

# **‘New Femininities’ Fiction**

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## **Abstract**

I identify and analyse an emergent sub-genre of contemporary literature by women that I am calling ‘New Femininities’ fiction. This fiction is about the distinctly feminine experience of contemporary domestic life written by women about the lives of heterosexual female characters that are married or in committed partnerships, often with children. These texts are concerned with the nature of the self, with a self that is plural and ‘in process’, and make use of particular narrative devices – ironic voice, unreliable narration, free indirect discourse, and interrogative endings that exceed their roles as simply telling stories. ‘New Femininities’ fictions allow their language the necessary freedom to multiply meanings and enact the narrative conflicts they raise and by so doing, undermine the binary oppositions which structure a gendered world. In this dissertation, I argue the models of existing criticism would do a disservice to these texts because much of the criticism either overvalues the theoretical and ignores the literariness of the text or seeks to identify a ‘feminine’ language the definition of which serves to reinforce and revalue patriarchal notions of femininity. The readings that this fiction requires necessitate a negotiation with established models of feminist literary criticism. I attempt to identify the characteristics of their style that allows them to straddle binary oppositions and to look at the language these authors use without having to label it ‘feminine’ and by so doing establish, build, or reinforce a boundary with some undefined ‘masculine’ language which stands in for all occurrences that are not ‘feminine’. Additionally, I attempt to forge a transformed, adapted concept vocabulary for dealing with this group of writers. To this end, I make use of various discourses to show how the different authors either negotiate with that discourse or prove its inadequacy to describe or explain these new femininities.

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## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that all critical and other sources (literary or electronic) have been specifically and properly acknowledged, as and when they occur in the body of my text.

Signed:

Date:

## Introduction

Rachel Cusk, in a 2009 article in *The Guardian*, ‘Shakespeare’s Daughters’, argued that, eighty-one years after *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf’s call to women writers to ‘write as women write, not as men write’ taking into account that women’s values ‘differ very often from’ men’s values, is still relevant.<sup>1</sup> Cusk maintains that women writers who pay attention to their difference from men, their distinctly female experience of ‘domesticity and motherhood and family life’ of ‘babies [and] mediocrity’ face rejection from other women, publishers, and the world at large.<sup>2</sup> Rita Felski argues that some ‘aspects of women’s lives – motherhood, romance, the love or friendship of other women – are often seen as lacking in literary and philosophical glamour. They have been deemed minor, not major’.<sup>3</sup> She assigns this discrepancy in part to the reluctance of men to read novels written by women. ‘A recent British survey found that women are more willing to read novels by male authors than men are to read the works of women. Rather than women giving up their bi-textuality, men surely need to increase theirs’.<sup>4</sup> Thus, she identifies a hegemonic homo-textism. Not only is there a

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, Great Ideas Series, (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 85-86.

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Cusk, ‘Shakespeare’s Daughters’, *The Guardian*, Review, Saturday 12 December 2009, p. 2-3.

<sup>3</sup> Rita Felski, *Literature After Feminism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Felski 2003, p. 49.

reluctance to read what Norman Mailer called the ‘lady-book’,<sup>5</sup> but perhaps even more so, there is a resistance to reading domestic fiction. As Mona Simpson asserts: ‘We are still, despite thirty years of feminism, a culture that considers the word “domestic” when applied to fiction to mean “tamer” and even “less”’.<sup>6</sup> For a brief period in the 1960s and 1970s, feminism concerned itself not only with the domestic, but with revaluing domestic novels as well. The ‘consciousness-raising’ novels and ‘mad housewife’ novels of that time led many women readers into the Women’s Liberation Movement. However, at the end of the 1970s, with more women moving into the workforce, novels about housewives went into decline and feminist attention turned away from domestic novels of realism toward more utopian (or dystopian) science fiction and women’s detective fiction and the domestic and domestic fiction began to be disregarded by feminism.

The domestic novel continues to be discounted. When Ali Smith and Toby Litt edited the annual Arts Council Anthology of new writing in 2005 they contended that ‘the submissions from women were disappointingly domestic, the opposite of risk taking’.<sup>7</sup> When she was chair of the Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction in 2007, Muriel Gray complained about the ‘lack of inventiveness and imagination’ of the entries: ‘it’s hard to ignore the sheer volume of thinly disguised autobiographical writing from women on small-scale domestic themes such as motherhood, boyfriend

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<sup>5</sup> Norman Mailer, ‘The Mary McCarthy Case: A Review of *The Group*’, *The New York Review of Books*, 17 October 1963 <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1963/oct/17/the-mary-mccarthy-case/> [accessed 17 September 2011]

<sup>6</sup> Mona Simpson, ‘A Quiet Genius’, *Atlantic Monthly* 288.5 (2001), 125-136 <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/2001/12/simpson.htm> [accessed 30 May 2011], paragraph 12

<sup>7</sup> Suzi Feay, ‘The Big Question: Is Muriel Gray right ... do female writers today lack imagination?’, *The Independent*, 20 March 2007 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/the-big-question-is-muriel-gray-right-do-female-writers-today-lack-imagination-440969.html> [accessed 25 June 2010], paragraph 4.

troubles and tiny family dramas'.<sup>8</sup> The assumption that domestic novels must be autobiographical because women writers lack imagination is, according to Domna C. Stanton, 'age-old' and 'pervasive' because it is assumed that 'women could not transcend, but only record, the concerns of the private self'.<sup>9</sup> Gray qualifies her statement by admitting that some domestic novels have been extraordinary, 'Of course it would be ridiculous to suggest that personal experience should never be plundered by novelists. The list of those geniuses who have done so is long, [...] but they have used them to create bigger, ambitious tales, that speak louder'.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, Gray does not explain how one distinguishes between 'small scale domestic themes' and the 'bigger, ambitious tales, that speak louder'; what does the 'louder' novel sound like? What does it look like? Her 'tiny, random' list of 'geniuses' featured Jane Austen, Doris Lessing, and Alice Walker: authors whose novels located the bigger issues within their attention to the small scale. Many readers failed to perceive some of the ideological concerns that they were exploring. For example, Austen's novels were, and continue to be, often read as romances. Thus, that a domestic novel might contain genius is often overlooked when it concerns itself with the home life of a woman and even more so if it is a married woman who spends some of her time at home with her children. It is assumed that such a novel's concerns will be limited to the mundane and that it will not experiment with style; that middle-class domestic lives are uninteresting. However, as Emma Parker has argued, 'the domestic sphere remains a central part of the lives of most women, and it thus remains a legitimate subject of fiction.'<sup>11</sup> In this dissertation, I

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<sup>8</sup> Muriel Gray, 'Women Authors Must Drop Domestic Themes', *The Guardian Books Blog*, 21 March 2007 <http://www.guardian.co.uk.books/booksblog/2007/mar/21/womenauthorsmustdropdomest> [accessed 25 June 2010], paragraph 2.

<sup>9</sup> Domna C. Stanton (ed.), *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987), p. 4, quoted in Maria Lauret, *Liberating Literature: Feminist Fiction in America* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 98.

<sup>10</sup> Gray 2007, paragraph 3.

<sup>11</sup> Emma Parker, "'The Proper Stuff of Fiction": Defending the Domestic, Reappraising the Parochial', in *Contemporary British Women Writers*, ed. by Emma Parker, Essays and Studies vol. 54 (Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2004), p. 14.

will identify and analyse an emergent sub-genre of contemporary literature by women that I am calling ‘New Femininities’ fiction. This fiction is about the distinctly feminine experience of contemporary domestic life written by women about the lives of heterosexual female characters that are married or in committed partnerships, often with children. These authors experiment with style and, although their novels are concerned with ‘small’ domestic lives in which little changes, work to undermine the ideology of domestic femininities.

I would like to begin my discussion of New Femininities fiction by defining the central term that underlies my approach to these novels: negotiation. Christine Gledhill defines negotiation as ‘the holding together of opposite sides in an ongoing process of give-and-take [...] Meaning is neither imposed, nor passively imbibed, but arises out of a struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience’.<sup>12</sup> She uses as her example the television show *Cagney and Lacey* which made use of the generic properties of buddy films, cop shows, soap operas, and women’s films to create a program that responded to the issues raised by feminism while still conforming to mainstream concerns. Stuart Hall argues that negotiation allows a text to ‘operate[...] with exceptions to the rule’ of the mainstream.<sup>13</sup> *Cagney and Lacey*’s audience, Gledhill holds, would be well-versed in the conventions of its various genres and would find pleasurable the ways in which the show breaks the rules. She contends that ‘[a]pproached from this perspective, the cultural ‘work’ of the text concerns the generation of different readings; readings which challenge each other, provoke social negotiation of meanings, definitions and identities’.<sup>14</sup> Readings which

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<sup>12</sup> Christine Gledhill, ‘Pleasurable Negotiations’, in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. by E. Deidre Pribram (London: Verso, 1988), p. 67-8.

<sup>13</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘Encoding/Decoding’, in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, ed. by Stuart Hall, et al (London: Hutchinson, 1980), p. 137.

<sup>14</sup> Gledhill 1988, p. 74.



recognise these negotiations ‘work with the pleasures of the text, rather than suppressing or deconstructing them’.<sup>15</sup> Negotiation, then, allows an author to rethink and reimagine without having to reject; she can use the language of the mainstream to tell new stories that maintain the pleasures of the old ones. New Femininities fiction expresses a desire to negotiate rather than reject domestic novels, romance, and femininity.

‘Femininity’ was originally a term coined by patriarchy to position female humans as inferior, weak, and dependent. Femininity has been associated with, in a negative mode, ‘undesirable attributes’ such as dependency, passivity, masochism and a propensity for maternal ‘smothering’ and in a positive mode with ‘gentleness, sensitivity and nurturance’.<sup>16</sup> It is also the term against which, as Clare Hanson argues, feminism defined itself.<sup>17</sup> Thus for my purposes, it is a term that must operate ‘under erasure’. Stuart Hall explains that terms are put under erasure because:

[T]hey are no longer serviceable – ‘good to think with’ – in their originary and unreconstructed form. But since they have not been superseded dialectically, and there are no other, entirely different concepts with which to replace them, there is nothing to do but to continue to think with them – albeit now in their detotalized or deconstructed forms, and no longer operating within the paradigm in which they were originally generated. The line which cancels them, paradoxically, permits them to go on being read.<sup>18</sup>

Femininity is ‘still good to think with’, but to do so one needs to redefine one’s terms.

Toril Moi defines ‘femininity’ as ‘a set of culturally defined characteristics’<sup>19</sup>. Ruth

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<sup>15</sup> Gledhill 1988, p. 87.

<sup>16</sup> Paulina Palmer, *Contemporary Women’s Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 14-16.

<sup>17</sup> Clare Hanson, ‘Fiction, Feminism and Femininity from the Eighties to the Noughties’, in *Contemporary British Women Writers*, ed. by Emma Parker, Essays and Studies vol. 54 (Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2004), p. 25-26.

<sup>18</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘Introduction: Who Needs “Identity”?’’, in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: 1996), p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Toril Moi, ‘Feminist, Female, Feminine’, in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, ed. by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), p. 104.

Robbins expands this definition and posits that '[f]eminine is a sociological category which defines the behavioural characteristics associated in different contexts and at different times with female biology; feminine describes gender, and tends to suggest that gender is not the natural attribute of sex'.<sup>20</sup> Femininity is a performance of the gender associated with people in possession of female biology, although the actual possession of that biology is optional. Robbins argues that 'Whatever "feminine" is, it's clearly not quite secure or fixed' nor is it an inborn characteristic of female humans.<sup>21</sup> She argues that 'if femininity is not innate, it can be rewritten, re-imagined, constructed along different lines'.<sup>22</sup> Thus, femininity can be separated from its connection to sexism and patriarchy by employing it to signify particular performances of the gender 'woman' that are performances of femininity simply by being an individual's performance of 'woman'.

I choose to speak of 'femininities' in order to encompass the multiple ways in which femininity can be performed. To borrow Robbins' wording, the plural form of femininities disrupts the notion of 'feminine' as a single category with clear limits, rewrites the category as something potentially subversive, and suggests that femininities are multiple, could be anything, anywhere, and are uncontainable.<sup>23</sup> The femininities encountered in this fiction are not all the same, they are different, singular, individual. Marnina Gonick argues that 'Traditional femininity is being undone [...] even as it is being rearticulated through an ever increasing array of contradictions, the juggling of which has always shaped experiences of femininity'.<sup>24</sup> These performances of gender are a negotiation, she argues, 'between a gendered subjectivity achieved through an

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<sup>20</sup> Ruth Robbins, *Literary Feminisms* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Robbins 2000, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Robbins 2000, p. 111.

<sup>23</sup> Robbins 2000, p. 3. She uses this wording to discuss her choice to use the term 'feminisms'.

<sup>24</sup> Marnina Gonick, 'Old Plots and New Identities: Ambivalent Femininities in Late Modernity', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 25 (2004), p. 207.

apparently autonomous agency on the one hand and a relationality built on multiplicity on the other'.<sup>25</sup> Femininity is a performance and negotiation of gender norms and strategic transgression of these norms, a transgression which, if repeated often enough and by enough different performers, becomes assimilated into those very norms.

My use of the phrase 'New Femininities' echoes Stuart Hall's concept of 'New Ethnicities' in which 'new' is not about consumption or marketing, but points to emergent and developing identities. Hall coined the term in an effort to explain the effect of 'the politics of representation' on black cultural issues. No longer was it possible to speak about the 'black experience' without taking into consideration 'very different histories, traditions and ethnic identities'.<sup>26</sup> His new formulation of 'ethnicity' was as a way to speak about issues facing 'black' people without erasing their differences. Borrowing from Hall's rousing call for the recuperation of 'ethnicity' from 'its place in a system of negative equivalences', I believe many of the same arguments can be used in a recuperation of 'femininity'. The female subject is constructed historically, culturally, politically – and the concept which refers to this is 'femininity'. The displacement of the 'centred' discourses of the West entails putting in question its universalist character and its transcendental claims to speak for everyone, while being itself everywhere and nowhere. Women are, to borrow Hall's phraseology, *femininely* located and their feminine identities are crucial to their subjective sense of who they are and colour their perceptions. This is precisely the politics of femininities predicated on difference and diversity.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Gonick 2004, p. 207.

<sup>26</sup> Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities', in *Race, Culture and Difference*, ed. James Donald and Ali Rattansi (London: Sage, in association with the Open University, 1992), p. 252.

<sup>27</sup> Hall 1992, p. 257-258. He uses 'ethnicity' where I have inserted 'femininity'.

‘New Femininities’ is also a term used by media and cultural studies in a series of seminars from 2005 to 2007 in the UK that sought to ‘open up questions about the ways in which gender is lived, experienced and represented’. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, in the introduction to a collection of media studies essays on ‘New Femininities’ published in 2011, explain that ‘speaking of “femininities” is a way of highlighting the *social production and construction of gender* and avoiding essentialism [...] What new questions, we wondered, might the notion of femininities allow us to ask? What new insights or possibilities?’<sup>28</sup> This is very much the way in which I utilise the term to think about fiction. However, media and cultural studies locate the term in such a way as to gesture toward a notion that these ‘new femininities’ are indicative of a ‘postfeminist’ world in which women are now repudiating feminism, suffering backlash, and reverting to prefeminist ideals of femininity.<sup>29</sup> They locate their evidence of new femininities in Western political discourses, employment, media stories, advertising and men’s magazines, sexual slavery and trafficking, and the mainstreaming of pornography.<sup>30</sup> Estella Tincknell argues that the limited social and political gains that women have made in the twenty-first century are ‘paralleled by a renewed discursive emphasis on femininity as a pathological condition, this time recast as a relentless drive for physical perfectibility’.<sup>31</sup> These new femininities are bodily performances of femininity through consumption of beauty products, plastic surgery, and an ideal of fitness and sexiness even for pregnant and older women and which are sold to, and swallowed whole by, women through advertisements, magazines such as *Shape Fit*

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<sup>28</sup> Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, ‘Introduction’, in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 2, original emphasis.

<sup>29</sup> See their discussion of postfeminism in Gill and Scharff 2011, p. 3-4

<sup>30</sup> Rosalind Gill and Jane Arthurs, ‘Editors’ Introduction’, *Feminist Media Studies* 6 (2006), p. 443.

<sup>31</sup> Estella Tincknell, ‘Scourging the Abject Body: *Ten Years Younger* and Fragmented Femininity under Neoliberalism’, in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, ed. by Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 83.

*Pregnancy*, and reality television programming like ‘Ten Years Younger’ and ‘Extreme Makeover’.

However, I believe such readings underestimate women’s abilities to negotiate with the images of women put forth by the media and advertising and their ability to comprehend that the ideals are an illusion achieved through the use of PhotoShop, false eyelashes, and hair extensions. As Imelda Whelehan asserts, ‘there have to be more complicated readings than this which avoid the trap of seeing women either duped into one representation or liberated by another’.<sup>32</sup> A feminism that views women as unwitting dupes who take on the ideologies of beauty, sexuality, and femininity wholesale seems to be a patronising feminism that positions the enlightened critic above the average consumer victim woman and who views her with pity for her gullibility. Whelehan argues that the ‘third wave’ is made up of women ‘who are not duped by the glossy-magazine-speak of their day, but like their foresisters have to live out the realities of a patriarchal ideology which lags behind the progress suggested by the material gains in women’s lives’.<sup>33</sup> This third wave feminism is composed of ‘a generation educated into post-structuralism and with slightly more interrogative views on identity than early second-wavers, with a much more inclusive and sophisticated approach to popular cultural forms’.<sup>34</sup> Shelley Budgeon asserts that third wave feminism approaches ‘popular culture simultaneously as a site of pleasure and an object of critique’ and seeks the places where ‘lived contradictions’ reveal the instabilities of gender categories:

Particular attention is given to those sites in which lived contradictions associated with new femininities reveal the instabilities of gender categories

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<sup>32</sup> Imelda Whelehan, ‘Sex and the Single Girl: Helen Fielding, Erica Jong and Helen Gurley Brown’, in *Contemporary British Women Writers*, ed. by Emma Parker, Essays and Studies vol. 54 (Suffolk: D.S. Brewer. 2004), p.39.

<sup>33</sup> Whelehan 2004, p. 39.

<sup>34</sup> Whelehan 2004, p. 39.

and create the possibility for reclaiming femininity through the reappropriation and resignification of dominant codings of femininity'.<sup>35</sup>

Budgeon's examples of where third wave feminism locates these sites is in the reclamation of terms such as 'S-M, pornography, the words cunt and queer and pussy and girl' as well as the underground music community. But rather than locating power in the riot grrls movement, 'zine culture, or in underground musicians, New Femininities fiction makes use of the sites that are the bastions of traditional definitions of femininity – marriage, motherhood, and the domestic. It is in the difference between a focus on youth culture and a focus on mature women's relationship to the domestic that makes the concerns of the New Femininities fiction something new. The formal devices this fiction utilises, by working to disrupt binary oppositions, like idealised third wave feminism, 'insists on the necessity of straddling binaries and working with the contradictions that result'.<sup>36</sup> The women that populate these texts are negotiating between a sense of autonomy and the dependence that domestic life entails – both being relied upon and relying on others, and living with the contradictions that this entails.

Barbara Risman resists the label 'new femininities' and queries: 'But why is it that any group of human beings with vaginas should have their collective norms called a type of femininity? [...] Why categorize innovative behavior as new kinds of gender, new femininities and masculinities, rather than notice that the old gender norms are losing their currency?'<sup>37</sup> How are the identification of new kinds of gender performance and the recognition of the decline of older performances mutually exclusive? Why not refer to new negotiations of femininity that neither completely reject nor completely embrace traditional forms as 'new femininities'? Risman does not offer another term or

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<sup>35</sup> Shelley Budgeon, 'The Contradictions of Successful Femininity: Third-Wave Feminism, Postfeminism and 'New' Femininities', in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, ed. by Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 280 and 283.

<sup>36</sup> Budgeon 2011, p. 280.

<sup>37</sup> Barbara J. Risman, 'From Doing to Undoing: Gender as we Know it', *Gender and Society* 23 (2009), p. 84.

way of discussing these changes except for a concept of ‘undoing gender’ which she borrows from Judith Butler. ‘Undoing gender’ seems to suggest that these new performances make the gender binary disappear rather than renegotiating its boundaries. However, I would argue that this ‘innovative behaviour’ constitutes individuals who are simultaneously doing and undoing gender. ‘New femininities’ are negotiations of gender which create new versions of femininity that are individual and particular and not necessarily ‘normal’. Ellen Rooney asserts that women are ‘always already raced, classed, and sexualised, and by *contradictory* processes, which introduce differences within every construct of identity, so that there is no singular woman reader, or singular white woman reader, or singular black woman reader, or singular lesbian reader’.<sup>38</sup> There is no singular feminine or domestic woman.

The texts by British, Irish, and Canadian writers that I include in my New Femininities genre – Rachel Cusk’s *Arlington Park* (2006), Anne Enright’s *The Gathering* (2007), Tessa Hadley’s *Accidents in the Home* (2002), Zoë Heller’s *Notes from a Scandal* (2003), A.L. Kennedy’s *Paradise* (2004), Charlotte Mendelson’s *When We Were Bad* (2007), Alice Munro’s *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001), *Runaway* (2004), and *Too Much Happiness* (2009), Julie Myerson’s *The Story of You* (2006), and Ali Smith’s *The Accidental* (2005) – explore new femininities that are simultaneously a response to features of contemporary Western life, a refusal of romantic paradigms, and a challenge to the ideal of sexual fulfilment as the only female goal. Without becoming what Nicci Gerrard calls the ‘feminist novel of awakening’,<sup>39</sup> or embracing what Paulina Palmer identifies as ‘the “role-model”

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<sup>38</sup> Ellen Rooney, ‘Introduction’, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, ed. Ellen Rooney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 5.

<sup>39</sup> Nicci Gerrard, *Into the Mainstream: How Feminism Has Changed Women’s Writing* (London: Pandora, 1989), p. 113.

tradition of women's fiction',<sup>40</sup> they turn a sober, and at times chilling, eye on female desire, romantic love, motherhood and sexual competitiveness. The result is not always comfortable reading. Most importantly, these novels share, I contend, a repertoire of marked stylistic features—unreliable narration, an ironic voice, the use of free indirect discourse, and interrogative endings – that work to call into question authentication by narration, wreck the boundaries between binary oppositions, rethink sentimental domestic fiction in a negotiation with contemporary and traditional mores, unseat the comfort and safety of the domestic, and undermine notions of truth, identity, and meaning by suggesting that these concepts are impossible to define and are constantly 'in process'. These texts are not pioneering the use of these formal techniques nor are they doing anything brand new with them. Rather they utilize their form in order to stir up the contradictions that underpin their characters' lives. No longer necessarily yoked to the home, they still remain conflicted by the pressures of the institutions of heterosexual marriage and motherhood. They lead lives that show the contradictions that second wave feminism was unable to solve – how to square heterosexual desire and motherhood with an autonomous sense of self.

Their use of formal techniques that can be found in postmodern novels – second person narration, unreliable narration, and *paralepsis* (characters who know things that they could not possibly know) – rather than undermining their status as realist novels works to introduce contradiction and to draw attention to 'the surface complexity of languages (discourses)'.<sup>41</sup> Susan Watkins argues that part of the postmodern condition is a loss of belief in overarching theories or explanations:

In post-modernity most people no longer believe in the explanatory power of any one of these narratives [metanarratives of religion, scientific theories of

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<sup>40</sup> Palmer 1989, p. 52.

<sup>41</sup> Maggie Humm, *Practising Feminist Criticism: An Introduction* (London and New York: Prentice Hall, 1995), p. 133.



progress, economic and social theories, and psychological theories], or in the way of looking at the world they imply [...] Humans no longer seem to be the rational, unified creatures, capable of sound judgement and ethical behaviour that we believed them to be in the modern period. Instead, they become fractured, inconsistent and irrational beings who are forced to turn to a multiplicity of small-scale, local explanations to account for the various phenomena they encounter.<sup>42</sup>

The attention that New Femininities fiction pays to small-scale, local conditions and their comfort with the fractured, inconsistent and sometimes irrational behaviour of their characters is their postmodern response to feminism. They are not rejecting it, but can no longer believe in a ‘women’s writing of self-discovery’, to borrow Imelda Whelehan’s terminology.<sup>43</sup> As Maggie Humm argues, ‘The characteristic of postmodernism most specific to feminism is that it works within the very system it attempts to subvert’.<sup>44</sup> Rather than subverting feminism, these novels highlight the impossibility of the metatheory of feminism; the impossibility that a one-size feminism could fit anyone, even white, middle-class, heterosexual women.

This fiction fits securely into the traditions of woman-centred novels, feminist fiction, and the wider tradition of realism. They are the descendants of the mad housewife novels and consciousness-raising novels of the 1960s and 1970s and are the serious sisters of the chick lit and mumlit novels of the 1990s and 2000s. They are informed by queer theory which, to use Palmer’s words, ‘has its basis in the perception that sexuality and sexual practice, rather than being “natural”, are cultural constructs’.<sup>45</sup> Robbins asserts that ‘white women in white-dominant societies do not see themselves as having a race that needs analysis at all. Similarly, heterosexual women tend not to

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<sup>42</sup> Susan Watkins, *Twentieth-Century Women Novelists: Feminist Theory into Practice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 123.

<sup>43</sup> Imelda Whelehan, *The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), p. 89.

<sup>44</sup> Maggie Humm, *Border Traffic: Strategies of Contemporary Women Writers* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1991), p. 14.

<sup>45</sup> Palmer 1989, p. 47.

analyse their sexuality, taking it as a natural “given”<sup>46</sup>. However, these novels use the tools of queer theory to call into question the ‘normality’ and givenness of white, middle-class, heterosexual femininity and to suggest that the hegemonic ideal of white womanhood does not fit, nor is it liveable for, any woman. They negotiate with all these literary traditions and critiques in order to offer an insight into the contradictions at the root of domestic postmodern life. Although these texts confine themselves to the domestic concerns of white, Western, heterosexual, middle-class women, their concern with the nature of identity and ‘femininity’ is compelling. The women that people this fiction lead lives that are isolated and limited by their confinement to a middle-class domestic space. They have few friendships and no contact with people of other ethnicities or sexualities. Yet, this isolation allows them the luxury of thinking about their ‘selves’, the luxury of contemplating the questions: ‘Who am I? What am I?’ that are raised by attempting to fulfil the roles of wife and mother. These texts exceed the norms of the institutions of motherhood, marriage, and self. They push the boundaries while depicting lives that remain fairly static.

One of the genres that the New Femininities fiction negotiates is the feminist novel. Gayle Greene argues that regardless of an author’s political affiliations, ‘we may term a novel “feminist” for its analysis of gender as socially constructed and its sense that what has been constructed may be reconstructed – for its understanding that change is possible and that narrative can play a part in it’<sup>47</sup>. They must concern themselves with ‘female solidarity’, according to Maria Lauret, and have a vision of female community and a ‘demand for an autonomous political space for women’<sup>48</sup>. Lisa Maria Hogeland suggests that ‘A feminist novel in [the opinion of some feminists] must perform a

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<sup>46</sup> Robbins 2000, p. 97.

<sup>47</sup> Gayle Greene, *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> Lauret 1994, p. 19 and 31.

systemic critique of patriarchy rather than merely depict individual character flaws'.<sup>49</sup> Numerous studies identify as the core texts of feminist fiction Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), and Jean Rhys's *The Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* (1977), Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973), Lisa Alther's *Kinflicks* (1976), and Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973).<sup>50</sup> What these novels share is a concern with the lives of women, with their sexuality, their domesticity, their aspirations, and the conditions which curtail their freedom and happiness. Lessing, Plath, and Rhys's novels are often called 'prefeminist' because their publications predate the beginning of the Women's Liberation Movement (1967) and are identified as the texts that were read and discussed in the early days of the movement – Sylvia Plath is seen as 'the archetypal victim of patriarchy'<sup>51</sup> and Lessing's novel is quoted extensively by Greene in her discussion of the tradition of feminist fiction. Hogeland terms the novels of the seventies 'consciousness raising novels'. These novels worked in conjunction with the women's movement to radicalise women's views of their lives under patriarchy and to encourage them to begin collective action.

Hogeland contends that second wave feminism was a literacy, 'a way of reading both texts and everyday life' that recognized the ideologies that underpinned patriarchy and effected women's daily lives.<sup>52</sup> She attributes the explosion of feminism in the first half of the 1970s to the spread of this literacy through the reading of the 'consciousness-raising' novel. According to Hogeland, the CR novel served to

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<sup>49</sup> Lisa Maria Hogeland, *Feminism and its Fictions: The Consciousness-Raising Novel and the Women's Liberation Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p. 84.

<sup>50</sup> See Gerrard 1989; Greene 1991; Hogeland 1998; Humm 1991; Maroula Joannou, *Contemporary Women's Writing: From The Golden Notebook to The Color Purple* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000); Lauret 1994; Palmer 1989; Whelehan 2005.

<sup>51</sup> Hogeland 1998, p. 15.

<sup>52</sup> Hogeland 1998, p. 1.

‘interpellate their readers as feminist readers’.<sup>53</sup> She holds that CR novels follow a particular overplot. The female protagonist undergoes an experience of ‘reflexive perceptions’ that help her to begin to recognize Betty Friedan’s ‘problem that has no name’. This experience leads her to begin changing her life. In the process of determining ‘that marriage and motherhood are no longer solutions for her’, ‘she works through a series of confrontations with individuals and institutions that try to keep her in her place’ – friends, family, doctors, husbands, educators.<sup>54</sup> However, she argues, ‘the realist novels [of feminism of the 1970s] about heterosexual women tend to critique individual marriages and relationships rather than institutions’ of marriage and motherhood. Only rarely do they ‘develop a political edge anything like that in the radical feminist analyses being published at the same time’.<sup>55</sup> The New Femininities fiction resists the ‘reflective perceptions’ and the epiphanic recognition of the ‘problem that has no name’ but they end up being a critique of the institutions of marriage and motherhood by exploring the dynamics of very individual and specific marriages and family lives.

Whelehan asserts that CR novels fill a need that feminist discourse was unable to satisfy. ‘[F]eminist discourse had trouble giving positive expression to love, sexual attraction, and maternal feelings, because these emotions were regarded as tied up in the mystifications of patriarchal ideology’. However, ‘the CR novels portrayed them in all their ambiguity’.<sup>56</sup> New Femininities fiction shares with the CR novel its concern with the contradictions, the love/hate, of settled domestic life, and its resistance to the ‘classic romance ending’. CR novels usually end, in Hogeland’s words:

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<sup>53</sup> Hogeland 1998, p. 45.

<sup>54</sup> Hogeland 1998, p. 36-37.

<sup>55</sup> Hogeland 1998, p. 38.

<sup>56</sup> Whelehan 2005, p. 116.

with ‘the doubt, uncertainty, and inconclusiveness which are the experience of many women in this era’. The CR novel ends on the verge of changes, or in the early stages of changes, in the protagonist’s life. These endings reflect the widespread sense in the seventies that the Women’s Liberation Movement’s effects were only beginning to be felt. [The unfinished ending] serves as well to invite readers to ‘read in’ their own changes to finish the narrative.<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, New Femininities fiction often ends on the verge of change. However, if, in the 1970s, the novels ended inconclusively because of a sense that Women’s Liberation has not quite solved the equation of heterosexuality and empowerment, the New Femininities fiction ends interrogatively because it is a problem that remains unsolved. Lauret asserts that ‘one of the distinguishing features of feminist realism is a Utopian dimension to even the grimmest tale of women’s suffering’.<sup>58</sup> Thus, although feminist fictions present love, sex, and mothering in all their ambiguity and refuse to solve the problems that their characters face, they maintain a sense of being on the verge of a new world in which things will be improved. This Utopian dimension is one that is not shared by the New Femininities fiction. They depict love, marriage, and motherhood in all its contradictions without any sense that the world is on the verge of a transformation for the better.

The time that many New Femininities fiction characters spend in these fraught relationships and in the home, while continuing to maintain working identities as writers, postgraduate students, and part-time teachers, means that their narratives share much with the subgenre of CR novels, the ‘Mad Housewife novel’. The ‘Mad Housewife’ novels trace their beginnings to Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*. These novels flourished between 1962 and 1975 when stories about housewives seem to fall out of favour because of what, Hogeland suggests, ‘might be seen as a shift in who counts as an “ordinary” or “average” woman’.<sup>59</sup> The ‘Mad Housewife’ novels concern a

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<sup>57</sup> Hogeland 1998, p. 44.

<sup>58</sup> Lauret 1994, p. 82.

<sup>59</sup> Hogeland 1998, p. 154-155.

phenomenon remarked on and experienced by Lessing's Anna Wulf while canvassing for the Communist Party. She is greeted by 'lonely women going mad quietly by themselves, in spite of husband and children or rather because of them. The quality they all had: self doubt. A guilt because they were not happy'.<sup>60</sup> These housewives going quietly mad populated much of the CR novels of that time. The protagonists are intelligent, capable women who are driven mad by the realities of domesticity.

According to Whelehan:

The central protagonists of these 'mad housewife' novels are well educated, intellectually questing and often artistically inclined women. Their marriages are based on the solid foundation of compatibility and companionship. They freely enter into these partnerships, secure in the knowledge that this is a new era of equality and self-definition and that their marriages will be different to that of their parents. These are not novels of breadth and incident; much of the drama takes place in the women's heads or arises in the narrating of the most mundane of incidents.<sup>61</sup>

New Femininities fiction fits this description as well. Intelligent and well educated, these women entered marriage expecting equality and difference from their parents' marriages, and their novels are not ones of breadth and incident. Similarly, both 'Mad Housewife' novels and New Femininities fiction share an interest in the price to self of domesticity. Whelehan contends, 'That the women quite often are frustrated artists, writers, or would-be intellectuals makes the point that it is the life of the mind which domestic quietude so often quashes'.<sup>62</sup> These 'Mad Housewife' novels name, in Greene's words, 'not only the housewife's malaise but also articulat[e] areas of women's lives that were formerly taboo[...] female sexuality, pregnancy, child rearing, women's relation to their bodies, 'body image', eating – starving, fasting, purging, gorging'.<sup>63</sup> The New Femininities fiction resists this obsession with the body, the

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<sup>60</sup> Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (London: Flamingo, 1993), p. 161, quoted in Watkins 2001, p. 66.

<sup>61</sup> Whelehan 2005, p. 75-76.

<sup>62</sup> Whelehan 2005, p. 7-8.

<sup>63</sup> Greene 1991, p. 60.

requisite abortion, the fumbling sex with a lover, and menstruation; topics which were revolutionary for the CR novels to confront and which became almost obligatory.<sup>64</sup> I would argue that they resist them because the female body as site of conflict is not what interests these texts. Rather, they are interested in the conflicts in subjectivity and identity which arise from simultaneously attempting to occupy the roles of wife, mother, and self. They are uninterested in consciousness-raising. Greene dismisses novels that do not perform consciousness-raising as ‘postfeminist’ (for example, Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye* (1988)), but I would argue that because they lack CR, she misreads them – she is unable to see the value of stories of femininity which are not about empowerment and which do not portray women as heroines or victims, but are about survival and about the darker side of what it means to be a woman. Greene seems to identify feminist fiction with a desire for big sweeping changes – the New Femininities fiction is concerned with the small negotiations that make a life liveable.

In the 1980s, the feminist bestsellers moved away from the domestic sphere into the realm of bonkbusters or ‘sex and shopping’ novels in which the heroines held powerful, well-paid jobs and ‘children are as likely to be abandoned or absent from the main space of the narrative while the heroine plays out her bid for ultimate power in whatever business empire she finds herself’.<sup>65</sup> The protagonists, like actual businesswomen of the 1980s, dress in clothing that amplifies their gender while coopting the masculine suit. Whelehan argues that this worked to defuse the sense that by taking up power that traditionally belonged to men they were attempting to be men: ‘Femininity was exaggerated to neutralize the overt masculinity of the roles that such high-achieving businesswomen occupied’.<sup>66</sup> I would argue that it is because of the

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<sup>64</sup> See Greene 1991, p. 64 and Whelehan 2005, p. 66

<sup>65</sup> Whelehan 2005, p. 30.

<sup>66</sup> Whelehan 2005, p. 208-209.

conflicts between motherhood and a high-powered career that the bonkbusters ignore children who spend their dependency with nannies and out of their mother's thoughts; how would she achieve her quest for power if she were hurrying home to put her children to bed. She has the money to hand domesticity over to paid help.

At the same time as the 'bonkbuster', Lauret identifies a strand of feminist fiction which she calls 'backlash fictions' that seem to repudiate the gains of feminism by critiquing their flaws.<sup>67</sup> Her examples include Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Sue Miller's *The Good Mother* (1986). She sees this trend as reflecting Judith Stacey's contention that feminism had retreated from the politics of patriarchal domination and embraced the New Right's focus on family. Stacey identifies 'a shift in priorities and ideology' which 'enable[d] feminists to retrieve the pro-life, pro-family moral principles from the political Right' accompanied feminism's move into conservatism.<sup>68</sup> This new conservative feminism was characterised by three features:

First, it promotes a 'pro-family' stance that views sexual politics, and particularly the politicisation of personal relationships, as threatening to 'the family'. Second, it affirms gender differentiation and celebrates traditionally feminine qualities, particularly those associated with mothering. Finally, the new conservatives believe that struggle against male domination detracts from political agendas they consider more important.<sup>69</sup>

The focus on home and family of the New Femininities fiction does not arise from this conservatism. They do not present family as 'the last haven in a bureaucratic capitalist and totalitarian socialist world' – they depict domesticity in all its difficulty and contradiction – but they refuse to reject the family either.<sup>70</sup> Family and domesticity are realities which these characters must *negotiate*, with all of the special seriousness which

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<sup>67</sup> Lauret 1994, p. 165-186.

<sup>68</sup> Judith Stacey, 'Are Feminists Afraid to Leave Home? The Challenge of Conservative Pro-family Feminism', in *What is Feminism?*, ed. by Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 223.

<sup>69</sup> Stacey 1986, p. 222.

<sup>70</sup> Stacey 1986, p. 225-226.



my argument attaches to that term. They do not revalue traditional femininity, but rather offer a negotiated version which is able to wreck the boundaries between the gendered binaries allowing their characters to occupy both sides – mind and body, passive and active, and head and heart. Finally, they do not ignore male domination, but evaluate the new masculinities of sensitive, helpful, involved husbands and fathers. Despite their change from the rigid and macho men of the CR and ‘Mad Housewife’ novels, marriage is no less fraught; equality is still elusive. Here, too, they negotiate and neither embrace and romanticise heterosexual relationships and men nor reject them.

In the 1990s, chick lit became the best-selling genre of woman-centred fiction. Supposedly offering narratives of female ‘choice’, which surprisingly seem to mirror ‘normative notions of femininity’<sup>71</sup>, these contemporary novels in fact focus almost exclusively on acquiring a romantic relationship with a man, simultaneously infantilising their narrators and offering (once again) sexual identity as the only ‘authentic’ female identity. Crucially, as Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff argue, this is a ‘femininity [that] is defined as a bodily property, rather than a social structural or psychological one’.<sup>72</sup> This bodily femininity ‘is depicted as requiring endless self-surveillance, monitoring, dieting, purging and work’ and it is the presence of this ‘unruly body that needs constant disciplining’ that is, according to Gill and Herdieckerhoff, constitutive of the chick lit novel.<sup>73</sup> Heroines are, despite a commitment to career, naïve and passive, frequently in need of rescue, and destined for a ‘happy ever after’.<sup>74</sup> This concern with femininity as a bodily property parallels the

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<sup>71</sup> Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff, ‘Rewriting the Romance: New Femininities in Chick Lit?’, *Feminist Media Studies* 6 (2006), p. 499.

<sup>72</sup> Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff, ‘Rewriting the Romance: New Femininities in Chick Lit?’, *Feminist Media Studies* 6 (2006), p. 498.

<sup>73</sup> Gill and Herdieckerhoff 2006, p. 497.

<sup>74</sup> Gill and Herdieckerhoff 2006, p. 494-498

bodily obsession of the Mad Housewife novels and is, again, an obsession that the New Femininities fiction resists.

Whelehan argues that chick lit is the descendant of the CR novel of the 1970s. They, she contends, are evidence that ‘once again women writers of popular fiction [are] returning to the domestic to articulate a view of contemporary women’s lives as bounded by home and family rather than work and ambition’.<sup>75</sup> She argues that although it seems that chick lit rejects the notion of the personal being political, ‘you do not have to read many of these texts to observe a shared note of anxiety about the fate of femininity after feminism and the culture of achievement it has seemed to breed’.<sup>76</sup> These are not novels that have necessarily turned away from feminism, but rather do not know how to negotiate femininity in a postfeminist era. Their attention to issues of feminism is not the only parallel:

There are moments when the sentiments expressed in these books collide with those of the feminist bestsellers, not least because, in many cases, the narrative journey is primarily emotional. Through it, she comes to understand the limits placed upon her as a woman. The contemporary answer to encountering such obstacles is to find a very individual way round them, rather than rail against the system, but what is the reader to make of these new kinds of open endings? [The endings allow] the possibility of a dual reading, but [are] ultimately conservative.<sup>77</sup>

Their individual efforts to bypass the limits placed upon them by the gender ‘woman’ allow them to rehabilitate the romance story and eke out happy endings for themselves. What is conservative about their ‘happy endings’ is that, although the novel has located real issues about gender limitations, the ending in romantic entanglement allows the heroine to ignore this knowledge and submerge herself in happily ever after. What their encounter with the limits of gender illuminates, Whelehan argues, is the questions that

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<sup>75</sup> Whelehan 2005, p. 172.

<sup>76</sup> Whelehan 2005, p. 6.

<sup>77</sup> Whelehan 2005, p. 196.

Second Wave feminism was unable to answer ‘around relationships, sexuality, and romantic love’.<sup>78</sup> She asserts that ‘[h]eterosexuality dominated the debates in the Women’s Movement – both in its association with male power and institutional practices of oppression, such as marriage, and in debates about how women might seek liberation through sex’.<sup>79</sup> The question of how to square heterosexuality with feminism was left ultimately unanswered and ‘[f]eminist politics became increasingly silent on the topic, leaving women to negotiate privately the best solutions they could’.<sup>80</sup> Thus, chick lit is not a rejection of feminism per se, but rather an attempt at negotiation between romance and heterosexuality on one side and feminism and autonomy on the other. Their solutions are unsatisfying because they entail ignoring the conflicts. This approach to conflict is one of the ways in which New Femininities fiction exceeds chick lit; they resist the happy ending because the contradictions will not simply go away.

Whelehan identifies a subgenre of chick lit which she calls mumlit. Mumlit is made up of novels concerned with heroines who are married and have children. ‘Partnered and settled, these women find that men are now part of the problem and that monogamy, which implicitly underpins the chick lit narrative, is hard work’.<sup>81</sup> Much like their chick lit sisters, these women have fantastic jobs, but whereas the chick litters struggle with the notion that work is not enough, mumlit protagonists struggle with attempting to navigate their lives while being torn between work and home. Whelehan argues that ‘mumlit inevitably beckons to more serious topics through the depiction of the ways in which women suddenly have little choice about their destinies when the

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<sup>78</sup> Whelehan 2005, p. 205.

<sup>79</sup> Whelehan 2005, p. 132.

<sup>80</sup> Whelehan 2005, p. 101.

<sup>81</sup> Whelehan 2005, p. 196.

realities of childcare set in'.<sup>82</sup> What they reveal is that motherhood and work make demands that the protagonists cannot reconcile with each other:

It seems that in chick lit, like Hollywood, there is no benign way to present the career woman, since all these texts, conservative or otherwise, vividly depict the incompatibility of motherhood and work; yet the novels seem to offer implicit critiques of the system that treats women who reproduce with contempt.<sup>83</sup>

The contempt that she identifies at the root of the economic and social system that discounts maternity underlies the problems with domesticity after second-wave feminism. Women are fed conflicting stories about motherhood: on the one hand it is portrayed as the pinnacle of feminine achievement with an intelligent and well-adjusted progeny who can only be properly parented by their secure attachment to their mothers and on the other hand, motherhood is viewed as thankless, boring, and degrading; it is beneath well-educated women who are meant for something better. Whelehan ascertains a discrepancy between form and content – mumlit's concerns chafe against the lightheartedness of chick lit: 'At least for the singleton there is the gloss of the romance, however ironically narrated; mumlit presents problems less easy to shrug off with a little whimsical humour'.<sup>84</sup> The New Femininities fiction resists whimsical humour in order to avoid shrugging off the problems of the contradictions of the happy housewife and the miserable harridan in the home. Additionally, where the mumlit novel suppresses the gravity of the issues it has raised, ending 'in predictable chick lit style, which doesn't just offer a happy resolution to the lovers but ends with traditional social events such as weddings or christenings',<sup>85</sup> the New Femininities fiction resists the conventional public expressions of marriage and motherhood as capable of tying up the loose ends that the texts elucidate.

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<sup>82</sup> Whelehan 2005, p. 194.

<sup>83</sup> Whelehan 2005, p. 195.

<sup>84</sup> Whelehan 2005, p. 196.

<sup>85</sup> Whelehan 2005, p. 200.

New Femininities fiction arises, too, from the tradition of feminist novels, but unlike chick lit and mumlit, they do not offer love as the solution or the reward; romantic, conjugal, and maternal love are not adequate compensation nor do they make the difficulties ‘all worthwhile’. However, New Femininities fiction does not reject love either. They allow their characters to continue to desire love and even to believe in it while simultaneously exposing the contradictions of the love plot. Like the feminist novels, New Femininities fiction ends without resolution. Hogeland argues that the CR novels’ open endings served to allow readers to draw their own conclusions and make their own choices. New Femininities fiction’s interrogative endings work to call into question the satisfaction of any of the previous endings – reconciliation, independence, rejection of love, marriage or birth ceremonies, embracing of love, sexual freedom, renunciation of sexuality, because none of these are adequate. Because they negotiate with romance and feminist fiction, a reader might hope for love and understanding and a return to the bosom of the family or escape to some semblance of freedom, but these novels resist such resolution. Simply working from home cannot circumvent the contradictions of marriage and motherhood – New Femininities fiction’s protagonists are already there and the contradictions are just as difficult to negotiate and the dissatisfactions continue.

Lorna Sage identifies a ‘new – revisionist – realism’ that she calls ‘the novel of the middle ground’.<sup>86</sup> She associates Iris Murdoch, Edna O’Brien, Margaret Drabble, and Mary McCarthy with this kind of novel and argues that this realism, rather than being a conservative move in order to reinstate women in the confines of domesticity, worked to unsettle just as effectively as the anti-realism that was being valued by postmodernist critics. She connects it to the history of nineteenth-century realist novels:

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<sup>86</sup> Lorna Sage, *Women in the House of Fiction: Post-War Women Novelists* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 71 and 111.

Perhaps after all the traditional novel was *rightly* anti-utopian? Density, detail, particularity, local truths, all the paraphernalia of representation acquire a new urgency and poignancy now that they have lost a large part of their prestige. This revaluation of realism has something nostalgic about it, of course. But it also reflects dissent: a protest on behalf of fiction-as-family, as the middle ground where genders and generations can be pinned in focus together. We arrive back home, but home has changed.<sup>87</sup>

The New Femininities fiction takes place in this changed home and are protesting fiction-as-family. Home is no longer the haven of the ‘happy housewife’ yet it is also not a place from which one can simply walk away; its contradictions adhere and are the contradictions of postmodern gender ideology. Women are empowered and fabulous, but they are still the domestic workhorses and the sources of love and nurturing of the next generation. This exploration of contradictions places these novels firmly in the realist tradition of the nineteenth century with George Eliot, Henry James, and Gustave Flaubert. As Norma Clarke argues, ‘Throughout the nineteenth century, novelists had explored the contradictions in women’s lives, the lack of fit between ideal and reality, the stranglehold of myth and ideology’.<sup>88</sup> Even if the myths and ideology of what it means to be a woman have changed, they continue to exercise a stranglehold on their gendered subjects.

I started out wanting to look at novels about married women to see if it was possible to square marriage and motherhood with gender studies. I began to look at novels that had a married woman as the central protagonist and found myself particularly attracted to novels of domestic stasis; novels that maintain a close focus on the interior life confined within a domestic setting. Some of the protagonists do travel, but never on holiday, rather they travel in order to retrieve a brother’s body or to go to Canada for alcohol rehabilitation. Thus, New Femininities fiction ends up being about

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<sup>87</sup> Sage 1992, p. 71.

<sup>88</sup> Norma Clarke, ‘Feminism and the Popular Novel of the 1890s: A Brief Consideration of a Forgotten Feminist Novelist’, *Feminist Review* 20 (1985), p. 93, quoted in Whelehan 2005, p. 65.

particular works rather than authors. However, there are some authors, Anne Enright for example, who tend to write fiction and nonfiction whose concerns and aesthetics are with new domestic femininities. I also wanted to retain a focus on novels written by women, because just as I think the domestic deserves attention, I equally believe that women writers deserve notice. Perhaps I should qualify the term ‘women’ as functioning in erasure as I am not asserting that one can easily group all biological females together in a universal container, still the category continues to be useful to think with. Nor am I asserting that New Femininities fiction could only be written by biological females. Men could write New Femininities fiction if they are open to the contradictions and performances of femininities that negotiate with the traditional and the feminist while neither fully rejecting nor embracing either. As novels accrued, I found that the ones that held my attention, fascinated and perplexed me, were concerned with the nature of the self, with a self that was plural and ‘in process’, and made use of particular narrative devices – ironic voice, unreliable narration, free indirect discourse, and interrogative endings – that exceeded their roles as simply telling stories. The relationship between these narrative devices and exploration of self and gender then became the focus of my project expanding its boundaries to address work that is not about married women as central characters, or, in the case of A.L. Kennedy’s *Paradise*, is not about a married woman at all.

Emma Parker cites a debate within the Orange Prize at its inception in 1996 which contended that British women’s writing was dreary, parochial, and confined to the domestic while American women’s writing was sharper and vigorous. She quotes Val Hennessy’s assertion that ‘American women writers seem to be more energetic and exciting. They seem to be able to lift themselves out of their own domestic routine in their books. They go away from all that, move out of their own spheres and go further

abroad for their experiences'.<sup>89</sup> I would question whether what these critics found lacking in British women's domestic fiction might not be what Lauret identifies as definitive in American realist texts, 'Utopian elements which posit the possibility of social change'.<sup>90</sup> The British novel resists the American impulse to envision a brighter and better future. It is exactly this anti-Utopian impulse which I found most valuable in the texts that I have chosen to examine as representative of New Femininities fiction. These fictions put the contentions about British versus American fiction to the test – are small domestic novels dreary and parochial or do they prove that one does not need to go abroad to write ambitious stories; that the redemptive self is not the only interesting story? All the New Femininities writers are British except Alice Munro who is Canadian and whose writing embraces not just the domestic, but the small town and the insular, repeating the same stories again and again, while always managing to say something new and fresh, and Anne Enright who is Irish and makes use of claustrophobic domesticity to upset the gendered mind/body binary. I would argue that Canada and Ireland inhabit a middle ground between Britain and the United States and I identify these authors' affinity with small-scale British domestic fictions. New Femininities fiction proves not only that the domestic is worthy of attention, but that the small domestic British woman-authored novel is able to do remarkable things.

However, just as my criteria expanded to allow in other types of fiction, novels were eliminated which seemed to fit my original criteria. For example, Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* seemed to be a perfect fit with my topic. Her narrator, Eva, is married with children, she utilises an ironic voice, she is an unreliable narrator, and the novel concludes in an arguably interrogative fashion. However, her use of the

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<sup>89</sup> Nigel Reynolds, 'All-women book prize shortlist attacked', *Daily Telegraph*, 15 April 1996 quoted in Parker 2005, p. 2.

<sup>90</sup> Lauret 1994, p. 83.



narrative devices does not allow her novel to exceed the role of simply telling stories. She is not comfortable with the necessary contradictions, both formal and within content, with which New Femininities fiction is centrally concerned. Another example that helps to elucidate my elimination process is Fay Weldon's *She May Not Leave*. Weldon makes use of a fascinating postmodern narrative technique; her first person narrator also tells the story of her granddaughter's marriage and motherhood in third person narration making use of analepsis. Grandma appears to be all-knowing and all-seeing in relation to her granddaughter's life. However, the novel fits much better with the tradition of consciousness-raising novels. At its conclusion, Hattie realises that she finds marriage and motherhood unliveable and would rather leave them to the ruthless women willing to fight for them. This epiphanic realisation and rejection of marriage and motherhood illuminates the novel's lack of subtlety and comfort with the discomfort of contradictions in women's lives and, like the conclusions of the mumlit novels, feels artificially imposed in the name of a feminist happy ending. It does not actually resolve the issues it has raised; it sidesteps them.

The 'New Femininities' fictions allow their language the necessary freedom to multiply meanings and enact the narrative conflicts they raise. By doing so, they undermine the binary oppositions which structure a gendered world. These works are ahead of theory. They do a clever job of being both highly appealing to female readership while situated in a complex way with feminism – and even have something pleasurable to offer literary critics in their masterful uses of narrative devices. I argue that the models of existing criticism would do a disservice to these texts because much of the criticism either overvalues the theoretical and, as Robbins repeatedly points out in her analysis of literary feminisms, 'forgets the literariness (the forms and language)

of the literary text',<sup>91</sup> or seeks to identify a 'feminine' language the definition of which serves to reinforce and revalue patriarchal notions of femininity. The readings that this fiction requires necessitate a negotiation with established models of feminist literary criticism.

Robin Mills, Lynne Pearce, Sue Spaul, and Elaine Millard identify three major stages in the development of feminist theory: 'first, a critique of male canonical writing, complaining about the negative images of women; secondly, a concentration on the establishment and tracing of a female literary tradition, re-valuing those texts which had been written by women; and thirdly, a calling into question of gender difference'.<sup>92</sup> One of the foundational texts of feminist literary criticism was Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979) which used the metaphor of the madwoman as the key to female authorship. However, they had to ignore other metaphors in the works they analysed in order to make madness seem to be the most fitting explanation. As Mills et al argue, 'The main problem [...] with Gilbert and Gubar's mode of analysis is that it appears to assume a universal archetypal female subject which ignores the changing modes of femininity which become possible at particular historical moments'.<sup>93</sup> Nor does the madwoman metaphor offer much to a reading of the New Femininities fiction. Elaine Showalter with *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (1977) introduced Gynocriticism 'whose aim', according to Mills et al, 'was not only to read women's literature for its portrayal of women's experience [...] but who sought to identify an authentic female voice in

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<sup>91</sup> Robbins 2000, p. 65.

<sup>92</sup> Sarah Mills, Lynne Pearce, Sue Spaul, and Elaine Millard (ed.), *Feminist Readings/Feminists Reading* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 4.

<sup>93</sup> Mills et al 1989, p. 149.

women's writing: a style and genre which was distinctly female'.<sup>94</sup> However, the search for an authentic female voice once again ignores the differences of women in order to create a unified history. The notion of a female voice often leads critics into the morass of attempting to pin down what exactly would constitute a female voice. How would it be different from a male voice? And what is it about women that makes them different? Answers to these questions have led to over-valuing what has traditionally been patriarchy's definition of the feminine: passivity, relationality, and the body. The third stage, post-structuralists represented by Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva, called into question any division based upon gender because it is 'socially produced, through language and through the interaction of different discourses. Thus, no meaning is always already there'.<sup>95</sup> Thus there is no intrinsic gender, "masculinity" and "femininity" do not pre-exist the discursive processes that give them meaning: they are constructed through those processes'.<sup>96</sup> This is a powerful theoretical position to reach, but one that proved difficult to negotiate in practice.

Hélène Cixous in her experimental essay 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays' (1975) called attention to the power of language to revolutionise gender relations by identifying that 'dual, hierarchized oppositions' lay at the root of patriarchy and organise discourse. She posits that the only truly creative people are those who can reconcile the different genders within themselves. She calls for an *l'écriture féminine* that writes in such a way as to exceed the rules of discourse, that overflows them; a writing that comes from a connection to the mother and is written in her milk. This writing can be produced by both men and women, as her example of James Joyce exemplifies, but Cixous argues that women are much more likely to be able to write this

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<sup>94</sup> Mills et al 1989, p. 84.

<sup>95</sup> Mills et al 1989, p. 118.

<sup>96</sup> Mills et al 1989, p. 118.

way because of their experience of otherness. I will argue that her call to transgress the boundaries of binary oppositions does not require a discourse that is excessive and poetic as this might imply, and as Cixous's choice of examples seems to suggest. The formal features of the New Femininities fiction answer this call by writing in ways that straddle the boundaries between binary oppositions of gender without setting down on either side. To use Cixous's examples, the use of unreliable narration, free indirect discourse, an ironic voice, and interrogative endings allows the characters in these novels and short stories to be both active *and* passive, head *and* heart, intelligible *and* palpable. They can fulfil Cixous's call to occupy both the body and the mind but without having to gush or babble in a feminine language that is somehow more 'natural' to women.

The basis of Cixous's argument for *l'écriture féminine* is powerful and persuasive. The root of patriarchy is a division of the world into couples and that one who embraces within her self qualities that fall on both sides of the binary oppositions attains a 'bisexuality' that Cixous defines as 'the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes, evident and insistent in different ways according to the individual, the nonexclusion of difference or of a sex'.<sup>97</sup> This bisexuality is one which recognises that a person never fully occupies one side or the other of the binary oppositions. Women have qualities that are gendered masculine and men have ones that are gendered feminine. Embracing this 'bisexuality' is the basis of Cixous's *écriture féminine*. Kari Weil explains that Cixous's theoretical practice is strongly informed by Jacques Derrida. She asserts that '[t]he term '*écriture*' itself is one that Derrida uses to correspond to the notion of *différance* and refers to a process of textual production in which meaning is never fully present, never totalizable, but, rather, always deferred or

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<sup>97</sup> Hélène Cixous 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays', in *The Feminist Reader*, ed. by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997b), p. 93.

in process'.<sup>98</sup> Therefore, although Cixous identifies that patriarchy divides the world into two, through Derrida she is aware that these binaries are illusory. Ruth Robbins argues that in Cixous's *écriture féminine*, '[t]he binary relationship that appears to affirm the presence and meaning collapses, not into meaninglessness, but into a different and deferred set of possibilities that is not foreclosed (already decided and fixed)'.<sup>99</sup> The binary relationship can no longer limit definitively, but instead opens up possibilities to think differently.

However, the question of how to straddle or subvert these binaries without situating oneself on one side or the other was a fundamental problem of second wave feminism. This difficulty resulted in theories that either embraced the feminine/negative side of the binary, finding value in the characteristics that had traditionally defined women's inferiority, or that worked to upset these binaries and allow women to occupy the masculine/'positive' side, asserting that women possess these characteristics and are just as valuable as men. Kari Weil argues that the position French feminists found themselves in, wanting to use the tools of Derrida, but wanting to retain gender as a useful category, was a difficult one:

As we turn to the notion of 'feminine writing' we begin to see the difficult line which French feminists tread, wanting, on the one hand, not to collude with a system of thought which has constructed identities such as femininity only to subordinate them, and on the other hand, to discover or, at least, imagine a different 'feminine' which has been heretofore oppressed and unspoken because it is unspeakable within the patriarchal language.<sup>100</sup>

Finding a version of 'feminine' that was different, oppressed, and unspeakable within patriarchal language is impossible for the very notion of masculine and feminine underlie patriarchy. Often their new femininity was defined by the very terms they were

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<sup>98</sup> Kari Weil, 'French Feminism's *écriture féminine*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, ed. by Ellen Rooney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 160.

<sup>99</sup> Robbins 2000, p. 171.

<sup>100</sup> Weil 2006, p. 160.

rejecting whether it was a revaluing of the feminine negative or an embrace of women's ability to personify the masculine and 'positive' side.

Cixous is aware of these dangers. She writes that the solution to the 'couples' that dictate gender relations 'is not a question of appropriating their [patriarchy's] instruments, their concepts, their places for oneself or of wishing oneself in their position of mastery'.<sup>101</sup> Cixous struggles with how to use the tools of poststructuralism to rethink the position of women. Toril Moi argues that Cixous's project is to imagine what woman is if she does not fit into the feminine/negative side of the binary oppositions, most particularly the definition of woman as passive:

'Either woman is passive or she doesn't exist'. Her whole theoretical project can in one sense be summed up as the effort to undo this logocentric ideology: to proclaim woman as the source of life, power and energy and to hail the advent of a new, feminine language that ceaselessly subverts these patriarchal binary schemes where logocentrism colludes with phallogentrism in an effort to oppress and silence women.<sup>102</sup>

However, the proclamation of woman as the source of life, power and energy, Cixous's *l'écriture féminine*, often reads as a revaluation of the body that appropriates patriarchy's instruments through a reclamation and elevation of the maternal function, the female body, and patriarchy's definition of femininity to claim a position of superiority if not mastery. Woman, because of her marginality and her life-giving function, is better suited to liberate the world. Along the way she is defined as chaotic and flowing, equated to the gush of her menstrual blood and mother's milk. This is an essentialism that reinforces the patriarchal definitions of women as ruled by her bodily functions, hysterical, and unreliable.

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<sup>101</sup> Cixous 1997b, p. 101.

<sup>102</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, New Accents Series (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 105.

That is to say, Cixous's recourse to the body is problematically rooted in the traditional opposition of body and mind and a recognition that women need to be willing to occupy both; to straddle that binary of mind and body. A reconciliation of the mind and body, a recognition that women are both, is revolutionary. Her vision of a writing style that allows women to work in the in-between, to inhabit the middle ground between binary oppositions, identifies a way forward in which language can be used as a tool to undermine the oppression of absolute opposites:

To admit that writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live, undoing the work of death – to admit this is first to want the two, as well as both, the ensemble of the one and the other, not fixed in sequences of struggle and expulsion or some other form of death but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another. A process of different subjects knowing one another and beginning one another anew only from the living boundaries of the other: a multiple and inexhaustible course with millions of encounters and transformations of the same into the other and into the in-between, from which woman takes her forms (and man, in his turn; but that's his other history).<sup>103</sup>

This kind of writing does not regard one side of an opposition as superior to the other or seek to value a previously discounted characteristic, but rather find a place where 'both/and' can be inhabited rather than 'either/or'. It has a regard for the porous boundary where the binaries overlap.

However, as Robbins explains, Cixous's 'writing enacts a resistance to a closed system of duality, through a mode of writing which is rhetorical, excessive and poetic rather than logical, ordered and prosaic'.<sup>104</sup> She recognises the limits that binary thinking has placed on gendered beings, but her response to a 'closed system of duality' is to introduce her own binaries – rhetorical/logical, excessive/ordered, poetic/prosaic –

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<sup>103</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, and Hampshire: Macmillan, 1997a), p. 353.

<sup>104</sup> Robbins 2000, p. 171.

and place the value on the feminine side. Furthermore, at times her discourse seems to be claiming a biological value to women's writing:

Her rising: is not erection. But diffusion. Not the shaft. The vessel. Let her write! And her text knows in seeking itself that it is more than flesh and blood, dough kneading itself, rising, uprising openly with resounding, perfumed ingredients, a turbulent compound of flying colours, leafy spaces, and rivers flowing to the sea we feed'.<sup>105</sup>

She situates woman securely on one side of the bodily binary oppositions. She is not erection, male, but diffusion, female. She is not the shaft, male, she is the vessel, female. It is a valuation that comes at the expense of claiming women's ability to be both body and mind and by privileging the body serves to invert the hierarchy; what is feminine becomes the positive value and masculine becomes negative. Cixous envisioned the liberation of women through a writing style that was distinctly female, rooted in her body and in her experience as 'Other'. Cixous's underlying argument, that it is dividing the world into couples that maintains women's position in society, is convincing when she asserts: 'Woman must write her body, must make up the unimpeded tongue that bursts partitions, classes, and rhetorics, orders and codes, must inundate, run through, go beyond the discourse with its last reserves'.<sup>106</sup> However, it is not in a rhetorical, excessive, poetic prose style that women (and men) can transcend gender boundaries; it is in a style that allows them to straddle these oppositions.

I attempt to identify the characteristics of this 'style' and to look at the language these authors use without having to label it 'feminine' and by so doing establish, build, or reinforce a boundary with some undefined 'masculine' language which stands in for all occurrences that are not 'feminine'. Additionally, I attempt to forge a transformed, adapted concept vocabulary for dealing with this group of writers. As Maggie Humm

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<sup>105</sup> Cixous 1997b, p. 97.

<sup>106</sup> Cixous 1997b, p. 100.



argues ‘Feminist criticism has no party line but brings together many ways of looking which in turn draw on different disciplines and debates’.<sup>107</sup> To this end, I make use of various discourses to show how the different authors either negotiate with that discourse or prove its inadequacy to describe or explain these new femininities. Marilyn R. Farwell argues that lesbian criticism ‘must find a way to accommodate some of the revolutionary postmodern insights of feminist and lesbian thinking on textuality and at the same time validate both traditional and non-traditional stories as lesbian and as disruptive’.<sup>108</sup> I attempt to do something similar for New Femininities fiction in order to accommodate the revolutionary within the traditional validating domestic white middle-class femininities as disruptive.

In the first chapter I argue that New Femininities fiction utilises unreliable narration in order to not only upset the binaries of reliable/unreliable, truth/lie, but make them irrelevant and call into question the system of authentication by narration. Ali Smith’s *The Accidental* unseats the reassurance of the domestic and disrupts the binaries of comfort and discomfort. Julie Myerson’s *The Story of You* disturbs the boundaries between truth and untruth, reality and delusion. Alice Munro’s short fiction renders a vision of self and autonomy that is dependent on relationships, that cannot happen in isolation, and her unreliable narration works to draw attention to the conflicts of subjectivity inherent in her characters’ desires for both connection and disconnection. Unreliable narration and the subject of the next chapter, first person ironic narration, overlap and in fact may be performed by the same narrator, for example Barbara Covett in Zoë Heller’s *Notes on a Scandal* is both unreliable and ironic. Unreliable and ironic

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<sup>107</sup> Humm 1995, p. xi.

<sup>108</sup> Marilyn R. Farwell, *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives*, The Cutting Edge: Lesbian Life and Literature series (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996), p. 14.

narration are ways that first person narrators call into question the certainties around which gender identities are fashioned.

In the second chapter, I suggest that, rather than embracing Cixous's call to transgress the boundaries of binary oppositions through a discourse that is excessive, poetic, and feminine, the use of the ironic voice allows the New Femininities' fictions' characters to occupy both sides of binary oppositions. Anne Enright's *The Gathering* uses her ironic voice to disrupt the mind/body 'couple' – her ironic hovering figures an embodied intellect. Zoë Heller's *Notes on a Scandal* reworks Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* and negotiates the boundary between masculine spectator and feminine spectacle by casting a woman in the role of spectator. A.L. Kennedy's *Paradise* problematises the boundaries of masculine 'alcoholic' and feminine 'accomplice'.

The third-person narrators of the New Femininities' fiction embed their irony in free indirect discourse. In the third chapter, I assert that free indirect discourse is used to call into question the truth of what is said and who says it and thus undermines the ideology of marriage and motherhood that serves to limit women's lives. In their ironic asides rendered in free indirect discourse the characters negotiate a particularised way to occupy these roles without the need to sacrifice their autonomy or reject relationships. Rachel Cusk's use of free indirect discourse in *Arlington Park* functions to expose the unnaturalness of 'natural' feminine gender roles, voice her characters' inner rebellion, and suggest the potentiality of subversive performances of femininity. Charlotte Mendelson's *When We Were Bad* uses free indirect discourse to enact a self divided and to articulate a way for her character to contain her needs for autonomy within the confines of her relationships. Tessa Hadley's *Accidents in the Home* uses free indirect discourse to negotiate between the genres of anti-romance and the sentimental

domestic novel and rereads Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* utilising Henry James's embrace of the imagination of pleasure.

The first three chapters share a concern with narration and the various ways that the New Femininities fiction has of dealing with the binaries that shape reality. They share an overarching concern with challenging the fundamental certainties that have been thought to organise gender and limit women's possibilities. I look at the way these authors negotiate narrative form to talk about and respond to feminist theory and ideas of femininity.

The fourth chapter extends my interest from narration to how the structuring of a text serves to underline the unseating of certainties. In this chapter, I argue that interrogative endings offer a proliferation of questions rather than closure to the New Femininities fiction. They negotiate with traditional endings and refuse the certainty implied by the conventional happy ending suggesting that no ending is adequate for a tales of domestic femininities. Just as feminism could not square itself with heterosexual domesticity, fiction is unable to resolve the equation and allowing these contradictions to stand without recourse to a Utopian sensibility is what makes these fictions new. The concerns New Femininities fiction has with unseating uncertainties highlights the performativity of femininity and how negotiable gender really is.

## Chapter One: The Unreliable Narrator and the ‘New Femininities’ Novel

The female narrators of the ‘New Femininities’ fiction are darkly funny, ironically self-deprecating, clever and above all not to be trusted. When they are honest they are brutally so, but they are also unreliable. They reveal either too much, using details that they could not know; too little, leaving the reader grappling with what is missing; or continuously call into question the veracity of what they have said. These narrators are not mad, mentally deficient, wilfully deceptive, or alarmingly naïve, as common definitions of ‘unreliable narrator’ imply. These narrators are unreliable because they do not necessarily know what really happened and I would argue that these novelists are simultaneously resisting the urge to make definitive sense of their stories and frustrating the reader’s ability to do so. They are wilfully ‘incompetent’ if ‘competence’ is accepted as meaning ‘the capacity to deal adequately with a subject’.<sup>1</sup> Their subjects are such that there is no way to adequately deal with them. Ali Smith’s *The Accidental* weaves a beguiling story (told from multiple viewpoints) about a mysterious young

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Competence’, in *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, ed. by John Simpson, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)  
<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.stir.ac.uk/view/Entry/37567?redirectedFrom=competence#eid> [accessed 3 June 2011]

woman who turns up at a family's holiday home and intervenes unpredictably in their lives bringing both comfort and discomfort, disrupting female (and male) bourgeois values: career, marriage, children, and a settled home. For Smith, 'truth' is problematic. She uses multiperson narration and *paralepsis* to create dialogism and to undermine the veracity of her narrators and reinforce the elusiveness of 'truth'. Julie Myerson's *The Story of You* is told by a delusional narrator grieving the loss of her baby daughter. For much of her novel, she does not know, is unable to discern, or actively resists allowing herself to see the truth. Alice Munro's short stories are narrated by speakers who do not trust 'the truth' or the need their audience has for it. Her narrators repeatedly thwart the meaning of their narratives by calling into question the authenticity of their tales; they are self-cancelling. They are unwilling to say definitively whether events happened the way that they have said. They withdraw from authorizing their stories. The New Femininities authors' use of an unreliable narrator does not simply upset the binaries of reliable and unreliable, truth and lie. Rather it makes these binaries immaterial; to use Cixous's terms, it goes beyond the 'reserve-discourse'; it 'wrecks' the 'regulations and codes' of storytelling.<sup>2</sup> In choosing to present their lives through the eyes of narrators who question the whole system of authentication by narration, their authors sabotage the truth-value of their own stories.

Wayne C. Booth first used the term 'the unreliable narrator' in his 1961 study *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. According to Booth, the 'fallible' or unreliable narrator is distanced from the 'implied author', a construct that 'carries the reader with him [sic] in judging the narrator'.<sup>3</sup> For Booth, a narrator is *reliable* 'when he speaks for or acts in

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<sup>2</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, and Hampshire: Macmillan, 1997a), p. 355.

<sup>3</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 158.

accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), and *unreliable* when he does not'.<sup>4</sup> This theory requires that the reader be able to locate an implied author in the text, distinguish his norms, and ascertain if his narrator transgresses these norms. It also carries an implied sense that 'normal' is a universal and concrete term. As Ansgar Nünning argues: 'The trouble with seemingly self-explanatory yardsticks like "normal moral standards" and "basic common sense" is that no generally accepted standard of normality exists which can serve as the basis for impartial judgments'.<sup>5</sup> Another question Booth leaves unanswered is whether the transgression of these norms entails immorality or a naïve worldview. What if a narrator is 'normal' and 'moral', but still unreliable?

Even though Booth can be criticised for his confident assumptions about readerly competence, coherent authorial consciousness, and the transparency of a literary work's singular moral position, his main point still has considerable force, namely that the reader's retrospective discovery of the distance between implied author and narrator is crucial to our understanding of the literary work: 'If [the narrator] is discovered to be untrustworthy, then the total effect of the work he relays to us is transformed'.<sup>6</sup> Elke D'hoker argues that this transformation should not provoke a dismissal of the story as lies or delusions, but rather instigate a focussing of attention:

The point of using an unreliable narrator is not to have the whole story dismissed as false, but rather to draw attention to the narrator and the way in which he or she tells, distorts, or conceals his or her tale. It is therefore important to consider unreliability in the novel as a fictional construct with a particular purpose.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Booth 1961, p. 158-159.

<sup>5</sup> Ansgar F. Nünning, 'Reconceptualizing Unreliable Narration: Synthesizing Cognitive and Rhetorical Approaches', in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 97.

<sup>6</sup> Booth 1961, p. 158.

<sup>7</sup> Elke D'hoker, 'The Unreliable Ripley: Irony and Satire in Robert McLiam Wilson's *Ripley Bogle*', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 52 (2007), p. 464.

When faced with unreliability, then, the reader needs to think about why a novelist might choose to employ an unreliable narrator; what is she trying to call attention to by attributing the narration to someone who is not being completely honest? Unreliability in a narrator is not necessarily ‘a matter of lying’, Booth observes. Rather, ‘[i]t is most often a matter of what [Henry] James calls *inconscience*; the narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him ... [Unreliable narrators] make stronger demands on the reader’s powers of inference than do reliable narrators’.<sup>8</sup> For Booth, these demands perplex the reader. As he argues about Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, ‘few of us feel happy with a situation in which we cannot decide whether the subject is two evil children as seen by a naïve but well-meaning governess or two innocent children as seen by a hysterical, destructive governess’.<sup>9</sup> Following D’Hoker, one must ask why James chooses to write a story that complicates the difference between the binaries of innocent and evil, well-meaning and destructive? Is it simply to make his readers ‘unhappy’? Or has he complicated the ‘truth’ of the governess/child relationship? Booth identifies the unreliability of the narrator of the short story, but he does not concern himself with why James utilizes unreliable narration.

Booth attempts to identify two kinds of unreliable narrators. The first has shortcomings we can ignore: ‘even though the narrator may ... have serious faults, we are scarcely aware of them.’ But one feels altogether less sanguine about the second: although this narrator may have ‘some redeeming qualities’, the reader cannot accept him as a trustworthy guide.<sup>10</sup> The problem with Booth’s taxonomy is these categories are slippery and could describe most narrators. Here I agree with Frank Kermode: ‘[a]ll

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<sup>8</sup> Booth 1961, p. 159.

<sup>9</sup> Booth 1961, p. 346.

<sup>10</sup> Booth 1961, p. 300.

narrators are unreliable.’<sup>11</sup> However, as Kermode observes, ‘[t]he trouble is not that there are unreliable narrators but that we have endorsed the fiction of the “reliable” narrator.’<sup>12</sup> In other words, we still subscribe to the humanist thinking that supposes that reliable narration is possible. Kathleen Wall argues that, in the last century, novels began to reflect a changing attitude towards reliability in response to the changes in theories of subjectivity brought about by poststructuralism: ‘The standard definitions of an unreliable narrator presuppose a *reliable* counterpart who is the “rational, self-present subject of humanism”, who occupies a world in which language is a transparent medium that is capable of reflecting a “real” world.’<sup>13</sup> She contends that with the poststructuralist vision of subjectivity as fluid, in process, and unstable, the reliability of narrators too has become questionable:

These questions are brought into play by our recognition that human subjectivity is not entirely coherent; that it is indeed a sight [sic] of conflict; that, like unreliable narrators, we frequently ‘lie’ to ourselves, and – with just a shadow of awareness – avoid facts that might undermine the coherence or the purpose of narratives we construct about our lives. [...] But if ‘subjectivity ... is precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak’, then we are forced to think about the issue of unreliable narration as a matter of degree rather than as the moral aberration of more traditional definitions.<sup>14</sup>

All narrators are now in some way unreliable because subjectivity itself is unreliable. Interestingly, unreliability is most common, as Bruno Zerweck argues, in realist contemporary novels: ‘most texts from our century featuring unreliable narrators are not experimental, or at least not radically anti-illusionist. It is the realist or only partly anti-illusionist literature of the twentieth century that is largely characterized by unreliable

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<sup>11</sup> Frank Kermode, ‘Secrets and Narrative Sequence’, *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980), pp. 89-90.

<sup>12</sup> Kermode 1980, p. 90, n 7.

<sup>13</sup> Kathleen Wall, ‘*The Remains of the Day* and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration’, *Journal of Narrative Technique*, 24 (1994), p. 21, quotation from Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> Wall 1994, p. 21-2, the quotation is from Weedon 1987, p. 33.



narrators'.<sup>15</sup> New Femininities fiction works within a sub-genre of realist writing where narration is unreliable because 'reliability is regarded as an impossibility'.<sup>16</sup>

Unreliability is now the norm. A narrator 'who exposes his cognitive or epistemological limitations is arguably much more in tune with our notions of "normality" and of the possibilities of its fictional representation'.<sup>17</sup> Unreliability draws attention to the narrator, but also serves to render the work realistic.

This fiction, with its unreliable narrators, both aids and frustrates the reader's desire to decipher 'what really happened'. This simultaneous give and take, according to Wall, 'not only refocuses the reader's attention on the narrator's mental processes, but deconstructs the notion of truth, and consequently questions both "reliable" and "unreliable" narration and the distinctions we make between them'.<sup>18</sup> To what end? It changes the focus from 'what really happened' and an attempt to determine the narrator's moral directive or the values of the implied author to a focus on the conflicts of subjectivity:

Moving to the end of this century, however, writers may be far more concerned with the causes and consequences of split subjectivity than with values. The result may be a diminishing focus upon the conflict between the norms and values of the implied author and those held by the narrator [...] and a greater focus on interior conflicts, conflicts of subjectivity, that assert or manifest themselves in unreliable narration.<sup>19</sup>

These conflicts of subjectivity are exemplified in the unreliable New Femininities narrator as she simultaneously narrates and tries to make sense of her experience. Her attempt to articulate something which she herself cannot quite grasp lies at the root of the unreliability of her narration. This 'something' that is difficult to translate into

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<sup>15</sup> Bruno Zerweck, 'Historicizing Unreliable Narration: Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative Fiction', *Style*, 35 (2001), [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2342/is\\_1\\_35/ai\\_97074176/print](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2342/is_1_35/ai_97074176/print) [accessed 11 December 2007], paragraph 46.

<sup>16</sup> Zerweck 2001, paragraph 47.

<sup>17</sup> Zerweck 2001, paragraph 47.

<sup>18</sup> Wall 1994, p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> Wall 1994, p. 38.

language could be described as the ‘truth’ of the narrator’s experience. This is not a truth that can be reliably proven; its veracity is contingent and immaterial. Rather its telling allows its authors to try to get beyond what Cixous calls ‘the ultimate reserve-discourse’ to speak in a ‘language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes’.<sup>20</sup> Their narratives seek to tell the truth in a way that does not require the repudiation of its binary opposite, the untruth; sometimes truth is a lie and sometimes lies are true.

### **Comforting Discomfort: Ali Smith’s *The Accidental***

Ali Smith’s *The Accidental* is deeply concerned with truth and authority. Its first person narrator’s unreliability questions the veracity of narratorial authority by claiming the plots of movies as her life experience and in her actions in the third-person narratives focalised through the four members of the Smart family; the children, Astrid and Magnus, and the parents, Michael and Eve. The use of this multivoice narration allows an insight into the five characters and the contradictions revealed serve to complicate the ‘truth’ of each character’s experience. Alhambra, the first-person narrator, speaks for herself, but she chooses to relay information that does not reveal much about her. Her characterisation is achieved by the composite impressions offered by the differing accounts of her in the variously focalised third-person sections. She is, by and large, a truth-teller, but her truths are received as outrageous stories and her lies as truth. Ali Smith makes use of young female grifters and drifters in her plots in order to disrupt the domestic status quo. Alhambra appears at the Smarts’ rented summer cottage at a pivotal time in their lives. Each member is expecting to return home to an upheaval: Astrid is starting secondary school, Magnus is implicated in a prank that resulted in the

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<sup>20</sup> Cixous 1997a, p. 355.

suicide of a classmate, Michael's sexual exploits with female students is about to come to light, and Eve is facing the deadline for a book which she is unable to write. Alhambra's presence brings the family together during their holiday, introduces comfort into the discomfort of the 'substandard' summerhouse, but her theft of the entire contents of their permanent home, including the doorknobs, disrupts the comfort of the settled domestic home. The domestic is meant to reassure, but it is exactly that reassurance Alhambra unseats. She makes the uncomfortable comfortable and intrudes discomfort into the comfortable domestic environment. She wrecks the partition between the binary of comfort and discomfort and undermines the authenticity that narrating is supposed to offer.

Alhambra's first-person narrative opens and closes the novel reinforcing a sense that it is in some way her narrative. The structure of the novel makes use of what Brian Richardson calls 'multiperson narration' and which resembles Dickens's use of both an omniscient third-person narrator and the first person narration of Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*. Unlike Dickens, however, Smith avoids the omniscient and opinionated heterodiegetic narrator and uses a limited third person narration that is confined to the knowledge of its focalising character. Richardson argues that the presence of more than one narrator in a novel exceeds the parameters of narrative identified by Gerard

Genette:

The novelist's choice, unlike the narrator's, is not between two grammatical forms, but between two narrative postures (whose grammatical forms are simply an automatic consequence): to have the story told by one of its 'characters,' or to have it told by a narrator outside of the story.<sup>21</sup>

Genette only recognises the 'either/or' of narrative postures and not the possibility that a novelist could choose to utilise or resist both postures. This is exactly what Smith

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<sup>21</sup> Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 244.

does; she chooses to have both an outside narrator and a character within the story speak. What multiperson narration allows a novelist to achieve, Richardson argues, is to ‘allow the free play of multiple voices and [...] generate] a greater degree of dialogism than more conventional techniques typically allow’.<sup>22</sup> The many voices speaking in Smith’s text allow the ‘truth’ of what they relate to be called into question. The reader is aware that the woman they refer to as ‘Amber’ is in fact called ‘Alhambra’ and that they have, as a group, based their perception of her on a misunderstanding; they misname her in both actual name and in their perception of her motivations and truthfulness. Their perceptions of her are unreliable.

The reliability of Alhambra’s personal narrative is questionable as well. She knows details about her conception that she could not possibly know. This is a use of ‘paralepsis’ which Ruediger Heinze defines as ‘the phenomenon of a first-person narrator knowing and/or sensing something to which he/she should not have access by all that we as readers know about human cognition and perception’.<sup>23</sup> The impossibility of some of her narration renders her unreliable, but rather than invite a wholesale rejection of her narration this paralepsis invites the reader to make sense of it. Ruth Ronen argues that ‘impossibilities, in the logical sense, have become a central poetic device, which shows that contradictions in themselves do not collapse the coherence of a fictional world’.<sup>24</sup> Fiction is able to create multiple and contradictory worlds that, like Jorge Luis Borges’s multiverses, feature ‘an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times. This network of times [...]

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<sup>22</sup> Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2006), p. 68.

<sup>23</sup> Ruediger Heinze, ‘Violations of Mimetic Epistemology in First-Person Narrative Fiction’, *Narrative* 16 (2008), p. 282.

<sup>24</sup> Ruth Ronen, *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 55.

embraces all possibilities of time'.<sup>25</sup> Nor does the presence of impossible narration undermine a novel's status as a realist text. Jan Alber, et al argue that realist texts often make use of what they term 'impossible narration'. 'Standard realist texts, for example, are full of unnatural elements such as narratorial omniscience, instances of analepsis, streamlined plots, definitive closure, or what James Phelan calls "redundant telling"'.<sup>26</sup> These instances of impossible narration do not necessarily undermine the realism of the text, but serve to draw attention to its concerns. As Tamar Yacobi asserts, often deviances and peculiarities can be explained by the novel's functional design.

Yacobi argues that 'The work's aesthetic, thematic and persuasive goals invariably operate as a major guideline to making sense of its peculiarities as well as its more regular features'. This is 'because the opposite is also true; such peculiarities serve as a pointer, if not as a key, to the work's functional design'.<sup>27</sup> The novel's concern with what is the truth and who possesses it is echoed and reinforced in *Alhambra's* impossible knowledge. The question of 'how does she know' raises the question of 'how does anyone know' and renders truth elusive and situational. The function of the novel is echoed in its thematic content. Yacobi asserts that the functional mechanism can be used to tame the deviances and peculiarities it encompasses:

The *functional* mechanism imposes order on the deviant terms of the ends requiring or justifying that deviance. Whatever looks odd – about the characters, the ideas, the structure – can be motivated by the work's purpose, local or overall, literary or otherwise.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Garden of Forking Paths', in *The New Media Reader*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), p. 34.

<sup>26</sup> Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson, 'Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models', *Narrative* 18 (2010), p. 130.

<sup>27</sup> Tamar Yacobi, 'Fictional Reliability as a Communicative Problem', *Poetics Today* 2 (1981), p. 117.

<sup>28</sup> Tamar Yacobi, 'Authorial Rhetoric, Narratorial (Un)Reliability, Divergent Readings: Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata*', in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 111.

Creating a narrator whose reliability is always in question and placing her in contrast to the usually reliable third-person narrator whose tale is all about the obscurity of truth upsets the reassurance of the realist text as reinforcing the way things are. In a discussion of Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm*, Heinze puts into practice Yacobi's functional design argument to assert that the structure of Moody's novel, a third-person narrative that is revealed at the last moment to have been the product of one of its characters, can be explained by its concern with how perspective affects the nature of what is told:

As an authorial reporter of the events, the narrator is clearly heterodiegetic, narrating through a variety of focalizers, one of which he is himself. As Paul, he is homo- and autodiegetic. His double status as character and paralectic narrator at the end of the novel undermines the 'reporter' status of the narrator function throughout the majority of the narrative, as the reliability of everything that has been told to us has to be reevaluated. In fact, as readers we realize that our reevaluation cannot reach closure, that on the level of the narrative, reliability cannot be decided, that the violation of mimetic epistemology coming with a first-person narrator narrating about himself and others from an authorial position is indeterminate.<sup>29</sup>

Much like *Alhambra*, Paul's status as both narrator and character undermines the reliability of the novel and leaves it undecidable. It is possible that *Alhambra* narrates the entire novel, that her paralectic abilities include the reading of the other characters' minds, and it is this possibility, even if one chooses to reject it, that draws attention to the work's purpose, to its questioning of authority and truth. Heinze connects *The Ice Storm*'s undecidability with the novel's concern with 'a time which the characters experience as contradictory, making no sense and beyond the roster of received cognition'.<sup>30</sup> Smith's novel, too, concerns a time which her characters find contradictory; they found comfort in an alien place, but returned home to find that it had become alien.

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<sup>29</sup> Heinze 2008, p. 291.

<sup>30</sup> Heinze 2008, p. 291.

A noteworthy example of the contradictoriness of the narrative and its interest in the contingency of truth and authority can be illustrated by the novel's attempt to pin down who or what Alhambra is. The family call her 'Amber' because when she introduces herself to Michael, he mishears her. 'She had rung the doorbell this morning. He had opened the door and she'd walked in. Sorry I'm late, she'd said. I'm Amber. Car broke down'.<sup>31</sup> He assumes that she is there on legitimate business to meet his wife, Eve. Eve assumes that she is 'something to do with Michael' (*The Accidental*, p. 80). Alhambra does not explain her presence, taking advantage of the family's willingness to make assumptions and not question her appearance in their house and lives. Their perceptions of her accent, their attempts to locate her origins geographically, reveal their own interests and needs rather than reflecting how she might actually sound. Astrid believes that she is interesting and different and hears her accent as Irish or American, accents that are both familiar and exotic (*The Accidental*, p. 31). Michael is attracted to her and interprets her accent through the veil of a pivotal sexual awakening at age ten with two Swedish women; he perceives her as 'foreign [...] Scandinavian' (*The Accidental*, p. 65). Eve is looking for comfort and reads comfort into Alhambra's voice: 'You're Scottish, aren't you? I can hear it in your voice. I love Scotland. I haven't been for years. My mother was Scottish' (*The Accidental*, p. 91). The effect of these perceptions is contradictory and can in no way convey how Alhambra might really sound – her voice is co-opted by each member of the Smart family for their own purposes: to read Amber as a cool friend, a potential sexual partner, or a familiar and reassuring reminder of the past.

Alhambra is allowed to speak for herself, to narrate her own story. However, her account is filled with paralepsis and histories that are not her own. She introduces

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<sup>31</sup> Ali Smith, *The Accidental* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 61. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition and noted parenthetically in the body of the text.

herself by relating the story of how she was conceived in the café of a cinema, a story that does not reveal much detail about who *she* is, but which is deeply connected to her name: ‘I am Alhambra, named for the place of my conception’ (*The Accidental*, p. 3). She describes details of the café where she was conceived on a table, but these are details which her mother could not notice laying on the table, and which Alhambra cannot know: ‘Behind the till the half-submerged oranges in the orange juice machine went round and round on their spikes; the dregs at the bottom of the tank rose and settled, rose and settled’ (*The Accidental*, p. 1-2). She variously describes her life by tracing it through the historical events of 1968 and the plots of films from the sixties through the eighties: she is a child of *The Sound of Music*: ‘My mother was a nun who could no longer stand the convent. She married my father, the captain; he was very strict. She taught us all to sing and made new clothes out of curtains’ (*The Accidental*, p. 103), and of *Mary Poppins*, *National Velvet*, *My Fair Lady*, and *Rosemary’s Baby*, among others. Each film’s recognisable plot is claimed as the events of her life and accumulates into a web of contradictions. These are not the details of her life but rather the account of a childhood spent watching movies. She traces the history of cinema and of the particular Alhambra theatre in which she was conceived; she traces the history of the name ‘Alhambra’ and its various incarnations as a palace, a theatre, and a minivan, rather than relate the details of her life or of the ‘truth’ of who she is. The stories she tells are clearly not the truth, but their blatant untruthfulness calls attention to the fact that the system of authentication by narration is flawed. Even if she told a story of growing up and sexual awakening, it might be no more true than her claim to have lived the plot of *Dirty Dancing*. She finishes the novel by claiming to be ‘everything you ever dreamed’ (*The Accidental*, p. 306). She leaves open the possibilities. She can be anyone



or anything she wants and likewise, by refraining from defining herself, she can be anyone or anything her perceivers want.

Alhambra's resistance to defining herself conclusively echoes the novel's concern with what is true and its resemblance to what is false or fake. Alhambra challenges the certainties that the other characters have about the world and their desires to tame it by placing these certainties into words. Eve and Astrid both tell stories about Adam, Astrid's father, but rather than being drawn into their reminiscences (Eve) or fantasies (Astrid), Alhambra resists the story. She tells Astrid she is 'disgusting' and Eve that she is 'boring'. "Is that the highpoint, the true-blue, the secret-can't-be-told everything-must-go ultimate all-singing all-dancing story-of-you?" she asks Eve. "Jesus God you're going to have to tell me something a bit more interesting than that" (*The Accidental*, p. 196). Despite the 'truth' of Eve's story, it is unable to fulfil the role of a narrative that encompasses Eve and it fails at the all-important requirement; it is not interesting. Alhambra questions Magnus's belief in the concrete truthfulness of maths. When he tells her that the equals sign was invented by Leibniz, she wants to know how he knows this and how he knows that it is true:

But how do you know it's true? Amber said.

Well, Magnus said. Assuming I read it in a book, because I can't remember exactly when or how I learned it as a fact, but assuming I read it in a book, well, then it will have been in a book, which makes it presumably true.

Why would being in a book make it true? Amber said.

Because if it was in a book it was presumably in a schoolbook, a textbook, Magnus said, and textbooks tend to have been written by people who have studied a subject for a long enough time, and well enough, to be able to teach it to people who know a lot less about it. And also. Books are edited by editors who check the facts before they publish them. And even assuming I didn't learn it from a textbook but from a teacher, then the same applies.

What, Amber said, teachers are edited by editors who check the facts before they teach them? (*The Accidental*, p. 251).

She undermines all of his assurances, all of his safe places of truth, books and teachers, the existence of people who possess fact and truth. His repetition of 'presumably'

suggests that knowledge can be taken for granted. Magnus uses book knowledge and maths to both make sense of the world and to reassure himself that it is safe and logical. Alhambra questions not only the facticity of fact, but even that there is a way to definitively know something. She questions the whole system of authentication by narration: just because it is written in a book or related by a trusted authority does not mean it is the truth. She equally questions whether something that seems ludicrous might be reality. She draws a pair of pictures for Astrid: in the first a little girl has a drawing of her mother. It is 'a stick figure with its arms stuck stupidly out, funny jaggy hair and one eye much bigger than the other and a scrawl for a mouth' (*The Accidental*, p. 120). In the second one, the mother is waiting at the school gates and looks exactly like her daughter's picture. Astrid finds these pictures hilarious because they call into question the assumption of what real people look like. She thinks about 'how clever the idea of it is, the mother standing waiting at the school gates looking like she exists in the real world exactly the stupid childish way she has been drawn i.e. as if the way the child drew her was actually true and real after all' (*The Accidental*, p. 122). It is humorous because it is ludicrous. It goes against everything one knows about what mothers look like. The picture raises the possibility that the child's representation of her mother does not reflect her childishness but rather the reality of her mother or the mother reflects her child's perception of her, she is determined by that perception. Truth and falsehood can be indistinguishable and do not rely on surety or presumption. Rather Amber introduces discomfort into Magnus and Astrid's confidence in 'truth'.

New Femininities fictions work to call it into question and to elucidate the contingent nature of 'truth', and Smith iterates the discomfiture aroused by disrupting the truth-value of narrative. 'Amber', the Smarts' perception of Alhambra, brings comfort and ease to their uncomfortable summer rental described repeatedly by Astrid

as ‘substandard’ and a ‘dump’ (*The Accidental*, p. 7-27). The summer rental falls far below Astrid’s expectations and the qualities of a nice home. The family is on the verge of collapse; are all about to face the consequences for their actions or inactions, and the time they spend with Amber serves as a reprieve from the worry and the separateness that characterises the family. Magnus imagines Amber as the sun in the Smart family’s solar system: ‘Amber at the centre of it like an axis [...] holding them all together right now in this room, keeping everything going round, stopping everything from fragmenting into an exploded nothing that shatters itself out into the furthest reaches of the known universe’ (*The Accidental*, p. 152). Alhambra acts as the magnet that holds them all together and without her they would fragment and divide, the family would self-destruct. For the Smart parents, this comfort in the uncomfortable home is inverted by returning to their normally comfortable home after the holiday to discover that Alhambra has emptied it. The children, however, find that there is something strangely comforting in the discomfort of their formerly comfortable home:

I mean, it was good when we were on holiday this year, he says.[...] It was really good, too, he says, when we got back here and there was like nearly nothing left.[...]

It was brilliant, she says. It was so good.

I think I liked it best when there was totally nothing, Magnus says. When you could just walk through a room and there was nothing at all in it.

And we could hear ourselves all different when we walked or talked, even just breathing was different, Astrid says. [...] And when we spoke it sounded like an echo, all round us, like we lived in a stately historic house, Astrid says, or like we were on stage or something because of the carpets gone, no carpets where you expected there to be carpets. So it was like we were walking out on to a wooden stage every time we went across a room. [...] Except we weren’t, she says, we hadn’t, we were just at home, in our own house (*The Accidental*, p. 257).

The emptiness transforms their house into something more. It is still home, but it exceeds ‘home’ and becomes a grand estate or a theatre. These images echo Alhambra’s definition of ‘Alhambra’ as ‘Heaven on earth. Alhambra. [...] It’s a palace in the sun.

It's a derelict old cinema packed with inflammable filmstock' (*The Accidental*, p. 306). By emptying it, Alhambra has transformed their house into a reminder of her, a reminder of the comfort of discomfort. The children are the first to realise that there is something comforting about the discomfort of their empty house. They find comfort in the empty domestic home, in its defamiliarisation of the homely. Astrid says, 'Getting home and walking in through the front door and it all being bare was like hearing yourself breathe for the first time. It was like as if someone had turned your breathing volume level inside you up to full' (*The Accidental*, p. 217). The empty house allows her to hear herself breathe, to recognise her own aliveness. Alhambra has wrecked the partitions between comfort and discomfort. Their meaning, much like Freud's *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, when stretched to their limits, comes to denote their binary opposite.

The homely and unhomely are at the root of Freud's analysis in his essay, 'The "Uncanny"'. He approaches the uncanny via dictionaries, exploring the meaning of the word *unheimlich* (the English 'uncanny', but which literally translates as 'unhomely'). He discovers that '*heimlich* ['homely'] is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich* [unhomely/uncanny]'.<sup>32</sup> The meaning of *heimlich* eventually coincides with the meaning of *unheimlich*; linguistically the homely can be unhomely, the familiar, strange, the domestic, uncanny. The division that should exist between binary opposites is elided and it is this intrusion of the other that is uncanny. Cixous argues that this uncanny linguistic coupling, the homely and unhomely, is an 'androgynous', the Platonic notion of primordial humans made up of both male and female who were separated but are now, in *heimlich/unheimlich*, made one again. She contends that Freud's realisation

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<sup>32</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"' [1919], trans. James Strachey, *New Literary History*, 7 (1976), p. 624.

that the pair has been reunited disturbs him and he attempts to alleviate his own discomfiture by halting the linguistic discussion and picking up a literary one:

At the end of this strange crossing of languages, *Unheimliche* can consider itself a part of this myth [of the androgyne]: from *Heimliche* to *Unheimliche*. In this crossing, the meaning reproduces itself or it becomes extinguished or it is stirred up. Opposition has been blunted; the divergence opened just enough space for it to be reclosed. The phoenix reproduces itself. Elsewhere, Freud's commentary attempts to mitigate the disquieting character of the junction by contriving a sort of dislocation of contraries: a remarkable repugnance to acknowledge the absolute reclosing that takes place.<sup>33</sup>

The convergence of meaning of *unheimlich* and *heimlich* denotes a couple whose separation has been ended; no longer do the words, which she implies are gendered male and female, lie on opposite sides of a division: they occupy the same space where they might mean the same thing, negate each other's meaning, or multiply the possibilities. This 'reclosing' of the separation is disquieting and repugnant to Freud, Cixous argues, and he attempts to render it less uncanny, to quickly move away from meaning into a discussion of the uncanny in action. Cixous raises the questions that this merging of meaning introduces for the possibility of subverting patriarchal binary schemes through the use of language. She argues: 'This indirectly brings up the question of hierarchy in the dual relationship of two terms: is there any inversion of the *Heimliche* and the *Unheimliche*, or else, starting from *Heimliche*, is there any emergence, through the *Unheimliche*, of a *new* concept?'<sup>34</sup> If *heimlich* and *unheimlich* have reunited in an androgyne, how do they fit into the binary oppositions that Cixous argues structure gender relations? Which is on top, which is the valued term? If there is not a positive and negative word, if they are equivalent, then is this something new? These questions remain unanswered by Freud. The *unheimlich/heimlich* androgyne

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<sup>33</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The "uncanny")', *New Literary History*, 7 (1976), p. 531.

<sup>34</sup> Cixous 1976, p. 531.

could introduce the revolutionary bisexuality which Cixous seeks and perhaps it is that very bisexuality which Freud finds uncanny.

Thus, the uncanny has the potential to be revolutionary, to model the power of terms that are androgynous, that encompass the 'both/and'. For *The Accidental* it is the androgyne of comfort and discomfort which, the children recognise, have come to mean the same thing bringing the domestic and the alien into close quarters as well. By closing the gap of meaning between comfort and discomfort, the assurance and certainty of the domestic becomes unsettled. Nicholas Royle, in his discussion of the effects of the uncanny, argues that its effects are similar to the Russian formalists' 'defamiliarization' which sought to 'make strange, to defamiliarize, to make unfamiliar all sorts of familiar perceptions and beliefs' and gestures towards the 'revolutionary possibilities of making the familiar strange'.<sup>35</sup> Returning home to find one's house has been completely emptied is the familiar being made strange:

As soon as they went in Astrid registered the bleeping noise. Then she registered that something was different. Then she registered that the place where the coatstand usually was was strange. This was because the coatstand was gone. [...] It is funny, Astrid thinks, that it actually took a moment to remember, and sometimes was actually quite difficult to re-imagine what it was that was in the space that something left after it got taken away (*The Accidental*, p. 219).

The familiar has become strange and quickly the strange becomes familiar making it difficult to remember what used to be familiar. She traces her dawning awareness that something was wrong and recognition of what was different with the repetition of 'registered'. The repeating of 'actually' contributes to the characterisation of Astrid as a twelve-year old girl as well as her desire to relate her reaction accurately. Gina Wisker asserts that 'Knowing what we fear, we know what we desire: safety, mother, friends.

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<sup>35</sup> Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 5.

Our worst fears arise from dangerous domestic disillusionment'.<sup>36</sup> But, for Astrid and Magnus, the defamiliarisation of home, of the domestic, is a source of pleasure and a welcome change. Alhambra has familiarised them with the androgyne of comfort/discomfort and they feel the pleasure of crossing its wrecked borders.

Smith's novel unseats the comfort and safety of the domestic. Alhambra calls into question the reassurance of the domestic by illuminating comfort/discomfort's identity as an androgyne that goes beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, the safety offered by a world neatly ordered through binary oppositions. If everything can be divided into either/or, right or wrong, good or evil, male or female, then answers are much easier and more concrete; the world is a safer more manageable place. However, the destruction of the partitions, as the Smart family discovers, opens up the possibilities of discovering a truth that can countenance falsehood and comfort in the uncomfortable. The unreliable narrator, the use of multiperson narration and *paralepsis*, serve as a layering of pointers that draw attention to the novel's purpose: to unseat the taken for granted comfort of the domestic, narratorial authority, and an identifiable truth guaranteed by its opposite.

### **'It's what you've decided to let yourself feel': Unreliable Second-Person Narration in Julie Myerson's *The Story of You***

Julie Myerson's *The Story of You* is told by Rosy, a grief-stricken narrator, who finds truth in its opposite, untruth and delusion. She is unreliable because, for much of her novel, she does not know, or is unable to discern, and actively resists allowing herself to see, the truth. Her 'narration' encompasses both senses of the word identified by Kathleen Wall: 'To narrate comes not only from the Latin *narrare*, *to relate* or *recount*,

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<sup>36</sup> Gina Wisker, 'Viciousness in the Kitchen: Sylvia Plath's Gothic', *Gothic Studies*, 6 (2004), p. 106.

but is also related to *gnarus, knowing, skilled*, and thus ultimately allied to the verb *know* (OED). Narration can thus be both an attempt to tell and an effort to understand one's story'.<sup>37</sup> She tells the story of 'you' in order to reconcile herself with her own story. The 'you' whose story she tells, is an unnamed lover with whom she reunites after twenty years. As she relates the story of her affair it becomes clear that the story is about her grief after the loss of her infant daughter, 'Baby', just before her second birthday. Rosy either does not know or keeps secret that her relationship with her lover is imaginary, but hints at his intangibility throughout and finally reveals that he had, unbeknownst to her, died in a car accident just before their first reunion. Rosy is haunted, in fact invites haunting, as neither of her narratees, lover or child, is still alive. Like Smith's novel, there is a misnaming: the protagonist's partner, Tom, calls her 'Nic' from her middle name, 'Nicole', where before she met him she had been 'Rosy', short for 'Rosemary'. This misnaming stands in for the loss of self required of her by settled domesticity and motherhood. The story is told in the second person, addressed throughout to a 'you' whose subject is mostly the lover, but whose referent occasionally shifts to the 'general', to stand in for the 'I', or to address her daughter. It is told in the present tense, but slides into the past and into the future tenses, at times in the middle of a sentence. Myerson's shifting tenses and shifting narratees disturb narrative norms of realism and enact Nic/Rosy's shifting sense of her self as she struggles to discern the boundaries between truth and untruth until she realizes that the boundary is immaterial. Regardless of what is real or imagined, Rosy's 'I' narrates the story of a 'you' which allows her to begin to articulate the 'truth' of her experience, its veracity contingent and irrelevant.

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<sup>37</sup> Wall 1994, p. 38.



Rosy addresses her narrative to a specific ‘you’, much the way a person might in a letter or in speech. The use of second person narration is often a device used to defamiliarise the narrative certainties of novel reading and implicate the reader in the events of the novel. Brian Richardson defines three types of second person narrative that he views as ‘unnatural’ and exceeding the traditional narrative theories of point of view: the ‘standard’ form, in which the protagonist is designated ‘you’ rather than ‘I’ or ‘he’ or ‘she’, the ‘hypothetical’ form, ‘employs the style of the guidebook to recount a narrative’, and the ‘autotelic’ form, which ‘employs direct address to the reader or narratee’.<sup>38</sup> Myerson’s text does not fit any of these categories: it is not in the ‘standard’ form as she does not ‘oscillate between third and first person perspectives, it is not ‘hypothetical’ as it does not resemble a guidebook, nor is it autotelic because it lacks a necessary component, what Richardson calls ‘one of the most fascinating features of second person narrative: the way the narrative ‘you’ is alternately opposed to and fused with the reader –both the constructed and the actual reader’.<sup>39</sup> The second person is used to address a homodiegetic audience and not to address the actual reader. The actual reader ‘overhears’ the narrative and acts as narrative audience rather than narratee. However, Myerson does make use of some of the same devices as Richardson’s defamiliarising and postmodern stories. The novel ‘is told primarily in the present tense, and some pronominal shifting is evident’.<sup>40</sup> The use of the second person does disturb the reading process because ‘you’ is deictic. As Steve Cohan and Linda M. Shires explain: ‘Like other deictic terms – such as *here* and *there*, *then* and *now*, *this* and *that* – pronouns mean only by referring (literally pointing) to an antecedent located somewhere else in the discourse’.<sup>41</sup> ‘You’ lacks a concrete identity, and requires

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<sup>38</sup> Richardson 2006, p. 18.

<sup>39</sup> Richardson 2006, p. 33.

<sup>40</sup> Richardson 2006, p. 31.

<sup>41</sup> Steven Cohan and Linda M. Shires, *Telling Stories: A Theoretical Analysis of Narrative Fiction*, New Accents Series (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 104.

deductive thinking to determine whom the narrative is hailing. Emile Benveniste argues that 'I' and 'you' 'do not refer to "reality" or to "objective" positions in space and time but to the utterance, unique each time, that contains them'.<sup>42</sup> The identity of 'you' depends entirely upon the context in which it is situated, requires some decoding, and can often be unclear.

Richardson asserts that 'you' 'can refer to the protagonist, the narrator, the narratee, or the reader; authors using this form regularly play on this ambiguity as well as on its multiple possible meanings'.<sup>43</sup> Myerson recognises the power of the deictic even if she only occasionally makes use of it as an address to someone other than the homodiegetic audience. Rosy's rumination on the signification of proper names, addressed to a 'you' that could be replaced by 'one', recognises that names too are deictic:

Nicole, Rosemary, Nic, Rosy. Sometimes you can step outside of a name. Just for a moment or two you can step outside of it and there's the name and there are you, stranded and clueless on the outside, and for a few unnerving moments it's possible to see it clearly for what it is. A name, a word you call someone – a brief flavour on the tongue, stronger or sweeter depending on what you think or know of that person. But how does that leave you, the person? Nameless and stranded I think (p. 12).<sup>44</sup>

One's name is just as arbitrary as the pronoun 'you'. It could refer to another person altogether and what it signifies depends 'on what you think or know of that person'. Whether someone calls her 'Nic' or 'Rosy' they still are not 'naming' her, she is something else. Yet without a name, she is nowhere, she is no one. To 'step outside' one's name is in effect to step outside one's self and raises the question: if I am not Nicole, Rosemary, Nic, or Rosy, who am I? Richardson asserts that 'at a more

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<sup>42</sup> Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971), p. 219.

<sup>43</sup> Richardson 2006, p. 14.

<sup>44</sup> Julie Myerson, *The Story of You* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006), p. 12. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition and noted parenthetically in the body of the text.

philosophical level, it [second person narration] is admirably suited to express the unstable nature and intersubjective constitution of the self'.<sup>45</sup> The use of 'you' narration, then, can draw attention to what Yacobi calls a text's functional design, its 'aesthetic, thematic and persuasive goals'.<sup>46</sup> For Myerson's novel, the ambiguity of 'you' and its defamiliarising of the process of reading a story, calls attention to the novel's concerns with subjectivity and Rosie's attempt to comfort herself by externalising part of her self, she transforms 'I' into 'you' in order to articulate a new version of her self.

The source of confusion in the novel arises not because the narrator appears to be addressing the actual reader as Richardson prefers, but from the suspicion that some of her narrative might be addressed to her lost child, that child and lover have become confused. A passage arguably addressed to her lover works equally well if read as addressed to her child, 'Baby': 'I like to imagine that I might get a chance one day to ask you, baby, why it had to be like this, why you had to come and find me and make me love you so very hard and then why you had to hurt us both, why you had to go?' (*Story*, p. 311). The appellation 'baby' is, for Rosy, deictic as it can apply to any small child, her lover, or her lost infant. The confusion of the two narratees reinforces the sense that this narration is an attempt to tell and simultaneously to begin to understand her own story. It works to call into question whether this is an account of romantic love or whether the story of romantic love and loss, because of its ubiquity and formulaic treatment as a subject of fiction, might be easier to tell than the story of maternal love and loss. The nature of these concerns means that *The Story of You* is a story of relationship enacted in the interplay of 'I' and 'you'. Monika Fludernik, in her

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<sup>45</sup> Richardson 2006, p. 36.

<sup>46</sup> Yacobi 1981, p. 17

introduction to a special issue of *Style* on second person narration, unlike Richardson, recognises this type of narration as second person narration:

second-person texts frequently also have an explicit communicative level on which a narrator (speaker) tells the story of the ‘you’ to (sometimes) the ‘you’ protagonist’s present-day absent or dead, wiser, self. In such contexts the narratee acquires a fictional past through the narrative in progress. The narrative projects an addressee by means of the second-person pronoun, and that speech act of address evolves into a narration of the ‘you’s’ past experience [...] (One might even call such narratives ‘I’ and ‘you’ narratives).<sup>47</sup>

Myerson’s ‘you’ protagonist, it is revealed, is both absent and dead, and her narrator fabricates the past and present she articulates for him. Myerson uses ‘I’ and ‘you’ to allow Rosy to formulate who she is, who ‘I’ is, by conjuring up a return to a relationship with a ‘you’ which was cut short by chance and not by death. Her interaction with him, imaginary though it is, recalls a past version of herself she can recognise: ‘Rosy’ rather than ‘Nic’. Fludernik further explains that, ‘These texts also involve the narrator’s past selves to such an extent that the addressee and the narrator are protagonists of equal weighting. The story, then, is one of shared experience, not solely that of the ‘you’ protagonist’.<sup>48</sup> ‘I’ and ‘you’ narration is used to tell the story of a relationship, of two people of ‘equal weighting’, which Myerson utilises to push the boundaries of realism, highlight the contingency and immateriality of ‘truth’, and allow Rosy to ‘retell’ herself.

Luce Irigaray argues that this desire to speak about relationships and give equal weighting to both the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ characterises feminine speech. After conducting studies in linguistic gender which analysed the speech patterns of men and women, Irigaray concluded: ‘With men, the *I* is asserted in different ways; it is significantly more important than the *you* and *the world*. With women, the *I* often makes way for

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<sup>47</sup> Monika Fludernik, ‘Introduction: Second-Person Narrative and Related Issues’, *Style* 28 (1994), p. 288.

<sup>48</sup> Fludernik 1994, p. 289.

you, the world, for the objectivity of words and things'.<sup>49</sup> Men are self-obsessed objectifiers and women are selfless relaters. In her study, she asked her subjects to create sentences using the preposition 'with' or the adverb 'together':

female adolescents and students, and many adult women, will respond with statements such as: 'I'll go out with him tonight'; or 'We'll always live together'. Male subjects instead respond: 'I came with my motorcycle'; 'I wrote this sentence with my pencil'; or 'Me and my guitar are good together'.<sup>50</sup>

She concludes that men and women 'occupy different subjective configurations and different worlds' in which men relate to objects while women have a 'taste for intersubjectivity'.<sup>51</sup> She sees women's choice of subject-subject relations to be the more ethical of the two. Irigaray identifies linguistic gender as a basis upon which to theorize the necessity of a 'style' of writing that would allow women to speak their own feminine subjectivity. Margaret Whitford explains that for Irigaray: 'What is important is to shift the position of the subject in discourse, the subject of enunciation, and find ways and "styles" to bring about changes in discourse'.<sup>52</sup> This is an evolution of Irigaray's version of *parler femme*: rather than women speaking in a contiguous way connected to the layout of their genitals, Irigaray is calling for women to speak and write in a style that recognises that their subjectivity is not a discount version of male subjectivity, but rather a separate and different subjectivity, and one that is capable of recognising the subjectivity of others.

By embracing our sexual difference, analysing 'the formal structures of discourse', and creating a new 'style', Irigaray asserts, women can establish 'different

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<sup>49</sup> Luce Irigaray, 'The Three Genres' in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. by Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 146.

<sup>50</sup> Luce Irigaray, 'The Question of the Other', trans. by Noah Guynn, *Yale French Studies* 87 (1995), p. 16. Irigaray explains that 'the research was conducted in a variety of languages and cultures, mostly Romance and Anglo-Saxon.

<sup>51</sup> Irigaray 1995, p. 16-17.

<sup>52</sup> Margaret Whitford, 'Introduction to Section II' in Luce Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. by Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 78.

norms of life'.<sup>53</sup> However, she chooses not to describe this new style as she did in *This Sex Which is Not One* in order 'not to reduplicate [the ethics of traditional morality] by explaining what is being invented'.<sup>54</sup> Rather, she suggests that the benefits of 'a style' is that it is immune to reduction:

A style resists coding, summarizing, encrypting, pigeon-holing in differently programmed machines. It cannot be reduced to oppositions like sensible/intelligent, poetic/conceptual ... or the masculine/feminine, as presented to us by all these dichotomies. A style will not let itself be reduced to bipolar alternatives: positive/negative, better/not so good, etc. It may permit them, especially in the form of [...] in one way or another contradictory commentaries, but it escapes them insofar as it creates and is neither resolved nor dissolved into dichotomies, however refined.<sup>55</sup>

Irigaray's sense of style is immune to dichotomies, resists being split into binaries, because it allows contradictions without resolving or dissolving them. Without explaining what it looks like, this style is, up to a point, what I have been identifying in the narrative devices utilised by the New Femininities writers. Her argument about linguistic gender suggests that a feminine style would take into account women's preference for 'subject-subject relations, the present and future tense [...] being with, being two [*l'être (à) deux*]'.<sup>56</sup> Thus their style would be characterised by the 'I' and 'you', present and future tense, and an interest in the objectivity of words and things. It could be argued that this 'feminine' style is the style that Myerson employs in her narrative.

However, I would want to qualify this definition on two levels. Firstly, I am unconvinced by Irigaray's 'feminine language'. It maintains the binary of masculine and feminine and simply inverts the hierarchy, revaluing the feminine negative while denigrating the masculine positive. She reinforces patriarchy's definition of women as

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<sup>53</sup> Irigaray 1991, p. 148.

<sup>54</sup> Irigaray 1991, p. 148, original emphasis.

<sup>55</sup> Irigaray 1991, p. 148.

<sup>56</sup> Irigaray 1995, p. 16.

selfless and defined by their relationships: mother, daughter, wife: subjects who can only assert themselves by demurring to an other, a 'you'. Rather than recognising that women straddle the traditional boundaries of binaristic thinking as this fiction does, are both body and mind, active and passive, independent and interdependent, she embraces the 'feminine' side and confines women, once again, to relationships. Secondly, Myerson's use of the 'I' and 'you' is one stripped of its ethics and intersubjectivity. Rosy's 'you' is imaginary and invented out of, and in order to, allow her to overcome her grief. Her lover articulates this provenance: 'And I think that grief – this grief and loss I'm talking about – it can be a force for good as well as sadness. Stuff can be conjured out of grief, quite literally, out of the salt and sweat of the actual tears you cry' (*Story*, p. 243). She has conjured him out of her grief as a force against sadness. Rosy is not interested in her lover's desires. Her relationship with him is imagined in order to satisfy her own needs, so much so that his needs exactly mirror hers. The narrative often comments on this sameness of feeling and perception: He does not need to speak because 'I know how you feel – I feel it too, I feel exactly the same' (*Story*, p. 9). The boundaries between the two of them are completely permeable because 'you' is actually an expression of 'I'. She blurs the boundaries between real and imaginary and comes to the conclusion that this border is irrelevant; the imaginary can be real, or its unreality is immaterial: 'None of this is real, I say, but mostly I say it to myself and I'm surprised at how little it bothers me' (*Story*, p. 228). Unreality no longer 'bothers' her. For her to tell her story and make sense of it, the boundaries do not exist.

It is not the use of the relationship of 'I' and 'you' that allows the novel to enact the 'truth' of Rosy's conflicts of subjectivity and desire to make sense of her experience despite its status as untruth, delusion, and fantasy; rather it is Myerson's recognition of the power of the deictic to unseat assurances of identity, the temporal unreliability in

her use of shifting present and future tenses, and the calling into question the ‘reality’ of her narrative. The novel’s sense of ‘reality’ is undermined by Rosy’s inability to keep track of time. When she is with her lover, it stops or moves slowly: ‘Minutes pass. Or I think they are minutes. They could be whole hours or days. Time has crinkled up on itself again and gone strange’ (*Story*, p. 43). Time’s failure to pass reinforces the sense that the lover is not really there, that she is imagining the encounter. The novel does have a clear sense of a present, a here-and-now, a settled perspective from which Rosy reflects on the relationship and the story of you. Her use of flashback and prolepsis make strange her narration – how can a memory in the past be recounted in the present tense; how can she know what he will say? She further complicates the difference between the three tenses because she feels that she is unable to occupy the time in which her lover exists: ‘I’m locked somewhere between the past and the future and all I want is to stay in this present with you’ (*Story*, p. 177). Grief has locked her out of the present, but the present of her lover is actually the past of the account. St Augustine argues that the past and future do not exist. Rather ‘there are three times, a present of things past, a present of things present, a present of things to come’. Past and future occur in the present, exist only in our perceptions of them. Augustine asserts that: ‘The present considering the past is the memory, the present considering the present is immediate awareness, the present considering the future is expectation’.<sup>57</sup> Rosy’s use of future tense is an expectation of a future that is impossible. Her lover and her baby will not be able to talk to her or to answer her.

‘And I’ll ask you this, not because I really need to know, but because I want to see, right now after all this time, how you’ll answer’. And you’ll look at me and touch my face for a quick second but you’ll say nothing and I’ll think how after all you’re just like the photo I still have of you somewhere – secretly stashed at the bottom of a box, smiling all the time beneath a pile of other photos, impossible to forget, flat and shiny and perfect, my old love. Telling

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<sup>57</sup> St Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford World Classics series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), XI.xx (26).



me nothing but acting all the time as if you had the answers, as if you knew, as if you know (*Story*, p. 6).

Because the future is the present of things to come, expectation, she is able to say ‘I will’ and speak of ‘right now’. Her qualifications, ‘as if you knew’, past tense, and ‘as if you know’, present tense, reiterate the impossibility of the situation. Her lover really is like the picture: he can tell her nothing; he will tell her nothing. When Rosy makes use of the present tense for a past experience she speaks in memory; she truly flashes back and occupies the present of that past. Her account of a night twenty years before enacts the movement from the present looking back to the present of that past: ‘It wasn’t cold at all, not like this, in fact I know it was a stifling summer’s night, the kind of airless night where it’s still hot in the city at midnight. It’s been like that practically all the summer term – day after day, night after night’ (*Story*, p. 79). The shifting of tense in the middle of the sentence means that Rosy’s memory occurs in the present of things past and that she occupies that present; if only in her language. Temporal unreliability is naturalised in *The Story of You*; Rosy is able to simultaneously occupy past, present, and future.

Time is not the only unreliable element of her narrative. Her identity is in flux. This is rendered in her language by an early shifting of person. She has been speaking as an ‘I’ narrator, but shifts to ‘a woman’ and ‘her’ to detail the difficulty of confessing to her husband that she has been conducting an affair: ‘It begins with snow and with a woman who must tell her husband the truth before she dissolves to nothing. I don’t do this lightly. She doesn’t do this lightly’ (*Story*, p. 11). She begins the passage as ‘a woman’, she has externalised her own crisis; she narrates the experience as if it is happening to someone else. She asserts the ‘I’ to establish the importance of the confession, but returns to ‘she’ to reiterate its seriousness. Not confessing would mean the destruction of her self, she would disappear, dissolve. The next sentence returns to

the 'I' never to return to third person. The rest of her narrative is told in 'first person' because she takes ownership of her story. Her refusal to place the responsibility of the narrative onto a stand-in 'she' is crucial to her project of not only telling but somehow making sense of an experience in which she must accept the unreal as representing a real experience: 'In the end it's entirely in your own hands – it's what you decide to let yourself feel that matters. It's how much love you decide to give, not what you spend time imagining you ought to get back. I think I believe this, certainly I try to' (*Story*, p. 309). She is using the 'you' in its use as 'one' and iterating that reality or unreality does not matter, in the end what is important about her story is the sense she makes of it; what she discovers about herself. But even now, she is unable to fully authorize this message, that it all comes down to 'you', she must qualify her endorsement of it, she thinks she believes it, she wants to believe it. Belief too becomes an androgyne. She can neither believe nor disbelieve, she can only negotiate between the two by *trying* to believe.

Negotiating contradictions is central to this novel. Rosy not only questions the 'reality' of her experience, she often contradicts her own recollections and her own experience. This novel is not only a story, but also an effort to make sense of that story. The act of composing and organising what happened and how it happened require precision or honesty about the provisional quality of what one relates. To that end, Rosy often uses 'maybe' to signal the tenuousness of her own recollections :

He was being so easy and kind and good – so much the Tom I find it easy to respond to – and I drank enough wine almost to forget how crazy and confusing the day had been, to forget about you. Maybe the earlier vodkas helped too. Or maybe not. Maybe I'd never had them. Maybe it didn't matter. After all, vodka leaves no trace on the breath (*Story*, p. 103).

She is unsure whether she actually met her lover in a bar and drank vodkas with him.

She repeats 'maybe' as she proposes why she could put her lover's disappearance out of

her mind. However, this series of ‘maybes’ brings her back to the question of the reality of her experience and of her lover. She concludes that it does not matter because the evidence that would prove the veracity of her experience, the vodka, is undetectable. Peter J. Rabinowitz argues that in postmodern detective stories ‘the search is not for some empirically verifiable “truth” but rather for some coherent story “about” the world’.<sup>58</sup> I would argue that this is true for Myerson and for all of the New Femininities texts – these texts are not about a truth or a moral, but rather about telling a story that relates something about their experience. If the search is for story rather than truth then a narrator may question her own narration and conclude that ‘maybe it didn’t matter’.

For Myerson, the point of her novel is not to find and articulate an undeniable, verifiable, universal truth; it is to tell a story that says something ‘true’ about experience even if its truth is a lie. Her use of ‘I-you’ narration, shifting tenses and narratees renders her unreliable and draws attention to conflicts of subjectivity and a desire to make sense, to tell the ‘truth’ of her experience. What she relates is patently untrue, but its veracity is immaterial – it is the truth of her experience. This questions the system of authentication by narration – she tells lies that allow her to both tell and begin to understand her own story. Her narrative is unbelievable, even she can only ‘try’ to believe in it, yet it works to upset the boundaries between reliable/unreliable, truth/untruth, and real/unreal to suggest that her experience goes beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse and aims for the impossible.

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<sup>58</sup> Peter J. Rabinowitz, “‘How Did You Know He Licked His Lips?’: Second Person Knowledge and First Person Power in *The Maltese Falcon*”, in *Understanding Narrative*, ed. by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, *The Theory and Interpretation of Narrative Series* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994), p. 160.

## **The Pleasure and Pain of Connection and Disconnection: Alice Munro's Recent Short Fiction**

It is well established that Alice Munro's short stories deal with questions of truth, reliability, meaning, and identity, and that she rejects the system of authentication by narration. Like much of her mature work, her collections of stories from the 2000s, *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001), *Runaway* (2004), and *Too Much Happiness* (2009), are populated by narrators who do not trust 'the truth' or the need their audience has for it. Her narrators repeatedly thwart the meaning of their narratives by calling into question the authenticity of their tales: they self-cancel and are therefore unreliable. They are unwilling to say definitively whether events happened in the way that they have said; in fact they explicitly call into question the very notion that any narrative can be 'the whole truth'. They withdraw from authorizing their stories instead they take ownership of the unreliability of memory without rejecting the story that they have told. Truth, meaning, and identity are shown to be complex, changeable, and partial – they all exist 'in process'. As Margaret Atwood argues, 'For Munro, a thing can be true, but not true, but true nonetheless'.<sup>59</sup> Using established research on the puzzling and ambiguous qualities of Munro's fiction as a jumping off point, I will discuss how her short fiction renders a vision of self and autonomy that is dependent on relationships, that cannot happen in isolation, and argue that her unreliable narration works to draw attention to the conflicts of subjectivity inherent in her characters' desires for both connection and disconnection, freedom and enclosure, domesticity and autonomy.

Adrian Hunter argues that Munro's short stories are 'interrogative fictions' characterised by her 'technique of multiple layering, [...] she allows different strands in

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<sup>59</sup> Margaret Atwood, 'Close to Home', *The Guardian* (Saturday 11 October 2008) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/oct/11/alice-munro> [accessed 31 May 2011], paragraph 27.

her texts to qualify or even to cancel one another out and so produce[s] a sense of chronic misapprehension and irresolution'.<sup>60</sup> Munro unseats closure and readerly assurance of narratives relaying universal truths; her writing, in Hunter's words, 'backs away from its own truth-value'.<sup>61</sup> Coral Ann Howells characterises it as Munro's 'art of indeterminacy: her narratives evade any single meaning but allow room for the interplay of shifting multiple meanings and of multiple human interests'.<sup>62</sup> Like the other authors of New Femininities fiction, she is comfortable with the indeterminacy of language and allows her meanings to proliferate. She fashions prose that rewards rereading with new information and new interpretations. Howells asserts that Munro's stories are 'revisitings [... that] oddly combine familiarity with strangeness'.<sup>63</sup> Munro has throughout her career 'revisited' the same narratorial ground, the subjects of growing up in rural 1940s Ontario, marriages and migrations to the Canadian West Coast, divorce and adultery, and, as she has aged, bereavement and illness; but each revisiting introduces something new and, often, surprising to these familiar stories. Georgeann Murphy argues that: 'If she [Munro] calls her identity as a writer into question with her series of ambivalent, self-conscious narrators, it is only because she would have us realize that none of us can be smug about labeling what we see "the truth"''.<sup>64</sup> Perceptions colour interpretations so one person's truth is not necessarily, or even likely, identical to another person's; nor can it be *the* truth. Even authors are subject to this 'truth'. Robert McGill asserts that Munro's unreliability arises from her acceptance that 'narratives are always subjective and therefore partial, and that

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<sup>60</sup> Adrian Hunter, 'Story into History: Alice Munro's Minor Literature', *English* 53 (2004), p. 225.

<sup>61</sup> Hunter 2004, p. 236.

<sup>62</sup> Coral Ann Howells, *Alice Munro*, Contemporary World Writers series (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 85-86.

<sup>63</sup> Coral Ann Howells, *Refiguring Identities: Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 54.

<sup>64</sup> Georgeann Murphy, 'The Art of Alice Munro: Memory, Identity, and the Aesthetics of Connection', in *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*, ed. Mickey Pearlman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), p. 23.

audiences should not take any one account – whether fictional or non-fictional – as telling them the whole story and equipping them adequately for ethical judgments of the people involved.<sup>65</sup> This partiality means that no one in her stories is in possession of the ‘real’ or ‘true’ version of the events. Their narratives are only an interpretation that, in all likelihood, will change – their interpretations, like the interpretations of her audience, are not fixed.

Munro’s interest in the domestic and women’s ambivalent relationship with gender roles – marriage, motherhood, and daughterhood – is equally well documented. Murphy identifies ‘connection’ as ‘a subsuming theme of Munro’s fiction. Her characters, particularly the writers among them, struggle to forge their identities in a crucible of connections: of one place to the next, of the past to the present, and of one sexual being to another’.<sup>66</sup> Murphy performs a thematic reading of Munro’s pre-1992 fiction and catalogues the various connections, familial, location, temporal, and sexual, that can be found in her short stories. She argues that Munro’s fiction is about how these various connections ‘shape our lives’.<sup>67</sup> She further argues that Munro’s style is a ‘function’ of connection as well and that Munro ‘follows the modernist tradition of juxtaposing seemingly unconnected incidents to evoke a new meaning. Contradictory narration, multiple storytellers, and leaps in time require the reader actively to connect and interpret divergent materials’.<sup>68</sup> Murphy’s interest in ‘connection’ in Munro’s work is to chronicle how the theme functions in Munro’s prose. My focus will be on *how* Munro’s unreliable, contradictory, narration is concerned not only with connection, but equally concerned with ‘disconnection’. Further, I will argue that her characters inhabit

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<sup>65</sup> Robert McGill, “‘Daringly Out in the Public Eye’: Alice Munro and the Ethics of Writing Back”, *University of Toronto Quarterly* 76 (2007), p. 888.

<sup>66</sup> Murphy 1993, p. 21.

<sup>67</sup> Murphy 1993, p. 23.

<sup>68</sup> Murphy 1993, p. 21.

a subjectivity that requires for them *both* autonomy and relationship so that they must attempt to maintain a delicate tension between connecting and disconnecting, most particularly with their spouses or partners.

Unlike the sexual connection, which Murphy identifies, I will focus on ‘relationship’, what Arnold Weinstein calls ‘the bizarre spectacle of connection itself’.<sup>69</sup> Weinstein holds that passion describes something separate from relationship: ‘Passion may easily be constructed as an individual feeling, and here too we reach the crux of relationship: it is insistently mutual, connective. The word itself suggests linkage’.<sup>70</sup> Relationship requires two participants to cooperate, to coexist, and to commingle. It is not effortless and its greatest impediment is time:

To maintain a relationship over time (formerly known as the concept of marriage) entails energies other than passion, and indeed poses problems that are unknown to passion. The energies in question have to do with fidelity, evolving feelings, and the like; the problems involved concern the peculiar assertiveness, the quasi-insolence of imposing a human form, of stopping the entropic work of time, of making something stick. Coming together is possible for anyone; staying together is a challenge to all parties involved [...] for it is an act of volition, the foisting of a human-made pattern onto the heterogeneous randomness of the species.<sup>71</sup>

Weinstein’s interest is a literary one. He believes that much of the great fiction and the great innovations in narrative in the West have been in the service of articulating the pleasures and difficulties of attaining and maintaining relationship with a desired other. It is the conflicting desire to preserve the connection and the desire for freedom and fear of annihilation of the self at the hand of one’s beloved, or, indeed, at one’s own hands in the name of love, self-abnegation that lies at the root of the conflicts of prose. Weinstein asks: ‘Is anything more ambivalent than human connection? [...] The physical outcome of pleasure or death is fully matched by the drama of connection as

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<sup>69</sup> Arnold Weinstein, *The Fiction of Relationship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 3.

<sup>70</sup> Weinstein 1988, p. 24.

<sup>71</sup> Weinstein 1988, p. 25.

“completion” or “invasion” [...] Is the self expanded, or diminished, when it encounters linkage?’<sup>72</sup> I would question the use of the word ‘completion’ to describe the positive outcome of a romantic connection: does anyone really desire ‘completion’ when it implies concluded, ended, finished? Is the desired end of romantic love the ending of self?

The attainment of the desired love object, for Munro, does not bring unbridled happiness, nor an ending in completion, but rather a sense of the self being diminished and of enclosure. Passion, desire, and love cannot prove the culmination of a woman’s identity nor can they bring meaning to her life. Connection, in Munro, is much more complicated than sexual compatibility and the longing for it comes equipped with equal amounts of desire for disconnection and freedom. In the story ‘Nettles’, a chance meeting with a man she had known and loved when they were children, means that the unnamed narrator finds herself falling, comfortably, into the roles that they inhabited as children: ‘I would aid and admire him, he would direct and stand ready to protect me’.<sup>73</sup> Because her recent divorce means that she is living a life of increasing disconnection with others, the immediate ease and connection she feels with Mike proves seductive. However, this is too simplistic a reading, for even in the middle of the pleasure of connection, she is conscious of its naiveté as well. She experiences delight about occupying the ‘wife’s seat’ in Mike’s truck, but perceives this pleasure as ‘light-headed as an adolescent girl’s. The notion of being a wife beguiled me, just as if I had never been one. This had never happened with the man who was now my actual lover. Could I really have settled in, with a true love, and somehow just got rid of the parts of me that did not fit, and been happy?’ (p. 178). While fantasies of companionship and bonhomie

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<sup>72</sup> Weinstein 1988, p. 199.

<sup>73</sup> Alice Munro, ‘Nettles’, in *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2001), p. 165. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition and noted parenthetically in the body of the text.



‘beguile’ her, she simultaneously is critical of a ‘true love’ which requires the abandonment of the parts of her self that do not ‘fit’, a disconnection with her self. She is well aware that she is no longer the eight-year-old who loved Mike or a light-headed adolescent. Her sense of self, her current identity as divorcee, would be unable to unquestioningly occupy the wife’s seat, the role of directed and protected helpmate, or true love’s amputee. Her conflicted emotions at her reunion with Mike means she fluctuates between desire to belong to him and knowledge that she is no longer capable of belonging, desire to connect and knowledge of the pleasures of disconnection.

Michiko Kakutani notes that women in Munro’s stories ‘oscillate between two poles: between domesticity and independence, between a yearning for roots and a vision of themselves as solitary outsiders’.<sup>74</sup> The fantasy of wifedom, connection, and domesticity is countered by the fantasy of self-control, independence, and freedom. These oscillations, with neither pole being a satisfactory location, characterise the narrator’s life. In the aftermath of her divorce where she left ‘husband and house and all the things acquired during the marriage (except of course the children, who were to be parcelled about) in the hope of making a life that could be lived without hypocrisy or deprivation or shame’ (p. 168), she is conflicted about her children. She can leave the domesticity of husband, house, and marital possessions, but her ironic aside exemplifies her ambivalence about ‘parcelling’ her children about, separating and reuniting with them. The hope is that without domesticity her life will be authentic and satisfying, lacking hypocrisy, deprivation, and shame. However, she reveals in her narrative, perhaps without even realising it herself, that her new life very much involves hypocrisy, deprivation, and shame. Her daughters have stayed with their father in the

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<sup>74</sup> Michiko Kakutani, ‘Realizing That Certainty is Inevitably Uncertain’, *New York Times*, Books of the Times (7 December 2004), [http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/07/books/07kaku.html?\\_r=1&ref=bookreviews](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/07/books/07kaku.html?_r=1&ref=bookreviews) [accessed 30 May 2011], paragraph 8.

family home and visit her in Toronto over the summer holiday. Her new life is so alien and unwelcoming to her children that they insist upon returning to their father earlier than planned:

When I came back, alone, I gathered up all reminders of them – a cartoon the younger one had drawn, a *Glamour* magazine that the older one had bought, various bits of jewelry and clothing they could wear in Toronto but not at home – and stuffed them in a garbage bag. And I did more or less the same thing every time I thought of them – I snapped my mind shut. There were miseries that I could bear – those connected with me. And other miseries – those connected with children – that I could not (p. 170).

She stuffs all reminders, thoughts, and feelings about her daughters into a mental garbage bag. The miseries connected with her daughters are the miseries of their mother and that identity cannot live comfortably in her new flat. That identity reads the separation as a deprivation and the packing away as hypocrisy. The absence of the connections mother and wife to define her lead to a sense of being identity free, completely disconnected, of the possibility of no longer existing: ‘Outside the windows, as it got dark, the back-yard parties would begin, with music and shouting and provocations that later might develop into fights, and I would be frightened, not of any hostility but of a kind of non-existence’ (p. 171). The vacillation between connection and disconnection arises from a sense that connection is often that to which identity is anchored. Without connections, husband, and most particularly, children, she feels in danger of ceasing to matter. Despite the fears that disconnection will erase her, Munro resists reconnecting her with a different man, she does not wring a ‘truth’ about domesticity or independence out of her narrative, or foreclose the narrator’s identity conflicts. Her story brings into question the desire for ‘completion’ through romantic love; the desire to write ‘the end’ to self and individuality. Concluded, ended, finished are exactly the states that Munro’s short fiction resists. She has complicated the binary outcomes of relationship that Weinstein established. Instead of completion/invasion and

expanded/diminished, Munro eradicates the boundaries: completion and invasion are not opposites but near synonyms and each might just as easily lead to diminishment as expansion. For the unnamed narrator of 'Nettles' the 'completion' that relationship offers her is a trimming of the extraneous aspects of self that do not fit; the self is diminished rather than expanded. Nor is an expansion of self necessarily a desirable result of relationship.

The feminine selves that populate the New Femininities fiction have to incorporate many divergent and conflicting identities into their sense of self. Any new relationship will bring an expansion of some sort as a woman assimilates the new identity of friend or lover to that particular person. Whether these expansions, and the inherent juggling of identities and roles, are always welcome is questionable. Diana Tietjens Meyers argues that the dominant contemporary Anglo-American moral and political philosophy based on *homo economicus*, 'the free and rational chooser and actor whose desires are ranked in a coherent order and whose aim is to maximize desire satisfaction', is inadequate to encompass the subjectivity experienced by women (and arguably by men as well).<sup>75</sup> This model underestimates the importance of 'unchosen circumstances and relationships. It eclipses interpersonal commitments, including friendship, love, and caregiving relationships [... and] downplays the difficulty of resolving conflicts that arise between these commitments and personal aims'.<sup>76</sup> It cannot account for the importance of familial relationships in identity formation or the impact of affinitive affiliations on a subject's sense of self. Additionally, it is blind to gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and other particularising forces, as constituents of identity because it only recognises the happy, and middle class, consumer who lives

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<sup>75</sup> Diana Tietjens Meyers, 'Introduction', in *Feminists Rethink the Self*, ed. by Diana Tietjens Meyers, Feminist Theory and Politics Series (Boulder, CO and Oxford, UK: Westview, 1997), p. 2.

<sup>76</sup> Meyers 1997, p. 2.

in isolation. For *homo economicus*, autonomy and freedom are of the utmost importance. Marilyn Friedman argues that definitions of subjectivity must take into account social relationships. She suggests that Evelyn Fox Keller's conception of 'dynamic autonomy' offers a squaring of autonomy and relationship because it 'acknowledges the human interrelatedness that produces autonomy, recognizes that the self is influenced by and needs others, and allows for a recognition of other selves as subjects in their own right'.<sup>77</sup> Keller also recognizes that there will always be a tension between 'autonomy and intimacy, separation and connection, aggression and love'.<sup>78</sup> I would argue that this is the subjectivity that Munro's characters, as well as many characters in postmodern fiction, inhabit and that these tensions are what enact the indeterminacy of her fiction. She makes the binaries immaterial. For her narratives, autonomy and intimacy, separation and connection, aggression and love exist simultaneously – they are inseparable and the conflicts her characters face involve attempting to maintain the balance between autonomy and intimacy so as to maintain a healthy sense of self.

One of the stories that Munro revisits frequently is the story of the wife who runs away from her husband only to return quickly, often before her spouse has noticed her absence. This wife finds the idea of disconnection seductive, but its realisation terrifying and self-abnegating – who is she if she is not being defined by her husband? Naomi Scheman asserts that people are not simply who they remember themselves as being, but 'are equally, for better or worse, the persons others remember us as being [...] and we can be grateful or resentful or both for being held in their memories, for

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<sup>77</sup> Marilyn Friedman, 'Autonomy and Social Relationships', in *Feminists Rethink the Self*, ed. by Diana Tietjens Meyers, Feminist Theory and Politics Series (Boulder, CO and Oxford, UK: Westview, 1997), p. 44.

<sup>78</sup> Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p.97-99, quoted in Friedman 1997, p. 44..

being continuous with the persons they remember us as being'.<sup>79</sup> What such a wife faces is the conundrum of locating who she is when she is outside the orbit of the person around whom she has centred her life, when she can no longer rely upon being reminded of her continuity with his definition of her. In 'Runaway', Carla feels that 'she would be lost' when she contemplates living without the identity 'Clark's wife'.<sup>80</sup> Clark is unpleasant and moody, particularly over the summer when it rains every day and their horseback riding school loses business. Her life begins to feel unliveable when Clark insists she help him to blackmail their neighbour, Sylvia, about the inappropriate sexual advances of her now deceased husband. With Sylvia's assistance, Carla leaves Clark to embark on an independent life in Toronto, but as soon as she gets distance between herself and her husband her desire for connection, to be connected to someone, reasserts itself:

And what was strange about it was that she was doing all this, she was riding on this bus in the hope of recovering herself. As Mrs. Jamieson might say – and as she herself might with satisfaction have said – *taking charge of her own life*. With nobody glowering over her, nobody's mood infecting her with misery.

But what would she care about? How would she know that she was alive? ('Runaway', p. 34).

Her identity is precarious outside of the relationship she shares with Clark, she is unsure of her self when it is not reinforced by Clark's glower and infectious bad moods. The conflict between autonomy and dependence, the need to maintain them in a constant tension, call her home; she gets off the bus and phones Clark to come and get her. She cannot, or is unwilling, to sever the connection with Clark. It is interesting that their names are almost identical; they share every letter save one. She cannot fabricate an

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<sup>79</sup> Naomi Scheman, 'Queering the Center by Centering the Queer: Reflections on Transsexuals and Secular Jews', in *Feminists Rethink the Self*, ed. by Diana Tietjens Meyers, Feminist Theory and Politics Series (Boulder, CO and Oxford, UK: Westview, 1997), p. 125-6.

<sup>80</sup> Alice Munro, 'Runaway', in *Runaway* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2004), p. 34. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition and noted parenthetically in the body of the text.

identity without him. Carla's near brush with freedom and independence is hampered by her inability to deal with the conflicts between connection and disconnection. She will continue to vacillate, because this is Munro, between connection and disconnection, relationship and isolation. Carol Shields posits that for Munro: 'hanging on to your own life may mean the excommunication of *all* others'.<sup>81</sup> Carla is unwilling to excommunicate *all* others; she is unwilling to fully embrace disconnection, to cement her identity as separate from Clark and the riding school. Instead, she will maintain the tension between intimacy and autonomy, connection and disconnection.

Sylvia, Carla's neighbour, in the wake of her husband's illness and death, feels a connection. Carla had cleaned her house when he was ill and comes to help Sylvia clear out his possessions after he dies. Sylvia disposes of everything her husband had owned, his clothing, his pills and creams, the supplies that kept him alive: 'all of that was dumped into plastic bags to be hauled away as garbage, and Carla didn't question a thing [...] When Sylvia said, "I wish I hadn't taken the clothes to town. I wish I'd burned them all up in the incinerator," Carla had shown no surprise' ('Runaway', p. 16-17). Instead, Carla offers her the comfort of laughter and companionship, the comfort of connection. However, when Carla breaks down and cries because of her unhappiness at home, Sylvia begins to disconnect: 'And Sylvia could not help feeling how, with every moment of this show of misery, the girl made herself more ordinary' ('Runaway', p. 22). The sense of connection that Sylvia felt for Carla made her 'sense' Carla's superiority to other women and the evidence that Carla was vulnerable and miserable just like every other woman causes Sylvia to withdraw. The language of the passage echoes this withdrawal. Sylvia is the focaliser at this point in the narrative. Her speech

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<sup>81</sup> Carol Shields, 'In Ontario', *London Review of Books* 13.3 (7 March 1991), 22-23, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v13/n03/carol-shields/in-ontario> [accessed 30 May 2011], paragraph 6, original emphasis.

is rendered in direct speech using quotation marks: ““Has he hurt you, Carla?”” (‘Runaway’, p. 23). However, Carla’s speech is rendered in indirect discourse: ‘He was mad at her all the time. He acted as if he hated her. There was nothing she could do right, there was nothing she could say. Living with him was driving her crazy. Sometimes she thought she already was crazy. Sometimes she thought he was’ (‘Runaway’, p. 23). Carla is paraphrased as if Sylvia is only partly listening, as if Sylvia has disconnected from this tale of woe. Carla and Sylvia’s relationship is one of only temporary connection because it lacked real intimacy; their intimacy was only a perceived connection. Rather than autonomy being overwhelmed by dependency, Carla and Sylvia were unable to establish a relationship of intimacy, they were unable to grow dependent on each other, and thus the balance was never achieved and the relationship dissipated into separate autonomies.

Not all relationships are conducive to realizing autonomy, of course, nor does Munro’s fiction reject disconnection entirely. Her stories often feature divorcees, widows, and the mothers of adult children who have disappeared and lost touch. ‘Deep-Holes’ is a story from the latter revisiting. Sally’s son has left his family behind in search of a more authentic life. The story is told in two times: the first when Sally’s eldest son, Kent, is nine and severely breaks his leg by falling into one of the deep holes of the title. The second is in Sally’s widowhood when her son resurfaces living in the same part of Canada. Her bereavement is recent and she has spent the final years of her geologist husband’s life being used by him ‘for scale, in the photographs. So she became the small figure in black or bright clothing, contrasting with the ribbons of Silurian or Devonian rock’.<sup>82</sup> She acts as scale in her husband’s retirement, the small figure that contrasts with him. His death leaves her ‘at loose ends a little’ (‘Deep-

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<sup>82</sup> Alice Munro, ‘Deep-Holes’, in *Too Much Happiness* (London: Vintage, 2010), p. 103. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition and noted parenthetically in the body of the text.

Holes', p. 106). The reunion with her son is fraught. He is a distant and self-satisfied man and Sally wants to flee his company. 'When he was gone she thought of running away. If she could locate a back door, a route that didn't go through the kitchen. But she could not do it, because it would mean she would never see him again' ('Deep-Holes, p. 113). She stays because she fears the permanent disconnection that a minor one would predict – she wants connection with her son despite feeling 'steered' and that he emphasizes 'the cost' speaking to her is for him, the 'labour' it requires ('Deep-Holes, p. 109). For his part, Kent desires a relationship with her, but one predicated on his terms:

I am after you. Don't you want a different life? I'm not saying I love you, I don't use stupid language. Or, I want to save you. You know you can only save yourself. So what is the point? I don't usually try to get anywhere talking to people. I usually try to avoid personal relationships. I mean I do. I do avoid them.

Relationships ('Deep-Holes, p. 114).

He retracts the usual rewards of connection: love, deliverance from loneliness, conversation, and personal relationship, personal ties. His articulation of his motivations reveals much about his character. His search for an authentic life has culminated in his embracing of disconnection – he no longer speaks of love, he no longer talks to people, and he avoids personal relationships. He refuses to maintain the necessary tension between connection and disconnection, autonomy and dependence, and thus reveals himself as a deficient subject. Her repetition of the final word 'relationships' in free indirect discourse underscores her recognition of everything that reconnection with her son will deny her, of the real sense of connection that will be impossible and that will remain lost.

Sally is faced with a decision about reconnecting with her son: is connection, any connection, worth the sacrifice of all the benefits of relationship? Friedman argues



that although some relationships ‘of certain sorts are necessary for the realization of autonomy’, other types of relationship can be ‘irrelevant or positively detrimental to it’.

<sup>83</sup> Although relationship allows one to realize autonomy, not all relationships are conducive to it. Some people in relationships, rather than maintaining the tension between dependence and independence, choose one side or the other, dependence or independence, and thus force their partner onto the other side, to embrace the opposition. Not all relationships benefit both parties equally; only one person may find self-fulfilment while the other party encounters only self-abnegation. ‘One relationship might, furthermore, foster the personal autonomy of only *some* of its participants while at the same time hindering the personal autonomy of other participants’.<sup>84</sup> Sally’s response to her son is often a visceral one. At the possibility that she might be reunited with him, she finds herself shaking: ‘Sally was overcome by a trembling, a longing, a weariness’ (‘Deep-Holes, p. 105). The experience of both longing and weariness create a complex and possibly contradictory set of emotions. She wants him back, but the thought of him makes her tired or perhaps she is tired of the longing for him having not seen him in a decade. Her response to his offer of a relationship without love, dialogue, or real connection is a physical one as well:

She is shaking with anger. What is she supposed to do, go back to the condemned house and scrub the rotten linoleum and cook up the chicken parts that were thrown out because they’re past the best-before date? And be reminded every day how she falls short of Marnie or any other afflicted creature? All for the privilege of being useful in the life somebody else – Kent – has chosen (‘Deep-Holes, p. 115).

She rejects the life of self-abnegation, the life of sacrifice in which she can never redeem herself, where she will always fall short because she is not properly afflicted. Sally refuses, in her widowhood, finally, to act as the figure that gives scale to the male

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<sup>83</sup> Friedman 1997, p. 56.

<sup>84</sup> Friedman 1997, p. 56, original emphasis.

enterprise that is her son's life. If relationship requires a fine balance between intimacy and autonomy, connection and disconnection, love and aggression, she refuses to settle for one that is unbalanced, that can only offer her dependence, disconnection, and the withholding of love. Sally's choice of disconnection from her son does not mean a neat and tidy conclusion to her story; rather Munro resists such an ending. Sally leaves open the possibility of future reconnection with her son and takes consolation in the thought that she might become senile, 'marooned on [an] island of [her] own choosing, clear sighted, content' and thus no longer feel bereft at the loss of the relationship with Kent ('Deep-Holes', p. 115).

Munro resists resolving the conflicts that her protagonists face because such resolution would be an evasive falsification. She renders a vision of a subjectivity predicated on both connection and disconnection; one that recognises autonomy is made possible by relationships with others. Her protagonists oscillate between the poles of domestic connection and independent excommunication, with neither being a comfortable resting place because life is lived in the fluctuating between. Her protagonists will continue to revisit the familiar places and struggle with the discomfort of connection and their desire for the pleasure of disconnection. It is these tensions, between autonomy and intimacy, separation and connection, love and hate that enact the indeterminacy of Munro's fiction.

The New Femininities authors' use of an unreliable narrator does not simply upset the binaries of reliable and unreliable, truth and lie, connection and disconnection, it makes these binaries immaterial; it goes beyond the 'reserve-discourse'; it 'wrecks' the 'regulations and codes' of storytelling. In choosing to present their lives through the eyes of narrators who question the whole system of authentication by narration, these authors sabotage the truth-value of their own stories. These writers are simultaneously

resisting the urge to make definitive sense of their stories and frustrating the reader's ability to do so. They are wilfully 'incompetent' 'because their subjects are such that there is no way to adequately deal with them.

## Chapter Two: Flirting with the Boundary: The Ironic Voices of Enright, Heller, and Kennedy

Just as the unreliable narrator works to call into question the boundaries between binaries, the unreliable narrators of the New Femininities fictions employ an ironic voice to allow them to straddle the gendered binary oppositions which are at the root of patriarchy and which organize attributes along an axis of positive/negative, active/passive, and masculine/feminine. An ironic voice does not necessarily say what it means, rather it works by echoing a cultural norm or previous statement in such a way as to dissociate the speaker from it. Kierkegaard describes a person who uses irony as ‘*svaevende* (hovering)’.<sup>1</sup> Lydia Rainford describes the ironist as a flirt who teases the boundaries without ever consummating or rejecting her suitor.<sup>2</sup> By hovering and flirting, irony allows its speakers to straddle the binaries and occupy a position of bothness. Rather than embracing Cixous’s call to transgress the boundaries of binary oppositions through a discourse that is excessive and poetic, the use of the ironic voice, to use Cixous’s examples, allows its characters to be both active *and* passive, head *and*

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<sup>1</sup> Birgit Baldwin, ‘Irony, that “Little, Invisible Personage”’: A Reading of Kierkegaard’s Ghosts’, *MLN*, 104 (1989), p. 1131.

<sup>2</sup> Lydia Rainford, *She Changes by Intrigue Irony, Femininity and Feminism* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005), p. 67-8.

heart, intelligible *and* palpable. They can fulfil Cixous's call to occupy both the body and the mind but without having to speak in a feminine language that is somehow more 'natural' to women. Anne Enright's *The Gathering* uses her ironic voice to disrupt the mind/body 'couple' – her ironic hovering figures an embodied intellect. Zoë Heller's *Notes on a Scandal* reworks Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* and negotiates the boundary between masculine spectator and feminine spectacle by casting a woman in the role of spectator. A.L. Kennedy's *Paradise* problematises the boundaries of masculine 'alcoholic' and feminine 'accomplice'.

Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, suggested that in order to create one needs to balance the masculine and feminine sides of one's mind, a balance she calls, after Coleridge, 'androgyny'.<sup>3</sup> This androgynous state does not engage in bodily metaphors but rather chooses to ignore binary oppositions to envision a self that bridges the division between masculine and feminine. An androgynous mind finds binary oppositions permeable, it is capable of hovering over and flirting with difference. Creativity is rooted in a mind that straddles the boundaries between the two. This is not to say that Woolf ignores gender difference or believes that it is completely escapable. Toril Moi argues that

Far from fleeing such gender identities because she fears them, Woolf rejects them because she has seen them for what they are. She has understood that the goal of the feminist struggle must precisely be to deconstruct the death-dealing binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity.<sup>4</sup>

Rather than attempt to revalue the feminine or denigrate the masculine, deconstructing the binary oppositions means recognising that they are constructed through language and can be subverted through language. By way of the use of the ironic voice, I will argue that these texts disrupt the partitions and go beyond the discourse of gender. The

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<sup>3</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, Great Ideas Series, (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 114.

<sup>4</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, New Accents Series (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 13.

‘hovering’ that the ironic voice accomplishes straddles the binary oppositions without coming down decisively on either side of the boundary, without embracing the feminine/negative or the masculine/positive and without rejecting them either. Their authors realise for their characters Cixous’s ‘bisexuality’ but *not* in the ways that Cixous imagined. This bisexuality/androgyny allows a person to occupy a position of bothness – she hovers or straddles binary oppositions in a place that allows her to be both: active *and* passive, culture *and* nature, head *and* heart, intelligible *and* palpable. Hovering, straddling, ‘being both’ describes the ‘autonomous self’ which I have been arguing the New Femininities’ characters are seeking.

The *OED* defines irony as ‘a figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used’.<sup>5</sup> Irony is much more sophisticated than the *OED*’s definition implies. This definition implies that meaning falls neatly into binary oppositions and that to decode an ironic utterance all that is required is to locate this oppositionality. However, meanings are not stationary nor do they necessarily carry binary opposites. In the words of Ruth Robbins:

[M]eaning comes not from the closed relationship of two, but from an endless stream of differentiations: not one, not two, but many [...] In French, *différance* puns on two meanings; difference and deferral. Derrida argues that all meaning takes place within the realm of *différance*; words mean in terms of their differences to other words, rather than having meanings fixed within them, and therefore meaning is always deferred, put off, never present.<sup>6</sup>

An ironic statement requires interpretation which obliges a listener to discern what the ironist intended to imply. Irony does not lie in an opposite meaning, but rather can be found in what Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber call an ‘echoic interpretive use’ which echoes a previous statement or cultural value in such a way as to communicate the

<sup>5</sup> ‘Irony’, in *Oxford English Dictionary Online* 2008 [1989], 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press <[http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50121251?query\\_type=word&queryword=irony&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10&sort\\_type=alpha&result\\_place=1&search\\_id=LqAU-AFhi8V-550&hilite=50121251](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50121251?query_type=word&queryword=irony&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=1&search_id=LqAU-AFhi8V-550&hilite=50121251)> [accessed 10 May 2008]

<sup>6</sup> Ruth Robbins, *Literary Feminisms*, Transitions series (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 171.

speaker's dissociation with that statement.<sup>7</sup> The reader of irony unravels the implication of that dissociation. Linda Hutcheon asserts that rather than the presence of two meanings, irony occurs in the in-between:

[Irony] happens in the space *between* (and including) the said and the unsaid; it needs both to happen. What I want to call the 'ironic' meaning is inclusive and relational: the said and the unsaid coexist for the interpreter, and each has meaning in relation to the other because they literally 'interact' to create the real 'ironic' meaning. The 'ironic' meaning is not, then, simply the unsaid meaning, and the unsaid meaning is not always a simple inversion or opposite of the said: it is always different – *other than* and more than the said.<sup>8</sup>

Irony allows a betweenness of meaning, of what Hutcheon calls the said and unsaid, that allows their meanings to coexist, to be 'both/and', and further to function as more than a simple statement, to in effect become a statement that goes beyond binary oppositions, a statement that straddles the boundaries. This straddling of boundaries, Rainford posits, allows irony to call into question the structures which it undermines. She argues that 'irony operates from within the structure it interrogates, repeating the beliefs of the structure in such a way as to negate their value; thus implying that the *real* truth is another thing altogether'.<sup>9</sup> Irony works to achieve Cixous's project of disrupting the 'couples' that structure gender difference and discourse.

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<sup>7</sup> Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber, 'On Verbal Irony', in *The Stylistics Reader: From Roman Jakobson to the Present*, ed. by Jean Jacques Weber (London: Arnold, 1996), p. 278.

<sup>8</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 12-3, original emphasis.

<sup>9</sup> Rainford 2005, p. 3.

## **Anne Enright's Ironic Voice: Hovering on the Border Between Body and Mind**

The gendered duality of mind and body which designates man as transcendent consciousness and woman as located in and bound to her body, man as human and woman as animal, has characterised Western thought since the time of Plato. Judith Butler asserts that '[t]he cultural associations of mind with masculinity and body with femininity are well documented within the field of philosophy and feminism'.<sup>10</sup> Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* has been interpreted by many to be a woman's argument against the ideologies that confined her to the bodily and a desire to be equivalent to men and able to become existential subjects capable of embracing the Cartesian location of existence in thinking. She argued that women were hampered from embracing their full existential subjectivity by the ideology of marriage and motherhood that required them to care for small children at the expense of their working lives and intellectual lives. According to Weil, Beauvoir argued 'that it was primarily because of their identification with the maternal function that women were confined to a domestic role and prohibited from transcending their bodies and nature to become fully human'.<sup>11</sup> Beauvoir's critique of the ideology of motherhood makes her one of the theorists to whom Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva are responding and whom they ultimately resist. In 'Women's Time', Kristeva accuses 'existential feminists', like Beauvoir, of a 'rejection, when necessary, of the attributes traditionally considered feminine or maternal insofar as they are deemed incompatible with insertion in that history', and of desiring a universalist politics of identification with the male

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<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> Kari Weil, 'French Feminism's *écriture féminine*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, ed. by Ellen Rooney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 155.



position.<sup>12</sup> Beauvoir's politics, Kristeva intimates, require the denial of maternity and sexual difference.

However, Beauvoir's argument is much more nuanced than a simple rejection of motherhood and call for women to become transcendent existential subjects. Her discussion of the body recognises that 'nature is no more an immutable given than is historical reality'.<sup>13</sup> Bodies are marked and interpreted by the cultures in which they live and there is nothing intrinsic to the body that explains the values assigned to sexual difference:

It is not as a body but as a body subjected to taboos and laws that the subject gains consciousness of and accomplishes himself. He valorises himself in the name of certain values. And once again, physiology cannot ground values: rather, biological data take on those values the existent confers upon them.<sup>14</sup>

Her understanding of consciousness, this passage seems to imply, is of an intellect rooted in a body and that the value of particular bodies over other bodies is dictated by ideology. Butler argues that Beauvoir is calling for an embodiment of consciousness, a realisation that women, and men, do not simply want to be able to claim an existentialist subjectivity but that they want to be able to inhabit that subjectivity:

Although Beauvoir is often understood to be calling for the right of women, in effect, to become existential subjects and, hence, for inclusion within the terms of an abstract universality, her position also implies a fundamental critique of the very disembodiment of the abstract masculine epistemological subject. That subject is abstract to the extent that it disavows its socially marked embodiment, and, further, projects that disavowed and disparaged embodiment on to the feminine sphere, effectively renaming the body as female. This association of the body with the female works along magical relations of reciprocity whereby the female sex becomes restricted to its body, and the male body, fully disavowed, becomes, paradoxically, the incorporeal instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom [...] Beauvoir proposes that the

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<sup>12</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', *Signs*, 7 (1981), p. 18-19.

<sup>13</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> de Beauvoir 2009, p. 48.

female body ought to be the situation and instrumentality of women's freedom, not a defining and limiting essence.<sup>15</sup>

Butler is interpreting Beauvoir as proposing that women should be recognised as inhabiting a middle ground in which they are situated in the body, but not confined in it; in which they are able to be great thinking minds while still being embodied women. Butler argues that for Beauvoir the 'socially marked embodiment' is inescapable and that freedom is located in and made possible by that body. Women need to be able to be both intellect and body, to bridge the mind/body duality, and situate themselves on that bridge, that in-between. The theorists of *écriture féminine* seem to be attempting to find such a place, but have difficulty with negotiating the mind and body connection; too much emphasis on either side suggests a return to identification or a foray into essentialist politics that takes as its own the traditional reading of the social marks on the female body.

Luce Irigaray takes as her starting point the biological marks of the female body and defines women's thinking as contiguous rather than linear anchoring her description in the physical layout of women's genitals. Women have two lips that rub together continuously and therefore '[w]hat she says is never identical with anything, moreover; rather, it is contiguous. *It touches (upon)*'.<sup>16</sup> Irigaray further argues that 'woman has sex organs more or less everywhere' and, in contrast to men who have one pleasure centre and thus think linearly, tend to speak from several different directions, from several different pleasure centres. This explains, for Irigaray, why women are perceived to be irrational and illogical.<sup>17</sup> She is using revolutionary thinking about the female body to explain the patriarchal definitions of women's nature, 'whimsical,

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<sup>15</sup> Butler 2006, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> Luce Irigaray, 'This Sex Which is Not One', in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, revised edn (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 366, her emphasis.

<sup>17</sup> Irigaray 1997, p. 366.

incomprehensible, agitated, capricious’, incoherent, and ‘contradictory’.<sup>18</sup> In Ann Rosalind Jones’s words, this kind of theory ‘[r]ather than questioning the terms of such a definition (woman is man’s opposite) *féminité* as a celebration of women’s difference from men maintains them’.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, as Beauvoir argued, ‘nature is no more an immutable given than is historical reality’; women’s biology is not her destiny but her ideologically interpreted situation. Jones asserts that:

All in all, at this point in history, most of us perceive our bodies through a jumpy, contradictory mesh of hoary sexual symbolization and political counter-response. It is possible to argue that the French feminists make of the female body too unproblematic pleasurable and totalized an entity.<sup>20</sup>

The female body is too uncomplicated in Irigaray’s formulation and her conclusions serve to reinforce the patriarchal definition of women’s nature, a definition that is far too rigid. Women are not a totalizable entity, they do not all think the same or behave the same. This universalist definition ignores race, class, education, sexuality, and all the other factors that contribute to the individuality of each distinct woman, that contribute to women who do not think contiguously or who are not afraid to speak or who speak from a part of their bodies not connected to pleasure or sexuality.

Anne Enright’s use of the ironic voice serves to straddle the distance between the body and the mind. Her style is not about the pleasures of the female body, but rather hovers between an academic discourse and a deep interest in the experiences of the body. In her collection of essays on motherhood, *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* (2005), her focus is upon an experience that is definitely bodily, but for Enright, the intellectual component is fundamental and undeniable:

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<sup>18</sup> Irigaray 1997, p. 366.

<sup>19</sup> Ann Rosalind Jones, ‘Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *l’écriture féminine*’, in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, revised edn (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 376.

<sup>20</sup> Jones 1997, p. 376.

Speech is a selfish act, and mothers should probably remain silent [...] I'd like to apologise to all those people who find the whole idea of talking about things as opposed to just getting on with them mildly indecent, or provoking [...] Also to those readers who would prefer me not to think so much (because mothers just shouldn't), and to those thinkers who will realise that in the last few years I have not had time to research, or check a reference – the only books I have finished, since I had children, being the ones I wrote myself (not quite true, but it's a nice thing to say) [...] Also, sorry about my insides: I was reared with the idea that, for a woman, anatomy is destiny, so I have always paid close attention to what the body is and what it actually does. Call it a hobby.<sup>21</sup>

In this passage, Enright identifies the cultural valuation of mothers as being selfless occupants of the body – they should not speak or think, they do not have time to research, they should simply do. Despite their embodied nature, the workings of that body should remain mysterious and should not be discussed. The ironic voice that characterises this passage (she echoes her critics and the ideology of motherhood in such a way as to clearly dissociate herself with it) makes clear that these opinions are not her own as she will spend one hundred ninety-six pages writing and thinking about motherhood and 'her insides'. In this passage, Enright begins with a rhetorically strong opening, 'speech is a selfish act', but immediately deflates her seriousness by shifting registers from intellectual thinker to conversational mother, 'talking about things'. She plays off 'wrong' thinking, mothers should not speak or do not think, with 'right' thinking, mothers do think and should speak; they do have interesting 'things' to say. She is not happy to settle on either side. She leaves the door open to interpretation to avoid foreclosing or preaching a version of 'rightness' to her readers. Enright takes Freud's maxim that 'the anatomy is destiny' and turns it on her critics. If anatomy is destiny, then a woman should think and talk about it. The final 'call it a hobby' is a bathetic return from the performed intellectualism of quoting Freud to the embodied

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<sup>21</sup> Anne Enright, *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* (London: Vintage, 2005), p. 1-2. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition and noted parenthetically in the body of the text.

mother for whom intellectual pursuits are a hobby. For Enright, mothers are both of the body and of the mind.

Enright uses her ironic voice, in her essays, short stories, and novels, to disrupt the mind/body 'couple'. In her work, both body and mind are central. Her ironic voice interjects whenever the discourse becomes too entrenched in the body or the consciousness. A passage that pays close attention to the physical will finish with an ironic aside that introduces the intellect either through an echoic interpretive use of cultural norms or through dissociation from the physical perspective. A passage that theorises will be interrupted by an ironic aside that restores attention to the body. These ironic asides, physical or intellectual, tend to be bathetic, to serve as an anticlimactic return to the in-between. The existence of a narrative voice that hovers around the middle ground between the body and the mind is compelling because the division between the mind and body has traditionally been gendered masculine mind and feminine body, and it is this well-known division and a mainstay of feminism, that has been used to justify patriarchy. I will argue that Enright makes use of an ironic voice to upset the gendered binary of mind and body and suggest a middle ground where women can be both, an intellect and a body.

Enright finds herself puzzled by how much the physical experience of motherhood is intertwined with the intellectual. Her nursing reflex responds not only to crying babies, but also to thoughts, to images, and to stories. She finds that her nursing body's desire to feed strangers and memories raises questions about the origins of stories, whether they are physical or intellectual constructs. Motherhood's very embodiment requires critical thinking:

Stories, no matter how fake, produce a real biological response in us, and we are used to this. But the questions my nursing body raises are more testing to me. Do we need stories in order to produce emotion, or is an emotion already a

story? What is the connection, in other words, between narrative and my alveolar cells? I suspect, as I search the room for the hunger by the fireplace, or the hunger in her cry, that I have found a place before stories start. Or the precise place where stories start. How else can I explain the shift from language that has happened in my brain? This is why mothers do not write, because motherhood happens in the body, as much as the mind (*Making Babies*, p. 46-7).

Interestingly, Enright implies that her previous assumption had been that motherhood happens in the mind; motherhood is an intellectual activity. That she finds thoughts are translated into a biological response, the let down of milk, surprises her. For her nursing self, thoughts straddle the boundary; they are both bodily and in her mind. She shifts register with her question ‘what is the connection [...] between narrative and my alveolar cells’ to a more intellectual tone; she uses the scientific terminology for her breast tissue and changes from ‘story’ to ‘narrative’; her questions of the body translated into academic speak. This reading of breastfeeding runs counter to Beauvoir’s assertion that the physical reality of mothering is a passive submission to biology. Beauvoir found mothering a purely physical and non-intellectual undertaking:

But in any case, to give birth and to breastfeed are not *activities*, they are natural functions; they do not involve a project, which is why the woman finds no motive there to claim a higher meaning for her existence; she passively submits to her biological destiny.<sup>22</sup>

Birthing and nursing are purely biological functions and require no higher thinking from the participants, mother and child. This is a common view of mothering and is echoed in narratives in which the mother resents spending her days dealing with eating, sleeping, and defecating: activities lacking intellectual stimulation. Enright finds that her very physical response, releasing milk to feed unnamed and often imaginary hunger which is inconvenient and often embarrassing, is connected to an intellectual one and actually inspires her intellectually. She ponders the meaning behind the biological functions of her body. Her body not only responds to stories, she theorises that it is the

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<sup>22</sup> de Beauvoir 2009, p. 75.

source of stories. For Enright, motherhood takes place in the body as well as the brain; it straddles the division and occurs in the in-between.

In her short story collection, *Taking Pictures*, her narrative focus shifts from the connection of mind and body to the related distinction between public and private. Her characters confuse the distinction between physical and private attributes and financial and public markers in her short story entitled 'Caravan'. Continuing the confusion of the intellectual and the emotional which she makes explicit in her essay on breastfeeding, Enright's narrative continues to place value on body and mind in such a way as to establish a tension between the two that is a 'Both/And' situation. In a tale of the difficulties of a middle class Irish family holiday to a caravan park in France, boundaries are confused between the physical body which is traditionally associated with the feminine and the private, but which is public evidence of financial success or lack thereof:

Most people on the campsite had two. Most people, like them, were doing 'all right'. They probably weren't doing 'well' – the women hadn't lost the baby weight, and the men's legs looked a bit self-conscious in shorts – but even 'all right' cost a fucking fortune.<sup>23</sup>

The financial security usually connected with the notions of people doing 'all right' and doing 'well' is conflated with baby weight and physical appearance, with popular culture markers of success that locates it in a slim body. Body parts, 'legs', are imbued with self-awareness and the ability to feel 'self-conscious'. Men's legs are now able to feel insecure in their exposure to public gaze and to reveal the financial insecurity of their owners' lives. Mind and body, public and private, coexist and infer that these middle class people on vacation inhabit an in-between where their private is made public and vice versa.

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<sup>23</sup> Anne Enright, *Taking Pictures* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), p. 177. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition and noted parenthetically in the body of the text.

The anorectic inhabits a body that is both public and private, not only as performances of a class identity; her self-restriction marks her body out as different and open to the perception of onlookers. The narrator of the story, 'Little Sister', confronts the in-betweenness of public and private in the glimpsed body of an anorectic. Anorexia is a disease in which the body is subjugated by the mind which chooses not to feed it. Susan Bordo argues that this struggle is a gendered struggle of the masculine mind over the feminine body:

Hilda Bruch reports that many anorectics talk of having a 'ghost' inside them or surrounding them, 'a dictator who dominates me,' as one describes it; 'a little man who objects when I eat' is the description given by another. The little ghost, the dictator, the 'other self' (as he is often described) is always male, reports Bruch. The anorectic's *other self* – the self of uncontrollable appetites, the impurities and taints, the flabby will and tendency to mental torpor – is the body, as we have seen. But it is also (and here the anorectic's associations are surely in the mainstream of Western culture) the *female* self.<sup>24</sup>

The anorectic embodies the struggle between the notion of intellect as masculine and the body as appetitive, weak-willed, passive feminine. She has turned this struggle inward, rather than finding a way to inhabit both sides of the binary mind and body, the anorectic sets them at war within herself. The narrator of Enright's story describes the physicality of the anorectic body in detail before ending with a register shift:

I opened the bathroom door one day and saw one of them in there, checking herself in the mirror. She was standing on a toilet seat with the cubicle door open and her nightdress pulled up to her face. You could see all her bones. There was a mile of space between her legs, and her pubis stuck out, a bulging hammock of flesh, terribly split. She pulled the nightdress down when she heard the door open, so by the time I looked from her reflection to the cubicle, she was decent again. It was just a flash, like flicking the remote to find a sitcom and getting a shot of famine in the middle, or of porn (*Taking Pictures*, p. 59).

The girl is characterised as one of 'them', a distancing that defines the girl entirely by her body and her illness. The physical description conveys horror; her pubis is 'a

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<sup>24</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1993), p. 155.



bulging hammock of flesh, terribly split'. The concluding ironic remark further builds the sense of voyeurism by equating her glimpse with changing the channels on a television – she is a passive watcher. However, the confusion and equation of news footage of famine with porn reintroduces a strongly critical mind asserting itself as more than a passive eye absorbing a scene. It is an intellect that recognises that the female body can hover between famine and porn: between the denial of one's appetite and the use and exploitation of another. The same female body can denote both famine and porn, both spectacles that might inspire horror or pleasure in their viewers. Enright's spectator experiences both emotions and acts as both the passive consuming viewer, body, and the critical reader of culture, mind, with neither role given preference or a higher value.

Enright creates this same balance between body and mind in her novel *The Gathering*. The homodiegetic narrator, Veronica, finds her sense of self collapsing in the wake of her brother's death. Once again, the ironic voice interrupts whenever the narrative is in danger of becoming too engrossed 'in' the body or too entrenched in the mind. If she finds herself feeling socially awkward and out of place, her response is to try to find a bodily solution to her mental unease:

I should be wearing my light green tweed skirt, tight across the thighs – that would show them. I should be sitting here in one of those posh wrap dresses. This is what I think about, on the brink of my marriage (or is it my sanity) in the Shelbourne bar – I think clothes would make a difference.<sup>25</sup>

The passage attempts to shift registers; to imagine that her emotional distress would be eliminated if she was wearing a different outfit; if she was performing 'sexy' or 'posh'. She repeats 'I should' as she considers different outfits in which she would feel more confident. Its repetition calls attention to her compulsion to find a way to feel more

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<sup>25</sup> Anne Enright, *The Gathering* (New York: Black Cat, 2007), p. 178. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition and noted parenthetically in the body of the text.

comfortable and how unsatisfying her solutions are because she is transferring her discomfort with her situation on to the outer surface of her body; her sense of alienation onto the performance of fashion. The parenthetical ironic aside of ‘or is it my sanity’ reinforces this blurring of boundaries between the physical, marriage, and the mind, her sanity. She cannot distinguish which she is in danger of losing or if there is a difference between the two. The final bathetic ironic statement, ‘I think clothes would make a difference’, emphasises the conflict. Perhaps if she were more comfortable with her physical performance of her self she would feel less self-conscious and out of place, but when the mental difficulty is the end of marriage or sanity, a physical performance is not enough. She does not really think that clothes would make a difference.

Veronica does not confine herself to physical performances of class or sophistication to remedy an uncomfortable emotional situation, but also finds that beauty treatments and body hair management help to calm her mind. In order to return to her house, her husband, and her family after impulsively flying to Gatwick Airport she feels that she must compose her body with a leg wax and facial, in order to clear her mind to reconstruct her life:

I should go and get a half-wax in the spa. I have the rest of my life to organise. I can’t organise the rest of my life with hairy legs. I wonder is there any way to get into the Clarins shop in the departure lounge where a woman in a white coat does a serious facial in a little back room, though facials always make me looked plucked. Still, I have a terrible yearning for a woman in a rasping white coat whose pressing and patting fingers will stick my face back on, where it is in danger of falling away (*The Gathering*, p. 255-6).

The ironic tone of this passage makes clear that she finds ludicrous her contention that she cannot rebuild her life while her legs are hairy. However, it is this irony that suggests the middle ground, that, although absurd, the mind and body are connected and depilation may help her feel more in control of her life. She equates her face with her life and her sanity. Her sense that it is falling away externalises an interior sense of

disarray. The adjective ‘plucked’ brings to mind poultry ready for cooking as well as tweezing eyebrows. The choice of the adjective ‘rasping’ to describe the technician’s white coat could mean that she finds it irritating but also evokes the image of a rasp that is used ‘to scrape off, away, out – file or sand down’.<sup>26</sup> Her desire for a spa treatment is a desire to be sanded down, remodelled, and rejuvenated physically and mentally. For Veronica, the physical reflects the emotional and the intellectual; controlling the physical enables her to feel more in control of her mind.

Veronica’s insistence that mind and body are connected, and that the physical can be employed to remedy what ails the mind, functions in the opposite direction as well: intellect can be used to assuage physical discomfort. As the novel progresses, Veronica finds herself unmoored from her life, most particularly from her husband. She finds that the binary of desire and hatred is confused in her marriage; they are the same thing. Making love for Tom and Veronica is the same thing as making hate:

I say I have slept with ‘men’ but you know that is a sort of affectation, because what I mean is that when I sleep with Tom, that this is sometimes what he is like, yearning on the pull-back and hatred on the forward slam, and, ‘What are you looking at?’ he says, or a weird sarcasm at dinner with friends about coming, or me not coming, though you know I do come – at least I think I do – realising then, later, that what he wants, what my husband has always wanted, and the thing I will not give him, is my annihilation. This is the way his desire runs. It runs close to hatred. It is sometimes the same thing (*The Gathering*, p. 144-5).

The binary of love and hatred is upset here; Veronica speculates that her husband equates them. The physical act of ‘making love’ conveys both love and hatred. The parallelism of ‘yearning on the pull-back’ and ‘hatred on the forward slam’ sets up three sets of binaries: yearning/hatred, back/forward, and pull/slam whose difference

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<sup>26</sup> ‘Rasp’, in *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, ed. by John Simpson, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)  
[http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50197606?query\\_type=word&queryword=rasp&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10&sort\\_type=alpha&result\\_place=1&search\\_id=DgO6-2rfucD-3716&hilite=50197606](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50197606?query_type=word&queryword=rasp&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=1&search_id=DgO6-2rfucD-3716&hilite=50197606), [accessed 19 October 2010]

becomes elided in Veronica and Tom's relationship. The run-on stream of consciousness nature of this passage renders an urgency to her analysis of her husband's desire, as if she is only able to make sense of him as she speaks. She is in the body with 'pull-back' and 'forward slam', noun phrases that enact the violence that they describe, and then shifts register to a cerebral discourse by choosing the word 'annihilation' which echoes masculine discourse of the active man and the passive female. Veronica must utilise her intellectual skills to articulate to herself what has foundered in her relationship, but it is physical cues which fuel her conclusion. Love and hatred exist in the middle ground between the mind and the body; in both mind and body.

Enright's use of the ironic voice serves to straddle the binary division between body and mind without privileging or denigrating either. Veronica does not recognise a divide between what belongs to the body and what belongs to the mind perhaps because the division is an arbitrary one. Thinking is a physical undertaking that occurs in the body and the body carries out the instructions of the mind. This connection is made clear in Veronica's theory of belief. In the church, at her brother's funeral, Veronica realises that belief, too, is both bodily and of the mind:

I check my heart now, and I find that there is still a feeling there, of something hot and struggling. I roll my eyes back under my closed lids, and there is the sense of opening in the middle of my forehead. The chest thing is like fighting for words and the forehead thing is pure and empty, like after all the words have been said.

There now.

Belief. I have the biology of it. All I need is the stuff to put in there. All I need are the words (*The Gathering*, p. 229).

She locates the ability to believe in both the mind and the body. She can find it in her heart and in her head, but the feelings are related to language, to intellectual activity. The ironic assertion that she has 'the biology' of belief, that she is naturally capable of

it, that it is rooted in her body is rendered bathetic because this biology is empty; she lacks the words, the culture, to fill up her biology. The location in her heart is characterised by both physical warmth and sense of movement and with the intellectual fighting for words. In her head there is a physical opening and a feeling of intellectual completion after having said everything you want to say. She finds that she has the physical feelings of belief and only needs the language to realise it. Her experience of belief is both of the body and of the mind and she is unable to separate these parts out. The intellectual fills the body, the body makes possible the intellectual.

If belief is a biological capability that simply requires something to believe in and the words with which to do it, then Veronica comes to realise that her previous religion was her husband. She has anchored herself in him, but soon becomes conscious that this faith has foundered because of the concessions she has to make to his job and his philandering. However, rather than ceasing to believe in her husband's fidelity or his love, Veronica ceases to believe in his body:

There he is now, in our bed, still alive. The air goes into him and the air comes out. His toenails grow. His hair turns silently grey.

The last time I touched him was the night of Liam's wake. And I don't know what is wrong with me since, but I do not believe in my husband's body any more (*The Gathering*, p. 73).

The passage begins in the body with her husband's physical presence. Although she asserts that he is alive the attention to his growing toenails and greying hair could characterise a corpse, which anecdotally continues to grow hair and toenails after death. The passage changes focus from the physical, with a description of his breathing body in bed, to the intellect, she is contemplating what has changed, thinking hard about what is 'wrong' with her, and then returns to the body and her lack of belief in his. Since for Veronica belief is rooted in both body and mind, her loss of belief is much more total. Perhaps the root of the problem is that her belief was in just one side of a binary that for

her is indivisible, body and mind; her belief was in his body alone and cannot sustain her.

Enright's assertion that for women body and mind cannot be separated, that life is lived in both, disrupts the binary division between mind and body, and its traditional gendering. She is not excessive or poetic. She does not root herself in the pleasures of the female body, rather her style hovers between a sharply critical intellectualism and a deep interest in the body. Whenever one side of the binary threatens to take over and upset the balance, her ironic voice calls attention to the other side with an anticlimactic return to the in-between. Through the use of this ironic voice she refuses to commit to either side of the binary opposition of mind and body and thus enables her female characters to intellectually inhabit their physical bodies; they are able to be an intellect rooted and situated in a body.

### **Zoë Heller and the Impossible Female Gaze**

The mind/body duality can be seen in the binary of spectator and spectacle founded on Freudian psychoanalysis and the equation of the spectator with the masculine-active and the spectacle with the feminine-passive. Zoë Heller negotiates this binary in her novel *Notes on a Scandal*, but chooses to make both her gazer and the object of that gaze women, thus, complicating from the start their gendered roles. Heller's novel raises the question: if a woman looks at another woman with desire, is her gaze necessarily masculinised? I will examine how Heller negotiates the observer and observed binary to offer a different story of the female spectator and the female spectacle and how the use of an ironic voice does not allow the narrative or reader to foreclose on Barbara's motivations in her role as female spectator of another woman's performance of femininity. Her gaze is definitely an acquisitive one, she wants Sheba to

be hers, but it is also identificatory; she wants to be like Sheba. She seeks both conquest and collaboration. Feminist theorists, most particularly in film theory, have been struggling to envision a female spectator who does not have to take on the masculine subject position in what Laura Mulvey characterises as transvestism nor place herself in the position of feminine body to be scrutinised. Heller's choice to name her heroine Bathsheba places her novel in a history of literary representations of women as objects of the acquisitive male gaze dating back to the Biblical story of David and Bathsheba and Thomas Hardy's 1874 novel *Far from the Madding Crowd*. However, Heller offers an active female gazer whose gaze embodies both desire and identification, treading the middle ground between masculine and feminine observer, and calling into question the gendering of spectator and spectacle.

Much of the discussion of women and gaze occurs among feminist film theorists and was sparked in 1975 by Laura Mulvey's article, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. In this article, Mulvey took Freud's binary of scopophilia and exhibitionism and articulated how they were supported in cinema. In Freud's theory, scopophilia, the perversion of looking, is gendered masculine, while its opposite, exhibitionism, is gendered feminine. Freud sets up an equivalence between the active and passive nature of scopophilia and exhibitionism and that of sadism and masochism which elucidates the objectification inherent in gazing at another as well as locating them in the binary of gender:

In the perversions which are directed towards looking and being looked at, we come across a very remarkable characteristic with which we shall be still more intensely concerned in the aberration that we shall consider next: in these perversions the sexual aim occurs in two forms, an *active* and a *passive* one [...] Sadism and masochism occupy a special position among the perversions,

since the contrast between activity and passivity which lies behind them is among the universal characteristics of sexual life.<sup>27</sup>

Hence scopophilia becomes associated with the active, the masculine, and the sadistic – he dominates; exhibitionism with the passive, the feminine, and the masochistic – she is dominated and enjoys it. Daryl Ogden argues: ‘The distancing effect that scopophilia makes possible between subject and object corresponds precisely to the objectification of the desired other that sadism requires’.<sup>28</sup> However, he points out that Freud’s own gendering of binary difference is flawed and confused. Freud writes, ‘The compulsion to exhibit, for instance, is also closely dependent on the castration complex: it is a means of constantly insisting upon the integrity of the subject’s own (male) genitals and it reiterates his infantile satisfaction at the absence of a penis in those of women’; clearly gendering exhibitionism masculine and active.<sup>29</sup> The gendering of this binary is problematic, as is the gendering of all binaries, because it is arbitrary and based on ideology regarding how people of certain genders behave. Although the exhibitionist is not necessarily female or passive, Freud must force it onto the feminine passive in order to preserve, in Stephen Heath’s words, his previous ‘emphasis elsewhere [...] on libidinal investment in the eye as phallus’.<sup>30</sup> Oedipus’s blinding is a form of castration in punishment for sleeping with his mother. If the eye and vision are phallic, then they belong to the masculine. This binary preserves the gendered mind/body duality as the feminine is once again reduced to a passive body.

Feminist theorists have attempted to envision an active feminine spectator while shackled to psychoanalytic binaries that seem to concretely gender sight as masculine.

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<sup>27</sup> Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, trans. by James Strachey, ed. by Angela Richards, The Pelican Freud Library (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 70-2, original emphasis.

<sup>28</sup> Daryl Ogden, *The Language of the Eyes: Science, Sexuality, and Female Vision in English Literature and Culture, 1690-1927* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 184.

<sup>29</sup> Freud 1977, p. 70, note 2.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Heath, ‘Difference’ in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, ed. by Screen (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 77.



As E. Ann Kaplan asserts: ‘men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and of possession which is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act upon it’.<sup>31</sup> An embrace of this assertion means women are confined to passively looking back; their agency is taken away. In Mulvey’s pivotal article, she demonstrates the validity of psychoanalysis’s gendering of observer and observed and unquestioningly casts the spectator of cinema as male:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.<sup>32</sup>

The women she discusses are the ones projected onto the screen, not the women in the audience watching and deciphering, or not, the code for visual and erotic impact. She does not question these binary roles nor does she discuss the female spectator. Rather she takes the gaze to be exclusively masculine. Her notion of ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ echoes Lacan’s argument that the pleasure of the gaze for women is in being its object. He says that there is satisfaction for ‘a woman who knows that she is being looked at, on condition that one does not show her that one knows that she knows’.<sup>33</sup> Mulvey stimulated much debate in film theory studies, with feminists calling for an articulation of the experience of cinema from the female spectator’s vantage point. Six years later, Mulvey wrote a follow-up in which she argued that the feminine gaze becomes masculinised, that she identifies with the hero. This identification can be pleasurable, or it can be uncomfortable. Mulvey argues that ‘trans-sex identification is a *habit* that very

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<sup>31</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 31.

<sup>32</sup> Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, ed. by *Screen* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 27, original emphasis.

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI* (New York and London: Norton, 1981), p. 75.

easily becomes *second nature*. However, this Nature does not sit easily and shifts restlessly in its borrowed transvestite clothes'.<sup>34</sup> For Mulvey, the female spectator must slip on a masculine identity that does not fit in order to harness the power of action and of possession that her own gaze lacks. Jackie Byars finds fault with this assertion and points out: 'Basic to these arguments are the assumptions that [...] the gazes/looks of both characters and spectators are "male" or, at best, "masculine" (this assumption basically gives up *looking* – or voyeurism – to the male)'.<sup>35</sup> This is a surrender that hampers feminist theorising and serves to reinforce patriarchy.

These discussions of gaze led Teresa de Lauretis to posit that there was a female gaze that was outside of the patriarchal definitions of feminized and masculinised; a gaze that was not about looking as a man would look, with a sexualized, acquisitive gaze, nor with a narcissistic feminine gaze enjoying seeing oneself being looked at as Lacan would have it. This gaze would, in Ogden's words, seek neither 'the feminized valorization of the male gaze nor the masculinized visual conquest of the opposite sex'.<sup>36</sup> The difficulty that de Lauretis found in articulating such a gaze was the position she argues the female subject takes in language:

Though now the place of the female subject in language, in discourse, and in the social may be understood another way, it is an equally impossible position. She now finds herself in the empty space between the signs, in a void of meaning, where no demand is possible and no code available; or, going back to the cinema, she finds herself in the place of the female spectator, between the look of the camera (the masculine representation) and the image on the screen (the specular fixity of the feminine representation), not one or the other but both and neither.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)', in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 32-2, original emphasis.

<sup>35</sup> Jackie Byars, 'Gazes/Voices/Power: Expanding Psychoanalysis for Feminist Film and Television Theory', in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. by E. Deidre Pribram (London and New York: Verso, 1988), p. 121, original emphasis.

<sup>36</sup> Daryl Ogden, 'Bathsheba's Visual Estate: Female Spectatorship in *Far From the Madding Crowd*', *Journal of Narrative Technique*, 23.1 (1993), p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 35.

De Lauretis identifies the female spectator's position as an 'impossible' place where she is both taking up the gaze of the man and in the position of the objectified gazed at woman while being neither; she is trapped in a place where the terms do not include her. This realisation does not paralyse de Lauretis or convince her to surrender sight to men and embrace the feminine sense of touch as Irigaray does: 'Woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking,' she asserts, 'and her entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation'.<sup>38</sup> Rather, de Lauretis begins to interrogate how to think from this position: 'The question then is how to reconstruct or organize vision from the "impossible" place of female desire [...] and how to represent the terms of her double identification in the process of looking at her looking'.<sup>39</sup> As a means to answer this question, she calls attention to Freud's acknowledgement that a woman may continue to exhibit masculine traits even after she has made her oedipal journey to become feminine. Some women may even alternate between the two subject positions throughout their lives. Thus, de Lauretis concludes: 'The two terms, femininity and masculinity, do not refer so much to qualities or states of being inherent in a person, as to positions which she occupies in relation to desire. They are terms of identification'.<sup>40</sup> This assertion, while it does not abolish or evacuate the terms nor bring attention to their arbitrariness, suggests that when a woman assumes a masculine gaze, she is not practicing a form of transvestism, the putting on of a gender that is not her own, but rather she is taking up of a subject position that could well belong to her. However, for de Lauretis, the female gaze that is not dictated by patriarchy, that is not gendered feminine or masculine, continues to be an 'impossible' one. De Lauretis seems unable to unseat the binary, although she has found evidence that gender is more fluid than its

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<sup>38</sup> Irigaray 1997, p. 364.

<sup>39</sup> de Lauretis 1984, p. 69.

<sup>40</sup> de Lauretis 1984, p. 142.

division into two solid categories and that women occupy their gender in such a way as to choose from both sides of the binary couples that serve as the scaffold of patriarchal society, she is unable to locate examples of women looking with a non-patriarchal gaze.

Ogden undertakes a search for the ‘impossible’ place of female visual desire by exploring the Bathsheba mythos. In II Samuel, David sees Bathsheba from afar bathing on the roof and covets her. He sends her husband off to his death so that he might have her. In the Biblical tale, David is the phallic scopophilic and Bathsheba the passive object of his gaze, unaware that he is looking. Ogden argues that Thomas Hardy rethinks this scopic tale in *Far from the Madding Crowd* by christening his female protagonist Bathsheba Everdene, but by making her passivity questionable:

Hardy invokes a correspondence with the biblical Bathsheba, and then proceeds to parallel his own Bathsheba with her biblical namesake by depicting her as a passive target of male scopic desire in the novel’s opening chapters. Yet Hardy’s subsequent characterization of Bathsheba Everdene departs from the biblical Bathsheba’s in its portrayal not merely as a ‘feminized’ spectator who peripherally perceives the visual attentions of male characters, but also as a socially empowered, near ‘masculinized’ spectator of those same male characters.<sup>41</sup>

Ogden argues that Bathsheba begins the book as an unwitting object of Gabriel Oak’s gaze. An orphaned milkmaid sent to live with her Aunt, she is vulnerable and appears passive and unaware, indeed unwilling to acknowledge, the curious male gaze. The first time Gabriel sees her it is from afar and she is sitting in a wagon atop all of her worldly goods gazing at herself in a mirror. He is surprised at ‘the change from the customary spot and necessary occasion for such an act – from the dressing hour in a bedroom to a time of travelling out of doors’ and assumes ‘Woman’s prescriptive infirmity had stalked into the sunlight’; he assumes that she is flawed by ‘Vanity’.<sup>42</sup> However,

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<sup>41</sup> Ogden 1993, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1924), p. 5 and 7. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition and noted parenthetically in the body of the text.

Bathsheba at the beginning of the novel is not as passive as she appears and she resists being the object of Gabriel's gaze once she realises that he has been watching her. She understands that acquiescence to a man will mean the end of her freedom: 'I *hate* to be thought men's property in that way, though possibly I shall be had some day' (*FFMC*, p. 32, original emphasis). Although, because of her socially disadvantaged position, her resistance of his gaze is arguably passive – she simply does not go where he can see her – her resistance of his marriage proposal is direct – she says 'no'.

The change in Bathsheba's social position when she inherits her uncle's farm and assumes its management duties, Ogden argues, changes her way of negotiating the gaze. She continues to be the recipient of numerous male gazes; however, she is no longer the passive spectacle nor is she the passive exhibitionist. Rather, she knows how to control her observers gaze and influence what it sees; she is an active recipient of their gazes. Ogden states:

Bathsheba's acute self-awareness of her physical desirability, coupled with the inheritance of her uncle's farm, prompts her transformation into an exhibitionist, a version of Berger's 'feminized' spectator who watches herself being watched [...] Exhibitionism thus becomes a strategy of resistance against the objectifying gaze of the spectator for the exhibitionist shows the spectator only what 'she' chooses 'him' to see.<sup>43</sup>

Her recognition and ability to wield the power of a woman who knows that she is beautiful and that men are looking at her almost allows her to transcend the patriarchal division of the genders; it almost allows her to enter into the scopic economy as neither a masculinised nor feminised gazer. If she could maintain her control of her observers and of her own performance, she would be able to embody a gaze that is not about acquisition, but about a woman on equal footing with the men around her.

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<sup>43</sup> Ogden 1993, p. 5.

However, the dual position which feminine spectators traditionally take, as identifying with both the masculine gazer and the feminine spectacle, proves upsetting to her equilibrium. When she meets Sergeant Troy in the dark, he literally entangles her, catching his stirrup in her dress. In the sudden light of a lamp lit so that they can see to extricate her skirts, she is dazzled by his scarlet suit and brass accoutrement and cowed by his overpowering gaze. His gaze drives her to avert her eyes.

He looked hard into her eyes when she raised them for a moment; Bathsheba looked down again, for his gaze was too strong to be received pointblank with her own. But she had obliquely noticed that he was young and slim, and that he wore three chevrons upon his sleeve (*FFMC*, p. 187).

Troy's mastery of the role of both spectator and spectacle defeats her reserve and she is overwhelmed by a desire that renders her passive to his will. She surrenders all to his scopic dexterity and makes a hasty marriage that ends in desertion and his death. Bathsheba, at the novel's end, has been diminished by her experiences of visual seduction and marries her original voyeur, the novel's hero, Gabriel. Their marriage returns the novel to the status quo of gender division; she takes up her position as passive female to Gabriel's active male. On her wedding day 'having at Gabriel's request, arranged her hair this morning as she had worn it years ago on Norcombe Hill', she has figuratively returned to the woman she was at the beginning of the novel, but now the willing passive object of another's gaze (*FFMC*, p. 474). Gabriel, by requesting she change her appearance, compels Bathsheba to turn back the clock to the time when she refused him and assume her proper place as his wife. His acquisition of both Bathsheba and her property, Ogden argues, 'doubl[es] the scope of male property ownership and reassert[s] male scopic and social hegemony. Bathsheba's marriage to Gabriel functions as an ideological recontainment of the female gaze and the foreclosure of female property ownership'.<sup>44</sup> Although Hardy's novel attempts to unseat

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<sup>44</sup> Ogden 1993, p. 13.

the traditional scopic binary, as Ogden asserts, ‘to conceive and manifest a non-patriarchal female spectator will require a reformulation of gender roles and relations on numerous cultural registers, a task that Hardy, in spite of his profound criticism of his age’s gender conventionality, was not prepared to undertake’.<sup>45</sup> Bathsheba Everdene could not maintain her position as a woman outside of traditional gender roles because such a space did not exist. Her gaze must be returned to the passive enjoyment of a man’s pleasure in her appearance stripped of the power which her exhibitionism previously exercised.

Heller’s novel enters into the Bathsheba mythos and its scopophilic concerns through both the presence of a character named Bathsheba and with her role as object of desire of an undetected observer. However, her retelling of Bathsheba as the object of desire changes the equation by casting a woman, fittingly named Barbara Covett, as Bathsheba’s unobserved spectator. By employing a female spectator and a female spectacle, Heller dispenses with the (traditional) division of couples into masculine and feminine, and begins to explore relationships and desires between women. Barbara and Sheba are teachers at a secondary school. The novel is Barbara’s account of Sheba’s scandalous relationship with a fifteen-year-old boy and the fallout when it is discovered by the world, but more importantly it is Barbara’s chronicle of the development of their friendship. Barbara is a harsh judge of everyone around her, but her voice is ironic and allows the narrative to hover between what can be seen, what is obvious, and what must be discerned, between the visual and the intuitive. Because of this hovering, the narrative leaves open the question of what motivates Barbara – is her desire for Sheba a sexually acquisitive one, and thus masculine, or is it feminine, identificatory and about

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<sup>45</sup> Ogden 1993, p. 13.

mutuality and friendship, or is it both/and, desire and identification, the ‘impossible’ gaze not constrained by patriarchal limitations?

Heller’s awareness of the connection of the myth to scopis desire and a history of women as passive spectacles is suggested by the parallels she draws between her novel, the Biblical account, and Hardy’s *Bathsheba*. Barbara’s first view of Sheba is from afar, in common with both the Bible and Hardy, but she judges Sheba harshly which makes the parallel unarguably with Hardy:

The first time I ever saw Sheba was on a Monday morning, early in the winter term of 1996. I was standing in the St George’s car park, getting books out of the back of my car when she came through the gates on a bicycle – an old-fashioned butcher-boy model with a basket in the front. Her hair was arranged in one of those artfully dishevelled up-dos: a lot of stray tendrils framing the jaw, and something like a chopstick piercing a rough bun at the back. It was the sort of hairstyle that film actresses wear when they’re playing sexy lady doctors. I can’t recall exactly what she had on. Sheba’s outfits tend to be very complicated – lots of floaty layers. I know she was wearing purple shoes. And there was definitely a long skirt involved, because I remember thinking that it was in imminent danger of becoming entangled in her spokes. When she dismounted – with a lithe, rather irritating, little skip – I saw that the skirt was made of some diaphanous material. Fey was the word that swam into my mind. *Fey person*, I thought. Then I locked my car and walked away.<sup>46</sup>

Barbara notices a great deal of detail, but interprets it quickly in order to develop an opinion about the value of the object of her gaze. She notices tangible details, the old-fashioned bicycle, the dishevelled hair, the long skirt and purple shoes, but interprets these details to expose in Sheba an element of performance – ‘the sort of hairstyle that film actresses wear when they’re playing sexy doctors’. Sheba, Barbara construes has chosen her grooming so as to affect both intelligence and sex appeal. These details seem to annoy Barbara: a ‘lithe, rather irritating, little skip’ and ‘complicated’ and ‘diaphanous’ outfits. The ironic voice asserts a judgement that translates the visible, tangible items of Sheba’s appearance into her intuitive perception of some intrinsic

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<sup>46</sup> Zoë Heller, *Notes on a Scandal* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 11, original emphasis. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition and noted parenthetically in the body of the text.



quality; Sheba is a fey person. The *OED* defines ‘fey’ as ‘frequently used ironically, in sense “affected, whimsy”’.<sup>47</sup> Sheba is affected and whimsical and thus not deserving of Barbara’s attention; Barbara chooses to walk away. The judgement and subsequent dismissal are echoed in Hardy’s novel. Gabriel sums his Bathsheba up in one word: ‘Vanity’ (*FFMC*, p. 7). They both determine that their Bathsheba is not worthy of their regard and return to work.

It is a second look, once again unnoticed, which convince both Barbara and Gabriel that Bathsheba is deserving of their regard and desire. For Gabriel, listening to Bathsheba’s assurance of her competence at riding a horse convinces him she is a beautiful and interesting woman. Hooded so she is unrecognisable as the vain maiden he had previously observed, Bathsheba engages her observer by her activity, by her confidence; not by her feminine passivity or diffident demeanour. Barbara’s interest in Sheba is aroused when she officially meets her and she perceives that other people, men, find Sheba beautiful:

Women observing other women tend to be engrossed by the details – the bodily minutiae, the clothing particulars. We get so caught up in the lone dimple, the excessive ears, the missing button, that we often lag behind men in organizing the individual features into an overall impression. I mention this by way of explaining why it was only now, watching Bill, that the fact of Sheba’s beauty occurred to me. *Of course*, I thought. *She’s very good-looking*. Sheba, who had been smiling fixedly [...] made another nervous adjustment to her hair. As she raised her long, thin arms to fuss with the chopstick hair ornament, her torso lengthened and her chest was thrust forward slightly. She had a dancer’s bosom. Two firm little patties riding the raft of her ribs [...] The change that took place in the teachers’ faces as they set eyes on Sheba confirmed my appraisal of Bill’s appraisal. The men beamed and ogled. The women shrank slightly and turned sullen (*Notes*, p. 13-4, original emphasis).

Barbara comments here on the psychology of men and women. She identifies with both the women and the men in this passage, feminine and masculine views, for she refers to

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<sup>47</sup> ‘Fey’, in *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, ed. by John Simpson, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.stir.ac.uk/Entry/69711> [accessed 14 February 2011]

women as ‘we’, but does not report shrinking or feeling sullen at the realisation that Sheba is beautiful. She continues to judge everyone around her, casting the men as ‘ogling’ Sheba, and placing herself above women who might feel intimidated by a beautiful woman. ‘Women’, in Barbara’s estimation, looking at a beautiful woman, find themselves in that double position de Lauretis identified, seeing her through men’s eyes and finding her beautiful, and then identifying with her and finding their own ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ wanting. Barbara begins to desire Sheba whether for her overall beauty or the dancer’s bosom is unclear. Perhaps Barbara experiences a moment of sexual frisson at the sight and thought of Sheba’s small breasts riding on her ribcage. However the question of whether her motivation is of a sexual nature is left open by her ironic distancing from the people around her. She reports how everyone else responds, but not her own response.

Yet, because of her newfound desire Barbara intuits that Sheba and herself are compatible and similar and credits Sheba with sympathetic understanding. Barbara believes that Sheba recognises the condescending tone of a work colleague who claims the school would fall apart if Barbara left: ‘It was difficult to distinguish her tone, but it seemed to me that it contained a note of genuine sympathy – as if she understood how maddening it might be to be patronized by Mawson’ (*Notes*, p. 15). She confuses the boundaries between the tangibles that can be seen, the bodily minutiae, to an intuited sense of Sheba’s similarity and affinity with herself. Barbara begins to paint her beautiful colleague as a potential ‘soul mate’ (*Notes*, p. 36), as a friend with whom she can have a bond of ‘uncommon intimacy and trust – a relationship *de chaleur* as the French say’ (*Notes*, p. 18). Her pretentious use of French exposes both her own performance of intelligence and her exaggerated sense of rapport. It is clear that Barbara desires Sheba, but is it in the same way as the acquisitive masculine gaze of

sexual conquest? Does her gaze identify with Sheba or is her gaze about imagining a relationship in which they share a mutual gaze, in which they are both subjects gazing at other subjects?

Jackie Stacey argues that psychoanalytic film theory is unable to account for the desires experienced by a female spectator admiring another woman. She takes as her evidence two films about a woman idealizing another woman, *All About Eve* and *Desperately Seeking Susan*. These films ‘construct not only a feminine object of desire in the narrative, but also a feminine subject of that desire’.<sup>48</sup> In both films, a woman adulates another woman and tries to emulate her, by wearing her clothes, endeavouring to seduce her lovers, and attempting to live her life. What motivates the female gazer to choose her object of desire is not easily broken down into the binary of masculinity and femininity. She is neither taking a masculine position of conquest toward her object nor is her desire a passive desire to be admired. Stacey contends:

The binary opposition between masculinity and femininity offers a limited framework for the discussion of Eve’s fascination with Margot, which is articulated actively through an interplay of desire and identification during the film. In many ways, Margot is Eve’s idealized object of desire.<sup>49</sup>

What Stacey finds in these films is an interaction between desire and affinity. The gazer does not desire to possess her object, rather she wants to be near her, be like her, to experience her power. ‘However,’ Stacey asserts, ‘the pleasures of this feminine desire cannot be collapsed into simple identification, since difference and otherness are continuously played upon’. Further, ‘[t]he rigid distinction between *either* desire *or* identification, so characteristic of psychoanalytic film theory, fails to address the construction of desires which involve a specific interplay of both processes’.<sup>50</sup> The

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<sup>48</sup> Jackie Stacey, ‘Desperately Seeking Difference’, in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, ed. by *Screen* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 250.

<sup>49</sup> Stacey 1992, p. 251.

<sup>50</sup> Stacey 1992, p. 256, original emphasis.

longing for resemblance does not denote a desire for sameness; part of the pleasure of observing the idealized other is that she is different. Nor is the female ideal a mere object, but rather the ‘active bearer of the look’.<sup>51</sup> Kaplan suggests that women desire the gaze shared by mother and child which is a ‘*mutual gazing*, rather than the subject-object kind that reduces one of the parties to the place of submission’.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the female spectator’s gaze might be about desire, identification, and mutuality – I see you and you see me. Ogden suggests that such a gaze can be found in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* in which Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe ‘merg[e] their eyes with their objects of desire into a dynamic, fluid relationship predicated on mutuality and reciprocity rather than on a separation based on domination and subordination’.<sup>53</sup> According to Ogden, Woolf has envisioned female spectators whose gazes are not confined by patriarchal notions of subject and object.

Barbara yearns for a relationship built upon reciprocity and affinity. She longs for acknowledgement and mutuality, identification, and the presence of an active bearer of the look to look back at her. She is desperate enough for such a female ideal that she is willing to read the subtlest visual clues as indicating the presence of a spiritual affinity. However, Sheba does not seem to share her need for female connection nor is she aware of Barbara’s regard:

Owing to my seniority at St George’s and the fact that I am more formal in manner than most of my colleagues, I am used to being treated with a certain deference. But Sheba seemed to be oblivious of my status. There was little indication, for a long time, that she really *saw* me at all. Yet, in spite of this, I found myself possessed by a strange certainty that we would one day be friends. [...] The bond that I sensed, even at that stage, went far beyond anything that might have been expressed in quotidian chit-chat. It was an intuited kinship. An unspoken understanding. Does it sound too dramatic to call it spiritual recognition? Owing to our mutual reserve, I understood that it

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<sup>51</sup> Barbara Creed, ‘Introduction’, in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, ed. by Screen (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 225.

<sup>52</sup> Kaplan 1988, p. 205, original emphasis.

<sup>53</sup> Ogden 2005, p. 189.

would take time for us to form a friendship. But when we did, I had no doubt that it would prove to be one of uncommon intimacy and trust – a relationship *de chaleur* as the French say. In the meantime, I watched from afar (*Notes*, p. 18, original emphasis).

This passage is intimately concerned with gaze. It begins with Barbara's distress that Sheba never 'really *saw*' her and ends with her assertion that while she awaits Sheba's recognition of their shared affinity, she watches from afar; she will continue gazing at Sheba until she looks back. She uses terms of perception and a strong assertion of 'I' exposing the self-interest behind her reliance on senses other than sight: 'I found myself possessed', 'I sensed', 'I understood', and 'I had no doubt'. She can *see* that Sheba does not notice, but she *feels* that they are destined to be together. The paralleling of the noun phrases, 'an intuited kinship', 'an unspoken understanding', and 'spiritual recognition' amplify both the closeness of the bond and its provenance in the realm of feelings – it is not tangible, it cannot be observed or spoken, it is not physical. She intuits a similarity between them, an identification, a mutuality; their 'mutual reserve'. There is something ironic in Barbara's voice as she claims this affinity, as if she realises that she is overstating the connection. Sheba does not act as the exhibitionist deriving pleasure at looking at her observer looking at her. She refuses to recognise Barbara as an active gazer, as a person whose gaze 'carries with it the power of action and of possession'. Sheba perceives Barbara's gaze as the passive feminine one that only works to identify with and to admire her.

Sheba does not return Barbara's gaze because her gaze has been drawn by someone else. Rather than the passive feminine object of the gaze who is satisfied to simply be Irigaray's 'beautiful object of contemplation', Bathsheba's gaze is drawn by a child. Her experience as a pottery teacher in an underprivileged school is unpleasant and difficult, as are her students. She is overwhelmed by their language and their resistance to learning and spends many of her classes hiding in the back while the

students throw clay around the room. It is not until she is supervising an afterschool detention, that she encounters a young man who seems different and who captures her own acquisitive gaze:

They returned Sheba's gaze with reflexive surliness. Only one boy, at the very back of the room, sat working quietly. Sheba remembers being touched by his child-like posture of concentration – the way his tongue was peeping out from his mouth and his left arm was curled protectively around his labours. This was Steven Connolly (*Notes*, p. 25).

Sheba is looking for a mutuality of gazes with her students, but instead receives only automatic hostility. The term 'reflexive' could denote that the students are capable of reflection or serious thought, but the noun it modifies, 'surliness', locates its meaning as the opposite – 'automatic, unthinking, instinctive'.<sup>54</sup> Sheba is attracted by the child not included in the mass of automaton-like students, the one doing what he is supposed to do. She is drawn to his 'child-like' pose of absorption in his task; child-like is important here as it shows she chooses not to see him as a child. The tongue which adds to the endearing image of a concentrating child is characterised by another metaphor of vision; it is 'peeping' out, suggesting both the looking of a 'peeping tom' and its near homophone, 'peeking'. Steven Connolly is drawing which allows Sheba to approach him and start a conversation by commenting on his picture. This overture sets in motion the events that lead to Sheba's ruin and Barbara's triumph as she interposes herself into Sheba's life to become her sole companion.

Barbara's role as active female spectator of another woman's performance of femininity finds its culmination in a dinner invitation, after this dinner she ceases to cast herself as spectator of Sheba; she begins to feel a part of her performance. Sheba invites Barbara to come to her house for dinner and to meet her family. Barbara is

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<sup>54</sup> 'Reflexive', in *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, ed. by John Simpson, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.stir.ac.uk/Entry/160948> [accessed 14 February 2011].

overwhelmed by the hope that the invitation arouses in her: 'I'm a child in that respect: able to live, psychically speaking, on a crumb of anticipation for weeks at a time, but always in danger of crushing the waited-for even with the freight of my excessive hope' (*Notes*, p. 95). The change Barbara makes from feeling like an isolated spectator to identifying herself as the potential object of another's gaze occurs in the following passage:

I stood watching her as she walked away. Her long green cardigan was flapping around her in the breeze and her skirt was clinging to her woollen tights, getting caught up between her legs. She was fiddling, as usual, with her unruly hair [...] I kept my head down as I walked, partly so that I could concentrate on replaying the conversation that had just taken place and partly to avoid advertising the foolish smile on my face (*Notes*, p. 94).

She describes Sheba's visible appearance, the bodily minutiae and clothing particulars, but instead of shifting to an intuitive reading of Sheba, she shifts her attention to herself. She watches Sheba walk away and then focuses on herself, casts herself as a potential object of vision whose expression might be readable to passersby; advertising her pleasure at finally connecting with Sheba, finally getting a hint of her longed for intimacy in a dinner invitation that is only for her. She can cast herself as a potential object of someone else's gaze because she reads Sheba's invitation as representing her mutual regard, representing Sheba looking back at her.

Barbara, our active female spectator, desires conquest, collaboration, and mutual regard. She longs to be engaged in a relationship in which each member gazes and is gazed at by the other. Her ironic voice allows her to hover over the binary of visible and perceptible and masculine gaze and feminine spectacle. She is no transvestite, pulling on a gender that is not her own, nor does she place herself in the position of exhibitionist, for Barbara believes that no one is looking at her with desire. Her desire is both masculine, for she may well harbour erotic intentions towards Sheba, and

feminine, she does long to experience the power of the beautiful object, and neither, she longs for a mutuality and reciprocity that resists the patriarchal notions of subject and object.

### **A.L. Kennedy's *Paradise*: Femininity, Alcoholism, and the Ironic Voice**

The ironic voice of Hannah, *Paradise*'s homo- and autodiegetic narrator, works to flirt with the boundaries of masculine 'alcoholic' and feminine 'accomplice', between addict and enabler, monster and victim. 'The alcoholic woman is a subversive figure in modern fiction and culture', asserts Ellen Lansky, because she subverts gender expectations by taking up the masculine position of 'alcoholic' rather than the feminine one of 'accomplice'.<sup>55</sup> Hannah is an alcoholic who drinks like a man in order to escape the pressures of prescriptive femininity to which she feels inadequate. Alcoholism, it has been argued by some feminists,<sup>56</sup> not only allows a woman to evade normative femininity, but it also offers a reprieve from the slowness of time by allowing her to misplace large blocks of her life through blackouts, and it allows her to separate out different parts of her self as authentic while isolating others as false or dangerous. Hannah's identity is truly a self in division, a fragmented self. To this end, I will argue, Kennedy makes use of her characteristic narrative devices, an implementation of the future tense to speak of things that are past, a disruptive voice represented in italics which often proffers ironic asides, and an overall pattern of shifting narration, from 'I' to 'you', that attempts to distance and universalise experience, in order to explore the conflicts in subjectivity in a woman whose alcoholism means her experience is one of disruption, instability, and continuous alienation. Kennedy's narrative is not one of

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<sup>55</sup> Ellen Lansky, 'Female Trouble: Dorothy Parker, Katherine Anne Porter, and Alcoholism', *Literature and Medicine* 17 (1998), p. 213.

<sup>56</sup> See Karen Kopelson's 'Radical Indulgence: Excess, Addiction, and Female Desire', Melissa Pearl Friedling's *Recovering Women: Feminisms and the Representation of Addiction*, Helen Keane, *What's Wrong with Addiction*, and Avital Ronell's *Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, Mania*



liberation through alcohol or through the destruction of binaries, but Hannah's subversive performance of alcoholic femininity relates the cost of avoiding the negotiation of binary oppositions that is contemporary femininity; not all 'new femininities' are liberating.

Instead of being the passive partner who concerns herself with smoothing the way for her husband's excessive alcoholic needs to the exclusion of her own happiness, the alcoholic woman pursues her own excessive path. Karen Kopelson asserts that 'the primary manifestation of this pathology [addiction] is considered to be a focus on oneself bordering on egomania: a self-serving pursuit of what one wants [...], without regard for others and at all costs – usually considered "masculine" traits'.<sup>57</sup> The selfishness of alcoholism allows the female alcoholic to lay claim to her own version of masculinity. Her behaviour, however, Kopelson avers, refuses the 'definitive male traits of self-control that have long served to confer masculine (and upper-middle-class) power and privilege' and by so doing 'refuses to be the servile, docile counterpart to the ruling, virtuous male'.<sup>58</sup> In effect, the female alcoholic transcends the gender divide – she becomes someone who is neither virtuous masculine subject nor passive feminine object. In order to view this as liberatory, one must ignore the physical, mental, and emotional repercussions of addiction. The addict may transcend gender, but the consequences for this transcendence are severe –physical vulnerability, poverty, malnutrition, and isolation. The female alcoholic's transcendence of gender is not a performance that one could recommend to others. What is lacking from the model of the addict as emancipated from gender is a negotiation with the binary oppositions that allow one to generate a liveable self, rather than a compulsion which will ultimately

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<sup>57</sup> Karen Kopelson, 'Radical Indulgence: Excess, Addiction, and Female Desire', *Postmodern Culture* 17 (2006), <http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.stir.ac.uk/journals/pmc/v017/17.1kopelson.html> [accessed 13 June 2011], paragraph 20.

<sup>58</sup> Kopelson 2006, paragraph 14-15.

destroy that self. However, rather than seeking a model of liberation, the alcoholic Hannah, and Kopelson's addicts, are models of subversive performances of femininity.

Kopelson asserts that intoxication and drug addiction are 'another form of women's lived, embodied protest against patriarchal structures of containment'.<sup>59</sup> Addiction is a response to the difficulties of conforming to normative femininity and heteronormativity. It could be argued that Hannah's alcoholism is rooted in her difficulties with 'normal' and her perceived inadequacy to perform femininity properly. Jane Nardin, in a discussion of Jean Rhys's pre-war novels, posits that alcoholism is a choice for her protagonists because it is preferable to the oppressive situations in which they find themselves. Alcohol often 'functions as a means of escape from intolerable humiliation', exploitation by men, rejection, and exclusion from family and friends.<sup>60</sup> This escape is only into oblivion and does not change or end the humiliation. Thus, as an escape and a protest, and it can be both, addiction and alcoholism are indicators of the intolerable humiliation of the constrictions of femininity.

Simone de Beauvoir asserts that the process of 'feminising' a young girl requires her 'to realise herself as passivity, to accept dependence'<sup>61</sup> and identifies adolescence as the pivotal moment when a young, confident autonomous girl has to renounce her self and accept femininity in order to become an adult. This process, she argues, is traumatic and difficult. 'The girl buries her childhood slowly – this autonomous and imperious individual she has been; and she enters adult existence

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<sup>59</sup> Kopelson 2006, paragraph 4. She borrows the term, 'embodied protest', from Susan Bordo's discussion of anorexic and fat bodies. Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>60</sup> Jane Nardin, "'As Soon as I Sober Up I Start Again": Alcohol and the Will in Jean Rhys's Pre-War Novels', *Papers on Language and Literature* 42 (2006), 46-72 [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3708/is\\_200601/ai\\_n17170472/pg\\_11/?tag=content;coll](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3708/is_200601/ai_n17170472/pg_11/?tag=content;coll) [accessed 13 June 2011], paragraph 8.

<sup>61</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), p. 355.

submissively'.<sup>62</sup> Little girls enjoy a freedom that is curtailed when they begin to show signs of physical maturity. Beauvoir argues that becoming a woman involves the surrender of autonomy:

For the girl [...] there is a divorce between her properly human condition and her feminine vocation. This is why adolescence is such a difficult and decisive moment for woman. Until then she was an autonomous individual: she now has to renounce her sovereignty.<sup>63</sup>

More recently, in the 1990s, Mary Pipher, a clinical psychologist, argued that adolescence continues to be a time of traumatic passage for young western women. Preadolescent girls 'have a brief respite from the female role and can be tomboys, a word that conveys courage, competency, and irreverence'.<sup>64</sup> However, the demands of peers and the media that young girls start becoming women, become concerned with their weight, make-up, and sexual relationships, means that there are pressures to be quieter, less active, and more decorative. They find these changes devastating:

Something dramatic happens to girls in early adolescence. Just as planes and ships disappear mysteriously into the Bermuda Triangle, so do the selves of girls go down in droves. They crash and burn in a social and developmental Bermuda Triangle. In early adolescence, studies show that [...] they lose their resiliency and optimism and become less curious and inclined to take risks.<sup>65</sup>

Their loss of resilience, curiosity, optimism, and courage shows the frightening nature of normative femininity; its potential to demoralise. Pipher argues that the choice appears to be between autonomy and femininity, between freedom and acceptance. This conflict requires the internment of a girl's child self and the fabrication of a new feminine self. Alcoholism and drug addiction can begin in adolescence, Pipher argues, as a response to the stressors of growing up and to the difficulty of creating this feminine self: 'Often heavy chemical use is a red flag that points to other issues, such as despair, social

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<sup>62</sup> Beauvoir 2009, p. 389.

<sup>63</sup> Beauvoir 2009, p. 359.

<sup>64</sup> Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Ballantine, 1995), p. 18.

<sup>65</sup> Pipher 1995, p. 19.

anxiety, [...] or difficulty finding a positive identity'.<sup>66</sup> Further, Pipher maintains, 'adolescent girls experience [...] pressure to split into true and false selves'.<sup>67</sup> Their new feminine self is experienced as false, as a performance that is not 'true' to who the girl believes she is.

Hannah identifies her issues with alcohol as having started around the beginning of her adolescence. By the 'last years at school', she is 'wandering the park after lunch hour in the company of charming and dumpy bottlettes of cider'.<sup>68</sup> She is already habitually drinking and, ironically, personifying her alcohol, attributing friendly characteristics to it while simultaneously being aware of calling into question the truth of the charm of her teenage drinking. She is, in Rainford's formulation, 'repeating the belief of the structure [alcoholism] in such a way as to negate [its] value; thus implying that the *real* truth is something altogether'.<sup>69</sup> That her alcoholism is tied to adolescence and to the changes required of a young girl approaching adulthood, is supported by the adult Hannah's nostalgia for childhood, for the 'clean and early times' (*Paradise*, p. 217). Her nostalgia for childhood and connection with her parents and younger brother act as her anchor to her self, to the self she was before she started drinking, to the self that she finds authentic and valuable. At moments of illness brought about by the alcohol, she retreats to these memories of her life as a child with her little brother:

And I cry because by now I am very scared and because I want to be with him this evening, the two of us together, eating toasted cheese and wearing our pyjamas and being glad that we're indoors – outside it's raining – and maybe our father will come in, [...] and he'll stand in the doorway quietly and watch us, as if we might have slipped away while he was out, or changed – but here we are, ourselves and not lost, turning in time to see his face and know that he loves us to the point of pain (*Paradise*, p. 135).

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<sup>66</sup> Pipher 1995, p. 191.

<sup>67</sup> Pipher 1995, p. 22.

<sup>68</sup> A.L. Kennedy, *Paradise* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), p. 87. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition and noted parenthetically in the body of the text.

<sup>69</sup> Rainford 2005, p. 3.

Her idea of safety is childhood, pyjamas, and nursery food, and being snug inside knowing that your father loves you and that you have done nothing wrong. She sees not only love, but also pain on her father's face; she links adult love with pain. It is this pain that she attempts to numb with her drinking, but it is also the disconnections inherent in adulthood, being separate from her family. She longs to return to the time when she was inseparable from her parents, when her father's smell was 'invisible, in the way I was to me, something so near it could never be separate' (*Paradise*, p. 89). She longs to be the same as her parents again. These nostalgic moments are particularly painful because her return to the present reminds her of the emptiness of her existence:

Sitting in the barley with Simon, my head was always orderly and bright – full of the birds we couldn't name that carved out notes and spaces, that tickled and soared, and poppies more red than a colour, like the marks of somewhere else, some unnatural place, shimmering, and the height of the stalks there to hide us, because we were small. Then I was clean.

Now I am no one, which is not the same thing [...] And I should be Hannah Luckraft and that should be joy (*Paradise*, p. 339).

Being no one is not the same as being clean nor is it the same as being free as Kopelson posited for addiction. The birdsong and the poppies inscribe their presence, carve out notes, they are the marks of somewhere else. They are marks of her childhood and Hannah's nostalgia is evident here. Her language to describe her childhood memory is extravagant, everything exceeds her present reality. The poppies are *more* red, her head is *full* of the birdsong. Her present reality is empty. She does not feel like herself, like Hannah Luckraft. Her refusal of the feminine identity by taking up the masculine position of selfish alcoholic means that she has failed to take up a subject position of her own. She has not negotiated a 'Hannah Luckraft', a self, whom she can comfortably inhabit. Her alcoholism has simply postponed the difficult identity formation she avoided in her youth. For her, neither masculine nor feminine occupy the positive side of the binary opposition. Both subject positions are uninhabitable. Her choice, rather

than ‘both/and’, is neither. Unfortunately, as Beauvoir argues, ‘The adolescent girl often thinks she can simply scorn convention; but by doing so she is making a statement; she is creating a new situation involving consequences she will have to assume’.<sup>70</sup> The consequences of Hannah’s ducking of adulthood and the selection of her own way of occupying a feminine subject position in the world is that she feels she is no one and being Hannah Luckraft is not joy, it is torment.

Hannah does drink as a response to femininity and her own perception that she is inadequate and unable to perform it ‘right’ (*Paradise*, p. 21). Even the word ‘feminine’ is difficult for Hannah. She uses it seven times throughout her novel and each time it carries a negative connotation: it is an impractical burden. An ugly food cart in a seedy airport motel ‘is burdened with a feminine canopy and fat, little flounces of chintz’ (*Paradise*, p. 5). She uses it derisively to describe her sister-in-law, Gillian ‘who renders any guilt ridiculous. It is impossible to think of her badly enough’ (*Paradise*, p. 139) and who, Hannah feels, gloats over her superior performance of femininity through the ‘domestic proficiency’ of a dust free floor (*Paradise*, p. 159). She uses ‘feminine’ to describe the eyelashes of a young man who was maimed, indeed arguably emasculated, by an accident with a knife that severed much of his tongue (*Paradise*, p. 174). And she uses it to describe her fear of a spider as ‘So much like a pathetic come-on, or some kind of feminine panic attack’ (*Paradise*, p. 323). In this context, ‘feminine’ is a performance of weakness and hysteria. In fact, when the term applies to her or to her clothing, it is very much about performance and carries a note of irony as if she is aware that it is a performance. When she prepares to return to her local pub after leaving rehab, she washes thoroughly, puts on makeup and new underwear, and wears a ‘feminine sweater’ to perform the role of ‘the prodigal returned’. Thus,

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<sup>70</sup> Beauvoir 2009, p. 740.

‘feminine’ is a derogatory term that denotes a false performance, much like the false performance of self that Pipher identifies the adolescent girl as having to embrace. The ‘feminine’ is problematic for Hannah.

The only person for whom ‘feminine’ is not a derisive label is Hannah’s mother. However, she has set up her mother’s performance of femininity as perfect and ideal. Her mother can wear clothes in a way that is unfashionable because ‘she has the poise to look lovely like that, and even her bending is feminine, delicate’ (*Paradise*, p. 217). Every gesture her mother makes moves her through the world fragrantly, delicately, and tastefully. Hannah so admires her mother that she has always felt that she is unable to equal her mother’s performance of femininity: ‘I’ve developed degrees of assurance, naturally. I am a woman and not unwomanly, I suppose; but I realised years ago, before I was seven, that I won’t be a woman the way that my mother is, I’ll never do it right. She is a heartbreaker, really’ (*Paradise*, p. 20-21). Hannah continues to rely on an assessment of herself that she made when she was seven and it is a rigid ideal that does not countenance individual difference or interpretation; it is non-negotiable. She recognises that she is a woman, although she qualifies it with an ironic ‘I suppose’. She performs femininity well enough to communicate her gender, she is not ‘unwomanly’, but her fears of femininity are grounded in the conviction that she will never do it ‘right’. The final sentence, ‘she’s a heartbreaker, really’, implies that it is Hannah’s heart that is broken. Hannah is heartbroken by the impossible ideal of femininity.

In a world ordered by binaristic thinking, Hannah’s inability to properly perform femininity would leave her only the option to embrace masculinity. She does ponder her gendered position in the world. She is aware of the masculine subject position which, not only her alcoholism, but her performance of this alcoholism, means that she takes. Her choice to be a social drinker, to spend her time drinking with groups of men in bars,

to in fact take her drinking into the public realm, means that she drinks like a man and not like a woman:

And I do see this is how a man drinks and, therefore, inappropriate for me. I should have been at home behind my curtains with the methylated gin, the Tia Maria and Blue Nun. I should have been an early-morning shame at the off-licence: make-up uneven, hands trembling into my bag for the greasy purse and then flitting over the counter to snatch up a genteel quarter-bottle, requested with a quiet excuse, even slight surprise, and back to sneak it down mixed with my tea – in the cup, not the pot – nobody there to see me, but female drinking is a sin and should be made invisible. Further downhill, I could have been a regular call to the local minicabs, asking them to fetch my bottles for me, so I could avoid the challenge of a walk, pay the premium to keep in hiding.

*That's how you really do go insane. That's how you die alone.*

So I stay with the men, because then I'm not alone and because they do their best to be happy (*Paradise*, p. 184).

The feminine alcoholic, though, is a depressing alternative: ashamed, hidden, secretive, diffident, and sinful. She argues that female drinking believes itself invisible, but it is clear that the female alcoholic's performance of respectability is not a convincing one – her makeup is uneven, her hands tremble – the idle observer in the off-licence is not fooled by the 'genteel quarter-bottle' or her 'slight surprise'. Her dependence on the alcohol is noticeable. It is so sinful that she must keep up appearances even when alone, behind her curtains in her house, she must not let herself see her greed for it. The whole passage is characterised by an ironic tone. This is the way things are for alcoholic women, but Hannah implies that it should be different, that this truth is unsatisfactory. The ironic italicised aside supports her in her rejection of the feminine performance of alcoholism, of the shame and secrecy it requires. Hannah the manly drunk may still go insane, but her male companions will assure that others observe her death. The womanly drunk would 'really' go insane and die alone. It is this dying alone which Hannah most fears.



It is with the use of that italicised voice that, Julie Scanlon argues, Kennedy ‘destabilizes the notion of a unifying voice’.<sup>71</sup> Its italicisation marks it out as different, if only slightly, from Hannah’s narrative voice. It tends to interject agreement with Hannah’s rationalisations that allow her to continue to drink or to continue to resist change. Glenda Norquay argues that Kennedy is known for undermining conventions of voice and form and this ‘undermining [...] can offer an equally convincing challenge to the discourses of authority’.<sup>72</sup> Whose authority does its use undermine in this context? Its assertion that the pattern of drinking allotted to women is much more dangerous and devastating than the jovial social drinking allowed men calls into question the societal norm that women’s drinking should be invisible. As well as calling discourses of authority into question, Scanlon argues that this use of different voices works to suggest Hannah’s fragmented identity, her split subjectivity:

The narrator displays a split, polyvocal subjectivity. This is demonstrated by occasional sentences and passages presented in italics, which sometimes seem to suggest a dialogue between one part of Hannah’s self and another, sometimes her internal thoughts reflecting on the dominant narrative voice, represented in non-italicized typeface. There are, inevitably, points of confusion between the voices; they are by no means clear-cut and the function of the textual asides is not always apparent, if they may be called asides. In one respect they act as novelistic soliloquy, yet this does not quite capture them in their entirety, for the dominant narrative is in itself a soliloquy as there is no direct addressee beyond an implied reader. What emerges is a dislocated means of expressing Hannah’s difficult sense of self. The voices literally appear not to come from one place, to be dialogic rather than monologic and express an attempt to regain control.<sup>73</sup>

Scanlon cannot pin down the source of this voice. However, Hannah names it her ‘drinking voice’ and identifies it as ‘the one that’s seen my soul. It understands me’ (*Paradise*, p. 136). The asides vary in tone: usually they are ironic and sometimes

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<sup>71</sup> Julie Scanlon, ‘Unruly Novels, Unruly Selves’, in *Generic Instability and Identity in the Contemporary Novel*, ed. Madelena Gonzalez and Marie-Odile Pittin-Hédon (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), p. 143-144.

<sup>72</sup> Glenda Norquay, ‘“Partial Intensity: The Novels of A.L. Kennedy’’, in *The Contemporary British Novel*, ed. James Acheson and Sarah C.E. Ross (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 144.

<sup>73</sup> Scanlon 2010, p. 143-144.

reassuring, sometimes reinforcing, and sometimes cruel and manipulative. Her 'drinking voice' makes use of its interior knowledge to insure that Hannah will continue drinking. When Hannah finds herself incapacitated by an infection in her face and jaw, she calls her brother, a doctor, to come help her. As soon as he agrees to drive the three hours, her drinking voice begins to belittle and accuse her: '*Fooled him. Anything to get him here – that's it, isn't it? Any emotion you can fake. Well, isn't it? You fooled him and you weren't found out. Your own brother. Anything to get your way. Why couldn't you have saved him all this trouble? Why couldn't you have died?*' (*Paradise*, p. 136). While it is untrue that Hannah was being manipulative, deceptive, or artificial, the result of this tirade is Hannah's decision to drink every last bottle of alcohol in her flat before her brother can arrive. Clearly her drinking voice is a self that she has developed in order to protect her alcoholism and prolong her contact with the alcoholic beverages she views as the only things she can count on in her adult life; a self that has become so powerful she interjects in order to maintain the status quo of alcoholism.

Norquay identifies Kennedy's concerns as 'being insistently with the question of being in the world. Rather than taking her only into abstractions, her interest in the structures and contradictions of the self produces subtle and detailed explorations of its manifestations'.<sup>74</sup> This can be seen not only in Hannah's split subjectivity, her dialogic relationship to herself and her own life, but in her use of what Sarah M. Dunnigan calls an 'expendable temporal framework [...] which renders the past and present lives of characters in intimate proximity'.<sup>75</sup> In *Paradise*, this framework renders the past into the future and by so doing rewrites a drinking binge, triggered by her boyfriend Robert's ending of their relationship, as an act of volition:

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<sup>74</sup> Norquay 2005, p. 147.

<sup>75</sup> Sarah M. Dunnigan, 'A.L. Kennedy's Longer Fiction: Articulate Grace', in *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers*, ed. Aileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 145.

And in a while I will drink: drag it in so hard and obviously that it will steal away my job and I will go home and keep on drinking until I destroy whole days of myself, a week, and I will go to his flat at a point I don't remember and find there is a new lock, no curtains, bare floor behind the letter box, everything stripped and no one there and I will drink until the spider comes into my mouth, I will drink until there's no one there, I will drink until I leave me, until I leave myself alone (*Paradise*, p. 269).

The use of the future tense lends her reckless actions an air of decisive intention and an ironic detachment from her descent into oblivion, she *willed* these things to happen. She is the instigator of the destruction of whole days and of the abandonment of herself; she *will* wake up in a psychiatric ward. Yet, she places the blame for the loss of her job onto the drinking; it steals away her job. The poignancy of her leaving herself alone might mean that she drinks enough to silence even her drinking voice, her other self. She locates these actions in a future, St Augustine's 'present of things to come', and by implying that they will occur later, she is able to remain in the present of Robert's leaving, the time before she drinks herself away.

Kennedy makes use of 'you' narration to articulate how someone who has been abandoned by everyone including her self might speak. Even the 'I' has deserted her; she has evicted it, drowned it, and blacked it out. What is left is a consciousness which seems to dwell outside of the body and outside of the social configuration of people, her family, attempting to put her back together, to bring her back to her self. Kopelson identifies an intervention as serving the purpose of reuniting the addict with her 'authentic' self. During an intervention: 'the drug user is corralled by friends and family members, reasoned with, told in no uncertain terms that she is in "denial", and then shipped off to treatment which will return her to reality and "recover" her authentic self'.<sup>76</sup> Hannah experiences her intervention with equal distaste:

[T]he five of them sending you off to win their bet and recover yourself, grow respectable and better until everyone can pretend that's the way you were

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<sup>76</sup> Kopelson 2006, paragraph 17.

made [...] and all the while you're plunging downwards to the point where your family's wishes are going to make you disappear [...] here is your ticket and boarding pass and here is your passport in order, although it contains the picture of someone who is not truly you and, judging yourself against your papers, it's terribly easy to spot the forgery. The cheap, dull fake.

*But Robert knows me – he knows that I'm real and like this and correct (Paradise, p. 160-161).*

She experiences sobriety as a falling and its permanence would mean that she would cease to exist, her 'true' self would disappear. She finds the photograph on her passport to contain a counterfeit; it is faked; it depicts the self her family wants her to be. The drinking voice interjects to reinforce Hannah's resistance to recovery and support the notion that she is Hannah's real self. Hannah feels that alcoholism is what allows her to be, without it she is nothing, or perhaps without it she has to confront the false self she constructed to cope with the pressures of femininity. The use of 'you' narration, enacts Hannah's distancing of herself from the experience of being sent away and attempts to bring her listener in with her, implicate her narratee, and transform her situation into one that could happen to anyone, the universal 'you'. Her use of 'you' tries to render an alcoholic's intervention and forced admittance to a recovery centre into a common life event.

Choosing to centre her novel on an alcoholic allows Kennedy to continue her experiments with time, voice, and her characters' negotiations of identity. *Paradise* belongs to New Femininities fiction because Hannah's conflicted and afflicted performance of femininity calls into question gender norms and the trauma of normative femininity. Although she fails to find a liveable feminine subject position where she can negotiate the space between masculine and feminine without the limited choices of monstrous drinker or empty woman, Hannah's narrative identifies the conflicts and elucidates the problems inherent in locating emancipation in a practice that leads only to self-harm and self-destruction. Negotiating the boundaries of binary

oppositions does not guarantee liberation or even self-actualization, but subversive performances of femininity do call into question the ideologies that require a young girl to put away tomboyish things and embrace a subdued feminine self that she finds false.

A resistance to confinement by the gendered binaries of body and mind, spectacle and spectator, feminine and masculine and a desire to eke out a position that hovers somewhere in the middle refusing to place oneself down on either side is a common goal of New Femininities fiction. With their ironic voices they speak of the 'both/and' to repeat the beliefs of the structure of patriarchy in such a way as to negate its value, call it into question, and imply that the *real* truth is another thing altogether, a negotiation of the terms, a flirting that refuses to commit to either suitor. This fiction problematises the confinement of gender identities while suggesting that there are ways to negotiate the boundaries and find a position of tension in the in-between.

## Chapter Three: Free Indirect Discourse and the Search for Self

For the protagonists of New Femininities fictions, answers always lie somewhere in the middle, in the constant tension of self and mother, self and wife, self and worker. They struggle with maintaining the necessary tension between autonomy and intimacy, independence and responsibility for others. However, this tension is a precarious balance because, often, the position they need to occupy is not a simple one of duality, self and mother, but one of multiplicity: self, mother, wife, daughter, friend, where the demands of each relationship threaten to tip the scales into an overwhelming dependence, responsibility, or self-abnegation. The protagonists of this section struggle with the inadequacy of the moral philosophical model of *homo economicus*, chooser and consumer of autonomy and independence, to describe the subjectivity that they inhabit. As I have argued earlier, that model ignores the importance and contradictions of interpersonal relationships. Each protagonist must negotiate the conflicts between their plural identities in order to assert a subjectivity in which relationship and autonomy can coexist. Through their use of free indirect discourse, the overlap of the voices of character and third person narrator which occludes who is speaking, and its ability to upset dichotomies, the novels are able to blur the binaries that serve to limit

their characters' lives and allow them to negotiate a particularised way to occupy their roles without sacrificing their sense of self or rejecting relationship.

Anna Snaith argues that free indirect discourse 'is not a synthesis or a replacing of one voice by another, but a combination of two separate, distinctive voices [...]. Neither voice "takes over" in free indirect discourse. The narrator is still present, rendering the discourse a bivocal construction'.<sup>1</sup> David Lodge asserts that free indirect discourse allows novelists to 'combine their own voice with the voices of their characters in order to render thought and emotion'.<sup>2</sup> He argues that this fulfils Bakhtin's assertion that 'For the prose artist the world is full of other people's words, among which he must orient himself and whose speech characteristics he must be able to perceive with a very keen ear. He must introduce them into the plane of his own discourse, but in such a way that this plane is not destroyed.'<sup>3</sup> Michal Peled Ginsburg calls what is achieved 'a double-voiced utterance, an utterance in which both the voice of the narrator and the voice of the character are heard, it reveals the doubling of the speaking subject' and 'a break between a subject and his language. Because we cannot determine one speaking subject, we cannot see the language as belonging to a certain subject, as expressing a self'.<sup>4</sup> Snaith argues that through the indeterminacy of free indirect discourse 'dichotomies such as speech/thought, character/narrator, mimesis/diegesis and style/content become blurred'.<sup>5</sup> Free indirect discourse, like unreliable narration and the ironic voice, works to undermine the certainty of binary oppositions. However, I will argue that the use of free indirect discourse introduces into

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Snaith, *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 128.

<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson, *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 8 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 201, quoted in Lodge 1992, p. 128.

<sup>4</sup> Michal Peled Ginsburg, 'Free Indirect Discourse: A Reconsideration', *Language and Style* 15.2 (1982), p. 146-147.

<sup>5</sup> Snaith 2003, p. 71.

the narrative of the New Femininities fiction multiple voices which, as Snaith puts it, ‘acknowledge the variety, fragmentation and situatedness of subjectivity’, a subjectivity which cannot be totalised or contained.<sup>6</sup>

As I have argued in the previous chapters, one of the difficulties of subjectivity is its predominant model is based upon the binary opposition of autonomy and dependence which fails to take into account interpersonal relationships and underestimates the difficulty of resolving tensions that exist between finding self-fulfilment and caring for others. It cannot account for the importance of familial relationships in identity formation nor the impact of affiliation on a subject’s sense of self. For *homo economicus*, autonomy and freedom are of the utmost importance. Marilyn Friedman argues that ‘conceptions of the self [need to] make sense of experiences of interpersonal dependency and interdependency that are central to many women’s lives and that these conceptions yield an ethical view that is tenable in these intimate relationships’.<sup>7</sup> I suggested that Evelyn Fox Keller’s conception of ‘dynamic autonomy’ offers a squaring of autonomy and relationship because it acknowledges that relationship is necessary for the formation of autonomy.<sup>8</sup> These novels, rather than recognising the delicate balance of connection and disconnection that Munro’s fiction negotiates, use free indirect discourse to blur the dichotomies of self and mother, self and wife, self and daughter, self and friend. These are not identities that are necessarily to be considered dichotomous, but I would argue that the protagonists experience them in this way because they necessitate a focus on the self and autonomy and the dependence of others and on others; which are considered binaries. Thus their efforts to

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<sup>6</sup> Snaith 2003, p. 82.

<sup>7</sup> Diana Tietjens Meyers, ‘Introduction’, in *Feminists Rethink the Self*, ed. by Diana Tietjens Meyers, Feminist Theory and Politics Series (Boulder, CO and Oxford, UK: Westview, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Marilyn Friedman, ‘Autonomy and Social Relationships’, in *Feminists Rethink the Self*, ed. by Diana Tietjens Meyers, Feminist Theory and Politics Series (Boulder, CO and Oxford, UK: Westview, 1997), p. 44.



find ways to inhabit motherhood or marriage without sacrificing their own sense of self seeks to have both autonomy *and* relationship, autonomy *in* relationship; an identity that allows them to occupy their roles without sacrificing their sense of self.

The characters in these novels are struggling to stake out a 'new' female subjectivity predicated on antagonism between autonomy and dependence. The instability of free indirect discourse and its often ironic asides are used as narrative modes because they enable the articulation and enactment of this subjectivity of dynamic autonomy. I will focus on three novels: Rachel Cusk's *Arlington Park* (2006), Charlotte Mendelson's *When We Were Bad* (2007), and Tessa Hadley's *Accidents in the Home* (2002). In my reading of these novels I will concentrate on how their use of free indirect discourse ironises the apparently bleak presentation of marriage and motherhood, suggesting a subversive questioning of the expectations that contemporary culture still places on women and the inadequacy of *homo economicus* to describe a liveable subjectivity for them, thus articulating different concerns about how women inhabit their 'selves' in the twenty-first century. Moreover, in choosing to confuse the source of opinions with free indirect discourse, the authors foreclose on the possibility of allowing the reader to resolve the identity conflicts. This element of form – free indirect discourse – with its undermining of narrative/narrational reliability, echoes and reinforces the unreliability of identity and calls into question the efficacy of societal roles – wife, daughter, mother, and even worker – to describe actual (or fictional) women.

## Rachel Cusk's *Arlington Park* and the 'Truth' of Motherhood

The identities 'wife', 'mother', and 'neighbour' of Rachel Cusk's *Arlington Park*'s suburban subjects fall short of adequately defining how these women see themselves. Cusk is perhaps best known as the author of *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (2001), a frank documentary account of early motherhood that provoked extreme reactions from some readers because of the vehemence of its critique of motherhood. *Arlington Park* approaches both contemporary marriage and motherhood as sites of cultural contestation and sources of deep dissatisfaction for women. Marriage is 'murder' and motherhood is a form of prison where children 'manacled themselves [...] to one's breathless form'.<sup>9</sup> The novel accords no sympathy to the children bound to their mothers' dead bodies and barely sympathises with their asphyxiated mothers. Cusk's use of free indirect discourse in the novel functions to expose the unnaturalness of 'natural' feminine gender roles, voice her characters' inner rebellion, and suggest the potentiality of subversive performances of femininity which negotiate subjectivities that can countenance both autonomy and dependence.

*Arlington Park*'s overt heterodiegetic narrator incorporates both a panoramic view of the action told in her own voice staying remote from the characters in a scene, and variable focalization where she gives an extreme close-up of a series of characters' consciousnesses told in a mixture of indirect speech and free indirect discourse.<sup>10</sup> As James Wood asserts, free indirect discourse allows readers to 'inhabit omniscience and

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<sup>9</sup> Rachel Cusk, *Arlington Park* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p. 20-22. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition and noted parenthetically in the body of the text.

<sup>10</sup> I am following Lanser's rule: 'in the absence of any text-internal clues as to the narrator's sex, use the pronoun appropriate to the author's sex' in Manfred Jahn, 'Narratology: A Guide to the Theory of Narratology', English Department, Cologne: University of Cologne, 2005, accessed online <http://www.uni-keoln.de/~ame02/pppn.htm> [accessed 08 December 2009]. Following this rule allows me to avoid the awkwardness of 's/he' and 'him/her'. However, I do not want to imply that the author and narrator are interchangeable.

partiality at once'. In that space between omniscience and partiality, '[a] gap opens between author and character, and the bridge – which is free indirect style itself – between them simultaneously closes the gap and draws attention to its distance'.<sup>11</sup> Such a gap opens up between self and performance of feminine gender roles as well – the characters simultaneously align themselves with the gender role and draw attention to their distance from it – they negotiate their performance. Much of this negotiation takes place in free indirect discourse. Michael Toolan argues that the difficulty of pinning down who is speaking often arouses uncertainty about the 'truth' of the narrative. He asserts that free indirect discourse raises questions about reliability and veracity: 'is what has been narrated 'the truth', or fabrication, or something other or in between?' Additionally, it raises questions: 'who says this?' and 'how true/reliable is this?'<sup>12</sup> As Snaith, in a discussion of Virginia Woolf, argues:

The narrator, omniscient because he or she can enter the characters' minds as well as describe their thoughts, relinquishes his or her authority, often [...]making pure narration secondary to the free indirect discourse [... This] displays the artificiality of the omniscient narrator, and his or her unproblematic conveying of subjectivity. [...] The] use of multiple voices through free indirect discourse acknowledges the variety, fragmentation and situatedness of subjectivity: it cannot be totalized or contained.<sup>13</sup>

Free indirect discourse, then, echoes the self that is fragmented and situated. The narrator's omniscience becomes suspect for she is often submerged within the character's consciousness and loses the boundary that separates them. These moments of ambiguity allow the narrative voice, as Susan Sniader Lanser has argued about Virginia Woolf's novelistic voice, to surreptitiously 'ponder, preach, and prophesy', in

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<sup>11</sup> James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (London: Vintage, 2009), p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Toolan, 'The "Irresponsibility" of FID', 'Professor Michael Toolan' on 'University of Birmingham, Department of English' website, <http://artsweb.bham.ac.uk/MToolan/> [accessed 7 September 2009], p. 1. Article is available online but was published elsewhere in 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Snaith 2003, p. 82.

this case about modern suburban women and their relationships to their multiple identities of mother, wife, and self.<sup>14</sup>

What Cusk's narrator is pondering and prophesying, if not preaching, in *Arlington Park* is the dark story of suburban womanhood. The women are like dragonflies fossilised in amber, frozen in time, and unable to break free; this is a novel of stasis rather than change. The events of the novel take place during a single day where little ostensibly happens: children are taken to school, children are picked up from school, a mall is visited, and a dinner party attended. The narrator begins the story with a tour of Arlington Park and London, commenting on the people going about their lives, and implies that the appearance of this setting might be deceptive: 'The story of life required its stops and its pauses, its days and its nights. It didn't make sense otherwise. But to look at that view [of the city] you'd think that a human life was meaningless. You'd think that a day meant nothing at all' (*AP*, p. 7). The use of 'you' narration stands in for the general 'one' and hails the narratee, implicates her by creating a relationship of 'I', the speaker, and 'you', the listener, a 'we' that takes the audience's agreement for granted. Through ironic negation, this statement implies that the opposite may be true: a day might mean something significant; human life may not be meaningless while simultaneously implying that the story that will be relayed concerns lives that 'we' might consider insignificant – suburban middle class women. What could be interesting about the school run? Why would anyone care about shopping malls or dinner parties?

Performances of motherhood and marriage are complicated by the fact that motherhood and marriage are social institutions and are mired in norms and ideologies

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<sup>14</sup> Susan Sniader Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 116.

that make their performance complicated and conflicting. Judith Butler, in an early essay on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, identifies motherhood as 'a compulsory social institution' whose 'optional character is being denied': an example of how culturally determined practices are naturalized and universalized.<sup>15</sup> Jon Simons calls this naturalization the 'maternal matrix', a term he appropriates from Butler's own formulation of the heterosexual matrix, which is a 'model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender'<sup>16</sup>. Simons argues that in the maternal matrix, 'the subject position and identity of mothering depends on a series of coherences' – female anatomy, desire to bear children, preference for reproduction in a secure heterosexual setting, propensity and ability to rear children, caring orientation to others, predilection for domestic issues, and prioritization of children. These coherences greatly resemble the coherences that underlie femininity, thus a performance of motherhood is a performance of a rigid version of femininity predicated on the definition of women as 'naturally' nurturing selfless relaters. Simons calls for these coherences to be disrupted by subversive performances of motherhood.<sup>17</sup> The characters in the novel find their roles incoherent and their performances are subversive almost by default because of the self-abnegation required in order to be fully coherent mothers. Free indirect discourse is well suited for these concerns. Through its use, as Jane Lilienfeld argues, a text 'questions the meaning of knowledge, its origins, and its circulation'.<sup>18</sup> Free indirect discourse with its confusion of narrator and character, and the 'truth' of its assertions

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<sup>15</sup> Judith Butler, 'Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*', *Yale French Studies*, 72 (1986), p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> Jon Simons, 'Foucault's Mother', in *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, ed. by Susan J. Hekman (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), p. 183; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2006), p. 208, note 6.

<sup>17</sup> Simons, p. 199

<sup>18</sup> Jane Lilienfeld, "'To have the reader work with the author": The Circulation of Knowledge in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Toni Morrison's *Jazz*', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006), p. 44.

works to disrupt the sense of universality and absolutism of the maternal matrix. As Barbara Johnson and Henry Louis Gates argue, ‘free indirect discourse [...] is a dramatic way of expressing a *divided* self’.<sup>19</sup> The conflicts aroused by their attempts to inhabit the maternal matrix, or perhaps more precisely to resist the maternal matrix, are dramatically expressed through free indirect discourse.

The narrator of *Arlington Park* offers no versions of motherhood that suit the necessary coherences of Simons’s maternal matrix beyond that of being female and heterosexual. Motherhood is viewed as neither natural nor fulfilling. Rather, children are figured as thieves and plunderers, infiltrators policing normal behaviour, who excite rage and frustration in their mothers and whose demands leave them worn out like a stuffed toy: Juliet thinks of her son: ‘When he played, as he was playing just now with the little horse, it felt as if he were stealing something from her’ (*AP*, p. 31); Maisie’s daughters ‘appeared to her as people who had come into the world to constrain and criticise her, to record her comings and goings from the concept of normal behaviour’ (*AP*, p. 179), and Christine confuses her daughter’s stuffed rabbit with herself: ‘Robbie was grey and worn out with Ella’s need for him. He looked shapeless and insensate with the drudgery of love’ (*AP*, p. 88). Stuffed rabbits do not have feelings; it is Christine who feels worn out by the drudgery of love. Domestic issues are decidedly not something that they have a ‘particular liking for’.<sup>20</sup> Juliet rages that her husband would not get the children up because ‘It was Juliet that did everything. Everything!’ (*AP*, p. 14); and Christine fumes because while she cooked the dinner for the dinner

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<sup>19</sup> Barbara Johnson and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ‘A Black and Idiomatic Free Indirect Discourse’ in *Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God*, ed. by Harold Bloom, *Modern Critical Interpretations* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), p. 75, original emphasis.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Predilection’, in *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, ed. by John Simpson, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989)  
[http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50186797?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=predilection&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50186797?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=predilection&first=1&max_to_show=10), [accessed 19 June 2009]

party her husband ‘hadn’t even put the children to bed!’ (AP, p. 238). This rage and paranoia take place in their thoughts told in free indirect discourse indicated by the use of exclamation marks and is echoed by the narrator as evidenced by the choice of words like ‘constrain’ and ‘insensate’. Their resistance gestures toward a recognition that the demands of the institutions of marriage and motherhood contribute to their unhappiness and anger, and its exposure by the narrator via the telepathy that is free indirect discourse. Juliet, Christine, and Maisie have not yet realised the importance of embracing a subversive performance of their roles which might allow them to carve out the space for a different self that can inhabit the different roles without nullifying their sense of self, individuality, and personal value. Yet their struggle against marriage and motherhood is a form of subversion; it realises how ‘unnatural’ these institutions are to individual women.

A concern with how far short motherhood falls from the ideal, how incoherent it is to the assumptions about women that govern that ideal, permeates the novel. Solly Kerr-Leigh eloquently articulates the burden of motherhood and its ability to fragment one’s sense of self. She is heavily pregnant with her fourth child and is weighed down with the responsibilities of her domestic life. Throughout her chapter, she struggles against the impending pregnancy and the care of her children to re-locate her self. Her sense of self feels particularly absent because of the embodied loss of autonomy, of self-will, that is represented by a pregnant body and the looming birth. *Homo economicus* is not adequate to describe the subjectivity of the pregnant body because it ignores interpersonal commitments and ‘the difficulty of resolving conflicts that arise between these commitments and personal aims’.<sup>21</sup>

Solly had felt before the way everything altered just before a child was born. It was how she sometimes thought it might be to approach death. [...] And

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<sup>21</sup> Meyers 1997, p. 2.

although when the baby came it would restart it all with its unstoppable vegetable growth, there was a layer of Solly that was always irretrievably lost. She was depleted, of some aspect of experience, of history: it was torn from her, like the wrapping paper from a present. Generally she believed that this was what she had been born for. She was grateful that she had been able to put herself to such prolific use. And the children gave so much back to you, of course. She was like a sack stuffed with their love and acknowledgement, lumpy on the outside but full, heavy with interior knowledge. It was just that sometimes she tried to think about the past and couldn't. She couldn't locate a continuous sense of herself. It seemed to lie all around her in pieces, like the casings of Dora's Russian doll when all the babies were out (*AP*, p.125).

This passage of free indirect discourse compares giving birth to dying, a part of Solly will be lost to the process; a part she will never regrow. The words 'depleted', 'grateful', and 'prolific' seem to be the narrator's words and imply a judgment of Solly. Does she truly think she was born for childbirth and that it is good to be put to use? The phrase 'And children gave so much back to you, of course' uses free indirect discourse to infiltrate Solly's consciousness with the voice of societal norms: a cliché, a truism. It is what people say to recuperate motherhood; a well-used phrase to justify the burden and bother. The image of a well-loved mother as a bulging sack 'stuffed' with her family's love is not a pleasant one. Mother is a lumpy old pillow. Solly has lost contact with her past selves and is doomed to live in the present, a present in which she is a misshapen, hollowed out husk with her self lying in pieces around her, transformed into babies. Julie Choi argues that 'FID is commonly conceded to range between two poles of ironic distance and absolute empathy', and that often readers 'have placed primary importance' on one or the other or 'have insisted that the "technique" works precisely because two voices are heard simultaneously'.<sup>22</sup> Cusk's narrator oscillates between the two poles in this passage. She is both sympathetic to Solly's discomfort and distant from it, in fact makes clear how foolish some of Solly's self-perceptions are: that it is good to be put to use.

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<sup>22</sup> Julie Choi, 'Feminine Authority? Common Sense and the Question of Voice in the Novel', *New Literary History* 27 (1996), p. 655.



Solly's self is not static, but grows and changes, fragments and divides, much like the voices portrayed through the free indirect discourse. Her sense of having lost contact with her self suggests a desire to find an identity that can encompass who she is now satisfactorily. She longs for a self that will allow her to feel at home in her own skin even when she is not alone in it. As I argued previously, the home is not necessarily a homely place; it is by Freud's definition uncanny and by Cixous's definition an androgyne: homely and unhomely are able to denote the same thing. Perhaps most disturbing and uncanny is when the unhomely home is a woman's own body and a woman's own self. *Arlington Park's* female characters feel that husbands and children empty them out and inhabit them. They make their home in the mother and it is no longer her home. Solly's husband, Martin, and her children lay claim to her body as if she were their hometown. She believes that: 'For Martin, her body was like a village that over time had sprawled and grown until it became a bustling centre, cut through with new roads and modern developments, some of them unsightly. It had changed, but it was where he lived' (*AP*, p. 126). This is clearly free indirect discourse focalized by Solly and it is her perception of his view of her. She feels like his relationship with her body is one of location, ownership, and belonging, ways she does not or cannot feel about her own 'formless, dissipated' sacklike body (*AP*, p. 126). Moreover, Solly muses that his body has remained the same; has not been overtaken by urban sprawl. She envies his 'lean, untouched masculinity, his body that had never been plundered, the line that seemed to run from his toes to the top of his head. He was so—flat. The children were flat too. She realised that Martin was continuous with his child self and she envied him' (*AP*, p. 126). She begrudges Martin a physical body and sense of self that echo who he has always been, that are not divided by the demands of family that seem to shout over those of the self. He has not only her body to inhabit like a

homeland, but his own recognisable body in which he remains comfortable and at home. Solly's lumpiness is contrasted by his flatness; her fragmentation with his continuous being. Solly envies him a sense of embodied self that is not compromised by being broken into pieces by babies.

This embodied self that can accommodate multiple and potentially contradictory facets of identity is not the 'allegedly feminine "merging" of consciousness modelled on the mother who yields autonomous identity to identities-in-relationship' that Lanser relates was perceived by Woolf's critics.<sup>23</sup> Rather, it is a subjectivity which can maintain a sense of self and autonomy while inhabiting the many gender positions garnered through relationship, Martin's wife and Dora's mother, that a woman might inhabit. Surprisingly, it is from the beginning of yet another relationship of caregiving and dependence, 'new baby's mother', and the end of the physical occupation by her unborn child – from having yet another Russian doll removed from inside – that Solly regains a sense of her self. The birth of her child offers her a surprising alternative vision of her life:

The baby was a girl. It was lucky, Solly thought – another boy might have sunk her. But instead, like a little podium or plinth, the baby gave her a new, higher view of the world. When she was with her, Solly remembered that she had turned against Martin and the children a little: it seemed to her to be a sort of advance, a development. She would not come down again from her plinth. She would live at that new angle to them – she was determined to. [...] All the things there were to lose she had lost giving birth to the other three. So the fourth seemed more in the way of a credit: she loved it more and cared about it less. [...] Paola] sent a piece of Italian lace for the baby, but Solly kept it for herself. She bought more bottles of the bath oil, too. These were her riches. It was a sideline, and everyone had to have one of those (*AP*, p. 145-146).

Her final baby gives something to her rather than taking something away and she realises that separating herself from her family is progress, is necessary for her happiness. She must live at a remove from them; her self requires this distance. The

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<sup>23</sup> Lanser 1992, p. 117.

narrative voice enjoys the alliteration of ‘podium’ and ‘plinth’. They establish the distance as *above* her family with ‘plinth’. ‘Podium’ suggests that her separation gives her a sort of authority or place from which to speak. Her choices to keep the lace for herself and to have a sideline are her efforts at staking out her own life and her own self without abandoning the relationships she shares with her family. It is her sense of self whose situation is rendered with the contrast of loss and credit. Her dawning awareness that the way to negotiate these identities is to remove herself a little from them, to be true to what Solly wants as well as what ‘mother’ and ‘wife’ desire. The free indirect discourse allows the origin of the final line ‘and everyone had to have one of those’ to be ambiguous. It appears to be a continuation of Solly’s thought, but because the narrator’s voice often leaks through, it reads as belonging to both Solly and the narrator. It is an assertion of a universal truth which would imply its provenance with a narrator fond of maxims, but it is also Solly’s ‘truth’.

Solly’s ability to ironically love her new child more while caring about it less is explicable via Julia Kristeva’s reworking of D.W. Winnicott’s notion of the ‘good enough mother.’ ‘I would suggest’, Kristeva argues, ‘that maybe the good-enough mother is the mother who has something else to love besides her child, such as her work, her husband, [or] her lovers. If for a mother the child is the meaning of her life, it’s too heavy’.<sup>24</sup> Kristeva is not encouraging pathological selfishness in mothers or, needless to say, calling for universal child neglect. Rather, she is arguing that mothers need to be able to divide their interests between their children and the outside world. In other words, a mother must balance her caregiving responsibilities with autonomous activities. The ‘good enough mother’ is a woman who has managed the conflict between autonomy and relationship – she loves her children *and* her self. Thus Solly’s

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<sup>24</sup> Julia Kristeva, ‘Julia Kristeva in Conversation with Rosalind Coward (1984)’, in *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. by Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 334.

chapter ends on a positive note; she has discovered her own subversive performance of motherhood. It is one that resists the maternal matrix's coherence of the 'prioritisation of children'. She has asserted her autonomy without throwing out the baby with the bathwater, so to speak.

The narrator echoes this alternative reaction to the hopelessness, homelessness, and alienation from the self in the 'mothers of schoolchildren' for whom she uses collective focalization. The free indirect discourse that attributes the same attitude and thoughts to numerous women identified only by their relationship of mother to children who attend school is defamiliarising. These are the thoughts that the narrator assumes these women to have, but whether they all have them is questionable. The mothers of schoolchildren have survived the early phases of childrearing. They now have a reprieve, provided by school hours, from the demands of children to find space for their autonomy, and have discovered, the narrator contends, some underlying 'truth' of motherhood:

The mothers of the schoolchildren [...] weren't interested any more in things you could lose, in time or love or the feeling of a baby in your arms. They were interested in things that stayed with you for ever: houses, possibly husbands. And themselves, of course. What they wanted to avoid was destruction. Like politicians, they were interested in survival (*AP*, p. 154).

The mothers of schoolchildren act as war veterans who understand what the mothers of younger children are struggling with, as well as what really matters. They have given up the grief over things that can be lost; their counterparts with younger children mourn the loss of their pregnant selves and the loss of their dependent infants while their pregnant counterparts mourn the loss of self that is brought about by the occupation and subsequent departure of an infant tenant. The mothers of schoolchildren realise that the self, unlike time, love, and children, is not something that one can lose. The phrase 'possibly husbands' is an ironic aside that calls into question the permanence of

marriage and the reliability of men. An attribution of source for this aside is difficult to ascertain. It might be the musing of the collective mothers of schoolchildren or it might be an ironic aside from the narrator introducing her own cynicism. Their desire to avoid destruction is perhaps ominous and the simile that compares them to politicians may trivialize the sentiment (is that the narrator being ironically distant?) but their interest in survival speaks to a knowledge of the necessity of subverting the all-consuming institution of motherhood by having other interests. Those with what the narrator deems a powerful understanding know that first and foremost one must find a way to survive, whatever and wherever that might be. In the midst of a bleak tale of the banality of suburban life a glimmer of something else makes itself known through ironic negation: a life outside of one's children that might simultaneously make one a better mother and a happier person and this finds its 'expression' in multi-vocal narrative form.

Cusk's glimmer of hope affords her characters only the possibility of survival for she is not as optimistic as Kristeva. However, despite the ironic asides, or, as I have argued, because of them, the novel begins to offer an alternative to the empty misery of suburban motherhood. The performances of motherhood are subversive and disrupt the coherences of the maternal matrix through their ironic rejection of any redemptive reading of motherhood, yet does not reject it either. The narrator paints these characters with generous strokes of hopelessness and frustration and fixes them immovably in lives they find almost unliveable; but nevertheless, her ironic unreliability suggests a social critique and potential alternative. After the action of a single day, perhaps tomorrow will dawn differently. This new day can only bring a different relationship to motherhood and marriage when and if the women become aware that the 'truth' of these institutions is that they cannot be transcended but only survived, and that survival

can only come from embracing a subjectivity that is both autonomous and in relation to others.

### **Life in Division: Motherhood and *When We Were Bad***

It is not possible to negotiate an autonomous subjectivity in all relationships. In Charlotte Mendelson's *When We Were Bad*, Frances's relationships to her husband and family of birth serve to deny her autonomy. One of the flaws that Meyers identifies in the *homo economicus* model of subjectivity is its underestimation of the importance of 'unchosen circumstances and relationships' to subjectivity.<sup>25</sup> Families of birth are an example of relationships which one does not choose and thus cannot be accommodated by a model of a subject who is a 'free and rational chooser'. Frances's family resists her autonomy. They desire her to remain dependent and available to take care of their needs. She struggles to realise her autonomous desires without having to disregard the needs of her family, or completely disconnect from them. The free indirect discourse used throughout the novel serves to enact Frances's struggle to articulate and grasp a self divided between what she wants and what is expected of her by her family and how to contain her needs for autonomy within the confines of her relationships. Additionally, it exposes Frances's assumptions about the world and upsets the dichotomies she establishes between natural and unnatural, reasonable and unreasonable, normal and abnormal.

Marriage, which in Western contemporary society is usually a 'chosen' relationship, was not for Frances. She married the man her family wanted her to marry, but there is no sense in the novel that she has ever been in love with him or that the marriage, step-motherhood, or motherhood of her own child were ever things she chose

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<sup>25</sup> Meyers 1997, p. 2.

or desired. In fact, she does her best to limit her contact with her husband and children because she feels she is unable to perform these roles to anyone's satisfaction, most importantly to her own. Her marriage serves only to satisfy her mother and her husband. Kristeva theorises that marriage 'insur[es] security by furnishing an identity marker ("you love me therefore I am, in moments of passion, too, also in time of illness ..."), the couple is a durable mirror, a repeated recognition. It sustains'.<sup>26</sup> Rather than the Cartesian 'I think, therefore I am', the partner's love proves one's existence. However, if that love is not assured, if it is not part of the couple, then it cannot be relied upon to sustain identity. Thus Frances's ironic assertion in free indirect discourse that: 'They were made for each other, the Rubins and her husband. Isn't she lucky to have them both? Really, she should be the happiest woman alive', ironically comments on how 'the couple' is made up of her husband and her mother and excludes her.<sup>27</sup> Jonathan serves as a durable mirror of her mother. The love match of her husband and her family alienates her from both. The free indirect discourse undermines the meaning of 'lucky' and of 'happiness'. *They* were made for each other, not for her. They may find recognition and reassurance of self, but she finds only negation.

The free indirect discourse works, as well, to undermine the meanings of 'normal', 'reasonable' and 'natural'. These are words that organise socially acceptable behaviour, but their use in the novel serves to highlight how prescriptive norms of that behaviour are. Ginsburg asserts that 'FID, as a structure of undecidability, transgresses and violates binary oppositions and therefore raises serious problems in systems (literary and linguistic) built on such oppositions'.<sup>28</sup> One of the preoccupations of the

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<sup>26</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 227.

<sup>27</sup> Charlotte Mendelson, *When We Were Bad* (London: Picador, 2007), p. 37. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition and noted parenthetically in the body of the text.

<sup>28</sup> Ginsburg 1982, p. 133.

text is with 'normal'. Frances wants to be 'normal'. She wants her family to be 'normal'. However, 'normal' is impossible to achieve because what constitutes the norm is often defined by what exceeds it, by what is 'abnormal'. When Frances asserts that something she is doing is 'normal', she is usually afraid that it is not:

Frances knows she is lucky. It is emotion, purely, which makes her put down the glass she has been wrapping carefully in a double layer of napkin – how many grooms have severed an artery? – and claw a fragment of tissue from her sleeve. Crying at weddings is normal (*WWWB*, p. 8).

She defines her crying as normal because she is well aware that it is not. She cries because marriage is, for her, not lucky or happy. The assertion of its normalcy is in free indirect discourse further reinforcing the irony of the statement and raising issue with its organisation of behaviour based on an impossible norm. It is not only her actions which she finds outside the norm. She begins to identify her perfect husband as transgressing what is usual for married men: 'When she came in last night, he was asleep. Don't other men wait up for their wives, even to argue? Never mind, she thinks. All that is over. I am a good wife and mother and daughter and sister again. It does not matter now' (*WWWB*, p. 190). The free indirect discourse of the question 'Don't other husbands wait up for their wives?' calls into question the normality of her marriage. The repetition of the 'and' highlights how cumbersome her list of identities is, wife, mother, sister, daughter, and all demanding a performance that is 'good'. If Frances feels inadequate to the performance of normal femininity, normal marriage, and normal motherhood, this difficult to attribute voice is recognising that her situation is not normal.



The *OED* defines ‘reasonable’ as ‘not irrational, absurd, or ridiculous; just, legitimate; due, fitting’.<sup>29</sup> Although Frances’s rejection by her stepdaughters ‘seems perfectly reasonable’ (*WWWB*, p. 132) and ‘it seems quite reasonable that they should hate her’ (*WWWB*, p. 150), these statements of reason are ironic, implied by the use of ‘seems’. Frances might honestly believe that it is reasonable, but the overlap of the narrator’s voice implies that she is, in Lydia Rainford’s words, repeating this belief in such a way as to negate its value.<sup>30</sup> Her stepdaughters’ hatred and rejection are unreasonable. Frances is trying to get along with the girls; it is not fitting that she should be rejected or hated. Further, when Frances faces the prospect of returning to a life that she despises, her free indirect discourse continues to expose how unreasonable ‘reasonable’ really is:

She had assumed that evolution, quite reasonably, had reserved Claudia’s ferocity, her crusader’s zeal, for her stronger, lovelier son and daughter. Now, however, at the thought of the flat and fearful life behind her, the dim compliant future ahead, fire starts to roll through her. She stands up, sword in hand (*WWWB*, p. 302).

This assumption comes not from Frances herself, but from family lore that defines her good-for-nothing siblings as special and too talented to have to deal with everyday things. It is unreasonable that she be the compliant daughter; what is fitting is that she embrace her own ferocity and crusader’s zeal, her own autonomy and independence, to avoid living a dim, compliant, dependent future. ‘Reason’ has nothing to do with the way she was living her life; rather living an unfulfilling life is irrational, absurd, and ridiculous. The use of ‘reasonable’ to define unreasonable realities foregrounds its

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<sup>29</sup> ‘Reasonable’ ,in *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) [http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50218881?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=reasonable&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50218881?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=reasonable&first=1&max_to_show=10), [accessed 24 November 2009]

<sup>30</sup> Lydia Rainford, *She Changes by Intrigue Irony, Femininity and Feminism* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005), p. 3.

ironic negation of itself and echoes the ironic negation of Frances's attempt to embrace the maternal matrix.

The fallacy of 'natural' is also called into question in the novel. 'Natural' implies that something is 'inherent in the very constitution of a person or thing; innate; not acquired or assumed'.<sup>31</sup> Frances is conflicted because mothering is difficult for her. 'Even watching him sleeping does not come naturally to her' (*WWWB*, p. 66). Frances struggles with the maternal matrix and its notion that in order to be a coherent mother, and by extension a coherent woman, one must have the 'propensity and ability to rear children' as well as a 'prioritization' of them. 'Naturally', a coherent mother enjoys watching babies sleep because mothering is inborn and an essential part of what it means to be a woman – an identity as a selfless relater. The façade of nature occludes the reality that motherhood is a performance of nurturing that is learned by observing others. Frances flees her young son because 'she does not know how to be natural' (*WWWB*, p. 291). However, as Frances begins to exercise more autonomy in her life, she discovers rebellion is something that is intrinsic to her: 'Despite a lifetime of nightmares simply about being late, going AWOL comes naturally' (*WWWB*, p. 205). Motherhood does not feel natural, but running away does. Yet, when she flees her life, like a woman from a 'novel that changes lives', she soon discovers that abandoning her child and her family is not natural either: 'Shaking and crying are, she tells herself, a perfectly natural reaction to shock, as someone rescued from death might shake and cry. This is my cure, she thinks. It had to be dramatic and painful to work. There is no reason to think that escape was not the answer, after all' (*WWWB*, p. 272). Once again, 'natural' is being ironically negated. Frances's dawning awareness that fleeing

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<sup>31</sup> 'Natural' in *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, [http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50218881?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=natural&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10&sort\\_type=alpha&result\\_place=3&search\\_id=ieMc-ml4ei3-2663&hilite=00321540](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50218881?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=natural&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=3&search_id=ieMc-ml4ei3-2663&hilite=00321540), [accessed 24 November 2009]

motherhood is not going to satisfy her allows her to entertain the notion of performing motherhood subversively. Such a performance would recognise that one is not born a mother, but becomes one and there is, therefore, more than one way to inhabit that role. Frances's performance may require that she embrace her natural skill at rebellion in order to enable her to execute motherhood in a way that she can find liveable.

The gendered and institutionalised roles of wife and mother seem to require a performance that could be made by any woman and Frances spends the majority of the novel struggling to be that universal woman, that universal wife and mother. However, the prescribed performance is impossible for her to persuasively enact. She knows, and suspects that everyone else knows, that she is not doing it 'right', that her performance is not 'natural.' Kristeva argues that Western society has an image of an ideal woman that is intertwined with versions of ideal motherhood rooted in the impossibility of the Virgin Mary, what Alison Weir terms 'the archaic mother'.<sup>32</sup> This ideal woman complicates the possibility of a woman performing her gender in a way that allows her individuality. Kristeva theorises that:

Insofar as she has a specificity a woman finds it in asociality, in the breaking of communal conventions, in a sort of asymbolic singularity. But at the same time, and as if in order to camouflage this truth, she spends her life in pretence, in playing out the roles of the nurse, wife, or idealized mother of artists, or the travestied companion of the brothers.<sup>33</sup>

Women are individual and particular only when outside of their communities, when they are alone. Their performances as carers, wives, mothers, and companions act as a camouflage to their specificity and singularity. Kristeva argues that women's uniqueness is secret and underground, it is camouflaged by acceptable behaviour. What

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<sup>32</sup> Allison Weir, *Sacrificial Logics: Feminist Theory and the Critique of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), p. 178.

<sup>33</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'The Subject in Process', in *The Tel Quel Reader*, ed. by Patrick Ffrench and Roland-François Lack (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 150.

Frances, and the other women of the New Femininities fictions, is seeking a way to be a specific and individualised woman while at the same time occupying the roles of wife and mother, to occupy all sides of herself at the same time so that her performance of wife and mother becomes specific and singular and not a pretence, playacting, or camouflage. She needs to negotiate a performance of the 'good-enough mother', the 'good enough wife', and the 'good enough daughter', if the 'good enough' performance is one of balance between autonomy and dependence. For Frances, because her marriage is unloving and thus does not reinforce her self, the performance of wife is abandoned. Through free indirect discourse's raising of serious problems in systems, in this case the systems are the heterosexual and maternal matrices, the narrator foregrounds the necessity for a woman to be able to inhabit her self without having to perform an artificial version of gender roles.

Frances's realisation that she needs to seek a solution that allows for an individualised performance of motherhood comes to her as an epiphany in the bathtub. The themes of baptism, rebirth, resurrection, and purification are employed; themes that are often intermingled: death and rebirth, baptism and resurrection, purification and death. Frances has spent the previous days walking until she is exhausted as a way to try to escape her thoughts about what she has done by leaving her family. On the day of her revelation, she escapes to the bath to hide her distress from her landlady:

Today she has walked too far: all the way to Fulham, for no particular reason, and all the way back. Her defences are lowered. She lies in the flimsy pink bath and suddenly an image of her son's knees, sweet silky moons of flesh, floats above her. She begins to cry, then to sob. Howls of pain bounce off the fibreglass until she remembers that her landlady is home and ducks under the water, letting her mouth fill until at last she is quiet (*WWWB*, p. 290).

Bathing and water are symbolic of purification. This cleansing releases thoughts and images from which she has been trying to walk away. She is haunted by the physicality

of her son's knees, using metaphors of delicious food, 'sweet, silky, moons of flesh'. Ducking under the water and holding there until she is quiet is a symbolic drowning. The passage contains only brief asides of free indirect discourse, the 'no particular reason' of the walk to Fulham and the metaphoric baby legs. These might be instances of straightforward narrative description, but they read like Frances's thought or the narrator's aside. Her landlady's concern through the door that she might be in labour introduces the motif of birth into the scene and when she sits up it is 'like a corpse revived, water pouring from her hips and nipples' (*WWWB*, p. 291). She is resurrected, but the focus is upon the body parts that are associated with childbirth and mothering, hips and nipples. Her resurrection is a rebirth; she gives birth to herself as a mother, and to the knowledge that she can have an identity that includes motherhood, but that it will be different from the motherhood dictated by her husband and mother, different from the coherent mother of the maternal matrix. It is a performance that is specific to her.

It is specificity that Frances seeks, an identity that is 'Frances' and not exhausted by the more generic identities of Claudia's daughter, Jonathan's wife, or Max's mother. She is unsatisfied by the camouflage and pretence, she does not want to play the role of idealized mother or doting wife and dutiful daughter, she feels inadequate to these performances. Rather, she wants to be both her self and Max's mother:

She could tell Claudia what she has only now realized, torn between kissing Max's head and wincing with impatience: that she will always be a little distracted, selfish, unrelaxed, but that she wants him, absolutely. Instead of waiting to be the mother she thought she should be, this is her, Frances, being a mother, and she can do it reasonably well (*WWWB*, p. 315-316).

Motherhood is liveable for Frances when she allows herself to be both 'Frances' and 'Max's mother' and accepts that she will not be perfect. The adverbs 'absolutely' and 'reasonably' are Frances's thoughts in free indirect discourse. She continues to qualify

her narrative. She is willing to absolutely claim her desire for her son, but not to assert her abilities. Rather she fits her abilities into what is 'reasonable'. Frances has come to realise that it was not the relationship of mother that was unliveable, but the expectation of an idealized motherhood in which complete fulfilment as a woman is found in the body of a child. She did not find that fulfilment because it does not exist. Women who give the impression of the euphoric Madonna moment are camouflaging, playacting, and hiding their own specificity beneath the mask of the contented and beatified mother.

Frances is aware that motherhood is difficult for some women, that she is not the first to find it hopeless and unnatural, yet she chooses to isolate herself and keep her unhappiness a guilty secret. Through this shame and secretiveness, she becomes her own oppressor, her own jail warden. Foucauldian scholar Terry K. Aladjem argues that feminists need 'to wonder about the specific ways in which women are subjugated or constitute themselves in power or, like the prisoners of Panopticon, how they might be "caught up in a power situation of which they themselves are the bearers"'.<sup>34</sup> The free indirect discourse reveals Frances's internalisation of her family's ideology of the good, compliant daughter and uses it to repress her more rebellious thoughts and to convince herself to acquiesce to other people's wishes. Interestingly, Frances is most vulnerable to the speech of her husband and mother. The more someone talks to her, the more

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<sup>34</sup> Terry K. Aladjem, 'The Philosopher's Prism: Foucault, Feminism, and Critique', in *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, ed. by Susan J. Hekman, Re-reading the Canon series (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), p. 290. She is quoting Eloise A. Buker, 'A Feminist Deconstruction of Foucault: Hidden Desires and Missing Persons', Unpublished manuscript. Free indirect discourse has been accused of being a form of authorial panopticism because of its constant surveillance of its characters and its invasion of their privacy. However, such an argument is not fitting Mendelson's use of the device. See Dorrit Cohn, 'Optics and Power in the Novel' and 'Reply to John Bender and Mark Seltzer', John Bender, 'Making the World Safe for Narratology: A Reply to Dorrit Cohn', and Mark Seltzer, 'The Graphic Unconscious: A Response', *New Literary History* 26 (1995), p. 3-37.

<sup>34</sup> Ginsburg 1982, p. 133.

likely she is to yield. It is as if she is vulnerable to an overabundance of language; that words suffocate her. Her resistance to ‘family time’ is met by a litany of reasons that she should immerse herself in family. Neither her husband nor her mother acknowledge or yield to her desires. Instead, Frances acquiesces: ‘What can she do but surrender?’ (WWWB, p. 86). ‘Why is she even resisting? No physical mishap, no friend in need nor professional crisis, could save her now. A family Seder must come first’ (WWWB, p. 126). She finds her resistance futile and capitulates to their wishes. The narrator’s voice creates a chorus with Frances’s – they both can see the ludicrousness of her reticence. Yet the narrator’s echoing of Frances’s realisation carries an ironic undertone – she is repeating the beliefs of the structure, in this case the utmost and unyielding importance of family, in such a way as to negate their value; thus implying that the *real* truth is another thing altogether: A family Seder might not *have* to come first.

When Frances flees her family, her husband, and her son, she finds that away from familial pressures to camouflage herself and pretend to be the good daughter, wife, and mother. She is unsure who she is, what she likes, and what she wants. By trying to be the woman that her husband and family want her to be, she has lost touch with the woman that she wants to be. She attempts to reconnect with herself by collecting objects that appealed to her when she was a teenager:

In the National Gallery shop this morning she found a cheap book full of her teenage favourites: prodding spears and lascivious vines, Bronzino’s depraved Cupid, holy gleams of flesh. She has made it the base of a little temple to pleasure: a postcard of Battersea power station, disappointing red bean-paste cake from Chinatown, the paperbacks she has prescribed herself: *Emma*; *The Curse of the Woosters* (WWWB, p. 263).

Her temple of pleasure seems to be made up entirely of things that befit a much younger woman, that appeal to a teenager’s libido, and are ‘disappointing’, a picture of an abandoned power station which, although ‘an icon on the London skyline’ has been

‘left gutted and decaying after a procession of owners and failed development proposals’, an untasty sweet from Chinatown, and novels of manners that speak to a bygone era.<sup>35</sup> Someone is aware how childishly libidinal these teenage art favourites are, the description of the ‘prodding spheres’ and ‘lascivious vines’ calls attention to this, whether it is Frances being self-critical or the narrator exposing Frances’s immaturity is unclear. This confusion highlights Frances’s estrangement from self-knowledge. Her discovery that she does not know who Frances the individual is anymore leads her to approach her life differently and seek to live her roles of mother and daughter in a way that accommodates her specificity; that takes into account her self.

What finally makes mothering possible for Frances is doing it her own way, complete with all of her idiosyncrasies and neuroses. She can be both herself and a mother, if not a wife. She has recognised that her sense of self needs to be taken into account when she performs her social roles. She was too flexible and open to change and attempted to live a life dictated by Claudia’s answers to these crucial questions. She finally accepts motherhood by asserting her need to be both autonomous and a mother and locating her own version of ‘the good enough mother’. The free indirect discourse enacts this subversion of the binary oppositions that organised her life, because it allows the narrator and Frances to speak through each other and to chorus their voices as they seek a different way to approach the institutions of marriage and motherhood.

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<sup>35</sup> Maev Kennedy, ‘The Stately Wrecks of England’, *The Guardian*, 25 July 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2007/jul/25/artnews.art> [accessed 26 November 2009]. Please note that I was unable to locate a novel entitled *The Curse of the Woosters*. Rather I found P.G. Wodehouse’s *The Code of the Woosters* about Jeeves and Bertie Wooster and concluded this fictional novel belonged in the realm of a 1930s comedy of manners.



## Tessa Hadley and the Imagination of Pleasure

Tessa Hadley is concerned with the difficulty of finding a space for an autonomous self while maintaining the roles of wife, mother, daughter, and sister in her novel, *Accidents in the Home*. Like Heller's rethinking of the Bathsheba mythos in the previous chapter, Hadley, a Henry James scholar who lectures at Bath Spa University, uses her interpretation of James's method to rewrite Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. In her monograph on James, *Henry James and the Imagination of Pleasure*, Hadley argues that 'Flaubert's perception of Emma's want and of Emma's dreams is remote; the whole length of intelligence and self-consciousness yawns between the author and the character. Emma's story would sound quite differently, presumably, if she told it herself'.<sup>36</sup> Hadley's novel, I would like to suggest, does exactly this, imagines the story from Emma's perspective while placing it in a contemporary setting and makes use of the free indirect discourse that was innovated and perfected by both Flaubert and James as a forum for irony and a way to complicate the truthfulness of the narrative. Clare, Hadley's protagonist, is bored with marriage and motherhood like Emma Bovary, but she is also a PhD student in literature who is aware of the artificiality of the novelistic tropes she attempts to inhabit: adulterous wife, errant mother, and deluded dreamer. The novel is not a contemporary retelling of *Madame Bovary*, but rather reimagines that story for a different protagonist, with a different worldview, and to a different end.

Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is an anti-romance which works to dismantle the sentimental novel and its fantasizing heroine. For him, style was his chief concern and his aesthetic was, in David Cook's words, one of 'hardness, coldness, and inanimacy' which strove to represent the unsatisfactory nature of the real which he found 'ugly,

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<sup>36</sup> Tessa Hadley, *Henry James and the Imagination of Pleasure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 120.

oppressive, and horribly void'.<sup>37</sup> As in the sentimental domestic novel, his female protagonist must die for her sins, but her death is not a redemption. Unlike the sentimental novel, there is no catharsis or sense of transcendence. Emma occupies a world in which change and transcendence are impossible. Flaubert rejects the sentimental; there is no romance in his unsatisfactory vision of bourgeois reality. James admired Flaubert, but was disturbed by his novels' lack of sympathy for their characters. James, in his novels and short stories, was distinctly interested in the sentimental, in emotions and relationships, and in the domestic. Hadley argues that in his later novels, James began to articulate a middle ground between the propriety and morality of the English novel tradition and the cynical, amoral European fiction tradition, in which to imagine a female pleasure that did not require her destruction. What the filter of James allows Hadley to do with *Madame Bovary* is to negotiate between the genres of anti-romance and the sentimental domestic novel without having to reject or 'explode' either of them. Her novel is an effort to articulate her own middle ground between romance and cynicism in which to imagine an Emma Bovary whose female pleasure does not require her destruction nor does it guarantee her fulfilment.

In an essay on Flaubert, James calls Emma 'a victim of the imaginative habit'; a trait shared by Hadley's Clare.<sup>38</sup> Emma's imaginative habit leads to her destruction and death. Her desire for a life that resembles sentimental and romantic fiction, an impossibility, proves fatal. Clare's imaginative habit incorporates her knowledge of sentimental domestic fiction to imagine a life more pleasurable than her domestic drudgery as well; however it acts only to disrupt her life without destroying it. Through the use of what Dominic Head calls non-epiphanies, rendered through free indirect

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<sup>37</sup> David Cook, 'James and Flaubert: The Evolution of Perception', *Comparative Literature* 25 (1973), p. 299 and 293.

<sup>38</sup> Henry James, 'Gustave Flaubert (1902)', in *The Art of Fiction and Other Essays*, ed. by Morris Roberts (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 132.

discourse that ironises her self-romanticising fantasies to expose in comic fashion how hard she has to work to create and believe in her epiphanies and to articulate the impossibility of a life without imagination and pleasure, Hadley's narrator undermines Clare's romantic visions of herself, but without rejecting the value of imagination, pleasure, and the sentimental. Hadley's refusal to reject these elements is informed by her perception that James also refused to reject them. In her monograph she argues that James, in his later novels, did not deny the value of the imagination of romance and its pleasures in the adulterous liaisons of his protagonists:

The novels, of course, do not only record the sacrifice: they also enact the romance. If one merely reads the novels as chains of causation, then they certainly do have that story to tell, that sacrifice of the female buried deep within a certain masculine ideal. But [...] because the late novels are essentially dialogic and not monologic, in the same movement of imagination which sees through and round such phenomenon, they also imagine its bottomlessness, its persuasive beauties, its pleasures.<sup>39</sup>

James's later novels reveal a serious flaw at the root of the adulterous equation: the adulterous female sacrifices herself in order to fulfil her romantic partner. He risks very little while she risks everything. Yet James's imagination of the pleasure and beauty of these pairings allows two readings to coexist within the texts in constant tension: a moral reading that sees the revenge of the wronged partners as justified and a more forgiving reading in which the adulterous pair's desire for pleasure is validated. The experience of pleasure and beauty is valuable even if it is shortlived and ultimately ruinous. In his novels of adultery James does not discard the sentimental.

The equation of the sentimental with manipulative, overblown, and melodramatic feminine concerns is, according to Suzanne Clark, inherited from a modernist rejection of the female novel tradition. She argues that the contemporary definition of sentimental is 'connected loosely to a version of liberal humanism: valuing

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<sup>39</sup> Hadley 2002, p. 153.

the individual, intrinsic value, emotion or pathos, the endorsement of niceness and cooperation'.<sup>40</sup> It became a pejorative name for literature that pandered to the interests of a feminine audience. It is a term that continues to exist, but that now operates under erasure. Hadley allows the generic expectations of the sentimental domestic novel to go on being read, for example a desire for erotic fulfilment and the employment of two friends, one dark and one fair, who conceal rivalry under the veil of their friendship, while at the same time introducing qualities of the anti-romance, like the non-epiphany and the continual undermining of the protagonist, to be incorporated as well. This negotiation allows her to destabilise the romantic motivations of the sentimental domestic plot without fully rejecting them. For Hadley, as for Henry James, the sentimental is 'still good to think with'. Hadley does not simply reject sentimental domestic fiction, she is trying to preserve something of value – she sees through to the value hidden within the desire for pleasure and imagination and negotiates the different genres in order to reveal it. If negotiation allows an author to rethink and reimagine without having to reject; Hadley uses the language of the mainstream to tell new stories that maintain the pleasures of the old ones.

Hadley argues that James used the language of the English novel tradition to talk about subjects that that tradition would never approach: adultery, pleasure, and passion. She asserts that early James wrote moralising novels that shied away from sexuality, but that in *The Ambassadors* he changes his mind and begins to negotiate between the moral and the pleasurable. In the novel, Strether resists acknowledging the nature of the relationship between Chad and Mme de Vionnet, but finally allows himself to recognise it and to imagine the pleasure and happiness between them. This novel represents James's reconciliation with the European tradition but without

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<sup>40</sup> Suzanne Clark, *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 12.

rejecting entirely the English novel tradition. Hadley argues that James sought a middle-ground between the two:

‘[D]elicacy’, the female-centredness of the English tradition, persisted as a value for James even into the late fictions; [...] what interested him, again, was not the exchange of one system for another, but a perch between, a fictional medium in which both possibilities, a feminine-optimistic and male-cynical, could be made real and co-existent, and neither of them offered as exhaustive.<sup>41</sup>

In this way he sought ‘to create a language for womanliness which is not anchored in goodness, or chastity, or unsexuality [...] What is really a radical development in late James is the convincing creation of a space and language in fiction for a womanhood liberated to kick over the traces with no more ado than a man’.<sup>42</sup> For Hadley, James’s interest in imagination and pleasure represents a changing point and allows him to write novels that ‘perch between’ optimism and cynicism to offer deep insight into how these strictures of femininity – decency, chastity, and purity – become entrenched in the very imagination of his female characters and how they can make choices that allow them to operate outside of these social mores. The choice to occupy a femininity that enjoys an element of freedom from these ideological burdens does not lead to a happy ending. The women end up alone, in exile, or yoked to a punishing paternalistic man.

A resistance to the heavy consequences of trying to live outside of the strictures of propriety is one of the ways in which *Accidents from the Home* rewrites James himself. Clare is single at the end of her novel, but the price for her indulgence of her imagination, most particularly her imagination of pleasures which her husband and children cannot provide, is not that heavy and she does attain a freedom and space to realise a more autonomous self, even if that imagination of pleasure leaves her vulnerable to making the same mistakes that alienated her from that self in the first

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<sup>41</sup> Hadley 2002, p. 12.

<sup>42</sup> Hadley 2002, p. 38.

place. After her separation from her husband, she can imagine the freedoms now available to her, but she cannot fully embrace them:

But in the split seconds before she stood up and ran down the stairs to talk to him – they were like those elastic seconds that are supposed to be given to the drowning, to review their lives – she was sorry. Was this all the freedom she had meant, pulling on her wet jeans that morning? Love, again? All those emotional entanglements poised ready to fall into place: the jubilations and the raptures, the tugs and rendings and abasements, all quite outside the jurisdiction of her suspicious separate self. It would be good to refuse, to choose instead like George Sand retiring to Nohant after all those lovers the sounder happiness of gardening, cooking, children, books. It would be good to set out on the road like the old Tolstoy trying to leave the fraudulent fantasies of lust behind. Not going back to Bram, but not changing him for another man either.

But that would have to wait, she thought. After all, she was only thirty.<sup>43</sup>

It would be good to ‘kick over the traces’ like a man or older woman, to resist ‘the jubilations and the raptures’ always accompanied by ‘the tugs and rendings and abasements’, but Clare is realistic enough to know that her imagination of pleasure will endanger the very freedom it enabled her to attain, will endanger her ‘suspicious separate self’ to entanglements and constriction. In fact, the ‘sounder happiness of gardening, cooking, children, books’ is exactly the happiness that she fled in favour of the imagination of the pleasure of ‘another man’. She is aware that the retirements of George Sand and Tolstoy have been romanticised as if they were characters in a novel. Her realisation of the impossibility of abandoning the promise of a new relationship is conveyed in free indirect discourse which brings into relief the conflict between societal norms, young heterosexual women do not forego the love of a man, and personal autonomy.

Hadley’s use of free indirect discourse resembles James’s later style. Her narrator is not an overpowering presence whose irony serves to preach a message, judge her characters, or openly unseat them. Rather it is much more subtle, the undermining is

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<sup>43</sup> Tessa Hadley, *Accidents in the Home* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), p. 207-208. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition and noted parenthetically in the body of the text.

present, but done in such a way that it could well be Clare who undermines herself; her thoughts that expose her foolishness and vanity. Hadley connects this change of form in James, from an intrusive narrator to a subtler one, to his change of subject; to his interest in how the consciousnesses and imagination of women functions:

There is plenty of mutual enlightened intelligence in the late novels, but transcendent it is not; it is contingent, vulnerable, temporary [...] With new freedoms for James's heroines comes a loss of certainty; a free fall intimately related, of course, to the developments in James's form, where whatever was left of the controlling intrusive narrator and his containing ironies is sunk in the opaque subjective dialogic medium of the late fiction.<sup>44</sup>

The moral of the story becomes less the point. He is no longer concerned with what is right or even true, but pays his attention 'where experience is thick and turbulent and passionate'.<sup>45</sup> This interest in experience rather than 'truth' or 'rightness' differs from the sentimental domestic novel, it recognises the 'contingent, vulnerable, temporary' where the sentimental novel has found transcendence, but it does not reject it. If Hadley is negotiating between the genres of anti-romance and the sentimental domestic novel, she is following in the footsteps she identifies as being laid down by James.

Hadley distinguishes in James a sympathy and real interest in the consciousnesses of his female characters, one that contrasts greatly with Flaubert's approach. She argues that in the short story 'In the Cage', his telegraphist has all the attributes of Emma Bovary, the girl's sense of unfulfilment is exacerbated by her awareness of the power of her aristocratic clientele, 'her dreams feed off her hunger and her hunger feeds off her dreams in a spiralling drama of intense interior awareness'.<sup>46</sup> However, he chooses to link the narrative inextricably with the self-awareness of the girl, 'rendering a state of fantasising need that is nothing like Emma Bovary's delusion,

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<sup>44</sup> Hadley 2002, p. 39.

<sup>45</sup> Hadley 2002, p. 18.

<sup>46</sup> Hadley 2002, p. 120.

because it is so charged with sharp recognition of its own precariousness and fatality'.<sup>47</sup> This description could be applied to Clare as well who is even more like Emma Bovary in that she is married and seeking pleasure and passion that is not forthcoming in her domestic life. If James imagines a character that is similarly 'a victim of the imaginative habit', Hadley imagines a character that shares this habit and occupies a life that is similar to Emma's but also different. She is a bourgeois housewife dissatisfied with the drudgery of domestic life, but she is equally an academic in training and astutely aware of the fictionality of her daydreams of, ironically, occupying her own romantic novel:

This was one of those moments given on earth like a promise of what's possible: the palely veiled creamy blue sky, the water glinting, the sunwarmed stone against her skin, the heat on her shoulders, the loved child happy playing in the earth, all the loved family spread safely and at their proper distances like a constellation, so that she in her place, part of it, was both holding and held. In literature though, Clare thought, there is a notorious problem with heavenly peace. It is well known that it can only be appreciated through the glass of loss. [...] It is only because Emma Bovary's provincial Normandy is in the irrecoverably lost past that what seemed to her banal and smothering seems to us charming, mysterious, desirable (*Accidents*, p. 53).

Clare consciously compares her own reality to *Madame Bovary* which she reads as 'charming, mysterious, desirable', a description which runs counter to Flaubert's intention to represent a reality that was 'ugly, oppressive, and horribly void'. She recognises the perfection of the moment – that it is pleasurable, that family life can be satisfying if experienced at the right distance– but distrusts it not only because her literary mind insists it is precarious but because her literary mind will make it so. She experiences a real pleasure here, but she cannot fully enjoy it because she is waiting for her own novel to begin which will require a dramatic cessation of the simple pleasures and the imagining of a different kind of pleasure.

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<sup>47</sup> Hadley 2002, p. 120.



*Accidents in the Home* is greatly concerned with imagination; the word is repeated more than fifty times throughout the novel. Clare's husband, Bram's, greatest flaw is that he lacks imagination. Clare complains that 'He knew things but he didn't invent things' (p. 68) and he resists her role-playing sex games which experiment with the power and pleasure of sexuality – powerful women, mostly taken from novels, making demands of men who must obey because of class. Clare's imaginative habit is plagued by what Hadley calls 'female love-pathology, the melting and sacrificing, the cult of the man' which is a 'debilitating habit of the female imagination'.<sup>48</sup> As a teenager, she believed that boys had an authentic seriousness which she could only hope to acquire through the gaze of a man:

Her own passionate love for books did not count for freedom, it was too muddled with her life, she was searching too feverishly in her reading to learn how to live and what to be: things boys just knew without searching. The best you could hope for was to be able to break in on male objectivity and bathe in it cleansingly: what you desired was that the authenticating look of male seriousness would actually come to rest on all you were, and make you real (*Accidents*, p. 137).

Despite marrying a man who is very serious and being bathed almost to the point of drowning in his seriousness, Clare assumes that her lack of fulfilment is because he is the wrong man. Her novel offers her other pleasures, the pleasures of dawn over a lake when the rest of the house is still sleeping, the pleasure of sitting by a lake on a sunny day while your child plays without any demands being made on you. Yet, it is not enough. Even in these moments when she recognises the pleasure, Clare feels 'repentant already that this was not enough, that there was always more that one greedily wanted, more than whatever precious thing it was that one held real and live and finite in one's hands' (*Accidents*, p. 54). She shares this 'debilitating habit of the female imagination' with Emma Bovary, but for her it is not a fatal flaw; it does not

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<sup>48</sup> Hadley 2002, p. 49.

lead to her destruction. It allows her a certain measure of freedom even if it is a freedom that is ephemeral and vulnerable to the next whim of her susceptibility to ‘the cult of the man’, to the desire to have a man make her real.

In addition to exploring female susceptibility to ‘the cult of the man’, Hadley’s novel incorporates some of the tropes that she identifies as representing James’s change of mind and interrogation of femininity, imagination, and pleasure. Strether, in *The Ambassadors*, changes his mind about the nature of the relationship between Chad and Mme de Vionnet and acknowledges its sexual nature. Hadley argues that this is the revolutionary moment of the novel: ‘It is Strether’s recognition – fired, envious, perturbed; and his submission, eventually, to the flood of the realities of sensual pleasure and momentary happiness which cannot be explained or moralised or extended into an infinite future’.<sup>49</sup> It is revolutionary because James allows himself to approach the topic of adultery, a topic much explored in European novels but which was uncomfortable for the English tradition, without moralising or rejecting a value to that relationship. Marian, Clare’s mother, experiences a Strether-like moment when she finds herself on the outside of a closed bedroom door and experiences, painfully, an instant when she imagines the pleasure that she has foreclosed on since her divorce from her husband twenty years ago; the pleasure of sexuality and the pleasure of femininity – it is ‘the flash of a crimson dress, and the door banged shut’ that drives her to inconsolable tears (p. 112):

One day there was a flash of crimson across the landing at the top of the stairs as Marian came in at the front door: Tamsin running out of Marian’s bedroom (the only room with a full length mirror) in a crimson dress, a stunning full length dress in clinging satin cut on the cross over her hips, long black beads (Marian’s?) whipping after her. A whirl of Tamsin like a paparazzo’s snatch of a film star, loud laughter cut off, a door (Tamsin’s bedroom door) pulled shut with a bang. Left for Marian on the wrong side of the door was the not-quite-quiet of the shut out. From behind the door came warm and thick as dove-song

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<sup>49</sup> Hadley 2002, p. 20.

or slow-cooking, the burbling of silly talk, the up and down crooning of pleasure: not sex-noises, just pleasurable intimacy (*Accidents*, p. 110).

She is shut out not only from the ‘pleasurable intimacy’, but also from the pleasures of femininity clothed in a beautiful fitted dress, the object of appreciative attention from both an other and from oneself – for Tamsin is looking in the mirror when her mother comes home. Marian’s imagination of pleasure reinforces the novel’s concern with the value of such fantasies. The sound of their pleasurable intimacy is compared to ‘dove-song’ and ‘slow-cooking’ and it is ‘burbling’; sounds which carry their own pleasure and satisfactions. She has three moments in her chapter in which she imagines pleasure: first she imagines her father’s pleasure on a lovely day but fears she might have imagined his death, then she imagines her daughter’s pleasure at being young, beautiful, and desired, and finally she imagines her own pleasure in a dream about the accidental beauties of nature which can create a moment of perfection. All three moments are concerned with imagining not only pleasure, but the freedoms these pleasures accompany.

Marian’s imagining of Tamsin’s pleasure is accompanied by an unease at Tamsin’s connection with the boy hidden in her room. This connection is characterised similarly to the connection James uses for Adam and Charlotte in *The Golden Bowl*. Marian sees Tamsin as ‘leading him after her by the invisible silken cord. If Mark began talking to Marian about work and school then Tamsin tugged’ (*Accidents*, p. 109). A potentially apt description of the connection of new lovers, there is a menacing quality to this connection in the novel because Tamsin is twenty-five, ruthless, and disturbed. The boy is sixteen and innocent. The menace is increased by its resemblance to James’s couple:

[T]he likeness of their connexion would not have been wrongly figured if he had been thought of as holding in one of his pocketed hands the end of a long

silken halter looped around her beautiful neck. He didn't twitch it, yet it was there; he didn't drag her, but she came.<sup>50</sup>

She follows at his whim because her adultery has been discovered and she is at his mercy. Maggie, through whose eyes we see this 'long silken halter', imagines that her father is leading Charlotte off to her doom. Knowledge of this parallel heightens the danger of Tamsin's manipulation of the boy. However, Tamsin does not desire to lead the boy off to his doom, punish or destroy him, rather her desire is simply for his admiring gaze to validate her own narcissism.

It is Rene Girard's contention that desire is mimetic. He argues that desire arises from the perception that an object is desired by someone else, often a rival, which creates a triangle. Girard explains that '[t]he impulse toward the object is ultimately an impulse toward the mediator'.<sup>51</sup> For Tamsin, her desire for the boy, for the boy's reflecting gaze, is ultimately a desire for herself; their love triangle is mediated by her self; it is made up of her self-love and his admiration. Emma Bovary's desire mirrors the desires of the heroines in her sentimental novels, she desires what they have and in the process to be a sentimental heroine. Clare appears to be mirroring the desires of the nineteenth-century sentimental domestic novels she reads, but her desire is actually mediated by her best friend, Helly. Clare wants whatever Helly has. Hadley argues that Girard's formulation of mimetic desire has interesting connotations for women's friendships and identifies a long novelistic tradition of the fair and dark friends who profess undying friendship but act to undermine and steal from each other because this is the only medium in which their rivalry can be realised:

Of course *The Wings of the Dove* is by no means the first English novel which has two 'heroines'. Milly and Kate are created out of a stock of such contrasting pairs: Fanny and Mary, Emma and Jane, Hetty and Dinah, Becky

<sup>50</sup> Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (London: Penguin, 1966), p. 493-494. Quoted in Hadley 2002, p. 169.

<sup>51</sup> René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), p. 10.

and Amelia, Maggie and Lucy. A distinct pattern emerges; one girl is dark and one fair, one vivacious and one compliant, one dangerous and one 'good'. They are often friends; but their relationship is vitiated by an uneasy apprehension on one side at least that they will somehow do one another harm [...] There is no acceptable mould into which their 'competition' can be cast, as there might be if they were young men; it is not a part of the apparatus and expectation of femininity that girls should even playfully spar together. Therefore their concealed competition – their sense, often, that one has what the other wants – is dissimulated under all the appearances of a feminine cosy communion, the innocent sharing of shopping and confidences. But this in turn makes the anticipated betrayal loom all the more oppressively.<sup>52</sup>

Competition for limited resources, eligible and desirable men, money, and attention, appears to lie at the very root of novelistic female friendships hidden by the 'sharing of shopping and confidences'. In the traditional formulation of this pairing, it is the fair girl who is compliant and 'good' and the dark one who is vivacious, dangerous, and sexual. Hadley, however, allows both of her women to be sexual and flips the equation: Clare is dark, but compliant and settled. Helly is fair, yet sexy, adventurous, and vivacious. However, true to form, they each desire what the other has.

From the very beginnings of their friendship when they are teenagers they want to live each other's life. They immediately 'fell in love with one another's houses' (*Accidents*, p. 121). What Clare dislikes about her large, messy, bohemian household, Helly loves. What Helly resents about her orderly suburban home, Clare envies. They would gladly switch lives. For James's Milly and Kate their similar mimetic desire, Hadley contends, is the tragedy of the novel:

The reality of the luck of each girl is made sharp, is made poignant, is made into the very essence of the desirable, by how much each would have given for the luck of the other. Each would have given everything: this is the last twist of that rivalrous process of co-definition that binds the girls fatally to one another's losses.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Hadley 2002, p. 130.

<sup>53</sup> Hadley 2002, p. 142.

Milly and Kate would love to live each other's life: Kate would have loved to have Milly's wealth and Milly would have 'given everything' for Kate's health. Hadley takes this novelistic trope and further reimagines it: her characters actually switch lives, acquire each other's form of 'luck' and in the process avoid the tragic. Clare envies Helly's single life and imagines Helly's day as being much more enjoyable than her own: 'The idea of such empty acres of solitude was a cooling balm against the promiscuous itch of Clare and Bram's crowded little house where every surface was greasy with touching and there was no lock on the toilet door' (*Accidents*, p. 117). A singular existence sounds like paradise to Clare whose life is inescapably occupied by others – she cannot even escape into the toilet. The novel does not use Helly as a focaliser and thus perception of her envy for Clare's settled life as a well-loved wife and mother must be extrapolated from her behaviour in the novel and her affair with Clare's husband. Through the course of the novel, the two women exchange lives: Clare becomes single with opportunities for more time to herself and Helly steps into the role of mother in Clare's family, holding the children's hands, deciding what to feed them, and shaping Bram to be a man she can desire. Instead of realising the error of her envy, as Emma Woodhouse does with Jane Fairfax, Clare attains the freedom for which she envied Helly. This exchange does not serve to teach Clare a lesson about the danger of taking 'the precious thing it was that one held real and live and finite in one's hands' for granted. Clare does not envy Helly's place in her family nor does she desire to return to it. Clare finds the position of mother at the centre of her family 'unimaginable' (*Accidents*, p. 241). Hadley's version of Milly and Kate is able to realise the change of luck for which their predecessors would have given everything. In the process, Clare escapes the triangle of mimetic desire; her desires are no longer mediated by Helly.

Emma Bovary's triangle of mimetic desire leaves her with an unattainable longing to live a life like the lives led by romantic heroines. Her imagination of a pleasure she has read about in novels is her tragic flaw which propels her along a path to her eventual destruction. James calls her a 'victim of the imaginative habit' and it is this imaginative habit that Flaubert is denigrating. Hadley negotiates the genres of anti-romance and the sentimental domestic novel to find value in the imagination of pleasure. To this end she makes use of what Dominic Head, in a discussion of James Joyce's *Dubliners*, calls non-epiphanies, a device used in *Madame Bovary*. Head explains that 'in the epiphanic moment an essential 'truth' about character and/or situation is revealed in a flash of insight'.<sup>54</sup> However, in non-epiphanies there is 'a lack of illumination in many of the epiphanies. The determining factor is the consciousness that is taken to be experiencing the revelatory moment, and this is considerably complicated by the destabilizing narrative technique of indirect free discourse'.<sup>55</sup> The moments that should be life-changing founder because the character is unable or unwilling to accept this truth and this shortcoming is revealed in free indirect discourse. However because it is in free indirect discourse it becomes unclear who is revealing the character's shortcoming: is it the narrator exposing his protagonist's silliness or is it the character herself revealing her own foolishness. Hadley uses her free indirect discourse to ironise Clare's self-romanticising fantasies, to expose how hard Clare has to work to create and believe in her epiphanies, and to articulate the impossibility of a life without imagination and pleasure. Through their use Hadley's narrator undermines Clare's romantic visions of herself, but without rejecting the value of that imagination. Emma's epiphanies fail because she occupies a hard and uncompromising world in which enlightenment is impossible. Clare's epiphanies founder because she is self-consciously

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<sup>54</sup> Dominic Head, 'James Joyce: The Non-Epiphany Principle', in *The Modernist Short Story: A Study in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 49.

<sup>55</sup> Head 1992, p. 50.

performing them aware that they are novelistic tropes. Head argues that non-epiphanies can be used as a way to reveal the shortcomings of ideological social systems. He asserts that ‘An overt challenge to this system would have been unacceptable, as the fuss over morality in *Dubliners* indicates, and it is through Joyce’s subversion of literary convention that the consequences of this ideology are exposed’.<sup>56</sup> Hadley makes use of non-epiphanies to a similar end: to expose the consequences of the ‘debilitating habit of the female imagination’, the ‘female love pathology’ – ‘the cult of the man’, but without having to destroy the feminine imagination.

Hadley identifies such intent to expose without destroying this habit of the female imagination in James’s ‘In the Cage’. Like James’s telegraphist, Clare possesses ‘a state of fantasising need that is nothing like Emma Bovary’s delusion, because it is so charged with sharp recognition of its own precariousness and fatality’.<sup>57</sup> She understands how epiphanies are supposed to work, although she chooses to use the synonymous term ‘revelation’, and seeks them out. Yet her knowledge of sentimental domestic novels makes her aware of their artificiality. When she considers trying to reconcile with Bram she pictures herself down on her knees begging him for forgiveness. She immediately considers her vision ridiculous because she has nothing for which to be forgiven and recognises it as a scene from a novel. Yet, its very ridiculousness is what convinces her it might be that long awaited epiphany that will reveal an essential ‘truth’:

But then ridiculous was just what one ought to expect revelation to be, that was the whole point. By definition it shouldn’t show you anything you could deduce or arrive at by yourself. It didn’t follow on from anything that had come before, and it changed everything (*Accidents*, p. 204).

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<sup>56</sup> Head 1992, p. 65,

<sup>57</sup> Hadley 2002, p. 120.



Clare's definition of the function of epiphany shows an understanding of literary tropes, but the inanity of a flash of insight that can change everything, that does not arise out of one's own knowledge, foregrounds the fictionality of the epiphany. Clare's knowledge of novelistic techniques like epiphany means that her narrator can negotiate between using a generic convention of anti-romance within a sentimental domestic novel to perch between the destruction of its fantasising heroine and her fulfilment to create a contingent, vulnerable, and temporary freedom that arises from the imagination of pleasure.

Clare longs for epiphanies that will show her how to get free of her sticky and domestic life for one that is romantic and autonomous. However, she is too intelligent and has read too many novels to be able to suspend her disbelief long enough to embrace her plan to beg for forgiveness. She realises that the errant wife's return to her marriage and to selflessness is just as much a novelistic trope as begging on one's knees or fleeing married life in the name of personal fulfilment:

The first thought her mind reoccupied as she came to consciousness in the morning was this plan for her reconciliation with Bram. It seemed to her instantly factitious and false, sickening; a scene out of a novel, not out of her real life. She felt ashamed at her capacity for this kind of fantasy and at the danger she was always in of acting upon her fantasies and living by them [...] Of course she was not going back, of course not. This was what she had left for, to have adventures in strange houses, to wake up by herself in rooms that weren't snugly and safely moulded to her shape, ugly rooms like dead shells inside which she would know herself more sharply alive (*Accidents*, p. 205).

A return to domestic contentment is just as artificial and false as a life led seeking self-fulfilment; they are impossible dreams. There is no domestic happily ever after as promised by sentimental domestic novels nor is self-fulfilment enough. Equally, her separation from her husband and children does not require her destruction or her complete self-abasement. Clare is aware of the extent to which her current situation was dictated by acting upon a fantasy, the fantasy that sexual escape could set her free from

the constricting bonds of her settled life, or fulfil her; the fantasy that life is like a novel. The repetition of 'of course' suggests that she is trying to convince herself of the impossibility of that solution. Rather her solution is a freedom that is precariously perched between fulfilment and destruction, between romance and cynicism, constantly in danger of toppling into one or the other because of her inability to abandon 'the cult of the man' and its promise to make her real.

Hadley negotiates between the genres of anti-romance and the sentimental domestic novel by reading *Madame Bovary* with the attention and sympathetic ear of Henry James. James's later works offer an example to her of the value of imagination and pleasure and the imagination of pleasure and the potential freedom they offer to a self desiring autonomy. However, this is a contingent and precarious freedom which is threatened by the very imagination that brought it into being in the first place. Clare is constantly in danger of surrendering her newfound freedom to a new man who might make her 'real'.

The desire for a life lived in the middle between passion and practicality, self and mother, and assimilation and autonomy is what the New Femininities novels chronicle. Through their use of free indirect discourse and its ability to upset dichotomies, the novels are able to blur the binaries that serve to limit their characters' lives and allow them to try to find a particularised way to occupy their roles without sacrificing their sense of self. The rules of the institutions of heterosexual marriage and motherhood can seem insurmountable, but these novels suggest, some more optimistically than others, that subversive performances are not only possible, but essential to the characters' desires to find a liveable way to inhabit their gender roles that allows them to accommodate their selves.

## Chapter Four: Untied Text: The Sense of an Ending

The realisation that a performance of marriage or motherhood does not have to adhere to the rigid norms of femininity or to heteronormativity and that one can possibly accommodate one's self within the gender roles of wife and mother does not mean a tidy end to New Femininities fictions. Rather, these writers complete their works by raising questions instead of answering them. 'Questions', in Edmund Gordon's words, 'can duck every kind of schema, and escape even the possibility of repudiation, cloaked as they are in uncertainty [...]; they can take the place of answers'.<sup>1</sup> The New Femininities writers begin their novels by, to borrow Rachel Blau DuPlessis phrase, 'writing beyond the ending' because they write about characters who are, for the most part, already married, who have already achieved the end to their romantic quests; and instead of resisting the conventional endings of marriage and death completely or offering alternatives of social connection, woman-to-woman and mother-to-child, these novels negotiate between the two.<sup>2</sup> Rather than providing answers to the question of what options women have between love and adventure, these fictions stage interrogations of the act of questioning itself. The New Femininities fictions, that is to

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Gordon, 'Dude, c'est moi', *London Review of Books*, 33.3 (3 February 2011), p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. x.

say, function in a perpetually interrogative mode. In so doing, they meet Cixous's call for women to write beyond the 'ultimate-reserve discourse', that would declare 'the end'.

Existing criticism celebrates Alice Munro above all for the way her stories resist closure. Her endings are variously characterised as 'ambiguous',<sup>3</sup> 'indeterminate',<sup>4</sup> 'unfinished', 'elliptical and interdictive and prohibitive of any gesture of "summing up"'.<sup>5</sup> Munro states that in the collection *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, she consciously chose to avoid answering questions; she 'wanted to challenge what people want to know. Or expect to know. Or anticipate knowing. And as profoundly, what I think I know'.<sup>6</sup> Sunny, the friend of the unnamed narrator of Alice Munro's 'Nettles', comments on the dissatisfaction of endings that seek to inspire suspense. She and her husband have just seen *Bridge on the River Kwai*. Sunny is unconvinced by the actions of the conclusion of the film; it is 'too complicated'. She argues that the story contradicts the characterisation of Alec Guinness's character in order to create suspense and drama. She believes that behaving 'in character' would have more dramatic impact: "Well, I think he just should have seen the wire and known what was going to happen and stayed on the bridge and got blown up with it. I think that's what his character would have done and it would have been more dramatically effective" ('Nettles', p. 175). Rather than pander to audience needs for excitement and suspense, Sunny argues that endings need to be concerned with delivering a finish that is 'true' to the characters that people the story, even if it means

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<sup>3</sup> John Gerlach, 'To Close or Not to Close: Alice Munro's "The Love of a Good Woman"', *Journal of Narrative Theory* 37 (2007), p. 149.

<sup>4</sup> Coral Ann Howells, *Refiguring Identities: Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 77-78.

<sup>5</sup> Adrian Hunter, 'Story into History: Alice Munro's Minor Literature', *English* 53 (2004), p. 236 and 225.

<sup>6</sup> Plenke Boyce and Ron Smith, 'A National Treasure', *Meanjin* 54 (1995), quoted in Coral Ann Howells, *Refiguring Identities: Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 78.

frustrating audience satisfaction. L.M. Eldredge suggests that ‘because lives do not follow conventional plots, [fictions] which attempt genuinely to probe the lives of characters often end with an arbitrary turn of events that seems to flout tradition’.<sup>7</sup> Munro flouts tradition in ‘Nettles’. The story of potential romantic reconnection ends equivocally. ‘It would be the same old thing, if we ever met again. Or if we didn’t. Love that was not usable, that knew its place [...] Not risking a thing yet staying alive as a sweet trickle, an underground resource’ (‘Nettles’, p. 186-187). Although the love is ‘unusable’, it is still ‘sweet’ and a ‘resource’, something pleasant that she can draw upon; its memory sustaining. Love is alluded to, but, the question that she chooses to answer, the resolution that her story offers, is an identification of the plant that the unnamed narrator and Mike encountered that caused rashes on their forearms, hands, and ankles. It was not the ‘big pinkish-purple flowers’, the garish and noticeable plant, but ‘more insignificant plants, with a paler purple flower, and stalks wickedly outfitted with fine, fierce, skin-piercing and inflaming spines. Those would be present too, unnoticed’ (‘Nettles’, p. 187). It is more often the mundane and unnoticeable that leave their mark and not the garish and ostentatious; it is subtlety which can be the most devastating, in life and in conclusions. Why, though, does Munro choose to end a story about reconnection with information about the appearance of stinging nettles and not with a statement about the unnamed narrator’s happiness? Does the unnamed narrator ever find connection; find a love that is useable? Munro resists offering completion in love as a conclusion to a story about disconnection.

The narrator’s comments about the sweet resource of unusable love that does not require they ever meet again subverts a particular sort of romance ending. As Carol

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<sup>7</sup> L.M. Eldredge, ‘A Sense of Ending in *Lives of Girls and Women*’, *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en Littérature Canadienne* 9 (1984) [http://www.lib.unb.ca/Texts/SCL/bin/get.cgi?directory=vol9\\_1/&filename=Eldredge.htm](http://www.lib.unb.ca/Texts/SCL/bin/get.cgi?directory=vol9_1/&filename=Eldredge.htm) [accessed 21 February 2011], paragraph 2.

L. Beran suggests, ‘these references to the conventional closure of women’s stories provide a sense that the story has ended while leaving the ending open’.<sup>8</sup> ‘Closed’ endings conclude by attaining what H. Porter Abbott calls ‘closure at the level of expectations’, by fulfilling generic parameters of a happy ending or of each character getting some form of justice, and “‘closure at the level of questions”, where the text has answered all of the questions that it raises’; the reader leaves the text enlightened.<sup>9</sup> While open endings resist closure on either or both levels. John Gerlach argues that the term ‘open ending’ is inadequate to describe Munro’s endings, and I would argue, inadequate to characterise the endings of any of the New Femininities Fiction. ‘Stories often do end ambiguously, and we already have the serviceable term “open ending” for such cases, but generally the choices for an open ending are primarily binary, rather than continuously indeterminate’.<sup>10</sup> The open ending leaves its reader with a choice of two solutions, either happiness or despair, either the governess is mad or the children are evil. Rather than offer an either/or choice, the New Femininities fictions raise numerous questions which resist simplification into either/or. Like the ironic voice they hover and represent a tactical aversion to the very notion of either/or. I will characterise the endings of these fictions as ‘interrogative’ and explore the questions that the texts raise and refuse to answer. These are not texts that completely refuse closure and the conventional endings of women’s novels; in fact, they negotiate with the familiar endings. These novels require their reader to formulate and digest the questions that are left unanswered. They negotiate the space between ‘open’ and ‘closed’ endings, traditional and postmodern techniques, to create a space in which the unanswerable of female experience can be interrogated.

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<sup>8</sup> Carol L. Beran, ‘The Pursuit of Happiness: A Study of Alice Munro’s Fiction’, *The Social Science Journal* 37 (2000), p. 331.

<sup>9</sup> H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 53-54.

<sup>10</sup> Gerlach 2007, p. 149.

*The Accidental* negotiates the space between open and closed endings through the irresolvability of Alhambra's identity. To borrow an assertion Shari Benstock makes about *The House of Mirth*, 'the moral directive of the novel remains an open question.'<sup>11</sup> Is Alhambra a hero? A destroyer? Or is she something in-between? Her presence that summer at the Smarts' vacation home and their discovery that she has stolen everything in their London home, down to the doorknobs, disrupts the Smarts' lives. Her role in the novel is as instigator of change and her narrative works against resolving the moral directive of her character. Demon or angel, what is interesting to the novel is irresolution and upheaval. Even without Alhambra's interference, the Smarts' lives were on the verge of collapse anyway; they were all escaping something when they went on holiday. Astrid is on the cusp of her teenage years and the huge changes that implies, Magnus sent an online video to his class that resulted in a classmate's suicide, Michael's sexual activities with his students are about to be revealed and cost him his academic job, and the families of Eve's literary subjects are preparing to sue her publisher for a share of the profits. The novel ends with everyone attempting to survive in the aftermath of these disasters, but resists a return to normalcy or a righting of all the wrongs. Most importantly for my interests, Eve has left her family to travel around the world and has thrown her mobile phone into the Grand Canyon. She does not have any money left nor does she have any plans to return to her family or to stay away. The novel closes without any closure on the level of expectations or on the level of questions.

The final section, 'The end', allows each of the characters to meditate on 'the end' and endings. For Astrid, coming back from holiday to an emptied house is not

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<sup>11</sup> Shari Benstock, "'The word which made all clear": The Silent Close of *The House of Mirth*', in *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure*, ed. by Alison Booth (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993), p. 246.

devastating or disastrous. Rather, it opens up possibilities for change and to make things different. She is angry at her mother for leaving and for not being better at handling the robbery and the loss of her career as a historical ‘faction’ writer:

It was doorknobs that were the end for her. The end is presumably different for everybody. Astrid thinks now that this is rather a disgusting end, doorknobs. It’s the end, her mother kept saying after that. The absolute end (*The Accidental*, p. 218).

Doorknobs do seem an odd choice for the final straw, for the discovery that makes everything else seem unbearable. Doorknobs can mean an end, if they are locked and the door is closed, but they also imply beginnings: a way in. Eve’s end is Astrid’s beginning: ‘Except that it isn’t the end. How can it be the end of anything? It’s just the beginning. It is the beginning of everything, the beginning of the century and it is definitely Astrid’s century, the twenty-first century, and here she is, here she comes’ (*The Accidental*, p. 234). She finds the robbery liberating. Her family can redefine itself by choosing differently in furniture, clothing, and future actions. If her family has spent the novel on the verge of personal disasters, she has been on the cusp of a new era in her life and she is hopeful of the possibilities open before her.

Eve’s response to the robbery is a re-evaluation of her self-definition. Her trip around the world is a midlife gap year, time off from her life and her responsibilities. The loss of her job and of the objects that made her house her home, and a reflection of her, leave her feeling that she lacks an identity and she realises that identity is much more fluid than she had previously recognized. Entering her completely empty house is devastating, but allows her to rethink who she is and who she wants to be:

What was happy? What was an ending? She had been refusing real happiness for years and she had been avoiding real endings for just as long, right up to the moment she had opened the front door on her own emptied house, her own cupboards stripped of their doors, her own unpictured walls and unfilled rooms, no trace of her left, nothing to prove that Eve Smart, whoever she was, had ever been there at all (*The Accidental*, p. 295).



She questions the notion of a happy ending, breaking it down into its constituent parts. She realises that she has been resisting both endings and happiness. Her emptied house has been evacuated of all evidence of her self and stands for her own disappearance. In effect, Alhambra has stolen Eve's sense of self. However, this loss of her sense of self has the potential to be liberating. Eve can reinvent herself as whomever she likes. The novel chooses to leave unanswered who it is Eve will choose to be.

Alhambra's first-person narration of her origins and the meanings of her name serve as a frame for the text. Her conception narrative opens the novel; she begins at the beginning and explains how her conception has contributed to who she is: 'From my mother: grace under pressure; the uses of mystery; how to get what I want. From my father: how to disappear, how to not exist' (*The Accidental*, p. 3). She begins her ending by summarising these same details: 'I was born. And all that. My mother and father. And so on' (*The Accidental*, p. 305). She reiterates the different meanings of her name that she had chronicled earlier in the novel and concludes with the destruction by fire of the cinema for which she is named. 'It's a derelict old cinema packed with inflammable filmstock. Got a light? See? Careful. I'm everything you ever dreamed' (*The Accidental*, p. 306). This final sentence is enigmatic. Is she saying she burnt down the cinema? Is she equating herself with the cinema full of incendiary contents? Her presence as a morally ambivalent character, whose role may be that of angel or demon, rescuer or instrument of destruction, seems echoed in this sentence but without determining on which side of the binary of good and evil she falls. In fact, she is a character who hovers between the two, neither kind nor cruel, but both, neither helper nor hinderer, but both. The novel's interrogative ending, just like Alhambra, resists binary organization and insists on being 'continuously indeterminate'. It negotiates with the teen coming-of-age narrative where a child concludes her story perched on the brink

of a new maturity and the novels that change lives genre of adult women walking away from an unsatisfying life, and, as I argued about its unreliable narration, situates itself within a tradition of realist narratives.

The ‘classic realist’ text is most commonly associated with a ‘closed’ ending concerned with closure and resolution of all questions and fulfilment of all expectations; Smith has clearly negotiated with the genre utilising what works and refusing what does not, closure. Catherine Belsey says that classic realist texts often follow a pattern, one recognisable to readers, and part of the pleasure of the classic realist text is its predictability. The tales often revolve around murder, war, a journey or love. These are the *Bildungsromans* and courtship novels, the boys’ adventure and mysteries:

But the story moves inevitably towards *closure* which is also disclosure, the dissolution of enigma through the re-establishment of order, recognizable as a reinstatement or a development of the order which is understood to have preceded the events of the story itself.<sup>12</sup>

She contends that this reinstatement of order might even be a new order, but that it is ‘always intelligible because familiar. Decisive choices are made, identity is established, the murderer is exposed, or marriage generates a new set of subject positions’.<sup>13</sup> Belsey further connects this resolution and return to order as ‘closing off in the process the sense of danger to the reader’s subjectivity’.<sup>14</sup> Everyone is happily married, the good are rewarded and the evil punished. Often there is an epilogue that moves ahead of the narrative by a few years and sums up the fates of all the major characters. Frank Kermode terms this ‘the old ending that panders to temporal expectations, the sort described (in its comic mode) by Henry James as “a distribution at the last of prizes,

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<sup>12</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 64-65.

<sup>13</sup> Belsey 2002, p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> Belsey 2002, p. 69.

pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs, and cheerful remarks”<sup>15</sup>. By choosing to end interrogatively, I am arguing, the New Femininities fiction resists offering order, calls into question the very binaries upon which order rests, and interrogates the ideology of gender and femininity.

Belsey calls ‘interrogative’ a text that requires ‘the reader to produce answers to the questions it implicitly raises’.<sup>16</sup> An interrogative text consistently draws attention to its status as fiction interrupting the sense of sinking below the surface of a novel: ‘Further’, she contends, ‘if the interrogative text is illusionist, it also tends to employ devices to undermine the illusion, to draw attention to its own textuality. The reader is distanced, at least from time to time, rather than wholly interpolated into a fictional world’.<sup>17</sup> I.A. Richards famously posited that ‘A book is a machine to think with’.<sup>18</sup> Interrogative texts take this role seriously. For my purposes, Umberto Eco’s definition of an ‘open work’ is a useful expansion on Belsey’s interrogative texts because he is concerned not only with what the text does, but with how it does it. In order to be considered an ‘open work’, a text must negotiate between rejecting the conventions of traditional texts and preserving them in such a way as to maximise their potential to convey ideas and to illicit thinking on the part of their readers. He argues:

In fact, one might say that rather than imposing a new system, contemporary art constantly oscillates between the rejection of the traditional linguistic system and its preservation – for if contemporary art imposed a totally new linguistic system, then its discourse would cease to be communicable. The dialectic between *form* and the *possibility* of multiple meanings, which constitutes the very essence of the ‘open work’, takes place in this oscillation.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 22, quoting Henry James, ‘The Art of Fiction’

<sup>16</sup> Belsey 2002, p. 84.

<sup>17</sup> Belsey 2002, p. 84-85.

<sup>18</sup> I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. by Anna Cancogni (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), p. 60.

Rather than completely rejecting the language and methods of its predecessor, Eco's 'open work', and my use of 'interrogative ending', negotiate between rejection and adherence in order to make possible the articulation of something new. Rosemarie McGerr argues that Eco's 'open texts' are texts that frustrate expectations in order to place ideological givens into question; thus allowing them to openly approach truly revolutionary undertakings. 'Rather than seeking to impose one point of view or to draw conflicting elements into a unified whole,' she asserts, 'an open work offers multiple perspectives on a problem and traces them either to diverse conclusions or to none at all'.<sup>20</sup> The language of the conventional ending is still useful to think with and allows the novelist to not only question the certainties herself, but to encourage her reader to question them as well.

By raising questions that they refuse to answer, the interrogative endings of the New Femininities fictions allow them to keep their secrets. In his essay 'Shibboleth: For Paul Celan', Jacques Derrida argues that all texts keep secrets. He posits that when a 'cipher' or puzzle within a text reveals itself to the reader, 'this is not in order to say to us: I am a cipher. It may still conceal from us, without the slightest hidden intention, the secret which it shelters in its readability. It moves, touches, fascinates, or seduces us all the more'.<sup>21</sup> Literary puzzles are not just there to be solved. They also engage and ravish the reader, and they do so precisely because they are ultimately textual: their surface 'readability' is all that 'shelters' the secret. That readability is all that is there. However, one cannot peek behind its curtain. As J. Hillis Miller explains: 'a true secret, if there is such a thing, cannot ever, by any means, be revealed'.<sup>22</sup> This is because

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<sup>20</sup> Rosemarie P. McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books: Resistance to Closure in Medieval Discourse* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'From Shibboleth: For Paul Celan', in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 405.

<sup>22</sup> J. Hillis Miller, 'Derrida's Topographies', *South Atlantic Review* 59 (1994), p. 17.

literature is ‘a matter of surface without depth. The reader cannot go behind it, or beneath it, or before and after it. Literature keeps its secret, but on the surface’(18). There are no other witnesses who could be cross-examined, no prisoners one could torture, to reveal the truth of the novels or the truth of femininity: only the words on the page.

The New Femininities fictions all without question keep their secrets and imply, through their interrogative endings, that discovering these secrets is impossible and is not their goal. They are much more interested in gesturing to the irresolvability of textual puzzles and feminine identities. I concentrate on the interrogative endings of these texts because the final sentence usually fulfils a need for profundity or for the conveyance of some universal truth; a need which these texts frustrate. David Lodge argues: ‘The last sentence of any story acquires a certain resonance merely by virtue of being the last’.<sup>23</sup> Thus, endings to fiction are important. Alison Booth argues that this emphasis on resonant final words is apparent even where a novel resists this power. ‘But even when the end does not pretend to have the last word, the emphasis will fall there for the reader’.<sup>24</sup> Marianna Torgovnick argues that ‘endings invite the retrospective analysis of a text’ and that often this final sentence is able to achieve defamiliarization and allows one to ‘feel the essence of things’:

If we expand Shklovsky’s idea slightly and apply it to endings and closures, we can then say that, in major fictions, effective endings command a novel to ‘stand still here’ in a way that defamiliarizes and makes us feel anew the artfulness of a fictional structure, the essence of some human experience, or both.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Viking, 1993), p. 226.

<sup>24</sup> Alison Booth, ‘Introduction’, *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure*, ed. by Alison Booth (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993), p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> Marianna Torgovnick, *Closure in the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Library, 1981), p. 209.

However, endings for women have historically and conventionally been limited. Booth, expanding on Kermode's 'sense of an ending', asserts that women characters in nineteenth-century novels face 'a sense of few endings'.<sup>26</sup> Booth argues that nineteenth-century 'novelistic endings [...] have seldom been anything more than double or binary choices for most female characters – seldom as various as the middles of novels' allowing her either romance or silence.<sup>27</sup> Women's endings have been confined to marriage, death, and motherhood; often the three fates meaning the same thing – silence and an end to female ambition. Booth contends that: 'Whether it is primarily generic or societal convention that decrees that even the most talented or ambitious heroine must marry or perish, the textual effect is that genre and ideology conspire against the figure of the woman'.<sup>28</sup> U.C. Knoepfelmacher adds to the sense of few endings recognised by feminist scholars 'a third element: the profound yearning for a return to primal origins that inevitably gets released whenever the writers finds it difficult to collapse the binaries of sex or to resolve the clash of generations, classes, and spheres of competing interests'.<sup>29</sup> He reads this as a return to the mother, a return to being mothered, or a quest to locate a lost mother. This return to dependency signals the end to the quest plot in the intimacy, privacy, and silence of the mother-child dyad.

*Paradise* negotiates between these few endings. Hannah spends her novel nostalgic for the mother-child dyad, longing for her mother. However, her narrative ends in alcoholic dementia, in complete mental dissolution, and in a series of hallucinations. Thomas Jones asserts that 'The novel itself has two endings – one hellish, the other paradisaical [...] but neither is more real than the other, and both are

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<sup>26</sup> Booth 1993, p. 3-4.

<sup>27</sup> Booth 1993, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Booth 1993, p. 3-4.

<sup>29</sup> U.C. Knoepfelmacher, 'Afterword', in *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure*, ed. by Alison Booth (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993), p. 352.

transitory: her life has disintegrated (finally, entirely) into alcoholic confabulation'.<sup>30</sup>

One hallucination has her trapped in a rehabilitation facility feeling like she is coming back to herself after a particularly large blackout and that not only is she not 'Hannah Luckraft', but she is bereft of joy. The other fantasy is that she is in a hotel room waiting for her lover with a bottle of alcohol.

I reach into my holdall and find the full bottle of Bushmill's undisturbed: that marvellous label: the long, slim door that leads to somewhere else. When Robert has finished, when he steps through, pink with scrubbing, wrapped snug in a towel, then we'll lie on the bed together and we'll talk, we'll tell each other everything. I'll ask him to bring through the glasses and then we'll begin (*Paradise*, p. 344).

This fantasy is her happy ending in the romance plot, with her two loves, Robert and whisky. This ending harkens back to the beginning of the novel. She is in the same hotel with a bottle of Bushmills. It serves to negate the events of the novel, as if they were all perhaps brought about by alcoholic confabulation. The final phrase 'and then we'll begin' suggests that a reader could simply start the novel again

Such circularity is echoed in Hannah's frequent blackouts. She comes to herself and has to begin again drawing conclusions about where she has been and what she has been doing, or 'how me and myself have been getting along lately' (*Paradise*, p. 25). Even here she exhibits an awareness of her divided selves, of Hannah and the drinking voice and their complicated relationship. Hannah's alcoholism makes her prone to double endings. She remembers events concluding in a variety of ways. In an airport shop looking at DVDs, she comes across one entitled *Lesbian Tarts Having Sex*, a title that she finds ludicrous. She tries to make a joke to the counter man by saying that the title 'seems a bit vague. I mean, I wouldn't want to end up buying something I wasn't sure of. Does it have harpsichords?' She remembers that when the man asked if she

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas Jones, 'Intimate Strangers', *London Review of Books* 26.9 (2004), 26 <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n19/thomas-jones/intimate-strangers/print> [accessed 6 June 2011], paragraph 6.

knew what she could do when she informed him that she did not intend to buy the porn, she either responded by leaving quietly or she responded “‘Fuck myself and make a video of it called *Fucking Myself*.’” (*Paradise*, p. 10-11). Either ending strikes her as possible.

I can remember both endings which is tricky. But I think I’m more convinced by the first. I think I told him I had no desire to make a purchase and then left. However it played out, there were no children anywhere near me at that stage – I would never have used offensive language and referred to sexual acts had there been any young folk present. I have standards (*Paradise*, p. 11).

However it ends, she likes to believe that she behaved responsibly. Despite the evidence that she steals from people, sleeps with men she finds repulsive, and otherwise causes trouble, she tries to maintain a sense of herself as a good person. She argues that blackouts are beneficial, that they allow one to ‘dissolve your bleak points and blur your edges: if you didn’t they would hurt. So continuous minor blackouts are fair enough’ (*Paradise*, p. 19). However, she soon contradicts herself when she begins to face the consequences of not being able to narrate the past events of her life. ‘This is how my stories stop, they peter out into more and more lists and I find myself saying *or far too often* and thinking that a life rich in possibilities is not, in other ways, perpetually delightful’ (*Paradise*, p. 29, original emphasis). Blackouts allow her to escape from unpleasantness and drudgery, but their cost is very high. Hannah’s dual worlds are both fantastical and horrific, thus the ending of her novel in a living death and/or the happy ending of the romance plot is fitting. However, because these endings are connected to alcoholic dementia, neither one seems particularly real or conclusive – her novel does not end in marriage, motherhood, or death.

Booth’s assertion that expanding the possibility that a novel can end differently, make use of endings that are not confined to death, marriage, and motherhood, serves a feminist purpose and opens up the possibility for a reconception of the potentiality of



women. ‘Should we not therefore claim that to shatter the sense of few endings, to open the closed narrative of female development, is to propose a more open judgment of women in all their difference?’<sup>31</sup> However, it is not only in novels that the sense of few endings for women is available. It is echoed in psychoanalytic theories of female development. DuPlessis asserts that the conventional nineteenth-century ending of marriage, death, or motherhood is echoed by Freud’s theory of ‘normal femininity’. In order to achieve this ‘normal’ femininity, young women must put away ambition, defiance, and activity:

Freudian theory puts a high premium on female passivity and narcissism and on the ‘end’ of husband, home, and male child. As for the quest or individual aspiration, Freud poignantly realizes that the achievement of femininity has left ‘no paths open to [a woman] for further development’.<sup>32</sup>

Freud seems to take the conventional woman’s ending as the way things are for women, reinforcing and empowering its ideological authority. Femininity requires the young girl to abandon her individuality and embrace an identity in relation to a man, as obedient daughter, wife, and mother to, of course, a son. DuPlessis argues that ‘twentieth century women novelists’ resisted this foreclosure of identity and worked to posit alternatives: ‘In the work of twentieth-century women, the marriage plot, with its high status in novels, and the quest plot of punishment for female aspiration were displaced, eroded, or removed from the center of the novel’,<sup>33</sup> with the use of ‘such narrative strategies as reparenting, female bonding, including lesbian ties, mother-child dyads, brother-sister pairs, familial transpositions, the multiple individual, and the transpersonal protagonist’.<sup>34</sup> These novels offered a different type of connection, but

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<sup>31</sup> Booth 1993, p. 10.

<sup>32</sup> DuPlessis 1985, p. 35.

<sup>33</sup> DuPlessis 1985, p. 21.

<sup>34</sup> DuPlessis 1985, p. 34-5.

one that was no less in line with feminine identity being founded on relationships with others: this alternative merely offers a different set of others.

*Notes on a Scandal* resists the plot of settled domesticity; Barbara longs for the conclusion in female community and female-to-female connections. However, the novel negotiates with the notion of female community. Barbara believes that she and Sheba have created a dyad. After a showdown over Sheba's possession of pornographic photographs and her sculpture of herself and Connolly as mother and child, Barbara feels that Sheba can be allowed some freedom because 'she knows, by now, not to go too far without me' (*Notes*, p. 244). These are the final words of the novel, but her confidence that she has become indispensable is unconvincing. It is open to interpretation whether she and Sheba are the united pair that she believes them to be; whether Sheba feels part of a dyad and whether she wants to be the child that Barbara mothers. The novel ends before Sheba returns and therefore leaves open the possibility that she may not come back.

The possibility that she might leave is suggested by the disturbing way in which Barbara speaks to Sheba after the scandal has broken. She begins to speak to Sheba as if she were her child: "You're going to be all right, darling," I said, stroking her hair. "Barbara's here" (*Notes*, p. 244). Barbara believes that she has Sheba's best interests at heart, but she infantilises her for selfish reasons and not purely for reasons of creating a female community. Barbara requires Sheba's dependence to guarantee that she continues to have a place to stay and someone in her life. As the novel concludes, Barbara is planning to move herself and Sheba to Scotland to stay in Sheba's mother's house, but she is concerned that their dyad might fall apart:

Since then, various hitches in my brilliant plan have occurred to me. For one thing, I'm not sure if the terms of Sheba's bail will allow her to travel so far. And even if they do, Sheba may refuse to let me go with her. I have been

trying to prepare myself for this possibility, but the thought is intolerable. How will Sheba manage on her own? Who will do the shopping and cook her meals? Who will make sure she showers every day? I'm not sure I can bear it if I have to go back to being on my own again (*Notes*, p. 240).

Barbara is aware that her plan relies entirely on other people acquiescing, both the law and Sheba, to her wishes. Her concern for Sheba's well-being rings false. The activities that Barbara worries will go undone are tasks that Sheba has been doing for years, not only for herself but also for her family. The final sentence exposes Barbara's real anxiety: what is truly intolerable to Barbara is not Sheba's helplessness without her, but her own aloneness without Sheba. She wants female community and connection no matter the cost.

In order to bring Sheba around to relying entirely upon her, Barbara breaks her down by destroying all of the visual representations of Sheba's relationship with Connolly: pornographic photographs of the couple and a mother and child sculpture Sheba works on for weeks which casts her as the mother and Connolly as the son. Barbara is particularly revolted by the sculpture: 'For me it was an utterly obscene object' (*Notes*, p. 241). I would argue that she finds it obscene because if she were to have sculpted it, she would cast herself as the mother and Sheba as the child. She takes great pleasure in destroying the sculpture:

The sculpture wasn't nearly as tough or as dense as I had expected. I missed it with my first swing but as soon as I actually made my target, I crushed the boy's torso straight off. Tiny splinters of clay flew through the air. One large shard landed in Eddie's compost heap. I glanced up at one point, and saw Sheba watching me from her window, a solemn Victorian wraith. I waved cheerfully and then I went on. With my second blow I took the top of the boy's head off cleanly, like an egg. Within five minutes, there was nothing left but Sheba's crossed legs and a small jagged remnant of her abdomen (*Notes*, p. 243).

Her first successful blow is aimed at the boy whom she despises. She characterises Sheba as 'a solemn Victorian wraith' which highlights Sheba's diminished state, she is

a ghost of herself. A 'Victorian' wraith was often '[a]n immaterial or spectral appearance of a living being freq. regarded as portending that person's death'.<sup>35</sup> Sheba stands in for both her own ghost and the foretelling of her demise. The reduction of Sheba's sculpture and her symbolic body to crossed legs and a remnant of abdomen works metaphorically. Barbara possesses a destroyed version of Sheba; the ruined Sheba of the end of the novel is a mere remnant of what she was. Crucially, these acts of destruction of the sculpture and photographs make Barbara feel that she possesses Sheba and she takes her into an embrace that resembles the statue of mother holding child: 'After the photographs were cut up, I went to her and took her very gently in my arms. Sheba's body is so slender these days, one feels one could almost crush it' (*Notes*, p. 243). She enjoys this power she now has over Sheba, a physical superiority which makes her able to crush her, but like a good mother, she chooses to touch her gently. This is not DuPlessis's empowering female community, this is a community of one woman dominating another and benefiting from her destruction and loss of family. The unlikelihood that Sheba will stay with Barbara suggests that this ending is equally unsatisfactory. Female community does not necessarily mean a safe place for a transgressive woman to find sanctuary, but could mean her victimisation at the hands of a predator.

I would question whether resolution in a new parent-child dyad, lesbian romance, or an escape into motherhood are solutions that offer a woman the freedom of individuality that she had to sacrifice in order to embrace her feminine identity. These endings offer a utopia of female centeredness, female connection, and female empowerment that is just as fantastical as the happy ending in marriage or heterosexual

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<sup>35</sup> 'Wraith', in *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, ed. by John Simpson, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/230504?redirectedFrom=wraith#eid> [accessed 20 March 2011]

romance. I will structure the remainder of my analysis of the interrogative endings of the New Femininities novels around the three nineteenth-century endings that feminist scholars have identified for female characters: marriage, death, and a return to primal origins which I will read as a return to the beginning. However, these novels negotiate the conventional endings in such a way as to call into question the notion of a return to the 'normal', the satisfaction of the romantic ending, and the sense of resolution that novels may impart. For the most part, they resist the modernist solution of female connection and the transpersonal protagonist, strategies that point to utopic possibilities for women. They leave their reader questioning, which is exactly the goal of the interrogative text.

### **Unmarriage: Resisting 'Happily Ever After'**

The marriage ending to conventional novels is troubling to feminist literary scholars because it serves to curtail the heroine's freedom, bring her narrative to an abrupt halt, and in the process silence her. She hands over her identity and independence to become the pliant wife. Karen Newman argues that 'Marriage, almost inevitably the narrative event that constitutes a happy ending, represents in [feminists'] view submission to a masculine narrative imperative that has traditionally allotted women love and men the world'.<sup>36</sup> The courtship novel, with its happy marital ending, serves to reinforce the ideology that a woman's ultimate goal is love and marriage while men have the potential to rule the world. Novels did not create the myth of women's marital fulfilment, but rather served to perpetuate it, along with, as DuPlessis argued, Freud and other social commentators. Hadley, Mendelson, and some of Munro's fiction negotiate the marriage ending by concluding their texts with the married female

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<sup>36</sup> Karen Newman, 'Can this Marriage be Saved: Jane Austen Makes Sense of an Ending', *ELH*, 50 (1983), p. 693.

protagonist leaving her marriage, but without rejecting the possibility that she will soon return to a settled domesticity with another man. They end in a state of ‘unmarriage’ a term used by Alexander Welsh to name the evasion of marriage as an ending in order to achieve openendedness:

When Dickens [in the ending to *Little Dorrit*] uses the language of ‘vanishing point’ and ‘termination’ for marriage, when he immediately invokes the ‘mere waste and darkened sky’ that lie beyond, he builds into the narrative the two endings paraded before the readers in *Les Misérables* and many other novels. These are not merely difficulties with words: marriage provides a dramatic ending to a novel precisely because of the contradictions of desire that it proclaims. If we think of famous novels that do not have dramatic endings, they are often works like *Tristram Shandy*, or *Ulysses*, or *Dead Souls* [...] which evade marriage as an end [...] There is nothing like unmarriage, an idea that realists have always toyed with, to express openendedness.<sup>37</sup>

Clearly, the happy ending in marriage proves problematic even to a realist like Dickens who enjoyed achieving both closure at the level of expectations and at the level of questions. By simply choosing to resist the tidiness of the marriage ending, Welsh asserts that Sterne, Joyce, and Gogol achieve a conclusion that is not dramatic and which defies closure. The unmarried status of the female protagonists of the New Femininities fictions proves problematic as well, although I would argue it is an intentional quandary. Unmarriage lacks the permanence of marriage, the characters are left in a liminal state with the possibility of coupling wide open before them; they are only temporarily unmarried. The unsatisfying quality of the unmarriage ending invites the questioning of the satisfactions of the marriage version.

There is a long history of resistance to the ending of a novel in marriage even in realist novels that do not seek undramatic endings. Thackeray and Flaubert, Torgovnick argues, ‘both shrewdly perceived the conventional social values expressed by happy endings in which hero marries heroine and everyone who deserves to lives happily ever

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<sup>37</sup> Alexander Welsh, ‘Opening and Closing *Les Misérables*’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 33 (1978), p. 22.

after [...] But they were unwilling or unable to share those values'.<sup>38</sup> Their form of realism could not countenance the easy promises of the 'distribution of last prizes'.

Thackeray and Flaubert wrote a form of realism that was unable to support the happy ending in marriage and divine justice because of its lack of verisimilitude. David Lodge argues that:

The marriage knot is the primary symbol of happiness, of the optimistic idea that the nice and the good are one and shall inherit the earth. Conversely, the novelist's refusal to tie the marriage knot between hero and heroine expresses a bleaker and more pessimistic view that life rarely conforms to our desires, or our notions of justice<sup>39</sup>.

A resistance to the marriage knot then proves to be a resistance to the wishful thinking of the conventional novel ending. Life is unfair and cruel and happiness elusive. This pessimistic view, for the authors of the New Femininities fictions, works to raise questions about the nature of narrative satisfaction. Would it be more satisfying if these female characters returned to their husbands at the end of the narrative or if they found true love in someone else's arms? What does it mean when a novel resists love as the ultimate goal and fulfilment of a woman? However, these texts do not completely renounce romance or the possibility of future domestic satisfaction, they do not fully reject marriage or love or human connection. They suggest that marriage, love, and human connections, as well as the breaking off of these connections, do not guarantee satisfaction, and that there is no satisfactory conclusion to the domestic novel.

Mendelson's Frances ends her novel questioning the status quo of middle class domesticity: she embraces motherhood but walks away from marriage, possibly into the arms of a new lover, her vicar landlady. Fulfilment and satisfaction in this new life is

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<sup>38</sup> Torgovnick 1981, p. 101.

<sup>39</sup> David Lodge, 'Ambiguously Ever After: Problematical Endings in English Fiction', in *Working with Structuralism: Essays and Reviews on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Boston, London, and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 149.

possible, but the novel ends before it is found. Perhaps ominously, the most dominating part of Frances's life has been her overbearing rabbi mother and a new relationship with a female vicar could be seen as a replacement, another powerful woman who wants to tell her who and how to be. Both women are religious authorities as well as mothering presences. How is the replacement of one mother figure for another a solution? The satisfactions the novel brings reside in the changes that Frances makes; she refuses to continue living her unliveable life. However, these changes are equivocal, she makes the big gestures, leaves her husband, stands up to her mother, but she continues to be unsure and uncomfortable with her own inabilities to conform to expectations; she continues to be the same person who lived her life in fear of making mistakes and not being adequate to the roles expected of her.

Frances does not plan her escape from her family. She just gets up from the table at a family party and walks out the front door. This impulsive desertion of her husband and son leads her to meet Gillian when she rents a room in her flat. Frances admires Gillian's calm demeanour and practicality. Yet, although she appreciates Gillian's strength, she reveals an unease as well. She transfers this unease to the canvas bags that Gillian encourages her to take with her when she goes to her mother's house to retrieve her son Max's things:

Max is heavy and the enormous canvas bags Gillian insisted she bring entwine themselves lovingly around her legs, trying to keep her back.

No, she tells herself. Don't think like that. She will carry them with pride, she decides as she climbs on and on (*Bad*, p. 309).

For Frances love is restrictive. It tries to hold her back. The inanimate bags are characterised as 'entwin[ing] themselves lovingly around her legs, trying to keep her back'. They personify a love that is interfering and controlling, a love that impedes her resolution to confront her family and her fears. Is it Gillian's love since Frances has



brought them at her behest? Frances is revealing her awareness that Gillian may be just as likely to take control of her life as her mother and husband always have. Frances resists this realisation, silences it; she tells herself no. Instead she shifts her thinking to hold Gillian's love as a weapon against her family: 'Having Gillian behind her is like going into battle with a superior gun' (*Bad*, p. 312). Approaching her family is a battle for which she must arm herself. She sees her relationship with her mother and her husband as antagonistic. The relationship with Gillian is attractive because it is her choice. She has not entered into it through accident of birth or by arrangement of her family. The novel complicates this relationship by allowing the possibilities of happily-ever-after and stuck-in-the-same to coexist.

Frances vacillates between feeling strong and independent in her choices and almost paralysing anxiety at what she has done to her family especially her son, Max. Her concerns mean that she selects the palliative items of baby care, favourite books, stuffed animals, and adorable pyjamas. Items that will soothe both her son and her own sense of having injured him grievously with her selfishness and inadequacies:

There is room only for essential babyware: not his towelling bath chair but a chewed spider book; the favourite pyjamas she has not allowed herself to dress him in, lest he became sweeter and she more vulnerable; a selection of hedgehogs and elephant seals because she does not know which will comfort him when he misses the rest of his family, when the terrible wound she has inflicted begins to show (*Bad*, p. 310-1).

Frances's impracticality arises from her sense of guilt at taking control of her life. Mendelson resists transforming Frances. She gives her the strength to change her life, but there is no miraculous escape from neuroses. Frances will never be confident or sure that she has not made a horrible mistake. She will continue to feel the pressure to conform to her mother's expectations of her even if she no longer wants to be who Claudia wants her to be. Her visit to her parents' house is timed so that she will avoid

her mother, but Claudia is home ill: 'It is extraordinarily difficult not to tell her Max has missed her, not to put up a hand to civilize her own hair, but she resists' (*Bad*, p. 314). Her urge, in her mother's presence, is to tame or domesticate her hair; to make her appearance seem to conform to the domestic norms expected by her mother. While she continues to be someone constantly second-guessing herself, her happiness will remain contingent and elusive; she will remain dependent on the opinions of others as the gauge of her own performance of self.

Frances's self-doubt arises from her belief that she falls short of her mother's example, that she fails to embody her mother's confidence and self-assurance. However, Frances and Claudia are very much alike. They both spend much of their time worrying about catastrophes striking their loved ones and making small concessions in a bid to ward them off. Claudia hides her self-doubt and fear away under her persona of domineering religious and familial leader. Claudia only finds relief from this fear in the knowledge of her imminent death:

Then something occurs to her. Tonight, if it is going to happen tonight, there is no time for news of bicycle accidents or heart attacks. For the first time in her life she is safe from fear. Her own death is the worst thing she has to face. This is, at last, happiness [...] She begins to write – who knew that it would be quite so difficult? – Emily, Simeon, Frances, Leo and Norman, most of all Norman, the love letters that they deserve (*Bad*, p. 321).

Claudia finds happiness when the worst thing she can imagine happening is her own death. Happiness is no longer having to worry about other people's worst-case scenarios. Frances might find comfort in the knowledge of this unrealised affinity between herself and Claudia. Frances is paralysed (or at least incapacitated) by her fears, while her mother uses fear to drive herself. Unfortunately, Claudia refrains from allowing Frances to see this similarity or from showing her how to find strength in fear rather than only weakness. The novel resists the re-establishment of the mother-child

dyad, the reconciliation of their relationship that would enable Frances to emerge a new woman. However, it leaves the question open: what will Claudia's love letter to her daughter say and will it make a difference in how Frances perceives herself? The novel negotiates between an ending in the freedom from marriage and in female connection and chooses not to foreclose either possibility.

Hadley's Clare's choice of unmarried life is in response to the unromantic reality of settled domesticity and the tension of attempting to live one's life in a way that fulfils one's husband's desires and not one's own. Clare is a woman who longs to believe in the novel's traditional promise that happiness lies in the love of a man and blames domesticity's failure to fulfil this promise on the man with whom she has settled. Hadley resists an ending that would allow Clare either fulfilment in the arms of a new man or the feminist realisation that she does not need one. In an interview with Alex Clark, Hadley argues that she consciously chooses to leave the questions her novels raise unanswered. "Fragmentary is what there is," she says, and she resists the temptation of a Dickensian-style wrapping-up of loose ends'.<sup>40</sup> Clare will continue to struggle with her desire to find love and her awareness that novels make empty promises.

The ending of *Accidents in the Home* acts as an epilogue after the demise of Clare's marriage to Bram. Clare has not walked away from motherhood, but finds that it is a preoccupation that is difficult to hold on to when she is not with the children. Her fair counterpart, Helly, is marked by her foray into domesticity. She has gone from '[h]er usual beauty [...] a kind of remote and dazzling performance' to a 'fragile tentativeness' (*Accidents*, p. 140 and 242); the price for her of the love of a man and

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<sup>40</sup> Alex Clark, 'Tessa Hadley: A Life in Writing', *The Guardian*, (Culture, Books) Saturday 26 February 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/feb/28/tessa-hadley-life-writing-fiction> [accessed 3 March 2011]

settled domesticity is a loss of identity. Because the novel is a negotiation with the sentimental romance genre, Hadley does not foreclose the possibility that Clare will find further romance, but the novel leaves this an open question. If the romance plot is unfulfilling and the adultery plot uncomfortable and humiliating, what is left? Is Clare just headed into another self-obscuring relationship or will her relationship with Tony prove fleeting leaving her completely ‘unmarried’? Hadley does not definitively reject love as a reward for a woman, but works to raise the question of how satisfying it is as a conclusion to the quest of an adult woman. The novel ends just in time to leave these questions open, to avoid deciding for its reader whether love compensates for limitation in the world.

Virginia Woolf, in reference to the romance plots of Jane Austen’s fiction, argues that in order to achieve the tidiness of the marriage ending, the novels require a severe limiting of the character’s opportunities. Built into the very notion of romance is female limitation. She asserts that Austen’s ironic voice is in response to this limited world that is required for the certainty of the marriage ending and that it reassures its readers that the world is safe and predictable enough to be ridiculed:

The writer adopts an ironic attitude to her creatures, because she has denied them so many adventures and experiences. A suitable marriage is, after all, the upshot of all this coming together and drawing apart. A world which so often ends in a suitable marriage is not a world to wring one’s hands over. On the contrary, it is a world about which we can be sarcastic; into which we can peer endlessly, as we fit the jagged pieces one into another.<sup>41</sup>

Marriage plots work, Woolf implies, by joining two incongruent pieces together.

However, Hadley’s novel is concerned with the aftermath of the coming together of just such dissimilar pieces. Marriage is unable to assure the happy ending and in fact the ill fit is worthy of attention. Clare’s inability to abandon the faith she has placed in love is

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<sup>41</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘Phase of Fiction’, in *Granite and Rainbow: Essays by Virginia Woolf* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958), p. 118.

supported by her fascination with romance novels. Her recourse to novels of adultery is in an attempt to figure out why she has been denied the happiness guaranteed by marriage in courtship novels. The adultery novels offer a bleak portrayal of women who seek love extramaritally, but Clare ignores the misery of these novels in favour of the intensity and romance they promise.

Clare's status as not only a reader but a professional-reader-in-training places her in an intriguing position, as I have argued earlier. She both wants to believe in the myth of female fulfilment through love and knows that the novels are reinforcing ideology that works to keep women in domesticity and assuage the sting of the limitation of their options. Yet she clings to her novels in the aftermath of the break-up of her marriage. A bomb threat at the library means a separation from her comforting books that 'she had already begun the process of taking [...] in through her skin and making them her own' (*Accidents*, p. 239) and a confrontation with the repercussions of her new status as unmarried mother:

Clare clung onto her books for a reluctant moment [...] Her afternoon without them looked bleak. Then as people obediently and without any sign of panic began to file out through the doors and down the stairs she caught sight in the crowd of an intensely familiar little knot of people: her own three children out with Bram and Helly. It was a dizzying sensation, to see the little knot from the outside whose inside feel she knew so vividly (*Accidents*, p. 239).

She experiences a sense of vertigo and defamiliarisation at the sight of her family which brings into relief her alienation with family life. The little family of which she has previously been the centre is both familiar and unfamiliar. Her longing to be a part of it has also been complicated. She finds that 'It looked utterly desirable – and unimaginable – to be part of that family' (*Accidents*, p. 241). Although she longs for the connection, she does not want to return to the centre of that particular knot. That it is both desirable and unimaginable connects it to her belief in novelistic tropes. The

promise of fulfilment through the love of a man or the love of children is both desirable and unbelievable.

Clare's yearning for her family causes her to follow them and torture herself with their sense of wholeness without her, with Helly in her place. She consoles herself with the knowledge that the children are resisting Helly's overtures, that she is irreplaceable, but pursues them nonetheless: 'Clare willed them not to turn round and see her as if her survival depended on it, and yet she could not tear herself away. This is the worst thing I'll ever feel, Clare thought; this is the worst moment I'll ever have, about leaving' (*Accidents*, p. 241). The exaggeration of this phrase with its use of superlatives, 'the *worst* moment I'll *ever* have', makes it ring false. She is, much like Madame Bovary, romanticising her guilt. If life were a romance novel, then this moment would be the worst, but in the real world of her novel, the truth is less romantic. Her guilt is fleeting and life quickly distracts her, again much like Emma Bovary, and comfort is found in consumerism and material objects. She is not diverted from her guilt by drama or romance, but by a simple browse in a fashion boutique. Looking at clothing that she does not need consumes her thoughts and draws her away from dwelling on her own misery or the misery of her children. 'She wandered into a crowded clothes shop and was immediately deeply absorbed in serious consideration of skirts, tops, trousers. How could this be? Why wasn't she considering rather the lostness of her children without her?' (*Accidents*, p. 243). Hadley resists allowing Clare to assume the role of the tortured and repentant adulteress or to romanticise her despair. She negotiates with the story of *Madame Bovary*, Clare behaves much like Emma, but resists the punitive ending in death. Clare will simply go on romanticising her life, feeling guilt, and escaping into the temporary pleasures of consumerism.

If Clare is suddenly a creature of the material world who can easily forget the heartache of motherhood by shopping for a top, Helly has assumed the role of obedient wife and meek mother. She is the cautionary tale of the woman who succeeds in finding love through adultery. Her reward is a blurring of her own identity, a loss of her own sharpness and individuality. Her relationship with Bram is changing both her physical self, which was glamorous and polished, and her personality, which was self-centred and sassy. Domesticity washes away her vibrancy and mutes her self-assertion – she begins to look like Bram:

She looked different, as if Bram's absorption in her was actually changing her into a creature of his kind of flesh. Her face was pale and scrubbed clean, she didn't have make-up on, she was letting her hair grow out into its natural light brown, her eyes seemed wider apart and paler and startled. Without wanting to, Clare imagined this face with its new fragile tentativeness against the pillows of her old bed (*Accidents*, p. 242).

Settled domesticity changes a woman, washes her out, mutes her individuality until she begins to resemble her partner. Helly's boldness has been subdued. She is now weak, perishable, and hesitant. The 'startled' look of her eyes suggests that domesticity is frightening. Allowing her hair to grow out begins to make physical the transformation of Helly, the fair friend, into the dark friend through the assumption of her position in the domestic pair. Each wants what the other has, but finds that the desired life requires just as many compromises to one's sense of self.

Clare's ending is equivocal. She has the freedom she desired, the ability to buy impractical tops that are 'ironic and flattering at once', which make her feel 'veiled, mysterious', and which allow her to imagine a new self 'with the gift of her powerful veiled knowingness' (*Accidents*, p. 244). She has always admired Helly's wardrobe and now she has the freedom from Bram's influence to create her own collection of glamorous clothes. However, she is becoming embroiled in a relationship with her

Ph.D. supervisor that endangers this very freedom and sense of the possibility of inhabiting new selves:

Mostly Tony was a problem. He didn't want to meet her children, and he didn't want her to move in. She was on the edge, the very edge, of being desperate about him, of stepping off from the safe ground of her self-possession [...]

She stopped in the rain and looked around for a phone box so that she could call him. She felt the need to reassure somebody that she had survived: even though there hadn't actually been any disaster' (*Accidents*, p. 245).

Tony's refusal to play house with her and her children jeopardizes her self-possession. His resistance is the very thing that intensifies her desire for him. Clare still longs for human connection and harbours the belief that the love of a man may make her real. This ending raises many questions: Is the disaster the bomb threat or the breakup of her family? Has she concluded that the end of her marriage to Bram is not a catastrophe? Is the danger of her loss of self-possession another disaster, another accident in the home, lying in wait? Hadley embraces the fragmentary and resists answering these questions. Again an ending in unmarriage finds its protagonist on the verge of a new life with the potential to make a new and different world or to fall back into the loss of self-possession in the name of love.

### **Death and the Matron: Endings as Natural Termination**

If the happy marriage that concluded the courtship novel of the nineteenth century served as the reward for the 'good' woman, the woman who adhered to the social and moral codes of her time and surrendered herself to the silence of marital bliss, death was the punishment for the 'bad' woman, the woman who transgressed societal norms through adultery or the loss of virginity or excess passion. DuPlessis argues that in nineteenth-century novels any woman who falls outside of what is expected of her, who refuses to be silenced, or insists upon expressing herself, must die. DuPlessis contends



that the death of the female protagonist in nineteenth-century novels is necessary because there is no alternative community in which the stain of her inequity will go unnoticed or be accepted. She asserts that twentieth-century novels were able to imagine female communities and chose to end in ‘community and social connectedness’.<sup>42</sup> Death in the New Femininities novels serves as a new beginning. Mothers, husbands, and brothers die while the female protagonists are not punished by death, but renewed; allowed to choose to make serious changes or to continue on as they were before the death of their loved one. Myerson’s use of the death of a child differs, however it does not require the destruction of the bereaved mother, she must find a way to carry on. Additionally, female communities are not the solution for these protagonists for whom both hetero- and homo-social communities are equally hostile and treacherous. These novels end without punishment in death or the attainment of self-affirming female communities of tolerance.

Kermode does not see the ending in death as necessarily a punishment, but rather argues that all endings are a symbol of mortality and act to humanize death reflecting ‘our deep need for intelligible Ends’.<sup>43</sup> Readers are attracted to stories that aid in meaning making and assuage the desire for death to make sense. The reader’s pleasure lies in the sense of closure that death implies:

Men, like poets, rush ‘into the midst,’ *in media res*, when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The End they imagine will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations. They fear it, and as far as we can see have always done so; the End is a figure for their own deaths. (So, perhaps, are all ends in fiction, even if represented, as they are for example by Kenneth Burke, as cathartic discharges).<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> DuPlessis 1985, p. 16.

<sup>43</sup> Kermode 1967, p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> Kermode 1967, p. 7.

Men are born and die in the middle of their stories and desire fiction to give them endings that make fleeting lives seem to be meaningful. The ending of a novel is a practice form of death and carries the potential for cathartic release. Enright makes use of fictional death to suggest the possibility of change and liberation for her female characters. However, this death is not closure, it opens her novel; her novel concludes with pregnancy and the promise of new life. J. Hillis Miller calls death ‘the most enigmatic, the most open-ended ending of all. It is the best dramatization of the way an ending, in the sense of a clarifying *telos*, law or ground of the whole story, always recedes, escapes, vanishes’.<sup>45</sup> Rather than give meaning to what came before, death can merely offer a sense of an ending and not closure at the level of questions.

I will make use of John Gerlach’s ‘natural termination’ to discuss novels that do not end in a physical death, but which terminate at a logical point. As Gerlach argues, ‘If the subject of a story is a character’s entire life, death is the natural termination, except, of course, for first-person narratives.’ He continues, ‘Other forms of natural termination are less radical: sleep, for instance, provides a natural close, and certain activities, once begun, imply natural ends’.<sup>46</sup> A novel written about a journey could predictably end when the journey ends. Or a novel written over the span of a day could reach termination as the sun rises on the next day. Natural termination endings seem apt, fitting, and tidy. Closure has been reached at the very least on the level of expectations. Gerlach asserts that ‘Closure at this level has an automatic and undeniable quality’.<sup>47</sup> However, the New Femininities fictions complicate even the logical conclusion in death, the end of a journey, or the finish of the tale the protagonist tells. These natural terminations serve to raise questions: If death is too melodramatic, what

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<sup>45</sup> J. Hillis Miller, ‘The Problematic of Ending in Narrative’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 33 (1978), p. 6.

<sup>46</sup> John Gerlach, *Toward the End: Closure and Structure in the American Short Story* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1985), p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> Gerlach 1985, p. 9.

is the punishment for a married woman who is unhappy but not adulterous? Does the conclusion at journey's end necessarily imply an undeniable closure? What if nothing is resolved or the protagonist has decided to go home and change nothing? These novels problematise natural termination which they expose is, in effect, artificial termination.

The death of Veronica's brother is the impetus of the action of Enright's novel. Her family gathers for his funeral, as does Veronica's dissatisfaction with her domestic life. His death sets Veronica on a journey to discover what it is that she wants. The novel ends as she decides to buy a plane ticket to return home and to her old life; her journey about to end offers a natural termination. The final paragraph leaves her in a metaphoric freefall right before she hits the ground that is her life:

Gatwick airport is not the best place to be gripped by a fear of flying. But it seems that this is what is happening to me now; because you are up so high, in those things, and there is such a long way to fall. Then again, I have been falling for months. I have been falling into my own life, for months. And I am about to hit it now (*The Gathering*, p. 260-1).

Although, the freefall is metaphoric, there is no doubt her fear is real. How can she take up that life again? How can she return to live that life after the journey on which she has been? How can a return to marriage and motherhood, with a new baby, that she believes will be male, be satisfying? How can it resolve this novel? The answer is that it cannot, that the novel is resisting exactly this kind of closure; embarking on a new life or embracing the seductions of 'unmarriage'. The novel ends before the natural termination of Veronica getting on a plane or arriving home. She could change her mind and keep travelling. She could never return home. Enright resists the closure of the natural termination and ends just before Veronica's return so that the questions will remain unanswered and suggest that there is no satisfactory conclusion to Veronica's quest.

Veronica is still searching in her final chapter for a solution to her dissatisfaction with domestic life and the discomfort of marriage. Her belief that she may be pregnant is one option she explores to anchor her in her life. She tries to believe in motherhood as the role around which to organise her life: 'I bow my head and try to believe that love will make it better, or if love won't then children will. I turn from the high to the humble and believe, for many seconds at a time, in the smallness and the necessity of being a mother' (*The Gathering*, p. 228). Motherhood is unable to bear this weight of justifying everything for more than 'many seconds at a time'. She recognises that it occupies a space which bridges the binaries of high and humble. It is both a 'higher' calling, a vocation, and the most humble and humbling role a woman occupies. Veronica is a metaphoric thinker and attempts to make symbolic acts to draw a close to her indecision. She equates the process of bathing and changing her underwear with discarding her life away from her family: 'I wake again, and shower. I put on new pants and leave the old ones in the bin. I discard this other life, and leave the hotel behind' (*The Gathering*, p. 257). She longs for the simplicity that such a symbolic gesture offers. Dirty underpants become her life in flight from domesticity; the return is as easy as stepping into a new pair.

However, her return and her journey are far more complicated than a changing of clothes or a cleansing of her body. The pull she feels from home, from her family, is a strong and visceral one. She equates it to the pull of blood, and the leaving and returning of people to their families with the circulatory system. People circulate around the globe always coming and going from the ones they love:

I look at the people queuing at the till, and I wonder are they going home, or are they going far away from the people they love. There are no other journeys. And I think we make for peculiar refugees, running from our own blood, or towards our own blood; pulsing back and forth along ghostly veins that wrap the world in a skein of blood. This is what I am thinking, as I stand in the queue in the Gatwick Village branch of Accessorize with my two pairs of flip-

flops, that sport at the plastic cleft a silk orchid for Emily, and for Rebecca a peony rose. I am thinking about the world wrapped in blood, as a ball of string is wrapped in its own string. That if I just follow the line I will find out what it is that I want to know.

Towards or away (*The Gathering*, p. 258).

People in a queue become blood and veins. Blood will answer her questions. Their possibilities, returning to or fleeing from their own blood, are binaries. A traveller either does one or the other. Yet, Veronica is, in many ways, still doing both. She is both trying to escape the pull of her blood and longing to return to it; longing for reconnection. The image of the world as a ball of string wrapped in blood reinforces her position of bothness, she believes that she can find what it is she wants to know if she follows the line, but because it is a sphere she would be forever coming and going, towards and away from her family.

Veronica's conclusion concerns her realisation of and reconciliation with the 'bothness' of her life. She is coming and going. She is both happy and unhappy. Importantly, if her husband hates her, he also loves her and if her life is unliveable it is also liveable. She confronts this bothness when, after spending much energy on what she does not want, she confronts the reality of what she does want:

But I do not want another destiny from the one that brought me here. I do not want a different life. I just want to be able to live it, that's all. I want to wake up in the morning and fall asleep at night. I want to make love to my husband again. Because, for every time he wanted to undo me, there was love that put me back together again – put us both back together. If I could just remember them too. If I could remember each time, as you remember different places you have seen – some of them so amazing; exotic, or confusing, or still (*The Gathering*, p. p. 260).

She uses repetition to clarify what she wants. She repeats 'I do not want' for the different life, the other life. She repeats 'I want to' for the life she has been living, bringing into relief the satisfactions of the life she has been resisting. If Tom longs to destroy her, he also puts her back together, again a binary is confused; is lived in

bothness. She repeats 'If I could remember' and connects it with a metaphor of life as a holiday or journey to foreign locales. This implies that memories can be mapped and described in order to aid in their retention. Life, love, and marriage are a journey characterised by locales of differing interest. The adjectives she chooses to describe these locales are not all complimentary. The locations are 'amazing', go beyond expectations, but they are not necessarily amazing in a positive way. 'Exotic' finds attraction in the strange or foreign, while 'confusing' carries negative connotations of the insecurity of being perplexed or bewildered. 'Still' is almost the opposite of 'confusing', it means 'undisturbed' or in 'a state of deep and quiet calm'.<sup>48</sup> These adjectives can encompass her experiences of life, love, and motherhood. They are all unexpected or go beyond expectations, they can be strange and perplexing, calm and attractive. What the novel cannot offer is a solution in which everything is on the positive side of the binary, satisfying, fulfilling, and liveable.

Veronica, pregnant with a new child and ready to re-embrace motherhood and marriage, is falling back into her life at the end of the novel. This ending is equivocal; she has not returned to and fully embraced domesticity, motherhood and marriage, these roles have not proven to be redemptive, she has not died for deserting her family nor has she found a female community of support. By resisting an ending in the natural termination that her return home at the end of her journey would have constituted, the novel raises questions about the adequacy of the return to the status quo to conclude a domestic novel while simultaneously not rejecting domesticity as an acceptable and liveable way of life.

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<sup>48</sup> 'Still', in *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. by Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson, 11<sup>th</sup> edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 1417.

## Resistance to Closure: Circularity

Enright uses natural termination as a way to question the status quo and the value of female connection and community without rejecting either. Other New Femininities fiction makes use of circularity, a return to the beginning, to negotiate hegemonic femininity and the possibility of any sense of resolution. Torgovnick asserts that circularity occurs '[w]hen the ending of a novel clearly recalls the beginning in language, in situation, in the grouping of characters, or in several of these ways'.<sup>49</sup>

Circularity implies a closed circle, but Cusk, Myerson, and Smith's texts return to their beginning, come full circle, without resolving the issues and questions that they raise. They have what Gerlach refers to as 'pure circularity without progress'.<sup>50</sup> They return to their beginnings but little has been noticeably changed.

Circularity is often a return to the beginning in language, imagery, or in theme. It implies a return to 'normalcy' or a righting of wrongs. However, a circular ending may do just the opposite and reassert that the wrongs are still wrong and the status quo remains upset. Torgovnick argues that this multi-faceted form of ending can be used to accomplish almost any novelistic endeavour:

A circular ending may suggest growth and change in a character by showing him behaving differently in a situation similar to that which began the novel, as in *The Ambassadors*; or it may show stagnation or stasis in a character, as in *L'Education sentimentale*. It may return to the novel's initial themes in order to resolve them (as in *Middlemarch*), to repeat them (as in *Vanity Fair*), or to reaffirm an ambivalence developed throughout the novel (as in *The Scarlet Letter*). Alternatively, a circular ending may be largely a formal element, with little thematic significance. A circular ending can be used to give a novel a consolatory, relatively happy ending, a bitterly ironic and unhappy one, or something in between.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Torgovnick 1981, p. 13.

<sup>50</sup> John Gerlach, 'Closure in Henry James's Short Fiction', *Journal of Narrative Technique* 14 (1984), p. 63.

<sup>51</sup> Torgovnick 1981, p. 199-200.

Her final assertion that the circular ending can be used to give a novel ‘something in between’ the happy ending and an ironic unhappy one is how it is used by Myerson. She suggests something in between change and stasis and reaffirms the ambivalences that structure her novel. Her ending proves to be neither happy nor unhappy, but rather open to interpretation, confusing, and cryptic. Her circularity is more akin to the roundness of a spiral than to the completeness of a circle.

Woolf was attracted to endings that did not imply completion. Anna Snaith argues that Woolf consciously chose to end her works in ways that refused closure and that allowed her texts to end quietly without trying to lay claim to profundity or morality. She chose instead to allow the strands of her thought to remain multiple rather than be unified into one foremost idea:

*Jacob's Room* ends with ‘confusion’ and an old pair of shoes (*JR*, p. 247), the penultimate sentence of *The Years* includes the uncertainty ‘And now?’ (*Y*, p. 413) and *Between the Acts* concludes with a beginning. In all these cases, Woolf frustrates the desire for closure. She wanted to be comfortable without such a conclusion: to be able to come away from a text without having to bind the multiple strands of thought into one.<sup>52</sup>

Myerson and Cusk’s novels emulate the ending that is confused, uncertain, and that returns to equivocal beginnings. Like Woolf, they leave resolution and closure to the interpretation of the reader and make it elusive and difficult to determine. They work to raise questions and offer few solutions and in the process call into question the price of the ‘normal femininity’ of Freud and romantic novels and what constitutes adultery.

*Arlington Park* concerns the price of ‘normal femininity’ in suburban London. It ends at a natural termination like the novels of the previous section, but makes striking use of circularity. The novel’s action takes place over the course of one day, from

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<sup>52</sup> Anna Snaith, *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 158.



midnight to midnight, and the ending repeats the opening image of couples walking home in the dark after a night out. This return to the images of the beginning suggests that all days in Arlington Park are virtually identical. It concludes at the end of Christine Lanham's dinner party and watches her guests depart. However, the final paragraph focuses in on Christine and her husband, Joe, and undermines any sense of closure that the format of a novel that covers twenty-four hours might imply. Christine begins her party annoyed at her husband for his indifference to the preparations and the settling of the children. She resents his ability to work in his workshop while she prepares the dinner, and that he has enough time to take a shower and to enjoy their guests, while she must cook the meal. Her resentment of her husband triggers a meditation on the relationship between the genders. She wonders if his privilege to remain aloof from the party preparations is what people 'meant when they talked about sexual inequality':

It had never seemed worth the bother to Christine, trying to sort it out when it was all so much of a muchness; but now she wondered whether that wasn't exactly what kept you in your place, this acceptance of things, so that you were forever going round and round in a circle and never getting anywhere. If you accepted things, where were you meant to go when it got unacceptable? Who were you meant to tell? There had to be room for change – there had to be room for contingency! (*AP*, p. 238).

She realises that her acceptance of Joe's privilege and exemption from responsibility for household duties is what defines their relationship and keeps her trapped in the sameness of domesticity. She longs for variety and surprise, and the space in which to do something different. She wants to be able to tell someone that the division of labour is unacceptable, but who does she tell? She cannot tell Joe.

Joe is a bigot, a sexist, and an elitist. The husbands of *Arlington Park* tend to be well-meaning buffoons who take part in childcare, support their wives' eccentricities, and attempt to be gentle, sensitive men. Joe is an unapologetic bully and thief who

enjoys a more traditional relationship with his wife. The final paragraph that sees her potentially connecting with him is made more uncomfortable by the amount of antipathy they have shown each other throughout their chapter. As the guests stand to leave, a feeling of anxiety begins to build at the realisation that Christine will be alone with Joe. She is desperate for them to stay and watches them until they are out of sight and then turns to her husband:

Joe was still standing in the hall. His face was full of expression. It was like a little stage with all sorts of things being acted on it. It was as if everything had made its way there, everything she knew: it had all found its way to Joe's face as a form of safekeeping, the whole world of herself concentrated on this little stage.

She did her dance again, snapping her fingers. Joe looked at her with bottomless eyes.

‘Come here,’ he said (*AP*, p. 248).

This scene could be read as a seduction or a reconnection between the spouses.

However, the use of ‘bottomless eyes’ implies danger of drowning, emptiness, and sorrow. It is said of the eyes of dying men and starving children, as well as of the eyes of dangerous and powerful people in novels of fantasy. Furthermore, it is a well-used cliché in contemporary romance novels, bodice rippers, to describe the eyes of the desired other, usually for sexy and sexualised women, but for male objects of desire as well. This ending is what Kermode identifies as the Shklovskian ‘illusory ending’:

Shklovsky speaks of the ease with which the reader may be induced to supply his own ending by the provision of some observation about the scenery or the weather; he calls this ‘illusory ending’. Such endings have nothing to do with raveling or unraveling; they simply say the cold got colder, or the plain stretched out interminably.<sup>53</sup>

Although the scene does not concern the landscape or the weather, its enigmatic meaning indicates that it too has nothing to do with the raveling or unravelling of the plot and does not contribute to closure at the level of questions or expectations. In fact,

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<sup>53</sup> Frank Kermode, ‘Sensing Endings’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 33 (1978), p. 146.

it raises more questions than it answers and is completely unexpected. Is this about her surrender to her life: allowing herself to be projected onto the screen of her husband; allowing herself to be defined by him? Or does reconnection require her to project her world onto him; to read him as the safekeeper of her experiences, to read him as a safe place? To envisage her world on his face requires effort, volition, to see herself in him, to make this a connection. His eyes are open to interpretation – she can read them however she wants. Does his ‘Come here’ mean seduction or menace? Perhaps it is both, menace and seduction, as her world becomes small enough to fit on his face. The novel only raises these questions; it refuses to answer them. Like characters of romance novels, the domestic novel requires limitation and marriage serves as compensation for this limitation. The ending is unsatisfactory because marriage is an unsatisfactory compensation for the limitation of identity and a woman’s world imposed by domesticity.

The female protagonist of *The Story of You* compensates herself for the loss of her child and the subsequent loss of connection with her partner with an imaginary lover. The novel strikingly uses circularity as a structure. It opens with: ‘It begins with snow, the story of you’ and closes with: ‘It’s the story of you and it stretches both ways, into past and future, and it begins right here and now, with snow’ (*The Story of You*, p. 1 and 312). Her haunting by, or delusional creation of, her lover arises from her grief at Mary’s death, but how an imaginary lover is equivalent to or fills the void left by a child is confusing and unclear. The imaginary lover is the young man she had an intense experience with twenty years before. The novel raises the questions: what constitutes adultery? Is it adultery if your affair is imaginary? Is romantic love able to stand in for maternal love? Can it help one heal after the loss of a child? Both the lover and her daughter felt like the love of her life, but are these two loves interchangeable?

Mary's death has unseated her mother who avoids speaking of her. Grief, adultery, and reality have all become confused for Nicole and her imaginary affair has concrete effects in her life. Before she discovers that her lover died before their first reunion, she confesses the affair to her partner, Tom. She does not admit to him that the affair was a delusion, that she imagined her betrayal, that her straying was all in her head. She is willing to bear the weight it has in their relationship:

I think that Tom and I are happy now – our family feels happy – most days I am perfectly happy, as long as I don't try to stop and question that happiness too much. Too much thinking. It took me a long time to understand how hard and deeply I loved and needed Tom, but I did, I do. In the end it's entirely in your own hands – it's what you decide to let yourself feel that matters. It's how much love you decide to give, not what you spend time imagining you ought to get back. I think I believe this, certainly I try to. I do believe I hurt him deeply and, though I don't think I could have done otherwise, not at the time, still I'm so very sorry for that, I'm sorry it has to be a hard fact lodged between us for ever like that in our mutual past (*Story*, p. 309).

Nicole still seems emotionally and mentally fragile. She continues to slip back and forth in time using the language of tense: 'I did, I do'. However, she realises that her love affair was an imagining of what she 'ought to get back' that distracted her from her feelings of grief for her child and her need of comfort from her partner. Myerson uses the generality of 'you' to great effect in this novel. 'You' is not simply her imaginary lover or her lost child. The 'you' of this passage is the implied audience 'you', the listener 'you', as well as Nicole's 'I'. 'In the end its entirely in *my* own hands – it is what *I* decide to let *myself* feel that matters. It's how much love *I* decide to give, not what *I* spend time imagining *I* ought to get back'. As the novel concludes, 'you' begins to slide into 'I'. Her final assertion that 'It's the story of you and it stretches both ways, into past and future, and it begins right here and now, with snow' is actually the beginning of the story of 'I', the story of Rosy. For this novel the answer to the question 'who does she mean by "you"' is unimportant because the story is about Nicole's

telling of it, about her making sense of her life and how to go on living it in the wake of her daughter's death. She imagined walking away from her life into adultery, into self-fulfilling, self-loving fantasy, but ultimately that was not a satisfactory conclusion. Instead, the story concludes by stretching into the past and the future and beginning at its conclusion; its conclusion pointing the reader back to its beginning. It resists answering the questions that it raises about adultery, romantic love, and maternal love, and utilises pure circularity without progress – the story goes nowhere, it does not matter, what matters is the telling.

The New Femininities fictions embrace uncertainty. They negotiate between the conventional sense of few endings for women, marriage, death, and a return to beginnings, and the twentieth-century alternatives of social connection, woman-to-woman and mother-to-child. Rather than providing answers to the question of what options women have between love and adventure, these fictions stage interrogations of the act of questioning itself. The New Femininities fictions, that is to say, function in a perpetually interrogative mode. In so doing, they meet Cixous's call for women to write beyond the 'ultimate-reserve discourse', that would declare 'the end'.

## Conclusion

I neither want to confine you to kitchen quarters nor even suggest that it might be desirable. But I do think that many of us have become alienated from the domestic sphere, and that it can actually make us feel better to claim back some of that space, make it comforting rather than frightening. In a way, baking stands both as a useful metaphor for the familial warmth of the kitchen we fondly *imagine* used to exist and as a way of reclaiming our lost Eden [...] This is what baking, what all of this book, is about: feeling good, wafting along in the warm, sweet-smelling air, unwinding, no longer being entirely an office creature; and that's exactly what I mean by 'comfort cooking' [...] The good thing is, we don't have to get ourselves up in Little Lady drag and we don't have to renounce the world and enter into a life of domestic drudgery. But we can bake a little – and a cake is just a cake [...] This isn't a dream; what's more, it isn't even a nightmare.<sup>1</sup>

*Nigella Lawson, How to be a Domestic Goddess*

The New Femininities fiction make use of formal techniques of an unreliable narrator, an ironic voice, free indirect discourse, and an interrogative ending in order to call into question the certainties around which gender identities are fashioned and to undermine the ideology of marriage and motherhood that serves to limit women's lives. Their authors use narrative form to echo the contradictions of postmodern femininity and to talk about and respond to feminist theory and in so doing suggest that rather than being a binary, feminism and femininity can be ways of negotiating each other. These texts share a concern with challenging the fundamental contradictions that are inhabited by

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<sup>1</sup> Nigella Lawson, *How to be a Domestic Goddess* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000), p. vii, my emphasis.

domestic femininity and highlight the stalemate that has continued from the late 1970s when second wave feminism fell silent on domesticity. Because of the contradictory nature of contemporary femininities which have to encompass so many roles with conflicting interests, New Femininities fiction's protagonists must be able to countenance contradiction. In this way, they would appear to be negotiating a feminism akin to the third wave feminism described by Shelley Budgeon which 'insists on the necessity of straddling binaries and working with the contradictions that result'.<sup>2</sup> New Femininities fiction accommodates the revolutionary within the traditional validating domestic white middle-class femininities as disruptive.

As a way of concluding this dissertation, I would like to examine a debate about domesticity and feminism that broke out in the British press in September 2000 that illuminates the issues that the New Femininities fictions negotiate. This debate was predicated around the release of Nigella Lawson's cookbook, *How to be a Domestic Goddess*. Much like the debates about the small-scale domesticity of the British woman's novel, there is a certain amount of free publicity inherent in a controversy being connected to a product that is available for sale. Muriel Gray's remarks drew attention to the Orange Prize and the newspaper columns dedicated to decrying Lawson's assertion that anyone could be a domestic goddess as anti-feminist served to publicise her book. In this debate, however, feminist and postfeminist attitudes to domesticity were revealed in all their contradictoriness and discomfort. Baking became associated with domestic slavery, misplaced nostalgia, and time-consuming hard work and Lawson is characterised as out of touch with 'real' women', a 'con-woman', and a

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<sup>2</sup> Shelley Budgeon, 'The Contradictions of Successful Femininity: Third-Wave Feminism, Postfeminism and 'New' Femininities', in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, ed. by Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 280.

‘proud hausfrau’.<sup>3</sup> At the time that her cookbook was released, Lawson’s husband was dying of cancer, a fact that gets mentioned in the majority of articles. However, the emotions that her rehabilitation of baking aroused meant an ambivalence that turned quickly into outright dismissal. Gillian Glover notes that ‘Lawson moved from “heroine” to “smug cow” in the time it takes to coddle an egg. So the labelling goes on. Mother, Madonna, whore or just irritating bint with an out-of-date haircut’.<sup>4</sup> The dichotomies set up here reveal the oppositional thinking surrounding domesticity: ‘Mother’, with a capital ‘M’, and ‘Madonna’, which should figure on the ‘heroine’ side of the binary, are epithets, thus all the terms become synonymous with ‘smug cow’. These are identities much like ‘housewife’, that the New Femininities fiction resist.

Suzanne Moore argues that baking, for Lawson, is ‘the new therapy’, ‘I don’t blame her for wanting to escape into a world where if you only stick to the right recipe everything comes out as it should’.<sup>5</sup> However, Moore is ambivalent about the media coverage of Lawson’s performance of domestic femininity as possible and desirable for all women: ‘What I do mind, though, is the way that she has been cleverly marketed as some kind of role model for women, albeit in a rather arch way’.<sup>6</sup> Anna Burnside claim that Lawson’s baking book appeals to women who wish life could be simple enough to smoothly transition from work to home with style and aplomb. ‘Women who feel torn

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<sup>3</sup> Nicola Tyrer, Julie Myerson, and Sophie Parkin, ‘Who wants to be a domestic goddess anyway?’, *Daily Mail* (London), 19 October 2000

[http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.stir.ac.uk/uk/nexis/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21\\_T12922051084&format=GNBFI&sort=BOOLEAN&startDocNo=1&resultsUrlKey=29\\_T12922051088&cisb=22\\_T12922051087&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=138794&docNo=3](http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.stir.ac.uk/uk/nexis/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21_T12922051084&format=GNBFI&sort=BOOLEAN&startDocNo=1&resultsUrlKey=29_T12922051088&cisb=22_T12922051087&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=138794&docNo=3) [accessed on 7 August 2011],

<sup>4</sup> Gillian Glover, ‘New Sex and Old Dusters’, *The Scotsman*, Wednesday 20 September 2000  
[http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.stir.ac.uk/uk/nexis/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21\\_T12922001237&format=GNBFI&sort=DATE,A,H&startDocNo=701&resultsUrlKey=29\\_T12922001232&cisb=22\\_T12922001254&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=146174&docNo=725](http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.stir.ac.uk/uk/nexis/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21_T12922001237&format=GNBFI&sort=DATE,A,H&startDocNo=701&resultsUrlKey=29_T12922001232&cisb=22_T12922001254&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=146174&docNo=725) [accessed 7 August 2011], paragraph 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> Suzanne Moore, ‘Did we fight for the right to bake?’, *Mail on Sunday*, 22 October 2000  
<http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.stir.ac.uk/uk/nexis/search/homesubmitForm.do> [accessed 7 August 2011], paragraph 15-16.

<sup>6</sup> Moore 2000, paragraph 15-16.



between the demands of career and family, who are grown up but have not grown old, want her life'.<sup>7</sup> However, '[f]or women who don't buy *Vogue*, never mind contribute to it, Lawson is less of an inspiration and more of a reminder of how many compromises they have to make'.<sup>8</sup> Thus while these working mothers might want her life, they find their desire just increases their dissatisfaction; the illusion she creates that 'the shopping-and-chopping life of domestic goddess 2000 [can be] so painless and delightful' highlights the pain and unpleasantness of the conflict between home and work. Kate Carr asserts that Lawson's title is ironic, but '[n]ot everyone understood the irony of the title'.<sup>9</sup> Nicola Tyrer is one who does not read any irony, 'there is no joke intended'<sup>10</sup> she attests, and she wonders if 'the real reason women hate baking is because cake-making epitomises our status as domestic slaves? Most men secretly love the idea of a Stepford wife, programmed to eager servitude, be it sex or baking'.<sup>11</sup> The equation of 'baking' to domestic slavery is a tremendous leap. Even without Lawson's insistence that she does not want to confine anyone to the kitchen, and her notion of 'comfort cooking' which implies self-soothing and choice, baking is perhaps one of the least coercive acts of domesticity. No one ever *has* to bake. Bread and other baked goods are affordable and readily available.

Some of the columnists read Lawson's cookbook as part of a pattern of texts encouraging women to aspire to an über-domesticity. Martha Stewart's *Living* magazine, Cheryl Mendelson's *Home Comforts: The Art and Science of Keeping House*, and Rita Konig's housework column *Domestic Bliss: How to Live* are often

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<sup>7</sup> Anna Burnside, 'Lessons from a Goddess', *The Sunday Herald*, 3 September 2000 [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qn4156/is\\_20000903/ai\\_n13952172/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4156/is_20000903/ai_n13952172/) [accessed 7 August 2011], paragraph 8.

<sup>8</sup> Burnside 2000, paragraph 12.

<sup>9</sup> Kate Carr, 'Let them bake cakes', *The Times*, 4 October 2003 <http://www.thetimes.co.uk.tto/life/article1717842.ece> [accessed 7 August 2011], paragraph 1-8.

<sup>10</sup> Tyrer, Myerson, and Parkin 2000, paragraph 7.

<sup>11</sup> Tyrer, Myerson, and Parkin 2000, paragraph 20.

cited as examples of texts that dictate perfectionism in cleaning and a one-upmanship (or one-upwomanship) in decorating as an expression of power and control. Glover argues that ‘there’s [not] anything new in the glorification of domestic chores. Think back to all those 1950s home-and-hearth ads deliberately designed to lure the war-emancipated woman back to the kitchen sink with images of frilly aprons and smiling children’.<sup>12</sup> Does she really believe that Nigella Lawson is attempting to lure feminism-emancipated working women home? If anything, Lawson’s argument is more akin to the ‘having it all’ arguments of the 1980s that implied that women could be breadwinners, bread bakers, and vixens in the bedroom; that work and family could be compatible. Lawson’s cookbook incites Suzanne Moore to say ‘Never mind Mrs Pankhurst and Simone de Beauvoir. Never mind the right to vote and the right to an independent existence, what modern women now demand is the right to bake the perfect cupcake’.<sup>13</sup> I would argue that Lawson is not repudiating feminism, in fact, she assumes that most women are successful enough in the public sector to afford the help at home that would make time in the kitchen a site of respite in a hectic world rather than being yet another place filled with people and responsibilities making demands on women’s limited time.

Throughout this dissertation I have been arguing that domesticity is a problem which feminism is unable to resolve. What I would like to tease out of the debate around Lawson’s cookbook is the difficulty these columnists, and feminism in general, has with domesticity so that anything connected to the domestic cannot be an acceptable activity for women. Joanne Hollows asserts that ‘The hubbub raised by journalists over Nigella Lawson’s *How to be a Domestic Goddess* frequently assumed a straightforward choice between feminism and domestic femininity in which feminism

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<sup>12</sup> Glover 2000, paragraph 4.

<sup>13</sup> Moore 2000, paragraph 1-4.

could be the only “rational” response’.<sup>14</sup> By presenting the two options, feminism and domestic femininity, as choices, the debate reinforced their status as a binary opposition. Hollows asserts that this binary division between feminist and housewife lies at the heart of second wave feminism because the feminist’s very identity was ‘predicated on an escape from “home”, so it was predicated on a distance from the woman who lived there, “the housewife”’.<sup>15</sup> This opposition meant that ‘[d]omesticity and a suburban ‘home’ were things associated with the feminist’s ‘other’, and therefore needed to be kept at a distance’.<sup>16</sup> This problem with domesticity, as I have been arguing, underlies the debates about heterosexuality and the difficulty of squaring a feminist identity with a heterosexual relationship because settled heterosexuality often means a domestic arrangement. Imelda Whelehan asserts that ‘[h]eterosexuality dominated the debates in the Women’s Movement – both in its association with male power and institutional practices of oppression, such as marriage, and in debates about how women might seek liberation through sex’.<sup>17</sup> The question of how to square heterosexuality with feminism was left ultimately unanswered and ‘[f]eminist politics became increasingly silent on the topic, leaving women to negotiate privately the best solutions they could’.<sup>18</sup> It is the implication that a long-term heterosexual relationship means a return to the role of housewife, if only on a part-time basis, that frustrated a solution. Feminism continues to maintain an equivocal relationship to domesticity and to the domestic novel.

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<sup>14</sup> Joanne Hollows, ‘Can I go Home yet? Feminism, Post-feminism and Domesticity’, in *Feminism in Popular Culture*, ed. by Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2007), p. 106.

<sup>15</sup> Hollows 2007, p. 100.

<sup>16</sup> Hollows 2007, p. 101. This ambivalence to home and motherhood was a middle-class phenomenon, working class and black women found the family to be ‘a refuge’ against a harsh world. Maroula Joannou, *Contemporary Women’s Writing: From The Golden Notebook to The Color Purple* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 43.

<sup>17</sup> Imelda Whelehan, *The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), p. 132.

<sup>18</sup> Whelehan 2005, p. 101.

Postfeminism's very definition is tied up with issues surrounding domesticity. Those critics who want to dismiss postfeminism as evidence of a backlash against feminism highlight its association with domesticity and figures like Nigella Lawson. Yet, as Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd argue, it is 'clear that the tensions for women between achievement and domesticity have not been resolved by a story that calls on women to leave their "home selves" behind.'<sup>19</sup> However, Hollows argues that it continues to be an issue that is ignored, 'critics use a more positive conception of post-feminism by avoiding domesticity' through a concentration on fashion and youth cultures.<sup>20</sup> Thus domesticity is a pivotal issue, but one which feminists are only capable of associating with patriarchy and oppression. Therefore, '[w]hile we might know quite a lot about what emerges between feminism and youthful femininities, and between feminism and the single girl, what emerges between the feminist and the housewife remains largely unexplored'.<sup>21</sup> However, it is this territory that the New Femininities fiction explores, the world of postmodern domestic femininities, which Hollows argues 'need to be understood in relation to the lifestyle choices through which fractured middle-class identities are formed'.<sup>22</sup> Marriage, motherhood, and a role beyond the home are all lifestyle choices, but they are choices fraught with contradiction and in need of negotiation.

Laura Kipnis identifies the binary opposition of feminism and domestic femininity as a choice between 'The Feisty Feminist or the Eternal Feminine' and points out that 'the truly fascinating question is how it came about that whichever one you chose, what was once construed as a *liberation* movement somehow ended up

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<sup>19</sup> Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd, *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004), p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> Hollows 2007, p. 104.

<sup>21</sup> Hollows 2007, p. 104.

<sup>22</sup> Hollows 2007, p. 99.

producing more dichotomies and more impasses'.<sup>23</sup> Rather than being emancipated, women are confined by more binary oppositions. However, Kipnis argues that these dichotomies are an illusion:

Once women were faced with the vaginal-orgasm-versus-clitoral-orgasm dichotomy; now women are faced with the motherhood-versus-career dichotomy. These may sound like different kinds of dilemmas, but in fact they have structural similarities, and a similar underlying logic. To begin with, we have the same cast of characters: the womanly other-directed dependent type versus the masculine-identified striving autonomous type. And in both cases, a socially organized choice masquerades as a natural one, manufacturing a big dilemma where one doesn't have to exist.<sup>24</sup>

The underlying logic that motherhood means a 'womanly other-directed dependent type' and career the 'masculine-identified striving autonomous type' is exactly the logic that the New Femininities fiction's protagonists are struggling against, deconstructing, and bridging. Their narratives are about the fact that the boundaries between these binaries are illusory, they can be straddled; one can be a mother with a career, dependent and autonomous, and inhabit both femininity and feminism. This is not an emancipatory literature because no matter which side one occupies, femininity or feminism, or both, no one is free. All of these identities make demands and negotiating these demands is what constitutes postmodern femininity.

The New Femininities fictions are aware of the rhetoric surrounding postmodern femininity and domesticity. Eve, in *The Accidental*, has withdrawn from her domestic and work obligations. She spends her days shut away in a garden shed procrastinating her next book and her evenings failing to connect with any members of her family – she finds she 'almost couldn't bear to sit in the same room' as her son because he reminds her so much of his father, Adam; her daughter infuriates her so much she believes that Astrid 'deserved to have no father, just as Eve had done most of her life, and was lucky

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<sup>23</sup> Laura Kipnis, *The Female Thing: Dirt, Sex, Envy, Vulnerability* (New York: Pantheon, 2006), p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Kipnis 2006, p. 70.

to still have a mother at all' and her husband Michael 'come[s] home smelling, yet again, of someone else' (*The Accidental*, p. 184). Rather than deal with these issues and conflicts within her family, she justifies her withdrawal by parroting the postfeminist language regarding the difficulty of being a woman: 'It is very very hard work indeed, she answered, to be a woman and alive in this hemisphere in this day and age. It asks a lot, to be able to do all the things we're supposed to do the way we're expected to do them'. In order to meet these expectations, women need, 'Talent. Sex. Money. Family. The correct modest intelligence. The correct thinness. The correct presence' (*The Accidental*, p. 85). To which her internal interlocutor responds, '*Isn't that a bit feeble?*' The litany of unfair societal expectations of women is not an acceptable excuse for withdrawing from one's family and from one's work commitments. The domestic goddess is an unliveable ideal, but her opposite, the comatose woman is equivalently an inadequate subject position.

The New Femininities fictions negotiate the phenomenon of the domestic goddess and the conflicted relationship that women feel with her. The desire to perform domesticity in a fashion that shames other women is cancelled out by the fact that its performance is often unglamorous. Clare, in Hadley's *Accidents in the Home*, begins the novel preparing a delicious lunch for houseguests aware that her performance of domesticity is a skilled one that will show up her best friend: 'The onion soup, with Parmesan toasts baked in the oven, would be delicious. (It was). And Helly couldn't cook'. Yet, she fears that 'her limp T-shirt which had soaked up the smells of the onion soup she was making for their lunch' and that 'everything brilliant and savoury about her might appear to have drained into that onion soup, leaving her wan and dull and domesticated' (*Accidents in the Home*, p. 4). The process of cooking the soup has boiled out her difference; the adjectives 'brilliant' and 'savoury' could describe the

onions and other ingredients before they became soup. Her act of competent domestic femininity comes at the expense of her performance of polished femininity. Domestic goddess is a complicated performance since, in order to qualify as a 'goddess', one must look stylish, fresh, and in control despite spending a few hours in a warm and humid kitchen.

Being a domestic goddess is not just about cooking, although that was Lawson's use of the term. Domestic proficiency includes the management of the household: husband, children, and the house and is one of the ideals that the protagonists of New Femininities fiction negotiate. The trip Veronica, from Enright's *The Gathering*, takes to retrieve her brother's body for the funeral reveals that she is not indispensable: 'all the ways you thought you were vital are not even vaguely important. Your husband can feed the kids, he can work the new oven, he can find the sausages in the fridge, after all'. In fact, she discovers her role as household manager exists only because the other members of the family choose not to take responsibility for themselves. '[I]t is just as you suspected – most of the stuff that you do is just stupid, really stupid, most of the stuff you do is just nagging and whining and picking up for people who are too lazy even to love you, even that, let alone find their own shoes' (*The Gathering*, p. 27).

Veronica is made to feel taken for granted, stupid, and ultimately useless by her performance of domestic goddess rather than that she is basking in familial warmth. In Cusk's *Arlington Park*, Amanda feels that the compensation for her domestic drudgery falls short: 'Why was her solemn undertaking to spend her life with James and Jessica and Eddie repaid in her husband's stained underwear in the laundry basket and his hairs from shaving in the sink, in her children's discarded emotions?' (*Arlington Park*, p. 80). Lawson's domestic goddess might be a lovely role if women did not have children and husbands; if the cakes were only for invited houseguests who would be polite and leave

in a timely manner. Instead, domesticity is much more about chores, dirty underwear, lost shoes, and distilling one's very essence to make meals for others too lazy to do it for themselves. The vision of the domestic goddess is an erroneous one. However, these novels are not rejecting the domestic. Unlike the CR novels, they do not hold out the options of a job or an education as ways to escape the domestic because they already have these things and are still mired in the daily grind of cleaning, feeding, and emotional receptacle. Nor do they offer the option of walking away because children and responsibility will follow them wherever they go.

Work has been figured as the road to empowerment for women, but for working mothers their commitments mean that often while fulfilling one responsibility they are feeling guilty about not taking care of the other. The New Femininities fiction expose this contradiction. Mendelson's Francis attempts to combine work and home life by 'working at home'. However, this only serves to increase the pressures of both responsibilities: 'Wednesdays are generally the worst days. She works at home, reading frantically all morning and into the night to make time for the afternoon of childcare [...] Usually it grinds past in a daze of guilty clock-watching' (*When We Were Bad*, p. 114). Combining the two, rather than increasing her enjoyment by being able to do both at the same time, decreases her satisfaction with either role. She must read frantically because her childcare duties are exerting pressure, and during childcare she feels stressed not to be working. The solutions that are supposed to square feminism and domesticity are no less fraught than complete submersion or complete abandonment of the domestic. The protagonists do consider trying to escape their domestic lives. *The Story of You's* Rosy finds the state of her house after a weekend away to be almost unbearable. 'A bowl of Weetos – the last hurried thing eaten by Fin the morning we left – still sat by the sink and because he hadn't finished the milk, its sour smell, combined



with the mustier one of cat, punctured the room'. Her disconnection from herself is exposed by the fact that she realises how she feels by hearing herself. 'I hate this place, I heard myself say [...] I just need to be out of here, I said as quietly as I could, and was slightly shocked to realise I meant it' (*The Story of You*, p. 110). But, of course, what the spoiled milk in the Weetos bowl proves is that the demands of domesticity are always there when one returns; they can wait and they do. One can never really go away forever.

If this recognition of the permanency of the domestic for mothers characterises the majority of New Femininities fiction, so too Alice Munro negotiates leaving and staying in her stories. One of the narratives that Alice Munro revisits often in her short stories is the story of the divorcee, and often her protagonist leave her marriage at second wave feminism's peak. While it seems that leaving marriage should allow women to walk away forever and act as a neat and tidy solution to matters of unhappiness and entrapment, Munro offers a critique. The price of that freedom is great and it is not a truly 'free' freedom. The nameless narrator of 'Nettles' situates herself and her circumstances within the time of second wave feminism:

I had moved for the newfangled reason that was approved of mightily but fleetingly and only in some special circles – leaving husband and house and all the things acquired during the marriage (except of course the children, who were to be parcelled about) in the hope of making a life that could be lived without hypocrisy or deprivation or shame ('Nettles', p. 168).

Feminism seemed to promise that a walking away from domesticity and 'male-identified' lifestyles would mean a life lived without hypocrisy, deprivation, or shame. However, when children are involved, women do not get away without ties that pull them back. Her neatly tying up the children and their care into packages that can be 'parcelled about' is wishful thinking. The separation from her children requires hypocrisy, because her freedom means her children are entrapped in a scheme of shared

custody, deprivation because she can only afford to live quite simply and she misses her children, and shame because she must ignore the pain of separation. When she returns to her flat after returning her daughters to their father, she sweeps everything they left behind into a garbage bag, ‘And I did more or less the same thing every time I thought of them – I snapped my mind shut. There were miseries that I could bear – those connected with me. And other miseries – those connected with children – that I could not’ (‘Nettles’, p. 170). Her mental garbage bag allows her to contain the anguish of her distance from her daughters. Walking away from the domestic is impossible because its concerns follow; one even ends up tidying away uncomfortable emotions into mental rubbish bins.

Women on the outside of the domestic rather than feeling lucky to be spared the contradictions and conflicts, long to be on the inside. The two New Femininities novels in which the protagonists are not embedded in the domestic, Heller’s *Notes on a Scandal* and Kennedy’s *Paradise*, exhibit envy for those domestic lives. Though the women engrossed in domesticity dream of an escape, those outside of it long to be overwhelmed by the detritus and demands of others. Hannah’s lifestyle choice, her alcoholism and transitory nature, means, she has decided, that she will never have children. A good decision to make, of course, but it is a decision that fills her with anguish whenever she is reminded. Her brother’s announcement of his impending fatherhood drives Hannah into a flurry of self-pity because she believes that she could be different if she had a child. ‘They never will walk through their days, hemmed in with the scent of a child they haven’t got, won’t have, can’t have [...] They don’t hold it growing and wasting in them like a frozen mist – the impossible baby, the one who would let them be tender’ (*Paradise*, p. 105-106). Perhaps the notion of having a baby in order to find an ability to be caring and less selfish is ludicrous, but for Hannah the

inside of the domestic tangle of mother and child seems a lovely place. Barbara, whose loneliness drives her, finds Sheba's house simultaneously revolting and alluring:

There was a level of disorder in the place that I doubt I could ever tolerate. And yet, there was something in the disarray that was enviable. When you live alone, your furnishings, your possessions are always confronting you with the thinness of your existence. You know with painful accuracy the provenance of everything you touch and the last time you touched it. The five little cushions on your sofa stay plumped and leaning at their jaunty angle for months at a time unless you theatrically muss them. The level of the salt in your shaker decreases at the same excruciating rate, day after day. Sitting in Sheba's house – studying the mingled detritus of its several inhabitants – I could see what a relief it might be to let your own meagre effects be joined with other people's (*Notes*, p. 99).

Barbara longs for human connection and translates that connection to a material plane. It would be a relief to mingle with other people, to have other people inside the walls of her privacy. Whereas her domestic counterparts are fed up with the dirty underwear, the sour milk, and the lost shoes, she longs to have someone to make a mess so that she can clean up. The image of theatrically mussing up her cushions because she is frustrated that they never move and in fact, the fact that her cushions do not get flattened for months at a time means that she does not make use of her 'stuff', that she longs for another so that she can use her own things. New Femininities fiction recognises both the allure of domesticity and its conflicts and contradictions. Unlike the feminist fiction of the 1970s, it does not seek to solve these contradictions and unlike chick lit of the 1990s and 2000s it will not ignore them in order to offer a happy ending.

The New Femininities fiction negotiates not only traditional forms of fiction writing, but also the issues of the sociohistorical context in which they were written. Their authors use narrative form to echo the contradictions of postmodern femininity and feminist theory and suggest that feminism and femininity can be ways of negotiating each other. These texts negotiate a feminism akin to third wave feminism which 'insists on the necessity of straddling binaries and working with the

contradictions that result<sup>25</sup> while exposing that same feminism's neglect of the domestic. The New Femininities fiction share with third wave feminism a recognition of the value of contradiction and, by confronting issues of domesticity and motherhood that proved insurmountable to second wave feminism and are ignored by postfeminism's focus on the young and fashionable, illuminate their inadequacy to discuss the lives of adult women, domestic femininities, and the contemporary domestic novel.

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<sup>25</sup> Budgeon 2011, p. 280.

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