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The Women's Room: Women and the Confessional Mode

Susannah Radstone

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Summary

This thesis analyses the cultural work performed by confessional discourses. It contributes to feminist cultural theory by refining and extending the Foucauldian theory of confession through a comparison of the cultural instrumentality of the mainstream, male-authored confession and women's versions of the mode.

The thesis begins by arguing that though the mainstream, male-authored confession constructs and addresses a mutable subject suited to the requirements of modern power techniques, the polyvalence of confessional discourse also registers a resistance to subjection to contemporary forms of power/knowledge.

The second section of the thesis extends and refines this argument by contending that the gynocentric deployment of confession by the woman's confessional novel produces a double-voiced discourse, which mutedly resists patriarchal forms of femininity. The application of psycho-analytic literary theory to a close reading of Marilyn French's The Women's Room leads to the conclusion that this novel's deployment of confessional discourse allows for a muted venting of repressed active female desire.

The third section of the thesis extends the preceding examination of the cultural work performed by gynocentric confessional discourse through an analysis of the made-for-TV-movie version of French's The Women's Room. This section argues that though the application of a film studies and a TV studies approach to the movie appears to produce two contradictory readings of its cultural instrumentality, this divergence results from the different emphases of film and TV theory: while film theory emphasises text at the expense of context, TV theory tends to reverse this trend.

In conclusion, the thesis argues that discourse theory points the way towards a perspective which can address the relationship between textual and social subjects. This thesis examines the textual negotiation of confessional discourse by gynocentric forms; it also points towards the need for a perspective which can more adequately address the question of reception as negotiation.

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INTRODUCTION

In a recent interview in the journal Feminist Review, Julia MacPherson responded to a question asking when she started to see her life in the context of feminist ideas by naming a novel: 'For me,' she answered, 'the catalyst was reading The Women's Room by Marilyn French at the age of 18 ...' ¹ What this response apparently substantiates, is the publisher's claim that French's novel 'changes lives' ². During the 70's and early 80's, bookstores were flooded with, and the female reading public avidly and enthusiastically consumed, new 'women's novels' such as Shedding ³, The Shame Is Over ⁴, Fear of Flying ⁵, Kinflicks ⁶ and The Women's Room ⁷. Yet though these novels concerned themselves with a central female protagonist whose life underwent far-reaching changes as she encountered feminist ideas, feminist critical responses to 'the novel that changes lives' have been both cautious and circumspect: in the most influential of such responses, Ros Coward's article "'This Novel Changes Lives": Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?' ⁸ it is contended that novels such as The Women's Room, to which her title makes reference may 'correspond more closely to popular

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sentiment than they do to feminist aspirations.' For this reason, she argues, the supposed feminism of the best-selling 'woman's novel' may well prove to be illusory. This thesis, which began as an examination of the question of the cultural work performed by, or the cultural instrumentality of, what Coward calls the 'feminist culture' of the 70's and early 80's, gained its initial impetus from the apparent discontinuity between claims such as MacPherson's that 'the novel that changes lives' did change lives and the more circumspect and cautious feminist critical response exemplified by Coward.

What Coward implies in the above quotation and throughout her article is that the take-up of feminist ideas within popular forms such as the paperback best-seller threatens the integrity of those ideas. The most sophisticated exponents of this notion that the process of popularisation weakens or diffuses potentially subversive ideas - a recurrent one amongst feminist cultural critics - are located within that Gramscian marxist grouping for whom the concept of hegemony describes 'those processes whereby a fundamental social group ... which has achieved direction over the 'decisive economic nucleus', is able to expand this into a moment of social, political and cultural leadership and authority throughout civil society and the state ...' . According to this model of social relations, the maintenance of hegemony, or rule by

consent, depends partially upon a cultural struggle waged on the battle ground of popular culture to incorporate potentially subversive ideas into configurations which pose no threat to the maintenance of the status quo, by establishing a coherence between such ideas and the dominant culture.

Though, at its most sophisticated, the concept of incorporation arguably calls for the investigation of what Denise Riley has described as 'the responsibility of theories for their own popularisation'¹¹, she continues her introduction to War In The Nursery by arguing that what is commonly substituted for such an approach is the mobilisation of terms such as incorporation or popularisation as though they in themselves were sufficient to explain the complex relationship between a theory and its variously nuanced articulations across a cultural field: 'popularisation doesn't tell us anything about why a particular theory should at a particular moment ... lend itself to ... being broadcast to a wider audience. It assumes the essential purity of a theory which then, through no fault of its own, suffers a process of coarsening once the world gets hold of it ...'¹².

This reliance upon notions of incorporation or popularisation to explain the relationship between feminism and the recent explosion of novels, films and TV

programmes aimed at a female audience marks much recent feminist cultural criticism, and produces what Riley has described as 'an impossible disjunction between the innocence of a theory and the corruption of its deployment.'¹³ Often, such critical commentary investigates the arrival onto our TV screens, bookshelves and cinema screens of the phenomenon of 'the new woman', and concludes, in the words of one exponent of this approach that 'the challenges of feminism have been ideologically accommodated by the mass media through a patriarchal production of "the liberated woman".'¹⁴ 'Incorporation', she insists 'is the real social process on which (culture) depends.'¹⁵ Similarly, in his investigation of the phenomenon of the woman-centered paperback best-seller, John Sutherland describes feminist response to novels such as Fear of Flying thus: 'The superselling novel with emancipated themes was inevitably suspect as being indirectly exploitative of women ... or indicative of a repressive tolerance which insidiously sapped revolutionary energy and confused protest with entertainment ...'¹⁶ going on to conclude that 'Novels such as (French's) and Jong's do not, as adverts impudently claim, "change lives". In so far as they have a useful function it is in serving to domesticate alien, life-changing social ideas for the mass of the population ... they are anodynes. They soothe.'¹⁷ Similarly, though Elisabeth Cagan's discussion of advertising aimed at 'the new woman' promises to analyse the relationship

between 'the mechanisms underlying dominant culture which have the power to adapt and integrate critical ideas into commonplace notions (and) the nature of the critical ideas themselves'¹⁸ by pointing to the coherence a general culture which foregrounds 'self-fulfillment'¹⁹ establishes between the two, her analysis substitutes the term co-optation for a rigorous analysis of the inter-textual relations through which this 'climate' is articulated across feminism and the 'commercial culture' of 'the new woman'.

Coward's discussion of 'the novel that changes lives' exhibits a similar tendency to foreclose discussion of the point of articulation between feminist ideas and the popular fiction with which her article engages. She holds firmly to the distinction between 'feminist aspirations and popular sentiment'²⁰ rehearsing that distinction between 'the innocence of a theory and the corruption of its deployment'²¹ critiqued by Riley. In her book War In The Nursery, in which she discusses the take-up of Bowlby's ideas on child-care within post-1945 dominant discourses and practices of child-care, Riley contends that though the notion of popularisation claims a coherence between, in the case of her research, 'psychology and a socio-political climate'²² what it fails to analyse is 'the nature and production of this coherence and whether it may be a mirage'²³.

Though Coward and Cagan both mobilise notions of co-optation, popularisation and incorporation in place of any investigation of the nature and production of a coherence between feminist ideas and either 'the novel that changes lives' or the commercial culture's production of 'the new woman', a careful reading of both their papers does offer some initial suggestions concerning where such an investigation might begin. Before going on to argue that the image of the 'new woman' 'is a carefully shaped product of the commercial culture's attempts to defuse the revolutionary thrust of the women's movement ...'²⁴, Cagan implies a coherence between this image, the ideas of the women's movement, and a more general social climate which promotes personal growth and self-fulfillment. While Cagan distinguishes sharply between this coherence and the more conspiratorial theorisation she develops of the commercial culture's popularisation of the ideas of the women's movement, her initial comments suggest one point of articulation between feminist ideas and the 'new woman' image which, she argues, provides 'a "safe" outlet for "fantasies of liberation" '²⁵. Likewise, though Coward insistently distinguishes between feminism and what she calls the 'woman's novel', she simultaneously gestures towards the consciousness-raising frame which shapes many of the narratives she discusses, before pointing to their mobilisation of semi-autobiographical

and confessional structures, contending that 'the space of themes, modes of writing, hierarchies of appropriate statements which constitute these "feminist novels" is not so utterly unlike those of popular fiction in general...'²⁶ . Coward's assertion that the 'packaging' of feminism within confessional narratives which foreground sexual experience confirms women 'as bearers of sentiment, experience and romance ...'²⁷ leads her to conclude that 'it is quite clear that there are compelling similarities between "novels that change lives" and contemporary fictional conventions, which should warn us against any simple designation of these novels as feminist.'²⁸ Yet what is sidestepped by the distinction drawn here between feminism and contemporary fictional conventions is the imbeddedness of confessional practices and discourses within feminism itself - an inter-textual relation which arguably gives rise to the apparent coherence between feminism and those novels which Coward seeks to distinguish from feminism. The significance of this re-formulation of the relation between feminism, what Coward calls 'the women's novel', and confessional practices and discourses is that it allows some space for the discussion of what Riley described as the 'responsibility of theories for their own popularisation'²⁹ , while leaving open the question of the cultural instrumentality of what Coward calls 'women's culture': While Coward contends that the

articulation of confessional discourses by the woman-centered confessional novel answers the question of its cultural instrumentality, Riley insists that this finding in itself merely suggests a point of departure for research which questions the nature of this coherence and investigates the possibility that it may be a mirage: this thesis sets out to initiate such research by focussing on the inter-textual relation between mainstream confession, the woman's confessional novel and the woman's confessional film in order to ascertain whether or not the coherence confession apparently establishes across these cultural forms implies a homogeneous, single or simple cultural instrumentality.

In her article 'Tell It Like It Is: Women and Confessional Writing', Elisabeth Wilson contends that the framing of what Coward describes as the 'woman's novel' within a confessional mode was accidental: 'I'm not sure how deliberately the feminists of the late 1960's and early 1970's chose the genres in which we would speak our oppression. In the beginning I suspect we just plunged in, seeking what was nearest to hand as a vehicle for our explanations ...' : yet the imbeddedness of confessional practices and discourses accross practices of consciousness-raising and discussions of the personal as political as well as across the pages of 'the novel that changes lives' arguably points to the over-determination of this 'choice' - a choice which took place within a

culture which, in the words of Michel Foucault, has, since the Middle Ages, 'established the confession as one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth ...'³¹ To distinguish as Coward does, between feminist theory's progressive impulse and the conservative implications of the confessional 'novel that changes lives' ignores the fact that both the women's novel and feminist consciousness-raising practices have arisen in and been shaped by a culture suffused by confessional discourses.

Yet to assert that both feminism and what Coward calls 'feminist culture' have been shaped by the all-pervasiveness of the confession leaves aside the complex question of the cultural instrumentality implied by the apparent coherence confession articulates between 'feminist culture' and the more diffuse culture of self-fulfillment that we inhabit: in order to engage with this question, a prior set of questions concerning the cultural instrumentality of both the confession and what Coward describes as 'woman-centered' culture must first be addressed, and it is to these sets of questions that this thesis sets out to address itself.

Though this thesis identifies an apparent coherence formed by confessional discourse across mainstream and 'feminist' culture, it is not assumed that this coherence

implies a single or simple cultural instrumentality across cultural forms - it does not assume, in other words, that the framing of feminist culture by confessional discourse inevitably recuperates subversive elements for dominant culture. Whereas Coward's assumption is that 'feminist writing may well be compromised by its uncritical use of the conventional forms of the novel'³², this thesis takes a Gramscian approach arguing that as part of popular culture, the 'feminist culture' Coward discusses is more appropriately approached as a 'a site occupied by practices within which dominant and subordinate cultural and ideological elements are ..caught in different relations of articulation, locked in different relations of negotiation, transformation and resistance'³³. In the first chapter, therefore, it is argued that the cultural instrumentality of the mainstream confessional novel - the literary form which inflects the novels discussed by Coward - is more complex than she allows, since it registers both a capitulation to and a resistance of forms of subjection suited to the maintenance of modern power relations.

The second and third chapters begin to tease out the central question addressed by this thesis: that of the cultural instrumentality implied by the suffusion of 'feminist culture' by confessional discourses. In her critique of 'the novel that changes lives', Coward argues

that the 'woman-centeredness' of these novels does anything but guarantee their feminism, likening them to Mills and Boon Romances, as well as to melodrama, which, she argues 'is often promoted as 'women's pictures' suggesting that they are directed towards women as well as being about women'³⁴. Recently, however, feminist cultural critics have argued, conversely, that a careful reading of both popular romance and melodrama reveals that these 'gynocentric'³⁵ cultural forms do register women's protests against patriarchal culture - though often in convoluted and tortuous ways: for instance, in Loving With A Vengeance, Tania Modleski argues that though the feminist and the romance reader 'choose utterly different ways of overcoming their dissatisfaction'³⁶, the popular romance does allow for the venting of women's anger and dissatisfaction. In the second and third chapters of this thesis, a similar argument is advanced in relation to the women's confessional novel, for it is argued, in opposition to Coward, that the cultural instrumentality of the 'novel that changes lives' is inflected both by its relation to the complex cultural instrumentality of the mainstream confession and by its muted venting of women's dissatisfaction and anger. In 'Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?', Coward advances the thesis that it is the framing of feminist ideas within confessional narratives that subverts their progressive impulse,

adding that the woman-centeredness of these novels does anything but guarantee their feminist credentials: the first three chapters of the following thesis problematise Coward's thesis in two ways: firstly, it is argued that the cultural instrumentality of mainstream confession is far more complex than she allows, and secondly it is argued that like soap-opera or popular romance³⁷, the woman's confessional novel does articulate women's dissatisfaction and frustration, though admittedly in muted and convoluted ways.

Chapters one two and three investigate, therefore, the nature of the coherence that confession appears to produce between mainstream and women's confessional writing, arguing that a rigorous analysis of the inflection of the mainstream confessional novel by 'feminist culture' suggests that this inter-textual relation is far more complex than that implied by theories of incorporation. Chapter four continues the analysis of the coherence confession seems to establish across the cultural domain by comparing French's The Woman's Room with its adaptation as made-for-TV-movie. What this chapter seeks to extend is the first three chapters' contention that a rigorous questioning of the cultural instrumentality or instrumentalities this inter-textual relation produces depends upon tracing confessional discourses across what Volosinov has described as 'a long, long road that crosses a number of

qualitatively different domains, each with its own specific set of laws and its own specific characteristics.³⁸ Whereas chapters one two and three trace the path of confessional discourse as it is inflected across the mainstream and woman's confessional novel, chapter four traces the path further as it crosses from the literary domain to those of the cinematic and televisual - arguing that the analysis of the cultural instrumentality of the woman's confessional film must engage with the inter-textual relation produced by the confluence of confessional discourse with cinematic and televisual regimes of representation.

We inhabit a society in which, according to Michel Foucault's History Of Sexuality, 'the obligation to confess is now relayed through so many points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us'.³⁹ Confessional discourse suffuses the culture of the mainstream ; it 'plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships and in love relations'⁴⁰ . Confession plays a part, too , within feminist as well as within what Coward describes as 'women's culture'. Yet though Foucault contends that the labour of confession produces 'men's subjection: their constitution as subjects in both senses of the word'⁴¹ , this thesis argues that confession does not necessarily play the same part in mainstream

and in 'women's culture'.

This thesis initiates then, a questioning of the cultural instrumentality/ies implied by the apparent coherence confessional discourse establishes between the mainstream confessional novel, the women's 'novel that changes lives' and the confessional women's film.

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

1. J Hobsbawm and J MacPherson, 'Younger women and Feminism: A Kaleidoscope of Old and New', Feminist Review, 31, Spring 1989, p 135.
2. The cover to the 1978 Sphere paperback edition of Marilyn French's The Women's Room displays the publisher's blurb 'This novel changes lives'.
3. V Stefan, Shedding, London, The Women's Press 1979.
4. A Meutenbelt, The Shame is Over, London, The Women's Press 1980.
5. E Jong, Fear of Flying, Frogmore, Panther 1974.
6. L Alther, Kinflicks, Harmondsworth, Penguin 1977.
7. M French, The Womens Room, London, Sphere 1978.
8. R Coward "This Novel Changes Lives": Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels? A response to Rebecca O'Rourke's Article "Summer Reading", Feminist Review 5 (1980) pps 53-63.
9. Ibid, p 53
10. S Hall, D Hobson, A Lowe and P Willis (eds) Culture, Media, Language, London, Hutchinson 1980 p 35.
11. D Riley War in the Nursery, London, Virago, 1983 p 84.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid, p 9.
14. H Baehr 'The Liberated Woman in TV; Women's Studies International Quarterly, vol 3, 1980 p 29.
15. Ibid, p 29.
16. J Sutherland, Bestsellers London, RKP 1981 p 83.

17. Ibid, p 245.
18. E Cagan 'The Selling of the Women's Movement', Social Policy, May/June 1978, p 5.
19. Ibid, p 6.
20. R Coward, op cit, p 53.
21. D Riley, op cit, p 90.
22. Ibid, p 1.
23. Ibid.
24. E Cagan, op cit, p 6.
25. Ibid.
26. R Coward, op cit, p 59.
27. Ibid, p 60.
28. Ibid.
29. D Riley, op cit, p 84.
30. E Wilson 'Tell It Like It Is; Women and Confessional Writing', in S Radstone (ed) Sweet Dreams: Sexuality, Gender and Popular Fiction London, Lawrence and Wishart 1988, p 22.
31. M Foucault The History of Sexuality: Volume One An Introduction, Harmondsworth, Pelican 1981 p 58.
32. R Coward, op cit, p 61.
33. T Bennett, 'Popular Culture : Divided Territory' in mimeoed papers, Milton Keynes, Open University Publications 1981.
34. R Coward, op cit, p 58.
35. A term coined by Elaine Showalter to describe woman-centered cultural forms: see E Showalter 'Feminist Criticism In the Wilderness', E Showalter (ed) The New Feminist Criticism, London, Virago 1986 p 248.
36. T Modleski, Loving with A Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women, New York and London, Methuen 1982, p 26.
37. Ibid, see especially Modleski's introduction pps 11-34.

38. V Volosinov Marxism and the Philosophy of Language,
New York, Seminar Press 1973.
39. M. Foucault, op cit, p 60.
40. Ibid, p 59.
41. Ibid, p 60.

THE CULTURAL INSTRUMENTALITY OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY
AND CONFESSION

'A good feminist criticism therefore, must first acknowledge that men's and women's writing in our culture will inevitably share some common ground'¹

The much vaunted claim that the best-selling women's novels of the 70's 'changed lives' is suggestive of a degree of cultural instrumentality that begs a series of questions concerning the relation between changing modes of subjectivity and changing patterns of reading and writing. Yet though publishers and booksellers alike mounted their sales campaigns around such slogans, prevalent feminist critical commentary has turned them on their heads, by suggesting that these popular women's novels tend to impede, rather than to encourage change by weakening the political force of feminist theory². In the face of such obvious dissent, it is clear that further discussion is required before any tentative conclusions can be reached concerning the cultural instrumentality, or indeed the 'life changing' potential of 'the novel that changes lives'.

During the period roughly between 1978 and 1980, while I was running the fiction department of a central London bookstore, novels such as The Women's Room³, Fear of Flying⁴, The Shame Is Over⁵ and Shedding⁶ were all marketed by their publishers in similar ways - as potentially 'life-changing'. A cursory glance at this group of novels reveals that they shared more than this sales pitch, however, since they are all autobiographical or semi-autobiographical in form and confessional in tone. When women picked up their pens to write the new woman's novel, the shape their words took and the way those words were read, formed part of wider literary, cultural and social histories - histories of those that had written before; histories of those that had read before. Even in such areas as scientific autobiography, a 'flood' of confessional autobiographies during this period has recently been noted⁷, while Time magazine's labelling of Erica Jong's How To Save Your Own Life⁸ as 'an up to date confessional bulletin' confirms that this literary tendency was widespread. If these new patterns of writing and reading were in some sense innovatory or politically progressive - a question to which this thesis will only later address itself - they can nevertheless be mapped on to wider dominant trends within mainstream writing and reading patterns which have evidenced a popular move towards autobiography and confession. Since these women's novels did partake to some degree in wider

literary tendencies of the time whose specific cultural instrumentalities may have shaped those of the 'new' women's novel, a productive comparison between the dominant and the women's confessional novel must be preceded by a discussion of the cultural instrumentality of the mainstream autobiography and confession.

Even a brief glance at the critical literature which discusses mainstream autobiography and confession reveals that the corpus of work which forms the object of such discussion is authored entirely by men. Feminist cultural critics have recently proposed, moreover, that though the culture of the mainstream is produced, by and large, by men, on the whole, it operates, in addition, in the interests of patriarchy. In her essay 'Feminist Criticism In The Wilderness', Elaine Showalter argues that the field of dominant culture is the field of male culture⁹, while in the introduction to Women's Pictures, Annette Kuhn asserts that 'dominant modes of representation constitute forms of subjectivity ... characteristic of a masculinist or patriarchal culture.'¹⁰ This chapter, which culminates with a discussion of the cultural instrumentality of the mainstream confession, will therefore prepare the ground for a comparison between the cultural instrumentalities of the mainstream and the woman's confession. This comparison will ultimately address the question of

whether, and if so how, 'the novel that changes lives' represents a feminine or feminist alternative to its mainstream relation.

The confession is generally regarded as a mode of autobiographical writing; before this chapter discusses the cultural instrumentality of the former, it will therefore discuss a range of critical interventions which have - concerned themselves with the cultural work performed by autobiographical writing.

Autobiography and Cultural Theory

The claim that a novel can change a life, and the degree of cultural instrumentality which it implies, is congruent with a recent tendency within cultural theory which suggests that cultural practices such as novel reading may shape, rather than merely reflect, wider social trends and may, moreover play some part in constituting subjectivity itself. This critical tendency which gained its original impulse from Althusser's essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses'¹¹, takes as its starting point a belief in the relative autonomy of the domain of the cultural from that of the economic - a belief which grants to the cultural a degree of determinacy which was seen, by Althusser, to extend to the level of subjectivity itself. Literary theorists have extended this argument by contending that novel reading,

and more -specifically the classic realist text, constitutes a cultural practice which 'interpellates' the reader, addresses itself to him or her directly, offering the reader as the position from which the text is most 'obviously' intelligible, the position of the subject in (and of) ideology.¹² Though this Althusserian position was later problematised within cultural theory, by critics who argued that what needed consideration was the extent to which subject positions might be negotiable, the overall legacy of the original Althusserian interventions remain in the continuing assumption that to some degree, cultural practices such as novel reading do not merely reflect economic relations but have their own effectivity: as ideology, novels mould or shape readers.

While such assumptions inform debates within cultural theory concerning the cultural instrumentality of particular literary genres, the main body of literary criticism which has addressed the autobiography and its confessional mode was either written prior to or has remained largely untouched by such theory. Instead, studies of autobiography and its confessional mode have been undertaken largely within the broad confines of a humanist literary criticism which assumes 'that subjectivity, the individual mind or inner being, is the source of meaning and of action'¹³ and that the aim of

literary criticism is to contribute to a fuller understanding of the author's original intentions. A discussion of this still-influential body of work will therefore precede a consideration of those interventions which have discussed autobiography from the vantage point of a post-structuralist notion of the relation between subjects, texts and the wider social formation.

Since the woman's confessional novel is both autobiographical in form and confessional in tone, this chapter's discussion of the cultural instrumentality of the confession will be preceded by a consideration of the cultural work performed by autobiography. Moreover before autobiography can be discussed, a small explanatory comment is first required, for it is sometimes objected that very few truly autobiographical works have ever been written, and that those texts generally labelled autobiographical are often, in part, fictional. In the light of the immense difficulties presented by the task of distinguishing between the truly and the partly¹⁴ autobiographical, as discussed by both Elisabeth Wilson¹⁵ and Paul Jay, this chapter will use the term 'autobiographical style' to describe those first person narratives which, to a greater or lesser extent aim to portray their central protagonist in what John Cleland¹⁶ has referred to as 'the stark naked truth'. This suggestion runs counter to Jean Starbinski's proposal that 'it is essential to avoid speaking of an

autobiographical "style" or even an autobiographical
"form" because there is no such generic style or form.¹⁷

While there are clearly difficulties attendant upon defining the genre conclusively, the sheer amount of literary criticism devoted to describing and analysing the autobiographical novel does suggest that a degree of generic commonality between such first person narratives has generally been assumed.

On the whole, the question of cultural instrumentality has not been foregrounded within humanist literary-critical approaches to autobiography which have tended to suggest that autobiography merely reflects an author's attempt to give as truthful an account of himself as he can manage.¹⁸ Yet while this reflectionist tendency marks much of the criticism addressed to the autobiographical style, opinions do vary as to the exact nature of what is reflected. On the one hand, some would agree with James Olney that autobiography reflects an essential and unchanging human nature which desires to write about itself: 'there is no evolving autobiographical form to trace from the beginning through history to its present state because man has always cast his autobiography and has done it in that form to which his private spirit impelled him'.¹⁹ On the other hand and more typically, others like Georges Gusdorf have suggested that while autobiography does reflect rather than partially shape

the human condition, it reflects a historically shifting rather than essential and unchanging human nature: 'the genre of autobiography seems limited in time and space: it has not always existed, nor does it exist everywhere'.²⁰ Though Gusdorf's essay does not shift debate significantly beyond a consideration of autobiography as reflection, his suggestion that autobiography may itself be shaped by historical, social or cultural change does problematise Olney's essentialist emphasis, and begins to raise questions about the relationship between writer, text and context. Such questions do not necessarily impute to the autobiography a greater degree of cultural instrumentality than mere reflection, but the questions they raise concerning the determinants of changes within autobiography contribute to a destabilisation of the humanist legacy concerning an essential human nature.

Several literary theorists have recently suggested that a historical study of the autobiographical style reveals that its origins reflect the arrival onto the historical stage of a newly individualised self, and that the development of this literary style reflects shifts in the way that individualism has been experienced. This approach to autobiography is informed by recent historical and cultural studies which have tended to converge around a belief that the concept of the individual is historically and culturally specific.

According to this viewpoint, the coherent individual subject - the 'I' of contemporary common sense - was arrived at through the convergence of religious, economic, philosophical, social, and cultural changes. Though the exact weight ascribed to each of these factors varies according to the persuasion of the writer, it is generally agreed that it was at some point during the seventeenth century that the fully formed individual first walked onto the historical stage and began to appear within the pages of novels, diaries and autobiographies. This development has been identified by the historian Lawrence Stone, who argues that 'in the seventeenth century, there is clear evidence for a new interest in the self, and for recognition of the uniqueness of the individual. This is a development common to Europe, and which apparently had its origins in two different strands of thought: the secular Renaissance ideal of the individual hero as expressed in the autobiography of Cellini or the essays of Montaigne; and the religious introspection arising from the Calvinist sense of guilt and anxiety about salvation. There developed a series of wholly new genres of writing, the intimately self-revelatory diary, the autobiography and the love letter.'²¹ For Stone, then, the emergence of the autobiography reflected wider cultural and religious changes which were giving rise, during the seventeenth century, to a new sense of individual self. Like Stone,

Christopher Hill also locates the birth of the individual during the seventeenth century: in Century of Revolution, Hill argues that 'all roads in our period have led to individualism ... privacy contributed to the introspection and soul-searching of radical Puritanism, to the keeping of diaries and spiritual journals ... The defeat of Puritan political hopes turned mens' aspirations to seek a paradise within ... Earlier in the (seventeenth) century the popularity of portrait painting, of the drama, of "the character" had revealed a growing interest in individual psychology to which Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy and Samuel Cooper's portraits bear witness. Now, through Bunyan this was to blossom into the novel, the most individualistic of literary forms.'²² Though Stone and Hill differ as to whether religious or economic factors were of primary determinacy in bringing about this shift towards a spirit of individualism, they are both united in the belief that these changes were then expressed or reflected by the writing of the period, and thus do not advance the question of cultural instrumentality in relation to autobiography beyond the notion of reflection.

Ian Watt's The Rise Of The Novel adopts a somewhat contradictory position in relation to the latter question, for while he does suggest that the novel, and more specifically the autobiography reflect wider social changes, he does seem to move towards suggesting that the

novel, or more particularly autobiography may indeed have played a part in shaping the new individuality. In support of the reflectionist position, Watt argues that 'the novel is the form of literature which most fully reflects the individualist and innovating re-orientation. Previous literary forms had reflected the general tendency of their cultures to make conformity to traditional practice the major test of truth ... This literary traditionalism was first and most fully challenged by the novel, whose primary criterion was truth to individual experience.'²³ Watt goes on to argue that the autobiography was the genre par excellence of the new individualism: 'Defoe initiated an important new tendency in fiction: his total subordination of the plot to the pattern of the autobiographical memoir is as defiant an assertion of the primacy of individual experience in the novel as Descartes's cogito ergo sum in philosophy.'²⁴ From here, Watt moves on to problematise the notion that such literary innovation represents a direct reflection of changes occurring elsewhere in the realm of the social; he proposes that the literary realism which characterises this new form can be shown to be related to the new philosophy of realism through a series of analogues, however he goes on to add that these analogues 'are not proposed as exact; philosophy is one thing and literature is another ... Nor do these analogues depend in any way on the presumption that the

realist tradition in philosophy was a cause of the realism of the novel. That there was some influence is very likely ... But if a causal relationship of any importance exists, it is probably much less direct: both the philosophical and the literary manifestations must be seen as parallel manifestations of a larger change - that vast transformation of western civilisation since the Renaissance which has replaced the unified world picture of the middle ages with another very different one - one which presents us, essentially, with a developing but unplanned aggregate of particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times in particular places.²⁵ Here Watt's stress on the specificity of the literary begins to move theories of autobiography and its cultural instrumentality away from the reflection hypothesis and towards a consideration of its specific effectivity. While Watt remains elusive concerning the origins of that turn towards individualism, which, he argues, gave rise to changes both within philosophy and within literature, his emphasis upon the specificity of the literary suggests both that questions remain concerning what gives rise to literary changes, and that literature too, might have its own domain of effectivity - might play a part in shaping wider historical shifts. Such a position problematises a purely reflectionist position on the relationship between literature and society, while its emphasis on the shaping power of individualism casts doubt on the humanist belief that

autobiography reflects the 'stark naked truth' of the author, implying that authors may themselves be shaped by the literary conventions of the time.

Nevertheless, these implications have remained largely undeveloped within more detailed historical studies of autobiography, which have tended to hold in tension both a humanist notion of autobiography as the reflection of the author's creative spirit, and some notion of the genre having been shaped by either the new individualism, or a new stress on individuality. In his history of the autobiographical form²⁶, W C Spengemann divides the genre into three historical periods: 'what I call historical autobiography seems to me to accord perfectly with the climate of opinion regarding the self that prevailed from the middle ages to the Enlightenment, philosophic autobiography to reflect the changes in that climate which occurred around the turn of the eighteenth century and poetic autobiography to express the radically altered conditions that resulted from the ideological upheavals of the nineteenth century.'²⁷ Though Spengemann insists that 'we need to understand the conditions that have led different autobiographers at different times to write about themselves in different ways'²⁸, his insistence that autobiography represents a 'response to changing ideas about the nature of the self, the way in which the self has been apprehended ...'²⁹,

implies that autobiography itself merely 'reports'³⁰
religious and philosophical change, granting to the
literary form itself only a minor degree of cultural
instrumentality. Karl Weintraub's suggestions that
'autobiography assumes a significant cultural function
around AD 1800'³¹, and that 'autobiography proper ... is
obviously conditioned by the prevailing conception of
"life"³² seems to extend Watt's and Spengemann's notion
of the cultural instrumentality of autobiography beyond
that of mere reflection and to suggest a more dialectical
relation between subject, text and context. Yet his
conclusion that 'A full form of historical mindedness
came to the fore when the trust in the power of genetic
explanation became wedded to the fascination with
individual specificity as a treasured thing ...'³³ denies
the possibility that the autobiographical style may
itself have played some part in shaping the newly
individualised subject identified by Weintraub.

It was the impact of post-structuralist theories of
subjectivity's relation to language which first led
critics of the autobiographical style to extend notions
of its cultural instrumentality beyond those of mere
reflection. Such theories took as their starting point
Althusser's declaration that the media and the arts
constitute relatively autonomous ideological levels
within the social formation which 'contribute to the
process of reproducing ... the social relationships which

are the necessary condition for the existence and perpetuation of the capitalist mode of production.³⁴ In particular, this post-structuralist emphasis on the ideological role of the media and the arts, including literature in the reproduction of such social relationships, foregrounded the constitutive part played by these cultural practices in the construction of subjects for ideology. Crudely, Althusser argued that ideology was both produced by and produced the particular forms of subjectivity which 'inhabited' it: 'I say: the category of the subject is constitutive of all ideology, but at the same time and immediately I add that the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology in so far as all ideology has the function ...³⁵ of "constituting" concrete individuals as subjects.'

Moreover it was language, according to post-structuralism, which played the central part in ideology's 'elementary ideological effect'³⁶, - the constitution of subjects for ideology. According to Emile Benveniste, it is language which constitutes the subject since it is language which places the speaker as 'I', the subject of the sentence: 'Language is possible only because each speaker sets himself up as a subject by referring to himself as I in his discourse.'³⁷

Emphasis on the role of language in the constitution of subjectivity arose from post-structuralism's engagement

with the French psycho-analyst Jaques Lacan's re-reading
of the works of Freud³⁸ and raises issues far too complex
to be fully taken up within this chapter, where what does
need emphasis, in the context of post-structuralist
approaches to autobiography, is the Lacanian stress on
the illusory nature of this subject's coherence, unity
and autonomy. The notion of the author as guarantor of
the truth, coherence and unity of the autobiography was
thrown in question by post-structuralism's Saussurian³⁹
insistence that 'if language is a system of differences
with no positive terms'⁴⁰, the 'I' of autobiography
designates only the subject of each specific utterance.
Lacan extended this de-construction of the coherence and
unity of the subject by arguing that the constitution of
the 'I' of individual subjectivity is founded upon mis-
recognition. According to Lacan, the mirror-phase, in
which the infant perceives itself as other, an image,
outside its own perceiving self, depends upon a
splitting between the I which is perceived and the I
which perceives. Entry into language re-inforces this
first split since it necessitates a second division
between 'the subject of the "enonce" and the I who
speaks, the subject of the enunciation.'⁴¹ Lacan argued
that there is thus a contradiction between the self which
is spoken about and the self which speaks, a
contradiction which gives rise to 'the unconscious' at
the moment of entry into the symbolic order.

The impact of this body of theory upon the study of autobiography has brought about a thorough-going reconceptualisation of the relation between the author - the subject of the enunciation - and the 'I' of autobiography - the subject of the enonce. Once it had been posited that these two subject positions contradict, rather than mirror each other, then it was no longer possible to argue that autobiography mirrored the experiences of its author: indeed autobiography became a 'test-case' for post-structuralist literary theory, which sought to overturn the powerful 'realist' notion of autobiography as mirror of the author's soul, by arguing that there is a contradiction between the self which appears in autobiography and 'the self which is only partly represented there, the self which speaks'.⁴²

This contradictory relation between the subject of the enunciation and of the enonce has been taken up variously by post-structuralist critics of autobiography, who have tended, on the whole, to regard autobiography as a 'limit-text' since its foregrounding of the relation between the author and the 'I' of the narrative arguably threatens at every turn to call in question the congruence of the two. In a dramatic rehearsal of one version of this position, Louis Renza emphasises autobiography's foregrounding of the split between the enunciator and the enunciated, and insists on their

inevitable historical disjuncture - concluding that autobiography therefore constitutes a suicidal genre since 'it presents the writer with an empty or discursive "self" - an "I" never his own because it makes present what remains past to him.'

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The question of what manner of cultural instrumentality is implied by a post-structuralist theory of autobiography is a complex one, for though one tendency identified has emphasised autobiography's potential to unsettle the illusory coherence of the subject by foregrounding the contradictory process through which that subject comes into being, it is nevertheless the case that to some extent, post-structuralism regards autobiography as one instance in the production of that illusory coherence. Thus John Morris's assertion that 'form in autobiography is as important a part of the meaning as it is in a poem or a novel ... its narrative continuity asserts the unity of self - that "continuous personality"...' is not necessarily entirely out of keeping with a post-structuralist approach. The question which arises in this context concerns the extent to which autobiography's foregrounding of the contradictory process which gives rise to subjectivity undercuts its apparent assertion of that subject's coherence and continuity.

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In Being In The Text, Paul Jay surveys the history of

autobiography from a vantage point informed by Paul De Man's conviction that 'the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact ... determined ... by the resources of his medium.'⁴⁵ For Jay, the history of autobiography from St. Augustine's Confessions onwards constitutes a literary mapping of shifts in the ontology of the subject, as a belief in the possibility of gaining access to divine truth by way of inward knowledge gave way firstly to a relocation of divinity within the process of artistic production, and thence with the increasing secularisation of society, to a belief that truth lay in the process of introspection itself. Yet the shift towards a search for truth within, rather than via introspective first person narration led to a paradoxical foregrounding of the 'fictionality' of the self - a paradox which, argues Jay, underlies the historical development of autobiography. Jay traces the history of autobiography from The Prelude's 'implicit and continually repressed realisation that the textual "I" is always a partly fictive Other'⁴⁶, via Joyce's Portrait of the Artist, which, he argues, makes the fictionality of its subject, the subject of its narrative, to Barthes on Barthes, which he sees as 'a sustained denial of the fiction that the subject is anything other than a creation of human consciousness and human language.'⁴⁷

Though Jay's history of autobiography holds in tension both a structuralist emphasis on autobiography's constitutive role in the production of subjectivity and a more idealist notion that autobiography represents merely the translation of 'a psychological subject into a literary one'⁴⁸ (implying a lesser role in the constitution of subjectivity for autobiography itself), he does insist that we should view 'the subject as a textual production'⁴⁹. For Jay the history of autobiography constitutes a sustained attempt to resolve those contradictions which, he argues, lie at the heart of the autobiographical enterprise. As the 'fictionality' of the autobiographical self, the subject of the enonce, began to be addressed, rather than repressed, by autobiography itself, so such literature attempted to resolve or at least to hold at bay the constant threat posed to coherent subjectivity by the threat of its 'Otherness': 'What I will be charting ...is the growing recognition of how complex and problematic is the transposition of the author into the autobiographical protagonist and, in addition, how its disruption can in turn disrupt the personal and psychological goals of such works.'⁵⁰

Catherine Belsey's very brief post-structuralist history of autobiographical writing produces an alternative account of the historical factors which erode 'confidence'⁵¹ in the ideology of subjectivity.' For while Jay argued

that the deepening crisis he traced had its roots in the gradual secularisation of society, for Belsey, this erosion of confidence gains its impetus 'at times of crisis in the social formation, when the mode of production is radically threatened ...' ⁵² This difference of opinion leads Belsey and Jay to produce very different readings of Wordsworth's Prelude. For Jay, the latter constitutes what he calls a 'limit-text', since its repression of the contradictory relation between its author and protagonist is only ever partially resolved. For Belsey, on the other hand, The Prelude constitutes a 'successful' production of 'a super subject' ⁵³ : 'Here the project of the text is to ensure a convergence between the subject of the enonce and the subject of the enunciation to create a unified identity ... what the poet was, we are to understand, is the source of what he is.' ⁵⁴ Belsey and Jay clearly disagree over which historical factors are most likely to encourage the dissolution of the coherent and illusory subject of bourgeois ideology, but their theses converge in their common belief that its potential for dissolution arises from 'this contradiction in the subject - between the conscious self, which is conscious in so far as it is able to feature in discourse, and the self which is only partially represented there ...' ⁵⁵ Here, we return, once more, to the question of cultural instrumentality, for Belsey's commitment to a Lacanian-inspired post-

structuralism leads her to assert the subversive potential of autobiographical writing.

Several objections might be raised, however, in relation to this position: firstly, Belsey's position rests on an a priori account of reader response, which begs a series of questions concerning the conditions under which such subversiveness is most likely to reach its potential. In this context, it is interesting to compare Belsey's position with that of other critical interventions concerning the role of the reader of autobiography, for an alternative proposal argues that though autobiography does foreground instabilities at the core of literary self representation, this serves not to disturb the reader, but to turn the reader into 'the author' of the narrative. This position has been most forcefully advanced by John Pilling who argues that 'the scrutiny of self is squarely bound up with the construction of an art object that, by virtue of its multi-faceted perspectives, turns the relationship between author and reader inside out and gives renewed intensity to the "auto" of autobiography.'⁵⁶ From this perspective, then, the role of the reader of autobiography is, as Pilling insists,⁵⁷ 'collaborative' - for it is the reader who is invited to 'solve' the mystery of the autobiography by 'resolving' the contradictions posed by the act of autobiographical writing. This position might be seen as offering a corrective to Belsey's assumption concerning

autobiographical writing's potential to unsettle fixed subject positions, since it would now appear that this potential is inhibited by autobiography's address to its reader, which according to William Howarth, turns the reader into the hero of the narrative: 'the hero ... is its reader, who alone can master its final form.'⁵⁸

What Belsey and Jay champion, however, is autobiography's arguable potential, revealed at times of crisis, to subvert fixed subject positions by foregrounding the split between the conscious and the discursive self. According to Belsey, this foregrounding of the subject as process reveals that 'submission to the discursive practices of society is challenged by the existence of another self which is not synonymous with the subject of discourse'⁵⁹. What both Belsey and Jay move on to advocate is an avant-garde writing practice which foregrounds autobiography's arguable potential to unsettle fixed subject positions.

Though this post-structuralist tendency remains an influential one within literary theory, it will now be proposed that the application of theories advanced by the French thinker Michel Foucault to the question of the cultural instrumentality of autobiography and its confessional mode problematises the position described above. For Foucault and his followers, the process of

writing the self through autobiography constitutes a moment in 'that immense labour to turn man into a subject ... in order to subject him more completely and inescapably to the traversals and furrowings of power ...'⁶⁰ While the momentary revelation of a divided or split subject holds out, for Belsey and Jay, the promise of the eventual dissolution of subjectivity as it is now lived, for Foucault and his followers, the 'putting into discourse' of this very divideness constitutes the central technique for the production of that very subjectivity which, it should be added, is constituted as constantly in process. As opposed to Belsey, for Foucault, 'technologies of the self'⁶¹ - including autobiography and confession - both give rise to and operate in relation to a 'subject in process' - a subject which is not fixed, but constantly changing: in relation to confession, for instance, Foucault insists that 'it is ... a ritual in which the expression alone ... produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems and purifies him, it unburdens him of his wrongs ... and promises him salvation.'⁶² [emphasis added]. Since Foucault has expounded this thesis most fully in relation to the confession, this chapter will now move on to a fuller discussion of the cultural instrumentality of the confessional mode of autobiographical writing.

The Confessional Mode

Critics have noted a recent tendency for confession, with roots stretching back to St Augustine's Confessions, to all but take over the field of autobiography.⁶³ Yet though it is widely agreed that the confessional mode, characterised by a high degree of self-revelation, often of a supposedly 'intimate nature' has flooded the literary field, the question of its cultural instrumentality has been less widely addressed. Moreover though Michel Foucault's writings on 'the confession' as a 'technology of the self'⁶⁴ have been relatively influential within the field of cultural studies since their first publication in the early '70's, literary criticism's engagement with this mode either preceded, or has been relatively untouched by the impact of the Foucauldian thesis. In what follows, a discussion of the cultural instrumentality of the confession implied by the writings of Foucault will be preceded, therefore, by a discussion of several alternative theses, proposed not only from within the field of literary criticism, but also from the field of cultural commentary more generally. Since literary theory has only recently initiated discussion of the confession and its cultural instrumentality, these discussions will themselves be preceded by a delineation of those features of the confessional mode which arguably demarcate it from the general field of autobiography.

Attempts to describe the confessional mode of autobiographical writing have been both advanced and impeded by comparison with 'autobiography proper'. Though Paul Jay does not believe that it is possible to distinguish a discrete genre of autobiographical writing, he includes mention of St. Augustine's Confessions and Rousseau's The Confessions in his history of literary self-representation⁶⁵, as does W C Spengemann⁶⁶ who sees these works as belonging unproblematically within a discrete autobiographical genre. From this position it might appear that insufficient grounds exist upon which to distinguish a confessional mode within the autobiographical or self reflexive style, but more recently, several commentators have sought to define the confessional mode more closely, and although E L Stelzig has argued that the confessional novel is 'a prominent and problematic middle term between autobiography and fiction'⁶⁷, Peter Axthelm's exploration of the historical antecedents of the modern confessional novel opens by asserting that its origins can be traced back to St. Augustine's Confessions⁶⁸. Both Spengemann and Axthelm return to the latter in their search for the origins of autobiography and the confessional mode respectively, which suggests that the confession might properly be regarded as a mode of autobiographical writing; moreover closer attempts to define confessional narratives almost

unanimously do so within the context of autobiography, for example L M Porter concludes that the confessional narrative is a form of autobiographical writing, and sets about distinguishing it from what he terms 'autobiography proper'.⁶⁹ Further, those critics who have sought to define the confessional mode relatively succinctly have, on the whole, emphasised its status as a narrative of self-representation as well as its search for truth via a quest into the central protagonist's 'interior': Peter Axthelm defines the confession as 'sincere and passionate self-scrutiny'⁷⁰, adding that 'it presents a hero, at some point in his life, examining his past as well as his innermost thoughts in an effort to achieve some form of perception'⁷¹, while G K Hongo defines the confession as 'a condensed narrative about the evolution of an identity'⁷².

Several critics have attempted to identify the key characteristics of the confessional mode: 'selection' is highlighted by Axthelm, who emphasises that the confessional narrative does not offer itself as an all-inclusive representation of its central protagonist.⁷³ Likewise, E L Stelzig argues that the confession describes a slice, rather than the whole of a life,⁷⁴ going on to propose that it represents a scaling down of the attempt to 'get all of the person between the covers of a book ...'⁷⁵ While autobiography 'proper' tends to describe a life from the vantage point of a relatively

aged narrator, Stelzig also points out that the narrator of the confession tends to be if not young, then younger than the typical narrator of autobiography⁷⁶, while Axthelm adds to this description of the typical narrator of the confession, by pointing out that they are often represented as 'intellectuals'.⁷⁷

While these definitions of the confession so far reviewed have all been addressed to an ahistorical or 'ideal' version of the mode, critical histories have suggested that it has been subject to historical variation. It might at first glance appear that the historical development of the confessional novel has been indistinguishable from that of autobiography proper, or even the realist novel in its entirety: indeed as Ian Watt⁷⁸ and Elisabeth Wilson⁷⁹ (amongst many others) have pointed out, the realist novel, the confession and the autobiography all have their roots in that vast transformation of the seventeenth century which produced a capitalist, individualistic and highly privatised society. Yet closer studies of the history of the confession reveal that a discrete and particular history can be traced. It is generally agreed that the confessional mode first became dominant within autobiographical writing during the mid to late nineteenth century, for instance for Peter Axthelm, the publication of Dostoevsky's Notes from the Underground in

1864 marked the emergence of the first truly confessional novel, characterised by the impulse towards not self-exposition, but self-analysis, or self-discovery: the central character can find answers 'only through a sincere and single purposed self-analysis'⁸⁰. This 'inward turn'⁸¹, identified by Axthelm as at the very heart of the modern confessional novel, registered, he argues, a turning away from older confessional modes, within which the confessor seeks absolution and salvation from an outside power, usually God, and a turning towards a belief in salvation via introspection as an end in itself. Like Axthelm, Stelzig too pinpoints the emergence of the modern confession in the mid to late nineteenth century, when 'the confessional novel begins to flourish in a major way ...'⁸². However though Axthelm identifies the 'inward turn' as heralding the emergence of the modern confessional novel, further developments within this 'inward turn' have also been commented upon. Though Leon Edel's The Psychological Novel⁸³ does not directly address the confession, his comments on developments within twentieth century fiction, characterised, he argues by 'its inward turning to convey the flow of mental experience'⁸⁴, are, in the light of Axthelm's comments, of relevance to the development of the confession, especially since he pays particular attention to Dostoevsky. The historical development which Edel points to differentiates between a Dostoevskian 'inward turn', where the narrator reports the interior

experiences and reflections of the central protagonist, and a more recent, post-nineteenth century 'rendition' of those subjective states⁸⁵. A further development within the modern confession has been noted by Elisabeth Wilson, who points out that more recently still, the confessional writings of William Burroughs, Alexander Trocchi, John Reechy and Hubert Selby have extended the 'shameless self-revelation'⁸⁶ inaugurated by Rousseau's Confessions into previously forbidden areas of homosexuality, drug-taking and pornography⁸⁷. Taken together, these comments suggest that the modern confession's development has traced a penetration into two previously 'unknown' areas, firstly, the area of the interior: the private, closed world of self-reflection - the mental interior, and secondly 'deviant' or forbidden areas such as those of drug-taking and homosexuality.

The above review of descriptions of the modern confession have emphasised the following features as those which distinguish the mode from autobiography proper. Emphasis has been placed firstly on its 'inward-turning' mode of narration, which arose with the shift from rendering, rather than merely reporting the interior world of the confession's central protagonist. This 'inward-turn' in search of self-transformation is impelled by the sufferings and self-doubts of the central protagonist⁸⁸. In addition, the increased penetration into private

interior space led to a new emphasis on the sexual. Four features have so far emerged as key characteristics of the modern confession: firstly, its 'inward-turning' mode of narration, secondly its rendition of what I shall call the 'becomingness', or self-transformation, of its central protagonist, thirdly its delineation of a suffering central protagonist and fourthly its emphasis on the sexual. Before moving on to discuss the cultural instrumentality which they together imply, this chapter will first discuss each of these features more closely under the headings mode of narration, 'becomingness', sexuality and suffering.

Mode of Narration

It has generally been agreed that the modern confessional novel's mode of narration purports not only to report, but to make accessible to the reader, the experience of journeying inward in search of self-knowledge and in hope of self-transformation. Closer studies of the confessional's mode of narration reveal, however, that the inward journey that the confession purports to reveal is, in fact, constructed by means of a range of literary codes and conventions: Dorrit Cohn quotes Schiller, in order to expose the 'lie' at the heart of the 'inward turning' narrative: 'when the soul speaks, alas it is no longer the soul that speaks'⁸⁹, pointing out that 'contrary to a widely held belief, the novelist who

wishes to portray the least conscious strata of psychic life is forced to do so by way of the most indirect ... of the available modes ...' ⁹⁰ The confession's apparent 'projection of inner life before the world' ⁹¹ together with the 'illusion' ⁹² that it is offering access to the most private and personal areas of it's central protagonist's mind is constructed, as Stelzig has pointed out, via a splitting of central protagonist and author, or reliable narrator, whose relationship to one another he describes as 'the paradoxical one of identity and difference' ⁹³ . The reliable narrator's confessions concern the activities, thoughts and feelings of a central protagonist who is separated from that narrator by age and experience.

Though, as Porter has pointed out, this mode of narration 'multiplies implicit distinctions between protagonist and implied author ...' ⁹⁴ , the confession mobilises a range of strategies to compound or confound the distance between the two: thus while an ironic narrative tone implies distance between the central protagonist and the narrator, a more sympathetic tone implies an empathetic closeness. A relation of absolute identity between the two is unlikely , however, for a temporal distance must separate central protagonist and narrator, in order for the reliable narrator to confess his earlier activities, thoughts and feelings. Furthermore since confession

produces self-transformation, each act of confession both adds to and alters the view of the central protagonist that the reliable narrator offers the reader, or, as Stelzig puts it in his succinct summary of this aspect of the mode of narration, 'the signified self is changed in the process of self-transformation; confessions are Janus faced ...' ⁹⁵ .

In his essay 'The Habit of Confession', Bruce H Tracey draws a comparison between the modern confessional novel's address to its reader and the monologue of the analysand: 'This is an oral mode of free association monologue closely resembling the psychoanalytic as opposed to the religious confession ...' ⁹⁶ . The reliable narrator's confessions are therefore addressed to a reader who is invited to adopt the position of analyst. These confessions which add to the reader's knowledge concerning the central protagonist function as a 'talking cure': it is the telling, the confession itself, which brings about changes in the confessor, and it is this self-transformation - this process of 'becomingness' - which is both described and brought about by the confessional narrative.

Becomingness

'Only the process of becoming is essential ... if the book reveals that process, it endures, like a poem, for

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ever ...'

The trope of 'becomingness' produces a central protagonist characterised as 'in process'. At the heart of the diegetic movement of the confession is a subject on his way, a subject 'becoming', a subject characterised, indeed, by this forward movement towards becoming someone who is both identical with and yet markedly different from his former self. Though as Stelzig has pointed out, this literary enactment of 'a definition of the self in historical terms, as a process of becoming'⁹⁸ is not limited to the confession, the analysand-like address of the confessional's reliable narrator, together with its positioning of its reader as recipient of the confession not only foregrounds becomingness, but grants to the reader a central role in the process. 'Becomingness' does not occur in a vacuum; the movement forwards depends upon a telling, and it is to the reader that this telling is addressed. The reader, positioned as listener or analyst is placed, in a position of trust, the maintenance of which, according to Stelzig, 'is (probably) essential to any first person narrative which takes the form of confession.'⁹⁹ Though the confessions of the reliable narrator invite the reader to adopt the relatively powerful position of trusted listener or analyst, implying that it is the reader as analyst who is responsible for the confessor's

becomingness, an identification with the central protagonist threatens to unsettle readerly authority or power since at any one moment the central protagonist is both recognised and mis-recognised: we recognise the character who bears the name of the central protagonist, yet we mis-recognise because that character is never caught frozen outside the diegetic movement of 'becomingness'. The central protagonist is marked then as identical with himself and yet always moving on - in process. At the same time, that 'somewhere else' to which the central protagonist is moving is partially evoked through the reliable narrator, since that voice is always speaking from further along the path of becomingness, and must necessarily be so in order to do the telling.

The implied never-endingness of the 'becomingness' of the confessional narrative together with the necessarily inconclusive conclusion produced by the logic of 'becomingness' itself, would seem to *unsettle* Belsey's claim that any unfixing of identity within the classic realist novel is always undermined by the novel's closure¹⁰⁰. It might therefore be suggested that the confessional novel should be heralded as an 'interrogative text'¹⁰¹ - a text which works against the suppression of the unfixity of subjectivity. Yet this argument might be countered, perhaps, by pointing to the relative conventionality of the 'becomingness' trope within western literary culture. As Stelzig has pointed

out, since the late nineteenth century, the belief in the possibility of a psychological and temporal grasping of the whole self has begun to give way, as a model of a more open-ended and existential sense of self began to gain ground. Whereas novelists such as Goethe could still try to encompass the whole of a life-cycle within the bounds of a single work, since the nineteenth century 'such schemes to get all of the person between the covers of a book began to be scaled down.'¹⁰² . The unfinished or incomplete self, the 'self on the way', is a commonplace, one might say, of contemporary confessional fiction. While this does not necessarily rule out the possibility that the confession is indeed an interrogative text, the sense of readerly questioning and disruption which Belsey associates with such texts¹⁰³ seems anything but likely in the face of its sheer conventionality. Yet commonplace as it is, it is still arguably the case that the central protagonist's 'becomingness' unsettles fixed subject positions to some degree. The question of what this suggests concerning the cultural instrumentality of the confession will be taken up a little further on in this chapter.

Sexuality

Sexuality is a central concern of the contemporary

confessional novel - so much so, indeed, that it has led several commentators to argue that the concern with sexuality is one of the key defining characteristics of this literary mode. E L Stelzig goes so far as to argue that it is no accident that 'the erotic aspect has loomed so large in confessional writing ... for the presiding deity of the confessional imagination, of the self fantasised, is none other than Eros.'¹⁰⁴ Similarly, Rosalind Coward also argues that the contemporary confessional novel has become 'more preoccupied with talking about sex', and goes on to argue that 'Sexual confessions moved to the mainstream in the 1950's and '60's with writers like J D Salinger, Kingsley Amis, Henry Miller and Philip Roth ...'¹⁰⁵ . Only Lawrence Porter moves towards any problematisation of this association between a concern with sexuality and the confessional mode, when he argues that though Gide's Si Le Grain Ne Meurt 'resembles a confessional novel ... because much of it is devoted to reporting what at the time was inadmissible sexual behaviour - masturbation and homosexuality - on the part of the protagonist'¹⁰⁶ , its rhetoric 'differentiates it sharply from a confession'¹⁰⁷ . Even here, though, the association is only partly *unsettled* as Porter does acknowledge that the foregrounding of sexuality suggests an association with confessional writing.

In her article 'Tell It Like It Is: Women and

Confessional Writing' Elisabeth Wilson lends greater weight to Stelzig's and Coward's contentions that sexuality constitutes a key defining characteristic of the modern confessional novel by arguing that sexual confessions formed the central concern of the 60's confessions of Trocchi and Burroughs. While the associations drawn by Wilson and Tracey between confessional writing and the 'sexual revolution' of the '60's and between confessional writing and the growing popularity of psycho-analysis respectively might lend support to the idea that the inclusion of sexual revelations in confessional writing constituted a break from the literary past, an alternative proposal would suggest that the inclusion of intimate sexual revelation marks not a new departure but the further development of a tendency which can be identified within all fictional writing from the mid-eighteenth century onwards: namely an increasing stress on emotion, sentiment and latterly sexuality.

One critical tendency has sought the explanation for these changes within changing class relations, arguing that from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, 'literary convention began to justify the exposure of sensibility'¹⁰⁸ as part of the attempt by a new bourgeoisie to lay claim to a new non-aristocratic 'gentility', the evidence of which could be found within

their feelings and sensibilities , while a differently nuanced account privileges 'a contemporary endeavour to place the moral life on a secular basis.'¹¹⁰ Yet while it seems relatively uncontentious to place the growing accent on sexual matters within the context of this wider stress on the exposure of sensibility, this account fails to provide sufficient explanation for the cultural instrumentality of sexual confession within the contemporary context; this line of questioning will therefore be further developed in the following section under cultural instrumentality.

Suffering

Several commentators have noted that the central protagonist's journey of 'becomingness' is typically described as painful and difficult - indeed it would not be too much of an exaggeration to describe the path of becomingness as a path of suffering. Peter Axthelm points to this feature of the confessional narrative when he argues that: 'the confessional hero faces many of the same problems which confront every modern hero, but is distinguished by his reaction to them. He views his condition not with anger, but with deep internal pain; he rejects external rebellion in favour of self-laceration. His suffering originates not in the chaos of the world but in the chaos within the self ...'¹¹¹ The birth of the modern confessional novel in the mid-nineteenth century

was co-incident, according to Axthelm, with the arrival of a 'painful consciousness'¹¹², struggling, for the first time, to wrest meaning and truth from introspection.

Axthelm's description usefully highlights a central feature of the modern confessional novel, yet his account, with its stress on the difficulties and dangers of the introspective journey of becomingness merely re-states, rather than investigates this narrative mode's problematic of subjectivity, leaving questions of its cultural instrumentality unasked.

The Cultural Instrumentality Of The Confession

The mid to late nineteenth century onwards witnessed a marked swing towards the confessional mode of the autobiographical style. This swing has been deemed culturally instrumental in a variety of ways and from a widely divergent range of positions both within and outside the confines of literary theory and criticism. The following section will review and discuss the major interventions within this debate.

One major tendency within literary theory has suggested that the confessional mode reflects a shift from the belief that truth resided in the individual's relation to

God, to a belief that truth resided within the individual. Though in both cases, the quest for truth involved contemplation, self-analysis and reflection, whereas within the former problematic these activities were believed to lead individuals towards some realisation of their true relation to God, within the second, the inward journey was seen as an end in itself: each individual's introspective journey led only inwards and onwards towards an elusive and highly individual truth. In The Inward Turn Of Narrative, Erich Kahler describes this process as 'an increasing displacement of outer space ... a stretching of consciousness ...' ¹¹³. While it might be objected that the inward turn has characterised much fictional writing from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the previous discussion of the confession has highlighted the extent to which this mode foregrounds and is centrally concerned with this process of self-analysis, and might therefore be described as the mode par excellence of the inward turn. The confession is commonly regarded then as a reflection of secularisation, and the new, highly atomised and fragmented sense of individual reality heralded by capitalist and industrial developments.

In The Fall Of Public Man, Richard Sennett exemplifies this tendency to see the inward turn typified by confession as reflecting an anxiety the source of which 'lies in broad changes in capitalism and religious

belief'.¹¹⁴ These changes have led, argues Sennett to a society within which 'each person's self has become his principle burden;¹¹⁵' .

Though Sennett's work includes no specific discussion of confessional writing, his critique of contemporary society's accent on the 'the private ... (as) an end in itself'¹¹⁶ which results, he argues, in a social world in which 'to know oneself has become an end, instead of a means through which one knows the world'¹¹⁷, clearly articulates with Axthelm's description of the confessional mode as one response to the challenge to find meaning entirely within the self.¹¹⁸

What each of these approaches to confessional writing and the inward turning culture of which it forms a part share, is an underlying notion that the mode reflects, or marks one response to, a shift to a more secular, atomised society. Confessional writing is conceptualised here as a terminal, or end-point - a conceptualisation which fails to engage with the question of the cultural instrumentality of confession itself.

A second version of this 'reflectionist' model of the cultural instrumentality of confessional writing might take as its starting point Sennett's stress on the anxiety about the self which finds reflection in the

contemporary stress on the private and the inward turn. Such an approach sees the cultural instrumentality of a literary mode not as the reflection of economic and religious conditions, but rather as the reflection of a national or international 'collective consciousness' and is exemplified by the work of both Lawrence Porter and Christopher Lasch.

In his article 'Autobiography Versus The Confessional Novel', Porter proposes that the key distinguishing features between these two literary modes are the nature of the narrator-protagonists' relationship to their audiences and the ostensible degree of self awareness of those narrator-protagonists. Porter argues that whereas the autobiography constructs an adult to adult relationship between narrator-protagonists and audience and employs a rhetoric of awareness and self-discovery, the narrator-protagonists of the confession address their audience either as a child addresses its parents or as a parent addresses a child¹¹⁹. Porter's analysis, which makes use of terms borrowed from transactional analysis, concludes that only autobiographical writing reflects a mature culture, where adult to adult relationships are the norm, and suggests that the contemporary proliferation of confessional novels reflects an increasingly regressive tendency within contemporary culture.

A similar point is made by Christopher Lasch, who, in his two major works of cultural commentary The Culture of Narcissism¹²⁰ and The Minimal Self¹²¹ argues that the 'inward turn' so often identified as a key characteristic of confessional writing marks one aspect of a culture marked by 'the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self'¹²², and goes on to argue, echoing Sennett, that 'economic man himself has given way to the psychological man of our times (who is) haunted not by guilt but by anxiety.'¹²³ Lasch's description of the 'culture of narcissism' shares much ground with several critical approaches to confessional and inward-turning writing. In particular, his stress on the blurring of boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside' as a key defining characteristic of the culture of narcissism is echoed by several commentators on the confessional and inward-turning novel - though these commentators do not always share Lasch's stress on the pathological implications of this collective consciousness. Though Erich Kahler's Inward Turn of Narrative identifies within this body of work many of those characteristics deemed by Lasch to exemplify the culture of narcissism, he seeks rather to celebrate a literary development which marks 'an increasing displacement of outer space by what Rilke has called inner space...a stretching of consciousness.'¹²⁴ What Kahler sees as a stretching of consciousness is held by Lasch, however to mark a

shrinking of the self. In his second book, The Minimal Self Lasch develops the thesis proposed in The Culture of Narcissism: while he continues to argue that the inward-turning culture of which confession forms a part reflects a deeply narcissistic collective consciousness, his two interventions each provide a differently nuanced account of the origins of narcissism. In The Culture of Narcissism, Though he gestures towards the determinacy of economic factors, Lasch blames contemporary child-rearers for the fact that we arguably inhabit a world in which authentic feeling is impossible: 'Industrial production takes the father out of the home and diminishes the role he plays in the conscious life of the child. The mother attempts to make up to the child for the loss of the father, but she often lacks practical experience of child-rearing, feels herself at a loss to understand what the child needs and relies so heavily on outside experts that her attentions fail to provide the child with a sense of security.'¹²⁵ According to Lasch, this state of affairs gives rise to adults lacking in both a secure sense of self and in the ability to differentiate clearly between inside and outside; life is consequently spent searching for that reflection of self that the mother failed to provide, and a mature differentiation between self and other and between inside and outside is never achieved. In The Minimal Self, Lasch held to his belief in the all-pervasiveness of the culture of narcissism but moved towards placing greater emphasis for its rise upon

certain characteristic features of late capitalist production. In this second work, Lasch blames 'mass-culture' and the mass production of commodities, for the 'reduction' of the self arguing that 'prevailing social conditions, especially the fantastic mass-produced images that shape our perceptions of the world not only encourage a defensive contraction of the self but blur the boundaries between the self and its surroundings... the minimal or narcissistic self is, above all, a self uncertain of its own outlines, longing either to remake the world in its own image or to merge into its environment in blissful union.'¹²⁶ Lasch goes on to detail what he describes as a number of 'technologies of the self'¹²⁷, to which people have turned in the attempt to evade the narcissist's sense of the uncertain and problematic nature of identity¹²⁸: amongst these 'technologies' are identified various 'self-help' and 'personal growth' therapeutic practices which each involve confession to a mediator or therapist. In the light of these comments, it seems by no means too great an extension of the thesis to propose that Lasch's work signals an intervention, and a highly influential one, into the debate concerning the cultural instrumentality of the confession. The application of this thesis to confessional writing produces its cultural instrumentality as a reflection of the culture of narcissism, or the minimal self, the origins of which

Lasch traces both to changing patterns of child rearing and to the new mass culture and commodity production. Within this model, those cultural practices referred to by Lasch as 'technologies of the self' are not, in themselves, culturally instrumental - while Lasch identifies such practices as 'survivalist', he does not imply that such practices are, in themselves, anything more than reflections of the wider culture. Yet when Lasch does briefly turn his attention to contemporary fiction, he argues that 'the inner journey leads nowhere, neither to a fuller understanding of history ... nor even to a fuller understanding of the self.'¹²⁹ .

Though Lasch's position is clearly at odds with a post-structuralist notion of the construction of subjects by texts, he does seem to suggest here that though the contemporary fictional journey goes nowhere, such fiction might, in other circumstances lead to a 'fuller understanding of self' - which implies a potentially greater cultural instrumentality for the inward-turning contemporary confessional novel than that implied elsewhere in his work.

While such a position is only implied here by Lasch, several alternative approaches which stress the ideological function of confessional writing do grant to it a greater degree of cultural instrumentality. One such approach - already explored briefly within the earlier discussion of the historical development of the form -

implies that confessional writing, and the move towards the 'expression' of feelings and sentiment of which this mode forms part, has, or at least had, an ideological function, in that it sought to construct a new secular morality in support of the new, non-aristocratic bourgeoisie. From this perspective, the confessional mode is seen not merely as the reflection of an economic mode, a shift from a religious to a secular society, or a collective consciousness (or a combination of these) but as a cultural representation which has effects of its own.

One further attempt to locate the confessional novel within such a model of cultural instrumentality has been provided by Barry Taylor whose unpublished paper, 'Self-Incrimination and the Renaissance Writer' was delivered at the History Workshop conference on Autobiography held at Oxford in 1986. In this paper - a study of the origins of the confessional mode - Taylor argued that the feudal notion of a fixed hierarchical order in which there was a perfect fit between position, role and image was newly problematised by the new capitalist free market economy. New questions were raised about the nature of authenticity and the meaning of individuality. Whereas in modern confession the unique is celebrated as 'individual truth', for the Renaissance writers, these 'inaccuracies' were regarded as signs that the 'fit' between individual

and position had come undone. Pathetic repentance, or confession, was, argued Taylor, an attempt to speak and overcome such tensions. While this intervention cannot address the specificity of the cultural instrumentality of the contemporary confessional mode, it usefully shifts the ground from a consideration of the cultural work it performs as that of mere reflection, to a consideration that confession might play a part in shaping the social world of which it forms a part.

A greater degree of cultural instrumentality is also implied in relation to the confessional mode by those literary critics who praise the confession for its 'curative' powers. Though these critics are writing from positions informed by liberal humanism, rather than by post-structuralism, this notion that the confessional narrative can heal its writers and readers does, rather ironically, suggest a degree of cultural instrumentality congruent with the post-structuralist account of the text as formative of, rather than formed by its authors and readers. Thus though these critics speak with one voice in relation to the atomised and fragmented nature of contemporary culture, they suggest that the confession may heal, or make whole, the incoherent or fragmented self. According to this critical tendency, it is the confession's capacity to heal that explains its contemporary popular appeal. P M Spacks points out, in this regard, that 'the ability to tell one's own story

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coherently (is) an index of mental health' , while Axthelm insists that the confession is therapeutic: 'confronted with the disintegration and uncertainty of the modern condition, man is challenged to find new principles of order and meaning to guide his existence'¹³¹ , and it is through confessional writing that these principles are discovered. A similar point is made by G K Hongo, who argues that in confession, 'something cathartic occurs, the expulsion of some psychic poison which has absorbed *whatever had been* previously retarding the growth of the soul towards its rightful splendour.'¹³² .

An interesting comparison arises, at this point, between those post-structuralist literary theorists such as Catherine Belsey, whose work, described in the previous discussion of autobiography, identified in the autobiographical style a radical potential to foreground the split between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enonce, and these critical commentaries addressed to the confessional mode, which foreground, rather, its capacity to heal, rather than to reveal the fragmentation which threatens the coherence of the self. Only E L Stelzig's comments share any ground with those of Belsey or Jay, since he argues that 'confessional fiction appeals to the modern writer because it encourages an aesthetic and psychological game playing

with fragments of the self, self-exposure as well as self-masking'¹³³ implying that confession does foreground, rather than mask 'our contemporary notion of the protoplasmic and undefinable ego'¹³⁴. Though the work of Axthelm, Stelzig and Hongo can be read to impute a high degree of cultural instrumentality to the confession, in that it suggests that confession gives rise to particular subjectivities, two alternative positions have been identified, for whereas Axthelm and Hongo argue that the confession 'heals' the fragmented self - which would imply, from a post-structuralist position that the cultural work it performs helps maintain the status quo, Stelzig suggests that the confession speaks to and foregrounds that fragmentation - a position which suggests that confession might constitute what Belsey has described as an interrogative text - a text which 'permits the reader to glimpse a division within the subject'¹³⁵.

In the last section of this discussion, it will be suggested that Michel Foucault's theory of the cultural instrumentality of confession reveals the apparent paradox identified above as crucial to the confession's cultural work. His thesis, which also addresses the question of the centrality of sexuality, and the popularity of the confession, arguably grants a greater cultural instrumentality to the confession than those so far discussed, and insodoing arguably substantiates the

claim that confessional novels 'change lives'.

Foucault and The Confession

For Foucault, the act of confession constitutes a 'technology of the self'. To confess, according to Foucault, is to perform, with the help of others, an operation upon the self. Within the Foucauldian model, the transformations effected through confession both compound and confound the 'governability' of its subjects. Central to Foucault's thesis are his contentions concerning contemporary power relations, for he insists that in contemporary western society order is maintained not by an essentially coercive centralised state, but by the operation of a range of technologies, many of which, like confession, we operate upon ourselves.

In his essay 'The Subject and Power', Foucault explains that his project has been 'to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects (and) to study the ways a human turns himself into a subject.'¹³⁶ Since the Sixteenth century, there has developed, argues Foucault, a national state which has recently integrated 'in a new political shape, an old power technique which originated in Christian institutions'¹³⁷ : he goes on to argue that there are two aspects to this power, which he terms pastoral power -

firstly its ecclesiastical institutionalisation 'which has ceased, or at least lost its vitality since the Eighteenth century, and secondly its function, which has spread and multiplied outside the ecclesiastical institution.'¹³⁸ Confession figures, within this model, as one instance of the functioning of pastoral power in its post-Eighteenth century, non-ecclesiastical guise.

Foucault goes on to contend that integration into the modern state depends upon the production of 'individuality': the modern state can be seen 'as a ... matrix of individualisation or a new form of pastoral power.'¹³⁹ He continues by arguing that 'this form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorises the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth upon him which he must recognise and which others have to recognise in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings to the word 'subject', subject to someone else by control and dependence and tied to his own identity by a conscience of self-knowledge ...'¹⁴⁰

Though a full explication of Foucault's account of the history, rise and nature of pastoral power cannot be attempted here, some mention of his account of the exercise of pastoral power is necessary in order to

substantiate the hypothesis that the modern confessional narrative can most appropriately be seen as one instance of the operation of this power technique. One point that Foucault repeatedly emphasises throughout 'The Subject and Power',¹⁴¹ as well as elsewhere in his work, is that the exercise of pastoral power is never purely violent, 'nor is it a consent which, implicitly, is renewable. It is a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult ... it is always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action ...'¹⁴²

What follows from this is that the efficient and successful exercise of pastoral power depends upon the actions of 'free' subjects - 'power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realised.'¹⁴³

One precondition for the exercise of pastoral power, then, is 'freedom' or rather 'agonism' as Foucault terms 'the relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle, less a face to face confrontation which paralyses both sides than a permanent provocation.'¹⁴⁴ Confession, according to Foucault, can

be read, then, as one instance of the exercise of pastoral power - a power which depends, for its successful operation, not upon coercion, but upon 'agonism'. It now remains to look in a little more detail, at the ways in which the 'agonism' of confession both depends upon and produces individual subjects governable by yet potentially resistant to pastoral power.

In Volume One of The History of Sexuality, Foucault contends that the nineteenth century altered the scope of confession: 'it tended no longer to be solely concerned with what the subject wished to hide, but with what was hidden from himself, being incapable of coming to light except gradually and through the labour of a confession in which the questioner and the questioned each had a part to play.'¹⁴⁵ Here, Foucault's historicisation dovetails precisely with that of literary theorists such as Axthelm and Kahler, who, as we have already seen, traced the development of an 'inward turn' from the nineteenth century onwards. The application of the Foucauldian thesis suggests that these confessional narratives produced rather than revealed this individual truth, for a pre-requisite for the smooth and efficient operation of pastoral power is the existence of individual subjects, whose 'interiors' may be quarried in quest of 'truth'. Thus whereas Lasch argued that the 'psychological man of our times' was produced,

essentially, by a combination of changing patterns of economic production and shifts in child-rearing patterns, Foucault's thesis suggests, rather, that this mode of subjectivity is a pre-requisite for the operation of contemporary power relations.

It has already been noted that the contemporary confessional novel centrally concerns itself with the confession of a particular individual 'truth' - the truth of sexuality. According to Foucault, the production of the sexual as the essential truth at the heart of individuality has been central to the operation of power by individualisation. In The History of Sexuality, Foucault insists that contrary to popular opinion, sexual matters have not been repressed, but have formed, rather, the central concern of a number of discourses which have operated to tie individuals to the truth of their individual sexuality: writing from a Foucauldian position, Jeffrey Weeks has noted that 'for very many people in the modern world, knowing who we are involves knowing our sexuality ... where we really belong.'¹⁴⁶ In a similar vein, Ros Coward has commented that 'for several centuries now, sexuality has been at the heart of a number of discourses and, since the last century has been made more and more important ... the identity of the subject is found within these discourses ...'¹⁴⁷; similarly, Ethel Spector Person concludes her article on

the relationship between individual identity and sexuality by commenting that at least where men are concerned, 'in contemporary culture, sexuality is nearly always, but not invariably linked to identity.'¹⁴⁸ For Foucault, it is the truthful confession of sexual feelings and practices which constitutes a key technique of power by individualisation: 'the truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of individualisation by power.'¹⁴⁹

Though Foucault stresses the role of confession in tying the confessing subject to truth, he also points to the transformative nature of the act, which, as Stelzig has pointed out, changes the signified self in the process of signification. Thus though confession produces a central core of truth, conversely, the act also suggests a certain mutability, or unfixity, at the heart of subjectivity. While, as has previously been argued, post-structuralist and Lacanian-inspired theories of autobiography celebrate the foregrounding of this unfixity by modernist autobiography, claiming that it reveals as illusory the coherence and unity upon which we base our sense of ourselves, Foucault proposes, conversely, that in relation to confession, the simultaneous fixing and unfixing of identity which characterises the discourse of the confessing subject is central to the efficient operation of power by individualisation, which depends, for its success, both

upon tying the subject to individual truth, as well as upon producing that subject as 'free': this simultaneous fixing and unfixing of subjectivity produced by confession constitutes the agonism, which, argues Foucault, lies at the heart of the operation of pastoral power. From this perspective, the oscillation between fixity and unfixity which characterises the subject produced by confession works in the interests of the operation of pastoral power: Foucault describes this complex power relation in the following way: '... there is no face to face confrontation of power and freedom, which are mutually exclusive ... but a much more complicated interplay. In this game, freedom may well appear as the condition for the exercise of power (at the same time its precondition, since freedom must exist for power to be exerted, and also its permanent support since without the possibility of recalcitrance, power would be equivalent to a physical determination)'¹⁵⁰ .

This simultaneous fixing and unfixing of subjectivity is a key characteristic of the mode of narration of the contemporary confession. Like the narrator of all first person novels, the narrator of the confession 'is the bearer of the narrative about something that is experienced, something that he has seen, heard, thought or known. But infallibly, his narrative is at the same time a characterisation of himself.'¹⁵¹ As the narrators

tell their stories, their individual subjectivities are simultaneously and inevitably produced, described and fixed. Yet, at the same time, and as Foucault insists, 'The confession is a ritual ... in which the expression alone ... produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him and promises him salvation.'¹⁵² The confession's simultaneous production of a more 'known' as well as a transformed subject has earlier been termed 'becomingness'. Since the narrator is further along the path of becomingness than the central protagonist, this trope foregrounds the gap between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enonce. The application of the Foucauldian thesis to 'becomingness' suggests that the unfixity of subjectivity which it partially produces functions not to unsettle the illusory coherence of subjectivity, but rather to produce subjects whose 'freedom' - is an essential pre-requisite for the smooth operation of pastoral power.

The cultural instrumentality implied by the application of the Foucauldian thesis to the contemporary confessional narrative is a complex one, since within this framework, the confession appears as one instance of the diffuse operation of pastoral power. As a 'technology of the self', confession plays a specific role in the production of subjects governable by pastoral power. The contemporary confessional novel might be seen, then, as

one of those 'mechanisms of subjection' described by Foucault in the following way: 'It is certain that the mechanisms of subjection do not merely constitute the 'terminal' of more fundamental mechanisms ... they entertain complex and circular relations with other forms ...'
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...'

Compared to the theses so far addressed, the Foucauldian thesis proposes a far greater cultural instrumentality for the confession, for according to Foucault, it produces those forms of subjectivity upon which contemporary modes of government depend.

Yet though what has so far been addressed has been Foucault's stress on the role of confession in maintaining modes of government through pastoral power, it is nevertheless central to the Foucauldian thesis that as with all technologies of the self, the role of confession in the maintenance of modern government is double-edged: writing in more general terms about power relations, Foucault contends that '... if it is true that at the heart of power relations and as a permanent condition of their existence there is an insubordination and a certain essential obstinacy on the part of the principles of freedom, then there is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight ... It would not be possible for power relations to exist

without points of insubordination, which, by definition,
are means of escape ...' ¹⁵⁴ . Thus though the mutability
or transformative potential of the subject of confession
appears as the condition for the exercise of pastoral
power, this unfixity also signals a potential subversion
of those power relations: speaking more generally about
this potential for subversion at the heart of
contemporary power relations which function by acting
upon an active and mutable subject, Foucault argues that
'the consequence of this instability is the ability to
decipher the same events and the same transformations
either from inside the history of struggle or from the
standpoint of the power relationships.' ¹⁵⁵ Thus though
it has been argued that the 'becomingness' of the central
protagonist/narrator produces subjects governable by
pastoral power, it might also be contended that this very
mutability gestures towards a potential for change which
might not always serve the interests of such power
relations.

Though, like critics of the autobiographical style
already discussed, many commentators on the confessional
narrative have stressed the role of the reader as
receiver of the confession, so far this Foucauldian
reading of the cultural instrumentality of the
confessional narrative has stressed, rather, the role of
the narrator as confessor. In the following section,
therefore, the Foucauldian thesis concerning the cultural

instrumentality of confession will be discussed in relation to the role of the reader.

The Role of the Reader

L M Porter has argued that in any attempt to read off the meaning of a narrative form, it is necessary to attend to 'the nature of the narrator-protagonist's relation to his audience.'¹⁵⁶ The contention of this section is that discerning the nature of narrator-protagonists relation to their audience is also central to any attempt to understand the cultural instrumentality of the contemporary confessional narrative. In the earlier discussion of the autobiographical style, it was pointed out that several critics had suggested that where this narrative mode was concerned, it was the reader who mastered its final form. If the post-structuralist contention concerning the potential subversiveness of autobiography's foregrounding of the split between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enonce is accepted, then the role typically offered to the reader by non-avant garde autobiography confounds such potential, since that reader is invited to close the gap between the two. Similarly, it might be proposed that the cathartic, healing effects of reading confession testified to by commentators already discussed, suggests that though the mode is characterised by a split between

central protagonist and narrator, the reader is invited to 're-integrate' the split subject. According to Leon Edel, it is this work of re-integration which turns the reader of all 'inward-turning', psychological novels into an author: 'Above all, this kind of novel seemed to turn the reader into an author: it was he, ultimately, who put the story together and he had to keep his wits about him to accumulate data.'¹⁵⁷

Though, like Edel, several commentators on the confession pay particular emphasis to the intense identification between reader and confessor that this mode invites, closer textual analysis reveals that the positions offered to the reader by the confessional narrative are neither single nor simple. In his study of the confessional narrative, Lawrence Porter argues that it is the relationship between reader and narrator that is its key distinguishing factor: according to Porter, the narrator of the confession may address the audience as a child addresses its parents, or as a parent addresses children.¹⁵⁸ To complexify the power relation still further, however, it must be noted that while the reader may well be invited to identify with the narrator, s/he is also positioned as 'listener' - as the one being confessed to. At the same time, although identification with the more knowing narrator/confessor is the most likely, identification with the less knowing, suffering central protagonist is also a strong possibility. Thus

the reader is invited to identify both with two points on the path of 'becomingness' as well as with the 'listener' position.

The position of 'listener', or receiver of the confession is, according to E L Stelzig, a pleasureable one, since it situates the reader as trusted recipient of the confession¹⁵⁹. The position is also pleasureable since it implies that the reader is both indispensable and powerful: there can be no confession without a 'listener', and, as receiver of the confession, the listener has the capacity to advise, forgive or redeem. 'Becomingness' is not achieved in a vacuum. In order for the central protagonist of the confessional novel to 'grow', or to 'become', that which is to be superceded or discarded must be confessed. The movement of 'becomingness' is therefore predicated upon a telling; it is the act of telling, or confessing that produces the forward movement of 'becomingness'. Thus though the reader of the 'inward-turning' confessional narrative is invited to identify both with a less 'become' central protagonist and with a more knowing, though still becoming, (therefore only partially reliable narrator) it might be argued that the narrative's authority does rest, ultimately, with the reader-listener, whose task it is to receive confession and bear witness to 'becomingness'. In many ways, this reading position might be likened to that

of the position of analyst.

From a position informed by the work of Christopher Lasch, it might be contended that the pleasures attendant upon such a reading position are entirely in accord with that narcissistic culture which has endlessly raised the status of the analyst and the psycho-therapist. While such a contention would imply that the pleasures of reading the confessional narrative mirror the narcissistic concerns of society, the application of the Foucauldian thesis to the analysis of these reading pleasures suggests, rather, that the position of 'listener', or 'analyst' is centrally implicated in the production of subject positions governable by modern power techniques.

In The History of Sexuality, Foucault makes it plain that the act of listening is central to the power relations of confession: 'The agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks ... but in the one who listens and says nothing; not in the one who knows and answers, but in the one who questions ... And this discourse of truth finally takes effect, not in the one who receives it, but in the one from whom it is wrested.'¹⁶⁰ Applied to the role of the reader of confession, the Foucauldian thesis implies that the confessional mode's positioning of its reader as receiver of confession confirms upon him/her the pleasures of domination: ultimately, it is the reader

who produces the narrator's 'truth'. While the power invested in wielding this power is pleasureable, the role of listener also positions the reader, in Foucault's words, as 'agent' of domination, for to produce the narrator's truth is to subject him/her to the exercise of power by individualisation: 'The truth did not reside solely in the subject, who, by confessing, would reveal it wholly formed. It was constituted in two stages: present, but incomplete, blind to itself, in the one who spoke, it could only reach completion in the one who assimilated and recorded it ... It was the latter's function to verify this obscure truth. The revelation of confession had to be coupled with the decipherment of what it said.'¹⁶¹ According to this perspective, the reader as listener produces the 'truth' of the confession: 'The one who listened was not simply the forgiving master, the judge who condemned or acquitted; he was the master of truth. His was a hermeneutic function. With regard to the confession, his power was to constitute a discourse of truth on the basis of its decipherment.'¹⁶²

Yet while Foucault's thesis contends that the position of listener proposed by the confessional narrative invites complicity with power by individualisation, it has already been pointed out that in 'The Subject and Power', Foucault lays great stress on the 'agonist' nature of modern power techniques. This emphasis implies that a

Foucauldian analysis of the cultural instrumentality of the contemporary confessional narrative should also reveal points of subordination - challenges to the domination of power by individualisation.

Though the reader is invited to take up the position of listener, identification with the less 'become' central protagonist and the more knowing narrator is also proposed by the contemporary confessional narrative; moreover though the confessional narrative ends, the ending is often inconclusive, since the narrator is typically fairly young, which suggests that further change, or 'becomingness' is bound to take place. Both the reader's double identification with central protagonist and narrator, and the inconclusive ending of the confessional narrative point towards the never-endingness of 'becomingness': a never-endingness which mitigates against any final or full knowledge of the narrator/protagonist. The reader's truth-making function of listener may also confound as well as compound the complicity of the modern confessional narrative's relation to power by individualisation since though speculation concerning the future of the narrator will be shaped, in part, by the preceding narrative, its open-ended closure does not entirely preclude the reader's production of other truths concerning the narrator's future 'becomingness'.

This speculation returns consideration, once more, to the question of the reader's role as 'author' of confession, and to those previously addressed comments concerning the cathartic effects of reading confession. The application of the Foucauldian thesis to the question of the cultural instrumentality of the contemporary confessional narrative leads to the proposal that this narrative mode constitutes one instance of power by individualisation. Though the pre-requisite for the efficient operation of this power technique is that it should act upon 'free' - or in the terms of this chapter 'becoming' - subjects, the double-edgedness of this pre-requisite is emphasised by Foucault. In relation to the confessional narrative, it has been argued that the process of 'becomingness' exemplifies this double-edgedness, or 'agonism'. The narrator's constantly developing and growing self always threatens to exceed the reader's hermeneutic capacity; in addition, the open-endedness of the narrative gestures towards an unknown future.

Summary

In conclusion, then, this chapter has argued that a Foucauldian reading of mainstream autobiography's confessional mode unsettles post-structuralism's approach to autobiography. For post-structuralism, it is

autobiography's latent foregrounding of the gap between the subject of its enunciation and the subject of its enonce which constitutes its potential to subvert the illusory coherence of subjectivity. For Foucault, on the other hand, it is the confessional's putting into process of subjectivity via what has here been termed 'becomingness' which produces a subject both suited to as well as potentially resistant to the operation of modern power techniques.

In the following two chapters a comparison between the mainstream and the women's confessional novel will precede a discussion of the applicability to the latter of the above proposals concerning the cultural instrumentality of mainstream confession.

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THE WOMEN'S ROOM: A WOMAN'S CONFESSIONAL NOVEL

In the last chapter, it was argued that the success of the contemporary confessional novel of the mainstream might best be ascribed to its playing out of what were described, following Foucault, as 'agonist' power relations. The last chapter then went on to argue that the cultural work performed by this narrative mode is double-edged, since it allows for some resistance to as well as subjection to modern power techniques.

In the next two chapters, a set of ^Squestions concerning the relation between what has come to be termed 'woman's culture' and the culture of the mainstream will be discussed by shifting the focus of attention to the woman's confessional novel. The Women's Room by Marilyn French will form the object of an analysis which will seek to trace similarities and differences between this 'woman's novel' and its mainstream generic relation. In particular, it is hoped that this analysis will illuminate questions concerning the appeal of the woman's confessional novel to a female reading public.

During the early to mid-seventies, the woman's

confessional novel proved, time and time again, to be a surefire best-seller throughout the western world. Novels such as Erica Jong's Fear of Flying and Lisa Alther's Kinflicks together with such favourites of the women's movement as Anja Meulenbelt's The Shame is Over and Verena Stefan's Shedding clearly demonstrated the strong appeal of the woman's confessional novel. While it might be argued that these novels merely replaced a male with a female central protagonist, and that their appeal, like that of the confessional novel of the mainstream, arose from their foregrounding of agonist power relations, in the following two chapters an alternative approach will seek out a range of features which, it will be argued, serve to differentiate the woman's confessional novel from the confessional novel of the mainstream. It is by means of these features, it will be argued, that the woman's confessional novel articulates an address which appeals specifically to women readers.

Though literary theory has so far had little to say about the woman's confessional novel, feminist literary theorists have recently begun to study this mode of literary production, and from this still small corpus of work, the skeleton of a standard definition has begun to emerge. It is generally agreed that the contemporary woman's confessional novel constitutes a discreet

literary genre: for instance, Rosalind Coward introduces her discussion of this literary mode by declaring that recently 'a new genre of novel has appeared aimed at a specifically female audience'¹. What is also commonly acknowledged is that this woman's genre owes a debt to its mainstream historical antecedents. In 'Tell It Like It Is: Woman and Confessional Writing', Elisabeth Wilson traces the development of autobiographical and confessional writing from the seventeenth century to the present, arguing that the emergence of the contemporary woman's confessional novel constitutes one instance of a more general literary trend towards self-revelation and a concern with sexual matters.² A similar point is made by Rosalind Coward, who contends that the woman's confessional novel's arguable concern with sexual matters constitutes neither a radical break with the past, nor with contemporary mainstream fiction, which has latterly³ she argues, become suffused by sexual confessions. In the same vein, Margaret Tarratt also finds links between the contemporary woman's confessional novel's concern with sexuality and that same concern exhibited formerly by Byron's Don Juan, and latterly by 'the weary heroes of Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud or Updike himself, whose laboured sex-lives resemble nothing so much as the stations of the cross.'⁴ Yet though the critics reviewed above each argue both that the woman's confessional novel bears some comparison with contemporary mainstream confessional fiction, and that

common antecedents have partially shaped both these contemporary genres, all three of these commentators contend that features specific to the woman's confessional novel set it apart both from its historical antecedents and from its mainstream relations. For Elisabeth Wilson, the specificity of the woman's confessional novel lies in its bringing together of the mainstream confessional's breaking of taboos with 'the strong woman's voice in the literature of the 1960's' - a voice which had emphasised, in the novels of Lessing and Lehmann, a concern with the detailed and careful rendition of women's private and domestic experience. What this convergence produced, according to Wilson, was a mode of writing which was concerned with the experiences of women,⁶ and which foregrounded the role of sexual relationships in contributing to the development of the female central protagonist.⁷ In addition, it is repeatedly emphasised by each of the commentators reviewed here that the impact of the women's movement contributed to the development of the woman's confessional novel. It is commonly assented to both that consciousness-raising practices provide a narrative frame for many of the women's confessional novels of the mid-seventies and that the 'journey from victim to heroine'⁸ that these novels typically construct gains its impulse from the central protagonist's encounter with women's liberation. A further feature of the woman's confessional

narrative emphasised by both Wilson and Tarratt is that the final stage of the female central protagonist's development typically finds her alone and unhappy .

The skeletal standard definition which emerges from a review of the existing literature therefore defines the contemporary woman's confessional novel as a narrative which traces the development of a suffering and victimised central female protagonist, via an encounter with women's liberation and a variety of sexual experiences. Though the central female protagonist may achieve heroine-like status by the close of the narrative, her loneliness and unhappiness rarely decrease.

The next two chapters will begin to test the adequacy of this standard definition and will be organised in the following way: the first sets out to describe The Women's Room, pointing out similarities and differences between this novel and the confessional novel of the mainstream. The next chapter then proceeds to explore the particular appeal to a female reading public of those features which have emerged as specific to the woman's confessional novel.

Before ¹commenc[^]ing a close reading of The Women's Room, an analysis of the reading of the novel proposed by the British paperback cover will first be discussed. The

cover design is composed of a shiny silver background against which a black key-hole in the shape of the sign denoting 'woman' contains, in the upper circle, the novel's title, in yellow, underneath which, white capitalisation proclaims: 'THIS NOVEL CHANGES LIVES'. In each of the four corners of the front cover, a shiny silver screw emphasises that this cover represents a part of the door to a woman's lavatory. Between the bottom two screws, a white flier announces that this novel is 'The International Best-Seller by Marilyn French'. The use of the 'woman' sign invites readers to assume that this novel is related to the women's movement. This invitation is underlined by the title itself which signals towards a debate orchestrated by the women's movement concerning the rights of women to be called 'women' rather than the more diminishing 'ladies'. The cover-as-keyhole design also proposes to the prospective reader that the pleasures contained within this cover are to some extent voyeuristic. The back cover of The Women's Room collects together the publisher's comments on the novel together with several excerpts from reviews. The publisher's blurb includes the following extract:

'THE WOMEN'S ROOM is the hauntingly powerful story of Mira Ward - the wife of the Fifties who becomes a woman of the Seventies. From the shallow excitements of suburban cocktail parties and casual affairs, through the

varied nightmares of rape, madness and loneliness to the dawning awareness of the exhilaration of liberation, the experience of Mira and her friends crystallise those of a generation of modern women. '

This publisher's advertisement chooses to foreground the novel's concern with sexuality, in the form of casual affairs, suffering, in the form of madness and loneliness and a narrative concern with a central female protagonist who moves through a range of identities on her way to becoming what it describes as a 'modern woman'. The front-cover's references to the women's movement are also repeated here, by this blurb's references to 'the exhilaration of liberation'. This publisher's blurb is also followed by several critical comments, two of which are by Fay Weldon and Betty Friedan - both names linked to the women's movement at the time of publication.

So a passing glance at the cover of The Women's Room suggests that it proposes itself as both similar to and dissimilar from the confessional novel of the mainstream. Like its mainstream relation, it describes itself as concerned with 'becomingness', sexuality and suffering; unlike the former it advertises itself as bearing a direct relation to the women's movement and concerning itself with the 'becomingness' of a central female protagonist for whom liberation marks one boundary

between her former and more recent selves. The novel's self-advertisements therefore propose an appeal to women readers on the basis of voyeurism, and an identification with suffering and 'becomingness' which culminates in the achievement of liberation. The following two chapters will explore the question of this appeal in relation to the cultural construction of femininity, concluding with a discussion of the nature of this appeal in relation to debates concerning the feminism of 'the novel that changes lives'.

The remaining portion of this chapter will take the form of a brief outline of the narrative, followed by an outline of those features of The Women's Room which differentiate it from its mainstream relation. This close reading will pay particular attention to the first chapter of the novel, exploring the ways in which it sets the pattern for the rest of the novel. The previous chapter argued that the confessional mode is characterised firstly by a specific mode of narration within which an initial distance between narrator and central protagonist is gradually eroded through the 'becomingness' of that central protagonist, and secondly by a foregrounding of sexuality and suffering. In line with these findings, the differences of the women's confessional novel will be discussed under the headings mode of narration, becomingness, sexuality, and suffering. In the next

chapter, a range of feminist literary and cultural theories will be brought to bear upon these findings in order to explore the questions of the appeal of and cultural instrumentality of the the woman's confessional novel for women.

The narrative describes a period in the life of a woman called Mira Ward. It opens with Mira, a 38 year old divorced mother of two sons, beginning college as a mature student. At the close of the novel, Mira walks the beach near the small university town where she teaches English. The temporal order of these 'story' events is manipulated, however, by the novel's 'discourse'¹⁰ - we meet Mira when she is already a mature student and then learn about her past life. Mira's story begins with her rather cloistered and strict upbringing in 1950's America. A troubled and rather traumatic adolescence culminates in an unsuccessful love affair, after which Mira experiences a near-rape. These experiences lead her to give up her dreams of an independent life as an intellectual. She marries Norm, a medical student, has two sons by him and as they grow prosperous, begins to take part in suburban coffee mornings and cocktail parties. Her neighbours' lives seem less successful than her own - complicated by sexual infidelities, debt and memories of unhappy childhoods. In comparison to her neighbours' lives, Mira's seems smooth and trouble-free. She reads more than the other wives and

though she does not enjoy sex with Norm, she is relatively satisfied with her lot.

Increased prosperity leads to a move to a much larger house. Mira grows restless and begins to sit up at night drinking brandy and thinking about her life. Norm, whose increasingly frequent absences from home have been described as work-related, returns late one night and announces that he wants a divorce. Mira goes into shock, begins to drink heavily, attempts suicide, then takes the advice of her friend Martha and applies to go back to college. Martha, who has been having an affair with her tutor at college, discovers he does not intend to leave his wife and also attempts suicide.

This section of the narrative is broken up by descriptions of the lives of other unhappy wives. Lily, an Italian woman who has a nervous breakdown and spends most of her life in mental hospitals; Sam, an abandoned wife to whom Mira lends money against Norm's wishes - an act which leads to the divorce; Natalie, who has affairs and whose husband's pornographic fantasies are discovered in notebooks. Gradually Mira begins to develop an explanation to help her to understand what is wrong with these womens' lives: the problem, she decides, is men.

Mira begins college, feels like an outcast, gradually

meets people and begins to get ⁿinvolved in campus
^
politics. She mixes with groups campaigning against US
involvement in Vietnam, gets to know Val - a woman of
great independence who talks freely about sex and who has
a great influence upon Mira - mixes with young people who
smoke cannabis, takes a lover - a man called Ben - and
makes friends with a lesbian.

Then Val's young male lover Tad gets very drunk, becomes
abusive and tries to seduce her teenage daughter Chris.
Chris leaves home to go to college in Chicago and gets
brutally raped on the street where she is living. Val
goes to bring Chris home. Both mother and daughter
return home with a new sense of the world. They now
believe that rape and the brutal treatment of women
underpins all male/female relationships. Val's feminism
becomes increasingly separatist: she gives up all contact
with men and seems to Mira like a changed woman. Val
joins with a group of radical feminists who are
campaigning against the imprisonment of a woman who
stabbed her would-be rapist. The women attempt to set
the prisoner free, but are ambushed and shot at. Val is
shot so many times that her body explodes.

Mira's lover Ben asks her to accompany him on a work trip
to Africa and begs her to have his baby. Mira refuses
because she wants to complete her thesis. Ben leaves for
Africa alone. The narrative closes with Mira teaching

English at a small university near the coast, where she leads an extremely isolated and solitary life walking the beach and talking to herself in her free time.

At this point, a denouement reveals that Mira and the previously unnamed dramatised narrator are one. It has been Mira, all along, who has been telling her own story. This denouement underlines the difference between the Mira who we meet at the beginning of the novel, who is ridiculed and scorned by the narrator and the Mira who walks the beach at the end of the novel, announcing to us her intention to write down her life story. In a sense then the novel traces the trajectory of Mira on her way to becoming the narrator and the novel closes at the point where their identities do finally merge.

Mode of Narration

The mode of narration of The Women's Room is complex. Its female author, together with its self-advertisement as a 'woman's novel' invite the reader to assume that the narrator is female. Yet though the novel's closure suggests that the story has been narrated by a single coherent and unified narrator, namely Mira herself, the following close reading will argue, conversely, that this sense of a unified and coherent narrator who is Mira is partially confounded by strategies which suggest rather

that the narrating voice is fragmented, incoherent or multiple: further, though the novel's closure insists that Mira and the narrator are identical, a more ambiguous relationship between central protagonist and narrator/s is set from the novel's opening pages.

The novel opens with a description of Mira sitting on a lavatory seat in what is described as 'The Ladies' Room' at college. A clear division marks the relationship between Mira and the narrator, whose voyeuristic and mildly condescending tone suggests both omniscience and authority: 'She was perched, fully clothed, on the edge of the open toilet seat, feeling stupid and helpless, and constantly looking at her watch. It would all have been redeemed, even translated into excitement, had there been some grim-faced Walter Matthau ... someone glamorous and terrifying at any rate - waiting for her outside in the hall.'¹¹ This authoritative and anonymous commentary is marked by a clear sense of superiority to Mira and clearly differentiates the central protagonist from the narrator. The combination of authority and superiority, together with the voyeuristic angle of vision previously noted, (and compounded by the jacket design), constructs a distance between the narrator and Mira. While it is possible that the reader might identify with Mira here, empathising with her discomfort and unhappiness, it has been suggested by a number of literary theorists that readers are more likely to

identify with a narrator who displays a degree of authority of omniscience¹² At this stage, a split or fractured identification with both the suffering Mira and the narrator is therefore a theoretical possibility. While it might be argued that the first of these is the most likely, since it offers a more satisfyingly narcissistic position to the reader, it could also be argued that for a female reader, a masochistic identification with the unhappy central protagonist is also a strong possibility, since masochism arguably appeals strongly to women.¹³ This narrational strategy characterised by the description^e of a less authoritative central protagonist by a more authoritative and mildly condescending narrator also bears some affinity to a parent:child relation, where the narrator holds the position of parent and the central protagonist, Mira, holds that of the child. To summarise, then, the narrational strategy of the opening of the novel describes Mira from the point of view of an authoritative narrator who is distanced from the central protagonist through a tone of superiority compounded by a voyeuristic angle of vision. It has been suggested that though literary theorists such as Goodman would propose that given this narrational mode, the reader would almost without doubt identify with the narrator rather than with the female central protagonist, a female reader would be just as likely to identify with the sufferings of the

central female protagonist. It has also been suggested that the relation between narrator and central protagonist bears certain affinities to the parent:child relation, in which case perhaps a female audience's predisposition to take up a masochistic position, identifying with Mira, might be compounded by a predisposition to identify more readily with a daughter than with a parent.¹⁴

In section two of the first chapter, an authoritative and superior narrator continues to describe Mira's experiences for the reader. The narrator describes Mira as unable to see her 'whole self' in the mirror and comments that since she came to Harvard, Mira's whole self had refused to coalesce in the mirror. Mira's body is described, by the narrator, as a series of commodities - 'the legs'; 'the mouth' - thus underlining a voyeuristic angle of vision. The narrator's mildly ridiculing and condescending mode of narration continues as the narrator comments that Mira would have liked to cry, but didn't because she was in a public place 'full of other people's germs'.¹⁵ Though this ridicule is mild, most readers would probably find such squeamishness prudish, and would therefore be more likely to identify with the ridiculing narrator, rather than with the suffering Mira. Both positions are, however, available to the reader, and perhaps the most likely reader response might be one of oscillation between an identification with

the authoritative narrator and with the suffering central protagonist. Again, the narrator:central protagonist relation has clear affinities with that of the relation between parent and child. Moreover, the fractured or split identification that this narrator:central protagonist relation offers to the reader is mirrored by the description of Mira as herself incoherent or fractured.

It is at this point in section two that the mode of narration shifts as the narrator comments that it was because Mira had been feeling invisible that she had taken refuge in the lavatory, 'And when all you have is a visible surface, invisibility is death.'¹⁶ While this narrational mode reinforces the sense of the narrator as older and wiser than Mira, the use of 'you', coupled with the rather poetic and dramatic comments about the psychic consequences of feeling invisible operate to draw the reader closer to Mira's experiences as well as to suggest that these experiences are not unfamiliar to the narrator. Thus at this point the gap between narrator and central protagonist, and possibly between reader and central protagonist, is narrowed. The narrator's formerly condescending and mildly supercilious tone of superiority has shifted into a more sympathetic mode. Though the narrator's voice still speaks with great authority, the impression now is that the authority stems from a wealth of experiences shared with the central

protagonist. This shift in narrative tone suggests either a fractured or multiple narrator(s).

These two narrative modes are further distinguished from one another by their ironic or melodramatic tone. While an ironic undertow compounds the more authoritative and superior tone of the first mode of narration, inviting a readerly complicity with the narrator's distanced relation to Mira, the melodramatic edge to the second narrative voice prefigures the dramatised narrator of the next section, encouraging a readerly identification both with the authority of the narrator and with the pathos of Mira's position and experience.

The appeal to the reader of an ironic and a melodramatic tone are very distinct. Where the narrator adopts an ironic tone in relation to Mira, this serves both to distance the narrator from Mira as well as to forge a strong and complicit alliance between the narrator's and the reader's knowledge and mastery of ironic discourse. The melodramatic, 'excessive' descriptions of Mira's suffering, on the other hand, arguably work to close the gap between central protagonist, narrator and reader by gesturing towards a shared 'knowledge' that cannot be spoken: in the introduction to Home Is Where The Heart Is: Studies In Melodrama And The Woman's Film, Christine Gledhill points to the long-standing association between melodrama and femininity and argues that what

melodramatic excess attempts is to 'force meaning and identity from the inadequacies of language' contrasting its mode of representation with realism's more 'masculine' drive 'to possess the world by understanding it'¹⁷. What this in turn suggests is that whereas the appeal to mastery and knowledge figured by the narrator's ironic discourse speaks to a 'masculine' reader, the melodramatic mode attempts an address 'in the feminine'¹⁸ - a distinction that will be elaborated upon in the next chapter.

Section three opens with a further shift in narrative tone as the reader is directly addressed by a now fully dramatised¹⁹ and self-conscious narrator who comments: 'Perhaps you find Mira a little ridiculous. I do myself. But I also have some sympathy for her, more than you, probably ... You think she was vain and shallow, I suppose these are words that could have been applied to her ... I think she was ridiculous for hiding in the toilet, but I like her better for that than for the meanness of her mouth ... But I also feel a little sorry for her, at least I did then. Not anymore.'²⁰ This intervention from a self-conscious and dramatised narrator points up the oscillation between closeness and distance to the central protagonist that the previous narrative voices have worked to secure. Here, that oscillation takes place within the consciousness of the dramatised

narrator, whose discourse is still marked by a degree of irony since it is due to previous narrator interventions that the reader is likely to have a sense of Mira as 'a little ridiculous'. Here, the reader is offered an interior view of the dramatised narrator, rather than of Mira. This is likely to draw the reader closer to the narrator, and further away from the central protagonist. This intervention from the dramatised narrator constructs a degree of intimacy between reader and narrator, though the reader is gently chided for having taken up the reading position proposed by previous interventions from the narrator. The confessional tone of this dramatised narration alters the parent:child, narrator:reader relation constructed by the previous two sections, since the intimacy of the address to the reader coupled with a less authoritative and more contradictory discourse suggest a narrator:reader relation that oscillates between child:parent and sibling:sibling, depending on the extent to which reassurance and confirmation are sought from the reader.

The dramatised narrator's comment that she did, at one time, feel sorry for Mira proposes, but fails to elaborate on the nature of a relationship between the narrator and Mira. The enigmatic quality of this statement prefigures an enigma that underpins the whole narrative concerning the identity of the narrator, and the nature of the relationship between narrator and

central protagonist. The narrator's comment that 'There's Mira with all her closed doors, and here's me with all my open ones, and we're both miserable'²¹ underlines a sense of a relation of opposition and mirroring.

Section three continues by extending the monologue of the dramatised narrator. A chatty, informal and intimate discussion concerning happiness includes a throwaway reference to Schopenhauer. These instances of casual name-dropping come to characterise one mode of narration within the novel. The ease with which philosophers and academics are introduced into the narrative by this narrator suggest that she is master of this material, and may serve to authorise this more intimate voice. This mode of address also raises questions and offers clues as to the identity of this narrator. While it cannot be assumed that all readers will be familiar with these names - indeed, for some, this name-dropping may mystify the reader and distance her from the narrator - on the whole it is likely that the reader will feel drawn towards and will tend to identify with this dramatised and self-conscious voice.

A further shift of narrative mode takes place within this third section of the first chapter, as the dramatised narrator positions herself both temporally and spatially,

introducing, at the same time, a number of new characters. 'I spend a lot of time alone here, walking along the beach in any weather, and I think over and over about Mira and the others, Val, Isolde, Kyla, Clarissa, Grete, back at Harvard in 1968'.²² This passage reconfirms the distance between Mira and the narrator, while stressing that there is a historical connection between the two. The dramatised narration now addresses the reader as 'you', encouraging an identification between reader and narrator, before launching into a monologue concerning fairy tale images of the past - a monologue characterised by a regressed, infantile mode of speech:

'Good fairies wear pale blue gauzy tutus and carry golden wands; bad ones wear black and are humpbacked and have big chins and long noses'.²³ This mode of address repeats the child:parent, narrator:reader, relation, while the narrator's comments provide the reader with a much more fully fleshed out sense of her character. The intimate sense of revelation produced through this regressed mode of narration encourages the reader to feel close to this narrator; a sense of closeness which is compounded by the conversational quality of the monologue: 'Perhaps you call that incipient schizophrenia, but it seems to me that that's what I did in the end, lived in fairyland where there are only five basic colours, clear lines, and no beer cans cluttering up the grass.'²⁴

Here, the dramatised narrator addresses the reader as

though she were in the position of analyst. The use of regressed speech patterns further compounds this sense of a staging of the analytic situation, with reader as analyst and narrator as analysand. This reverses the power relations of the opening few pages of the novel, as the reader is now invited to interpret the discourse of the narrator, (though it should also be pointed out that the narrator's comments offer a likely reader interpretation only to reject it, thus reaffirming authority). The narrator then describes, in a 'stream of consciousness' fashion which compounds the analyst:analysand, narrator:reader relation, feelings about living on the Maine coast²⁵. As this 'stream of consciousness' passage continues, the narrator moves into a more and more emotional and self-revelatory mode, constructing an evermore intimate and private sense of the relation between reader and narrator. As the narrator confides to the reader, so a strong sense of trust is constructed between reader and narrator.

The dramatised narrator then forges a link between these memories of a fairy-tale like past and Mira: 'Anyway, all of this is ridiculous, because I was on my way to saying that Mira had lived all her life in fairy-land.'²⁶ This link through memory might suggest to some readers that the narrator and Mira are one and the same; it is also interesting to note that Mira is re-introduced at a point

where the dramatised narrator can once again stress superiority to Mira. It seems that the text works to affirm this relation between Mira and narrator, here stressing the narrator's more developed or more mature outlook.²⁷ The final sentence of this section once again invites the reader to take up the position of analyst: 'I leave it to you to decide on Mira's sanity.'²⁸ While the reader is invited to take up a powerful position in relation to the central protagonist, the dramatised narrator is guiding the reader in a parental fashion, thus re-establishing authority.

The following section shifts the axis of power between reader and narrator once more as the dramatised narrator returns to the child-like stream of consciousness monologue, seeking reassurance and confirmation from the reader as analyst/parent: 'Do you suppose there are snails with too little room who just die ... all they have to do is live. Is that an illusion do you suppose?'²⁹ The confessional tone continues as the dramatised narrator describes her unhappy life teaching college students, and dwells on feelings of loneliness and isolation. At one point during this confession, the narrator once again finds parallels between her experiences and those of Mira: 'I've deserted the image like Mira did when she went out and bought short pleated skirts because she was back at college'.³⁰ While the previous comparison between the narrator and Mira suggested that the central protagonist

and the narrator were related through opposition, here the relation is identified as one of similarity, which suggests either that the novel is being narrated by one contradictory narrator, or that there is more than one narrator.

A little further on, the narrator once again stresses her closeness to and similarity with Mira, while repeating an earlier ambivalence towards her: '... when I think of her my belly twists a little with contempt ... But how do I dare to feel that for her, for that woman so much like me?'³¹

This passage suggests that the narrator is both close to and distant from Mira, as while the narrator self-consciously affirms that contempt which marked the opening description of Mira, (thus compounding a sense that this dramatised narrator is indeed identical to the authoritative narrator of the novel's opening passage), the narrator's comments concerning the similarity between the narrator and Mira work to undercut that distance. Once more, however, the narrator re-introduces a contemptuous and supercilious note to her description of Mira, re-emphasising the sense of distance between narrator and central protagonist and offering the reader once again a choice between a narcissistically gratifying identification with the more knowing and powerful authoritative narrator and a more masochistic identification with the less powerful central

protagonist: ' You know her: she's that blonded, made-up matron, a little tipsy with her second Manhattan, playing bridge at the country club.'³² Further oscillations between an authoritative, reliable narrator, and a confessing dramatised narrator characterise this section of the novel - indeed, the dramatised narrator refers more and more frequently to the ground she shares with Mira, commenting at one point that at this time, Mira lived by her mirror, but then adding: 'a lot of us did'³³.

So far, it has been argued that closeness and distance between Mira and the narrator are constructed on the basis of melodrama (closeness) and irony (distance). It has also been suggested that the narrator's comments concerning her shared experiences with Mira construct a closeness between them, whereas scorn and contempt mark the narrator's distance from Mira. In addition, however, the narrator's rhetoric oscillates between an exploratory and intimate mode, similar to that of Mira's thoughts to which the reader gains access later in the text, and a cooler more detached and authoritative mode which arguably signifies distance from Mira. For instance, in the second section of chapter three, the narrator adopts an intimately confessional tone to discuss her own loneliness: '... I would have a different slant on things, perhaps, if I were not living this inconsolable loneliness. And that is an insoluble problem ... I mean,

you could go up to a stranger in the street and say "I'm inconsolably lonely", and he might take you home with him ... But that wouldn't help.'³⁴ Later, towards the close of the novel, Mira confesses her own loneliness in an equally revelatory, intimate and confessional style: 'I imagine that tomorrow I will be pounding and screaming to be let out, but no-one will hear, no-one will come'.³⁵ Likewise, at the beginning of chapter three, the narrator discusses the differences between art and life in a cool, detached and mildly humorous tone: 'Anyway, that is a thing art does for us: it allows us to fix our emotions on events at the moment they occur ... whereas in life, from moment to moment, one can't tell an onion from a piece of dry toast.'³⁶ Later, in chapter five, Mira adopts a similarly detached tone when she compares the 'unruliness' of life with her parents' fantasies: 'The world was in imminent trouble ... Their world was, when things like drugs and a rumoured abortion could break through the carefully wrought surface of their social life. Life breaks out everywhere, Mira thought.'³⁷

Towards the end of section four of the first chapter, the dramatised narrator announces that she is going to 'write it all down'³⁸. From this point onwards, the mode of narration shifts between a self-conscious and dramatised mode, and the mode of the omniscient narrator.

Towards the end of section five, the narrator, in omniscient mode, comments that Mira realised later in life that she had formed most of her beliefs by the age of fifteen. The narration continues with the following comment: 'Unfortunately she forgot most of these things and had to remember them the hard way.'³⁹ With this one comment, the narrator establishes her long-standing and in-depth knowledge of the central protagonist, and establishes herself as more knowing, wiser and to some extent standing in judgement over her. As readers, we are invited to sympathise with Mira, while maintaining a distancing relationship with the 'older and wiser' narrator. Some emphasis has been placed on the narrator's preceding comment about Mira because it condenses so many of those aspects of the mode of narration that will be discussed in the following chapter.

The preceding pages have outlined the mode of narration of The Women's Room, the most characteristic features of which include the oscillation between the narrator and the central protagonist, the split between the dramatised self-conscious narrator and the omniscient narrator and the mobilisation of several modes of narration to provide clues concerning the identity of the dramatised narrator. It has also been argued that several roles are offered to the reader, who is alternately invited to adopt positions including those of analyst, caring maternal listener, and

daughter.

Though the oscillation between an omniscient and a dramatised narrator characterises the mode of narration throughout the The Women's Room, the extent to which Mira is ridiculed by the omniscient narrator decreases as Mira and the dramatised narrator begin to merge together. A blurring of boundaries between Mira and the narrator begins as early as the tenth section of chapter one: Mira's thoughts on the impossibility for women, of combining an academic career with an active sexual life have been reported by omniscient narration: 'She saw her choice clearly as being between sex and independence, and she was paralysed by that.'⁴⁰ Then, a final sentence⁴¹ announces that 'women were indeed victims by nature.'⁴¹ The authority, even didacticism of this closing phrase, invites the reader to assume that it is spoken from the position of omniscient narration, yet in the light of Mira's preceding thoughts, it could just as easily be ascribed to the central protagonist. Though earlier in the novel, there are instances where the dramatised narrator speaks as though from the position of a more infantile central protagonist - 'She had sudden overwhelming desires to put her hand under her pyjamas and rub the skin of her shoulder, her sides, the insides of her thighs. And when she did that, strange spurts would⁴² happen inside her'. - as the narrative moves towards

closure, these instances of blurring between narrator and central protagonist occur with increasing frequency, and more usually serve to underline the reader's sense that Mira is becoming increasingly indistinguishable from the more knowing dramatised narrator and the authoritative omniscient narrator.⁴³ It is at moments of intense pain or pleasure that the boundaries between central protagonist and narrator are least stable, and where blurring between these positions is at its most marked: for instance, after omniscient narration has described Mira's difficult life with her children the dramatised narrator exclaims 'O God, I remember those years! A petulant afternoon convinces you you've turned out a monster'.⁴⁴ Similarly after reporting Mira's experiences on campus during the student uprising, the dramatised narrator adds 'It is easy to forget the feeling of those days just because the passions that were aroused came from principles, not existence, and so were evanescent. I remember sitting in Lehman Hall feeling the fragile air'.⁴⁵

As the gap between Mira and the sources of narration decreases, another character, Val, moves into the foreground and becomes increasingly authoritative and even, at moments, didactic. Whereas, earlier in the novel, Mira's thoughts and feelings are subjected to the condescending and sometimes scornful, derisory comments and criticisms of the omniscient and dramatised

narrators, further into the novel it is more typically the narrator who is subjected to the scorn and derision of a remembered Val. Thus, as Mira, the central protagonist, assumes an adult authoritative position within the narrative, another more authoritative figure is introduced, a figure who is powerful enough to criticise not only Mira, but also the narrator herself. Val is always described as powerfully maternal. She offers her blend of homely advice and caustic wit while stirring large saucepans of delicious food. As Mira moves from the daughter to the mother position, and as the dramatised and omniscient narration merges more and more with Mira's stream of consciousness, so a 'super-mother' in the form of Val, is introduced, enabling Mira and occasionally the narrator/s to continue to have access to the position of daughter.⁴⁶ By the beginning of chapter three, Mira, not the narrator has begun to quote from such literary sources as Dante, though the narration still shows itself to be more knowledgeable than Mira through the ironic naming of Mira's home as 'Beau Reve'. The narration continues to oscillate between cool, detached omniscience and stream of consciousness confession from the dramatised narrator: 'I mean you could go up to a stranger on the street and say "I'm inconsolably lonely", and he might take you home with him ... But that wouldn't help'.⁴⁷ but now, with the introduction of Val, the blurring between the modes

of narration and the discourse of the central protagonist merge further as they are both positioned as less known and less authoritative than Val. Though the omniscient narrator describes Val as adult, and though she clearly carries a great deal of authority in the scenes where she is shown with other women at Harvard, it is at those moments where she interrupts the musings of the dramatised narrator that the shift in mode of narration that her introduction brings about can most clearly be seen and this first occurs quite early on in the narrative: 'I can't even write the next sentence I had intended because Val's hoot comes charging in: "Hah! After the kids were born, he knew he had her, she was dependent on him and would have to take any thing he dished out!" There's probably truth in that, but I was trying to get to what Norm felt ... Subside Val. I'm trying to get to Norm.'⁴⁸ Val's introduction interrupts and undermines the musings of the dramatised narrator; moreover, it is at the point when Mira herself becomes a mother that Val first moves centre stage and begins to take over some of the duties of an authoritative narrator. The mother and daughter positions proposed by this narrative will be discussed further on in this thesis, at this point it will only be suggested that perhaps the introduction of the Val character at the point where the central protagonist, Mira, has herself just become a mother, signals towards an attempt to resolve a difficulty posed by the movement of central

protagonist from daughter to mother position. A supermother, in the form of Val, enables the central protagonist, and, at points the dramatised narrator, to continue to speak from the position of daughter.

Though Val remains as a source of authority against which both Mira and the dramatised narrator continue to judge themselves, the growing similarity between Mira's and the narrations' (both dramatised and omniscient) discourses mark the movement of the narrative towards closure. In the thirteenth section of chapter two, Mira's thoughts about drinking could be assigned to the narrator. The sense of a growingly authoritative central protagonist is produced, in part, through a gradual increase in space assigned to Mira's 'interior' world. Where the narration offers a deep plunge into the interior consciousness of a protagonist, that protagonist inevitably takes over, for the duration of that interior view, as narrator: as the narrative progresses, an increase in the depth and duration of these interior views combines to blur the boundaries between narrator/s and central protagonist. Often, the device of recording Mira's interior thought processes as she sits thinking and drinking brandy at night produces this blurring of boundaries as Mira and the narrator/s begin to speak with one voice: in the twentieth section of chapter three, Mira thinks 'Women and men. They played by different rules because the rules

applied to them were different. It was very simple. It was the women who got pregnant and the women who ended up with the kids. All the rest stemmed from that. So women had to learn to protect themselves, had to be wary and careful. The way the rules were set up, everything was against them'.⁴⁹ The didacticism and authority of this interior monologue is indistinguishable from the voice of the dramatised narrator.

As the central protagonist moves into the position of narrator, so the scornful and condescending comments directed at Mira decrease. However, in their place arises a self-critical discourse. In the twenty-first section of chapter three, for instance, Mira has been sitting sipping brandy at night when Norm returns late from work: 'she only wanted to welcome him', she thinks, 'and so she said in a low voice, "The moon is so beautiful tonight." And when he didn't answer she could hear her words in her head, hear them over and over, words of an ass-hole, a gushing idiot, gurgling, "The moon is so beautiful tonight," like something out of an Italian opera'.⁵⁰ Earlier on in the novel, these critical comments would have been assigned to the authoritative narrator, while here, they are assigned to the central protagonist. Mira is now describing herself, rather than being described. Once again, a device has been introduced which produces central protagonist and narrator as speaking with one voice.

Given that the use of these devices increases as the narrative moves towards closure, the eventual revelation that Mira and the central protagonist are indeed identical probably comes to most readers, as no great surprise - the ground has been well prepared. At the end of the final section of the novel, the dramatised narrator begins to discuss Mira's recent history in the following terms: 'She finished her dissertation, and when it was accepted, took her divorce money and went to Europe ... so she ended up at this little community college near the coast ... and drinks brandy every night and wonders if she's going mad. Clark called me the other night at two o'clock in the morning. I was sitting as usual, with a brandy and a cigarette'.⁵¹ Thus in these last few paragraphs, a resolution to the enigma of the identity of the narrator is achieved by means of this move from 'she' to 'I' and the novel leaves its readers with the final image of Mira/the narrator walking the beach musing on the possibility of her own insanity and the pain of her almost total isolation. Yet though this closure resolves the enigma of the narrator's identity, there remains an uneasy tension concerning Mira's identity. Tensions and antagonisms that had structured the dialogue between narrator and central protagonist are now revealed as located within the central protagonist herself; hence perhaps the thematic emphasis, within

these last few pages, on an extreme form of internal conflict/contradiction - insanity: 'Some days I feel dead, I feel like a robot, treading out time. Some days I feel alive, terribly alive, with hair like wires and a knife in my hand ... Other times I think I have gone over the line, like Lily'.⁵² The closure suggests not that the combined Mira/narrator identity is a comfortable one, but rather that an ongoing series of problems and contradictions will continue to underpin what it means to 'be' Mira. One tension left unresolved by the merging of central protagonist and Mira is the continuing eruption of the 'supermother' - Val: 'I have done one thing: I have laid them to rest, my dear, dear ghosts. "No!" one screams. Maybe I have let you live, my dear ghosts. She settles down, but she's watching me. I can feel her eyes'.⁵³ Though Val's name is not mentioned, it is clear from previous passages, that the somewhat threatening quality of this presence marks it out as Val's. So far this outline of the mode of narration of The Women's Room has emphasised the shifting boundaries between central protagonist and narrator - pointing to the oscillation within the narrative between a marked separation and a blurring of boundaries between the two. This oscillation between closeness and distance between the narrator and the central protagonist is underlined by the narrative's manipulation of story-time.

The mode of narration situates the narrator somewhere in

the future, looking back and commenting upon Mira's past life as it unfolds. But this smooth chronological narrating of Mira's life-story is interrupted as the narrator provides glimpses of the future. A particularly clear example of this strategy occurs in the last section of chapter one. At the close of the previous section, the authoritative narrator had described Mira's growing admiration for the selflessness of other mothers. The next section opens with an abrupt shift to another time: 'Valerie, of course, snorted when she heard this. We were sitting around in Val's place one night. Iso, Clarissa, Kyla and me ... It was in the late Fall of '68, and we didn't know each other well as a group'.⁵⁴

This sudden shift accomplishes a distancing of narrator and central protagonist, adds to our knowledge of the narrator's identity and increases the desire to understand the connection between these times and places - because the temporal shifts bring with them spatial shifts, as the narrative abruptly moves from Mira in a hospital ward in the 50's to the dramatised narrator sitting in a room in Cambridge in '68. Very frequently, the mode of narration shifts from the unspecified 'somewhere in the future' of the authoritative narrator, to the beach-world of the dramatised narrator. For instance, the second section of chapter five opens with an authoritative description of a campus strike, then suddenly the dramatised narrator interrupts this

discourse from the beach: 'The things that were revealed, discovered and discussed in those years were driven deep into peoples' minds; what happened in those years affected the way we think. Nevertheless, I do not expect that one day as I return from the beach, I will hear on my car radio that Eden has been proclaimed.'⁵⁵

Though the mode of narration returns frequently to the dramatised narrator's 'beach-time', this strategy serves to further readerly confusion concerning the identity of the dramatised narrator, and her relationship to the central protagonist. This confusion is compounded by the abstract quality of the space. There is sea and beach, but the location is unspecified. It is only in the last few pages that the relationships between the times and spaces of Mira and the dramatised narrator are revealed; until then, these spatial and temporal shifts serve to raise questions about those relationships as well as to compound that oscillation of closeness and distance between central protagonist and narrator/s that underpins the mode of narration.

In the preceding outline, a series of strategies have been described which together serve to construct an oscillating closeness and distance between readers, narrator/s and central protagonist. The mode of narration outlined constructs a range of reading positions. On the one hand, there is the possibility of identifying with the knowing, more experienced

authoritative narrator, while an empathetic identification with the suffering central protagonist is also a possibility. Added to this, readers are also drawn into the position of trusted listener to the stream of consciousness confessions of the dramatised narrator, while at the same time, a degree of empathy with these sufferings, is also encouraged. To some extent, irony and melodrama serve either to discourage or encourage a close readerly identification, while temporal shifts towards and away from the central protagonist work to privilege or close off identification with narrator/s or central protagonist. Though the denouement reveals that the narration has been performed, all along, by the central protagonist, the extent to which this closure eradicates the previously established sense of blurred and fragmentary identities is debatable, especially since Val re-emerges at the end of the novel and continues to disrupt the narrator's discourse.

Certain characteristics of the mode of narration's construction of relations between narrator/central protagonist, central protagonist/reader and reader/narrator correlate with the relation that pertains between mothers and daughters. The more knowing and experienced position of the authoritative narrator is certainly parental in relation to the less knowing and younger central protagonist, while the dramatised

narrator's appeals to the reader also invite the reader to position herself as caring maternal listener. Yet, at the same time, it is also possible that the reader might identify with the less knowing, younger, Mira or with the confessing suffering dramatised narrator, rather than with the more knowing narrator or the caring, listening mother position. What this suggests is that the narrative invites the reader to oscillate between a mother and a daughter position.

Like all first person novels, the confessional novel of the mainstream implies a particular point of view - that of the first person narrator/author. Though The Women's Room's narration emanates partially from the first person dramatised narrator, the above outline has revealed several features of mode of narration which diverge markedly from the typical confessional novel of the mainstream. Whereas the mainstream confessional novel typically describes the central protagonist from the point of view of the first person narrator/author, leaving the reader in no doubt that he is describing his former self, in the case of The Women's Room, the oscillation between the authoritative third person narration of Mira's life and the first person confessions of the dramatised narrator do not immediately suggest a relationship of identity between central protagonist and narrator/s. Indeed, it might even be argued that The Women's Room is only confessional in retrospect, since

though the reader is offered clues concerning the identity of the narrator/s throughout the text, it is only at the conclusion of the novel that the narrator's identity as Mira is finally revealed.

While there are clearly marked differences, then, between the implied point of view of the typical confessional novel and that of The Women's Room, this novel does share a range of narrational strategies with its main stream relation. The use of irony to distance narrator and central protagonist is a common confessional strategy, though as the above notes have indicated, the counterpointing of irony by melodrama in The Women's Room creates an oscillation between closeness and distance.

The preceding chapter included a brief outline of Porter's thesis,⁵⁶ in which he argues that since the confessional novel can only construct either child/parent or parent/child reader/narrator relations, the genre is less 'mature' than the autobiography, in which, according to Porter, an adult narrator addresses an adult reader. The above outline of The Women's Room does seem, to some extent at least, to support Porter's thesis: the narration typically addresses the reader either as mother or daughter and constructs a parent/child relationship between authoritative narrator and central protagonist. Two aspects of mode of

narration in The Women's Room confound this child/parent or parent/child reader/narrator or reader/central protagonist relation. Firstly, though the ironic mode of authoritative narration encourages an identification with an older, more experienced and maternal position in relation to the daughterly central protagonist, the melodramatic mode of dramatic narration arguably encourages an empathetic identification with either the central protagonist or the dramatised narrator. Thus while Porter argued that the mainstream confessional novel addressed its readers either as parents or as children, what this close reading of the The Women's Room's mode of narration has revealed is that it invites an oscillation between these two positions as well as between closeness to and distance from the central protagonist. This difference between the mainstream and the woman's confessional novel will therefore be discussed further in the following chapter.

'Becomingness' in the Women's Room

In the preceding chapter, it was argued that the continual and simultaneous fixing and unfixing of subjectivity constructed by the confessional novel marked it out as the narrative form 'par excellence' of agonist power relations. A range of devices were identified which together work to produce agonism: as the confessing narrator's discourse progresses, the identity of the

central protagonist is both further elaborated and altered - each confession simultaneously adding layers to and bringing about changes in that identity. It was also pointed out that the confessional novel of the twentieth century is clearly shaped, in part, by the discourses of psycho-analysis and psycho-therapy, within which the confessions of the analysand or patient produce changes within subjectivity. To further the comparison between The Women's Room and the confessional novel of the mainstream, the next section of this chapter will discuss the extent to which 'becomingness' as described above shapes the narrative of this example of a woman's confessional novel.

Whereas in the confessional novel of the mainstream, the confessing narrator describes himself as he was in the past, and inscribes, therefore, the trajectory traced by his former self on the way to becoming the narrator, in The Women's Room this paradigm is diverged from, since while the authoritative and dramatised narrators both inscribe the 'becomingness' of Mira, the dramatised narrator also inscribes her own 'becomingness' by means of confession - referring to herself in the past, for instance, before describing herself walking the beach. It is only at the moment of closure that it becomes clear that both the confessions of the dramatised narrator and the more distanced reporting of the central protagonist by the authoritative narrator, have served to play out

confessional agonism through describing as well as transforming the subjectivity of the central protagonist. Though it is therefore the case that agonist relations are inscribed by the narrative of The Women's Room, the authoritative narrator's third person descriptions of the central protagonist, together with the inclusion of an apparently discrete confessing dramatised first person narrator, clearly differentiate The Women's Room from the paradigm of the mainstream confessional narrative.

Temporal relations between the novel's 'story' and 'discourse' also serve to differentiate The Women's Room from the mainstream confessional, for while the mainstream narrative reports the 'becomingness' of its central protagonist chronologically, in The Women's Room the temporal shifts forward to either the narrator's life walking the beach, or to life on campus at Harvard serve to disrupt any sense of a smooth passage between one subjective state and another.

Nevertheless, if it is accepted that the novel's revelatory closure produces the narrative in retrospect as confessional, then a clear trajectory of 'becomingness' characterises the narrative development of both Mira and the dramatised narrator - as well as several of the 'Harvard' characters, including Clarissa, Kyla, Iso, Grete and Ava. In the following notes, these

trajectories will be closely analysed in order to compare them with that of the central protagonist of the mainstream confessional narrative.

In addition to the split it constructs between central protagonist and narrator/s, The Women's Room's mobilisation of the feminist practice of consciousness-raising also differentiates it further from its mainstream relation. In The Women's Room, acts of confession are instances of agonism - they flesh out and constantly produce shifts in the subjectivities of both Mira and the dramatised narrator; but the 'becomingness' which diminishes the distance between Mira and the dramatised and omniscient narrators not only produces Mira as older, more knowing and increasingly authoritative, it also produces Mira as feminist. As the narrative develops, the confession of the dramatised narrator and the central protagonist gradually begin to point towards similar conclusions as it is underlined that the underlying problem that causes womens' sufferings lies in their subordination to men. Gradually, Mira begins to make comments such as the following: "Yes. It's because (men) don't care about their kids. They just don't care about them. So they're free. Women are victims. All the way through", Mira heard herself say.⁵⁷ Mira's experience of living amongst all the other suburban wives is also constructed to parallel the experience of consciousness-raising

which, in the words of one participant, involves the attempt to 'draw the threads together'⁵⁸ from individual women's testimonies in order to analyse and struggle against the subordination of women. Central to consciousness-raising practices, according to Sue Bruley, is the transformation of personal anger, despair and dissatisfaction into feminist political struggle and analysis⁵⁹. These transformative moments mark key points in the 'becomingness' of Mira, who at her most despairing realises that 'Norm was not the enemy, only the embodiment of the enemy.'⁶⁰ Thus consciousness-raising, together with academia and the gaining of knowledge through education form the implicit framework within which Mira becomes the narrator of the novel and shifts from object position - remember that voyeuristic opening in the Ladies' Room - to that of subject.

The dramatised narrator increasingly refers to her position as author of the narrative. In the fourteenth section of chapter one, for instance, she comments that whereas novels used to end with marriage, this story is different: 'Some dramatic sense, probably culled from reading plays or female Bildungsromane, which always end with the heroine's marriage, makes me want to stop here'.⁶¹ This device works to distance the narrator from the central protagonist, and to gesture forward towards a future stage of Mira's 'becomingness', when she will

become the author of her own story.

Mira's 'becomingness' is also marked by a circularity that differentiates her trajectory from that of the mainstream central protagonist. While the confessional novel's closure is typically partial - the life, and therefore the process of 'becoming' are not yet ended - in the case of The Women's Room, not only does the narrative open with Mira already at college before flash-backs describe the path that has brought her there, but this structural circularity is also compounded thematically by such comments as the following: 'Later, much later, she would remember these years, and realise with astonishment that she had, by fifteen, decided on most of the assumptions she would carry for the rest of her life; that people were essentially not evil, that perfection was death ... Unfortunately she forgot most of these things and had to remember them the hard way.'

The novel's closure, moreover, does not produce a markedly improved life for Mira. Though she is clearly more mature, the ending is far from happy, and readers are left with a sense that life will continue to be extremely painful and difficult: 'Maybe I need a keeper. I don't want them to lock me up and give me electric shock until I forget. Forget: lethe: the opposite of truth. I have opened all the doors in my head. I have opened all the pores in my body. But only the tide rolls in.'

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popularised growth movement which clearly provides a framework for much confessional writing, the pessimistic and gloomy sense of foreboding which permeates these final lines marked The Women's Room out from the more optimistic end-notes of the mainstream confessional novel.

The following section will elaborate upon the particular mode of 'becomingness' traced within the woman's confessional novel by describing and commenting upon key moments of 'becomingness' in The Women's Room.

The centrality of feminism, academia and education to the 'becomingness' of the central protagonist is evidenced at many points in the novel. The becomingness of Mira is often signalled by a merging of dramatised and/or authoritative narrator and central protagonist, either through similar use of textual references, or through a growing similarity in mode of analysis - Mira increasingly offers a feminist interpretation of events, where men come to be seen as the enemy. For instance, in the thirteenth section of the first chapter, Mira's thoughts about her near-rape by Lanny's friends take the following form: 'it was not her virginity she treasured, but her right to herself, to her own mind and body ... It was ridiculous to talk about injustice; it was useless to protest. She knew from her few experiences of talking about women and freedom that such protests were always

taken by men as invitations to their taking greater freedoms with her.'⁶⁴ This passage pre-figures the eventual merging of narrator/s and central protagonist - the phrase which begins 'it was ridiculous ...' could be authoritative narration, but it could also be Mira's thoughts recorded by means of an interior glance which momentarily turns central protagonist into narrator. It is significant that at this point the blurring between central protagonist and narrator has reached a point where it is impossible to tell whether the passage represents authoritative narration or the reported interior thought processes of the central protagonist. Though the distinction between the two positions is swiftly re-emphasised, this blurring pre-figures the novel's eventual closure and marks a stage on Mira's path of 'becomingness'.

Though the above passage identifies the central protagonist's developing feminist consciousness as one of the sites upon which 'becomingness' is produced in The Women's Room, authoritative narration also describes marriage, childbirth and motherhood as key moments on the path. 'In January', announces the authoritative narrator, 'she had the baby, and a year and a half later, she had another. Norm's parents lent them money on a note: eight thousand dollars to be repaid when he went into practice. After that she got another diaphragm. But by then she was a different person.'⁶⁵ Childbirth and motherhood

lead the central protagonist to experience herself differently: in the post-natal ward, Mira meets other mothers: 'She smiled with them, laughed with them at the absurdities of the big world ... She felt she had arrived, finally, at womanhood.'⁶⁶ Interestingly, this marker on Mira's path of 'becomingness' is followed immediately by a flash-forwards to 1968 - a group of women are listening to Mira's stories of childbirth, and their comments are reported through what appears to be omniscient narration, but which the denouement reveals as Mira's memories. These women do not just speak, they storm, snort, crow, exclaim and giggle. They are not yet sure enough of each other to let politeness go completely, the reader is told, but they are 'getting there.'⁶⁷

The affirmation signalled by the omniscient narrator's description of the women as 'getting there', together with the adjectives used to describe the women's speech, which all connote openness, lack of inhibition, authenticity and spontaneity, combine to produce these women as further advanced down the path of 'becomingness' according to notions of progression culled from the personal growth movement of the 70's,⁶⁸ than Mira lying in bed in the post-natal ward. Through the manipulation of story-time, the narration thus continually relativises various stages of Mira's progression, and produces

'becomingness' as ongoing and interminable.

As the children grow older, and Mira and Norm have more money, Mira has more time for herself and begins to use this time for reading and independent study: 'Once a week, her friend Theresa would drive her to the library and she would get stacks of books all by one author. She read all the James, Huxley, Faulkner, Woolf, Austen and Dickens the library possessed ... she took out popular and scholarly books on psychology, sociology ... She was getting her life back'⁶⁹. Here, education and reading are clearly equated with a spiral of 'becomingness' which returns Mira to herself.

From this point of the narrative onwards, Mira's developing feminist consciousness becomes central to her path of 'becomingness'. The seventh section of chapter two includes a section of authoritative narration describing changes wrought in the consciousness of Mira and her group of friends by their cocktail parties: 'They began dimly to realise that they had another self from the one they lived with daily ... It seemed as if they might have another chance'⁷⁰. This sense of potential change becomes less diffuse as the narrative moves forward, and for Mira at least, a new way of seeing herself and the world brings about shifts in her sense of her own subjectivity. At the same time, the lives of many of the other women with whom Mira associates are

described from a feminist position by the authoritative narrator. Thus as Mira becomes a feminist, so the narrative works to position readers similarly: Mira's path of 'becomingness' becomes ours.

As Mira's feminist consciousness develops, so she is increasingly marked out as different from the other women by the authoritative narrator. Mira's friends no longer feel comfortable associating with her: 'Mira had been reading philosophy when Adele came in ... She was uncomfortable and decided she would not go to Mira's again'.⁷¹ As Mira becomes increasingly different from the other women, so the central protagonist takes over more frequently from authoritative narration and the point of view that the reader is thus invited to share becomes increasingly authoritative and knowing.

Still in chapter two, a 'flash-forwards' serves to underline Mira's 'becomingness' at this time, whilst also underlining the ongoingness of the process. Suddenly the action shifts to Harvard, where the other women are discussing the period of Mira's life just described: "You had a raised consciousness even then." "I had a raised unconscious," Mira corrected her. "I couldn't have articulated it; I had no words to describe what I felt."⁷² Here two stages on Mira's path of 'becomingness' are juxtaposed, and her own comments

underline the provisional nature of any one moment on the path.

In the sixteenth section of the second chapter, the authoritative narrator describes another change in Mira. She begins to sit up at night drinking brandy. From this point onwards, these solitary sittings provide a stage upon which the next steps of the central protagonist's 'becomingness' get taken. Sitting alone in the dark, Mira thinks, and her thoughts are recorded, stream of consciousness style through omniscient narration. While Mira's thoughts take centre stage, she becomes the narrator of the novel: 'To calm herself, she poured a little of Norm's brandy in a juice glass, and took it into the living room. She sat there sipping, smoking, meditating. It was the first time she ever did that, and the beginning of a new pattern ... Was she jealous? Did she wish it had been she Paul had come charging in on?'⁷³ Though Mira's thoughts are recorded here in the third person, this stream of consciousness passage marks a further stage in her journey towards total merging with the narrator/s. Further, when, a little later, Mira notices a bad rash on Natalie's hands and begins to think about the position of women, it is even more difficult to differentiate her discourse from that of the authoritative or the dramatised narrator: 'We all want it anyway. It doesn't seem so important to men. Women, victims again. Why should men be so important to us and

we not to them? Is that nature too? '⁷⁴

Mira becomes increasingly authoritative throughout this section of the novel. When she discusses Natalie's husband with her, she speaks with greater knowledge and assurance: 'In the letters, I'm an adorable child he's going to master; in the notebooks he masters women who aren't adorable children. One step out of the role of adorable child and you get tortured.'⁷⁵ Mira is beginning to speak in short epigrammatic sentences reminiscent of those of the dramatised narrator, while her outlook is here markedly influenced by a radical feminism where women are the helpless victims of male violence.

By the next section of chapter two, like the dramatised narrator, Mira too is beginning to decorate her speech with references to literary, philosophical or psychological texts. Here, Mira's thoughts are no longer reported in the third person by authoritative narration, instead, direct dialogue underlines the text's construction of central protagonist as now more able to speak for herself: 'Everybody, all the unhappy marriages ... I see it everywhere. It feels like hell to me. It may only be Dante's first circle, but that's hell enough. To go round like that forever.'⁷⁶

Now, the central protagonist goes so far as to acknowledge her own 'becomingness': 'Mira thought about her increasing habit of going off into private thoughts when she was with people ... Things that happened no longer made her feel: they made her think'.⁷⁷ This passage also underlines the centrality of Mira's developing intellect to the direction of her 'becomingness'. The emphasis here on thought together with the growing use of textual references combine to produce Mira's 'becomingness' as an intellectual development which gradually produces her as increasingly authoritative.

However, the authority that enables the central protagonist to begin to speak from the position of narrator does not only arise from the acquisition of education and an increased ability to provide literary references. Mira also moves into the position of dramatised narrator to the extent that her discourse begins to resemble the dramatised narrator's in its use of terms culled from the popularised growth movement, psycho-therapy and psychology. Thus in the seventh section of chapter three, Mira explains to Norm that his patients' children were trying to save their mother's life to alleviate guilt: 'And the obvious guilt is their wish for her to die'.⁷⁸ To some extent, authority depends upon the ability to psycho-analyse, to look within and to deliver the truth about another's interior

world; as Mira begins to speak within this discourse, so she moves more and more frequently into the position of the dramatised narrator. It is also at this point that the central protagonist begins to speak in rhyme: 'Love, love, heavens above, we all destroy in the name of love.'⁷⁹ This rhyming, together with her increasing recourse to psycho-therapeutic or growth movement terms together produce the increasing authority of the central protagonist - an authority rooted in notions of spontaneity, authenticity and knowledge of self.

As the central protagonist gains in authority, so omniscient narration becomes less obvious - which produces a shift in text/reader relations. Now that the more obvious signs of omniscient *narration begin to fall* away, the reader is presented more and more with long chunks of dialogue to interpret. Thus not only the central protagonist, but also the reader engages increasingly in analysing and attempting to understand character motives. Of course, this is not to argue that at this stage in the novel the reader has a more direct and less mediated relationship with the characters, but to suggest rather that the superceding of a 'telling' by a 'showing' form of narration⁸⁰ encourages the reader to feel as though she is in the powerful position of analyst or therapist. Thus as Mira gains in authority, the reader too is increasingly invited to occupy

authoritative and powerful positions. Mira's 'becomingness' produces the reader's 'becomingness'.

The manipulation of story-time continues to remind the reader, however, that the journey is by no means complete. For instance, in the eighteenth and nineteenth sections of chapter three, the dramatised narrator erupts into the text, speaking from another time and another place. Her stream of consciousness monologue enables the reader to compare and distinguish between this mode of speech and that of the central protagonist. The dramatised narrator confides in the reader, confessing openly and intimately. She is not afraid to expose her feelings. She trusts the reader, and she offers up her thoughts about her relationship between men and women. Hers is the voice of the radical feminism of the Seventies and the voice of the growth movement incarnate. To walk on the edge of insanity becomes a highly privileged practice: 'Maybe that's what the people perceive who look at me so strangely as I walk the beach. I feel like an outlaw not only because I think that men are rotten and women are great, but because I have come to believe that oppressed people have the right to use criminal means to survive.'⁸¹

Mira now exhibits further her ability to stand in the place of the narrator. However, she is no longer ridiculed by an authoritative narrator; instead, she

criticises herself: 'And when he didn't answer she could hear her words in her head, hear them over and over, words of an ass-hole, a gushing idiot, gurgling'.⁸²

Mira divorces Norm, attempts suicide and finally returns to college. It is during these first few weeks at college that the next major step in her 'becomingness' takes place. She realises that there is nothing that will make up for the past, and suddenly decides that from now on she will not try and live through another person but will live her own life: 'And suddenly it was all right, the past, even if it was all wrong, because it had freed her, it had placed her here, still alive, more alive than she had been.⁸³ From this point onwards, Mira becomes increasingly independent, alone and autonomous. Independence, autonomy and 'aloneness', together with 'openness' and living near the edge of an unhappiness deep enough to threaten loss of reason become the keynotes of her 'becomingness' and throughout the rest of the novel she becomes more aware of her own despair as well as more and more alone.

By the fourteenth section of chapter four, Mira has become the wise woman of Cambridge. She is now sought out for advice and words of wisdom by younger students on campus. She has become maternal. When Howard Perkins, a younger student, tells Mira, 'This has been the worst year

of my life', omniscient narration informs us that
'Mira gave a motherly murmur.'⁸⁴ As Mira becomes
increasingly maternal, so she is positioned more and more
frequently in the position of analyst. Younger students
like Kyla come to her for advice and to unburden
themselves. Yet with her two sons, Mira is less the
mother and more the daughter - she confesses to them that
she has a boyfriend, and chats to them about her own
adolescence, masturbation and sexuality. At this stage in
the narrative Mira begins to have a sexual relationship
with Ben, and for the first time experiences orgasm with a
man - another step on the path of 'becomingness'.

Nevertheless, though Mira is now positioned more
frequently not only as authoritative, but also as
maternal, Val emerges as more authoritative and maternal
than the central protagonist. Mira seeks approval and
advice from Val, the soothsayer. Then Val's daughter
Chris goes away to Chicago and gets raped in the street.
Their vision of the world darkens - they see nothing but
male violence and women victims. Another strand in the
story of 'becomingness' is woven through this section of
the narrative as Val becomes harsher, leaner and more
difficult to communicate with. When Val finally gets
shot for her attempt to set a woman prisoner free, Mira
moves irrevocably into the position of soothsayer. There
is no longer a dramatised narrator or a Supermother ahead
on the path of 'becomingness'. When Kyla, Clarissa and

Iso try to discuss their sexual triangle, they turn to Mira : 'They all turned to Mira as if she would know, and she gasped a laugh in embarrassment. She had to say something. She wished desperately that Val was there. Val would know . "It seems to me," she heard herself say gropingly, "that what Iso was saying is that she long ago gave up. " ' ⁸⁵ Though the shadow of the Supermother is acknowledged, Mira does produce her version of the truth. A few sentences on, Mira even begins to sound like Val: 'She smiled grimly and picked up the brandy. "Hah!" ⁸⁶ she heard. It was Val's voice.'

As Mira moves into this position, Val gets shot. Mira's 'becomingness' therefore seems to depend upon Val's death. Yet the final few lines of the novel suggest that Val is still present, shaping Mira's thoughts from beyond the grave.

In the above section an outline of the process of 'becomingness' as it is constructed by The Women's Room has been described. While agonist relations certainly do shape the narrative - the readers' knowledge of the central protagonist is both constantly augmented and yet altered by the narration - the split between central protagonist and authoritative and dramatised narrators produces what can best be described as a doubling of the 'becomingness' process. At the same time, Mira's

'becoming' depends upon the obliteration of Val, who remains, nevertheless as a shadowy presence right up until the last few lines of the novel. These features of 'becomingness' in The Women's Room, together with the imbrication within the narrative of feminist, psycho-analytic and psycho-therapeutic notions of development will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Sexuality in The Women's Room

In the last chapter, it was argued that one of the principal sites upon which agonist relations are played out is that of sexuality. Following Foucault, it was proposed that since sexuality is regarded as the core of individuality, the constant 'putting into discourse' of sexual practices and identities that characterises so much of our literary culture, represents a key moment both in the fixing of and in the attempt to unfix the certainties of sexual identity. Since much that gets confessed by the central protagonist of the mainstream confessional novel concerns itself with sexual feelings and practices, it was argued that this aspect of the novel provided support for the initial hypothesis that the mainstream confessional novel represented the narrative par excellence of agonist power relations.

In the next section, the place of sexuality in the narrative of The Women's Room will be explored in order

to see to what extent this aspect of the woman's confessional novel parallels or diverges from the mainstream narrative.

Whereas, in the mainstream confessional novel, the confessions of the first person narrator detail sexual activities, fantasies and feelings, the split between central protagonist and narrator/s which characterises the mode of narration of The Women's Room produces descriptions of sexual experiences and feelings in the third person: 'Her first experiments with what she did not know until years later was called masturbation were inept'.⁸⁷ While the dramatised narrator does 'confess' in the first person, these confessions do not concern themselves with sexuality; what the dramatised narrator confesses are experiences of suffering and pain, and feelings of despair. This split between a sexualised (and suffering) central protagonist, and a suffering though less highly sexualised first person narrator has several effects. Firstly, where the narrative concerns itself with the sexuality of the central protagonist, this is constructed from the point of view of the more knowing and authoritative narrator. Two positions are therefore offered to the reader who may either identify with the point of view of this authoritative narrator (voyeurism), or who may identify instead with the object of that investigation (masochism). Perhaps the most probable reading position falls somewhere between these

two poles, so that the process of reading entails an oscillation between masochism and voyeurism.

While the question of what the appeal of this oscillation might be for women readers will be fully explored in the next chapter, here, what needs emphasis is the distinction between the first person sexual confessing of the mainstream confessional novel, and the third person sexual descriptions which follow from the structural split between first person narration and central protagonist which characterises the bulk of the mode of narration of The Women's Room. It is also striking that whereas the mainstream confessional novel concerns itself, above all else, with the sexual experiences of the confessor, sexuality is not foregrounded to the same extent by The Women's Room; moreover, though thematic issues of sexuality and suffering will be treated separately in this chapter, the following exposition will illustrate the extent to which an overlap characterises the relationship between these two themes.

It has been suggested that whereas sexuality forms the central theme of the discourse of the mainstream confessional's first person narrator this theme is foregrounded to a lesser extent by the discourse of the first person dramatised narrator of The Women's Room. Nevertheless, when the authoritative narrator first

introduces the theme of sexuality in the first chapter, the matter of fact way in which these case-history like notes foreground sexuality within the central protagonist's adolescent development suggests that like the mainstream confessional, The Women's Room is shaped, to some extent at least, by a Freudian inspired notion of the centrality of sexuality to human development: 'At the end of her fourteenth year, Mira began to menstruate and was finally let in on the secret of sanitary napkins ... She had sudden overwhelming desires to put her hand under her pyjamas and rub the skin of her shoulder, her sides, the insides of her thighs.'⁸⁸ Here, the authoritative narration's case-history like mode suggests an inter-textual relation with psycho-analytic or psycho-therapeutic discourse and works, I would suggest, to distance the reader from any sense of identification with the experiences of the central protagonist, who is constructed as a specimen for the voyeuristic investigation of the authoritative narrator.

In the eighth section of chapter one, these case-history like reports from the authoritative narrator continue by describing Mira's experiences of the discomfort of menstruation. Though the narration implies that Mira's negative experiences of menstruation were produced, in part, by a woman fearing society: '(Men) did not have the same poisons in them, Mrs Mittlow said'⁸⁹, in this instance, the close attention to the detail of the

central protagonist's experience might encourage an empathetic relation to the sufferings of the central protagonist. Here too, the authoritative narration's mode of speech blurs with the inner thoughts of the central protagonist. These strategies combine to produce the sense of early sexual feelings and experiences as painful. This stress is underlined by the narration's descriptions of Mira's early masochistic masturbatory fantasies: 'She grasped at any material ... she realised ... that the essential ingredient of her titillation was humiliation, and for that, a power struggle was necessary.⁹⁰'

This overall construction of sexuality as painful and suffused with suffering continues throughout the authoritative narration of Mira's adolescence, early experiences with boys, first dates and first experiences of desire. She meets a young man to whom she does feel sexually attracted, only to be submitted to a near-rape. This experience leads her to give up all hopes of an independent life. Consequently she agrees to marry Norm and is soon the mother of two small sons.

If early experiences of sexuality are constructed as painful, then childbirth and marriage only serve to intensify this connection between sexuality and suffering: 'She was sick during the entire pregnancy,

with constant nausea and stomach pain ... Her small body swelled up enormously with the child, and by the seventh month she was miserably uncomfortable.⁹¹

The above section arguably reveals that in relation to sexuality, the reader is alternately invited to distance herself from and empathise with the experiences of the central protagonist. While the voyeuristic and analyst-like case-history notes of the authoritative narrator encourage a distancing from Mira, the more sympathetic tone that the narrator increasingly adopts encourages a masochistic identification with the sexual suffering of the central protagonist.

This emphasis upon the tight fit between sexuality and suffering is developed throughout the middle section of the novel as Mira learns about her friend Nat's husband's pornographic writings, about the unhappy and unsuccessful sex lives of the other women with whom she mixes, and about the affairs through which her women friends attempt to escape the dull drudgery of their lives at home with husbands and babies. Overall, heterosexuality is constructed through authoritative narration as an instance through which womens' subordination to male dominance is played out. Heterosexual experience is always difficult and painful, and represents one aspect of the pain and suffering that the women experience due to their subordinate position. As the central

protagonist gains authority, so she begins to develop a feminist analysis to explain why womens' experiences of sexuality are so painful.

Though The Women's Room foregrounds its central protagonist's sexuality to a lesser extent than does the confessional novel of the mainstream, the authoritative narrator's description of Mira's husband Norm does foreground his sexuality as a key organising feature of his identity: 'He was not much devoted to sex. His mother had seen to it, from his earliest years, that he slept with his hands on top of the blankets ... He lost his virginity on the back seat of a '39 Ford ... something would rise in him like a cry, a longing to reach out and grab hard ... to ... rape.'

The pattern of alignment of heterosexuality with suffering is diverged from during Mira's affair with Ben, when her sexual experiences are described in triumphant and celebratory terms: 'as she moved and she came, she felt like a goddess, triumphant, riding the winds, and she kept coming'.⁹³ Yet though these passages emphasise Mira's ability to have clitoral orgasms - her husband Norm told her she was frigid because she did not have vaginal orgasms - what the celebratory descriptions of Mira's sexuality such as the one above underline is not her new found sexual capacity, but rather her growing capacity to

spontaneously experience 'authentic' feelings. Thus though the ability to experience orgasm forms one stage on Mira's path to 'becomingness' what the orgasm signifies is that she is now able to 'let go' and freely experience her own authentic emotions. Moreover it is noticeable that Mira is described as in the superior position, implying that though she has 'let go' she is still in control, or perhaps that it is by letting go that she gains control. What this in turn points to, once again, is the extent to which Mira's 'becomingness' follows the well-trodden path of the growth movement of the mid-Seventies.⁹⁴ Though this passage does suggest, then, that heterosexuality can be pleasureable for women, it has been suggested that what the sexual act signifies here for Mira, is another step on the path of 'becomingness'. Moreover the suggestion of joyful heterosexual union is undercut both by Mira's previous questioning of her heterosexuality - she asks Val how you know if you are gay - and by the later construction of this affair as fleeting and unstable - Ben leaves her to go back to Africa, demanding that she follow, do secretarial work for him, and have his baby. Meanwhile Iso, the lesbian character, becomes more and more central to the narrative as she begins to gain in authority and take over from Val as lynch-pin of the group.

If heterosexuality is aligned, for the most part with unpleasure, suffering and the subordination of women,

lesbianism, from halfway through the fourth chapter onwards is represented as no less painful. Iso and Ava break up, then Iso has a complicated series of relationships ending with an immensely complex triangular denouement. Though authoritative narration works to produce Iso as independent, problems of blurred boundaries, merging and lack of separateness emerge as central to the experience of female homosexuality. Iso is eventually reported as attempting to solve these issues in the following manner: 'She would have to find a little man in her, whatever that meant ... It meant insisting on self, not the way they did, but a little. Otherwise you were the tramping ground of the world. A little. But how did one do that?'⁹⁵ Though lesbianism is presented as by no means unproblematic, the emergence of Iso as both authoritative and central in the last two chapters, together with the break-up of the relationship between Mira and Ben does suggest that to some extent, female homosexuality is produced as a possible alternative, at least, to the trials and tribulations of heterosexual coupledness. Yet descriptions of Iso such as the one above, emphasise not her sexuality, but her growing ability to assert herself and to be self-determining, independent and in control of her destiny - qualities which, according to Lasch lie at the heart of the path of 'becomingness' encouraged by the growth movement of the Seventies.⁹⁶

The main event of the last third of the novel, the rape of Val's daughter Chris, compounds the authoritative narration's production of heterosexuality as both painful and dangerous for women. Though Val's move to radical separatist politics is initially received sceptically by Mira, the final chapter's reinstatement of Val - she returns as soothsayer from beyond the grave - suggests that her viewpoint is sanctioned, to some extent at least, though the fact of her death cannot be ignored.

Sexuality, which marks the corner-stone upon which subjectivity forms and re-forms itself within the mainstream confessional novel is not emphasised to the same extent by this example of the woman's confessional novel, for though Norm is constructed as essentially sexual, sexuality, though significant is not central to the Mira character, and it is mentioned even less frequently by the dramatised narrator, so that when the merging of the two has finally taken place, the image is of a woman whose life is not centrally concerned with sexuality. Though she mentions 'horniness' to her son on the phone, the life she lives is a celibate one, and though to speak of celibacy is still to speak within the discourse of sexual identities, it is still the case that education, 'consciousness-raising', but above all, suffering rather than sexuality operate as the key organisers of Mira's 'becomingness'.

Suffering in The Women's Room

If sexuality is foregrounded to a lesser degree by The Women's Room than it is by the mainstream confessional novel, suffering which certainly characterises much of the experience of the mainstream central protagonist,⁹⁷ almost totally characterises the experiences of both Mira and the dramatised narrator. Suffering organises Mira's 'becomingness'. Moreover, while the mainstream confessional novel's closure generally suggests that greater self knowledge may well lead to a lessening (though not an end) to suffering, The Women's Room leaves its readers with the sense that life will continue to be excruciatingly painful for the central protagonist/narrator. Only the determinants of pain shift - for which the narration suggests that to be born a woman is to be born to suffer, Mira's 'becomingness' which, inter alia, produces in her the capacity to analyse her position intellectually, leads her to experience further and deeper suffering, since she can no longer experience anything but the raw and harsh truths concerning the position of women. The confessional novel always constructs the 'becomingness' of its central protagonist around a deepening self-awareness and an increased ability to feel,⁹⁸ ending on a note of hope. However, the closure of The Women's Room is marked by what can best, perhaps, be

termed pathos, since in this case, the discourse of 'becomingness' with its concomitant recourse to notions of growth and deepening self-awareness, produces not hope, but despair.⁹⁹

The authoritative narration with which the novel opens works to construct the central protagonist as suffering. The point of view the reader is offered is a voyeuristic one, since she is invited to watch unseen while Mira suffers. Since voyeurism works to position its object as victim of the investigative gaze, this point of view structure works to compound the sufferings of the central protagonist, who while in pain, is unknowingly subjected to this powerful scrutiny. At the same time, such a structure might well work to produce voyeuristic pleasure for the reader since she is offered a share in this sadistic mode of looking.

Though these early sections of chapter one do occasionally describe Mira's sufferings with sympathy, on the whole such moments are swiftly undercut by the ridiculing of the authoritative narrator. 'In spite of herself, however, her eyes caught her whole face, and in a moment her head was full of tears. She leaned her hot forehead against the cool tile wall, then remembered that this was a public place full of other peoples' germs, and straightened up hurriedly and left the room.'¹⁰⁰ By means of such strategies, the reader is caught up in an

ambivalent relation to the sufferings of the central protagonist, for while at moments an empathetic relation is possible, readers are then invited to distance themselves from the central protagonist once more as identification is undercut. Taken together, the oscillation between central protagonist and authoritative narrators (as outlined under Mode of Narration) together with this production and undercutting of readerly empathy towards the central protagonist work to encourage a readerly ambivalence towards Mira.

No such ambivalence is produced in relation to the confessions of the dramatised narrator which are suffused with suffering - there is a sense of revelling in pain to the point of masochism - while the absence of narrational interventions privileges a fully empathetic reader/dramatised narrator relation. This element of masochism is compounded thematically since the dramatised narrator does actually refer to almost enjoying her own pain¹⁰¹ which is constantly underlined by exclamations such as 'Oh God' serving to construct this pain as almost intolerable.

The theme of suffering develops throughout the The Women's Room. Authoritative narration declares that Mira found English interesting since it was concerned with 'blood and suffering'¹⁰². Pregnancy, childbirth, marriage and

sexuality are, as was outlined above, constructed almost totally as painful experiences for the central protagonist. Indeed, narrative progression is constructed, at least for the first third of the novel, through Mira's 'becomingness' resulting from a deepening of suffering. Thus Mira's experience of rowing with Norm is described thus: 'The rockets were exploding all over her body. Her heart ached no more than her stomach or her brain. It was all exploding in fire and tears, and the tears were as hot and hurtful as the fires of

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rage.

Passages such as the above, together with most of the dramatised narrator's confessions, where the experience of individual suffering is very fully described by means of metaphor, suggest that the narrative's construction of suffering is shaped by melodrama, a genre which is bound, according to Peter Brooks, by 'the possibility and necessity of saying everything' as well as by its impulse

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to excess; moreover, this melodramatic connection is underlined by authoritative narration, which frequently refers to the film melodrama Stella Dallas. This overlay of confessional with melodramatic discourses marks another area of differentiation between the mainstream confession narrative and The Women's Room and will therefore be discussed further in the following chapter.

When authoritative narration introduces the other women with whom Mira associates during the early years of her marriage and motherhood, their lives too are constructed as agonisingly painful - as life on the edge of madness and despair. Once again, these sufferings, like those of the central protagonist and the dramatised narrator, are dwelt on in great detail. Lily lives on a knife edge of tension and eventually has to be hospitalised. ¹⁰⁵

Samantha's husband builds up debts then abandons wife and family. ¹⁰⁶ Authoritative narration constructs each of these women as powerless - a theme which is eventually made explicit by the newly authoritative central protagonist herself: '“Yes. It's because they don't care about their kids. They just don't care about them. So they're free. Women are victims. All the way through,” Mira heard herself say.’ ¹⁰⁷

As the narrative progresses, the images used to construct this sense of powerless suffering intensify, and increasingly, the dramatised narrator makes use of the metaphor of Jews in the Nazi concentration camps to describe the sufferings of women: 'I feel like a survivor who has lost everything but her life, who wanders around inside a skinny, shrivelled body, collecting dandelion greens and muttering to herself.’ ¹⁰⁸ These pathetic images of the powerless victim intensify the melodramatic quality of the narrative, while drawing the reader into a

still closer empathy with this narrator.

Mira's attempted suicide on the departure of her husband marks a watershed in her 'becomingness'. From this point onwards, she begins to make life changing decisions, goes to college and begins to live a more fully independent life. Yet though these changes bring with them an increase in the authority and maternal capacities of the central protagonist - features which have been more fully outlined under Mode of Narration - these changes do not bring with them a decrease in suffering. Moreover, the interventions of the dramatised narrator - and by now many readers have probably guessed that this narrator is Mira - gain, if anything, in pathos and suffering: 'Will this story never end? My God, on and on and on. Only an atomic blast would end it. Sometimes I understand hawks: they too, like me, have moments of such intolerable pain that they would be willing to see it all go up, and would even cheer the mushroom cloud.'

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It has already been suggested that masochism marks the discourse of the dramatised narrator - a sense of pain being revelled in. Moreover, it has also been tentatively suggested that such a discourse might offer the reader a similar pleasure - that of empathising with and vicariously enjoying the pain that is so abundantly displayed. Indeed, as it has already been argued, at a certain point The Women's Room seems to suggest that the

proper path to 'becomingness' leads through extraordinary experiences of suffering. When Val learns that Mira had attempted suicide, her response underlines this validation of suffering: ' When I first met you, I thought you were a little - shallow, maybe. I don't think so now, haven't for a long time. But I guess I had assumed you'd deepened in the past couple of years. That you tried to knock yourself off tells me you always had strong feelings.'¹¹¹ Since the narration has already insisted that women's predominant experience of life is as suffering victim, then for a woman, to feel deeply is to suffer. Here, this validation of suffering reaches its apex.

As the narrative moves towards closure, Val's sufferings intensify. As her awareness of the injustice and sufferings in the world increases, so her capacity to remain sane decreases. Eventually, a television newsreport of the shooting of students during a demonstration sends her 'over the edge': ' and she heard this screaming, it was ungodly, it was coming from the back of her head, she could hear it, it was a woman screaming in agony, and when she looked, there was blood all over the kitchen floor.'¹¹² Though Val does eventually piece herself back together again, the suffering continues to intensify. Though Tad's attempt to seduce her daughter had begun the process, it is her

daughter's rape which brings about a profound shift of consciousness. For both mother and daughter, the world comes to be seen as inhabited solely by male rapists and women victims.

If it was argued in the Sexuality section that sexuality is constructed, within The Women's Room as predominantly the experience of suffering, then this Suffering section shows that the most intense form of suffering is constructed as concerned with sexuality. Val relinquishes the last vestiges of her heterosexuality and commits herself totally to radical separatist struggles. her sufferings pare her down to the bone - she becomes leaner, she loses her softness: 'Val was wearing jeans and a shirt; she had lost weight. Her face had lost its fullness, it was harder, firmer, older. Her hair was full of grey. The changes were slight, but she did not look the same person.'¹¹³ Though Val's becomingness through suffering has here led her away from femininity, and towards a more masculine sense of self, the narration undermines this resolution by suggesting that her death might have been avoided, had she resorted to a more traditionally feminine mode of suffering: 'Stella Dallas she had said. Yes. But not quite ... If only she had been Stella Dallas. If only she could have cried. I think to this day that would have softened everything, that would have made everything pliable enough to recover.'¹¹⁴ While the reference to that most feminine

of characters, Stella Dallas, suggests that a more feminine position is being advocated, the emphasis on crying - on showing feelings - as a way of resolving Val's situation re-emphasises the accent the narration places on a mode of 'becomingness' in keeping with that of the growth therapies of the Seventies.

Val's violent death represents one possible outcome that may result from the intense sufferings of women. The merging of dramatised narrator and central protagonist which forms the novel's closure represents the alternative path of 'becomingness' through suffering. Mira walks the beach which represents, at the same time, the borderline between sanity and madness. She is totally autonomous, totally isolated, totally alone: 'The beach grows emptier every day. I can walk for a long time without anyone turning to stare at the mad-woman ... Some days I feel dead, I feel like a robot, treading out time. Some days I feel alive, terribly alive, with hair like wires and a knife in my hand. '

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While the mainstream confessional novel is always concerned, to some extent, with the sufferings of its central protagonist, this section has revealed that in The Women's Room, suffering characterises the experience of all the women characters. Suffering is seen to characterise, indeed, the experience of women. Moreover,

suffering is not only represented as characterising, but as shaping the characters of women, in other words, it is through suffering that the central protagonist moves from one stage of 'becomingness' to the next. Suffering, which is represented structurally and thematically as the route to further stages of 'becomingness' is therefore validated throughout the The Women's Room. It has already been suggested that masochism pervades much of the discourse of the dramatised narrator as well as the authoritative narrator's descriptions of Mira's experiences. It has also been proposed that one of the readerly pleasures offered by this text might be that of an identification with these experiences. While the mainstream confessional also offers the reader the possibility of such an identification, the extent to which suffering, and masochism pervade The Women's Room serve to mark it out from its mainstream relation - and this intensification of suffering will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Summary

The preceding sections have each identified areas of similarity and of difference between The Women's Room and the mainstream, male-authored, confessional novel. Under 'Mode of Narration', the split between central protagonist

and authoritative and dramatised narrators was identified as a key mark of differentiation between the mainstream confessional narrative and The Women's Room. This mode of narration was then discussed in order to trace the shifting relationships of closeness and distance, of empathy and irony that it produces.

Under 'Becomingness in The Women's Room' it was argued that whereas both the mainstream confessional novel and The Women's Room trace the path of the 'becomingness' of their central protagonists, The Women's Room traces a particular path of 'becomingness' not only through growth, the acquisition of greater self-knowledge and the development of independence, autonomy and the capacity to love, but also through consciousness-raising, feminism, and the acquisition of education. It was also pointed out that whereas a straightforwardly chronological representation of the experiences of the central protagonist characterises the mainstream confessional novel, a circular mode of narration manipulates the story events of The Women's Room.

Under 'Sexuality in the Women's Room', it was pointed out that whereas the central protagonist of the mainstream confessional novel is essentially sexual, this is not so for either the central protagonist or the dramatised narrator of The Women's Room. Moreover, whereas

sexuality is a central determinant of the 'becomingness' of the mainstream central protagonist, sexuality as suffering determines, to a great extent, the 'becomingness' of Mira.

In the section 'Suffering in The Women's Room', it was argued that while the mainstream central protagonist certainly suffers, this suffering is intensified within The Women's Room. Moreover the references to Stella Dallas underline the melodramatic quality of this emphasis on suffering.

Many further points of differentiation arising from those underlined above were also identified and discussed in the preceding chapter, as were points of similarity. The following chapter will take this exploration further firstly by questioning the extent to which the differences outlined above together constitute an address to a feminine reading position, and secondly by returning to the question raised in the introduction to this thesis: are women's novels feminist novels?

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

1. R Coward, 'The True Story of How I Became My Own Person', in R Coward, Female Desire: Women's Sexuality Today, London, Paladin, 1984, p 176.
2. E Wilson, 'Tell It Like It Is: Women and Confessional Writing', in S Radstone (ed) Sweet Dreams: Sexuality, Gender and Popular Fiction, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1988, p 27.
3. R Coward, op cit, p 180.
4. M Tarratt, 'Mass Market Feminism', in Marxism Today, June 1983, pps 40-1.
5. E Wilson, op cit, p 27.
6. Ibid, p 12.
7. Ibid, p 30.
8. Ibid, p 22.
9. See E Wilson, op cit, p 29, and M Tarratt, op cit, p 41.
10. For a full discussion of this distinction see S Chatman, Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure In Fiction and Film, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1978.
11. M French, The Women's Room, London, Sphere, 1978, p 7.
12. See for instance P Goodman, The Structure of Literature, Chicago, Chicago University Press 1954, p 153.
13. In his essay 'A Child Is Being Beaten', (in Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud, trans J and A Strachey, London, Hogarth Press, 1924, pps 172-201), Freud argued that masochism was more often found amongst female, than amongst male patients.
14. See L M Porter, 'Autobiography Versus The

Confessional Novel', Symposium vol 30, No 2, Summer 1976, pps 144-157.

15. M French, op cit, p 10.
16. Ibid.
17. C Gledhill, Home Is Where The Heart Is: Studies In Melodrama and the Women's Film, London, British Film Institute, 1987, p 33.
18. This point will be further elaborated upon in the next chapter.
19. See C Booth, the Rhetoric of Fiction, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1987, p 152: 'In a sense, even the most reticent narrator is dramatised as soon as they are referred to as "I"'.
20. M French, op cit, p 10-11.
21. Ibid, p 11.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid, p 12.
25. This analyst/analysand narrator:reader relation recurs at a number of points within the text and is discussed more fully in the Becomingness section of this chapter.
26. M French, op cit, p 13.
27. Clearly, if the reader knows that Mira and the narrator are one and the same person, then this sense of the narrator's superiority allows a glimpse forwards towards Mira's 'becomingness', (see next section).
28. M French, op cit, p 13.
29. Ibid, p 14.
30. Ibid, p 15.
31. Ibid, p 16.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.

34. Ibid, p 189.
35. Ibid, p 636.
36. Ibid, p 183.
37. Ibid, p 474.
38. Ibid, p 17.
39. Ibid, p 23.
40. Ibid, p 41.
41. Ibid, p 42.
42. Ibid, p 24.
43. This point will be developed further in the Becomingness section.
44. M French, op cit, p 89.
45. Ibid, p 431.
46. This point will be developed further in the next chapter.
47. M French, op cit, p 189.
48. Ibid, p 92.
49. Ibid, p 277-278.
50. Ibid, p 280.
51. Ibid, p 633.
52. Ibid, p 636.
53. Ibid, p 635.
54. Ibid, p 77.
55. Ibid, p 433.
56. L M Porter, op cit. See the preceding chapter for an outline of this thesis.
57. M French, op cit, p 254.
58. S Bruley, 'Women Awake, The Experience of Consciousness Raising', in Feminist Anthology Collective (eds) No Turning Back: Writings From the Women's Liberation Movement 1975-1980, London,

- Women's Press, 1981, p 61.
59. Ibid, pps 65-66.
 60. M French, op cit, p 259.
 61. M French, op cit, p 52.
 62. Ibid, p 23.
 63. Ibid, p 636.
 64. Ibid, p 51.
 65. Ibid, p 60.
 66. Ibid, p 77.
 67. Ibid.
 68. For a short summary of the key features of this movement, see C Lasch, The Minimal Self, New York and London, W W Norton and Co, 1984, especially p 211.
 69. M French, op cit, p 98.
 70. Ibid, p 105.
 71. Ibid, p 131.
 72. Ibid, p 150.
 73. Ibid, p 158.
 74. Ibid, p 161.
 75. Ibid, p 172.
 76. Ibid, p 173.
 77. Ibid, p 174-175.
 78. Ibid, p 212.
 79. Ibid.
 80. C Booth refers to this distinction throughout The Rhetoric of Fiction, op cit.
 81. M French, op cit, p 267.
 82. Ibid, p 280.
 83. Ibid, p 315.

84. Ibid, p 361.
85. Ibid, p 614.
86. Ibid, p 622.
87. Ibid, p 30.
88. Ibid, p 24.
89. Ibid, p 32.
90. Ibid, p 30-31.
91. Ibid, p 64.
92. Ibid, p 262-264.
93. Ibid, p 424.
94. For a succinct summary of the growth movement's promotion of the clitoral orgasm, see C Lasch, op cit, p 212.
95. Ibid, p 599.
96. In The Minimal Self, op cit, Lasch emphasises the extent to which growth therapy aims to make its clients 'self-directing'.
97. E L Stelzig's paper 'Poetry and/or Truth: An Essay on the Confessional Imagination', University of Toronto Quarterly, Vol 54, Nov 1984, emphasises the extent to which the mainstream confessional novel foregrounds the suffering of its central protagonist.
98. Even J Salinger's the Catcher In the Rye, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1958, leaves readers with the promise that its central protagonist has found the psychiatric help he needs.
99. The question of the appeal of pathos to a female reader will be full explored in the following chapter.
100. M French, op cit, p 10.
101. Ibid, p 13.
102. Ibid, p 33.
103. Ibid, p 59.
104. P Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac.

Henry James, Melodrama and The Mode of Excess, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1976, p 42.

105. M French, *op cit.* See especially Chapter Three, sections 8, 9 and 10.
106. *Ibid*, see especially Chapter Three, section 14.
107. *Ibid*, p 254.
108. *Ibid*, p 271.
109. The following chapter will explore further the question of The Women's Room's particular construction of pathos.
110. *Ibid*, p 295.
111. *Ibid*, p 536.
112. *Ibid*, p 549.
113. *Ibid*, p 583.
114. *Ibid*, p 580.
115. *Ibid*, p 635-636.

THE CULTURAL INSTRUMENTALITY OF THE WOMAN'S CONFESSIONAL NOVEL

Feminist literary and cultural theories have, for some years now, concerned themselves both with defining the difference of women's writing and with explaining what gives rise to this difference. These theoretical endeavours have produced a variety of new conceptual tools for the analysis and critical appraisal of women's writing. The aim of this chapter is to bring these theoretical concerns to bear upon the previous chapter's close reading of The Women's Room¹ in order to move towards a definition of the cultural instrumentality of the woman's confessional novel. This chapter concerns itself almost exclusively with the best-known and most popular example of the genre, The Women's Room, though where key features of the woman's confessional novel are defined, comparisons with Shedding² and The Shame Is Over³, two texts included within Elisabeth Wilson's discussion of the genre⁴, are also offered.

The previous chapter's textual analysis revealed that The Women's Room shared certain features in common with, but also diverged markedly from the paradigm of the

mainstream confessional novel which emerged from the first chapter's analysis of the existing critical literature. Though there are examples of woman's confessional texts, the critical literature which presented itself for examination concerned itself exclusively with male-authored confessions. This chapter will therefore explore the applicability to the woman's confessional novel, of those mainstream critical approaches elaborated in relation to the male-authored confession.

Though the previous chapter contended that 'agonism' characterised not only the male-authored, mainstream confession, but also The Women's Room, textual analysis under the headings of 'mode of narration', 'becomingness', 'sexuality' and 'suffering' also revealed marked divergencies between these aspects of this example of the woman's text and those of those male-authored confessions which have made up the confessional canon. Over the past two decades, feminist literary and cultural theories have focussed predominantly upon the question of the nature of the difference of women's writing and women's culture more generally. At its most extreme, such an approach may go so far as to posit the existence of a separate sex-specific language of women's writing, and a separate history of women's literary production discontinuous from that of the mainstream. The usefulness

of such approaches would, however, appear to be thrown in doubt by the preceding textual analysis, which uncovered continuities, as well as discontinuities, between The Women's Room and the male confessional novel. Since the aim of this chapter is to discuss the cultural instrumentality implied by those aspects of The Women's Room which diverge from the previously discussed paradigm of the confessional novel, what is required is a theoretical framework within which women's writing is seen as both continuous with as well as discontinuous from the writing of the mainstream. Within the context of such a framework, it would then be possible to discuss those differences already outlined, without losing sight of or under-estimating the significance of the several ways in which The Women's Room does conform to the previously established paradigm of the confessional novel.

This chapter will begin with a review of a range of feminist literary and cultural theories which accept the existence of continuities, as well as discontinuities between women's writing and/or culture and that of the mainstream. The chapter will then proceed by discussing the similarities and differences between The Women's Room and the male-authored confessional novel within the context of those feminist approaches previously outlined. As in the previous chapter, these will be discussed under the headings of 'mode of narration', 'becomingness',

'sexuality' and 'suffering'.

While it has been suggested that novels such as The
Women's Room can be described as feminist, not all
feminist critics have agreed with such labelling.⁵ This
chapter will conclude by discussing the implications of
its findings within the context of these debates
concerning the cultural instrumentality of the woman's
confessional novel.⁶

Women's Writing: A Separate Sphere?

A number of interventions from the theoretical fields of
feminist literary and cultural theory have attempted to
map a relation of interconnection and divergence between
women's writing and the male writing which largely makes
up the established mainstream literary canon. Since
space precludes a full discussion of each of these
theories, and since the demands of clarity make some
contextualisation of these theories within the broader
confines of feminist academic work essential, this
section will limit itself to the discussion of a range of
representative approaches. Since a full discussion of the
most influential of these interventions is essential, the
constraints of space demand that this evaluation should
also serve as a more general introduction to the field of
feminist literary and cultural theory. In order to

satisfy the dual aims of this section, and in the interests of conciseness, a very brief introduction will therefore be followed by an evaluation and discussion of Showalter's thesis in the context of her own review of the field of feminist literary theory: her introduction to the edited collection The New Feminist Criticism .⁷

When feminist academics first turned their attention to the question of the difference of women's writing, the issues seemed simple enough - the marginalisation of women's writing within the canon became increasingly visible as feminist academics began to re-think curriculums and reading lists in the wake of the women's movement's growing awareness of the full implications of the subordination of women within patriarchy. At first, it seemed that the insertion of women authors into the canon, and the submission of their works to those critical operations already firmly in place, would redress the balance, but it was not long before the academy's resistance to such 'meddling' with the canon led feminist literary theorists to the conclusion that since in some cases the application of traditional literary critical approaches to the study of women's literature did result in the exclusion of some of these novels from the canon, perhaps this indicated not that women's literature was 'inferior', but that its evaluation might demand the formulation of new and different critical approaches. According to feminist

literary theorists such as Dale Spender, the invisibility of women writers and the apparent 'inferiority' of women's texts were 'man-made' phenomena: 'It is not that women have not written', argued Spender, 'nor that they have not broken through some of the restrictions and have been heard: it is that their contributions have been suppressed through a variety of social institutions which men have created and controlled.'

Once it had been generally agreed by feminists working within the field that any adequate study of the previously marginalised literary production of women required the formulation of new critical tools and conceptual apparatus, the question which endlessly resurfaced - and continues to reappear - concerned the nature and the difference of the woman author and her text. For some feminist literary theorists, this question was relatively easily answered: since the women's movement had by now convincingly argued that women's subordinate position within a patriarchal culture produced gender-specific experiences, then surely it was only common sense to posit that their literature would therefore reflect these different experiences. In her article 'On Feminine Identity and Writing by Women', Judith Kagan Gardiner confirms that an emphasis on the consequences of such different experiences upon women's writing, together with the positing of a specifically

feminine consciousness, has underlain much feminist literary enquiry: 'During the past few years,' she writes, 'feminist critics have approached writing by women with an abiding commitment to discover what, if anything, makes women's writing different from men's, and a tendency to feel that some significant differences do exist. The most common answer is that women's experiences differ from men's in profound and regular ways ...' The other main explanation of female difference posits a "female consciousness" that produces styles and structures innately different from those of the "masculine mind".⁹ While this summary of the direction taken by much feminist literary theory has the advantage of clearly defining two dominant trends, in practice, these two approaches often overlapped as illustrated in the work of one of the most prolific early contributors to the field, P M Spacks, who, in Contemporary Women Novelists,¹⁰ argued that though the woman novelist was indeed a special breed, 'in no simple sense does a woman novelist necessarily declare her sex by her writing.'¹¹ In an earlier article, Spacks neatly overturns Gardiner's attempt to separate questions of women's consciousness from those of women's experience by arguing that the relation between the former and the latter can more usefully be conceptualised as a dialectical one: 'In their memoirs and journals, women use the knowledge and tradition gained from the outer world as a way of shaping and comprehending their inner experience ...'¹² While it

might now be objected that such a formulation ascribes conscious intent to the more usually partially unconscious mental processes through which reality is psychically mediated, Spack's early formulation here of a relation of dialectical interdependence between experience and consciousness serves as a useful introduction to further developments within the field of feminist literary theory - developments which have striven to elucidate further the relation between women's experiences and women's consciousness in the reception, as well as in the production of women's writing. The inclusion of questions regarding the shaping force of psychical processes upon the production and reception of women's writing initiated an ongoing and far-reaching debate across the field of feminist literary and cultural theory, a debate the impact of which has been substantially under-estimated, if not misconstrued, by Elaine Showalter in her introduction to The New Feminist Criticism¹³, as well as by Elisabeth Abel's highly influential Writing and Sexual Difference¹⁴.

Showalter begins her short outline of the history of feminist literary theory by emphasising its long-standing relationship with the women's liberation movement: 'In the United States, feminist criticism was created by literary and academic women ... who had participated in the women's liberation movement of the late 60's and who

shared its polemical force, activist commitment, social concern, and sense of communal endeavour.¹⁵ She draws attention to the impact upon feminist literary theorists of the women's liberation movement's declaration that the personal is political: 'It is in the writing of women, moreover, that we find the fullest expression of the problematic of a feminist criticism: how to combine the theoretical and the personal. Feminist criticism reveals in its own history and form, many of the patterns of influence and rebellion that mark the female literary tradition as a whole. Here too, women writers searched for a language of their own, a style, a voice, and a structure with which they could enter a discipline previously dominated by men. The raw intensity of feeling and insistence on the relationship of literature to personal experience that accompanied these early phases often expressed itself in an autobiographical or even confessional criticism ...'¹⁶ It is noteworthy that in these initial comments, Showalter argues for a direct relation between women's political experiences and their writing - she speaks of feelings 'expressing themselves' and of feminist literary theorists desiring to 'enact and express in their own lives and words the revisionary sense of transformation ...'¹⁷ brought about through involvement in the women's liberation movement.

Such formulations of a direct and unproblematic relation between women and their writing have, however, been

radically problematised from a range of positions within the field of feminist literary criticism. While the impact of semiotics led to a new questioning of the meaning of 'woman' as sign within particular regimes of representation, the incorporation of post-Freudian psycho-analytic theories - notably Lacanian - led to the positing that within patriarchy, 'woman' represents not flesh and blood women, but attempts by a phallogentric culture to 'forget' the threat of castration by displacing castration onto the body of woman : 'According to Lacan, through the recognition of the sexual difference of the female 'other' who lacks the phallus that is the symbol of patriarchal privilege, the child gains entry into the symbolic order of human culture.'

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According to this formulation, sexual difference is the product, rather than the producer of literary texts, with women writers seemingly eternally caught up in this phallogentric regime which endlessly produces and reproduces femininity as lack. To put it crudely then, within this formulation, representations of 'woman' speak more loudly about masculinity as it is constructed within a phallogentric culture, than they do about women.¹⁹ The application of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to the study of women's writing led to a dual concern with the production of femininity through discourse and the relationship between women as readers and 'woman' as sign : 'The question then becomes ... How is the feminine

determined by discourse itself? - determined that is, as lack or error or as an inverted reproduction of the masculine subject ...²⁰ and 'Can women speak, and can images of women speak for women?'²¹

An engagement with these theoretical concerns is, however, largely absent from Showalter's introduction, which continues by charting a progressive development from an early concern with feminine stereotypes, the literary abuse of women and the exclusion of women from literary history²² towards what she calls the 'second phase of feminist criticism'²³, when it was discovered that 'women writers had a literature of their own, whose historic and thematic coherence, as well as artistic importance, had been obscured by the patriarchal values that dominate our culture.'²⁴ Examples of this type of approach would include Showalter's own A Literature of Their Own²⁵ as well as Ellen Moers's Literary Women²⁶ and Patricia Meyer Spacks's The Female Imagination²⁷. Showalter goes on to argue that the construction of this 'literature of women' led to an interest in the concept of a female imagination²⁸ - a concept which has, as Showalter points out, proved extremely difficult to define and apply, since its inherent essentialism has been contested by, amongst others, black, lesbian and working class women who have all insisted that their modes of femininity produce markedly different forms of writing. According to Showalter's historicisation, the

attempt to define a female aesthetic and to account fully for the difference of women's writing led to a new interest in psychoanalysis - an interest which was fuelled by the influence of radical critical thought from other countries, especially France. Nevertheless, as Showalter explains, the impact of theories such as those of Lacan have had uneven effects - while American feminist criticism, as evidenced by Showalter's own introduction, emphasises the role of real 'flesh and blood' women in the production of a 'female literature', European criticism tends, on the whole, to take on board the Lacanian-inspired notion of the discursive production of femininity as lack.²⁹

It could be argued that Showalter's attempt to summarise nearly two decades of feminist literary theory inevitably loses some of the finer distinctions between different schools of thought. Yet the manner of her historicisation would seem to suggest that she believes there may well be more common ground than seems apparent between the European - most especially French - schools of literary theory and those of the Americans - a belief which underpins the first theory of continuity and divergence between women's writing and the writing of the mainstream to be examined in this chapter, Showalter's own theory of women's writing 'in the wilderness'.³⁰

In answer to her own question: 'What is the difference of women's writing?'³¹, Showalter proposes that though the task of defining the feminine is a 'slippery and demanding'³² one, the study of the 'delicate divergency'³³ between women's writing and the writing of the largely male canon will, in time, lead to a full theory of the difference of the feminine in literature. In an attempt to bring together what she sees as the four models of difference employed within theories of women's writing - biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural - Showalter formulates a new model, which will, she proposes, place women's writing 'in the maximum context of culture.'³⁴ Basing her model on anthropological studies of colonisation and de-colonisation, Showalter proposes that though there is no feminine literary equivalent to the 'psychologically immediate ... mother tongue'³⁵ of the post-revolutionary state - there is no sex-specific language - anthropological studies of colonisation and de-colonisation may still offer feminist literary theory the most appropriate model within which to map the relation of women's culture to that of the mainstream, or phallogocentric dominant culture.

In their attempt to formulate a model of the relationship between women's culture and the masculinist culture of the mainstream, the two anthropologists Edwin and Shirley Ardener made use of the anthropological concepts of the

dominant and the muted group -concepts more usually mobilised in the context of cultural research in areas of colonisation. Showalter makes use of their model of two overlapping and intersecting circles - representing the dominant male group and the muted female group, pointing out that while much of muted circle Y falls within the dominant circle X, 'there is also a crescent of Y which is outside the dominant boundary and therefore (in Ardener's terminology) "wild".'³⁷ Showalter goes on to suggest that if the wild zone within the muted female circle is thought of metaphysically, or in terms of consciousness, it has no corresponding male space 'since all of male consciousness is within the circle of the dominant structure and thus accessible to or structured by language.'³⁸ Here then, or so it seems, is a map within which a place has finally been found for the elusive 'difference' of the feminine, yet a closer study of Showalter's⁵ re-reading of the Ardener's anthropological theories together with a glance at their original studies suggests that Showalter's claim to have found an ideal mapping of the relation between feminine and mainstream writings may have been somewhat hasty.

Showalter herself points out that since there can be no writing or criticism totally outside of the dominant structure, the application of this model reveals that women's writing is a 'double voiced discourse'³⁹,

containing a 'dominant' and a 'muted' story and suggests, furthermore, that the task of what she terms 'gynocritics' should be to seek out, reveal and amplify this muted story. Though Showalter does argue that the concept of writing in the wilderness must remain a playful abstraction - there is no women's writing totally outside the dominant circle - the concept of muting does nevertheless imply a process of suppression or silencing, which immediately raises the question of what it is, if not a pre-existing language, that has been silenced by the dominant group. Furthermore, it is noticeable that once in place, Showalter uses this model of dominance and mutedness to evade the issue of women's language, replacing the term throughout the latter part of the essay with the term culture or structure. Taken together, this would seem to suggest that as with her introduction to The New Feminist Criticism, this essay too is marked by an under-estimation of the full implications of the Lacanian-inspired shift within feminist literary criticism from the notion of a difference between men's and women's writing to the notion of sexual difference as the difference constructed within discourse. In Defining Females, Shirley Ardener explains that the discussion of mutedness 'is concerned, among other things, with distortion of modes of expression' and goes on to remind readers that in her earlier work Perceiving Women, it was suggested that 'the insertion of an "extra step" may be required of

muted groups after a thought is conceived before it is realised in speech. This process usually operates at an unconscious level and may be so rapid as to be collapsed into "simultaneity" ⁴³. This formulation inevitably raises questions concerning the nature of these pre-spoken concepts and the mechanisms supporting the unconscious process through which they are 'translated' into the language of the dominant (male) group. In an attempt to formulate those transformational rules governing the process of 'translation', Shirley Ardener comments that 'the construction and maintenance of any conceptual system conjoining the deep models of a muted group with the surface models of the dominant group would require from the members of the muted group the investment of a great deal of disciplined mental energy.' ⁴⁴ What Ardener fails to elaborate upon, however, are the processes through which this energy might be expended. Moreover, Edwin Ardener's attempt to clarify these issues in his paper 'The "Problem" Re-visited' merely adds to the confusion by arguing that 'The phenomenon of "mutedness" ... is a technically defined condition of structures - not some condition of linguistic silence. There is also an ambiguity about the term "muted" in this connection - for in English we mean by it both "dumb" and "of a reduced level of perceptibility". The muted structures are "there", but cannot be realised in the language of the dominant

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structures.' .

Ultimately, it appears that though the Ardeners' concept of a 'wild zone' of women's culture is an appealing, even seductive one it is hard to see how it might be applied to the critical appraisal of women's writing without some further elaboration of those unconscious processes which convert the original thoughts of the muted group into the language of the dominant group. While Shirley Ardener's proposal does hint at an unconscious component underpinning such processes, the nature of these processes is left unexplored. Moreover though Showalter has insisted that this model of women's culture has been formulated in the light of the ground gained by a Saussurian and Lacanian influenced feminist literary theory, the Ardeners' contentions regarding the existence of pre-linguistic thought concepts pays no heed to the Lacanian notion that the extra-linguistic (unconscious) is formed simultaneously with entry into language and culture. Within the Ardener's framework, language functions merely as a nomenclature.

While Showalter's formulation of women's writing as a double-voiced discourse does appear to hold promise for a fuller understanding of the relation between women's writing and the writing of the dominant culture in the light of the previous close reading's findings of continuities as well as discontinuities between The

Women's Room and the paradigm of the (male) confessional novel, the misconstruing of the significance of the insights provided by semiology and psychoanalysis previously noted in this chapter's discussion of Showalter's introduction to The New Feminist Criticism also diminish the immediate use-value of this model, which fails to theorise the relation between what it terms 'wild' elements, and the language and concepts that fall within the dominant sphere. Ardener's proposal that some (unspecified) unconscious process underpins the transformation of 'wild' to 'muted' elements does suggest, however, that the appropriate framework within which to map the continuities and divergencies between women's writing and the writing of the dominant, phallogentric culture, might be found within psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis promises to describe the conscious and unconscious processes through which gendered identity is acquired. Recent psychoanalytic feminist literary theory has argued that these processes, unconscious as well as conscious, leave their traces across women's texts, and that a psycho-analytically informed reading can begin to retrieve and lay bare the specifically feminine aspects of women's writing, or, from a Lacanian perspective, can begin to analyse the construction of sexual difference through textual production.

The previous close reading of The Women's Room revealed that while this text did partially conform to the paradigm of the male-authored confessional novel, divergent elements could also be isolated. While the overall aim of this chapter is to explore the ways in which these divergencies might throw light upon the difference of women's writing, as well as upon its cultural instrumentality, the interweaving of dominant and divergent elements previously identified does suggest, as Showalter argues, that there is no separate, 'wild zone' of women's writing. While Showalter's thesis proposes that all women's writing takes place within the overall field of the dominant, she argues that echoes from the 'wild zone' constitute the difference of women's writing. Since Showalter's theory offers no answers to questions concerning either the formation of these wild, pre-conceptual elements, nor of the process through which their echoes come to leave traces across women's writing 'in the dominant', three feminist psychoanalytic theories which each emphasise the overlapping and interweaving relations between the feminine and the dominant/masculine will now be outlined before moving on to discussing the divergencies of the woman's confessional novel in the light of these theories.

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In The Reproduction of Mothering, Nancy Chodorow re-works Freud's theory of the acquisition of gendered

identity, emphasising the ongoing significance, for the little girl and young woman, of her pre-Oedipal relation with her mother. Chodorow's thesis proposes itself as appropriate for relating the divergencies of the woman's confessional novel to the feminine, since her theory of the acquisition and development of feminine identity incorporates a notion of a mutedly ongoing, significant pre-Oedipal mother-daughter bond which underlies the imposition of the Oedipus complex. According to Chodorow, this bond provides the basis for the formation and development of 'normal' femininity, both before, during and after, the little girl's passage through the Oedipal moment. We find here then, one rendering, and elaboration, in psycho-analytic terms, of Showalter's notion of a 'wild zone'. In addition though Chodorow's emphasis on the early mother-daughter bond goes some way towards providing an explanation for this 'wild zone' 's formative origins and eventual fate, Chodorow's detailed account of the post-Oedipal development of feminine identity proposes that the negotiation of the Oedipal moment involves the repression but not the eradication of the significance of the mother-daughter relation in the formation of femininity: after stressing that for girls and boys, the relationship to the mother differs in systematic ways, Chodorow goes on to argue that 'every step of the way, a girl develops her relationship to her father while looking back at her mother.'⁴⁷ She adds, 'A girl's internal Oedipus

situation is multi-layered. Her relationship of dependence, attachment and symbiosis to her mother continues, and her Oedipal (triangular, sexualised) attachment to her mother and then her father are simply added.⁴⁸

Chodorow's mapping of the formation of adolescent and then adult femininity as multi-layered clearly articulates with Showalter's mapping of feminine culture as simultaneously within the dominant, but also as mutedly 'wild', but what Chodorow's psycho-analytic theory adds to Showalter's model is an explanatory framework within which to map the process of transformation from the wild (pre-Oedipal) to the dominant (post-Oedipal). It is my hypothesis that Chodorow's mapping of the development of femininity within a patriarchal culture may provide the basis not only for an elaboration of Showalter's notion of women's writing as a double-voiced discourse, but also for a more detailed analysis of particular divergencies between the women's confessional novel and the confessional novel of the mainstream - a hypothesis which will be tested in the next section under 'Mode Of Narration'.

Nancy Chodorow's object-relations influenced theory of the acquisition and development of feminine identity within patriarchy has been criticised by those who argue

that her rigorous stress on the sociality of the infant from - or even before - birth, misconstrues the relation between unconscious and conscious psychic processes. Whereas for Chodorow, it is the little girl's perceptions of her early relation to her mother which form, to a large extent, the contours and parameters of the feminine conscious and unconscious, feminist re-readings of Freud and later of Lacan insist that no such early sociality determines the formation of primary and secondary identifications - which are seen, rather, as produced through the attachment of sexual instincts to ego instincts: as produced, that is, through the working through of unconscious, innate drives. The detail of the debates between the Freudian and object-relations schools of psycho-analytic theory are too complex to rehearse here, moreover, though their effects have been widely felt within feminist psychoanalytic theory, recent developments among the 'New French Feminists'⁴⁹ have, to some extent brought about an uneasy rapprochement between these two positions. The more object-relations oriented, Chodorowian, psycho-analytic, feminist literary theorists stress the shaping force of femininity - though formed within the patriarchy - in the production of texts by women. New French feminists such as Irigaray and Cixous, insist that within the phallogentric culture of patriarchy 'woman' stands for lack or loss, but go on to produce, from this seemingly irretrievably pessimistic formulation a 'ghetto politics' within which the

possibilities for 'l'écriture feminine' are explored in the context of that impossibility of writing woman - except as 'always elsewhere'. According to the new French feminists, an underlining and hypostatisation of femininity as lack, loss, or 'elsewhere', might lead, for the first time, to the inscription of the feminine within language: 'To play with mimesis is ... for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by language, without allowing herself to simply be reduced to it ... it is ... to "bring out" by an effect of playful repetition what was to remain hidden: the recovery of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It is also to unveil the fact that if women mime so well they are not simply reabsorbed in this function. They also remain elsewhere.'

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Like Chodorow, Irigaray and the 'New French Feminists' map the place of the feminine in inter-relation with the masculine (dominant) - elaborating, from a psycho-analytic perspective, Showalter's conceptual map of a mutedly wild zone of the feminine within the dominant phallogentric order. While for a Chodorow-inspired feminist psycho-analytic literary theory, the quest is for traces of women's identities, formed according to Chodorowian psycho-analytic theory, within women's texts, the French school seek to write, and to find traces of writing from the 'impossible place' of the feminine in

language - arguing that these traces can be found and written by constantly gesturing towards an elsewhere, another place, that is the unrepresentable body of woman. It is commonly suggested that no rapprochement is possible between a literary theory seeking traces of the specifically feminine aspects of women's identities within women's texts and a theory founded upon a belief in the necessity of writing from the 'impossible' place of the feminine. Indeed it might be objected by the New French Feminist-inspired school of feminist literary theory that those traces of the feminine sought out and articulated to a conscious or unconscious aspect of woman by 'gynocritics'⁵¹ merely represent patriarchy's inscription of its 'other'. Nevertheless, the next section will work from the hypothesis that each of these approaches can be applied to different levels of textual analysis - levels that speak to a 'female reading competence (which is) derived from the different way women take on their identities under patriarchy and is a direct result of the social fact of female mothering'⁵² and levels which speak, perhaps simultaneously, of the impossibility of speaking woman as anything but 'woman', signifier of lack. Thus while it will be suggested that a Chodorowian approach can further the attempt to relate divergencies in mode of narration between the woman's confessional novel and that of the male-authored confessional novel of the canon to the specificity of the feminine, it will also be argued that

the psycho-analytic theory of the New French Feminists can aid in the attempt to articulate divergencies in mode of address to the attempt to write from the impossible place of woman.

In 'Feminist Criticism In the Wilderness'⁵³, Showalter argues that feminist psychoanalytic literary theory is limited by its inability to explain 'historical change, ethnic difference, or the shaping force of generic and economic factors',⁵⁴ adding that to consider these issues, 'we must go beyond psycho-analysis to a more flexible and comprehensive model of women's writing which places it in the maximum context of culture.'⁵⁵

One further feminist psychoanalytic approach which arguably offers a possible elaboration upon Showalter's undertheorised relation between preconceptual elements in the wild zone, and women's writing within the dominant zone, can be found in the work of another writer often treated as one of the New French Feminists, Julia Kristeva.⁵⁶ Like Irigaray and Chodorow, Kristeva focusses on the maternal body and pre-Oedipal sexuality in an attempt to 'speak the pre-Oedipal relations of woman to woman'.⁵⁷ Moreover, while it might be objected that Irigaray's search for the inscription of an authentic feminine voice free from phallic influence is overly utopian, Kristeva 'stresses the necessity of

positing a place from which women can speak themselves, all the while recognising that such places do not exist.'⁵⁸ .

Kristeva proposes that all writing - (not only the writing of women) is constituted through a dialectical relationship between what she calls 'the semiotic' and 'the symbolic'. The 'semiotic' designates 'that which precedes the imposition of the symbolic and the "self" at the mirror stage through the acquisition of language. It is the primary organisation of instinctual drives by rhythm, intonation and the primary processes and it functions in discourse as a supplementary register to that of the sign and meaning.'⁵⁹ The symbolic is the functioning of the sign and predication. Kristeva argues that the eruption of the semiotic marks texts on two levels, at the level of the fiction, by the interruption of the narrative, and at the level of linguistics, through deviations from the grammatical rules of the language, and the production of metaphors, for example. Moreover, since, for Kristeva, all human subjects articulate themselves through the interaction of these two modes, traces of the semiotic mark many texts, and not only the texts of women. Kristeva's literary critical practice seeks out 'limit texts' - texts which are particularly replete with semiotic eruptions, and while she argues that women may produce such texts, she also emphasises that a greater intrusion of the semiotic

function marks the texts of all those who live on the margins of society, as well as the texts of self-consciously avant-garde authors such as Mallarme and Joyce. A similar point is made by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, who, writing from a position informed by Gramscian marxism rather than by Lacanian psycho-analysis, contends, in her article 'For The Etruscans', that it would be mistaken to assume that a specific form of literary deviation marks womens' texts, whose writings, she argues, take similar shape to those of other marginalised social groups: 'What we have here been calling (the) female aesthetic turns out to be a specialised name for any practices available to those groups - nations, genders, sexualities, races, classes - all social practices which wish to criticise, to differentiate from, to overturn the dominant forms of knowing and understanding with which they are saturated.'⁶⁰ A little further on, DuPlessis emphasises that the writings of different 'non-hegemonic' groups such as blacks and women share many characteristics: 'For blacks, excluded from a Western world of whiteness, will affirm a connection to rhythms of earth, sensuality, intuition, subjectivity, and this will sound precisely as some women writers do.'⁶¹

In contrast to DuPlessis, though, Kristeva does appear to offer one possible mode of conceptualising the psychic

process of transformation which governs the production of 'mutedly' feminine texts, since her proposals concerning the relation between social marginality and the 'semiotic' can be seen as a further elaboration of Showalter's notion of the muted 'wild zone' within the field of the dominant. Moreover, Kristeva's emphasis on writing as 'a signifying practice which involves both the conscious social and political posture of the subject as well as the unconscious posture'⁶² does seem to promise to address questions of class, social, and cultural differences, thus invalidating Showalter's labelling of all feminist psychoanalytic literary theory as essentialist. Yet while Kristeva certainly does not merely translate literary difference into sexual difference - one of her aims, indeed, is to seek out the textual production of sexual difference, rather than the differences in texts produced by men and women - her use of psychoanalytic concepts raises questions concerning the relationship between specific pre-Oedipal relations, and social, cultural and class relations. To elaborate further, Kristeva suggests that 'limit-texts' are produced by those, presumably including some women, as well as male avant-garde writers, who live on the margins of society; she proposes that such texts are marked by a greater intrusion of the 'semiotic' - yet it seems questionable whether all positions of marginality give rise to similar 'writing-effects', especially since the distinction proposed between the 'semiotic' and the

'symbolic' depends upon an implicit notion of white, western, child-rearing patterns. While Jardine's useful commentary upon Kristevan theory stresses that 'description is not necessarily prescription',⁶³ Kristeva's claim that similar relations between 'semiotic' and 'symbolic' elements characterise the entire field of the textually marginal precludes discussion of the possibility that the psychoanalytic processes she describes, and upon which her theory depends, might not be as universally applicable as she seems to suggest.

Showalter hoped that her concept of the muted 'wild zone' would enable 'gynocritics', as she terms the sustained investigation of literature by women, to discern social, cultural, ethnic and class differences within the field of women's writing. It has been argued that Showalter's model failed to elaborate the unconscious processes entailed in the transformation of wild into muted elements. It was argued further that only a return to feminist psycho-analytic theory could compensate for this theoretical lacuna. It has now been pointed out that though Kristevan theory addresses the question of the relation between social marginality and textual difference from a psycho-analytic perspective, its tendency is to assume that the same psychoanalytic model is appropriate for all forms of marginality, whereas

recent psycho-analytic debate has centered around the possibility that different ethnic, social and cultural groupings may demand the application of different psychoanalytic models.⁶⁴

In the following sections, the aim will be to seek relations between feminist psycho-analytic theories of the production of femininity and the specificity of the women's confessional novel as identified in the preceding chapter. While my wish would be to produce a reading that is as attentive to questions of class, ethnic, cultural and social specificity as it is to questions of sexual difference, the constraints of space, together with the current theoretical impasse discussed above, have resulted in a reading which prioritises questions of sexual difference, while taking into account some aspects of social, historical and cultural context.

Mode of Narration

The mode of narration of The Women's Room was shown, in the last chapter, to implement a range of strategies largely dissimilar from those implemented by those male-authored confessions typically treated by mainstream literary studies of the genre. The beginning sections of the first chapter of The Women's Room introduce us to the central protagonist, Mira, through an omniscient narrator whose attitude towards Mira veers between a distant and

sarcastic condescension, and a sympathetic, tender closeness. The reader has the option either of identifying with the omniscient narrator's more authoritative and powerful position, or with the less powerful figure of the central protagonist. In the last chapter, it was argued that where identification is with this omniscient narrator, condescension, irony, distance, voyeurism and fetishism comprised strategies which produce a readerly distance from the central protagonist, while a more sympathetic narrational tone invites a closer identification with Mira, while still facilitating a degree of identification with the omniscient narrator. The last chapter also described the consequent splitting of this omniscient narrator - the discourse of the authoritative, omniscient narrator continues, but, in addition, a new dramatised, 'confessing' narrator also enters the text. Whereas, prior to this splitting of narrators, the reader identifying with the omniscient narrator had been invited to oscillate between feelings of closeness and distance towards the central protagonist, who was alternately constructed as worthy of sympathy or merely worthy of scorn, this splitting brings about a shift in relations between reader, central protagonist and narrators, for whereas an oscillation between closeness and distance has previously been produced in relation to the single figure of the central protagonist, this new narrational configuration produces

a readerly oscillation between closeness to the dramatised narrator, which is then distanced by interruptions of the omniscient narrator - who then goes on to swing between closeness and distance towards the central protagonist. The new narrational configuration mirrors the narrator:central protagonist relation, but whereas the novel opens with an omniscient narration that swings between closeness and distance in relation to the sole figure of the central protagonist, the introduction of the dramatised narrator produces an oscillation between two figures, rather than between two perspectives directed at one figure. The reader, then is invited to move between close and empathetic feelings in relation to the dramatised narrator as well as the central protagonist, and an identification with the more powerful authority of the omniscient narrator.

Though this oscillation between closeness and distance marks the mode of narration of Shedding and The Shame Is Over to a lesser degree than it marks that of The Women's Room - we know from the beginning of both novels, indeed, that narrator and central protagonist are identical - shifts from past tense narration of the history of the central protagonist/narrator, to present tense confessions by the narrator invites a readerly oscillation between closeness to the central protagonist in the past, and empathy with the confessing narrator in the present.⁶⁵

The last chapter went on to describe the simultaneous development of both a range of narrational strategies producing increasingly blurred boundaries between narrators and central protagonist, and the development of the Val character as an increasingly powerful and authoritative figure. It was further argued that while the increasing blurring of boundaries between Mira and the narrators decreased the potential for omniscient narratorial condescension, sarcasm and distance, thus producing the central protagonist as increasingly authoritative and powerful, this tendency was undercut both by the eruption, within the discourse of the central protagonist, of a self-critical tone, and by the presence of Val, whose greater authority and power in relation to Mira, undercuts the tendency of the narrative to produce Mira as fully authoritative - as adult. Within the constraints produced by the above strategies, Mira does attain a limited authority, and becomes increasingly maternal as the narrative progresses - especially after the death - the explosion - of Val, which leaves Mira, at the end of the novel, isolated, on the brink of insanity and internally fragmented.

There are a number of ways in which these features of The Women's Room's mode of narration articulate with a range of feminist psycho-analytic theories which have been

taken up within the field of feminist literary studies. The sense of a fragmented narrator or multiple narrators,⁶⁶ together with the introduction into the narrative of a large range of women, whose experiences mirror one another, and who can, therefore be read as fragmented or multiplied aspects of Mira, clearly differentiates this novel from the male-authored confessional novel and articulates, in different ways, with a number of feminist psycho-analytic theories concerning the nature of femininity. In an ironic re-writing and re-evaluation of those aspects of femininity repressed and devalued by the Lacanian equation of femininity with lack and castration, Luce Irigaray celebrates the diffuse and multiple qualities of female sexuality, and of a female body and a female sex that is not just one thing, but several. Just as the notion of a single, coherent subject position is put in question, to some extent, by The Women's Room's mode of narration, likewise, argues Irigaray, does the multiple and fragmentary quality of feminine sexuality problematise the identity-claiming assumptions of phallogentric discourse, expressed, as she puts it, within the following terms: 'I am a unified coherent being, and what is significant in the world reflects my male image'⁶⁷. In contra-distinction to such claims, Irigaray proposes that 'l'écriture feminine' should inscribe the specificity of feminine jouissance: 'Woman has sex organs just about everywhere. She experiences pleasure almost everywhere

... The geography of her pleasure is much more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is imagined - in an imaginary (system) centered a bit too much on one and the same.⁶⁸

Irigaray insists that femininity is multiple, diverse and diffuse: 'Whence the mystery that she represents in a culture that claims to enumerate everything, cipher everything by units, inventory everything by individualities. She is neither one nor two. She cannot, strictly speaking, be determined either as one person or as two'.⁶⁹ Though it might be objected that Irigaray's utopian descriptions of the potential disruption of that fixed and unitary subjectivity which arguably characterises phallogentric culture mobilise the terms 'woman' and 'femininity' only metaphorically, her own writings together with critical commentaries which address her writings suggest that the status of 'the feminine' remains ambiguous in her work. In their introduction to 'Women's Exile'⁷⁰, an interview with Irigaray, Diana Adlam and Couze Venn argue that Irigaray's 'challenge to theories of language and discourse can be read as grounded in female anatomy (the non-unitary, "two-lipped" structure) and the specific sexuality to which it gives rise',⁷¹ while in the interview itself, Irigaray repeatedly makes use of images of the female body and female sexuality in her attempt to describe an alternative to masculine language: 'You may

perhaps be able to see that when one starts from the "two lips" of the female sex, the dominant discourse finds itself baffled: there can no longer be a unity in the subject, for instance.⁷² From these examples, it would seem that though Irigaray's utopian 'feminine' language will not necessarily be spoken by women alone, her repeated use of images of female anatomy does seem to suggest that there is a strong possibility that it will be women who are more likely to speak it than men.

The Women's Room's multiple narrators and its blurring of boundaries between narrators, other women characters and the central protagonist arguably represent, therefore, the muted traces of an Irigarayan feminine alternative to the language of phallogentric culture. Indeed, there is a striking similarity between Irigaray's call for a language which would deconstruct the illusory unity and coherence of phallogentric subjectivity and the omniscient narrator's comments concerning Mira's failed attempts to secure a firm sense of a coherent and unified identity: 'Ever since she had changed her style of dress - that is, ever since she had been at Harvard - her self had refused to coalesce in the mirror ... She could see bits and pieces ... but the pieces wouldn't come together.'⁷³ However, whereas an Irigarayan reading might choose to celebrate this fragmentation as disrupting of the illusion of unitary and single subject positions, in The Women's Room the central protagonist's fragmentary

sense of self is held, by the narrator, to be problematic and painful. Moreover the coherence and mastery of the narrator's discourse contrasts markedly with the description of Mira's fragmentation. What this passage seems to invite is an identification both with the (masculine) coherence and mastery of the narrator's discourse as well as with the (feminine) fragmentation of the central protagonist.

Several other feminist literary critics have commented upon the recurrent theme in women's literature, of the search for an often elusive sense of identity. In Re-inventing Womanhood, Carolyn Heilbrun argues that 'women's search for identity has been even less successful within the world of fiction than outside it',⁷⁴ while Judith Kagan Gardiner proposes that 'the quest for female identity seems to be a soap opera, endless and never advancing, that plays the matinees of women's souls.'⁷⁵ This quality of fragmentation and diffuseness does not only characterise the woman's confessional novel, for several feminist literary theorists argue that the subject of many women's autobiographies is equally disabled or privileged, depending on the perspective employed. In her introduction to Women's Autobiographies, Estelle Jelinek points out that these are often characterised by irregularity rather than orderliness, before she goes on

to insist that women's autobiographies are 'disconnected, fragmentary ... The multi-dimensionality of women's roles seems to have established a pattern of diffusion and diversity'.⁷⁶ Likewise, Cynthia Pomerlau argues, for instance, that 'the traditional view of women is antithetical to the crucial motive of autobiography - a desire to synthesise, to see one's life as an organic whole ... women's lives are fragmented ... the process is not one of growth',⁷⁷ whereas Elisabeth Wilson finds cause for celebration in Lessing's description of her own life as 'crude, unfinished, raw, tentative', continuing her article on confessional writing by quoting Lessing's celebration of these very qualities: 'the raw, unfinished quality in my life was precisely what was valuable in it.'⁷⁸ What emerges from these comments is that the fragmented and multiple subject positions Irigaray contrasts with the single and unitary subject positions produced by phallogentric language do seem to surface in women's writings.

The Women's Room's mode of narration does conform to the 'agonism' of the mainstream confessional novel - we learn progressively more about the central protagonist as the narrative proceeds, yet new information functions both to cement and to shift our sense of who that central protagonist is. Yet an Irigarayan reading of The Women's Room suggests that where this mode of narration diverges from that of the mainstream confessional, it works also

to construct a fractured, fragmented and diffuse sense of identity. Whether we choose to celebrate these qualities or not, the application of an Irigarayan reading to these divergencies suggests that they function to produce a double-voiced discourse at the heart of the women's confessional novel - a discourse which speaks both of the agonism through which all 'modern' subjectivity is constituted while also re-producing those fractures and fragmentations which lie at the heart of femininity as it is produced within a phallogentric culture.

In the previous chapter, it was also argued that the fragmentation of central protagonist and narrator was further compounded through the use of mirroring - the act of looking in the mirror is often used metaphorically to express the attempt to see the whole self, while the dramatised narrator often refers to her relationship with the central protagonist as one of mirroring. It is generally agreed that doubling or mirroring figures a disturbance or crisis at the level of identity. The feminist film theorist Mary Anne Doane, for instance, has argued, within a Lacanian perspective, that the abundant use of the mirror in women's films, figures woman's inability to gain access to autonomous symbolic representation: 'The male alone has access to the privileged specular process of the mirror's identification. And it is the confirmation of the self

offered by the plane-mirror which, according to Irigaray, is 'most adequate for the mastery of the image, of representation, and of self-representation.'⁷⁹

Likewise, in The Women's Room, the central protagonist is described through omniscient narration as failing to coalesce in the mirror - so that, in a process akin to fetishisation, Mira becomes legs, body and skin. Moreover, the omniscient narrator does not only fetishise parts of the central protagonist, for voyeurism also marks her authoritative and powerful discourse. The reader is invited to share the omniscient narrator's privileged, investigative point of view as she describes the central protagonist's most private and intimate moments - making love, crying in the lavatory, sitting drinking brandy in the dead of night.

So far, this analysis has left aside questions concerning the specificity of women's reading pleasures in relation to this mode of narration. The introduction here of terms such as voyeurism and fetishism might suggest, moreover, that women may adopt a masculine reading position in order to gain pleasure from these aspects of the mode of narration. Classically, voyeurism and fetishism are regarded as strategies adopted by the male in order to ward off the castration anxiety which is aroused by events such as the sight of the naked female body. What this study of The Women's Room's mode of narration suggests, however, is that the opportunity to

deploy these 'masculine' defences may also be pleasureable for women.

It is commonly argued, following Freud, that voyeurism and fetishism represent twin distancing strategies adopted by the masculine subject in his effort to allay the anxiety provoked by the realisation of his mother's 'castrated state' - with the concomitant infantile masculine fantasy of castration that such a realisation provokes. However, though they argue from very different positions, both Mary Ann Doane and Nancy Chodorow suggest that while a pre-disposition for merging and the blurring of boundaries between self and (m)other characterises femininity, successful self-representation for women may depend, within phallogentric culture, on the outcome of an attempt to construct distance between self and (m)other. In the light of these theories, voyeuristic or fetishistic narrative strategies can be shown to speak to this female desire for distance.

Mary Ann Doane adopted the term 'the masquerade' to describe a potential strategy for self-representation and for pleasureable spectating available to women. From a Lacanian perspective, she argues that while women are haunted by 'the lack of that lack so essential for the realisation of the ideals of semiotic systems'⁸⁰ - and here she is referring to woman's continued closeness to

the maternal body and therefore to the imaginary due to her lack of the fear of castration - this over-closeness can be short-circuited and overcome by the manufacture of distance between self and image . Doane argues that this distance can be manufactured through the production of femininity as disguise, and she concludes her argument by proposing that: 'The effectivity of masquerade lies precisely in its potential to manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible and readable by the woman.'⁸¹

While Doane's concept of the masquerade represents a subversion of the Lacanian formulation of woman's inadequate access to symbolisation and language within the context of the specificity of the cinematic look, her emphasis upon the necessity, for women of the construction of distance between self and image is applicable within the context of a mode of narration which repeatedly adopts the strategies described above to produce distance between reader and point of identification, to 'manufacture a ... certain distance between oneself and one's image.'⁸²

No rapprochement is generally thought possible between the work of the American object-relations influenced school of feminist psycho-analysts, such as Chodorow, and that of the European feminist psycho-analysts like Irigaray, whose theories subvert post-Freudian notions of the feminine. It is generally assumed that the Lacanian

framework within which terms such as the phallus, the maternal and the imaginary mark the contours of a symbolic world entered by means of the acquisition of language, and the more typically object-relational stress on the psychic consequences, both unconscious and conscious, of the infant's interaction with real flesh and blood mothers and fathers, are inassimilable. Yet though Doane's concept of the maternal should not be conflated with Chodorow's concept of the mother - while the former term refers to a fantasy of lost plenitude, the latter refers to the introjection of a real flesh and blood woman - their writings both evidence a common emphasis upon femininity's desire/need for distance from the maternal body/mother. Doane insists that within phallogentric culture, femininity's over-closeness to the maternal body must be subverted to facilitate even a mimicry of self-representation - thus illuminating one side of the mode of narration's oscillation between the construction of closeness and distance on the part of narrators and readers towards central protagonist and narrators. Chodorow's thesis speaks moreover, to both sides of this oscillation, arguing that at the heart of femininity lies both a pre-disposition towards and a desire for merging and the blurring of boundaries between self and (m)other, together with a desire to continually distance the self from an experience of merging which is as much feared as it is desired.

Chodorow's key contribution to feminist psycho-analytic theory has been her re-evaluation of the significance, for daughters, of their early pre-Oedipal relation with the mother. Whereas Freud suggested, in many of his writings on femininity, that the daughter's Oedipal trajectory towards 'proper' femininity depended upon the abandonment and rejection of her 'castrated' mother, Chodorow argues that 'a girl never gives up her mother as an internal or external love object'.⁸³ The ambivalence complexity and consequences for women of this eternal mother daughter bond forms the object of Chodorow's investigation. She traces a developmental path for femininity beginning with the infant's experience of total merging with the mother. This stage of primary identification gradually alters, during the first year, as the child begins to oscillate between feelings of separation and merging with the mother. As the child becomes frustrated since it cannot have as much of the mother as it desires, so a process of self-differentiation develops, and the child becomes attached to the mother, rather than identified with her through primary narcissism. Feelings of ambivalence and hostility may be internalised at this time, producing the beginnings of an internal object world: 'The growing child's psychic structure and sense of self thus comes to consist of unconscious quasi-independent divided experiences of self in affective ... relation with an

inner object world, made up originally of aspects of its
relation to its mother.⁸⁴ Chodorow goes on to insist
that from the earliest period, the relationship to the
mother differs in systematic ways for boys and for girls.

During the pre-Oedipal phase, argues Chodorow, 'the
patterns of fusion, projection, narcissistic extension
and denial of separateness are more likely to happen ...
in early mother-daughter relationships than in those of
mothers and sons ... In all these cases the mother does
not recognise herself as a separate person and the
daughter herself then comes not to recognise or to have
difficulty recognising herself as a separate person. She
experiences herself, rather, as a continuation or
extension of ... her mother in particular'.⁸⁵ A blurring
of boundaries between characters and between central
protagonist and narrators constitutes one of the major
divergencies between the mode of narration of The Women's
Room and that of the paradigmatic, male-authored,
confessional novel of the mainstream. Chodorow's
preliminary comments concerning the construction of
femininity within patriarchal society suggest that the
oscillations between closeness and distance which mark
The Women's Room's mode of narration might speak to
specifically feminine desires.

Moreover, Chodorow's elaboration of the further stages of

pre-Oedipal, Oedipal and post-Oedipal feminine development substantiates this suggestion. Firstly, she argues that women continue to experience confusion concerning boundaries, as well as 'a lack of sense of separateness from the world'⁸⁶. This might explain both the extent to which the mode of narration constructs a sense of blurred boundaries, as described above, together with the sense of recognition and familiarity that this affords women readers. Chodorow argues that the adult woman's pre-disposition towards such experiences of merging and blurring depends upon the continuing significance, for women, of those early object-relational configurations formed in relation to the mother.

Moving on now to the question of the Oedipus complex, Chodorow proposes that whereas many psycho-analysts, both feminist and otherwise have argued that within our present societal ordering, it is inevitable that the little girl will eventually abandon her mother in the search for the phallus, previous attempts to explain the female Oedipal process have over-estimated the hostile and intensely aggressive side of the daughter's ambivalence towards the mother at the expense of an emphasis on the continuation of the positive, as well as negative aspects of the relation. She moves towards rectifying this by proposing that 'the Oedipus complex in girls is characterised by the continuation of pre-Oedipal attachments and pre-occupations, sexual oscillation in an

Oedipal triangle, and the lack of absolute change of love object or absolute Oedipal resolution.⁸⁷ This proposition leads Chodorow to propose that at the heart of adult femininity lies an oscillating desire for separation from and re-merging with the mother. Post-Oedipal femininity, argues Chodorow, entails 'oscillations in emotions and ambivalence. A girl alternates between total rejection of her mother who represents infantile dependence, and attachment, between identification with anyone other than her mother and feeling herself her mother's double and extension'.⁸⁸ The similarities between Chodorow's comments concerning post-Oedipal femininity and those characteristics of The Women's Room's mode of narration identified above, including oscillations between closeness and distance together with instances of blurring, and doubling or mirroring, are striking. Moreover, Chodorow insists that 'a girl continues to experience herself as involved in issues of merging and separation'.⁸⁹ These issues remain, according to Chodorow at the heart of adult feminine psychic pre-occupations, representing 'both a threat to selfhood and a promise of primal unity'.⁹⁰

This analysis of The Women's Room's mode of narration has so far revealed the traces of that oscillation which represents, according to Chodorow, the essence of feminine desire, and which reproduces femininity as

essentially relational or maternal in its pre-disposition towards empathetic, merged, relations with others and specifically with babies. While Chodorow argues that only identification with her own baby will enable the adult woman to re-experience both her original oneness with the mother together with the threat posed by such over-closeness and dependence, this study suggests that the mode of narration of the women's confessional novel may also unconsciously re-evolve such experiences for women readers. Moreover the relational aspect of feminine identity proposed by Chodorow and supported by this analysis of The Women's Room's mode of narration has also been identified by feminist literary theorists working on women's autobiographies. In an article entitled 'The Other Voice', Mary G Mason concludes, for instance, that 'the self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some "other" ... This grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other seems to enable women to write openly about themselves.⁹¹' Similarly, Judith Kagan Gardiner has proposed that all female authors are engaged in 'a process of testing and defining various aspects of identity chosen from many imaginative possibilities. That is, the woman writer uses her text, particularly one centering on a female hero, as part of a continuing process involving her own self-definition and her

empathetic identification with her character.' Gardiner goes on to propose that all women readers go through a 'somewhat analogous process in (their) empathetic identifications ... the reader shifts her empathetic identifications and her sense of immersion in and separation from the text as she reads. Both writer and reader can relate to the text as though it were a person with whom one might alternatively be merged empathetically, or from whom one might be separated and individuated ... Through the relationship between narrator and reader, such fictions re-create the ambivalent experiences of ego-violation and mutual identification that occur between mother and daughter.'

It has frequently been argued that within the context of our patriarchal culture, it is impossible to answer Freud's question 'what do women want?', yet recent interventions by feminist psychoanalysts have tended to suggest that those traces of women's desire which psychoanalysis can render accessible and amplify represent not only the 'repressed' of masculinity, but the sketchy outlines for an alternative feminine economy of desire. A common emphasis, borne out by this study of The Women's Room has been upon women's desire for connection and separation, proximity and distance. In 'A Desire of One's Own: Psycho-analytic Feminism and Inter-Subjective Space', Jessica Benjamin proposes that the concept of

intersubjectivity can provide us with a new psychic mode within which to map 'the rudiments of another form of representing desire, women's desire, in the here and now of patriarchal culture.'⁹⁴ Benjamin's proposition that the intersubjective mode both complements and contrasts with the symbolised ego of phallic structuring articulates with the notion that women's confessional writing functions as a double-voiced discourse. Thus strategies of voyeurism and fetishism have been shown to represent not only the masculine attempt to acknowledge, disavow or control difference, but also one side of an oscillation which constitutes women's desire for separation and closeness: 'We are seeking a relationship to desire in the freedom to: freedom to be both with and distinct from the other.'⁹⁵

One aspect of femininity emphasised by Chodorow and Benjamin is the difficulty experienced by women in attempting to separate from their mothers and take up an adult, rather than a daughterly position. While Chodorow argues that within our present cultural context this move is never fully accomplished, since the adult woman's desire for a baby arguably represents a desire to return to a fully merged relation with her mother, Benjamin proposes that the desire for intersubjectivity pre-figures an alternative feminine mode of being.

Kagan Gardiner follows her announcement that 'Female

identity formation is dependent on the mother-daughter bond',⁹⁶ by advancing the proposition that 'the hero is her author's daughter. The maternal metaphor of female authorship clarifies the woman writer's distinctive engagement with her characters and indicates an analogous relationship between woman reader and character.'⁹⁷ Gardiner proposes, then, that like the woman author, the woman reader of women's novels is positioned as mother to the characters she reads about. So far, this study has argued that the oscillations constitutive of the The Women's Room's mode of narration articulate with femininity's ambivalence concerning the maternal. Now it will be argued that while theorists such as Gardiner and Benjamin under-estimate the hostile feelings aroused by the threat posed by the mother, it can be shown that the mode of narration articulates these feelings through the relation constructed between central protagonist, Val and readers. Contrary to Gardiner, then, I am proposing that The Women's Room's mode of narration moves between inviting the reader to take up positions of daughter as well as mother in relation to the narrator and the central protagonist. For example, the previous chapter identified moments in the mode of narration where the discourse of the dramatised narrator was interrupted by the (imagined) voice of Val. This strategy functioned to impede the establishment of the dramatised narrator/Mira as a fully independent autonomous adult. Moreover, while

Mira does gain in maturity, eventually becoming a mother herself, the voice and memory of Val continues to erupt and disturb her thoughts. Even after Val's violent death, her ghost returns to haunt the final musings of the (now merged) dramatised narrator/Mira. In the light of the previous exposition of Chodorow's work, I now propose that the tropes outlined above are analagous with the return of the daughter's repressed but ongoing fear of annihilation in relation to the all-powerful mother. Moreover though Val's violent death may function to momentarily allay such fears, as the mode of narration demonstrates, that fear never does die, for even after the narrative has 'killed off' the mother, she returns to haunt the central protagonist. Gardiner concludes her article with the optimistic claim that 'contemporary women's literature promises that a sense of full, valued and congruent female identity may form in the continuing process of give and take that re-creates both self and other in the supportive community of women.'⁹⁸ This analysis of The Women's Room's mode of narration suggests both that Gardiner has severely under-estimated the force with which women's writing may evidence the return of the repressed positive and negative sides of daughter-mother ambivalence, and that her formulation overlooks the strategies by means of which women's writings may emphatically invite readers to position themselves as daughters, as well as mothers.

So far it has been argued that the appeal of The Women's Room's mode of narration lies in its re-staging of peculiarly feminine oscillations between distance and closeness to the mother. While Gardiner suggests that all women's writings offer the reader a maternal position from which to form empathetic relations with the central protagonist, the narrator and other characters, this section's study of The Women's Room's mode of narration has stressed rather the daughterly qualities of the positions offered to readers by The Women's Room, though following Chodorow, it has also been suggested that these very qualities contribute to the constitution of maternal, nurturing abilities in women. Following on from this, it can be proposed that the mode of narration works to reflect and cultivate those feminine qualities commonly associated with the maternal. Yet this proposal leaves aside certain additional strategies implemented by the mode of narration which produce neither maternal nor daughterly but sisterly reading positions.

Lawrence Porter's proposal that the narrator of the confessional novel addresses his audience either as child or as parent ⁹⁹ may be partially confounded by those aspects of The Women's Room's mode of narration which position the reader as trusting listener to the outpourings of the dramatised narrator. This narrator adopts a familiar and intimate mode of address, and

repeatedly constructs a sense of shared ground and common experience in relation to the reader. The intertextuality between the confessional novel's mode of narration and a cultural context within which psychoanalysis, growth, and self-discovery are flourishing has been discussed in chapter one of this thesis. The Women's Room's mode of narration additionally signals an intertextuality with the women's movement's re-working of these discourses in consciousness-raising groups, and through its emphasis on self-awareness and personal growth. Though it could be argued that this aspect of The Women's Room merely speaks these 'agonist' discourses, the next section will contend that emphasis on shared experience and common ground between reader and dramatised narrator arguably speaks also, of the possibility of communication between adult women, though this tendency is itself partially confounded by those lapses into regressed and infantile modes of address previously identified.

The outpourings of the dramatised narrator, identified above as proposing a sisterly reader/narrator relation, are frequently couched within an excessive or melodramatic register. Shock is likened to rockets exploding all over the body; the metaphor of the nazi concentration camp is frequently adopted to speak of male/female relationships. While it might be objected that woman to woman communication is impossible, since

women can only communicate within the language of the patriarchy, recent re-evaluations of melodrama as a cultural form which forces 'meaning and identity from the inadequacies of language'¹⁰⁰ suggest that melodrama might figure, in this context, an attempt to force an impossible woman-to-woman language from the inadequacies of language itself. Once again, the concept of mutedness may help to elaborate this proposal, for in his influential work The Melodramatic Imagination,¹⁰¹ Peter Brooks argues that melodramatic excess constitutes the expressive means of what he calls the 'text of muteness' which 'reaches toward meanings which cannot be generated from the language code.'¹⁰² This proposal is strikingly similar to Showalter's notion of women's muted language within patriarchal culture, and leads me to propose that those excessive images of atomic bombs, concentration camps, fragmented bodies and bloody carnage represent a muted women's language - an attempt to force a 'woman to woman' language from the constraining field of the patriarchal. Excess, or feminine extravagance functions here to gesture towards an 'elsewhere' of language that cannot be represented. The excessive, or extravagant use of metaphors of violence, carnage, explosion and even genocide arguably function, within an Irigarayan framework, to '"bring out" by an effect of playful repetition what was to remain hidden: the recovery of a possible operation of the feminine in language.'¹⁰³ In

'Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction', Nancy K Miller adds that she prefers to think of the insistence Irigaray posits 'as a form of emphasis: an italicised version of what passes for the neutral or standard face. Spoken or written, italics are a modality of intensity and stress; a way of marking what has already been said.'¹⁰⁴ The excessive extravagancies of the dramatised narrator's intimate confessions arguably represent one instance of this italicisation which marks an attempt to construct a woman's language within the confines of the patriarchy.

But, as has been shown, this dramatised confessional intimacy is constantly interrupted by shifts between omniscient and dramatised narration, as well as prolonged interior views which construct central protagonist as temporary narrator. While these interruptions limit the extent to which this italicised discourse dominates the mode of narration, they might well represent not only a re-staging of oscillations between closeness and distance, as argued above, but an attempt, not to gesture towards an impossible female language but to continue the text's cultivation of the reader as 'good mother'. In her essay 'The Search For Tomorrow In Today's Soap Operas', Tania Modleski describes the mode of narration of the typical daytime TV soap opera thus: 'A viewer might at one moment be asked to identify with a woman finally reunited with her lover, only to have that identification

broken in a moment of intensity and attention focussed on
the sufferings of the woman's rival.¹⁰⁵ The Women's
Room's mode of narration is strikingly similar to that
described here by Modleski. In both cases,
identifications are constantly interrupted; in both
cases, the viewer/reader is invited to shift
identification between contradictory points of view - for
instance the The Women's Room's reader is invited to
identify both with the condescension and superiority of
the dramatised narrator, as well as with the pain and
suffering of Mira; in both cases the viewer/reader is
faced with a range of characters who are all experiencing
great problems and difficulties in their lives which
appear irresolvable; in both cases the narrative seems
endless - a soap opera never ends, while The Women's
Room's ending marks anything but a closure of the
narrative. Given the extent of the similarities between
the findings of the close reading of The Women's Room's
mode of narration and Modleski's description of the
daytime TV soap, her proposition that these programmes
'provide a unique narrative pleasure which ... has become
thoroughly adapted to the rhythms of women's lives in the
home'¹⁰⁶ may also be applicable to those aspects of the
mode of narration outlined above. Modleski argues that
these interruptions and constant shifts in point of view
constitute the soap opera viewer 'as a sort of ideal
mother'¹⁰⁷ - having to sympathise with her entire family,

though their feelings and needs are often contradictory. Likewise, The Women's Room's reader is also invited to empathise with often contradictory positions, and to keep 'caring about everyone'¹⁰⁸. Modleski insists that the interrupted and distracted position proposed for the spectator by TV soap 'reflects and cultivates the "proper" psychological disposition of the mother in the home'¹⁰⁹, referencing Chodorow's description of women's activities in the home involving 'continuous connection to and concern about children and attunement to adult masculine needs'¹¹⁰. Like the TV daytime soap, The Women's Room's mode of narration also fulfils women's needs for connection to a 'family like' group. Moreover, that sense of connection is compounded, not, as in the TV soap, by a marked emphasis on close ups, which, according to Modleski, 'activate the gaze of the mother'¹¹¹, but by the repeated use of the interior point of view, which allows the reader a sense of closeness and intimacy with characters and central protagonist, and provide the reader with 'training in "reading" other people, in being sensitive to their (unspoken) feelings at any given moment'¹¹².

The Women's Room's final few pages reveal that narrators and Mira are, in fact, one. For a brief few paragraphs, a shift in the mode of narration abandons dramatised and omniscient narrators, leaving the readers with only one point of view with which to identify - that of the

central protagonist. An identification with this character's point of view at this point is painful; Mira feels she is going mad - isolated, separate and without connection, she fears impending insanity. While the mainstream, male-authored confessional ends, typically with a sense of optimism concerning the future, this shift in mode of narration at the end of The Women's Room suggests that the attainment of separate, autonomous adulthood, which marks the point of closure of many mainstream confessional novels, while conformed to here, may speak not of the successful attainment of adult femininity, but of the impossible demands made on women within patriarchal culture. Tania Modleski argues that separation and isolation are major feminine fears allayed by the endlessness of the soap opera, which provides an (often missing) sense of continual connection to others. The final coming together of Mira and the narrators may, to some extent, figure a return to those earliest fantasies of total merger with the mother, yet since, as Chodorow has pointed out, feminine development entails oscillations between deeply hostile and more benign feelings in relation to internalised aspects of the mother, this final coming together, with the loss of other points of view which enabled the reader to distance herself as well as to draw close to central protagonist and dramatised narrator, threatens the central protagonist with insanity. The ghost of Val and the

threat of insanity both point towards the fact that while separate, autonomous adulthood may represent a new beginning which allows the partial closure of the mainstream, male-authored confessional novel, ending this woman's version of the confession is neither so easily nor so finally achieved.

'Becomingness'

In the first chapter of this thesis, 'becomingness' was singled out as the trope 'par excellence' of agonism, producing, as it does a central protagonist characterised as continually 'in process'. This process, it was argued, depends upon the positioning of the reader as trustworthy listener. The confessions of the narrator/central protagonist to this listener guarantee successful 'becomingness'. The close reading of The Women's Room revealed that 'becomingness' as described above, does describe the trajectory traced by its central protagonist. Moreover, the extent to which Shedding and The Shame is Over construct similar paths of 'becomingness' for their central protagonists suggests that this trope does characterise the woman's confessional novel. In Shedding, the process of 'becomingness' is 113 likened to the continual casting-off of old skins, while in The Shame is Over, the process is likened to one 114 of enlarging. In The Women's Room, omniscient narration describes Mira as continually in process,

moving from childhood via marriage, childbirth, divorce, consciousness-raising, feminism and education, towards an extremely inconclusive closure where central protagonist and narrators merge producing an isolated and unhappy woman walking the beach musing upon her closeness to insanity.

Three features of the The Women's Room's 'becomingness' mark it out from the dominant paradigm of the confessional novel. Firstly, though Mira is constantly 'in process', any sense of linear development is confounded by circularity produced by discursive manipulations of the story's temporal order. Secondly, the device of splitting 'becomingness' between central protagonist, dramatised narrator, and to a lesser extent, a large cast of minor female protagonists, works against the male-authored confessional's tendency to focus attention on one developing and ever changing 'special' central protagonist. The Women's Room invites its readers, rather, to participate, as trustworthy listeners, in the 'becomingness' not only of Mira and the dramatised narrator, but also of Val, Martha, Kyla, Chris and all of those minor female characters to whom we are introduced throughout the narrative. Thirdly, while The Women's Room's 'becomingness' is, like that of its male-authored companion, shaped largely by discourses of psycho-therapy and personal growth, feminism and consciousness raising activities, together with education

are also of central importance in contributing to its variant of this trope.

Taken together, the first two of these divergencies produce a 'becomingness' which is less linear and less progressive than that of the male-authored confessional narrative. Moreover, the blurring, overlaps and confusions between central protagonist, dramatised narrator and minor female protagonists leave the reader not with the satisfying sense of having played a part in bringing one special individual to a point in development from which further growth will more easily be undertaken, but rather with the less satisfying sense of having witnessed or shared in a seemingly endless and inconclusive process of 'becomingness' which characterises the experience not only of the central protagonist, but of the dramatised narrator and all the other female protagonists as well. In chapter one, it was argued that the 'becomingness' of the confession works to foreground and to shore up the incoherences and instabilities at the heart of what it means to be an individual, positioning its reader as point of coherence, trustworthy witness, or guarantor for the viability of this position. In *The Women's Room*, however, the multiplicity of sites of 'becomingness', together with the blurring of identities, circularity of plot, and suggestion of impending insanity in the final few pages

together work to suggest that while 'becomingness' lies at the very heart of what it means to be a woman - any woman - even the illusion of coherence granted by the confessional narrative is less easily achieved by the woman's confessional narrative. Moreover while Mira's 'becomingness' does, in common with that of the confession described in chapter one, emphasise the development of the capacity to feel and to discuss emotions, as well as to live independently, progress in these areas is signalled by the extent to which Mira's discourse begins to resemble that of the dramatised narrator or Val. Thus in The Women's Room, 'becomingness' means becoming 'truer' to oneself by becoming more like another.

The blurring of identities described above, together with the circularity of the path traced by the central protagonist and the suggestion of impending insanity with which the narrative closes suggest that while all confessional novels foreground as well as shore up the instabilities at the heart of contemporary subjectivity, for women, even the fiction of coherence as granted by the confessional novel, is less easily achieved. Lacanian psycho-analytic theory would support such a contention by arguing that while any sense of the subject's coherence or unity is a mere fiction or illusion fostered by the ego, woman's deficiency in relation to language means that she cannot even share fully in this illusion: 'It is

this illusion of a coherent and controlling identity which becomes most important at the level of social subjectivity. And the woman does not even possess the same access to the fiction as the man.¹¹⁵ If the male-authored confession works both to foreground and to shore up this illusory coherence, then the blurrings and lack of boundaries between narrator's, central protagonist's and other protagonist's paths of 'becomingness' bear testimony to women's partial or blocked access to the illusion of coherence, unity and individuality. It has frequently been commented upon that women's novels concern themselves often with a never ending search for a sense of identity.¹¹⁶ The close reading of 'becomingness' proposed, moreover, that Mira's 'becomingness' becomes the reader's, thus it would seem that both the reader's and Mira's sense of 'becomingness' is founded upon a relation of resemblance to another woman. Mira becomes a version of Val and the dramatised narrator; the reader becomes, to some extent, Mira. Identification and 'becomingness' apparently go hand in hand in the woman's confessional novel. In The Women's Room, it is Mira's engagement in feminist practices such as intense 'consciousness-raising' conversations together with her gradual conversion to a muted version of radical feminism, which produce her eventual resemblance to the mother figure, Val.

Here again psycho-analytic theory can elucidate this relation. The Freudian description of the little girl's Oedipus complex emphasises that while the castration complex leads the little girl to give up her mother as love object, her desire for a baby as 'stand in' for the missing penis means that she desires to become like her mother: 'for the girl, acceptance of "castration" indicates that she should become like her mother'.¹¹⁷

From a Freudian position then, resemblance to another woman becomes a cornerstone of the attainment of adult femininity.

So far, it has been suggested that a comparison between the 'becomingness' of The Women's Room and that of the male-authored confession reveals certain obstacles which impede femininity's attempt to acquire full subjecthood and individuality. While Mira does, as the close reading indicated, move from object to subject position, this move appears to threaten her sanity. The narrative trajectory traces her 'becomingness' as a move towards resembling, in part, both Val and the dramatised and omniscient narrators. Though Mira's 'becomingness' depends upon the obliteration of Val, and the introjection of both narrators, this process is also threatening. While it has so far been suggested that this trajectory might be read as the narrativisation of woman's deficient access to full subjectivity - lacking the lack that would guarantee her entry into division,

language and subjectivity, she remains caught in a state of perpetual 'becoming' - new French feminists such as Irigaray have turned this deficiency into cause for celebration: 'These streams don't flow into one, definitive sea; these rivers have no permanent banks; this body no fixed borders. This unceasing mobility, this life. Which they might describe as our restlessness, whims, pretences, or lies. For all this seems so strange to those who claim 'solidity' as their foundation.'

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The perpetual 'becomingness' and ceaseless flux of identity which underlies the narrative trajectory of The Women's Room becomes, from this perspective a quality of femininity worthy of celebration, since it registers here not a deficiency, but a sign of 'otherness', bearing the potential to disrupt the certainties of phallogocentric discourse and culture. In the same way, Mary Russo has proposed a guarded welcome to the Bakhtinian analogy between the carnivalesque text - with its ability to subvert the dominant - and the image of the grotesque and becoming female body: 'The grotesque body is the open, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process and change ... the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world.'

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Clearly, then, an equivalence between femininity and a constant state of 'becomingness' (whether this is seen as cause for celebration or denigration), has been posited from a wide range of critical positions. This equivalence, it has been

argued is borne out by a close reading of The Women's Room.

The role of feminism in shaping the 'becomingness' of The Women's Room is double-edged. On the one hand, a feminist discourse of 'shared experience', 'sisterhood', and equality between women assumes an empathetic relation between reader and dramatised narrator: boundaries between reader, central protagonist other female protagonists and dramatised narrator blur through common experience, creating the boundless and becoming female body described by Irigaray. Moreover the acquisition of a feminist consciousness shapes the 'becomingness' of Mira, Val, Chris, the dramatised narrator and, to a lesser extent, several of the minor female protagonists, providing an overarching framework within which all their 'becomingness' becomes one. Thematically, it is the realisation that 'men are the enemy' which works to foreground this aspect of the articulation between 'becomingness' and feminism. While it might be argued that the narrative avoids fully endorsing such a position in the interests of 'playing safe', and keeping feminism within acceptable boundaries, the logic of the present reading would also propose that the narrative only ever half-heartedly supports such a position, since to fully endorse it would be to blur the last vestiges of the boundaries which serve to maintain distance between Val and Mira. While the boundless and 'becoming' woman

described by both Bakhtin and Irigaray figures the possibility for another culture, another language 'elsewhere', her 'grotesque body' poses a threat - a threat which shapes women's 'double-voiced' discourse. Thus feminism, which serves to underline the 'becomingness' of The Women's Room, also holds it within bounds.

Feminism, together with the quest for education signal woman's attempt to gain access to the language, culture and full subjectivity of phallogentric culture, and women's literature has, as Mary Jacobus points out, frequently foregrounded the thematisation of this quest: speaking of the question of women's access to knowledge and culture, she argues that 'in writing by women, the question is often explicitly thematised in terms of education'¹²⁰. What emerges here is that within The Women's Room, feminist discourses are double-voiced. On the one hand, the 'becomingness' initiated and propelled forward by the acquisition of a feminist consciousness brings about the merging between central protagonist, reliable narrator and Val, which arguably mutedly speak the possibility of an Irigarayan feminine alternative to the fixed, coherent and unitary subject positions which she ascribes to phallogentric culture. On the other hand, however, feminism together with the quest for education also 'thematise', to use Jacobus's term, women's desires

to enter fully and finally into the language, culture and subject positions of the patriarchy. It is less a paradox than an inevitable outcome of the contradictory tendencies bound up in 'becomingness' of feminism in The Women's Room, that the shared consciousness raising-like scenes between Mira and firstly the other suburban wives, and secondly Mira and the women at Harvard, lead not to the forming of some utopian community of women - a thematisation of the utopian possibilities figured by femininity - but to a closure where each woman's future life as 'successful individual career-woman' is briefly outlined: 'Clarissa walked into a Chicago TV station ... they hired her on the spot ... Iso finished her dissertation within another year'.

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Nevertheless, while this double-edged deployment of feminist discourse arguably places the most radical, threatening aspects of femininity as endless 'becomingness' within bounds - providing the women characters with greater access to separation and successful individual lives - the final merger between Mira and dramatised narrator indicates that the muted resistance to such subject positions which femininity arguably represents has not been entirely evacuated from the text. In my previous analysis of The Women's Room's mode of narration, it was argued that this aspect of the text is marked by a constant oscillation between closeness and distance. The present analysis of The

Women's Room's deployment of 'becomingness' suggests that a similar tension marks this aspect of the woman's confessional novel. While Val dreamt of a community where people might finally achieve the right balance between separation and closeness, the novel's closing moment marks an uneasy rapprochement between total isolation - woman as individual within patriarchal culture - and complete blurring of identities - Mira and the dramatised narrator collapse into one. We leave Mira caught in this narrativisation of the paradox between feminism's stress on the need for greater access to phallogentric culture, language and education, and its positing of a complete elsewhere of femininity, where all boundaries and meanings collapse. The novel's closure suggests that Mira's path of 'becomingness' will inevitably become a journey into insanity - a suggestion conveyed by the re-emergence of the rhythmic, poetic language which has occasionally marked Mira's discourse: 'I have opened all the doors in my head. I have opened all the pores in my body. But only the tide rolls in.'¹²² If, as Kristeva has argued, poetic prose allows, through the inscription of rhythmic, gestural language, the surfacing of 'semiotic discourse', representing those 'bodily drives that survive cultural pressures toward sublimation',¹²³ then this closure might be seen not only as a foregrounding of feminism's paradoxes, but also as a final inscription of the promise and threat of the

imaginary mother's body into the body of the text.

So far, this reading of The Women's Room's deployment of 'becomingness' has worked from the premise that the representations of the 'becomingness' of woman within this text bear some relation to real flesh and blood women, as well as to the unconscious processes which structure femininity. Recent post-modern literary criticism has suggested, on the other hand, that though the figure of woman and the process of becoming woman is central to post-modernist theories, they bear no necessary relation to real flesh and blood women. Since the figure of the 'becoming woman' is central both to post-modern literary criticism, and to the preceding reading of The Women's Room's deployment of 'becomingness', a discussion of this apparent overlap will now be undertaken.

Clearly, it would be inappropriate to claim The Women's Room as a fully post-modern text. Though the non-linearity of the narrative, together with the blurrings between characters, self-reflexivity of narrators' discourses, eruptions of poetic language and flux of identities arguably set in play a post-modern problematisation of the certainties of the speaking subject's position and relation to language, these tendencies are confounded by the text's relative 'transparency', and accessibility. In post-modern terms,

then, The Women's Room would not be described as a 'feminine text', 'femininity' signalling here a metaphor of reading which 'often has very little, if anything to do with woman'.¹²⁴ Post-modern literary theory mobilises the term 'femininity' together with adjectives such as 'invaginated' in relation to texts which inscribe 'woman' as process - as 'those processes which disrupt symbolic structures in the West.'¹²⁵ Adjectives relating to woman are set in play in relation to such texts since post-modernists argue that their disruptiveness of these symbolic structures stem from their putting into discourse of 'that which has been the master narrative's own "non-knowledge", what has eluded them, what has engulfed them. This other-than-themselves is almost always a "space" of some kind (over which the narrative has lost control), and this space has been coded as feminine, as woman.'¹²⁶ While it would be inappropriate to apply the term post-modernist to The Women's Room, its putting into discourse - over and over again - of the process of becoming a woman, does seem to thematise the post-modernist call for writers, whether men or women to become 'woman'. In Gynesis, Alice A Jardine attempts to distinguish between contemporary North American and French male writers by describing North American writing in the following way: 'Gynesis - the putting into discourse of 'woman' or 'the feminine' as problematic - seems to exist here only at the level of representation.

It has, in a sense, been externalised rather than internalised, and thematised rather than practiced'.¹²⁷

In a footnote, she adds that 'In some ways, the American version of gynesis is more prevalent in 'popular culture' than it is in high theory'.¹²⁸ While Jardine's comments refer, explicitly to North American male writers, I would nevertheless argue that her comments concerning 'gynesis' as representation - as theme rather than structure - describe The Women's Room more than adequately. While French post-modernists call for male poets to become woman, in order to incorporate the radical process of 'becoming woman' into their texts, Marilyn French's novel turns this representation of textual practice as woman back upon itself, producing a narrative that 'performs' and thematises the act of 'becoming woman'. Jardine contends that within gynesis the 'feminine' signifies, not woman herself, but those spaces which arguably conceptualise the master narrative's own 'non-knowledge', that area over which the narrative has lost control. This is the unknown, the terrifying, the monstrous.¹²⁹ If this is the case, then Mira's incipient insanity at the end of the novel can be read as registering three possible tensions: firstly, those which lie at the heart of this novel's version of feminism - between its celebration of sisterhood, merging and blurred empathetic identifications and its pull towards separation-individuation, competition and the acquisition of full phallogocentric subject positions; secondly, the psychic

tension this represents - the tension, described under mode of narration, figured by ambivalence in relation to the maternal: here the celebration of blurred identities can be read as representing one side of this ambivalence, and the push towards separation-individuation and 'phallogentric' modes of being the other; and lastly, the paradox posed for women by post-modernism's celebration of those monstrous spaces of non-knowledge - spaces which, through their alignment with 'the maternal', both threaten and suggest a utopian liberation.

Sexuality

In chapter one's discussion of the mainstream, male-authored confessional novel, it was argued that the confession of sexual practices and concerns was a principle organising feature of their narratives. The confession of sexual feelings and practices is, as Michel Foucault has argued, the principle practice through which the contemporary human subject is formed and re-formed, subjected to and placed as the subject of a range of discourses concerning on 'the sexual' - creating him as a fully 'fleshed out' sexual subject.¹³⁰ Two commentators on the woman's confessional novel have suggested, inter alia, that like its mainstream relation, it foregrounds the sexuality of its central protagonist. Ros Coward, speaking of the woman's confessional novel,

argues that 'contemporary women protagonists are positively garrulous about their intimate personal histories,' and goes on to assert that 'if sexual desire rendered the Victorian heroine mad, it now appears to be a vital component of the international best seller - a genre of sexual writing.'¹³¹ In what looks like a specific reference to The Women's Room, Coward goes on to comment that novels that 'change lives' 'have followed the general pattern of Victorian fiction towards sexual confession', concluding that 'sexual confessions in the '60's became synonymous with women writers'.¹³² In a similar vein, Elisabeth Wilson argues that it is hard to avoid placing sexuality at the centre of the feminist confessional since 'feminism has carried over from the wider culture the belief that our sexual being is the core of ourselves, where our identity most fundamentally resides.'¹³³

While it might be objected that The Women's Room is not a feminist novel - an argument to which this thesis will later address itself - both Coward and Wilson do assume that the woman's confessional novel shares with its male-authored relation the foregrounding of sexuality. Such a conclusion would seem to be partially problematised, however, by the findings outlined in the previous close reading of The Women's Room, which revealed that though the authoritative narration's construction of Mira does assume the centrality of early

masturbatory experiences, the onset of menstruation, early experiences with boys, marriage, childbirth, and the first orgasm,¹³⁴ the mode of narration's splitting of central protagonist, authoritative and dramatised narrators works to confound this centrality. Moreover, the reader/narrator/central protagonist relations invited by this mode of narration also preclude the positing of a relation of direct correspondence - as suggested by Coward and Wilson - between the male-authored and the woman's confessional novels' construction of sexuality in relation to their central protagonists. The following section will concern itself with these similarities and differences, and with what they might reveal about the nature of women's writing, its relation to dominant culture, and to 'the feminine'.

The close reading of The Women's Room revealed that while authoritative narration does place sexuality at the centre of its construction of Mira, dramatised narration rarely concerns itself with sexuality. Moreover the mode of narration invites the reader either to adopt the voyeuristic point of view of the authoritative narrator - watching her undergo the trials and tribulations of adolescence, unsuccessful heterosexual intercourse, and painful childbirth - or to adopt an empathetic identification with the central protagonist's experiences. It has already been argued that any such

identification would be on the basis of masochism, since Mira's sexual experiences are, on the whole, painful and unsatisfactory. If the authoritative narration's voyeuristic detailing of Mira's sexual experiences invites both an identification with this controlling and investigative discourse, as well as a masochistic identification with its object, the latter position is privileged by dramatised narration, which, with its relentless detailing of suffering and pain, together with appeals to the reader's own experience and knowledge, routinises this invitation to masochistic identification.

The popularity of The Women's Room, labelled as a woman's novel, testifies to its widespread appeal to women - to its ability to mobilise, therefore, female desire. Yet, as has already been argued, the construction of an actively desiring female subject poses problems for a phallogentric culture, within which femininity is routinely aligned with passivity - woman as object, rather than subject of desire. This oscillation between voyeuristic and masochistic reader/narrator and reader/central protagonist relations arguably results from the tensions underlying the attempt to construct such a female subject within the dominant, phallogentric culture - tensions which, as has already been argued, produce women's writing as a 'double-voiced' discourse. Yet if this 'double-voicedness' concerning sexuality is produced by tensions at the heart of the attempt to

construct an actively desiring female subject, it is nevertheless clear that the text does appeal to women - that it does mobilise female desire. The following section will aim to approach this oscillation between masochism and voyeurism both as a tension at the heart of the narrative, illustrative of tensions at the heart of femininity within our phallogentric culture as well as as an instance of the production of female desire.

It has already been suggested that the appeal of the mainstream, male-authored confession rests partly on its positioning of its readers as analysts or therapists. The reader therefore becomes, to some extent, the agent for the 'becomingness' of the confessor and is therefore implicated in and partially responsible for that 'becomingness'. While it has also been suggested that the privileging of such a powerful position is partially undercut by the dramatised narrator's appeals to her shared experience with the reader - which encourages, rather, a masochistic identification with this narrator - the authoritative narration's case history-like and voyeuristic detailing of the central protagonist's sexual feelings and experiences does privilege the taking-up by the reader of a powerful 'medical' or 'psychiatrist' point of view. Mira's early experiences of masturbation, menstruation and sexual interaction with boys are described with a clinical attention to detail, while

authoritative narration points towards possible causes for her inability to have orgasms in her early experiences: we are told, for instance, that as a child, Mira was kept tied up,¹³⁵ implying the later internalisation of inhibition and repression. What has so far been described as the authoritative narration's voyeuristic production of Mira's sexuality can more properly be termed 'medical'. The reader is invited to share in this powerful investigative study, while the text also 'reveals' in its case history like notes, the roots of Mira's problems in her early childhood experiences - clues decipherable by any reader with a passing acquaintance with psycho-analysis or psychology. This authoritative, voyeuristic, medical discourse offers the reader a relatively powerful and pleasureable position from which to study the central protagonist - at the same time the authoritative narration's clinical point of view also evidences the text's inability to construct Mira as active desiring female subject - producing her rather, as object of scrutiny for the voyeuristic - and therefore libidinised - medical discourse. In this regard, The Women's Room can best be likened to a subgenre of the woman's film of the 1940's, which, according to Mary Ann Doane, partially resolved the tension inherent in mainstream cinema's attempt to construct an actively desiring female subject within a regime of representation within which woman represented masculine desire, surface and 'to-be-looked-at-ness', by

associating woman with the pathological. Doane goes on to argue that while the medical discourse does release woman from her position as pure surface, and mere object of the look, an accession to an actively desiring position is precluded since the pure voyeurism of classical phallogentric cinema becomes, in this subgenre of the woman's film, an investigative medical glance. While the medical glance does grant woman an interior - and thus, by implication a quasi-subjectivity, this cinematic strategy represents only a detouring of the typically objectifying relation between dominant cinema and the female body: 'Medicine introduces a detour in the male's relation to the female body through an eroticisation of the very process of knowing the female subject. Thus, while the female body is despecularised, the doctor patient relation is, somewhat paradoxically, eroticised.'¹³⁶ The Women's Room's authoritative narration, produces a similar 'clinical discourse' which deploys voyeurism to eroticise and to partially objectify its central protagonist. The reader has the option of identifying with this powerful position - an identification which, with its objectification and eroticisation of Mira fits with typically 'masculine' codes and conventions - or of forming a masochistic identification with the objectified object of this clinical discourse.

If The Women's Room's deployment of sexuality conforms to the double-voicedness of the text already identified within its mode of narration and its deployment of 'becomingness', then the masochistic identification which counterpoints the masculinity of the clinical discourse arguably represents a 'muted ' feminine voice. This proposal finds substantiation within Freudian psychoanalytic theory which insists, indeed, that though both men and women may gain pleasure from the adoption of a masochistic position, a strong alignment exists, at the level of the psyche, between masochism and the feminine.

According to Freud, the acquisition of 'normal', adult, passive feminine sexuality demands the repression of the active, 'masculine', phallic side of an originally bisexual nature. The repression of the active 'masculine' components of this original bisexuality leaves its traces, argued Freud, as a range of neurotic predispositions, or tendencies: Freud's writings on femininity often took the form of descriptions of 'scenarios' which he repeatedly came across in the dreams, fantasies and day-dreams of his female patients. From his analyses of these scenarios, he concluded that the repression of the active, 'phallic' side of the young girl's originally bisexual nature - brought about through the female castration and Oedipus complexes - tended to produce a range of symptoms which he classified as masochistic, paranoid, or hysterical; moreover, in his

famous essay 'On Femininity', Freud emphasised his belief in the crucial significance of masochism in the psychic lives of women: 'There is one particularly constant relation between femininity and instinctual life which we do not want to overlook. The suppression of women's aggressiveness which is prescribed for them constitutionally and imposed on them socially favours the development of powerful masochistic impulses, which succeed, as we know, in binding erotically the destructive trends which have been diverted inwards.'¹³⁷

Just as Freud identified masochism -sexual pleasure gained through the experience of pain - as a typically feminine psychic impulse, so we find in The Women's Room the privileging of masochistic identifications between reader and central protagonist and reader and dramatised narrator. Moreover, this masochistic reading relation is compounded by the narrator's comments regarding Mira's predisposition towards masochistic fantasies. While one side of The Women's Room's privileging of alternately active and passive identifications foregrounds an identification with the actively investigative clinical glance at Mira's sexual experiences and sufferings, the other, more 'feminine' side of the oscillation invites a masochistic identification with Mira's painful sexual experiences as produced through this clinical glance.

What is most noticeable about this double-voiced

discourse of female sexuality is that neither an identification with the active or the passive side of the oscillation produces an actively desiring female subject, for, as Freud and his followers have insisted, masochism represents a psychic strategy by means of which active sexuality can be avoided. Moreover, as Mary Ann Doane has pointed out, Freud's descriptions of female identification processes all foreground the centrality of masochism: 'later attempts to rethink identification in the context of the second topography and the inter-subjective economy of the Oedipal complex retain this link between woman and masochism.'¹³⁸ Thus Freud describes the little girl's identification with her mother as that child's assumption of a painful symptom, for instance a cough. Commenting upon his most well known case history of female masochism, 'A Child Is Being Beaten',¹³⁹ Freud argues that the little girl's masochistic fantasy allows her to 'escape from the demands of the erotic side of her life altogether.'¹⁴⁰ Masochism, which arises, according to Freud, from the repression of active, phallic, 'aggressive' impulses results in fantasies of pain and suffering which produce sexual pleasure. Female identification often hinges on the hysterical acquisition of the mother's (or presumably another woman's) painful symptoms, and can thus be seen to be grounded in masochism, which also releases the girl child from the threat posed to normal 'passive' sexuality, by the active desires of the 'phallic' stage.

Clearly masochism can be seen as a psychic strategy attempting to magically resolve femininity's oscillation between active 'phallic' pre-Oedipal aims, and the more properly passive aims of mature femininity. Thus this muted feminine voice -privileging identification with the sexual sufferings of the central protagonist - illustrates femininity's inability to sustain an actively desiring subject position - constructing instead identification on the basis of a masochism which enables its 'quasi-subject' to gain a modicum of sexual pleasure through objectification, and identification with the symptoms of another.

It has so far been argued that Mira's sexual experiences and practices are produced, in The Women's Room, via an authoritative narration which leaves the reader with the option either of identifying with the powerful clinical investigation of the central protagonist, or on the basis of masochism, with the object of that investigation, Mira herself. However, while the central protagonist's sexuality is produced via this mode of narration, the dramatised narrator's discourse is almost exclusively concerned with suffering - sexuality is totally absent from this narrative voice. Since, as the 'becomingness' sections have illustrated, the 'becomingness' of Mira is registered by the extent to which her identity blurs with that of the dramatised narrator, it would appear that to

some extent, 'becomingness' is equated with a decrease in sexual activity.

This absence of sexuality at the level of the dramatised narration arguably continues the privileging of a masochistic reader/dramatised narrator relation. The dramatised narrator continually bemoans her isolated and lonely condition, inviting the reader to identify masochistically with her suffering. Yet, at the same time, each instance of dramatised narration signals the path for Mira's own becomingness, thus the celibacy and aloneness of the dramatised narrator is to some extent cause for celebration, as marker of the attainment of full independent, individual subjecthood. It has already been argued that the construction of an actively desiring female subject is well nigh impossible within the constraints of our phallogentric language. Perhaps the dramatised narrator's - and therefore Mira's - ultimate aloneness and celibacy testifies to this impossibility - in its effort to construct an active female subject, the narrative has to leave aside the question of woman's active desire. Though Mira/the dramatised narrator does bemoan her celibacy at the end of the novel, what is foregrounded, rather is this subject's fear of insanity and apprehension concerning what it really means to live as a single, working, independent woman. This decentralisation of sexual matters problematises the sense Coward and Wilson share that the woman's confessional

novel is relentlessly concerned with the sexual, and suggests, perhaps that whereas sexuality is a key feature of masculine identity, this is not necessarily the case where femininity is concerned. Such a position would seem to be supported both by the narrative's relentless foregrounding of active sexuality in its delineation of Mira's husband Norm, and by its closure, which invites a readerly identification with an active though celibate central protagonist. In her essay 'Sexuality as the Mainstay of Identity: Psycho-analytic Perspectives', Ethel Spector Person has argued that 'there is a wealth of clinical evidence to suggest that, in this culture, genital sexual activity is a prominent feature in the maintenance of masculine gender while it is a variable feature in feminine gender ... In men, gender appears to "lean on" sexuality ... Put another way, there is a difference in the primacy of sexuality between men and women, at least in this culture. In women, gender identity and self-worth can be consolidated by other means.'¹⁴¹

Perhaps, then, the identification which the narrative closure privileges, while it is clearly underpinned to some extent by masochism, also provides a pleasureably sustaining identification with a fully individualised and active, though celibate subject. Meanwhile, it should not be overlooked that the production of Mira as

individualised and fully active depended upon the full incorporation of the dramatised narrator – a blurring of boundaries, which has earlier been likened to a regressive fantasy concerning re-union with the mother – a re-union which is both dreaded and desired. Thus while it might be argued that sexuality is not a key feature of the text's closure, it should be borne in mind that this closure is predicated upon a libidinised fantasy of re-fusion. Thus we find again that an oscillation between a too-closeness, figured by masochistic identification and an eventual total merging of dramatised narrator and central protagonist, and a distance, figured by identification with the 'masculine' clinical gaze of authoritative narration, sets the parameters within which sexuality is produced within The Women's Room.

However the previous comments are not exhaustive in relation to The Women's Room's production of the field of female sexuality. Mira's 'becomingness' does produce her as newly 'orgasmic,' while her growing similarity to Val, together with the 'consciousness-raising' like scenes with the other Harvard women and Martha and Chris's rape combine to foreground the question of male violence and its links with heterosexuality. It might be argued, indeed, that the rape, together with Val's and Chris's conversion to radical separatist feminist politics and Mira's gradual movement towards such a position represent the novel's climax. At the same time, the theme of

lesbianism, introduced into the narrative by the increased centrality of Iso and the focus on her relationships with Ava, Kyla and Clarissa, might be seen as proposing a suggested alternative to the trials and tribulations of heterosexuality, yet this is arguably not the case, since lesbianism too, is constructed as both painful and difficult. Thus though Mira's brief moment of heterosexual pleasure is clearly marked as a crucial moment on her path of 'becomingness', the text's construction of Mira's developing feminist consciousness also produces her as growingly aware of the threat of male violence, problematising any closure predicated upon a heterosexual union.

At the same time, though lesbianism does move centrestage as these developments are taking place, and though Iso is referred to, at the close of the novel, as 'still the centre of us',¹⁴² what is noticeable is that these relationships are constructed not as specifically sexual - but as routes to an enhancement of self-esteem: it is through the experience of lesbianism, that Kyla and Clarissa learn to value themselves as individuals and to be aggressive and assertive within the competitive job market. Thus while the narrative does offer a fleeting glimpse of successful heterosexuality, together with a potential reader identification with a woman engaged in a temporarily successful heterosexual union, this is

constructed as a necessary though ultimately unsustainable position, while the text's construction of lesbianism as a practice for enhancing feelings of self-worth relegates the actively sexual aspects of this alternative to the 'unspoken' of the text. In the final analysis, neither heterosexuality nor lesbianism produce an actively desiring female subject.

It has so far been argued that though The Women's Room lacks an actively desiring central protagonist its privileging of masochistic identifications is symptomatic of the repression of an active, 'phallic' female sexuality, which is also held in check by the repressing clinical discourse. It has further been contended that where the text appears to produce representations of actively desiring female sexuality (first heterosexual, in the Mira/Ben relationship, then lesbian with the relationships between Iso, Kyla and Clarissa), what this construction of femininity represents is a step towards the enhancement of self-esteem within the context of discourses of personal growth and popular psycho-therapy. This paradox arguably results from the text's attempt to negotiate a range of somewhat contradictory discourses of individualism, autonomy and female sexuality as they articulate, within mainstream culture, with feminist discourses. In this regard, a striking similarity emerges between The Women's Room and Cosmopolitan Magazine.

In her thorough analysis of the changing face of women's magazines,¹⁴³ Janice Winship identifies a common strategy amongst mainstream magazines: the construction and production of an address to a newly individualised 'new woman'. While the roots of this push towards individualisation stretch back to the development, in the seventeenth century, of a 'possessive individualism' rooted in the political philosophy of Hobbes and Locke,¹⁴⁴ Winship argues that the accession of women to the position of fully possessive individuality was a long, slow process which reached its fullest expression only from the 1950's onwards, when the development of domestic consumer products necessitated the production of a new market. This market was provided by the 'new woman', whose desires for individual expression were given form by domestic consumer goods which began to flood the markets from the early '50's onwards. For Winship, the 'liberated superwoman', constructed and addressed in the '70's by Cosmopolitan magazine, exemplifies the most liberal edge of the push towards self-expression and 'freedom' which lies at the heart of competitive individualism. Within this context, the quest for orgasm, sexual pleasure and sexual 'liberation' represents one aspect of a wider push towards 'true' individuality: 'Lurking within Cosmopolitan's verbosity about sex is the sexual liberation notion that 'true' individuality is found and fulfilled in the

(hetero)sexual quest.¹⁴⁵ Thus for Winship, discourses of sexual liberation - including Cosmopolitan's celebratory descriptions of women's capacity for multiple orgasms, enjoyment of newly discovered sexual organs such as 'the G spot', and advice to women on how to increase their orgasmic capacity - represents less an attempt to construct a truly active and desiring female sexuality, than the articulation of femininity within discourses of competitive possessive individualism. Though Winship recognises that to some extent, these articulations of femininity may be progressive for women: 'my own view is that it is cutting off our nose to spite our face to outlaw wholesale what Cosmo stands for',¹⁴⁶ her thesis implies that such discourses ultimately serve capitalist rather than feminist interests. Likewise, both Ethel Spector Person and Elisabeth Wilson caution that any celebration of such apparently 'progressive' representations of female sexuality should be tempered by an acknowledgement of the extent to which they are articulated through discourses of personal growth, self-realisation and popular psycho-therapy - discourses which emphasise a competitive possessive individualism aimed, crudely at maximising the 'profit' one might gain from oneself, rather than stressing any sense of collective endeavour to re-constitute the terms within which femininity is constructed. Indeed, Ethel Spector Person goes so far as to suggest that: 'At its worst, sexual liberation is part of the cult of individuality which

only demands legitimisation of the expression of the individual's needs, what appears to be her raw "impulse" life, against the demands of society'.¹⁴⁷ Similarly, Elisabeth Wilson argues that those woman's confessional novels which appear to embrace lesbianism as a viable alternative to heterosexuality often emphasise 'loving women as a means of enhancing self-esteem, an idea culled ultimately from popular psycho-therapy'¹⁴⁸ which is, as Winship has argued, a body of discourse deeply implicated in possessive, competitive individualism.

It has already been noted that in The Women's Room, lesbianism seems remarkably asexual. This would support Wilson's thesis that lesbianism, in the woman's confessional novel, may represent an attempt to construct the new, self-possessed, individualised woman, whose sense of self-esteem enhances her sense of herself as 'winning' in the free-for-all of competing individuals. Thus though neither Kyla or Clarissa seem converted to lesbianism by their brief affairs with Iso, this brush with lesbianism increases their sense of self-worth, and sends them both off into the rat-race of academic competition with renewed energy and vigour.

In conclusion, it appears that the mobilisation of female desire in The Women's Room produces a series of paradoxes in relation to the representation of female sexuality.

While masochism and a 'clinical discourse' evidence the threat posed to mainstream, phallogentric culture, as well as to 'correct' notions of femininity, by the possibility of the production of a truly active desiring female sexuality, where an actively desiring female subject position does appear to be represented by the text, this has been shown to further the interests of competitive, possessive individualism, rather than to extend the possibilities for representing active female desire.

In conclusion, this analysis of discourses of sexuality in The Women's Room has revealed them to be 'double voiced': where the text invites an oscillating identification with a powerful clinical glance and with the sexual sufferings of the central protagonist, this oscillation has been shown to articulate both a phallogentric repression of female sexuality as well as femininity's tortuous attempt to vent this repression via masochism. Meanwhile though it is arguably the case that Mira's brief affair with Ben offers the reader a potential identification with a woman enjoying and actively shaping a heterosexual union - while Mira does not initiate the affair, she is an active rather than a passive sexual partner - these textual moments, together with the text's remarkably asexual representations of a possible lesbian alternative, have been shown to articulate discourses of competitive possessive

individualism rather than those which speak of the perhaps only utopian possibility of an actively desiring female subject.

Suffering

The central protagonist of The Women's Room suffers intensely almost throughout the narrative, as does the dramatised narrator.

Though Mira gains in authority and independence, and though she does experience fleeting moments of happiness during her marriage, with her children, with her new friends at Harvard, and with her lover, Ben, her 'becomingness' changes rather than lessens the extent of her suffering. Moreover though 'punitive', authoritative narration gradually gives way to the extended monologues of the central protagonist, this shift in point of view produces a new form of 'self-inflicted' suffering as Mira continually criticises herself. As the previous close reading revealed, suffering acts as a catalyst for Mira's 'becomingness' - speeding changes in her view of herself and the world and changes in the way she lives. These sufferings are duplicated by the experience of other women characters whose lives are all as relentlessly difficult and painful as those of the dramatised narrator and of Mira. Moreover though Mira does attempt self-determination, the novel's closure questions the extent

to which she has really been able to change things for the better - and underlines an underlying and repeated theme of the novel 'that women are victims all the way through, (as) Mira heard herself say.'¹⁴⁹

According to several critics of the genre, this foregrounding of the theme of suffering is a common characteristic of women's confessional novels, whose central protagonists, argues Margaret Tarratt, are on the whole centrally concerned with questions about how to survive alone in difficult circumstances when possibilities, though open are equally compromising.¹⁵⁰

Moreover intense suffering characterises the experiences of the central protagonists of both Shedding and The Shame Is Over, which confirms that this is a key characteristic of the woman's confessional novel.¹⁵¹

Elisabeth Wilson's study of the feminist confessional novel emphasises the genre's construction of its central protagonist as victim, though she goes on to argue that the narrative typically traces a trajectory from a victim to heroine position: 'it is the journey from victim to heroine that characterises feminist confessional writing'.¹⁵²

In this regard, the woman's and feminist confessional novel share much in common with their male-authored relation, which, according to Peter Axthelm, typically

concerns itself with a central protagonist who 'views his condition not with anger, but with a deep internal pain - he rejects external rebellion in favour of self-laceration. His suffering originates not in the chaos of the world, but in the chaos within the self'.¹⁵³

Axthelm goes on to propose that 'the hero is never saved or absolved by confession, but he does gain a vision',¹⁵⁴

adding that 'the modern confessional hero has sought a state of perception which will make his consciousness less painful and more meaningful.'¹⁵⁵

Axthelm's study of the established canon of confessional texts reveals that their narratives are centrally concerned with the pain, suffering and self-laceration of a central protagonist, who, towards the close of the text, gains a vision. Similarly Mira suffers, lacerates herself, becomes increasingly aware of the subordination of women and the threat posed to women by male violence, and walks the beach at the novel's close, unhappy and alone. The suffering of the central protagonist clearly marks an overlap between the male-authored and the woman's confessional novel, yet this overlap does not extend to the degree of suffering which marks the experience not only of Mira, but of all the other women characters who figure in this narrative - suffering which is compounded by a melodramatic-pathetic discourse. Moreover while the reader of the confessional novel treated by Axthelm is invited to identify with a central

protagonist on his way to gaining a vision, the reader of The Women's Room is invited, rather, to identify either with an authoritative narration - thereby gaining voyeuristic-sadistic pleasure, (an identification which is increasingly undermined as the narrative progresses), or with the sufferings of the central protagonist, together with those of the other women characters - thereby gaining masochistic pleasure. Moreover the 'vision' that Mira does gain at the end of the novel is an incoherent and fragmented one. While she has gained in knowledge (especially concerning the position of women), this new knowledge threatens her own coherence and sanity, thus differentiating this narrative from the confessional texts discussed by Axthelm which, he argues, trace the development of a consciousness which lessens suffering.

The following section's discussion of the woman's confessional novel's articulation of a suffering central protagonist will focus primarily upon three specific traits which differentiate The Women's Room's articulation of suffering from that of its male-authored relation: the privileging of a masochistic reader: central protagonist relation - bearing in mind that this is compounded via the reader relation invited in relation to the many other suffering women protagonists who people this narrative, as well as by authoritative references

to Mira's own masochism, the privileging of 'pathos' - the power of exciting tender emotions - as a discursive mode through which to convey suffering, and finally the novel's closure, where a merging of dramatised narrator and central protagonist produces a fragmented and incoherent view of the world, rather than the transformative vision achieved, according to Axthelm, by the hero of the typical mainstream confessional novel.

As authoritative narration recedes, and as the discourses of Mira and the dramatised narrator increasingly merge, the reader has less opportunity to identify with a voyeuristic (sadistic) point of view and is increasingly invited to gain pleasure through a masochistic identification with Mira, the dramatised narrator and several other women characters. Meanwhile as the narrative progresses, the extent to which these characters' lives are shaped and threatened by the subordination of women and the threat of male violence is increasingly foregrounded. While the individual women do achieve fleeting moments of happiness, Chris's rape, Val's murder, the breakdown of the Mira/Ben affair and the difficulties encountered by Iso, Kyla and Clarissa in their search for a viable lesbian alternative all combine to produce an apparently insurmountable gap between the powers of the women and the size of the 'problem' that they face. Moreover while the novel's closure does suggest that many of Mira's classmates are able to find

jobs and gain some recognition of their skills after leaving college, Mira, we are told, has 'missed the boat', since as a mature student, she is regarded as too old for the quality posts for which she is qualified at the close of the novel. Furthermore the revelation that Mira is the dramatised narrator is delayed until the last few pages of the novel. Taken together, these features combine to produce a pathetic discourse which, according to Mary Ann Doane, guarantees to move its audience through a range of strategies of mis-matching and mis-timing.¹⁵⁶ Mis-matching, one of the strategies commonly deployed by pathos, re-inforces the production of emotion through a disproportion between the weakness of a victim and the seriousness of that which threatens him/her. In The Women's Room, this deployment of pathos operates by mismatching the powers of the women characters with the obstacles which impede the achievement of the changes they desire. Mis-timing,¹⁵⁷ also a key strategy deployed by pathetic discourse to produce tender feelings, produces the desired solution to a problem at the wrong time - typically too late. In The Women's Room, Mira gets her doctorate, but is too old to get a good position, and the reader grows to empathise with the dramatised narrator, but only realises at the end of the novel that this dramatised narrator is Mira.

An alignment between pathos and 'the feminine' has been

proposed by Mary Ann Doane, who suggests that this discursive strategy both constructs and addresses a feminine position.¹⁵⁸ Doane proposes a congruence between the capacity of a pathetic discourse to produce immediate emotion - often tears - and that over-identification between subject and object which, according to Freud and later Lacan, typifies feminine 'hysterical' identification. To amplify this point, Doane refers to Bakhtin, who argues that 'a discourse of pathos is fully sufficient to itself and to its object. Indeed, the speaker completely immerses himself in such a discourse, there is no distance, there are no reservations'.¹⁵⁹ Doane points out that this definition duplicates Freud's definition of hysterical (feminine) identification, which he defined as 'sympathy, as it were, intensified to the point of reproduction.'¹⁶⁰ The force of this argument, in relation to the analysis of phallogentric culture's construction of and address to a female audience, resides in its foregrounding of pathos as a discourse which neither constructs, nor addresses a true subject: Doane contends, in this regard, that 'pathos always connotes a loss or fading of individual subjectivity in the process of signification; one might add that the situation of the receiver of the discourse mimics that of the speaker - immersion and loss of a well-defined subjectivity'.¹⁶¹ Doane's comments, which address the specificities of the woman's film of the 1930's and '40's are arguably applicable, nonetheless,

to The Women's Room's privileging of 'hysterical' over-identification, together with its construction of a 'fading' of full subjectivity. The deployment of both these strategies characterises the text's pathetic construction of Mira, the dramatised narrator and the other suffering women, who as victims are more acted upon than active, in relation to the mis-match between their individual power and the forces lined up against them. These strategies characterise in addition, the text's pathetic address to its reader, who is likely to be immediately and almost unwittingly driven to 'tender feelings' or even tears. Following Doane's line of argument, it appears that 'pathos' is one strategy through which The Women's Room negotiates the contradiction between the alignment of femininity with passivity, and the construction of an active central female protagonist.

While Mira does gain a modicum of independence, her 'becomingness' is constructed via suffering, which, through pathos, works to close the gap, once again, between subject and object, as well as between reader and text. Moreover, as Franco Moretti has argued, the tears which pathos produces, 'are always the product of powerlessness. They presuppose two mutually opposed facts: that it is clear how the present state of things should be changed - and that this change is

impossible.'

Thus while both the male-authored confession and the woman's confessional novel initially construct their central protagonists as victims, the triumph over adversity and the achievement of a transcendent consciousness which characterises the former, is absent in the woman's version of the genre. The Women's Room's pathetic closure emphasises both mis-matching and mis-timing. Mira's qualities and qualifications remain largely unused and unappreciated in the small college appointment which her excessive age obliges her to accept and readers learn too late that the narrator and Mira are one. Not only the central protagonist but the readers too are positioned as victims by this pathetic closure.

Yet the pathetic discourse does not only function to re-position women characters and readers within the confines of a properly passive and almost 'victim-like' femininity. Readers identify with these women characters on the basis of masochism - which, as has already been argued, testifies both to the repression, and to the feminine negotiation of repressed, active, desire. Thus while masochistic identification does align women with that victim position constructed, as described above, through pathos, it also allows the woman reader to vent those repressed desires - though, admittedly, in tortuous and convoluted ways.

For many readers, including myself, the closing few pages of The Women's Room are the most moving, culminating in the moment of revelation that the dramatised narrator is Mira. This revelation is 'pathetic' - in the sense that it gains its affect through an underlining of a past mis-timing and mis-recognition: the reader, 'recognising' the dramatised narrator too late, is invited to mourn the loss of the potential for appropriate identification with, and recognition of Mira/the dramatised narrator. At the same time, and again for many readers including myself, this revelation does not produce a single, or simple response - for though it produces a feeling of loss, it is also pleasureable: indeed, it might be argued that the sense of loss is recouped, via masochism, as pleasure. If this is the case, this problematises the analogue Claude Beylie draws between pathos and the sexual violation of the reader, for what Beylie overlooks, is the 'double-voicedness' of masochism, which speaks not only of repression (of active phallic desire) but also of the continued vitality of what has been repressed. Beylie returns to the term's origins to argue that 'The Greeks had a word for designating this, the art of captivating immediately and violently a public apparently reticent, in reality complicit (like a masochistic girl, who adores, at bottom, being violated): the word pathos'¹⁶³. In what is perhaps an over-eager take up of this description of

pathos, Doane likens the strategy to 'textual rape, arguing that it represents the displacement into affect of that aggression which underlies the narrative trajectory of more typically masculine genres such as the detective novel, or film. Doane's analogue between pathos and rape suggests that novels such as The Women's Room are entirely ideologically complicit - and that to enjoy them is to submit to the dominant ideology and its construction of femininity in its entirety. Yet the masochistic pleasures which guarantee pathos its affects function, as has already been argued, both to deny and to re-generate the shadows of an actively desiring female subject. Since this is the case, it would seem appropriate to adopt an ambivalent position in relation to pathos, which represents another instance of that 'double-voiced' discourse of woman's writing.

In the previous section's discussion of sexuality in The Women's Room, it was proposed that a discourse of competitive possessive individualism underlay its textual representation of both lesbianism and 'successful' heterosexuality. The narrative's closure constructs and invites a masochistic identification with the image of a lonely, isolated and unhappy woman, who fears that her incoherent and fragmented vision of the world may lead to insanity. To a degree, the narrative has therefore traced the 'becomingness through suffering' of Mira up to the point where she has become a fully autonomous individual.

With the death of Val, and the integration of Mira with the dramatised narrator, Mira is now truly 'alone'. At the same time, the integration of the dramatised narrator at the point of closure signals the impending loss of the reader as ever-present listener/analyst. The pathos produced by this closure, however, arguably renders problematic the previous celebration of possessive competitive individualism, pointing to a contradiction at the heart of the text, between its individualist discourses of 'personal growth', and its 'muted' feminine discourses which, as previous sections have argued, suggest that femininity poses a threat to the subject positions which underpin capitalist possessive individualism - a contradiction, it should be noted, which also underpins debates between an 'American' feminism which seeks 'equal rights' for women within the competitive capitalist market-place,¹⁶⁵ and a more 'European' emphasis on the inter-dependency between patriarchal and possessive-individualist, capitalist structures.¹⁶⁶ Mira's incoherent and fragmented vision evidences a straining in the text, and problematises the oft-repeated maxim that 'it is precisely in her solitude¹⁶⁷ that (woman) has the possibility for gaining a self'. While the male-authored confessional novel produces its hero, at its closure, as a fully active subject in possession of a transformative vision, such a subject position is unavailable to the woman, who is left

stranded between sea and shore - between an image of maternal plenitude and fullness and the dry land of (phallogentric) individualism: as Mira herself puts it 'this is not the world I would have wished'.¹⁶⁸ Doane's analogue between pathos and textual rape seems even less appropriate here: while a celebration of this closure is not intended, it is arguably the case that the 'tender feelings' elicited by this ending testify to a (muted) desire for that 'other world'.

Summary

In the preceding sections, it has been argued that a comparison between The Women's Room and the paradigm of the male-authored confessional novel has revealed continuities and discontinuities between the two forms. My analysis of the discontinuities identified, led to the proposition that The Women's Room constitutes a 'double-voiced discourse', within which the traces of a 'muted' (repressed) femininity interweave with the paradigmatic confessional narrative, constructing, and addressing a 'mutedly' feminine position. This 'mutedly feminine' discourse addresses its readers pleasureably since it allows for a limited and somewhat tortuous 'venting' of repressed active, phallic female desires.

Meanwhile the text's continual fixing and unfixing of subjectivity - its 'agonism' - works to construct and address the modern subject, 'the signified self (which) is changed in the process of signification,¹⁶⁹ the 'becoming' self, producing, in this instance, the 'new' and ever more individualised woman of the 1970's, as described by Janice Winship.

In order to conclude this section, two related questions must now be addressed, concerning firstly the relationship between these findings and the popular notion that The Women's Room, and women's confessional novels like it can and do 'change lives', and secondly the debate concerning the appropriateness of the label 'feminist' to this and similar novels.¹⁷⁰ These two questions can be drawn together by questioning the extent to which any changes that these novels might bring about are 'progressive', in feminist terms. The range of positions evident in existing criticism suggests that there may be no easy or simple answers to these questions, for while The Women's Room and similar women's confessional novels have been welcomed by some, for their foregrounding of women's issues and concerns,¹⁷¹ others advise a more circumspect and cautious approach, warning that while they may seem to further women's interests, closer analysis problematises the status of this appearance.¹⁷² Indeed, in what is perhaps the most emphatic of these warnings, Rosalind Coward goes so far

as to argue that 'this particular form of "women's writing" ... might have the effect of confirming women as bearers of sentiment, experience and romance'.¹⁷³

Any answer to the question of whether or not these woman's confessional novels bring about 'feminist' changes in their readers must hinge upon the issue of identification - an issue which has itself been hotly debated, since the question of how readers situate themselves in relation to the position/s offered them by a text has proved difficult to resolve. Several feminist critics have argued that novels such as The Women's Room are unproblematically progressive, since they form part of a women's cultural renaissance which constructs 'positive' images of women.¹⁷⁴ Similarly, others argue that the act of reading these novels, and identifying with their central protagonists enables women to remodel themselves along feminist lines.¹⁷⁵ This chapter has argued, however, that the identifications proposed by The Women's Room are both contradictory and complex: clearly the text invites what is, at one level, an 'agonist' identification, accross its narrative, with the 'becomingness' of Mira - but this is by no means the end of the story, for the narrative invites both a voyeuristic identification with an omniscient and condescending narrator as well as proposing, by means of a melodramatic-pathetic discourse, an identification on

the basis of masochism with both Mira and the dramatised narrator. Moreover, while the later stages of the narrative invite an identification with both Mira and the dramatised narrator, earlier stages invite an oscillating identification with both points of view, while still privileging the perspective of the omniscient narrator. Meanwhile identifications accross the narrative with a wide range of major and minor characters including Martha, Val, Kyla, Clarissa, Iso, Grete, Sam, Nathalie and even, perhaps, Norm, are also available to the reader.

So far, it has been suggested that the muted voice within the double-voiced discourse of The Women's Room speaks both of and to the repressed active side of female desire. This double-voiced-ness is evidenced by the oscillation between closeness and distance constructed through the text's mode of narration - an oscillation which speaks to femininity's repressed, ambivalent pre-Oedipal desire for the mother, and the melodramatic-pathetic discourse, which speaks mutedly both of the desire for another language, and of a repressed active (phallic) sexuality. Moreover, as has already been pointed out, The Women's Room's deployment of feminist discourses in its consciousness-raising narrative framework, its foregrounding of women's sufferings under patriarchy, its construction of its central protagonist's struggles to achieve academic success, and its

delineation of Mira's 'becomingness' as one of a growing resemblance both to Val and to the dramatised and reliable narrators, constitutes one of the key textual mechanisms for the production of double-voicedness through voyeurism, masochism and pathos.

It would clearly be inappropriate to celebrate the muted traces within this double-voiced discourse: they bear testimony, after all, not to the existence of some utopian femininity outside of patriarchy, but to the construction of a mutilating sexual division on the basis of phallogentrism. Yet reading this double-voiced discourse arguably provides one extremely restricted opportunity for the 'venting' of repressed desires and while it might be objected that such venting provides dominant culture with a 'safety-valve', and therefore works towards the perpetuation of the status quo, a counter-argument might propose that The Women's Room and similar novels show cause for optimism, since they bear testimony to an extraordinary psychic energy. Such a position is proposed by Tania Modleski, who concludes her study of the Harlequin romance by arguing that while it is 'easy to see that the romances not only reflect the "hysterical" state, but actually, to some extent, induce it ... on the other hand, a study of the romances shows cause for optimism ... The reader of romances, contrary to the arguments of many popular literature critics, is

engaged in an intensely active psychological process ...
Finally, not all the female longings and desires
expressed in Harlequins are regressive. Indeed many of
the contradictions ... derive from the attempt to adapt
what for women are utopian ideals to existing
circumstances.¹⁷⁶ Similarly, while a regression to a
pre-Oedipal ambivalent desire for the mother, or a
masochistic identification with the painful experiences
of another may not be directly progressive for women,
such convoluted survival tactics, and routes to a limited
pleasure do speak of a tremendous energy, and a capacity
to survive which, given such restricted circumstances,
must surely be worth celebrating. Thus while it would be
inappropriate to claim the muted feminine voice for
feminism, it is arguably the case that it does represent
a whisper in the text concerning women's desire to change
their lives.

Yet this claim rests on the assumption that psychic
structures and patterns are held in common amongst women
to the extent that some manner of unconscious
identification on the basis of recognition will take
place. While all psychoanalytic criticism rests upon
similar hypotheses, it must be borne in mind that where
unconscious identifications are concerned, it is simply
not possible to reach any hard and fast conclusions. Ian
Green's critique of what he sees as an over-rigid
application of psychoanalysis to the analysis of

representations of masculinity in cinema usefully summarises the difficulties: 'The question remains as to how we assess identification processes in audiences, the intensely diverse reactions of individuals and, above all, "contradictory" identifications as part of phantasy.'¹⁷⁷

So far, the difficulties attendant upon drawing hard and fast conclusions concerning the reading of the muted feminine voice have been stressed. Though this muted voice invites phantasy identifications on the basis of masochism and pre-Oedipal regressions, the extent to which we can deduce from this any hard and fast conclusions concerning the ways in which these invitations are taken up is limited: in the face of the complex, fluid and contradictory terrain of the unconscious, all statements must remain tentative.

Yet if difficult questions remain concerning the reading of femininity's muted voice, it is no easier to draw conclusions concerning the ways in which the combined voices of the muted and dominant will be read. Moreover, though the discursive field can be mapped, and the positions invited plotted, the ways in which readers differentiated along lines of class, ethnicity, culture, education and sexuality will situate themselves in relation to these positions will remain to a large extent

unpredictable.

So far the reading of the dominant voice offered by this chapter has traced the articulation of feminism through discourses of personal growth, 'becomingness', possessive individualism and the development of self-esteem - discourses which have tended to produce subject positions, which while not entirely uncontradictory, are not out of keeping with the maintenance of the status quo. Here, the aim has been to temper any hasty celebration of The Women's Room's feminism through pointing to the conservative potential of many of its component discourses. Overall then, this reading has suggested that The Women's Room invites a deeply contradictory series of identifications with a muted feminine and dominant phallogentric voice.

This mapping of a complex and contradictory series of conscious and unconscious identifications invited by The Women's Room, need not contradict the assertion made by several other critics that the popularity of the women's confessional novel arises, in the main, from the strong identification with its central protagonist that this mode of writing invites, though it should serve to raise questions concerning the cultural instrumentality produced by this identification.

While the findings of this chapter would tend to support

Elisabeth Wilson's circumspect approach to the strong identification the women's confessional novel invites with its central protagonist, they would not lend support to her proposals concerning the central protagonist as 'star', since such a formulation runs counter to this chapter's emphasis on the identifications invited as contradictory and fragmented. Wilson argues that the central protagonist as 'star' functions 'to represent in a condensed form certain of the irresolvable social conflicts in a society and to provide a "solution" to them in ideology'.¹⁷⁸ Yet the 'magical solution' offered by The Women's Room's closure invites an oscillating identification with both a central protagonist on the brink of insanity and a trusted and powerful listener. To an extent, this oscillation between a pleasureably masochistic and a more powerfully voyeuristic identification foregrounds rather than resolves - even at a magical level - the instabilities at the heart of femininity: while to term this closure progressive would be reductive, this reading does serve to problematise Wilson's somewhat over-tidy conclusion. What it points to, instead, is the 'double-voicedness' of The Women's Room, which oscillates between offering its readers opportunities to give vent to repressed active desires, and positioning those readers within subject positions suited to the exercise both of patriarchy and of modern power techniques.

Without thorough and extensive reader research - a task outside the reach of this thesis - no firm conclusions can be reached concerning the ways in which readers, differentiated along lines of class, race, culture, education and sexuality, will situate themselves in relation to the complex and contradictory identifications invited by the double voiced discourse of the woman's confessional novel. While it has been suggested that a potential identification with a muted feminine voice might allow some venting of feminine (repressed) desires, such identification is invited in the context of a range of dominant discourses constructing and addressing the 'growing', 'becoming', new woman of the 1970's.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

1. M French, The Women's Room, London, Sphere, 1978.
2. V Stefan, Shedding, London, The Women's Press, 1979.
3. A Meulenbelt, The Shame Is Over, London, The Women's Press, 1980.
4. E Wilson, 'Tell It Like It Is: Women and Confessional Writing', in S. Radstone (ed) Sweet Dreams: Sexuality, Gender and Popular Fiction, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1988.
5. See R O'Rourke, 'Summer Reading', Feminist Review No 2, (1979) p 3.
6. See R Coward, '"This Novel Changes Lives": Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?' Feminist Review 5, 1980, pps 53-63.
7. Ibid, pps 3-19.
8. D Spender, Man Made Language, London, RKP, 1980 p 205.
9. J K Gardiner, 'On Female Identity and Writing by Women', Critical Inquiry vol 8 no 2 Winter 1981 p 348.
10. P M Spacks (ed), Contemporary Women Novelists, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1977.
11. Ibid, p 9.
12. P M Spacks 'Reflecting Women', Yale Review vol 63 no 1 1973, p 26.
13. Op cit.
14. E Abel, Writing and Sexual Difference, Brighton, Harvester, 1986. (See Jane Gallop's critical response to this volume, included pps 283-290).
15. E Showalter, op cit, p 5.

16. Ibid p 4.
17. Ibid p 5.
18. L Williams, 'Something Else Besides A Mother: Stella Dallas and the Maternal Melodrama', in Home Is Where The Heart Is, Christine Gledhill (ed), London, BFI, '87 p 303.
19. For a full discussion of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and its impact upon semiotics, see R Coward and J Ellis, Language and Materialism, London, RKP, 1977.
20. M Jacobus, 'The Question of Language: Men of Maxims and The Mill On The Floss', Critical Inquiry vol 8 No 2 Winter 1981, p 208.
21. C Gledhill, 'Developments In Feminist Film Criticism', M A Doane, P Mellencamp & L Williams (eds) Revision: Essays In Feminist Film Criticism, Frederick: University Publications of America Inc, 1984.
22. E Showalter, op cit, p 5.
23. Ibid, p 6.
24. Ibid.
25. E Showalter, A Literature Of their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing, London, Virago, 1978.
26. E Moers, Literary Women: The Great Writers, London, Macmillan Press, 1978.
27. P M Spacks, The Female Imagination, NY, Alfred Knopf, 1975.
28. E Showalter The New Feminist Criticism op cit, p 6.
29. For a feminist critique of Lacanian psycho-analytic theory, see J Gallop, The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psycho-Analysis, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1982.
30. Outlined in E Showalter, 'Feminist Criticism In The Wilderness', op cit, pps 243-270.
31. Ibid, p 248.
32. Ibid, p 249.
33. Ibid, Showalter borrows the phrase from P M Spacks.

34. Ibid, p 259.
35. Ibid, p 255.
36. Published as E Ardener, 'Belief and the problem of Women' in Perceiving Women, S Ardener, (ed), NY, Halsted Press, 1978.
37. E Showalter New Feminist Criticism op cit, p 262.
38. Ibid, p 262.
39. Ibid., p263
40. See J Gallop, 'Writing and Sexual Difference: The difference within' in Writing and Sexual Difference (ed) Abel, op cit. In this polemical piece, a critical response to Abel's collection, Gallop sets out the major differences between the two positions.
41. Op cit.
42. Op cit.
43. S Ardener, Defining Females, London, Croom Helm, 1978.
44. S Ardener (ed) Perceiving Women op cit, p xvi.
45. E Ardener, 'The Problem Re-Visited' in S Ardener, (ed), Perceiving Women, op cit, p 22.
46. N Chodorow, The Re-Production of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978.
47. Ibid, p 125.
48. Ibid, p 129.
49. See E Marks and I de Courtivron (eds), New French Feminisms, Brighton, Harvester Press, 1981.
50. L Irigaray, Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1977, p 74.
51. Term introduced by E Showalter in her essay 'Towards A Feminist Politics' in The New Feminist Criticism, op cit. 'The second type of feminist criticism is concerned with woman as writer - with woman as the producer of textual meaning,' with the history, themes, genres, and structures of literature by women ... No term exists in English for such a

specialised discourse, and so I have adapted the French term *la gynocritique*: "gynocritics". (p128).

52. L Williams op cit, p 305.
53. Op cit.
54. Ibid, p 259.
55. Ibid.
56. Kristeva's work has been translated and published in a number of collections. The arguments referred to here are most fully elaborated in J Kristeva, Desire in Language: A semiotic approach to Literature and Art trans T Gora, A Jardine, L S Roudiez, NY: Columbia University Press, 1980.
57. L Williams, op cit, p 308.
58. Ibid p 308.
59. A Jardine, 'Theories of the Feminine: Kristeva' enclitic 4 No 2, Fall 1980, p 12.
60. R Du Plessis, 'For The Etruscans', in E Showalter, (ed), op cit, p 285.
61. Ibid, p 286.
62. Ibid, p 11.
63. Ibid, p 12.
64. This argument refers to unpublished discussions which took place during the lecture series 'Psychoanalysis in Britain Today', held at the British Psychoanalytical Society, Autumn 1988.
65. See for instance the abrupt change of tense in Shedding, p 41, and in The Shame Is Over, p 27.
66. The narrators of both Shedding and The Shame Is Over deploy images of fragmentation to describe themselves. The narrator/central protagonist of The Shame Is Over refers to 'the scraps of my life' (A Meulenbelt, op cit, p 3) and Shedding's narrator/central protagonist refers, on the opening page of the text, to her fragmented sense of personal history. (V Stefan, op cit, p 2).
67. L Irigaray, 'An Interview: "Women's Exile"', trans

- and introduced by D Adlam and C Venn, in Ideology and Consciousness 1 1977, pps 62-67.
68. Irigaray, Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un op cit, p 103.
 69. Ibid, p 101.
 70. L Irigaray, 'Women's Exile', op cit.
 71. D Adlam and C Venn, 'Introduction to Irigaray' in Ideology and Consciousness 1, 1977 p 60.
 72. L Irigaray, 'Women's Exile', op cit, p 65.
 73. M French, op cit, p 9.
 74. C G Heilbrun, Re-Inventing Womanhood, NY, W W Norton, 1979.
 75. J Kagan Gardiner, op cit, p 178.
 76. E Jelinek (ed), Women's Autobiography, Bloomington Indiana University Press 1980, p 17.
 77. C Fomerlau, 'The Emergence of Women's Autobiography in England', E Jelinek, ed, op cit, p 37.
 78. E Wilson, op cit, p 43.
 79. M A Doane, The Desire To Desire, London, Macmillan, 1987, p 15.
 80. M A Doane, 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator' Screen vol 23, nos 3-4, 1982, p 79.
 81. Ibid, p 87.
 82. Ibid, p 82.
 83. N Chodorow, op cit, p 127.
 84. Ibid, p 78.
 85. Ibid, p 103.
 86. Ibid, p 110.
 87. Ibid, p 133.
 88. Ibid, p 138.
 89. Ibid, p 167.

90. Ibid, p 194.
91. M G Mason, 'The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers', J Olney, (ed), Autobiography, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980, p 210.
92. J Kagan Gardiner, op cit, p 357.
93. Ibid, pps 357-358.
94. J Benjamin 'A Desire of One's Own: Psychoanalytic Feminism and Inter-Subjective Space', (ed) T de Lauretis, Feminist Studies/Critical Studies, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986 p 92.
95. Ibid, p 98.
96. J Kagan Gardiner op cit, p 349.
97. Ibid, p 349.
98. Ibid, p 361.
99. L Porter, 'Autobiography versus Confessional Writing: Gide's L'immoraliste and Si Le Grain Ne Meurt', Symposium, vol 30 No 2 Summer '76 pps 144-156.
100. C Gledhill, op cit, p 33.
101. P Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1976.
102. Ibid, p 72.
103. L Irigaray, Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un, op cit, p 74.
104. N K Miller, 'Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction' E Showalter (ed), op cit, p 343.
105. T Modleski, Loving With A Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women NY, Methuen, 1984, p 91.
106. Ibid, p 87.
107. Ibid, p 92.
108. Ibid, p 94.
109. Ibid, p 98.
110. N Chodorow, op cit, p 179.

111. T Modleski, op cit, pps 99- 100.
112. Ibid, p 100.
113. V Stefan, op cit, p 35.
114. A Meulenbelt, op cit, p 55.
115. M A Doane, The Desire To Desire, op cit p 11.
116. See J Kagan Gardiner op cit, p 348.
117. J Mitchell, Psychoanalysis and Feminism, Harmondsworth, Pelican, 1975, p 111.
118. L Irigaray, 'When Our Lips Speak Together', trans. C Burke, Signs 6 (Autumn 1980) p 75.
119. M Russo, 'Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory', T de Lauretis (ed), op cit, p 219.
120. M Jacobus, 'The Question of Language: Men of Maxims and Mill on the Floss' in E Abel (ed) op cit, p 43.
121. M French, op cit, p 629-631.
122. Ibid, p 636.
123. A Rosalind Jones 'Writing the body: L'écriture feminine', E Showalter (ed), op cit, p 362.
124. A Jardine, 'Theories of the feminine: Kristeva, op cit, p 6.
125. Ibid, p 7.
126. A Jardine, Gynesis, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985 p 25.
127. Ibid, p 236.
128. Ibid.
129. See A Jardine, op cit, especially, pps 88-89.
130. See especially M Foucault, The History of Sexuality: Volume One, An Introduction, Harmondsworth, Penguin 1980, pps 57-73.
131. R Coward, Female Desire: Women's Sexuality Today London, Granada, 1984, p 179.
132. Ibid, p 180.

133. E Wilson, op cit, p 30.
134. Both Shedding and The Shame Is Over deploy sexual-developmental stages as well as the gaining and loss of lovers as markers of their central protagonist's 'becomingness'.
135. M French (1978), op cit, p 18.
136. M A Doane The Desire To Desire, op cit, p 40.
137. S Freud, New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, Harmondsworth, Pelican, 1973, p 149.
138. M A Doane The Desire To Desire, op cit, p 17.
139. S Freud 'A Child Is Being Beaten', P Rieff (ed) Sexuality and The Psychology of Love, New York, Collier Books, 1963.
140. Ibid, p 128.
141. E Spector Person, 'Sexuality as The Mainstay of Identity: Psycho-analytic Perspectives', Signs Volume 5, no 4, 1980, p 619.
142. M French, op cit, p 632.
143. J Winship, Inside Women's Magazines, London, Pandora, 1987.
144. For a full discussion of this politico-philosophical history, see C B MacPherson, The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1962.
145. J Winship, op cit, p 132.
146. Ibid, p 137.
147. E Spector Person, op cit, p 629.
148. E Wilson, op cit, p 36.
149. M French, op cit, p 254.
150. M Tarratt, 'Mass Market Feminism', Marxism Today June 1983, pps 40-41.
151. The female central protagonists of Shedding and The Shame Is Over both suffer intensely and ceaselessly, which suggests that intense and unending suffering is a key characteristic of the woman's confessional novel. Moreover, it is

sexuality which causes much of the suffering for the central protagonist/narrators of both these woman's confessional novels. In Shedding, this tone is set by the narrator's description of the agony of losing virginity, (V Stefan, op cit, p 9), whereas in The Shame Is Over it is stressed that lesbianism is just as painful as heterosexuality. (A Meulenbelt, op cit, p 7).

152. E Wilson, op cit, p 22.
153. P Axthelm, The Modern Confessional Novel, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1967, p 9.
154. Ibid, p 52.
155. Ibid, p 128.
156. See M A Doane, The Desire To Desire, op cit, p 76.
157. Ibid, p 179.
158. Ibid, see especially pages 177-179.
159. M M Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays, trans C Emerson and M Holquist, ed M Holquist, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981, p 394.
160. S Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, trans James Strachey, New York, Avon Books, 1965, p 183.
161. Ibid, p 177.
162. F Moretti, Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology Of Literary Forms trans S Fischer, D Forgacs and D Miller, London, New Left Books, 1983, p 163 C Beylie, 'Propositions sur le Melo', Les Cahiers de la Cinematheque: Pour une Histoire du melo-drame au Cinema, no 28, pp 7-11.
164. Ibid p 95.
165. This form of feminist campaign is exemplified by the activities of the National Organisation Of Women, founded in 1966 by Betty Friedan to campaign for equal rights and opportunities for women.
166. For a full discussion of this position see A Kuhn and A Wolpe eds, Feminism and Materialism, London, RKP, 1978.
167. C Lopate, 'Daytime TV: You'll never want to leave

- home', Radical America 2, 1977 p 51. In her essay on TV soap operas, (in Loving With A Vengeance, London, Methuen, 1982 pps85-109), Tania Modleski takes issue with Lopate, arguing that this TV form constructs and addresses these fundamentally relational feminine desires - pointing to another striking similarity between The Women's Room and TV soaps.
168. M French, op cit, p 635.
169. E L Stelzig, op cit, p 27.
170. See R O'Rourke, 'Summer Reading', Feminist Review No 2, 1979, and R Coward's response 'Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?' Feminist Review 5 1980 pps 53-63. See also M Tarratt 'Mass Market Feminism', op cit.
171. See R O'Rourke, op cit, and M Tarratt op cit.
172. See E Wilson, 'Tell It Like It Is', op cit.
173. R Coward, op cit, p 60.
174. See, for instance, G Kimball, Women's Culture: The Women's Renaissance of the Seventies, op cit, p 22.
175. See for instance B Zimmerman, 'The Politics of Transliteration: Lesbian Personal Narratives' in The Lesbian Issue: Essays from Signs London, The University of Chicago Press, 1985, pps 251-270 and N K Gardiner, 'The Uses of Identity', Signs 6 Spring 1981.
176. T Modleski, Loving with a Vengeance: Mass produced Fantasies for Women NY and London, Methuen, 1982.
177. I Green, 'Malefunction', Screen vol 25, nos 4-5, July-Oct 1984, p 40.
178. E Wilson, 'Tell It Like It Is' op cit, p 33-4.

THE WOMEN'S ROOM: A MADE FOR TV MOVIE

The analysis undertaken by the previous two chapters of this thesis suggested that The Women's Room's muted feminine and dominant 'agonist' voices constituted a text riven by contradiction, the dominant 'agonist' voice speaking to and constructing its reader as the subject of 'power by individualisation', and the muted voice speaking to and giving vent to repressed feminine desires. The cultural instrumentality implied by this reading is complex, especially since the ways in which readers will situate themselves in relation to a text's unconscious structures are unpredictable. Nevertheless this reading has served to problematise any unambivalent celebration of The Women's Room's feminism as 'progressive' since its construction of feminism was shown to be partially articulated through discourses which 'tie' the subject to positions suited to the exercise of modern power techniques. This chapter will now move on to discuss the cultural work performed by the made-for-TV-movie, (TVM), The Women's Room (Glenn Jordan, Warner Bros, 1980) in order to ascertain whether such a

study reveals any overarching similarities of cultural instrumentality between the novel and the film.

At first glance, a comparison of The Women's Room as novel and as TVM reveals certain glaring differences in relation to pathos, which arguably constitutes one of the key tropes through which the novel reveals the repression of active female desire. In the previous chapter, it was argued that Chris's rape, Val's murder, the breakdown of Mira's affair with Ben and the difficulties Kyla, Clarissa and Iso encounter in their attempts to initiate lesbian relationships combined to produce an insurmountable gap between the powers and desires of the women protagonists and the size of the problems that they faced; this disproportion was constitutive, it was argued, of a 'pathetic' discourse - a discourse which both spoke to, and allowed some venting of repressed desire. Interestingly, it is precisely these narrative events which the TVM version of the novel either dispenses with, or radically alters: in the movie Chris does not get raped; Val does not become separatist, therefore she does not go on to engage in political acts which, in the novel, lead to her untimely and violent death; Ben does not demand that Mira accompany him to Africa - he simply knows that he has to return and accepts that he will return alone - and the difficulties of lesbian relationships are dealt with in a far more

cursory manner. Additionally, the identical voices of the movie's central protagonist and narrator vitiate against non-recognition of the narrator as the central protagonist, which precludes the elicitation of feeling through pathetic mis-timing of recognition. Finally, whereas the novel leaves its readers with the image of a lonely and almost incoherent Mira walking the beach near her small town college workplace, the TVM ends with a sequence where a newly confident and coherent Mira finishes a lecture on the possibilities opening up for women to the sound of rapturous applause culminating in a standing ovation from her student audience. The triumph of the TVM's closure, together with its undermining of the novel's pathetic mode of address, suggest that though relationships may suffer, with hard work and some sacrifices, a woman can get what she wants. Whereas the novel leaves its readers identifying with a woman on the brink of insanity, the film's final shot invites identification with a triumphant Mira, whose tears of joy testify to her having achieved her goal.

What these introductory comments concerning the presence or absence of pathos in the novel and movie appear to propose is that the cultural instrumentality of The Women's Room as TVM is far less complex than that of the novel itself: whereas the novel's contradictory interweaving of a dominant and a mutedly feminine voice produces a text which reveals - even perhaps amplifies -

the contradictions constitutive of contemporary constructions of femininity, the TVM's promise of the possibility of achievement for women within the present social formation appears to 'smooth over' these contradictions. This chapter will now go on to explore the validity of these initial propositions through a more detailed analysis of the TVM. However, before this analysis can be undertaken, certain introductory comments concerning the TVM as cultural object are first in order.

The previous chapters cumulatively argued that the question of the cultural instrumentality of the woman's confessional novel hinged to some extent upon the broader question of the cultural instrumentality of the confessional mode of the autobiographical style. Implicit within this approach was an assumption that to some extent, the exploration of the cultural work performed by the novel The Women's Room demanded a prior investigation of the cultural work performed by those mainstream, largely male-authored literary genres to which it was clearly related and from which it clearly derived many of its characteristics. When we come to the TVM version of the novel The Women's Room, however, the question of aligning it with its mainstream relatives poses a number of questions, since the small body of critical literature which has moved towards defining, delineating and discussing this cultural object exhibits

some confusion as to whether it should be approached as film, as TV or as a new 'hybrid' form. Thus one critic talks of the uniquely televisual immediacy of the TVM's address to its audience, while simultaneously describing them as 'these little "B" pictures',¹ while another asks whether 'the TV film is anything more than an extended (TV) play shot on film, or whether it is the equivalent of a film made for the cinema',² and another insists that 'In spite of the TV film's special characteristics, the closest analogy to be drawn is with the cinema',³ before going on to draw comparisons between TVMs and the later work of Alfred Hitchcock. These critical confusions cannot be sidestepped, since though the commentators mentioned above exhibit tendencies to slide between approaching the TVM as film and as TV, recently, it has been insistently argued that differences between the cinematic and televisual apparatuses should not be underestimated. These differences exhibit themselves in a comparison between the mainstream cinematic and televisual construction of narrative, image, and sound which arguably combine to address and construct the film spectator and the TV viewer in different ways.

The limits of space preclude an exhaustive rehearsal of these differences which might usefully be summarised thus: firstly, TV narrative diverges from the classical cinematic model outlined by Bordwell and Thompson,⁴ in that TV replaces mainstream cinema's discrete narratives

of chains of events 'in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space'⁵ with what John Ellis has described as the narrative 'segment': 'a coherent group of sounds and images, of relatively short duration that needs to be accompanied by other similar such segments.'⁶ The 'segmentation' of the televisual narrative replaces the common-sense notion of discrete television programmes with a notion of a constant televisual 'flow'⁷ composed of short narrative segments operating accross apparently separate 'programmes'. The introduction into TV analysis of the concept of the segment, with its emphasis on short bursts of action dispersed accross apparently discrete TV programmes, leads to the proposal that televisual narrative form is best analysed not by focussing on linear narrative development and resolution within 'discrete' TV programmes, but by attending, rather, to the relationship of segments to one another both within and between TV shows: the introduction of the concept of the segment has led one commentator to contend, indeed, that 'TV is not very well described by models of narrative analysis based on linearity and resolution.'⁸

Several commentators have argued that the difference between televisual and cinematic narrative organisation is determined by differences in the economics of the televisual and cinematic apparatuses. Unlike cinema, which plays to a captive audience whose purchase of a

ticket was made in the expectation of cinematic pleasure, commercial television, which relies heavily upon the sponsorship of advertisers, relies for funding on its ratings figures; it is therefore in the interests of the televisual institutions to develop strategies which encourage viewers to keep their TVs switched on for as long as possible each day. TV's segmental structure is particularly suited to the 'distracted' viewing patterns of the domestic viewer: it provides short bursts of narrative interest for a viewer whose attention varies in level of intensity depending on the domestic context within which viewing takes place and arguably evidences an attempt by the televisual institution to maintain just enough of the attention of its distracted audience to prevent the TV from being turned off: as John Ellis points out, within the domestic environment, 'Attention⁹ has to be solicited and grasped segment by segment.'

What this argument draws attention to is the difference of context between televisual and cinematic spectatorship/viewing - a difference which carries with it a range of consequences in relation to the cultural instrumentalities of the entire apparatuses of cinema and television. Arguments concerning cinema's complicitous address to the illusory wholeness, coherence and mastery of the bourgeois, masculine subject have been well¹⁰ rehearsed elsewhere - what needs stressing here, however, is that those aspects of the cinematic apparatus

upon which the ground-breaking 'cine-psycho-analytic'
work of Baudry,¹¹ Metz,¹² and Mulvey¹³ depends - the
darkened auditorium, the size of the screen in relation
to the size of the spectator, the 'present-absence' of
the cinematic image - are not shared by the televisual
apparatus. Moreover while much of this work focusses on
spectatorial relations constructed by the cinematic
image, where work on cinematic sound has been initiated,
notably in the work of Kaja Silverman,¹⁴ it has been
contended that dominant cinema's sound-track works in
complicity with the spectatorial relations constructed by
dominant cinema: 'Hollywood requires the female voice to
assume similar responsibilities to those it confers upon
the female body. The former, like the latter, functions
as a fetish within dominant cinema'.¹⁵ What needs
underlining, in relation to the televisual apparatus, is
its divergence from the model of spectatorial relations
outlined by 'cine-psycho-analysis': as Sandy Flitterman-
Lewis has insisted, 'there can be no simple exchange of
method from one medium to the other ... the most obvious
statement we can make is that the kind of 'subject-
effect' or spectator produced by the TV apparatus will
have to be quite different'.¹⁶ Crucially, cine-
psychoanalysis's reliance on the notion that the
cinematic apparatus initiates regression to pre-
Oedipality is problematised in relation to TV, which is
watched with less intensity, and often in an interrupted

fashion in a brightly lit room : 'from the very start, then, the spectator-dreamer analogy begins to crumble. Because there is no "artificial regression", primary voyeuristic identification is not enjoyed. The source of enunciation is dispersed (and made problematic) and, with that, its terms of address'¹⁷. Though Flitterman-Lewis acknowledges that the work of defining and describing the 'tele-spectator' has barely begun, what has so far been stressed is the apparent 'immediacy' of the television image, compared to the 'absent-presence' of the cinematic image,¹⁸ the less fascinated and more 'glancing' attention invited by the televisual segment, with its relatively poorly defined image,¹⁹ the 'dispersed' nature of the enunciator of television²⁰ and the crucial role of televisual sound in calling the spectator back regularly²¹ to the screen.

As yet, no single model of the 'tele-spectator' has gained dominance in TV studies - while it is tempting to suggest that the televisual apparatus has initiated the fragmentation of the masterful, masculine, coherent subject sustained by dominant cinema, Flitterman-Lewis seems to suggest that often, any such fragmentation is condensed and displaced onto the female body.²² Similarly, while Ellis agrees with Flitterman-Lewis that there can be no exchange between cinematic and televisual models of spectatorship, he does not argue that TV works to undermine the coherence of the unitary masculine

subject; instead, he argues that the televisual apparatus invites a delegation of the look to the TV itself: 'it is as though the TV institution looks, (and) the viewer passes his or her gaze across the sights in the TV eye'.²³ This model of 'tele-spectatorship' suggests that what the TV apparatus works to construct and uphold is not so much the illusory sense of mastery and coherence of the cinematic spectator, but a sense of 'family-like' normality shared by both viewers and TV broadcasters, which may then be contrasted with the 'outside world' which TV looks at for the viewer. This approach to the question of the TV viewer has been most fully elaborated²⁴ by Brunsdon and Morley. In their study of Nationwide,²⁴ they argued that this early evening news and current affairs programme constructed an address to a 'common-sense' shared by the 'family' of its viewers and²⁵ broadcasters.

What this discussion of the different ways in which the cinematic and televisual apparatuses address their spectators has served to problematise is the question of the cultural instrumentality of the TVM. If the TVM is indeed a new 'hybrid' shaped by both cinematic and televisual modes of spectatorial address, what is markedly lacking in any of the critical literature is any attempt either to define and describe its unique regime of representation, or to explore the question of cultural

instrumentality in relation to such a delineation. Additionally, while film and TV studies mobilise the notion of 'genre' in order to refine and develop notions of cultural instrumentality in relation to the diversity of film and TV, no attempt has yet been made to mobilise this concept in relation to the TVM, which, while it is often compared to the Hollywood film, is submitted to no comparable generic categorisation: thus in one of the few analyses of a TVM, Laurie Jane Schulze discusses the made-for-TV-movie genre in the singular, ascribing to it a single cultural aim - the acknowledgement and negotiation of salient and disturbing points of socio-cultural strain²⁶ - a contention echoed by Elayne Rapping²⁷ and Douglas Gomery.²⁸ Yet a cursory review of studies of the TVM reveals that movies such as Getting Physical (CBS, 20 March 1984), and Brian's Song (ABC, 30 November 1971) each mobilise and combine in a variety of ways, different elements from cinematic and televisual genres - for instance, Schulze points to the interweaving of the cinematic genres of the family melodrama and the heterosexual romance in Getting Physical,²⁹ while Gomery's reading of Brian's Song suggests an alignment with the 'buddy movie' as well as with the 'biopic'. Meanwhile both films clearly mobilise segmental narration more typical of TV than of cinema. What needs exploring, in relation to the preceding comments concerning the question of genre and the TVM, is whether formulations such as Schulze's concerning the cultural instrumentality

of the TVM are thrown in question by more rigorous generic analysis. While it is arguably the case that what is unique to the TVM - and what perhaps therefore constitutes it as a discrete televisual genre - is its mode of combining elements from cinematic and televisual genres, such an assertion awaits close textual analysis for its confirmation or refutation.

Yet though the question of genre remains urgent in the context of this chapter's investigation of the cultural work performed by the TVM The Women's Room - as film and TV theory has insisted, only a thorough-going investigation of the pleasures produced by particular genres can reveal the precise ways in which TV and cinema 'speak to' their spectators - my earlier comments concerning the differences between the televisual and cinematic apparatuses suggest that current film and TV theory do not facilitate the joint discussion of the televisual and cinematic aspects of the TVM.

Having drawn attention to some key obstacles which any discussion of the TVM must negotiate, and having pointed to the lack of any clear theoretical guidelines in this area, the following discussion of the TVM The Women's Room will take the following form. A brief over-view of the entire movie, identifying the key cinematic and televisual generic codes which constitute the text will

be followed by a closer analysis of three short extracts. While the close analysis of key extracts, rather than a less detailed analysis of an entire film, is often the preferred mode of film studies, this mode of analysis is, in addition, particularly suited to the TVM, since it privileges a mode of analysis which can seek out and closely analyse continuities and discontinuities between segments - features which might well be overlooked by an approach which seeks out, rather, a more filmic pattern of narrative development. The overall aim of this analysis will be to explore the question of cultural instrumentality in relation to the TVM and to ascertain to what extent the conclusions previously reached in relation to the novel might also prove appropriate in this context.

The Women's Room: A Question of Genre

The Women's Room's central female protagonist, together with its concern with 'women's issues' such as marriage, divorce, single motherhood, female friendship and women's liberation suggest that its closest generic relative must be the 'woman's picture'. Closer analysis suggests that like the novel, the movie shares certain characteristics with that sub-category of the woman's picture of the 30's and 40's identified by Mary Ann Doane as activating a medical discourse: ³⁰ according to Doane, the mobilisation of a medical discourse in relation to a 'sick' woman

constitutes one mechanism by means of which the woman's film negotiates its problematic - how to trace 'the contours of female subjectivity and desire'³¹ by means of dominant cinematic conventions which arguably work to sustain woman's positioning as spectacle, as deficient in relation to language, and as without access to desire. Doane argues that the films of the medical discourse negotiate this problematic by 'narrativising' the woman's body - by constructing it as symptom, rather than as spectacle.³²

The Women's Room diverges from this paradigm, however, since the controlling gaze of the doctor - agent of 'cure' within this sub-genre - is entirely absent: though the confessing voice-over of the older Mira clearly parallels the 'talking-cure' the doctor inevitably elicits within the films described by Doane, this voice-over requires no encouragement.

From the movie's opening sequence onwards, the unsolicited confessing voice-over's accompaniment to the long flash-back of Mira's pre-college life suggests that the contemporary pervasiveness of the confession has rendered the ministrations of the doctor/analyst superfluous; his interventions have been superseded by an internalised imperative to confess. The Women's Room's excision of the controlling figure of the doctor/analyst, together with its deployment of an intimate, 'women's group' mode of address by its female voice-over and its

closing representation of a highly articulate female central protagonist arguably suggest that this TVM eventually gives an authentic, female voice to its female central protagonist.³³ An alternative reading suggests, however, that though The Women's Room evidences the internalisation of the imperative to confess feelings and personal and intimate experiences together with the redundancy of the controlling interventions of the doctor/analyst, this cinematic shift from medical discourse to unsolicited confession represents anything but a lessening of patriarchy's hold on the cinematic representation of 'woman'. Briefly, from its opening sequence onwards, The Women's Room works to place its initially extra-diegetic, disembodied, female voice-over ever more firmly within the diegesis and within the body of the central protagonist. What these strategies represent, according to Kaja Silverman, is the divesting of woman of all traces of mastery, authority and claims to knowledge. In The Acoustic Mirror,³⁴ Silverman discusses the female voice in classical cinema. Silverman convincingly argues that mainstream cinema seeks to disavow the symbolic castration which marks the initiation into subjectivity of the masculine and feminine subject by means of strategies of displacement and condensation which align only the female voice with signifiers of subjection: 'the body' and 'the interior'. While it might be objected that for most of The Women's Room, the voice-over remains 'dis-embodied', Silverman

insists that the autobiographical diegetic voice-over - even where dis-embodied - signifies a far greater degree of 'subjection' than does the authoritative, masterful, extra-diegetic, disembodied voice-over - a speaking position which is never female within classical mainstream cinema. In addition, the eventual 'embodiment' of that voice-over in the closing sequences of the film would, according to Silverman, signify the further 'subjection' of the female, and would therefore represent the success of classical cinema's displacement of symbolic castration onto the body of woman.

The above brief discussion of The Women's Room has suggested that it represents a re-working of the 'medical discourse' subgenre of the woman's picture as described by Mary Ann Doane, which brings it into line with the workings of modern power techniques. It has also been pointed out that the absence of the analyst/doctor might signify a degree of hegemonisation of 'the confession' which renders its screen 'agent' superfluous. Moreover, the furthest point of Mira's 'becomingness' - signified here by the embodiment of the female voice-over - serves to close down that voice's partial signification of woman's voice as 'exterior' and masterful, testifying to the film's triumphant final displacement of symbolic castration onto the body of woman.

The accent on the confessing voice-over in the above brief discussion of The Women's Room as a 1980's variant of the 'medical discourse' woman's picture serves a dual function: it directs attention towards the TVM's mobilisation of confessional discourse, allowing for some comparison between novel and movie and it makes some attempt to reverse a recent trend within film studies towards a relative dismissal of the significance of the sound-track in favour of close analysis of the image. Moreover, in relation to the TVM such an approach is also in keeping with television's previously noted comparative dependence upon the sound-track to support its low-resolution image which permits less detail than the cinematic image.³⁵

Yet though my preliminary moves towards addressing the TVM's combined mobilisation of cinematic and televisual modes of representation has accented the voice-over, the suggested reading's argument that the eventual embodiment of the female voice-over at the close of the movie signalled a triumphant final re-location of symbolic castration within the body of woman relies both on a specifically cinematic model of narrative along the lines of enigma-retardation-resolution, as well as upon Silverman's cine-psycho-analytic approach which argues for the sound-track's complicity in patriarchal cinema's regime of visual representation. But as has already been pointed out, televisual narratives diverge from the

cinematic model in significant ways and television's comparative dependence on the sound-track - as Rick Altman has pointed out, we often 'listen' to TV without watching the screen³⁶ - suggests that where TV is concerned Silverman's contentions concerning relations between vision and sound might not be entirely appropriate. Moreover the argument so far advanced has been predicated upon a 'cine-psychoanalytic' notion of the regressed, pre-Oedipal subject addressed and constructed by mainstream cinema - whereas, as has already been pointed out, television studies demands the re-conceptualisation of the 'subject-effect' to take account of its address not to a pre-Oedipal, but to a domestic, 'distracted', 'tele-spectator'.³⁷

Yet though The Women's Room exhibits a degree of narrative development which exceeds that of the typical, highly segmented and inconclusive TV series or serial³⁸ - Mira's unhappiness, which poses the initial enigma is resolved, eventually, by her successful attempts to become a teacher - like most TVMs, it exhibits a high degree of variety and segmentation³⁹ which aligns it more closely with a series of soap-opera episodes, than with a 'theatrical' feature film. Though the TVM may appear more autonomous, with respect to its relationship to other TV texts - it is narratively self-contained, and without characters who 'bleed-over' from one movie to the next -

as Robert C Allen points out, the TVM does rely heavily upon the viewers' familiarity with other televisual texts.⁴⁰ Like soap-opera episodes, the intra ad-break sections of The Women's Room are each made up of short, semi-discrete segments. This similarity between TVM and soap-opera is not limited to narrative form; in addition, The Women's Room shares with the soap-opera a reliance on the close-up, a marked preference for interior settings, and a narrative concern with domestic issues and with the 'little person' - 'the kind of character a TV audience is most likely to recognise from soap operas'.⁴¹ Moreover since the movie runs for three hours, including ad-breaks, it seems more likely that the viewer would watch 'episodically' - maybe even missing the beginning or the end, thus problematising still further an analysis of The Women's Room based purely on film and lending greater support to a reading which foregrounds its soap-opera like address. Clearly an analysis of the cultural work performed by The Women's Room must embrace the parallels it exhibits both with the woman's picture and with soap-opera, yet divergencies between film and TV studies preclude the possibilities for the joint discussion of the more televisual and the more cinematic features of this TVM. These divergencies become most apparent where film and TV studies mobilise the concept of the spectator, and have been most clearly foregrounded within feminist studies of those film and TV genres such as the woman's picture and the soap-opera

which arguably address a female spectator.

As Annette Kuhn has recently pointed out, feminist analyses of the melodrama and the woman's picture tend to argue, following Laura Mulvey,⁴² that neither a central female protagonist nor the structuring of the hermeneutic by female desire guarantee the constitution of the spectator as feminine 'so much as it implies a contradictory, and in the final analysis impossible⁴³ 'fantasy of masculinisation' for the female spectator.'

Yet as Kuhn goes on to argue, when feminist critics have turned their attention to the soap-opera, they have argued, conversely, that this televisual form does address a female spectator in 'the feminine'.⁴⁴ In what has been the most influential feminist reading of the soap-opera, Tania Modleski argues that their narrative patterns, their foregrounding of 'female' skills in dealing with personal crises, and the capacity of their programme formats and scheduling to key into the rhythms of women's work in the home all address a female spectator. Modleski then goes on to argue that the soap-opera's open-endedness, its lack of narrative closure, together with its ruminatory rather than dilemma-solving patterns bear some resemblance to certain 'feminine' texts and so 'are not altogether at odds with ...⁴⁵ feminist aesthetics'.

Kuhn goes on to assert that this apparent divergence identified between the spectator positions offered by soap-opera and the woman's picture should not, however, be over-emphasised, since these findings might result from film and TV studies' divergent mobilisations of the concept of the spectator: Kuhn asks, 'Do soaps and melodramas really construct different relations of gendered spectatorship, with melodrama constructing contradictory identifications in ways that soap opera does not? Or do these different positions on spectatorship ... reflect the different intellectual histories and epistemological groundings of film theory and television theory?'⁴⁶ In answer to her rhetorical question, Kuhn responds that perhaps this divergence in emphasis between feminist studies of soap-opera and of the woman's picture arises since TV studies' use of the term 'spectator' comes closer to describing a 'social audience' already divided by gender, than a 'cine-spectator' 'in process of gender positioning'.⁴⁷

Though the following close reading of extracts from The Women's Room will focus upon continuities and discontinuities between its cinematic and televisual constructions of a gendered spectator, it will therefore be borne in mind that much of the film and TV studies research that will necessarily inform this reading will have mobilised the concept of the spectator in the two divergent ways identified by Kuhn.

In the following section, three extracts from The Women's Room will be closely examined in order to further the comparison between the cultural instrumentality of the novel and the TVM. The extracts selected are the opening and closing sequences together with the Mira/Ben first date sequence. The opening sequence has been selected since both film and TV studies argue that the first few moments of a film or TVM deserve particular attention. Whereas film studies often pays particular attention to the 'initial disruption'⁴⁸ which begins the move towards narrative resolution since this can reveal much concerning the underlying problematic of the film, TV studies argues that the opening moments of the TVM seek to redress its lack of ready-made audience with a compelling opening sequence which functions as what one critic has described as an 'open teaser'.⁴⁹

While the comparison between opening and closing sequences of film narratives is now a common practice within film studies this form of narrative analysis is less appropriate in relation to TV texts which commonly exhibit a lesser degree of narrative closure; nevertheless this mode of comparison will be undertaken since the TVM does exhibit a higher degree of narrative closure than the TV series or serial episode. The middle sequence where Mira has her first date with Ben has been

selected firstly because it marks roughly the mid-point of the TVM and secondly because preliminary viewings suggested that the introduction of the Ben character initiated a diminution of the female voice-over. This preliminary finding, together with its possible implications in relation to both film and TV studies, will be explored further in the following section.

The Women's Room: Woman's Picture or Soap Opera?

In each of the extract analyses below, an initial reading of The Women's Room as 'woman's picture' will be followed by a discussion concerning the ways in which existing TV theory - especially in relation to this movie's more soap-opera like qualities - might problematise these findings.

The Women's Room: The Opening Sequence

The first section chosen for analysis begins with the opening credits sequence - which 'describes' a university campus, and ends with Mira's marriage to Norm. Overall, this sequence bears out Mary Ann Doane's findings in relation to the woman's picture of the 30's and 40's: 'The woman's film is in many respects formally no different from other instances of the classical Hollywood

cinema; its narrative structure and conventions reiterate many of the factors which have contributed to a theorisation of the cinema spectator largely in terms of masculine psychical mechanisms ... The formal resistances to the elaboration of female subjectivity produce perturbations and contradictions within the narrative economy.⁵⁰ In the first extract, these perturbations and contradictions exhibit themselves most clearly in relation to the question of cinematic address: a contradictory and complex relation pertains between omniscient narration, the female voice-over and the voice and image of the central protagonist.

The Women's Room opens with a long credits sequence, interrupted by a short scene in which Mira's retreat to the women's toilet initiates the female voice-over. The credits sequence is composed of a sequence of long shots depicting outdoors campus life - complete with student demonstration. An initial medium close-up of a male student demonstrator, and long shots of students and campus buildings is followed by an over-head interior shot of the student refectory. The absence of subjective point of view shots, the spatial extensiveness of the sequence, and the 'impossible' over-head 'ceiling' shot of the student refectory all suggest omniscient narration, yet the theme song suggests, rather, that these images relate in complex and contradictory ways to the point of view suggested by the lyrics. The following

lyrics accompany the sequence already described: the exterior shots are accompanied by the lyrics 'You can't tell me where to go or what or who to see - I am exactly what I am, and not the way you'd like to see me be.' The consequent cut to the interior over-head shot of the refectory is accompanied by the lyrics 'then I close my eyes and watch my world unfold before me.' The camera pans from left to right over a group of laughing students, eventually coming to rest on Mira, whose anxious expression is at odds with the other womens' abandoned laughter. Both the protest song-like 'you can't tell me' which echoes the student demonstration and the accompaniment of the visual shift from exterior to interior space by the lyrics 'then I close my eyes and see my world unfold' suggest a high degree of complicity between the apparently omniscient visual narration and the unseen singer of the theme song, which is only partially extra-diegetic. At the same time, the protest lyrics 'you can't tell me where to go or what or who to see' suggest a resistance to the masterful visual narration. In her article 'Disembodying The Female Voice', Kaja Silverman argues that in mainstream cinema, the position of disembodied extra-diegetic voice-over is occupied by the male, adding that this position 'aligns him with transcendence, authoritative knowledge, potency and the law.'⁵¹ In her later work, Silverman outlines three strategies mobilised by mainstream cinema in its

strivings to align woman with narrative interiority and closeness to the body, which, through processes of displacement and condensation, come to represent the 'symbolic castration' attendant upon entry into language and subjection to the law. Firstly, the female voice may be folded into an inner textual space by means of flash-back, or film-within-film; secondly, psycho-analytic discourse may place woman within an exaggeratedly diegetic space through placing her within an 'inner', psychic reality and thirdly, the voice may be deposited ⁵² in the body by means of accent or speech impediment.

This opening sequence arguably marks both a capitulation and a resistance to these efforts to 'contain' the female voice. While the lyrics do echo the image track, suggesting a degree of containment within the diegesis, a degree of protest is also registered both by the protest song's resistance to the film's visualeconomy, and by the partially extra-diegetic quality of the theme song, which is underlined by the gradual inclusion, on the sound-track, of the synchronised sound of women's laughter as the camera comes to rest on Mira's anxious face.

The following section of this opening sequence arguably mobilises two of mainstream cinema's strategies for accomplishing the displacement of symbolic castration onto the figure of woman: the 'folding' of woman into an 'inner' diegetic space, and the placing of woman within

an exaggeratedly 'interior' space through psycho-analytic, (or in this case confessional) discourses. Mira's distraught escape downstairs to the women's toilet rapidly accomplishes her spatial containment. Her trauma initiates the disembodied voice-over which erupts over the image of Mira slumped against the bathroom wall, attempting to recover herself. The voice-over announces : 'In 1968 I went back to college. I was divorced, 38 years old and a mess'. The use of the first person pronoun indicates that this voice-over is 'embodied'. While an embodied voice-over indicates a degree of mastery, Silverman argues insistently that its potency is greatly impaired compared to the extra-diegetic disembodied (and typically male) voice-over: 'the embodied voice-over is a precarious hook on which to hang the phallus. Hollywood dictates that the closer a voice is to the 'inside' of the narrative, the more remote it is from the 'outside', i.e from that space fictionally inscribed by the disembodied voice-over, but which is in fact synonymous with the cinematic apparatus. In other words, it equates diegetic interiority with discursive impotence and lack of control'.⁵³ This sequence therefore accomplishes a shift from the relatively extra-diegetic lyric-singing voice over of the opening sequence, accompanied by wide-sweeping masterful and omniscient camerawork, to the embodiment and diegetic containment of that voice, accompanied by images of Mira

tightly enclosed within the toilet and the bathroom. Moreover the potency of this voice-over is further diminished by its alignment with the central protagonist's inner thoughts and feelings - it's confessional quality locates it within the exaggeratedly interior space of Mira's inner psychic reality. According to Mary Ann Doane, this autobiographical and self-revealing mode of voice-over turns the body 'inside out', displaying what is 'inaccessible to the image, what exceeds the visible.'⁵⁴ Moreover, unlike the 'medical discourse' films of the 40's this confessing voice-over needs no encouragement, which suggests a compulsion to speak. According to Silverman, this compulsion attests to the 'secondary' status of this mode of autobiographical voice-over, in relation to the mastery of the disembodied extra-diegetic voice-over - compulsion implies, she⁵⁵ suggests, involuntary speech.

In the following section of the opening sequence, Mira's departure from the bathroom and journey out onto campus provides the visual accompaniment for the last of the credits. A shot/reverse shot sequence of Mira looking at a mother and baby seated in the midst of the student demonstration provides another prompt for the voice-over, who announces: 'I was an independent baby, fond of removing all my clothes and running to the candy store.' Here Mira's look at the baby, followed by the voice-over's comments about childhood, clearly signal the

voice-over as memory. A close-up of Mira's face, accompanied by the voice-over's confession that her mother used to tie her up, slowly dissolves into an image of a car, headlights blazing, coming to a stop at the roadside. Seated in the car are two people, a younger Mira, and a young man. In this sequence, the dissolve signals a flash-back, which accomplishes a further disempowerment of the voice-over by containing it within the 'inner' diegetic space of the flash-back. This disempowerment is underlined by the dissolve itself which superimposes 'blinding' car headlights just below Mira's eyes.

But the disempowerment accomplished through the strategies outlined above is not total. Though the voice-over fades into synchronised diegetic sound with the initiation of the flash-back sequence, what remains is some uncertainty concerning the question of cinematic address. The bar-scene, with its overtly voyeuristic and fetishistic shots of Mira's body invites spectator identification with the cinematic apparatus, yet the previous dissolve to flash-back suggests that the implied point of view is that of the voice-over. While this might suggest that the alignment thus produced between voice-over and omniscient narration works to encourage female identification with the 'masculine' point of view of the cinematic apparatus, it could be argued, conversely, that

a 'muted' resistance can also be tracked across this contradictory address: the very exaggeratedness of the fetishistic and voyeuristic shots of Mira's body being fondled by Lanny's friends suggests a degree of ironic interrogation of, as well as complicity with, the 'masculinisation' of the spectator that these shots effect. This mutedly ironic interrogation takes place at the level of the visual, however when, at the end of the bar-room scene, and Mira's near rape, the voice-over re-emerges on the sound-track it is to verbally interrogate the images of Mira's apparently happy wedding by providing an ironic commentary. Shots of the smiling bride and groom are accompanied by the following words: 'I was overwhelmed with the injustice of it and defeated. My dreams of independence dissolved with my courage. I had been taught my place ... I retreated into marriage as if into a convent.' The mobilisation of irony serves here both to interrogate the narrative point of view suggested by the image-track, and to effect a distancing of the voice-over from the image of Mira on the screen. While these strategies work to partially 'exteriorise' the voice-over, aligning it with extra-diegetic authority, this potency is confounded by its confessional address, which bespeaks compulsion.

The preceding reading of the opening sequence of The Women's Room mobilised ideas culled from feminist film theory in order to argue that like the woman's picture of

the 40's this movie's mobilisation of a central female protagonist as well as its narrative concern with the question of female desire, produced contradictions at the level of cinematic address. It has been suggested that this sequence mobilises three strategies in order to align the woman with 'the interior' and 'the body', thereby moving the male subject from a position of linguistic containment and subordination: firstly, the initial lyric-singing, disembodied and partially extra-diegetic voice-over becomes the embodied, diegetic voice-over; secondly the flash-back works to place the woman within an 'inner' diegetic space and thirdly the confessional discourse further interiorises the woman's voice, while disempowering it further by suggesting a compulsion to speak. It has further been suggested that the voice-over's mobilisation of irony, though not extra-diegetic, serves to suggest a degree of 'masculine' distance which undermines the attempt to fold the woman entirely into the inner spaces of the diegesis.

Though the expansiveness of The Women's Room's exterior establishment sequence differentiates it from the more typically small-scale, close-up orientated visual style of TV, the interrupted credits sequence, together with the intimate, personal and psychologically dramatic 'women's room' scene between Mira and Val partially aligns this sequence with the TV soap -opera. In

addition, the foregrounding of the sound-track, accomplished here by the voice-over, aligns this sequence more closely with TV soap-opera, which, as Jeremy Butler has pointed out, relies heavily on sound, to the extent that a telespectator may listen to soap, while moving from room to room doing housework, or attending to children.⁵⁶

The previous reading of the opening sequence of The Women's Rooms as woman's picture argued that the spectator positions it constructed were contradictory in relation to gender. A more TV studies orientated approach might suggest, conversely, that the interrupted quality of this sequence, its reliance on sound supplemented by close-up, and its 'personalising' of the public sphere - Mira's look at the demonstration rests on mother and baby which prompts memories of her own childhood, rather than thoughts about the Vietnam war - all constitute the TV telespectator as good mother. In Loving With A Vengeance, Modleski argues that discussion of the personal keys into women's experience in the home, interruptedness is a key characteristic of women's working day, and the close-up cultivates empathetic 'caring' maternal qualities essential in the good mother.⁵⁷ Moreover the voice-over's commentary is arguably well suited to the viewing behaviour of a distracted housewife, since the commentary it provides can be listened to from another room. What this suggestion problematises is the previous, more

'cinematic' reading of the relation between voice-over and image, since what is being suggested here is that the voice-over may well be keyed into, by the distracted viewer who is only occasionally glancing at the screen. While the previous reading suggested that the contradictory relation between image and voice-over constructed a complex and contradictory spectator position in relation to gender, this more TV studies reading might suggest, conversely that the voice-over's commentary interacts with character dialogue to provide a 'conversational' background to the telespectator's activities in the home. In an article on the power of the narrator in modernist film politics, B Ruby Rich compares the male voice-over of Kluge's Part Time Work Of A Domestic Slave, (1974) with the female voice-over of Sander's The All-Round Reduced Personality - Redupers (1977). Rich concludes that whereas the male voice-over she describes invites spectatorial complicity with its superior and authoritative position, the female voice-over's relationship with the film's female protagonists is one of equality, producing what Rich terms a 'cinema of correspondence' likening its tone to that of women's letters to one another. The female confessional voice-over of The Women's Room is authoritative in relation to the central female protagonist - her voice comments ironically on the happy 'family album' images of Mira's wedding - but as 'sound-track', and in the absence of

close attention to the images on the screen, this voice-over bears some resemblance to the conversational and confessing tones of private conversations in the home, reflecting and cultivating, therefore, the private, personal and domestic modes of conversation routinely aligned with women's lives in the home.

The Women's Room: The Middle Sequence

The second extract selected for analysis concerns itself with Mira's preparations for Ben's arrival to take her out to dinner, his eventual arrival, their consequent conversation and Ben's eventual dismissal from the apartment. In this second extract, Mira is older and the voice-over which bleeds over from the previous scene is therefore now temporally less distanced from the female central protagonist. According to Silverman, this closing of temporal distance between voice and body works to anchor the voice-over ever more fully within the body as the narrative unfolds: 'Not only is (the female voice-over) at every point anchored to a specific body, but the temporal interval which separates it from that body constantly diminishes as the film unfolds.'⁵⁹ This increased containment of the voice-over within the female body arguably displaces symbolic castration yet more fully onto the woman by emphatically situating the female subject within the diegetic scene.

The voice-over's initial comments concerning Mira's anxieties about her first date with Ben bleed over from the previous scene. These comments also work to tie the voice-over more closely to the body by describing physical sensations of anxiety which threaten to overwhelm her, underlining the voice's proximity to the body: I was hot and my heart beat wildly, painfully. 38 going on 16.' Though the voice-over's comments concerning Mira's anxieties in relation to her feelings for Ben bleed over the cut between the previous scene and the sequence to be analysed, it becomes silent after the following speech, suggesting that it's proximity to the anxious female body has silenced it: 'I tried to control it. I told myself that I wanted to be a teacher, that loneliness was a conditioned response - that in reality I loved living alone, unfettered. I told myself that he probably had smelly feet and lived on brown rice and voted for Nixon.' What is interesting about the voice-over's final lines during this sequence, is that they invite the spectator to 'read' the image of Mira diagnostically. Clearly, her attempts to remain calm in relation to her forthcoming date are unsuccessful. The disjuncture between the voice-over on the sound-track and the image of Mira on the screen invites the spectator to take up a knowing, 'diagnostic' position in relation to the female central protagonist - a position which Ben's arrival encourages. Though a masochistic

identification with the suffering Mira is a possibility here, a more distanced, knowing, position in relation to her self-deception (as described by the voice-over) is also a strong possibility. What this suggests, is that like the novel, the movie does, at points, offer the spectator identifications which oscillate between closeness and distance, in relation to the central protagonist and the narrator. While an identification with the sufferings of the central protagonist bespeaks a conventionally feminine predisposition for masochism, an identification with the more knowing, masterful discourse of the female voice-over, bespeaks a female desire to occupy positions more usually aligned with masculinity.

The fading voice-over is replaced, after this final speech, by the anxious non-verbal gasps and cries emitted by the central protagonist as she prepares for Ben in front of her bathroom mirror. These sounds resemble a young baby's frustrated whimpers and cries. Anxiety has apparently initiated a regression to an almost pre-verbal stage of childhood development. These cries are accompanied by repeated looks in the mirror, which suggest a degree of instability concerning identity congruent with the earliest stages of infantile development. This suggestion is compounded by the degree of motor incapacity Mira exhibits - she stumbles, her movements lack co-ordination, she cannot fasten her hair decoration and she drops her water glass in the sink. In

The Acoustic Mirror, Silverman argues that a common strategy practised in order to displace symbolic castration from the male, so that it appears as a position occupied only by the female, is 'the displacement onto the mother of qualities which more properly characterise the newborn child.'⁶⁰ Silverman goes on to argue that this system of vocal conventions establishes the discursive potency of the male voice by stripping the female voice of all claim to verbal authority.⁶¹ The cries that Mira emits testify, according to this perspective, to mainstream cinema's successful accomplishment of what Silverman sees as one of its key aims - the wresting from woman of involuntary and meaningless sound. Only when this reversal has been achieved has the threat posed to the male child by the mother's verbal authority been contained. It is the imminent arrival of Ben which reduces the central female protagonist to this regressed state.

At the sound of Ben's knock at the door, Mira, still gasping and sighing, rushes to the stereo and puts on some gentle 'Chopinesque' piano music. Though the voice-over has been silenced by Ben's impending arrival, this music arguably partially takes its place, providing a mutedly ironic commentary as Mira and Ben begin their courtship. In her article 'The Problem of Femininity in Theories of Film Music',⁶² Carol Flinn takes exception

to the routine alignment of film music with femininity which characterises, she argues, much film criticism, asserting in her concluding comments that 'it is one thing to suggest that music offers woman a discursive place in which her desire is provisionally articulated; it is entirely another to argue that music is essentially, irrevocably 'feminine'.'⁶³ These comments seem particularly pertinent here, where Mira's increasingly frenzied preparations are accompanied by music so calm as to be ironic, while the tense interchange which ensues between Mira and Ben heralds a shift to an almost hysterically speeded up musical accompaniment. In this instance, the music therefore echoes the ironic tone of the voice-over's introductory comments, and accompanies each shift in Mira's mood. Thus while the music's mood accompaniment encourages an intense engagement with Mira's mood swings, its ironic undertow encourages a degree of spectatorial distance from the central protagonist. In this instance, the relation between music and image therefore both confounds and compounds the woman's film's tendency to invite identification on the basis of, in Mary Ann Doane's words⁶⁴ 'passivity, over-involvement and over-identification.'

Though it was earlier suggested that The Women's Room most closely resembled a 'medical discourse' woman's film without a doctor, for the duration of this sequence only, it is the central male protagonist functioning as

doctor, or analyst who 'rescues' Mira from her regression to pre-verbal infancy - a position induced by his own arrival. His request that Mira should tell him 'what is in your mind right now', as he clears up the glass, which she, in her nervousness, has dropped in the sink, resembles nothing more than the query of a concerned analyst and Mira responds by confessing to anxieties and sexual longings, as well as to feelings of regression: 'I was thinking of the first time I saw you ... I felt like I was 16 again ... my first crush. How is that?'

In The Desire To Desire, Mary Ann Doane argues that in the films of the medical discourse, mainstream cinema's drive to construct woman as spectacle is partially circumvented by the replacement of the scopophilic look by the diagnostic glance. Through this process, mainstream cinema partially accomplishes its aim in relation to the woman's picture - the narrativisation of woman: her body exhibits symptoms which the doctor's expert glance is able to interpret. Thus the anxious symptoms produced by Ben's arrival function to further 'interiorise' Mira - to the extent that the voice-over is completely silenced and only her body speaks. Only Ben, acting as 'expert' and amateur therapist is able to produce a temporary cure by exhorting her to describe her feelings. Though this sequence purports to narrate Mira's resistance to male mastery and authority - she responds

furiously when Ben takes down her hair and demands, eventually that he leaves her flat - the silencing of the female voice-over together with the transference of narrative authority from voice-over to Ben, both suggest that by this point, The Women's Room has succeeded in divesting woman of much of the authority exhibited in its opening few moments. The singing, partially extra-diegetic voice-over has been reduced to the symptom-producing female body which only the penetrating glance of the amateur therapist, trained in the discourses of confession and self-revelation can read and understand. Only the ironic commentary provided by the piano music which accompanies this sequence still nostalgically 'remembers' the authority, mastery and 'exteriority' of that initial singing voice.

A more TV studies oriented approach to this segment from The Women's Room would problematise the above reading in a number of ways. Firstly the above argument concerning the symbolic castration of woman effected in this sequence depends on a notion of narrative progression at odds with the interrupted and distracted practices of televiewing. Secondly, the forms of identification suggested above depend on cine-psycho-analytic theory which, it has already been pointed out, is inappropriate in the TV context. Though it was suggested above that this sequence privileged identification with the authoritative, diagnostic position occupied by Ben, the

little that has so far been written on soap-opera suggests rather, that as TV, this sequence would encourage its spectator to feel a maternal concern for both Mira and Ben. In Loving With A Vengeance, Modleski argues that soap-operas keep their spectators caring about everyone,⁶⁵ and insodoing constitute their spectators as ideal mothers.⁶⁶ The marked use of close-ups in this sequence, would, according to Modleski reinforce this positioning since they 'provide the spectator with training in "reading" other people, in being sensitive to their (unspoken) feelings at any given moment'⁶⁷ - skills required by the mother of young children. Moreover this segment, which is followed by a long ad-break, ends dramatically, but very inconclusively, an ending which resembles the end of many soap-opera episodes. The length of The Women's Room suggests that for many spectators, viewing might well be limited to short between-ads sections. According to Modleski, these inconclusive segment or episode endings share a part in the adaption of soap-operas to the rhythms of women's lives in the home: the never-endingness of soap, together with its proliferation of enigmas, produces a narrative pleasure constituted by anticipation for an end that never comes. According to Modleski, this pleasure in anticipation invests 'exquisite pleasure in the central condition of a woman's life: waiting - whether for her phone to ring,

for the baby to take its nap, or for the family to be reunited shortly after the day's final soap-opera has left its family still struggling against dissolution.⁶⁸ According to Charlotte Brunson, this open-ended ending, together with soap-opera's foregrounding of 'emotionally significant personal inter-action'⁶⁹ - a phrase which encapsulates the narrative concerns of the sequence under discussion - calls on 'the traditionally feminine competencies associated with the responsibility for "managing" the sphere of personal life - sensitivity, perception, intuition and the necessary privileging of the concerns of personal life.'⁷⁰

Here again then, when a more TV studies approach to the sequence under discussion is compared with a more film studies approach, what emerges, is that whereas the former proposes a reading which foregrounds The Women's Room's address to its spectator 'in the feminine' the latter suggests that the movie alternates between proposing masculine and feminine reading positions to a female audience.

The Women's Room: The Closing Sequence

A dissolve between the immediately preceding sequence - in which Val encourages Mira to overcome her 'broken heart' and 'make something of her life' - and the closing sequence, suggests temporal ellipsis, a suggestion which

is confirmed as the sequence unfolds, since the central protagonist is now a fully-fledged lecturer.

The sequence begins with a long shot of a white tower surrounded by green trees, against a sunny blue sky. As the camera tilts downwards, it becomes apparent that the white tower is part of that same space which constituted the image track for the opening establishment shot - the mise-en-scene of bicycles, students, trees and college buildings all suggest that this sequence parallels the opening sequence, as does the duration of this opening shot. This parallel with the opening sequence is underlined by the sound-track, on which an echoing voice-over is heard speaking, in the following terms, about the lives of women: 'In Moslem countries, women are invisible, white waifs drifting through the streets buying a bit of vegetables, they are less differentiated than dogs.' It is notable that here, the voice-over's words echo her invisibility, however whereas this off-screen voice equates invisibility with powerlessness, the voice which speaks these words arguably gains its potency from its dis-embodied state. Though the voice sounds a little like Mira's, the temporal ellipsis together with the sudden shift of scene is dis-orientating: for the first few moments of this closing sequence the identity of the voice-over therefore remains in question, suggesting comparison with the dis-embodied, singing voice-over of the opening sequence.

As the exterior shot pans across students and buildings, the voice-over's monologue continues with the following words: 'Here too, you don't really see them - poking amongst the cereal boxes in the supermarket. You see their clothes, their helmet of curls.' A cut to an interior medium close-up of a woman seated in an audience occurs as the voice-over describes the appearance of women in super-markets, then, as the voice-over comments that 'You stop taking them seriously', the camera pans across this audience, who are all gazing off-frame. At this stage, it is clear that the sequence is inviting speculation as to the identity of this impassioned voice-over. Though the echoing quality to the voice-over has already suggested that it was speaking from off-screen space, rather than extra-diegetically, it is only when the omniscient camera rotates through nearly 180 degrees that the speaker's identity is finally 'revealed' as Mira's. As the camera comes to rest in a medium close-up of Mira speaking to the assembled audience, her lecture becomes first a definition of woman, and then a plea:

'A woman is a person who makes choices.

A woman is a dreamer,

A woman is a planner ...

Will you choose change?

Will you choose to become the vanguard of the new world?'

The lecture finishes, the camera rotates through 180 degrees once more, to a long shot of the audience standing to give an ovation, then rotates back for a medium close-up of Mira smiling in acknowledgement of the applause. The movie ends with a medium shot of Mira's smiling, tearful face, silhouetted against an audience of clapping students.

Though this sequence arguably gives an authoritative, confident and knowledgeable voice to the previously inarticulate and confused central protagonist, the extinction of the dis-embodied female voice-over which this closing sequence accomplishes, arguably recapitulates and re-emphasises the overall project of the movie: the displacement of symbolic castration onto the body of woman. Though this sequence purportedly describes the triumphant accession to power of its central female protagonist, the film's underlying project of embodying an initially dis-embodied and partially extra-diegetic voice is here repeated in condensed form.

Yet though this repetition and condensation underlines the success of this patriarchal project, a trace of resistance remains, since just prior to its 're-embodiment' and specularisation, the voice-over's comments on the invisibility of visible women in supermarkets implicitly raises questions about mainstream

cinema's routine alignment of sight and knowledge, underlining the constant doubt which ceaselessly underpins voyeurism and fetishism: 'Here too, you don't really see them - you see their clothes; their helmet of curls'. Yet this moment of resistance is quickly extinguished as the camera rotates towards Mira following her announcement that 'you stop taking them seriously.' Moreover, the final few lines of Mira's lecture, which she delivers in a trance-like state, belong, she announces, not to her, but to somebody else - New York City's commissioner on human rights - underlining Silverman's argument that in mainstream film, the fear aroused in the male viewer by his exclusion from the site of filmic production is defended against in the following manner: 'Woman's words are shown to be even less her own than are her "looks". They are scripted for her, extracted from her by an external agency, or uttered by her in a trancelike state ... Even when she speaks without apparent coercion, she is always spoken from the place of the sexual other.'

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The above reading of the closing sequence of The Women's Room suggests that the sequence gains much of its force through a condensed repetition of the process of embodying the female voice - an argument which assumes a spectator who has been present throughout the transmission period. Clearly, however, this argument may

not be appropriate in relation to a TV transmission which may have been watched in an interrupted and distracted fashion. Yet the closure performed by this sequence markedly differentiates it from the closing sections of a TV serial episode, which, as it has already been argued, is characterised by a high degree of open-endedness. What this suggests is that the degree of closure demanded by the closing sequences of TVMs differentiates them from even their closest TV 'relatives'. In Loving With A Vengeance, Modleski argues that since twentieth century woman fears being abandoned and no longer needed by her children, the never-endingness of the soap-opera provides some reassurance: as long as the enigmas proliferate, 'as long as things don't come to a satisfying conclusion, the mother will be needed as confidante and adviser, and her function will never end.'⁷² Modleski concludes her study of the soap-opera by contending that its never-endingness and its proliferation of enigmas constitute a feminine alternative to 'the typical (and masculine) modes of pleasure in our society'.⁷³ If this is the case, then the closing sequence functions both to disempower the spectator, who is clearly no longer required as confidante by the now accomplished and confident central protagonist, and to negate that negation of masculine modes of pleasure arguably constituted by the open-endedness of the soap-opera.

What emerges from this analysis' comparison of a more film studies with a more TV studies approach to The Women's Room, is that the two approaches produce different readings of the first two sequences selected for analysis. A reading informed by current feminist film theory suggests that the first two sequences propose alternately masculine and feminine positions for a female spectator, while a reading informed by analyses of the soap-opera proposes that these sequences address their spectator less ambiguously in the feminine. This divergence falls away, however, when the two approaches are brought to bear on the final sequence, where the final embodiment of the voice-over arguably works to defend the male spectator against the threat posed by symbolic castration and the closure brings to an end the address 'in the feminine' constituted by the never-endingness of The Women's Room as soap-opera.

The Women's Room as Made-for-TV-Movie: A Question Of Cultural Instrumentality

In her essay 'Femininity as Mas(s)querade: A Feminist Approach To Mass Culture',⁷⁴ Tania Modleski proposes that though mass culture has been routinely aligned with femininity since the time of the Frankfurt School, such analogues should be treated with the utmost caution. Within TV studies, however, the feminine analogue remains seductive as a means both of condemning and exalting the

medium.

If TV is routinely aligned with the feminine, critics of the TVM single out this televisual form, arguing for instance, that 'the telefilm product is oriented towards what network executives think of as "female appeal"'.⁷⁵

A number of reasons are given for the assumed address of the TVM to a female audience: Nancy Schwartz argues TVM makers work from the assumption that whereas it is the man who often chooses which film to see at the cinema, decisions about what to watch on TV are joint, therefore 'female appeal' is aimed for,⁷⁶ whereas Clancy Sigal's comments concerning the similarities in theme and visual style between the TVM and the soap-opera⁷⁷ suggest that like soap, the TVM addresses a female audience.

Commentators on the TVM also repeatedly stress that this televisual form typically concerns itself with topical questions related to social issues and problems: when interviewed, Len Hill, a director of TVMs, discussed their tendency to deal with 'still hot contemporary issues',⁷⁸ while Robert C Allen argues that the tendency of TVMs to concern themselves with contemporary social issues arises as a promotional strategy: 'the film is based upon a current social controversy and discourse about that controversy is used to promote the film.'⁷⁹ In his article 'The Movie Of The Week', Richard Maynard

argues that the TVM's tendency to concern itself with questions of social concern arises from the small-scale and intimate nature of TV, and goes on to draw a comparison between the TVM and the Warner Brothers 'B' picture,⁸⁰ a comparison that is also drawn by a number of other critics.⁸¹

The Women's Room's narrative concern with a central female protagonist, together with its foregrounding of a 'hot' topical issue of the time - women's liberation - would seem, then to exemplify the twin tendencies of the TVM outlined above. Indeed a survey of the existing literature suggests that to a large extent, the TVM is a cultural product which to a large extent has concerned itself with the question of the changing role of women, a point underlined by Jeffrey Reese, a director of feature films at the American network ABC, who commented that what this network was interested in marketing were 'films that explore the changing nature of women and of justice in contemporary society.'⁸² Similarly, in the article 'Made for TV Movies: The Domestication of Social Issues', all the TVMs discussed by Elayne Rapping concern themselves with women's issues.⁸³

Though the question of the cultural instrumentality of these 'gynocentric'⁸⁴ TVMs remains largely unexplored, those few cultural critics and TV commentators who do attempt to address the question, do so largely without

reference to the specificity of the TVMs partly televisual and partly cinematic address. Two critics who do address themselves to the question of the cultural instrumentality of the TVM are Elayne Rapping and Laurie Jane Schulze. Both their articles, written from a feminist perspective, argue that the TVMs they discuss function to defuse the threat posed by feminist ideas by 'framing' these ideas within the parameters of dominant notions of 'normal' domestic, heterosexual femininity. Thus Elayne Rapping argues that though the TVM The Burning Bed is 'almost rhetorically feminist in perspective ... because of its framing devices, it is a simple morality tale, in which the solutions to women's problems lie in the bold actions of a soap-opera hero',⁸⁵ while Laurie Jane Schulze contends that though Getting Physical appears to challenge normative notions of feminine physicality by concerning itself with female body building, 'certain textual strategies are activated ... to reposition its depiction of the female body builder within traditional frames.'⁸⁶ Though the use of the term 'frame' suggests that some discussion of the specificity of the TVM's address will be undertaken in these two articles, a close reading reveals that such discussion is both tentative and uneven. Thus while Rapping alludes to TV's tendency to collapse boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, no attempt is made to elaborate upon this point in relation to her discussion

of the TVM's cultural project. Similarly, though Schulze does contend that TV's reliance on sound and poorly defined visual image allows Getting Physical to speak about female bodybuilding while avoiding the potentially threatening display of female muscles, she simultaneously argues that sequences of female bodybuilding halt the narrative in moments of visual pleasure - an argument culled from cine-psychoanalysis which appears to run counter to her more televisual reading.

Clearly work on the TVM is in its very early stages, and as yet, no clear methodology for analysing their complex interweaving of cinematic and televisual modes of address has emerged. Both Rapping and Schulze conclude that the TVMs they discuss perform a hegemonising function by defusing the threat posed by feminist ideas. What is absent from both articles, however, is any attempt to combine a film with a TV studies approach to the TVM. Both papers consequently pay far more attention to the text's address to normative discourses already in circulation, than to the analysis of spectator positions constructed by the TVM. In this regard, existing work clearly bears out Annette Kuhn's contention that whereas film analysis has tended to foreground questions of sexual difference constructed in relations between spectators and texts, work on TV has tended to foreground

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the question of context.

Summary

In the second and third chapters of this thesis, the question of the cultural instrumentality of the woman's confessional novel was explored by analysing the ways in which a muted feminine discourse spoke through this genre's deployment of the confession. The present chapter's reading of The Women's Room as woman's picture suggests that a somewhat diminished version of this muted feminine discourse speaks through the TVM's deployment of the confession. The first sequence analysed invited the spectator to oscillate between a masochistic over-identification with the sufferings of its central female protagonist and with the confessions of its disembodied, partially extra-diegetic voice-over. As chapters two and three argued, masochistic identification bespeaks the repression of femininity's desires for active sexual subjecthood.⁸⁸ The proposed identification with the masterful authoritative position of the dis-embodied, extra-diegetic voice-over suggests an alignment with a position more commonly associated with masculinity, rather than with femininity. The first sequence's mode of narration therefore arguably parallels that of the novel - proposing an identification which oscillates between a conventionally 'feminine' over-closeness to the image and a more 'masculine' authoritative distance. The analysis of The Women's Room undertaken in chapters two and three emphasised, in addition, the role of pathos in

constructing a mutedly feminine discourse which resisted the conventional alignment of woman with passivity and subjection. As the introduction to the present chapter argued, a reading of The Women's Room as woman's picture reveals that in contrast to the novel, the movie version deploys pathos rarely, thus diminishing the opportunities for the deployment of a mutedly feminine discourse. This opportunity is further diminished by the movie's construction of Mira's 'becomingness': as Mira becomes stronger and more articulate, so the disembodied female voice-over - representative of woman's resistance to discourses which align femininity with symbolic castration - fades from the sound-track. In its place, the occasional eruption of an ironic musical counterpointing of the image nostalgically gestures back to the position from which that voice initially spoke. In short, though the deployment of the confession initially constructs a female voice-over whose position challenges mainstream cinema's conventional alignment of femininity with symbolic castration, the 'becomingness' to which confessional discourse gives rise increases Mira's ability to speak 'for herself' and therefore motivates a fading of that voice-over.

The TV studies reading of The Women's Room undertaken in this chapter has proved less amenable to the demonstration of the ways in which 'gynocentric' texts

inflect confessional discourse. A reading informed by TV studies analyses of the soap opera has revealed few discontinuities or continuities between this thesis's reading of The Women's Room as novel and as TV. Though in the third chapter of this thesis, it was argued that those features of the novel's mode of narration which proposed a 'soap-opera' like interrupted identification alternately with the narrator and with the central protagonist, positioned the reader as caring, 'good mother', it was also pointed out that the novel's mode of narration invited readers to oscillate between 'masculine' and 'feminine' positions. In the present chapter, the TV studies-influenced reading of The Women's Room has argued that the confessing voice-over addresses the spectator as 'good mother' and that the never-endingness and interrupted quality of the TVM constructs an address 'in the feminine'. This suggests that the oscillation between 'masculine' and 'feminine' positions proposed to readers of the novel and to spectators of the TVM as woman's picture is not proposed for viewers of the TVM as soap-opera. In addition, it is arguably the case, as was argued above, that this address 'in the feminine' is brought to an end by the closing moments of the TVM. Two areas of analysis have proved resistant to this TV studies approach - firstly the analysis of the TVM's inflection of confessional discourse's specific mode of narration which inserts distance between central protagonist and narrator and secondly the TVM's

inflection of confessional discourse's trope of 'becomingness'. Though it might be contended that what this reveals is that as soap opera, The Women's Room does not deploy confessional discourse to any great extent, it seems unlikely that this discourse which is so heavily deployed by The Women's Room as novel and as woman's picture should be largely absent from The Women's Room as TV. What these findings arguably reveal, therefore, is that as yet, TV studies has failed to elaborate an approach which can track the inflection of modern power techniques such as the confession, by 'gynocentric' TV texts.

The preceding analysis of The Women's Room contended that while this TVM's more cinematic modes of address constructed a contradictorily gendered spectator position, its more televisual aspects addressed themselves to a female audience 'in the feminine'. Though the final sequence arguably resolved this tension by eradicating the open-endedness and anticipation-encouraging structure of the TV soap, the extent to which this closure works to undermine the previous three hours of transmission is debatable. As this reading of The Women's Room was informed by current film and TV research, it is perhaps unsurprising that it has borne out Annette Kuhn's findings in relation to the different emphases of work on film and TV. Yet what it

demonstrates, perhaps more than anything is the need for an approach that can bring together film theory's attention to the textual construction of gendered spectator positions, and TV study's emphasis on the TV text's address to a social audience already divided by gender. Only with the development of such an approach will it be possible to take further the question of the cultural instrumentality of the TVM.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

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26. L J Schulze, 'Getting Physical: Text/Context/Reading And The Made For Television Movie', Cinema Journal 25 no 2 Winter 1986, p 35.
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28. D Gomery, 'Brian's Song:Television, Hollywood And The Evolution Of The Movie Made For TV', in J.E. O'Connor (ed), American History/American Television: Interpreting The Video Past, New York, F Ungar Publishing Co. 1983, pps 208-227.
29. L J Schulze, op cit, p 38.
30. M A Doane, The Desire To Desire: The Woman's Film Of The 1940's, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1987 pps 38-69.
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32. Ibid p 39.
33. The reading I sketch here suggests parallels between The Women's Room and the feminist documentary films of the early '70's. In her article 'The Political Aesthetics Of The Feminist

Documentary Film' (Quarterly Review Of Film Studies vol 3 no 4, Fall 1978), J Lesage argues that these documentaries' mobilisation of modes of address congruent with those of the feminist consciousness-raising group enabled women to show and define themselves on their own terms on the screen. (p 513).

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35. L J Schulze, op cit, p 47.
36. R Altman, op cit, especially p 42.
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64. See M A Doane, The Desire To Desire op cit, p 2.
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67. Ibid, p 100.
68. Ibid, p 88.
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71. K Silverman, The Acoustic Mirror, op cit, p 31.
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74. T Modleski, 'Femininity As Mas(s)querade: A Feminist

- Approach To Mass Culture', C McCabe (ed), High Theory/Low Culture, op cit, p 39.
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 79. R C Allen, 'Reader-Oriented Criticism', op cit, p 4.
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 81. See for instance D Gomery, op cit and C Sigal, op cit.
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 88. See M A Doane, The Desire To Desire, op cit, pps 17-19.

CONCLUSION

This thesis had its origins in a desire to investigate the cultural work performed by confessional discourses. In The History Of Sexuality, Michel Foucault points out that the confession has become one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth: 'the confession', he goes on to assert, 'has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations...whence a metamorphosis in literature...whence too this new way of philosophising'¹. The Foucauldian thesis, which has been taken up widely by cultural theory, posits that the obligation to confess, routinised by the suffusion of so much of contemporary Western culture by confessional discourse, constitutes a mode through which contemporary forms of human subjectivity are produced. Confession, argues Foucault, produces the 'truth' of who we are and constitutes us as subjects in both senses of the word: the confessor is both the subject of confession, and is also subjected to the law of truth described by confessional discourse.² Though Foucault's thesis makes reference to a wide body of discourses - literary, judicial, ecclesiastical, medical

and personal - he insists that what all these discourses share is a concern with the confession of sexuality: it is through the imperative to confess the 'truth' of sexual being, argues Foucault, that the human subject became tied to a regime of power/knowledge: 'an austere monarchy of sex so that we became dedicated to the endless task of forcing its secret, of exacting the truest of confessions from a shadow'.³ For Foucault, confession constitutes, therefore, one of the key strategies through which modern power relations are maintained, yet throughout The History Of Sexuality, he is at pains to stress that the deployment of confessional discourse can also constitute a resistance to these very relations: 'we must make allowance', he argues, 'for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it re-inforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.'⁴ Though the model of power relations advanced in The History Of Sexuality is a sophisticated one, Foucault's grouping together under the rubric of 'confessional' such diverse discourses as those of the law, medicine, literature, philosophy, religion and the intimate discourse of lovers, implies that all these discourses perform very similar cultural work. This thesis has aimed to refine and extend the

Foucauldian thesis, through an analysis of the cultural work performed by women's confessional texts.

As the introduction to this thesis pointed out, it was Ros Coward's mobilisation of the Foucauldian thesis in support of her reading of the woman's confession as inherently conservative⁵ which provided a starting point for this thesis, which has aimed to contribute to feminist cultural theory by engaging with two questions foreclosed by Coward's discussion. Firstly, this thesis has argued that a discussion of the cultural work performed by the woman's confession demands some refinement of the Foucauldian thesis: though clear similarities between the woman's and the mainstream, male-authored confession have been found, it has also been argued that the gynocentric version of the confessional mode differs markedly from its mainstream relation. Secondly, this thesis has retained the Foucauldian emphasis on discourse as polyvalent⁶ - an aspect of Foucault's theory of confession overlooked by Coward - and has therefore begun from the Foucauldian hypothesis that like all discourse, the woman's confession arguably 'transmits...but also undermines...power.'⁷

The findings of this thesis can be summarised in the following way: in the first chapter, it was argued that

the mainstream, male-authored confession inscribes a subject-in-process - a subject caught in the interminable process of 'becomingness'. The 'becoming' subject inscribed by the confessional mode is a subject suited to the deployment of modern power techniques, which require that the subject should 'freely' submit to 'a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimise, and multiply it'⁸. The exercise of this modern power produces and requires a 'mutable' subject who performs upon her/himself an endless series of operations to produce her/his own truth - a subject 'faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse compartments may be realised.'⁹ Further, the first chapter of this thesis went on to argue that the Foucauldian stress on the polyvalence of discourse suggests that the cultural instrumentality of the confessional mode is complex: though confessional discourse inscribes a subject suited to the deployment of modern power techniques it also inscribes a resistance to those very techniques. Though the knowledge produced by confessional discourse constitutes the 'truth' of its subject, the deployment of confession simultaneously produces changes in subjectivity, thus problematising the status of that truth.

The second and third chapters then went on to take issue with Ros Coward's reading of the woman's confessional

text, by discussing its cultural instrumentality in the context of the findings of the first chapter. This section of the thesis argued firstly that what Coward's dismissal of the confessional text had overlooked was the Foucauldian emphasis on the polyvalence of discourse. Where the mainstream, male-authored confession is concerned, it had been argued that this polyvalence exhibits itself through the confession's simultaneous fixing and unfixing of subject positions. In chapters two and three, this argument was extended by means of an analysis of the woman's confession which suggested that though, like its mainstream relation, this gynocentric genre deploys confession to produce subjects suited to the operation of modern power techniques, it registers, in addition, a muted resistance to patriarchal constructions of femininity. Through a range of strategies fully described in chapters two and three, the reading positions invited by the woman's confession allow for some venting of repressed, active female desire. Coward's reading of what she calls 'women's novels' concludes by suggesting that it is their deployment of the confessional mode which problematises their status as 'feminist novels'. This thesis has problematised this conclusion in two ways: firstly it has pointed out that like the contemporary woman's novel, feminist theory and practice is suffused by confessional discourse, which it deploys through consciousness-raising practices, as well

as through its emphasis on personal testimony and experience and its deployment of discourses of personal growth and self-assertion , and secondly it has argued that the cultural work performed by confession is complex, since the polyvalence of the discourse allows for some resistance to, as well as conformity with patriarchal subject positions.

The fourth chapter of this thesis went on to analyse the made-for-TV-movie (TVM) version of The Women's Room in order to ascertain the extent to which its cultural instrumentality was comparable with that of the woman's confessional novel. This chapter contended that a theoretical impasse impeded a full analysis of the cultural work performed by the made-for-TV-movie, for as yet, no model has been elaborated to facilitate the joint discussion of the TVM's unique deployment of televisual and cinematic regimes of representation. This chapter went on to argue that whereas a film studies approach to the TVM The Women's Room suggested that it registered a diminished version of the novel's resistance to patriarchal constructions of femininity, an approach informed by current work in TV studies suggested, on the other hand, that like soap-opera, this TVM not only addressed female spectators, but insodoing constructed feminine subject positions which transcend patriarchal modes of subjectivity. The fourth chapter's discussion of The Women's Room concluded by contending that though

the application of a film studies and a TV studies approach to the analysis of The Women's Room appears to produce divergent readings of its cultural instrumentality, what this divergence might indicate, rather, is what Annette Kuhn has described as 'the different intellectual histories and epistemological groundings of film theory and television theory'.¹¹

Whereas film theory mobilises the term 'spectator' to discuss subject positions constructed by representation, TV studies tends to mobilise the term to describe a social audience constructed within culture. In order to further the analysis of cultural instrumentality what is required, as Kuhn has argued, is a mode of analysis which discusses the relationship between the subject positions proposed by texts and a social subject who may or may not take up these positions.¹²

In the first, second and third chapters of this thesis, a rapprochement between these two divergent approaches has been attempted via an analysis of the ways in which the specificities of the mainstream and the woman's confessional novels' deployment of confessional discourses articulates with a cultural context already shaped by the deployment of discourses of personal growth, self-assertion, and possessive individualism. Yet as has already been pointed out at several points in this thesis, the exploration of the relationship between the

subject positions proposed by texts and their reception by social subjects already divided by class, gender, and sexuality is riven by difficulties.

It had originally been proposed that this thesis's textual analysis would be supplemented by ethnographic research. Such research appears to offer one possible route around these difficulties by facilitating the analysis of the ways in which social audiences inhabit the subject positions proposed by texts. However recent attempts to undertake such research have emphatically indicated that ethnographic research may in fact shed little light on our understanding of the relationship between textual and social audiences.

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In her new introduction to Reading The Romance, in which a theory of the significance of the act of romance reading is proposed, Janice Radway argues that she had originally hoped that ethnographic research might enable her to move beyond the various concepts of the inscribed, ideal, or model reader and to advance, therefore, her analysis of the cultural instrumentality of romance reading. Since completing her study, she goes on to explain, she had come to acknowledge, however, that like textual analysis, ethnographic research must also be a form of interpretation. Radway goes on to comment that though at the time she undertook her study, she believed that reader research could usefully increase her

knowledge not only of the significance of particular texts to particular social audiences, but also of the significance of the act of reading itself within the overall lives of particular groups of readers, she had since come to regard her findings with a certain degree of scepticism, since the interpretation of the interviewed women's comments was informed by her own feminist politics. In addition, Radway's introduction raises useful questions about the status of interviewees responses - questions which problematise the assumption that ethnographic or reader research can supplement textual analysis in any straightforward manner. Though it is now generally accepted that textual analysis must attend to the absences, or to the 'unconscious' of a text, work in reader research, influenced by positivist social science, has tended, on the whole, to sidestep such issues. Thus though the analysis of the cultural instrumentality of texts arguably depends upon a theory of the relation between textual and social subjects, further work is required to resolve the difficulties posed above.

In her recently published article 'Pleasureable
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Negotiations', Christine Gledhill elaborates upon the need for a 'theory of texts which can accommodate the
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historical existence of social audiences'. The concept of negotiation, she goes on to suggest, 'might take a

central place in rethinking the relations between media products, ideologies and audiences - perhaps bridging the gap between textual and social subject.¹⁷ Gledhill goes on to suggest that the advantage of a model of meaning production based on the concept of negotiation is that it avoids an overly deterministic view of cultural production. Three different levels of negotiated meaning production can be analysed, she argues: institutional negotiations, textual negotiations and reception as negotiation. Though Gledhill argues that reception is 'potentially the most radical moment of negotiation, because the most variable and unpredictable',¹⁸ her discussion of the negotiation of textual subject positions by social subjects fails to propose solutions to difficulties attendant upon the analysis of these processes.

This thesis, then, has focussed not on reception as negotiation, but on textual negotiations. It has analysed the negotiation of confessional discourse by gynocentric texts and the cultural instrumentality implied by such negotiation. It has also, in this conclusion, pointed towards the need for a theoretical framework which can more adequately discuss the negotiations which take place between those subject positions which texts propose, and which it has been the aim of this thesis to analyse, and the social subjects who variously inhabit them.

Five years ago, I remember discussing with several women friends the impact that particular novels had had upon our lives. One friend, in particular, remembered reading The Women's Room and shared my sense that this novel had certainly played some part in shaping the direction of our future lives. Looking back, it is now clear that it was that conversation that convinced me of the direction I wished to take in my research. Much more recently, during a visit from the same friend, the subject of this thesis was raised once more. My friend remembered reading The Women's Room and still felt that it was this novel which had shaped, to a large extent, the outlines of her future life. This time, however, her reminiscences included reference to the context within which she had so avidly read the novel. 'I had left my husband four weeks before beginning The Women's Room', she remembered, 'perhaps that is why the novel had such an impact on my life'.

Just as my friend's remarks five years ago provided the impetus for this research, so her more recent comments point the way forward, towards the formulation of a theoretical perspective which can more adequately discuss both texts and contexts. It is in this direction that we must move, in order reach a more adequate assessment of the cultural work performed by texts.

NOTES TO CONCLUSION

1. M Foucault, The History of Sexuality Volume One: An Introduction Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1981, p 59.
2. Ibid, p 60.
3. Ibid, p 159.
4. Ibid, p 101.
5. R Coward, ' "This Novel Changes Lives": Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?', Feminist Review 5, 1980.
6. See M Foucault, The History of Sexuality, op cit, p 100.
7. Ibid, p 107.
8. Ibid, p 137.
9. M Foucault, 'The Subject and Power' in Critical Inquiry 8, Summer 1987, p 790.
10. A Kuhn, 'Women's Genres: Melodrama, Soap Opera and Theory' in C Gledhill (ed), Home is Where The Heart Is London, BFI, 1987, p 341.
11. Ibid, p 345.
12. Kuhn refers here to Charlotte Brunson's article 'Crossroads: Notes on Soap Opera', Screen vol 22, no 4, 1981, pps 32-7.
13. J Radway, Reading The Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature, London, Verso, 1987.
14. Ibid, p 5.
15. C Gledhill, 'Pleasureable Negotiations' in D Pribram (ed), Female Spectators, London, Verso, 1988.
16. Ibid, p 67.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid, p 70.

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