’s reply, “You did”. “I want to win. All my life I’ve wanted to win”, is David’s response to her accusation, his involvement in the wedding justified by his higher purpose, to win an Olympic gold medal. Muriel’s reaction, “Me too”, again demonstrating the importance that marriage, the wedding and the role of bride have been in Muriel’s conception of herself and her capacity to succeed in the world. David’s complicity in the corruption that is his marriage to Muriel is justified, as he exits the church his coach responds for him to the journalist’s question “How do you feel?” Holding the newlywed’s hand he states, “The next gold you’ll see on this hand will be a gold medal for the 1500 metres.” However, while David displays no respect for his role as the groom this does not affect the perception of others. Muriel and the bridesmaids rush to mob him following the exchanging of vows, an act which works to position the desire of Muriel for the institution of the groom as more contemptible than his manipulation of the system for sporting glory.

Despite his tendency to be caught in unflattering grimaces, David van Arkle’s construction as a groom is not nearly as reprehensible as Chook’s. Unlike Chook, David is not completely discarded in the narrative, and akin to Bill Heslop, he is
somewhat redeemed through his relationship with Muriel at the conclusion of the film – the two come to confess a common ‘liking’ of each other and friendship. This transformation can be seen by comparing the way in which Muriel and David are filmed during their first and last encounters. In a hotel room scene following Betty’s funeral Muriel is seated on the bed, side-on to the camera, looking up towards David who is just out of shot as she did at their first meeting. This time, however, rather than remaining the absent object of her adoring gaze, David moves down to meet her at eye-level, holds her hands and then rests his head against hers, throughout which the music from the wedding, Ave Maria, plays. The relationship established is one more equal than in the earlier scene, thus humanising David – he is allowed dialogue and the disgruntled snarl is replaced by a genuine look of concern – he is no longer just the Prince Charming groom Muriel required in order to enact her wedding fantasy now that that fantasy has been discredited and discarded. Instead of the false marital relationship, David and Muriel are now presented in a valid ‘friendship’. Their rejection of the wedding discourse is presented with the same soundtrack of romantic music used for the church wedding. This new relationship supplants the traditional marriage yet it is still ascribed a similar status - the reverential role of bride dispelled for Muriel and the uncomfortable burden of the role of groom taken from David. The two are now able to consummate that ‘friendship’ with a sexual encounter. The wedding, the marriage coded as feminine disregarded from the outset by David is here seen to have entrapped and constrained both bride and groom, the rejection of the institution leaving the way open for fulfilment, or does it?
Bryce as rejected SNAG

Initially Bryce is presented in the narrative as Muriel’s legitimate choice of partner. As a couple they are witnessed going through courtship rituals that Muriel’s partnership with David is seen to lack. Awkward scenes of Bryce attempting to chat up Muriel at work in the video store, going on a date and then returning to Muriel and Rhonda’s flat for an attempted sexual liaison construct the two as a dating couple. A couple that, one is led to believe, share a romantic interest. This is reinforced by the shots of Bryce at Muriel’s wedding looking despondent and out of place, suffering clearly from a broken heart. So why is it if Bryce is presented as a valid partner that he just fades away after the wedding? Why does Muriel turn to David after her mother’s death and not Bryce?

The answer to these questions is that Bryce is a SNAG, a ‘new man’ (McMahon, 1998). He is a feminised masculinity that, like the violent ‘protest masculinity’ of Chook, is rejected in the narrative. “The ‘new man’ gained his credentials by adopting ‘feminine’, nurturing, affective qualities” (Harwood, 1997, p. 73). As a ‘new man’ Bryce is considered somehow lacking - “less thoroughly masculine” (McMahon, 1998, p.150) - and is subordinated by other men. Therefore it is David who remains sexually desirable to Muriel. Bryce, when invited home by Muriel after their date, shows he just can’t cut it sexually. His attempt at seduction results in slapstick comedy. As he attempts to unzip Muriel’s leather pants he inadvertently opens the beanbag on which they are reclining, sending him sliding across the room and out the window as Muriel shrieks hysterically. All the noise brings Rhonda and her two lovers into the room and the embarrassed, small-framed Bryce is contrasted with two naked, muscular American sailors. His masculinity is visually shown to be
lacking. “The sexuality of the New Man is particularly problematic: ‘The trouble with SNAGs is, they don’t get women’s lust-metres ticking...They are often totally devoid of sex appeal, and seem weak, soft, limp” (McMahon, 1998, p.150).

David as sexually potent compared to the feminised Bryce and the violent Chook, is read as a preferred masculinity when liberated from the feminising wedding discourse. However, he is a South African and not a representative of Australian masculinity. Positioning David as an outsider leaves the character of Bill Heslop as the only representative of hegemonic Australian masculinity left in the narrative. How he enacts this masculinity will now be examined.

Bill as the hegemonic groom

Bill Heslop acts as the counterpoint to the contemporary groom David and Chook. He is the 1950s groom to Betty’s 1950s bride, and as such embodies a traditional hegemonic masculinity in his enactment of the role of husband and father. Whereas the characters of David and Chook are instrumental in highlighting the inherent flaws in the ‘Prince Charming’ groom idealised by Muriel, Bill is presented as a reason for this reassessment. Symbolically he is the negative incarnation of the constructed role of the groom that both David and Chook, as characters, operate to undermine. He is the problem that needs to be fixed. Betty, representing a redundant and outmoded femininity, is evacuated from the narrative, leaving space for Muriel. Bill’s role in the narrative, however, is not so easily reconciled. There is no other character to take up the dominant masculine role, of which he is seen to be a discredited version; David, for all his possible ‘Prince Charming’ credentials, is rejected by Muriel, Chook ends the film incarcerated and Bryce seems somehow to just slip away into
the background. Understanding masculinities as “competing, contradictory and mutually undermining” (Moore, 1998, p. 2), the masculinities enacted by David, Chook and Bryce have, like the femininity enacted by Betty, been evacuated from the narrative. All three are characters “who do not conform to a masculine standard [they] are feminised and excluded” (Biber, 1999, p. 29); David is presented as visual spectacle, Chook is emasculated by Tania and Bryce as the SNAG is just ignored. The “masculine standard” that remains is Bill Heslop. Yet the masculinity he represents, as has been mentioned, is not one that is unproblematic. It operates, I would suggest, as outlined by Biber in her examination of the representation of masculinities in Australian cinema: “As is the nature of hegemony, it is a process which operates covertly, to restore masculinity in those who are letting down the side” (1999, p.30). Bill Heslop is a cautionary example, so to speak, of a masculinity that is ‘letting the side down’. His progression through the narrative reflects a transition from an ‘old’, hegemonic masculinity to a ‘new’ adaptation of that hegemonic masculinity that in undergoing change retains its position of power. As such, it is useful to examine the character of Bill Heslop in relation to the changing representation of masculinity within the broader Australian film culture. To begin with I shall examine the way in which he is constructed to represent a traditional, ‘normalised’ masculinity in his role as husband.

Bill: the 1950s husband

“The pathological silencing of women: 1950s masculinity” reads a subheading in Beynon’s Masculinities and Culture (2002). A description of men of that era that appears easily transferable to the character Bill Heslop. The masculinity of the 1950s is perceived in a contradictory manner, on the one hand, negative, destructive
and outmoded – “Many men are still locked into attitudes and patterns of behaviour that were appropriate in the 1950s, but are out of step with women’s need and aspirations in the 1990s” (Morton, 1997, pp. 7-8), and on the other, it is an idealised era, the values of which should be reasserted in contemporary society, as the conservative B. A. Santamaria writes of the family and Australian society: “There was no Golden Age; but there is a qualitative difference between the life of the fifties and that of the present” (1995, p. 7).

These contradictions are inherent in the character of Bill Heslop in the way that he appropriates traditionally valorised aspects of the national character, yet is also constructed as a visual caricature and parody of that character. Bill is a ‘battler’. He emblazons this across his daughter Joanie’s chest on a promotional t-shirt. During a meeting with his lawyers, a young boy asks him for an autograph from ‘Bill the Battler’ and he leaves chanting Bill’s slogan “You can’t stop progress!” Bill is also keen to point out his battler status whenever the chance arises. A scene in which he is lunching with his Japanese business partners sees him applauded by his guests for how much he does for Porpoise Spit. Bill responds with “Who told you that?” “You did” is the reply he is given. The dubious nature of Bill’s appropriation of the national imagery of the battler is also brought into question when the red-nosed crony, first seen talking to Muriel at Tania’s wedding, at another lunch says, “He’s a great man.” As he delivers this accolade his speech slurs and the remnants of one drink too many spills across the table. Bill’s status as a battler is the result of either self-aggrandisement or the testimony of characters constructed as unreliable. It could, therefore, be read that the appropriation of the battler imagery here is the
problem, not the imagery itself that represents a traditional masculinity (Lucas, 1998, p. 138).

However Bill is not the iconic “settler foundation figure, subject of the bush myth” (Landman, 1996, p. 117), rather he is the contemporary configuration of this mythology transformed into the small businessman, the entrepreneur, the suburbanite battling to survive in the commercial rather than the natural world. Bill has transposed the ‘bush myth’ to one of battling against bureaucracy and planning legislation as a small-time developer. ‘Porpoise Spit’, in name offering dual possibilities, is the heartland of ‘Bill the Battler’ a reference no doubt to the tourist developments of the NSW/Queensland coast. Bill as the ‘settler figure’ of the 1990s is figured wooing investment from Japan in Chinese restaurants to construct shopping malls and resorts, and promoting such development through involvement in local politics. In *Muriel's Wedding* these actions are ultimately presented as fraudulent as Bill’s empire comes undone and charges are laid. During a scene in yet another Chinese restaurant, Deirdre unwittingly outlines the extent of Bill’s fraud over a resort development, a fraud that can quite easily be transferred from the individual to the discourse of the battler as national icon – “It was the Crown land that did it . . . there were Aboriginals living on it.”

The battler imagery remains relatively unquestioned in the national consciousness in both its past and present incarnations. As a mainstay of political discourse, the battler is referred to in the present tense; it is a contemporary phenomenon, not just a nostalgic recollection of the colonial past. Figured as a battler Bill Heslop appropriates connotations of the original image – he may be doing things wrong with
the privilege of hindsight, but his intentions were good, at least within the range of
discourses in which he operates. This is an opinion the director of the film appears to
have of his creation:

I feel that Bill’s fall is a Greek myth on a domestic scale. He starts off in
the film as this great man and he is gradually undone by those closest to
him. He’s got a lot of generosity towards strangers but abuses the people
that love him the most and they are the ones that bring him down.
(cited in Wignall, 1994, p. 32)

But there are other ways of reading Bill’s character. As with the negative
construction of Chook, Bill is presented as a parody and a downright unattractive
character. Bill’s negative characterisation is something that is picked up on in
popular reviews of the film. He is described as, “her bullying father . . . a corrupt
local alderman” (Williams, 1994), “a corrupt politician, a terrible father and an
adulterous husband” (Quinn, 1994/5, p. 25), “a ‘coulda-been’ white-shoe brigadier”
(Byrnes, 1994), “a bluff bully-cum-crook” (Zuel, 1995), and “a crooked shire
president” (Keneally, 1998). Again the narrative presents two possibilities. Bill
Heslop as an individual can be read as a corruption of the battler imagery or as a
contemporary representation of the battler. Either way Bill’s flaws are derived from
his adherence to that discourse which is ultimately corrupt. Bill as a representative of
Australian masculinity can also be read as either a corrupt individual or as a
reflection of a corrupt discourse. I would argue, as he remains a focal point in the
film, the character of Bill operates in the latter. His progression through the narrative
is that of a hegemonic masculinity redefining and reasserting itself.

The proposition that the character of Bill Heslop can be read as a representation of a
hegemonic Australian masculinity in transition is supported by the cultural
knowledge surrounding the actor Bill Hunter who plays the role. Biber (1999)
situates Hunter as one of “the archetypical heroes of our national cinema – [who] return over and over again to reprise their laconic routines” (p. 32). In the films of the 1990s, however, much of the certainty about the roles played by the ‘archetypal heroes’ has dissipated. No longer are they as easily recognisable and unproblematic as those of earlier decades; the nature of Australian masculinity itself has become a concern (Butterss, 1999, p. 79). The much compared scenes of Jack Thompson in *A Sunday Too Far Away* and *The Sum of Us* illustrate this process of reassessment. Thompson as the “‘70s cinematic icon of nationalist subjectivity” (Nicoll, 1997, p. 58) in his role as ocker shearer is transformed in the ‘90s into an apron-clad father cooking dinner for his son. Whereas the mise-en-scene acts to feminise the character of Harry, played by Thompson in *The Sum of Us*, the cultural knowledge associated with the actor and the overt referencing of the earlier text present this as a parody, and in doing so questions that ‘70s national subjectivity.

Bill Hunter’s cinematic roles likewise have often become a parody of earlier iconic performances, self-reflexively examining the Australian masculinity he has been seen to embody. For example, in the film *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) his character of Barry Fife the Dance Federation chief is constructed as the patriarchal authority that the young dancer Scott Hastings must challenge through his choice of partner, his dance steps and the sexual nature of his routine (Buchbinder, 1998, p. 61). The figure of patriarchal authority in *Strictly Ballroom*, as with *Muriel’s Wedding*, is constructed as a 1950s mythologised ideal. Again it is an ideal that is used in order to demonstrate its inherent flaws and outmoded characteristics. Scott’s family house appears as an attempt at 1950s bourgeoisie (Buchbinder, 1998, p. 58), the film “refers ironically and parodically to the dance and musical films of the 1940s and
1950s” (p. 53) and the mise-en-scene of the ballroom dancing scenes, the styles of
dresses, hair and make-up, place the film far from the contemporary world,
reminiscent again of those 1940/50s musicals. Ballroom dancing itself is hardly
lodged in the public consciousness as a contemporary pursuit, more one imbibed
with the nostalgia of bygone age. Barry Fife as a symbol of patriarchal authority is
read by Buchbinder (1998) as false display, which is signified by the unnaturalness
of the dancers and their routines “and such obvious fakery as Fife’s wig, as well as
his evident hypocrisy and self-interest” (p. 62). With Fife discredited, the role for
Scott is to re-establish a ‘positive’ masculinity to replace that of the fallen patriarch,
much like a male version of Cinderella (Buchbinder, 1998, p. 67) he is transformed
to become the rightful heir to Fife’s throne.

The characterisation of Barry Fife is in many ways transferable to that of Bill Heslop
in Muriel’s Wedding, both represent a corrupt patriarchal authority. Bill Heslop is
both the ‘battler’ national icon – as character and as actor – and is presented as
corrupt and outmoded. A point of difference between the patriarchal authority
Hunter represents in Muriel’s Wedding and that in Strictly Ballroom is that in the
former there is no ‘male Cinderella’ to introduce a ‘new’ improved version of the
masculine/the national ideal. Instead, the character of Bill Heslop occupies both
positions. He is a point of reference to Chook, David, Perry and Bryce as ‘old’
traditional masculinity and through his progression in the narrative a ‘new’
permutation of Australian masculinity that is ultimately seen as preferable. The
arena in which Bill is provided with the capacity for this development is the domestic
sphere, which includes his relationship with his family, (what remains of it), and his
role as father.
Bill as a father

“As long as he doesn’t pretend they’re not his and cross to the other side of the street, he’s doing his bit as a father”. (1970s newspaper discussion cited in McMahon, 1998, p. 147).

There are contradictions in the way in which the character of Bill Heslop enacts the role of father. Firstly he can be seen to represent a progressive, transformed masculinity that has embraced, willingly or otherwise, the role of the involved and caring father. In contrast to which, he is also presented as a reprehensible father figure such as that admonished in the above quotation. He is witnessed publicly berating his offspring as hopeless and the cause of his misfortune in life, and blames his daughter for his ultimate downfall – “It’s all your fault. I’m destitute because of you”. Yet he ends the narrative as the primary caregiver to his remaining brood, be it that his daughter has to instruct him in his responsibilities. “It’s your job now Dad” Muriel says to her father before finally departing the family home and her siblings to return to Sydney. Be it an imposed rather than chosen duty, the role of father is presented in Muriel’s Wedding as the means by which traditional ‘old’ masculinity is transformed.

The appropriation of feminine caring characteristics into the discourse of fatherhood implied by Bill taking on the ‘job’ of responsibility for his children’s is a noted motif in the construction of masculinity in recent cinema. In her study of US masculinity in Hollywood films, Susan Jeffords proposes that in the 1990s a shift occurred in cinematic representations of masculinity from one of external display, “the bold spectacle of male musculature and/as violence”, to a more internalised version of
masculinity, "a self-effacing man . . . who now, instead of learning to fight, learns to love" (1993, p.245). Through analysis of the Terminator series Jeffords traces this 'new' masculinity to a re-evaluation of the role of father. The 'old' external masculinity embodied in the Terminator played by the hyper-muscular Arnold Schwarzenegger melts away to be replaced by the 'new' internal, caring masculinity embodied in the character of the young John Conner. John Conner's 'new' masculinity is fundamentally linked to his perceived paternal role:

[H]e who survives the destruction of the 'old' masculinity, witnessing teary-eyed the Terminator's destruction. As he stands above the melting Terminators, audiences are to recognize in John Conner not only the father of his own and the human future, but the new masculinity as well. (Jeffords, 1993, pp.260-1)

Demonstrating a transition from 'old' to 'new' masculinity is not the only function Jeffords attributes to the characters of the Terminator and John Conner in these films. She also highlights the way in which the Terminator undergoes a transformation from bad to good, from cold to caring, from killer to 'wounder' through his role as a father figure to John Conner in the second film T2. In doing so he demonstrates a softening of the 'old' violent masculinity - his acknowledgment of his own redundancy leading to his final act of self-sacrifice. This final act produces one of the "most remarkable inversions" of the film T2, in that it "manages not only to reveal the 'new' masculinity/father, but to excuse the 'old' one as well" (Jeffords, 1993, p. 261). Destructive masculinity as embodied in the earlier T1 and action films of the 1980s is excused for its excess - it is not "inherently bad, but only...misunderstood" (p. 261). According to Jeffords the only one to understand this is the 'new' man in the form of John Conner, who in doing so is "saving masculinity for itself, not only embodying the 'new' future of masculinity, but rescuing its past for revival" (p. 261).
In *Muriel's Wedding* there is no character that can be seen as a ‘new man’ in the sense that Jeffords describes John Conner in *T2*. As previously discussed, David, Chook and Bryce are all discarded or discredited in the narrative. With all the young male characters disposed of, Bill Heslop is left to enact the roles of both the traditional ‘Terminator’ masculinity and the transformed and transforming masculinity of John Conner. Despite this difference, the basic tenet of Jeffords’s article that masculinity is reworked and ‘old’ outmoded masculinity is excused of its excess can be usefully applied to *Muriel’s Wedding*. Is Bill’s adoption of a caring and nurturing paternal role merely an adaptation designed to maintain the hegemonic masculinity he is seen to embody?

Collier (1999) in the article “Men, heterosexuality and the changing family” presents fatherhood as central to debate surrounding the changing constructions of masculinity. He claims “contestations around the concept of fatherhood have increasingly assumed centre-stage” in relation to the “purported ‘crises’ of masculinity” and have brought into question “what in the past has been taken to be a normative model of fatherhood” (pp. 40-41). Interestingly in relation to *Muriel’s Wedding*, Collier also indicates that this interrogation of the normative model of fatherhood has not necessarily resulted in anything new.

> What we appear to be dealing with is the emergence of a... 'new' fatherhood, an idea of the father as being somehow an ‘improvement’ on earlier practices and values (such as the father as disciplinarian, the father as emotionally distant, the father as primary ‘breadwinner’ and so forth) ... He is also, on closer examination, perhaps not so ‘new’ after all. (Collier, 1999, p. 43)

The maintenance of Bill Heslop as the central masculine figure in *Muriel’s Wedding* reinstates as dominant the ‘normalised’ fatherhood that he is seen to embody – even
though as a father he is clearly presented as flawed. Therefore Bill’s ‘new’ interpretation of his role as a father can be read as an adaptation rather than transformation. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the final scene of the film. The binary opposition between a ‘new’ and a ‘traditional’ masculinity is replaced by one that restates a gender division where masculinity is seen to be privileged - Bill becomes the primary parental caregiver and supersedes Betty as mother in the process.

Bill Heslop’s final scene in *Muriel’s Wedding* sees him filmed from above, standing alone beneath the charred remains of washing on the Hills hoist, in the burnt backyard of the family home. The garden has long been associated with the domestication of the landscape through colonisation in the Hollywood Western. A process that Wright-Wexman (1993) relates to emergence of the idyllic image of suburban lawn of the 1950s:

In addition to its connotations of privately held land, the garden ideal, which by the 1950s was expressed primarily in the image of the suburban lawn, implied familial space that was constructed rather than natural – one whose character was imposed by the force of a dominant human power rather than one that evolved through a harmonious interaction between people and the environment. (p. 80)

Use of the backyard as a symbolic sign for the family is also prevalent in the Australian context, as implicitly summed up in the television program *Burke’s Backyard* (McKee, 2001). The destruction of the Heslops’ backyard represents the destruction of the Heslops as a traditional nuclear family. Placed in a national context, the critique can then be extended to represent faults inherent in the discourse of the Australian nuclear family and in images of that family espoused in programmes such as *Burke’s Backyard*: “the central terms of Don’s community – backyard, home and family” (McKee, 2001, p. 262).
By positioning Bill in the centre of this destruction of the ordinary Australian ideal, the ring of charred lawn, he is presented as the cause of that destruction, as an errant individual rather than the result of a corrupt masculinity. Bill as an exception to the rule is further emphasised by the dialogue he appears to say to himself during this scene, “I don’t understand it. Why’d she burn the backyard?” Although visually placed as the cause of the devastation to the domestic unit, Bill remains oblivious to the negative impact he has had on his wife and on his family. However in the scene Bill is not speaking to himself, as initially perceived, he is in fact speaking to his daughter Muriel. The camera drops soon after he has delivered the dialogue and the frame widens to include Muriel looking blankly at her father. With both Muriel and Bill in shot the two begin to engage in a conversation about the future of the Heslop family and who will look after the kids. Muriel, who in the previous scene is witnessed leaving her husband David, refuses her father’s request to return to the family home to take on the role vacated by her mother. In taking ownership of her own life, she rejects both the rule of her father (Landman, 1996, p. 120) and of her husband, who has been sanctioned to replace him through the institution of marriage. “She’s all yours now” Bill says to David at the altar as if transferring mutually unwanted goods.

Blame appears to be fairly and squarely placed upon Bill’s shoulders as the destructive influence in Muriel’s and his family’s lives, however, in this final scene Bill appears to be presented in a more sympathetic light. In particular, his reference to the proverb, ‘You reap what you sow.’ “You think I’d learnt that growing up on a farm,” he says to his daughter in reference to his changed circumstances. His fall from the high-point of his life - being only 14 votes away from a state government
seat, a contender for three days - to his current position of being unemployed and signing on the dole. Bill’s fall in status is not the only way that the proverb ‘You reap what you sow’ operates to create meaning in this scene. For Bill is talking to his daughter about his children, and blame is being apportioned for the way in which they have turned out – they are the result of what he has sown, what he has grown and the sad results are his to reap. Following his delivery of the line for the final time there is a cut to Joanie, perhaps the most pathetic of his offspring, calling out from the veranda that the cricket is on. Bill’s actions have resulted in not only a demise in status in the public sphere, his role in the domestic has led to betrayal by his daughter Muriel, who refuses to stay with her family, and the rest of his offspring living up to the description he has given them as ‘useless’. Ultimately, it is in the domestic sphere that Bill is given means to improve the situation. He looks thoughtfully to Muriel as she tells Joanie that she is soon to depart and tells her to stay in touch. In a close-up during this exchange his face softens and can be read as acknowledgment of the negative impact he has had on his children and his new responsibilities. This is reinforced when Joanie asks her father, “Want me to open a can of beer?” to which Bill replies, “That would be lovely, Joanie.” The exchange is a far cry from the early scenes of Bill barking orders at his family with little concern for civility or gratitude. This change implies that Bill is capable of operating successfully as a parental figure in the domestic sphere, that he has learnt from his past failings.

As John Conner is seen by Jeffords (1993) to present a ‘new’ masculinity that at the same time excuses the old, the character of Bill Heslop by taking on domestic responsibility and by acknowledging his own fault in his family’s destruction, is
likewise excusing ‘old’ masculinity as misguided, yet redeemable. By moving into the ‘feminine’ domestic realm, Bill is able to rectify previous wrongdoing, his own and that attributed to the traditional father figure as disciplinarian, emotionally distant, primary ‘breadwinner’ outlined by Collier (1999) earlier. Here I would argue that Bill as the ‘new’ father complies with Collier’s (1999) ideas and is not so new after all. For what Bill Heslop has become in this final scene is a single-father in receipt of social security, a position I would argue that would be read quite differently if it were a single-mother. The redemptive qualities that the role of single-father offers Bill in his acceptance of responsibility for his children is not a notion frequently associated with single-motherhood. “Quite simply, single mothers are bad, and their children do not fare well. Furthermore, negative discourses about single motherhood prevail throughout our culture,” writes Valdivia (1998) on the representation of single mothers in Hollywood cinema. Bill by moving into the domestic sphere is not redressing the power imbalance in the public-private divide, but rather extending a patriarchal dominance into a feminine domain. Bill may well have caused the problems of the Heslop family, but he is still the only one that can fix those problems. The disparaging reference to Deirdre Chambers in this final scene reinforces this idea. Deirdre is no longer interested in him now the kids are involved Bill tells Muriel. She is presented as cold-hearted and self-interested, unlike Bill her characterisation isn’t softened.

It is interesting to note that in these final scenes Bill is depicted renegotiating his familial role with his daughters Muriel and Joanie, his sons are not in sight. This can be read in two ways. Firstly, as Bill is embarking on a domestic role he is presented in relation to the two most likely to have taken on the role of his wife Betty, his
daughters not his sons. The transition into the domestic sphere is one that requires
the adoption of what has been traditionally viewed as feminine responsibility. Or
conversely, in Muriel’s case, Bill is undergoing a role reversal with his daughter –
Muriel is leaving for the public sphere of work whilst Bill takes responsibility for the
family. Despite the possible renegotiation of traditional gender roles that this could
imply, it is useful to remember that Bill is taking on a domestic role that his wife is
seen to have failed at. As a not-so-new father/man, he is still operating within a
gender hierarchy that sees him firmly planted at the top. How then, does this relate
to Muriel’s rejection of the ‘feminine’, the domestic? I will argue Muriel that has to
become a bloke too. First, however, it is useful to examine the way in which the
relationship between Bill and his children – Muriel in particular – relates to
traditional discourses of fatherhood and the family.

Traditional ideas of fatherhood signifying ownership of offspring, particularly of
daughters until responsibility for them is transferred to a husband, (Morton, 1997,
pp.263-4) are alluded to in the wedding scene in *Muriel’s Wedding*. Bill’s
‘ownership’ of Muriel that was transferred to David through marriage has now
returned to him, prompting his demand for her to stick with him and help look after
the kids. By rejecting the gendered role of family carer in place of her mother,
Muriel also frees herself from the ‘ownership’ of her father. This is reiterated by the
financial transaction undertaken between Muriel and Bill, as she hands over the first
instalment of the money she stole from him. Throughout the film the relationship
between Bill and Muriel is caged in financial terms - she owes him for the secretarial
certificate he ‘bought’ for her in an attempt to gain her employment and she is the
reason for his financial ruin and public disgrace. As Bill marches Muriel into the
church on her wedding day he blaming her again for his downfall, which on this occasion has resulted in her mother having to travel to Sydney by bus, as he couldn't afford to pay for her flight. Betty's absence at the wedding is the result of Muriel's deceit. Throughout the film whenever Muriel and her father meet there is reference made to her indebtedness, be it the secretarial course or the stolen funds. Muriel's last scene with her father sees this relationship reversed, as she is the one giving back a portion of the stolen money and in return asking of her father a repayment of the debt he is seen to owe her and her siblings - "We're not useless. You have to stop telling them that. It's your job now to look after them."

The paternal role enacted by Bill Heslop operates in a number of ways. He is presented in a traditional sense as the ruling patriarch from whose control Muriel must rebel. The handing back of the money owed in the final scene is representative of the financial hold that that her father has over her being severed, she is no longer his property. However this is not the only way in which Muriel rebels. Summoned to a Chinese restaurant to meet her father whilst he is being prosecuted in Sydney, Muriel, again confronted with the accusations of bringing the family down, informs her father of her change of name from Muriel to Mariel. Bill at first ignores this, to which Muriel responds by shouting at her father that she is no longer Muriel, she is Mariel, a new person. By drawing attention to her change in name Muriel is challenging the naming rites of the father – “Bill’s charge to Muriel that she is a thief, when she tells him she is now Mariel…refers to her theft of his power to name as much as to her embezzlement of the family’s bank account” (Landman, 1996, p.117). The self-transformation of Muriel to Mariel represents a break with her past and also her family. When she then becomes Mariel Van Arkle this transformation is
complete. In name she is no longer a Heslop, however arguably it is because she is a Heslop that she is in the position in which she finds herself.

In the same way that *Muriel's Wedding* presents the wedding ceremony as romantic performance, it also problematises one of the more pervasive social constructions that derive from that performance, the hereditary power of the patriarch. For although Muriel has renounced her family name and fled her family home the motivations for her actions are very much coded in the narrative as derivative of inherited characteristics from her father. It is the traits of corruption and dishonesty inherited from her father that Muriel has employed in order to achieve this release, and it is her acknowledgement of the derivation of these traits from her father that results in her final self-realisation – “I’ve got to stop telling lies. I tell too many lies.” During her mother’s funeral, the actions of her father Bill are presented as truly reprehensible – gloating over the telegram from the former prime minister. His actions provide the final turning point in the narrative, with Muriel leaving the funeral service, her husband and ultimately her family. So what is Muriel left with? Muriel is left with a relationship with Rhonda. A relationship I will argue that is constructed within the Australian masculine tradition of mateship.
CONCLUSION

This study was embarked upon as an exploration of the ways in which the discourses of gender, marriage, the family and national identity intersect in one specific media text, *Muriel's Wedding*. To this end, I investigate the way in which the narrative privileges characters in terms of their roles as bride/groom, wife/husband and mother/father. My concern was with how the representation of the characters acts to either challenge or reinforce traditional and dominant discourses of marriage and the family. I shall now attempt to synthesise the points raised so far through a discussion of the couple created at the end of the film, Muriel and Rhonda. I will argue that the coupling of Muriel and Rhonda challenges dominant discourses of marriage and the family by devaluing traditional feminine gender roles and adopting those traditionally coded as masculine, in this instance, the role of the mate.

Muriel, the vehicle for the deconstruction of the discourses of the wedding, marriage and the family, at the finale is left with her friend Rhonda and an unknown future in Sydney. As they leave Porpoise Spit the pair say farewell to all the landmarks of their former lives that they pass – “Goodbye shopping malls. Goodbye surfies.” Narratively, the implication is that a journey has been completed and that as a character Muriel has undergone a linear development, which sees a new and improved young woman depicted in these final scenes. The impetus for her transformation is presented in the film as a rejection of traditional gender discourses. In particular, the rejection of her feminine role within the domestic sphere as wife and mother epitomised by the character of Muriel’s mother Betty. The binary opposition between ‘old’ and ‘new’ femininity favours Muriel over her mother,
implying a generational shift for the better - be it one that is seen to devalue characteristics traditionally understood as feminine. In contrast, the resolution of the binary opposition between the male characters sees the traditional ‘old’ masculinity represented by Bill Heslop as privileged. Bill’s traditional masculinity is favoured over the ‘new’ constructions of masculinity represented by David, Chook and Bryce, as well as over the female characters, in that Bill becomes a better mother than Betty. The resolution of binary oppositions in this way reasserts the traditional masculine gender roles of father and husband and rejects the traditional feminine gender roles of wife and mother. On the one hand, marriage and the traditional nuclear family are celebrated through Bill’s acceptance of his role as father, and on the other, they are challenged by Muriel’s rejection of the traditional feminine gender roles of wife and mother.

The rejection of traditional feminine gender roles within the family, (the roles of wife and mother), could be read as preferred, as Muriel is the protagonist in the narrative. However, I would argue that despite Muriel being the protagonist and the most sympathetically presented character in the film, the traditional gender roles associated with her father Bill are those that are ultimately supported by the narrative. Muriel is more closely linked to her father than she is to her mother throughout the film. Muriel enacts her father’s character traits, (or flaws), by stealing, telling lies and engaging in deception and, as previously discussed, it is her acknowledgement of her inheritance from him that brings about her self awareness that she must change her ways and stop telling lies. I would argue that although Muriel recognises her father’s legacy as corrupt, she achieves her position of privilege in the narrative through her appropriation of the national discourse of
mateship from him. As Bill adopts the feminine role of caring parent to the betterment of his remaining family, Muriel adopts the masculine role of the mate in preference to any role within the family. She not only inherits character traits from her father, she also inherits his signification of what a positive relationship is in the Australian cultural context – a mate.

The relationship between Muriel and Rhonda, although polysemic, is one that is presented as mateship - the traditional Australian masculine homosocial relationship glorified in so much of the nation’s cinema (Hussey, 1997, p.78). Muriel and Rhonda are clearly not mates in a traditional sense, as they are women, but their relationship is one that can be described as female mateship. They have both rejected the other relationships that they have in their lives with family, friends, and in Muriel’s case, her husband and her former boyfriend Bryce, to be with each other. In particular, the positive depiction of Muriel’s decision to forsake all others for her relationship with Rhonda is one that appears to absolve her of past misdemeanours. Muriel’s desertion of Rhonda, her lies, her theft of money from her mother and her rejection of her siblings are all wiped away as she and Rhonda depart Porpoise Spit backed by an uplifting soundtrack. Their future if not bright is decidedly better than if they had stayed with their respective families. The value of the relationship with Rhonda is the lesson that has been learnt by Muriel through her narrative journey. In contrast, marriage, family and female friendship (as signified by Tania and her group) are found wanting.

By placing Muriel’s narrative progression within the nationalist framework of mateship, the transgression of gender positions enacted by characters in the film
appears to be nullified. Nicoll (1997) claims that the national discourse of mateship acts to normalise the identities of the homosexual characters in *The Sum of Us*. She writes, “it is possible to understand why the ‘nationalisation’ of a gay male identity is a relatively simple operation. The film adheres to the pre-existing conventions of the mateship narrative” (1997, p. 68). Similarly, Hussey (1997) claims of *The Sum of Us* that the relationship between Jeff and Greg presented within the traditional Australian masculine iconography of sport and the pub, is read as homosocial mateship within the national discourse rather than homosexual desire (p. 82).

I would argue that through a similar appropriation of the discourse of mateship, the character of Muriel is seen to enact a ‘positive’ Australian femininity. Muriel’s characterisation at the end of the narrative is one of very few in the film that is given sympathetic treatment. She is depicted as having undergone a psychological journey of learning. She has learnt not to lie, not to believe in the status of the bride and not to desire marriage. She has also learnt that her father, in stepping up to the responsibility of rearing his family, makes a better parent than her mother ever did, and that relationships between women are bitchy and unfulfilling where men are involved. What Muriel appears to take away with her from Porpoise Spit is that true friendship means standing by your mate, even at the expense of intimate relationships and family. Rhonda is the wounded soldier (ANZAC, digger) in need of her mate, Muriel, who finally returns to uphold vows seen to be more important than wedding vows.

Mateship as more important than marriage is a statement that does not seem to be too out of place when discussing the Australian nationalist subjectivity, a nationalist subjectivity that “feminist critics have noted with frustration . . . has been constructed
in exclusively masculine terms” (Nicoll, 1997, p. 62). By privileging mates over marriage *Muriel's Wedding* can be seen as a rather conservative text, privileging a masculine discourse over those coded as feminine. For example, the wedding and the role of the bride, so desired by Muriel, is presented as phoney, the working woman is ridiculed, the role of the mother is seen to be better undertaken by a man, and female friendships are presented as bitchy and cruel. In addition to which, men who demonstrate too many feminine characteristics, such as Bryce, are removed from the narrative.

Ultimately, *Muriel's Wedding* operates to circulate rather traditional gender identities, however in doing so the film also articulates a number of the arguments that have been made against the traditional nuclear family. Not surprisingly what has been problematised in the film, (the roles afforded to women within marriage and the family), corresponds to feminist critiques of the family, because it is feminist critiques that have provided the bulk of the debate on weddings, marriage and the family. However what is perhaps of more interest from this study is what appears to be lacking in treatment of the Australian family in *Muriel's Wedding*. In particular, future research could be undertaken across a broader range of media texts to examine the representation of masculinity and wedding discourse. A possible question to be asked is whether there is a discourse of the groom circulating in the Australian media sphere, or is it that weddings solely constructed as a feminine discourse?
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