Writing Herself In: Mother Fiction and the Female *Künstlerroman*

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ABSTRACT

This project examines the 'mother-writer problem' within contemporary Canadian fiction by women. Using three novels that tell the story of a mother who is also a writer, Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, Audrey Thomas' *Intertidal Life* and Carol Shields' *Unless*, I will outline the manner in which the roles of mother and writer are negotiated by the authors and their central characters. Further, I will investigate how creating a narrative about a female artist who is also a mother challenges and changes the structure and content of the standard female *künstlerroman*. Finally, this thesis will attempt to determine how or if such challenges and changes improve the portrait-of-the-female-artist novel.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce projet se penche sur la question de la mère-écrivain au sein de la prose féminine contemporaine canadienne-anglaise. L'analyse de *The Diviners*, de Margaret Laurence, d'*Intertidal Life*, d'Audrey Thomas et d'*Unless*, de Carol Shields, romans qui représentent chacun une mère écrivain, souligne ce double rôle ainsi que la façon dont celui-ci est traité à la fois par les auteurs et par leurs personnages. Je cherche de plus à comprendre qu'un récit portant sur une artiste féminine qui soit également mère puisse porter un défi et même altérer la structure et le contenu du *künstlerroman* féminin traditionnel. Enfin, ce mémoire pose la question de savoir si les changements apportés par le personnage central de la mère-écrivain améliorent nettement ce genre particulier de roman.

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This thesis is dedicated to my mother for having the strength to write her own life and to my father for being the kind of man who encourages his daughters to do the same.

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INTRODUCTION

I. *The Mother Finds Her Voice*

> My mother, in her leather jacket and odd long 1940s hair, standing beside the tray for the birds, her hand stretched out; the jays were there too, she's training them, one is on her shoulder, peering at her with clever thumbtack eyes, another is landing on her wrist, wings caught as a blur. Sun sifting around her through the pines, her eyes look straight at the camera, frightened, receding into the shadows of her head like a skull's, a trick of the light. (Atwood *Surfacing*, 107-08)

For so long 'mother' has been standing there, the world in movement around her, while she remains frozen, captured. For so long we have looked at her image and created her nurturing, teaching, giving, yet outdated. For so long she has appeared 'frightened,' or, maybe, frightening? For so long we have kept her silent.

Recently, however, with the advent of second-wave and post-feminism, the mother has found her voice. Moreover, instead of being erased or written by others, the mother has begun writing herself. Within contemporary Canadian fiction by women, this change has been signaled through the creation of the mother-writer protagonist, a creation that validates writing the mother and the mother writing. The genre chosen for the development of this 'writing mother' is the female *künstlerroman*; a genre that is itself altered by the addition of the mother-writer figure. Through examining three novels by Canadian female writers, I will investigate the ways in which the mother-writer is presented; the ways in which this figure challenges and changes the form and content of

the portrait-of-the-*female*-artist novel; and, finally, how these changes either improve or trouble the standard female *künstlerroman*.

II. *Patriarchy and the Maternal*

Birth, Di Brandt posits, is "one of the most amazing and magical moments in human experience, and it belongs, in the case of adults, exclusively to women who become mothers" (8). Yet, time and again, Western literature ignores or flattens the experience of becoming and being a mother. That is, instances of a female protagonist who is also a mother are few and far between. Further, those texts that do feature a mother heroine place little to no emphasis on the 'mother' aspect; they do not develop the protagonist as mother. Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, for example, revolves around Emma's struggles as lover, as middle-class, as woman, but pays no attention to her potential struggles, conflicts or development as a mother. The same may be said of Homer's Penelope, James Joyce's Molly Bloom and F. Scott Fitzgerald's Daisy, to name only a few. In terms of traditional patriarchal literature, this cultural matricide is unsurprising. As a woman, the mother is not only the unknown/unknowable other; she is the other from which existence springs. Mother has the power to give life, a power that Brandt argues is "envied and imitated" by men in Western culture (8). For example, texts often use the act of childbirth or maternal nurturing as a metaphor for or render it equivalent to acts of male creation and production, such as 'labouring' over a work of art. In *Ulysses*' "Oxen of the Sun" chapter, Joyce draws a lengthy parallel between the Mrs. Purefoy's giving birth and Bloom's writing process. Both T.S. Eliot and Percy Shelley, amongst others,

have relied on the metaphor of childbirth in order to explain the male artistic creation. In this way, patriarchy has denied and leveled the experience of mothering.

Simultaneously, however, becoming a wife and mother has been presented by the patriarchy as woman's biological destiny, as her only acceptable role. As Rachel Blau Duplessis points out, the "pieties" of fiction have long required that a good female protagonist must, by the end of a novel, marry (*Writing Beyond the Ending*, 87). Those women who choose to reject the designated role of wife and mother are invariably punished. From as far back as Clytemnestra through to Anna Karenina, women who try to move outside of paternal law meet with destruction and/or death. The figure of Mother, then, is both claimed and controlled by the patriarchy.

III. *Daughter Fiction: Roots and Representations*

III.1 *The Mother in Feminist Literature of the Daughter*

It is understandable, therefore, that in earlier or even pre-feminist thought (that of the late 1800s through to the mid-1960s) the Mother or motherhood served as an emblem of outmoded woman, a holdover from the very system (patriarchy) against which feminism was revolting. Further, because feminism was struggling to free itself from patriarchy, to even destroy it, Mother became a symbol and a casualty of this battle. As a symbol of the patriarchy, the "threatening figure of the angry mother" (Hirsch 36) appeared in much feminist writing as, for example, in Audrey Thomas' *Songs My Mother Taught Me* or in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. However, more frequently, Mother acted as a symbol of the type of life and femininity from which the female protagonist was trying

to escape: "It is the mother's absence which creates the space in which the heroine's plot and her activity of plotting can evolve" (Hirsch 57).

This 'heroine,' the heroine of early feminist fiction and perhaps even the majority of contemporary feminist fiction, is the daughter. It is from and about the daughter's perspective that the story is told. The mother, therefore, is always erased, obscured or rewritten by the daughter. As Hirsch asserts: "It is the woman as *daughter* who occupies the center of the global reconstruction of subjectivity and subject-object relation. The woman as *mother* remains in the position of *other*, and the emergence of feminine-daughterly subjectivity rests and depends on the continued and repeated process of *othering* the mother" (136). The result of this "othering" is a constant seeing or reading or writing of the mother through the words of the daughter. Denied her own subjectivity, lacking any identity except that created for her by her daughter, the mother must remain motionless and silent. As in the above excerpt from Atwood's *Surfacing*, the mother is caught and held as though in a photograph. This moment, her story, is only "a trick of light," dependent on the daughter to be seen and told.

III.2. *Finding Herself in the Other's Absence*

The roots of this dominance of the daughter's perspective in narrative can, in fact, be traced back to Freudian and Lacanian theory. Freud connects sexual definition, indeed individual definition in general, with the phallus (not to be confused with the penis, yet inextricably linked to this organ). While the mother may constitute the first love object for both boys and girls, this selection on the male's part has no lasting effects. He has the penis and, therefore, the phallus, and will eventually replace this first love object with

another. The girl, on the other hand, is obliged to renounce the mother as a love object; she must effect a violent separation from her earliest sexual pleasures. Moreover, because the daughter perceives the mother as both deficient herself and as the cause of her daughter's deficiency, the daughter almost immediately begins a process of rejecting the mother. The link Freud develops between individual development and separation from the mother means "the mother's own part in that process remains absent, erased from theoretical and narrative representation" (Hirsch 169).

Like Freud, Jacques Lacan argues the female child considers herself castrated and blames the mother for her deprivation of the phallus. However, he adds another layer to that of blame and deprivation. Along with being the rejected, Lacan claims the mother is seen as the rejecter, a perception that further alienates the daughter and motivates her to establish her own and separate identity from that of her mother. Of course, because the daughter establishes her subjectivity in reaction and relation to her mother, it can never truly be her own, but is inevitably and invariably attached to the maternal.

Julia Kristeva pursues these psychoanalytic theories from a feminist angle. The maternal, for Kristeva, is tied to the ambiguity of language. Kristeva states that "belief in the mother is rooted in fear, fascinated with a weakness—the weakness of language" (*Tales of Love* 251). Is it any wonder, then, that the child who begins by being the other in and for the mother longs to claim for herself a language and identity, a process that ends up othering her mother? As Gail Scott puts it, "the mother's presence in language has been reduced to utilitarian function (the mother is not a person) making it difficult for the little girl to break the symbiotic hold of the relationship enough to see the woman in the

mother. So the mother ends up partly in shadow. Maybe that's why she ends up as a...terrible absence" (128).

To summarize, according to psychoanalytic and semiotic theory, for the daughter, Mother is associated with deprivation and ambiguity, as well as the desire for individuation or separation. Add to that feminist works that associate motherhood with patriarchal limitations and isolation, such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1979) and Patricia Meyer Spacks' *The Female Imagination* (1975), and it is unsurprising that within women's writing the mother has long been denied narrative subjectivity. This denial is located within texts from the nineteenth-century through to those of first- and even second-wave feminism, such as Geraldine Jewsbury's *The Half Sisters*, Gabrielle Roy's *La détresse et l'enchantement* (1984) and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972), to name a few.

IV. *Mother Fiction*

IV.1 *A Fiction of Their Own*

Despite or, perhaps, because of this proliferation of fiction of the daughter, over the past three decades an interest in the project of maternal narrative has developed. In 1993, Brandt observed that in contemporary feminist theory and fiction, "most of it published in the last decade...the maternal subject has begun to be articulated in a way that's useful for rewriting and identifying the place of the mother in narrative" (7). No longer the frightening, the silent, or the obscured, the mother has recently found a voice with which to tell her story. The mother's subjectivity and perspective are being developed as worthwhile and important aspects of feminist narrative. Female writers

participating in this movement include Alice Munro, Sandra Birdsell, Elizabeth Hay and Anita Rau Badami.

IV.2 *The Mother-Writer*

Margaret Laurence, Audrey Thomas and Carol Shields are not unusual, then, in their choice of protagonist. The exploration of a mother's experiences and identity had been and will continue to be undertaken by female writers. What makes *The Diviners* (1974), *Intertidal Life* (1984) and *Unless* (2002) unique and justifies my focus on these three texts in this study of the mother-writer problem is the combination of motherhood and artistry. That is, all three novels feature a mother who is a writer. Morag Gunn is both a mother to Pique and the successful author of three novels. Alice Hoyle has three daughters (Hannah, Anne, and Flora) and throughout *Intertidal Life* she works diligently on her creative project and turns to literature as a source for answers and questions. *Unless* begins with the substantial list of books Reta Winters has written, a list which Reta continually interrupts with reflections on her children and maternal concerns. By creating a protagonist who is a mother and a writer, Laurence, Thomas and Shields are able to overtly refer to the very project with which their texts (and other texts that examine maternal subjectivity and experience) are involved. That is, Morag, Alice and Reta as writers are writing the mother into Western literature, an act that in many ways mirrors feminist fiction of the daughter. Returning for a moment to my earlier examples (*The Half Sisters*, *La détresse et l'enchantement*, *Surfacing*), it is important to note that there is another connection between these protagonists: besides their parallel roles as daughters, they are also artists. The daughter artist is a recurring figure within early

writing by and about women. Like these female characters of daughter fiction, Morag, Alice and Reta are using artistry as a mode of expressing their long silenced stories. By writing motherhood into literature they are both mimicking and questioning the daughter's monopoly on the female *künstlerroman*.

IV.3 *Portrait of the Artist as a Mother*

The *künstlerroman* (the portrait-of-the-artist novel) is an important fictional form for narratives of the daughter. DuPlessis explains the mother's role within these *künstlerromane* of the daughter as one of muse: "Such a narrative is engaged with a maternal figure and...is often compensatory for her losses (which may themselves be imaginatively heightened by being remembered by her child). The daughter becomes an artist to extend, reveal, and elaborate her mother's often thwarted talents" (*Writing Beyond the Ending* 93). Alternatively, as Linda Huf argues, the female artist figure is often motherless or unmothered. The daughter protagonist is self-created because she is reborn as an artist: "the woman artist must become her own model or mother. She must give birth to herself. Hence, the creative heroine's rebirth as an artist is of necessity a self-birth" (153). In either case, while the *künstlerroman* may have been a vehicle of expression for the daughter, it was simultaneously a site of silence or erasure for the mother.

By adopting a form so often used by feminist fiction of the daughter to write the mother's subjectivity out of the literary trajectory, Laurence, Thomas and Shields are making their intentions clear. Their novels use the *künstlerroman* for a narrative of motherhood. Taking the place of the daughter's perspective and expression, the mother

protagonist writes herself back into existence and identity. This act of self-inscription/narration allows Laurence, Thomas and Shields to make two arguments regarding the figure of mother-writer. First, in response to both patriarchal and former feminist fiction of the daughter, *The Diviners*, *Intertidal Life* and *Unless* all point to the validity of writing the mother, the validity of the mother's story. Second, and perhaps on a slightly self-interested note since Laurence, Thomas and Shields are mothers themselves, producing a narrative that features a mother writing gives validity to the possibility of a successful mother-writer.

V. *Thesis Objectives*

Is a successful mother-writer a valid fictional protagonist? How would an author present such a character? This thesis will investigate how *The Diviners*, *Intertidal Life*, and *Unless* depict the mother-writer figure. It will ask how Laurence's, Thomas' and Shields' novels present the conflict, struggle or tension existent between motherhood and artistry. Finally, this thesis will explain how the addition of mother and the manner in which these novelists handle the mother-writer problem affects the *künstlerroman* of earlier feminism.

VI. *The Mother-artist Conundrum*

VI.1 *The Mother-artist As Impossibility*

Whether a woman can balance motherhood with artistry has been a topic of some debate for feminist writers and theorists. Many have depicted motherhood as an impediment, even an impossibility for writers. For example, Sylvia Plath once wrote:

"Perfection is terrible. It cannot have children./It tamps the womb" ("The Munich Mannequins" 74). Later Adrienne Rich, in *Of Woman Born*, describes fighting for her own life against those of her children (29) and of being trapped by the bonds of motherhood (53). In 1978, Nina Auerbach, drawing on the lives of actual female writers (Virginia Woolf, the Brontës, Jane Austen and George Eliot) declares the mother-writer a "false alliance." Others, such as Luce Irigaray and Kristeva, have pointed to the dispersion of self that motherhood causes, the inability to wholly concentrate on writing: "More than in any other human relationship, overwhelmingly more, motherhood means being instantly interruptible, responsive, responsible. Children need one *now*...that there is no one else responsible for these needs gives them primacy....Unused capacities atrophy, cease to be" (Olsen 19). Motherhood and writing has often been portrayed as incompatible, the result of which is clear: because mothers have been unable to express themselves creatively, they have thus been denied expression, voice, subjectivity within even feminist literature. As Anne Stevenson puts it: "I don't think you can write truthfully and be entirely comfortable...something has to be sacrificed" (175).

VI.2 *The Mother-Artist as Possibility*

Laurence recognizes and discusses the mother-writer problem in her autobiography, *Dance on the Earth*: "Faced with the daily demands of their own work, the daily needs of their children and their husbands, and the ever-present household...a woman writer often feels what I believe is termed a role conflict" (136). However, Laurence also clearly feels these many roles are not insupportable. She makes clear that one can be both mother and writer. Further, she feels that the tension between the two

roles is lessening due to societal changes: "The fact is that being a woman writer and a mother is very different from being a male writer and a father. This difference may be diminished. I hope so" (135). Thomas and Shields both express similar sentiments to Laurence. Thomas, in interview, states: "One part of me is really happy to stay at home and have kids, and really be the traditional housewife, but this other side of me says no, that isn't enough" (Coupey et al. 95). Shields also admits the difficulty of being a mother and a writer but insists the two roles can also be mutually enriching (Hollenberg 343).

Even those critics that seem to portray the mother-writer as an impossibility, reflect positively on this tension between mothering and writing. Rich, Plath and Olsen are, after all, mothers themselves, and it is only from this very position that they are able to produce texts exploring the tension between being a mother and being a writer. Further, while Stevenson may point to sacrifice as part of writing, she also argues that "Tension is the mainspring of the imagination" (175). Perhaps it is not a matter of choosing.

VII *Feminism and Multiplicity*

This rejection of a single role or identity fits perfectly with the feminist vision of multiplicity. The work of Irigaray and Kristeva, for example, is fraught with just such a vision. Tying language to the maternal, which she labels the "ambivalent principle," Kristeva describes femininity as "unnamable," "nonlanguage, or body." It becomes a realm where the "Name" (connected to the patriarchal order, the Word of God) disappears and homogeneous identity is destroyed (*Tales of Love*, 234-5). In *This Sex Which is Not One* (the title itself pointing to the connection between women, sexuality and plurality),

Irigaray also speaks of the female body, linking heterogeneity to her claim that women have sex organs everywhere.

These images of multiplicity are not limited to French feminism. Looking at current Anglo-American feminism, one quickly discovers the same motif. In reaction against essentialism, critics such as Misao Dean disqualify 'female experience' in favour of a more open-ended, nebulous definition of women, not Woman. As Mary Jacobus puts it, "femininity at once discloses and discomposes itself, endlessly displacing the fixity of gender identity by the play of difference and division which simultaneously creates and uncreates gender, identity, and meaning" (24). Further, the feminine aesthetic will "produce art works that incorporate contradiction and nonlinear movement into the heart of a text" (DuPlessis, *For the Etruscans*, 135), an aesthetic of motion, of shifting, of "monism" (*For the Etruscans* 132). The female way of creating art becomes one of "both/and vision" (DuPlessis, *For the Etruscans* 132).

Strikingly similar to DuPlessis' 'both/and vision,' Conny Steenman-Marcusse in her discussion of writing mothers comments: "The artist figure and the mother figure converge, not an either/or position any more but an and/and position" (5). It is this 'and/and' that informs Laurence's, Thomas' and Shields' choice of a mother-writer protagonist. *The Diviners*, *Intertidal Life*, and *Unless* are texts that strive to prove the female is capable of more than one role. They attempt to free motherhood from the confinement of patriarchal and early feminist literature, both of which in their obscuring of maternal subjectivity and narrative write the Mother into a limited and limiting position. Morag, Alice and Reta are all mothers, and this clearly affects their perspective and, more importantly, the stories that they tell. Equally integral to these novels is the fact

that they are also writers (as well as wives, lovers, friends, colleagues). This unique combination of mother and writer and the exploration of its dynamics are perhaps the most essential and revolutionary factor of Laurence's, Thomas' and Shields' female *künstlerromane.*

VIII. *Chapter Summaries*

In order to understand the ways these authors' creation and depiction of the mother-writer protagonist works both within and against the standard female *künstlerroman*, the first chapter will begin with a brief analysis of the traditional or male portrait-of-the-artist novel. Outlining the characteristics of the patriarchal/traditional *künstlerroman* will facilitate a longer discussion of its female revision. The *künstlerroman* by and about women differs from its male counterpart in terms of the struggle or division undergone by its protagonist. The conflicts and tensions a female artist faces, both externally and internally, are more complex and are unique from those of the male artist protagonist. Moreover, as a result and reflection of these revisions to plot and character, the female *künstlerroman*'s form (and, specifically, its circular structure) is a departure from the linear and chronological one of the traditional *künstlerroman.* I will explain what motivates these challenges to the male portrait-of-the-artist novel. Further, I will draw on Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* as a concrete example of the standard female *künstlerroman.*

Once the standard female *künstlerroman* has been explained and established, I can turn to three novels that revise the revision. *Unless* is the first text to be examined because, although it is the most contemporary in terms of publication, it seems to reject

the standard female *künstlerroman* and conform to several patriarchal literary conventions. However, upon closer examination this initial reading falls apart. Still, *Unless* also does not fit neatly into the mold of the standard female *künstlerroman*. Instead, Shields challenges and changes the standard female *künstlerroman* in order to better present the mother-writer figure as a viable option, thereby opening up ideas of feminism and feminist narrative.

The Diviners more closely follows the standard female *künstlerroman*. Laurence foregrounds the struggle between Morag's female obligations (those of mothering) and her passion for creating literature. However, Laurence makes some important departures from the standard female *künstlerroman* as well. While Laurence's alterations to the standard female *künstlerroman* alleviate some difficulties, they also create a whole new set of problems.

The examination of these problems continues and is deepened with the discussion of *Intertidal Life*, a book whose alterations to the female *künstlerroman* are so radical that its inclusion within the genre is questionable. In this novel, Thomas is interested in revising a variety of established genres from a feminist perspective. However, as will be demonstrated, her techniques of revision jeopardize the clarity of her arguments. Central to this confusion is the lack of development of Thomas' mother-writer, a lack that leads to the question of whether *Intertidal Life* is, indeed, a rewriting of the *künstlerroman* or of daughter fiction.

While all of these novels include a mother-writer, the way in which she is presented differs drastically. Moreover, the ways in which the mother-writer transforms the dynamic of the female *künstlerroman* also changes from novel to novel. *Intertidal*

Life with its radical departure from the form and content of the female *künstlerroman* signals a possible incompatibility between the mother-writer and the artist novel. This is why Thomas' text is placed last, it points towards some problems with and some alternatives to the current narrative of the mother-writer.

CHAPTER ONE

I. *The Traditional (male) Künstlerroman*

The *künstlerroman* has been an important fictional form for a long line of male authors and their male characters. In his influential study of the *bildungsroman*, a narrative that traces the development of a male protagonist from childhood to maturity, Jerome Buckley points out that many such stories emerge as a *künstlerroman* (13). That is, with their focus on a sensitive young man, *bildungsromane* are frequently 'portraits of the artist.'

Examples of this genre are abundant in Western literature and, as Maurice Beebe claims (tongue firmly in cheek), while artists have always prided themselves on their individuality "the most surprising fact about portrait-of-the-artist novels is their similarity" (5). From Goethe's *Faust* to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, there is essentially one archetype of the artist. In *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts*, arguably the most thorough and monumental study of the *künstlerroman*, Beebe defines the artist figure with the phrase "divided self" (6).

As a result of the artist's division between his real life as a man (mortal desires, concrete experience) and the life of his art, the *künstlerroman* generally presents one of two solutions. The man/artist can either transcend this world, "refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails" (Joyce 215) in the *Ivory Tower*; or he can drink deeply from the *Sacred Fount*, drawing his material from humanity and his own earthly encounters. Brian Trehearne structures this division a bit differently. The *Ivory Tower* becomes "Paterian aestheticism," the first movement of the *künstlerroman*, based upon

the stoic, detached artist hero of Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicuran*. The *Sacred Fount* is comparable to Trehearne's "Decadence," the second type of artist hero portrayed in literature. Definitions aside, what remains clear is that the sole obligation, the sole passion of the *künstlerroman*'s hero, is his art. What the typical *künstlerroman* narrative traces, then, is the male's recognition of his singular calling or destiny, his internal struggle against this force leading to his eventual acceptance and development into an artist, a development that revolves around his choice between the 'ivory tower' and the 'sacred fount.' Despite the doubleness or division the male artist experiences, there is only ever one real option, one real role available. That the hero of the *künstlerroman* will fill this role, will dedicate himself to his art, is inevitable. It is the only conclusion.

The pre-determined plot or character development of the *künstlerroman* is reflected in its linear structure. For example, Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* begins with Stephen Daedalus' beginnings (vague memories of childhood stories) extends to his adolescence and into adulthood. The path is clearly marked; we know Stephen will stumble, will experience inner conflict and anguish, but we also know that art, as the only consistent thread throughout the novel, will triumph. While, in a sense, the narrative is framed by the voice of the developed artist, as this is the only vantage point from which to clearly view the development, there is no need to make this explicit. Joyce is not concerned with reassuring the reader that Stephen becomes an artist; it is a given. There is no point, then, in disrupting the linear or forward motion of the *künstlerroman*'s narrative with either a structure that looks back at the hero's maturation from the secure position of developed artist or that foregrounds the artistic process. The only interest of

the traditional/patriarchal *künstlerroman* is *how* (not if) the male hero becomes the male artist.

II. *The Female Künstlerroman*

II.1 *How the Female Artist Complicates the Tower and the Fount*

What happens when the artist hero is not male, when the *künstlerroman* revolves around a female protagonist? As several feminist critics have argued, for women's writing and writing about women the structure and plot of the traditional *künstlerroman* is largely inapplicable. The struggle and the development of the female artist is in many ways different from that of the male artist; therefore, the *künstlerroman* must be altered if it is to fit the story of woman as artist. Grace Stewart, for example, takes up where Beebe left off. That is, she discusses the portrait-of-an-artist as a female character and author. Stewart argues that neither option offered by the male *künstlerroman* – either a life of selfish isolation or a life of selfish experience – "befits the womanly role of selfless involvement with and connection to others" (14). Therefore, the female writer must either reject the traditional definition of artist or of woman.

Other feminist critics point to a similar problematic. Carol Pearson and Linda Huf both underline the problem layered on the *künstlerroman* when the artist is a female. They argue that if "the artist hero is a divided self...the artist heroine is that and more. She is torn not only between life and art but, more specifically, between her role as a woman demanding selfless devotion to others, and her aspirations as an artist, requiring exclusive commitment to work" (Huf 5). Therefore, while the male artist's only obligation is to his art, his only passion for his art, the female artist is subject to various,

equally strong roles and passions. Her decision between 'ivory tower' and 'sacred fount' is, then, secondary to her decision and prioritizing of herself as woman (friend, wife, sister, mother) and herself as artist.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that many female *künstlerromane* have ended rather badly for their protagonists. "When as a female, [the writer] creates an artist as heroine, she is denied convenient escapes. Her heroine may therefore remain disintegrated, estranged, or unsuccessful—a failure as a woman or as an artist" (Stewart 15). This is particularly apparent in earlier female *künstlerromane*, for example those from the nineteenth-century such as George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* or Geraldine Jewsbury's *The Half Sisters*. These texts, which DuPlessis describes as "lacerated with conflicts between femininity and ambition," primarily resolved the woman or artist dilemma by "putting their final emphasis on the woman, not the genius" (*Writing Beyond the Ending* 87). Female *künstlerromane* of the early to mid-twentieth-century, such as Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* or Sylvia Plath's *Bell Jar*, resolved what Huf calls a "no-win situation" in the opposite manner. The emphasis of these texts is on artistry to the exclusion of all else, including the artist's gender.

II.2 *The Contemporary Portrait of the Female Artist*

If the traditional *künstlerroman* cast woman as muse, mother or sphinx to the male artist (Stewart 107), then the initial female *künstlerromane* either returned her firmly to woman or forced her to relinquish her gender in favour of her art. These two possible outcomes for the female artist differ from those of her male counterpart. While he may suffer from a feeling of internal division, the female artist must actually enact this

division. That is, she must choose between her sex and her art, a choice that ends any internal division by eliminating half of the female *künstlerroman*'s protagonist. The new portrait-of-the-female-artist, therefore, had to "rewrite the old myths or create a new *mythos*" if it was "to depict the heroine as a positive and active figure" (Stewart 107-108). It had to show the protagonist as both a successful artist and a successful woman, a resolution Huf recognizes in the proliferation of the female *künstlerroman* since the mid-sixties: "Women are not only writing more *künstlerroman*, they are creating heroines who are likelier to succeed than ever before" (159).

The 'success' of these female artist heroines is reliant upon a plot and characterization that give equal weight to the protagonist's gender and her vocation, resulting in a balance between the two, while simultaneously recognizing the struggle the female artist must undergo to achieve this balance. Further, the female *künstlerroman* does not artificially divide artist from woman, but instead depicts the sometimes divisive and sometimes synchronistic relationship the protagonist has with her role as woman and her role as artist. The heroine's artistic nature and female 'nature,' then, develop along parallel lines or trajectories, continually weaving together and pulling apart. Ultimately, the narrative must demonstrate the continuance and importance of both woman and artist, and even their mutuality, a task that involves alterations of the *künstlerroman* structure as well as its content.

As we have seen, for the traditional/male *künstlerroman*, that the protagonist will become an artist is a foregone conclusion. This, however, is not a certainty for the female artist figure. If her roles and obligations as woman appear to jeopardize the autonomy and selfishness of her art, the destiny of the female artist may seem unclear at the level of

plot. Will our protagonist indeed persevere and become an artist, or will ambition and passion be cast aside due to her gender? More is at stake here than there is for the linear and established pattern of the canonical *künstlerroman*. An integral means of insuring and authenticating the development of the woman into an artist is to present this development in a circular form. That is, to place the narrative in the voice/words of the end product, of the complete and successful female artist. While Joyce begins *Portrait of the Artist* with five-year-old Stephen's childish descriptions of the 'moocow' and 'baby tuckoo' (7), the female *künstlerroman* often begins in the narrative present, with the developed (senior or middle-aged) protagonist, and returns to the past where it charts her artistic development, eventually returning to the present. The female *künstlerroman*, then, frequently relies upon circularity, for if the story is couched in the current success and stability of the woman's artistic career, it lends both truth and purpose to her struggles and her decisions, it renders the possibility and validity of the female artist unquestionable.

Gayle Greene discusses the circularity of the female *künstlerroman* in terms of working both within and against the linearity of the traditional *künstlerroman*. That is, circular return "leaves intact the linear sequence of language and narrative, retaining its coherence and comprehensibility while also critiquing its limitations and suggesting alternatives" (15). Further, the alternative offered by circularity, Greene argues, is one that places agency or power within the hands of the female protagonist. By beginning in the present and working up through the past the female artist is able to return to previous material, a return "which allows repetition with revision" (14). Circularity, therefore, not only firmly establishes the protagonist as developed female artist, it also allows this same

artist to revisit the past, creatively expressing and even rewriting her struggles as woman and as artist.

II.3 *Cat's Eye as Example of the Standard Female Künstlerroman*

Before turning to an analysis of how Carol Shields' *Unless* presents the conflicted mother-artist figure, a character that troubles the typical female *künstlerroman*, an example of a standard portrait-of-the-female-artist novel is useful as it will help illustrate the differences and difficulties of the mother's *künstlerroman*. Margaret Atwood's novel *Cat's Eye* provides just such an example.

Cat's Eye tells the story of Elaine Risley's childhood struggles and her eventual reconciliation to and integration of these struggles into art. For example, Mrs. Smeath and her self-righteousness, her 'lump'iness (246), become material for a series of paintings (368). Elaine also faces societal pressures and expectations as woman that threaten her as artist. Her first husband, Jon, complains about her painting at night, but, as Elaine recognizes, what he is really saying is "*Don't do it at all*" (365). Initially even Elaine herself is troubled and held back from artistry by her own feelings of conflict. For a while she stops painting and when she returns to art has lost her confidence, wondering if "all I will ever be is what I am now" (363). Ultimately, however, Elaine fulfills her artistic destiny, attested to by the story line that occurs in the present with Elaine's return to Toronto for a retrospective of her work (15). This career of "painting," as Elaine describes it (15), does not preclude her existence as a woman. Rather, we are informed from the outset that Elaine of the present has a husband, Ben, and two daughters (15). These relationships are not important to the story, though. Instead, it seems Atwood has

inserted them as a merely perfunctory means of demonstrating Elaine's status as female. Elaine, as with many other *künstlerroman* heroines (Gabrielle Roy's Christine, Laurence's Vanessa and Alice Munro's Rose) is first a daughter. Her artistry is always partially a reaction against her mother and Atwood's novel could, therefore, also be categorized as 'daughter fiction.'

It is the circular narrative structure of *Cat's Eye* that allows Atwood to position Elaine as daughter developing and, simultaneously, as established artist woman figure. By anchoring the narrative in the present, where Elaine is a successful woman in middle age and a painter, Atwood is able to return to her past and chart her struggles, her setbacks, her conflicts without fear of undermining the female *künstlerroman*. There can be no doubt that this narrative recovering and uncovering of the Elaine of the past is worthwhile because the Elaine of the present is an example of a complete and triumphant, yet complex, female artist. Further, through remembering her own artistic transformation, Elaine is able to take power over her own construction as woman and as artist. Through remembering she can revise.

III *Tracing Carol Shields' Women*

> I remember being spooked by Tillie Olsen's essay on women writers...in which she said that we have had no great women writers who have been mothers....I'm not sure I agree. It seems to me that someone who is a parent and thus witness to the development of character is uniquely suited to be a novelist....A secure, loving family has sustained me and given me perspective, even though I know how family life consumes and fractures time (Carol Shields in interview with Donna Hollenberg 343)

III.1 *Mothers and Artists in Shields' Novels*

Although Atwood's Elaine Risley has a family, is a mother and a wife, this is not the central subject of *Cat's Eye*. Rather, it is the result of the process of the female artist's development that the narrative traces: Elaine's development as a woman (the retrospective is the result of Elaine's development as an artist) is a process that is inherently linked to the daughter's, not the mother's, perspective. Carol Shields, in contrast, has made this 'result' (rather than the process) of the female *künstlerroman* the focus of many of her novels. Motherhood, she has said, "assigned me a subject" (Hollenberg 344). Many of Shields' protagonists, therefore, are mothers and wives. Her earliest novel, *Small Ceremonies*, places Judith Gill at the center of what Bruce Macdonald calls a "delicate Jane Austenish portrait of family and friends" (148). Brenda Bowman of *A Fairly Conventional Woman* is also a wife and mother and by the end of *The Stone Diaries* Daisy Goodwill has become a mother and grandmother.

The female protagonists of Shields' books are also almost invariably artists. Judith Gill is a biographer, leading Macdonald to push past the "Jane Austenish" surface and

argue that it poses the major literary question "about the relationship between art and life" (148). Brenda Bowman is a quilter and *A Fairly Conventional Woman* revolves around her experiences at a quilting convention, a place where she discovers the importance and validity of her art. Daisy Goodwill is a homemaker and a writer, if only for a garden column in the local paper. Although this occupation is short-lived she embarks upon it passionately. While Judith, Brenda and Daisy may not appear conventional artists, through their stories Shields launches "a serious attack on the narrowness of the accepted arenas of women's art" (Mellor 105) and validates alternate forms of creative expression.

III.2 *Striking Out Structurally*

This notion of alternate forms extends beyond the plots and characters of Shields' novels. None of the above novels fits the standard female *künstlerroman*. While the closest, *The Stone Diaries*, does begin with Daisy Goodwill's tragic and difficult birth and the narrative follows her development into adulthood and eventually to old age and death, it lacks the typical circularity. More importantly, "rather than being at the apex of her own life story, Daisy becomes a mute hollow structure that deflects meaning and points relentlessly away from her" (Mellor 99). Daisy is not the narrator or, at least, not the only narrator. She is not standing at the end of her life looking back. Although she may have been given a story "she has not been given a voice" (99). Therefore, as both female and artist she is silent, even erased, leaving us to wonder if this is truly a female *künstlerroman* at all.

As Nino Ricci points out, structurally *The Stone Diaries* "is a dog's breakfast" and "the novel seems to break almost every rule"(172-3). *A Fairly Conventional Woman* and

Small Ceremonies, however, are less experimental in form and are more firmly placed within the words and experience of female artists. Still, they follow the narrative structure of the female *künstlerroman* even less than *The Stone Diaries*. The stories of Judith and Brenda both begin *in medias res*, that is they begin with Judith and Brenda already artists and already mothers. Because of this, there is no need for circularity and the narrative unfolding is linear. Still, I would argue these novels are female *künstlerromane*. These women are just discovering the depth and validity of their artistry. For example, of Brenda, Shields explains, "the main thing I wanted to write about was a woman's discovery that she was an artist and what that does. Nothing had prepared her for this sense of herself" (Watchel 35). Further, because their role as mother is in crisis (Judith gets extremely sick and Brenda is away from her family), these women have to struggle with alterations to their role as mother. Instead of the standard female *künstlerroman*, which charts the establishment of the female artist, Shields is tracing her protagonist's *re*establishment as mothers and as artists. While the standard female *künstlerroman* with its focus on develop*ed* story and character and its circular structure gives a sense of closure and permanence, Shields' interest in continuing or ongoing development endows the female artist figure with an important aspect of dynamism and possibility.

IV *Unless' Narrative*

IV.1 *Reta's Mediocre Artistry*

Shields' final novel, *Unless*, is an extension and expansion of her earlier work incorporating motherhood and the female *künstlerroman*. Although their roles as mothers and as artists are undoubtedly integral to the characters of Judith, Brenda and Daisy, the

plots of Shields' previous books do not revolve around these roles. Rather, as Herb Weil notes, "in most of her work, Shields creates a wide variety of relations between narrator and characters, situations, actions" (165). With *Unless,* Shields returns to the mother-artist figure, but this time the narrative is built entirely upon the material of art and motherhood. Instead of dealing with several plots simultaneously, instead of developing and exploring several characters (as we see in *The Republic of Love*, *Larry's Party* or *The Stone Diaries*), here Shields places the focus on one character's struggle. The story takes place almost entirely inside Reta Winter's head (largely made possible by the first-person narrative) as she grapples with her failings and reflects upon her triumphs as mother and artist.

Reta is a writer. Almost immediately we are made aware of this fact, as Reta takes us through a list of her various projects and publications. In addition, we are informed that Reta is beginning a new novel: "I'm going to write a second novel, a sequel to *My Thyme is Up*....It is a mere abstraction at the moment, something that's popped out of the ground like the rounded snout of a crocus on a cold lawn" (15). It is this novel, the process of its creation, that will preoccupy Reta the artist for the majority of the narrative. As Wendy Roy points out, "*Unless* incorporates evocative descriptions of writing and the importance of writing....Much of the latter half of the novel focuses on details of Reta's construction of characters and plot lines" (131).

However, while Reta may have produced and even be engaged in producing a piece of art, throughout Shields' novel there is an undeniable undercutting of this same activity. In her initial list of "what I've written so far in my life" (2), Reta consistently trivializes her own abilities. While she includes her translation work, for feminist

Danielle Westerman, each time Reta adds one of these books to her list she makes clear that she does not really consider this writing, that translation does not count: "I am a little uneasy about claiming *Isolation* as my own" (3). Further, when Reta introduces her original work it is with many qualifications, as though her writing is somehow inauthentic, not 'real.' One short story is self-published in books that are bought mainly by family and friends (5). Another creation, *Shakespeare and Flowers,* is "a wee 'giftie' book" (9). Even her first novel, *My Thyme is Up,* is described by Reta as "A light novel. A novel for summertime" (14), which she wrote "for no particular reason" (79). From the outset, then, Shields makes clear that Reta does not consider herself a 'serious' writer; writing for Reta is "a very small poultice" (2), a distraction.

IV.2 *Unless This is Not the Story of a Writer*

As Reta says, "My life as a writer and translator is my back story, as they say in the movie business; my front story is that I live in this house on a hill with Tom and our girls and our seven-year-old golden retriever, Pet" (50). In other words, Reta is first and foremost a mother, a wife, a 'woman.' She admits to thinking of herself as a "watercolour blob that means mother" (28). Her description of herself as a writer is preceded by a description of her family, her home. Several items on Reta's list are tied to her children. For example, number two, "The Brightness of a Star," is firmly situated within Reta's real life narrative "mother of Norah, aged four, her sister Christine, aged two, and about to give birth to Natalie" (4). Reflecting on the reactions of other people at the time this short story was published, Reta makes clear that her "darling sprogs" were not neglected for her writing career: "I never thought in terms of career. I dabbled in writing. It was my

macramé, my knitting" (4). Several other items on Reta's list are connected to, even placed under her role as mother; translation work pays for a family trip to France and it is there, positioned amongst her daughters, that Reta begins the process of her first novel. However, what really makes Reta's priorities clear is the narrative of her daughter Norah, which forms a key component of Reta's list, interrupting and exposing Reta's recounting of her artistic endeavours as a soothing and superficial mechanism.

First and foremost, *Unless* is the story of a mother in crisis. It is the female protagonist, the matrix of the *künstlerroman,* that Shields is interested in developing/ establishing. Reta's art will never be as important to Reta as her children. The primary subject of this novel is "Reta's struggle to come to terms with and understand her daughter's path" (Roy 126), and literature is merely one way of doing this. It is about Norah, not writing, that Reta obsessively, compulsively thinks. During dinner with an old friend, the theory of relativity is in Reta's mind related to Norah: "I kept thinking of Norah" (18). After making love with Tom, Reta asks him if he is ever able to forget about their daughter, to which he responds, "I don't think so....Do you?" (184). Without hesitation Reta answers, "No" (185). Reta's fear for her daughter, her own feelings of failure, intrude upon every moment, every thought:

> And then suddenly I will be thrown out of the circle of safety, aching all over with pain and feeling a fracture in my cone of consciousness, which is inhabited, every curve of it, by the knowledge (that pale sustenance) that Norah, in the cold and snow of downtown Toronto, has gone as far away as she could go. As was possible to go. (236)

If every 'curve' of her mind is consumed with the 'knowledge' of Norah's rejection/departure, there can be little room left for concerns over writing. As such, Reta is not the typical artist hero of the female *künstlerroman*. It is not her art, her creativity that Reta is struggling to find and express. It is rather the female, the mother that is in jeopardy here and so it is this side of Reta (the female role) that is given a voice. Therefore, while Roy may argue that in *Unless* "life itself is represented as narrative" (131), I would assert that in this novel narrative is represented as life. That is, Reta the mother finds an outlet in artistry. Writing in *Unless* is secondary to and contained within the female protagonist's life as woman/mother.

IV.3 *Danielle Westerman as the Artist*

The character of Danielle Westerman further complicates Shields' female *künstlerroman*. In some ways it is Danielle, not Reta, who represents artistry. If Reta is the female/the mother of *Unless*, then Danielle is the real writer. It is Reta herself who casts Danielle in this role, continually quoting Danielle's work: "To paraphrase Danielle Westerman, we don't make metaphors in order to distract ourselves. Metaphors hold their own power over us" (61). Reta admits that "She is the other voice in my head, almost always there, sometimes the echo, sometimes the soloist" (151). Further, it is Danielle's texts that figure prominently in Reta's initial list and her descriptions of these texts are markedly different from those Reta gives of her own. For example, of *The Middle Years* Reta says: "My translation doesn't begin to express what she has accomplished....The book is stark; it is also sentimental; one balances and rescues the other, strangely enough" (14). Finally, in Reta's various unsent letters it is Danielle's writing, not her own, that she

presents as proof of great female artists: "I am sure you realized when you were reading over your proofs that you had neglected to mention Danielle Westerman" (164).

Despite Reta's admiration and even emulation of Danielle, there is a distance there. Just as Reta seems to place writing in a lesser category than her duties and passions as mother, wife, woman, Danielle seems to privilege writing to the exclusion of her femininity. Shields through Reta makes certain that this divide is clear, having Reta remark that Danielle does not understand "why I'm not going on with the translation of her memoirs" (105) despite the crisis Reta as mother faces. Danielle has never had children, "her life is not [Reta's] life" (103), and Danielle cannot understand how a mother's "body" and her "consciousness, has never, even for a moment been separated from" those of her children (104). The fact that Danielle is not a mother, in Reta's mind, creates an absence in Danielle's memoirs: "There's something missing in these memoirs....She does not have a child" (15).

A distance exists, then, between the artist and the mother, one signaled by Reta's consistent use of Danielle's full (rather than her first) name. To summarize, writing and literature for Reta is one of many tools for coping with her narrative as mother. Although it provides a welcome distraction, in many ways, art for Reta is only that, a distraction from her 'real' life. For Danielle 'real' life is writing; she is divorced from her female roles and represents the pure, serious artist. The plot and the characters of *Unless* solve the mother/writer dilemma by dividing the two figures. Shields' final novel separates female (mother) from *künstlerroman*, a technique that, in many ways, presents the mother-artist as an impossibility.

V *Unless*' Episodic Structure

V.1 *Unless There is Something More*

At first glance, the structure of *Unless* seems to mirror this division of female and writer. Unlike the standard female *künstlerroman*, Shields has chosen a linear narrative (beginning *in medias res*) that mimics her earlier work. In fact, there are two, parallel plot lines: one concerned with Reta's story (the development of a woman through motherhood and middle age), the other with Danielle's (the narrative of a standard portrait-of-the-artist).

However, Shields complicates these categories in a variety of ways. First, there are Reta's letters. Starting mid-way through the novel and disrupting the narrative, these rants serve an important purpose, namely that of underlining the limiting and repressive cultural (patriarchal) conditions under which women must develop. Next, there are the loops of memory, when Reta reflects on past events, creating segments of circularity that seem to dangle from *Unless*' linear structure. Finally, the *künstlerroman*, the sections of the text tracing Danielle's development, are not really linear either, but rather jump back and forth between past and present, depending on Reta's thought pattern. Perhaps, then, *Unless* is not so cleanly linear, the artist and mother not so cleanly divided, as they seemed at first glance.

Shields once wrote: "I noticed that women tended to deal in the episodic, to suppress what was smoothly linear, to set up digressions, little side stories which were not really digressions at all but integral parts of the story" ("Arriving Late: Starting Over"145). While her final novel may not follow the standard format of the female *künstlerroman* (it is not circular, there is no single clearly established woman artist

figure), through its 'episodic,' as opposed to linear structure, *Unless* is able to explore and even emphasize the importance of the female artist(ry). Returning to the feminist themes of Shields' previous narratives (132) (for example women's silencing and cultural subscription), *Unless* "does not just demonstrate feminist strategies, as many of her earlier works, it names them" (126). Through Reta's letters, which initially appear a minor part of the story, Shields addresses the historical and ongoing exclusion of women's writings from education and literature: "a callous lack of curiosity about great women's minds, a complete unawareness, in fact" (137). Through Reta's recounting of Danielle's theories and opinions, which again take up little space in the actual text, Shields is able to subtly introduce French feminism: "Why do I have red curtains in my kitchen? Because Simone de Beauvoir loved red curtains; because Danielle Westerman loves red curtains out of respect for Beauvoir" (170). Finally, Reta's own writing, while often presented in a self-mocking, self-effacing tone, is simultaneously the site of significant reflection on the notion of women's writing: "I too am aware of being in incestuous waters, a woman writer who is writing about a woman writer who is writing....But no....This matters, the remaking of an untenable world through the nib of a pen; it matters so much I can't stop doing it" (208).

V.2 *Episodic Feminism: A Solution to the Mother-Artist Problem*

In general, then, the importance of the female artist to feminism is clearly established by way of digressions that, through their frequency and recurring subject matter, ultimately form a large part of Shields' final novel. However, the prominence given to female creative expression through Reta's narrative is never separated from the

mystery of Norah. Each feminist theory, icon, piece of literature to which Reta alludes is invoked in an attempt to understand Norah's choice of 'Goodness.' Therefore, the compulsive return to women writing and writing about women can never be separated from Reta's role as mother. Woman as artist becomes a route into, an escape from and a voice for woman as mother. Yet, at the same time, it is woman as mother who provides subject, perspective and humanity to woman as writer. In the end, *Unless*, through its episodic structure and through its simultaneous separation and conjoining of the mother-artist figure is able to present a narrative in which mothering and writing are neither mutually exclusive nor codependent but, rather, symbiotic.

While Shields' portrait-of-the-mother-as-an-artist in many ways solves the mother-artist conundrum, these very solutions trouble and question the standard female *künstlerroman*. First, the circular narrative is suddenly exposed as closed, even static. Yes, the female artist can revise and rewrite, but the material is limited, the past has already occurred and so the story of the artist heroine has for all intents and purposes already been written. Further, if the female *künstlerroman* traces the development of its protagonist, then the developed female artist of the present will always represent a kind of conclusion. There is no future; indeed 'the portrait-of-the-female-artist' is an apt expression. By beginning *in medias res* and using an episodic structure, *Unless* is better able to demonstrate the ongoing, inconclusive growth of the female and the artist. In addition, by presenting the two roles (woman and artist) as both separate and reconciled, Shields is better able to foreground the struggle than does Atwood in *Cat's Eye*, where Elaine is only incidentally a mother and wife.

The standard female *künstlerroman* is an insecure text. How can a protagonist be a woman and an artist without being divided to the point of disintegration? Although circularity and a minimal emphasis on gender (or not giving the female any additional roles besides that of merely being female) are ways of insuring the success of the 'portrait,' they are also ways of insuring that narratives are both exclusive and conclusive. Shields' *Unless* exposes and disrupts these tendencies and, by departing from the female *künstlerroman*, strikes a balance between artistry and motherhood.

CHAPTER TWO

I. *Laurence, Shields and the Transformed Künstlerroman*

If Shields represents motherhood and artistry as harmonious, then some credit must be given to her Canadian forerunners who took the first tentative steps towards revising the standard female *künstlerroman* to facilitate the presentation of the mother-artist. Perhaps the first and most important of these forerunners is Margaret Laurence who, close to three decades before the publication of *Unless*, began to unravel and resolve the mother-writer conflict in her final novel. *The Diviners* is in many ways similar to *Unless*. *The Diviners*' Morag Gunn is, like Reta, a mother and a writer. Further, like Shields' novel, *The Diviners* is told from the female heroine's perspective and much of the 'action' of the plot takes place inside her head and through her memories. Finally, Laurence and Shields are both clearly engaged in a feminist project. Laurence uses Morag as an example of woman's oppression within patriarchal culture and as proof of the necessity of female autonomy and independence.

There are, however, some crucial differences between the two novels as well. *Unless* deals overtly with feminist questions and concerns. Reta's letters, theories and reflections are primarily concerned with the writing of other women and their exclusion from the canon. Shields' practice of feminist strategy is blatant; as Roy says, she does not just demonstrate, she names. Further, Shields' identification of feminist critical and narrative strategy is merely the first step. As argued in the previous chapter, *Unless* is ultimately a revision of the standard female *künstlerroman*. In order to deal with the mother-writer problem, Shields' novel begins *in medias res* and features an episodic, as

opposed to circular, structure. These changes not only provide a solution to the mother-writer conflict, they also provide improvements to the portrait-of-the-female-artist novel.

The Diviners' departure from the standard female *künstlerroman* is not as marked at that of *Unless*. In fact, in many ways Laurence closely follows the narrative pattern of novels such as *Cat's Eye*. Morag's story begins in the present and works its way chronologically through Morag's past, arriving back at Morag of the present. Further, Laurence places more emphasis than Shields does on the struggle between the role of female and the role of artist. The life-art tension that is so integral to the *künstlerroman* is foregrounded in *The Diviners*. However, the fact that Morag is a mother is also foregrounded in a manner atypical of the female *künstlerroman*.

Laurence's decision to make Morag a mother further complicates the life-art tension. Laurence's solutions to this complexity result in changes to the feminist narrative strategy within which she seems to be working: namely, while Laurence may seem to be working with the standard circular structure, she alters this by having the story of Morag as mother begin *in medias res*. As with Shields, this modification lends a greater sense of dynamism to the female part of the equation. In order to counter the sense of stasis that comes with the circularity of the artist's development, Laurence has Morag of the present (Morag, the established mother-writer) engaged in writing a novel. Morag is actually writing the very novel in which she is protagonist. That is, within *The Diviners* Morag is writing *The Diviners*. Although this move away from the circularity of the standard female *künstlerroman* solves the problem of closure and limitation for the artist heroine, Laurence's adoption of the *mise en abyme* creates other difficulties, particularly for Morag as mother.

II *Morag Gunn: More Artist Than Mother?*

II.1 *Laurence's Artist-Mother in Criticism*

Since *The Diviners* publication in 1974, several critics have argued that Morag is a sort of ideal female artist or, more specifically, mother-artist (for example, Helen Buss and Barbara Godard). While early analyses making this point, such as those by Clara Thomas and Angelika Maeser, tend toward vagueness and generality, later criticism is so specific that it has a tendency to overlook the literary context of Laurence's portrait of a female artist (see Hildegard Kuester and Christl Verduyn). Until now, the manner in which *The Diviners* both mimics and revises the standard female *künstlerroman* has been ignored. More importantly, the fact that these revisions are the result of Laurence's attempts to grapple with the mother-writer conundrum has thus far been overlooked. The following critics all examine Morag as female artist, yet they fail to investigate Laurence's presentation of and adaptations to this figure.

In her 1980 article, Angelika Maeser compares all the women of Laurence's Manawaka novels and concludes that Morag is the creative resolution of all the patriarchal problems with which her forerunners (Hagar, Rachel, and Stacey) deal. Maeser links Morag with imagination and "the ontological affirmation of the I AM" (159). But what exactly Morag is, Maeser leaves unclear, perhaps intentionally as Maeser sees Morag, and indeed the entire text of *The Diviners*, as holistic, all-inclusive. Nancy Bailey also points to a creative wholeness. Morag, she asserts, is the perfect androgyne and *The Diviners* an example of the androgynous text (12). For Bailey Laurence's protagonist is able to be and do all things: "Morag can accept and balance the

irreconcilable differences...between her own needs as mother, as erotic woman and as writer" (14).

Helen Buss, in 1985, perceives the same successful balancing act in the character of Morag. According to Buss, the-portrait-of-the-mother is alive and well in *The Diviners*, co-existing peacefully alongside the-portrait-of-the artist. Indeed, Buss asserts that, as opposed to hindering creativity, the mother-daughter relationship actually "becomes a source of inspiration for the artist-figure" (*Mother and Daughter* 55). Like Buss, Hildegard Kuester links Morag's motherhood with her artistry and posits that she "has succeeded in reconciling her role as mother with that of writer" (*Mother and Daughter* 114).

However, there is by no means a consensus regarding Morag's 'reconciliation' of the roles of mother and artist. Indeed, even Kuester implies that, in part, Morag becomes a mother merely to satisfy the requirements of the *female* artist novel: "In leaving Brooke, Morag seems to be abandoning her gender identity for her professional identity. But this impression is corrected in the narrative by her parallel condition of pregnancy, which of course entails another aspect of her female identity, motherhood" (113). Sherrill Grace, who lauds *The Diviners* for its depiction of a Canadian hero, is also skeptical about Morag-as-mother: "Pique is, perhaps, a more debatable presence in the book....Pique's major role seems to me to be a symbolic one...she completes Morag's existence as woman" (70).

Is Morag, then, yet another Elaine Risley? Is her role as mother incidental, secondary to her real story, that of her development as a writer? Is *The Diviners* an addition to or a revision of the narrative of the female artist? I would argue that it is both

a narrative of the female artist, as Grace suggests, and a narrative about balancing motherhood and writing, as Buss and Kuester recognize. Other critics who have examined the struggle and synchronicity of Morag the writer and Morag the woman include W.H. New and Coral Ann Howells. Most recently, Christian Bök labels *The Diviners* a *künstlerroman*. Despite their recognition of certain features of the portrait of the artist novel within Laurence's text, none of these critics clearly identifies and discusses the ways in which *The Diviners* is a female *künstlerroman* nor identifies how making the artist heroine a mother complicates this genre. Further, no criticism as yet has deals with the second part of my argument. That is, no one points out that *The Diviners* alters the standard female *künstlerroman*, let alone explains how or why.

II.2 *Life Through Literature*

Let us begin by looking at the fundamental ways Morag's story mimics that of the standard female *künstlerroman*. Like Elaine, Morag comprehends her life and her daily struggles through her art. From a young age, Morag understands the world and her place in it through literature or narrative. As Clara Thomas states in *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*, "she is constantly and obsessively translating experience and impression, from anxiety about Pique to wonder at the swallows, into her medium, the word" (134). Christie's tales of Piper Gunn give Morag a sense of her ancestry and, with that, a sense of her own origins and character. After "Christie's First Tale of Piper Gunn" Morag is obviously deeply affected. Prin finds her shivering and calls her a "mooner," but Morag is impervious as she wonders, "What means *The Strength of Conviction*?" (52). It is also from the narrative of Piper Gunn that Morag's creativity is awakened and it is

from Christie's stories that she draws her material for her first story: "Morag, upstairs. Writing in her scribbler. This one is nearly full, and what it is full of is a long story about...Piper Gunn's woman" (86).

Later, fourteen-year-old Morag at a church service tries to grasp "WAR," where all the Manawaka boys have gone. Again she turns to literature, this time to understand the world and the events that shape its history: "Morag, head bent, tries to imagine the War....Is it like that poem they took this year in English?" (109). Furthermore, after reflecting on the poem, Morag in fact becomes distracted from the War and her earlier questions, concentrating instead on the poem and its quality. Therefore, while Morag may understand the world and her role within it through literature, the narratives of others and herself simultaneously remove her from her life and the people and events around her, focusing her attention internally and creatively.

The complex relationship that Morag maintains between life and narrative follows her through to adulthood. For example, in Pique's absence, Morag continually carries on conversations with Catharine Parr Traill. For Morag, Parr Traill is a character in a book who represents unattainable perfection, a sort of old-fashioned Martha Stewart. Morag turns to the stalwart and practical Parr Traill's book *The Canadian Settlers' Guide* for answers when Pique disappears:

> How could you stop yourself from worrying? The kid was eighteen. Only.
>
> What had Catharine said, somewhere about emergencies?
>
> Morag loped over to the bookshelves which lined two wall of the seldom-used livingroom. Found the pertinent text.
>
> In case of emergency, it is folly to fold one's hands and sit down to bewail in abject terror. It is better to be up and doing. (97)

Even her daughter's departure, then, is processed and produced as part of an ongoing internal narrative between Morag and Parr Traill or, more generally, as part of an ongoing exchange between Morag's life and art/literature.

II.3 *Mothering and Writing in Struggle*

The dual function of Morag's art, its capacity to both connect Morag with the world and remove her from it, results in a contradictory relationship between life and narrative. While literature may be a way for Morag to express and examine her struggles, it is also the root of other struggles. The main conflict Morag must cope with is the one between her role as a woman and her role as a writer, a conflict that is perhaps the key feature of the standard female *künstlerroman* plot and characterization.

Morag often resents the demands of the people in her life: "how could anyone be expected to work in such a madhouse, and here she was feeding them all, more or less, and no goddamn money would be coming in if she didn't get back to the typewriter" (5). The demands of motherhood, however, are clearly the ones that Morag finds most difficult to handle. Throughout *The Diviners,* Morag presents herself as torn between her

work and her child. Both demand her attention and Morag struggles to give each one equal weight, but often writing has the stronger pull.

In the early days, in the Memorybank movie, "Morag has to write longhand now, at nights, so as not to waken the child. She can only type when Pique is awake. The room grows smaller every day" (306). Pique continues to impact Morag's writing in the present. When Pique runs away for the first time, Morag is worried but unable to wholly give herself over to her maternal concerns: "I've got too damn much work in hand to fret over Pique. Lucky me. I've got my work to take my mind off my life" (4). Later, in conversation with Ella, Morag cannot seem to focus on Pique's departure, but rather keeps shifting her attention back to her writing, recognizing that, like Ella, she lives "too many lives simultaneously" (212). Upon Pique's return, Morag is grateful, but there is also a sense of resentment as Pique interferes with Morag's writing.

> "Hi, Ma. You working?"....
>
> "I'm not sure," Morag said, untruthfully, because she had been.
>
> This had been the pattern of her life for how long? Morag at this table, working, and people arriving and saying, in effect, *Please don't let me interrupt you*. But they *did* interrupt her, damn it. (349)

In some ways then, Laurence casts Morag as a writer and renders her role as woman, as mother, secondary.

II.4 *Mothering and Writing in Synchronicity*

However, as with *Cat's Eye* and other female *künstlerromane*, life and Morag's female role within it also enrich her art, indeed, even provide material for it. Morag's first

stories, as mentioned above, are taken from Christie's tales. Her first novel, *The Spear of Innocence*, features a female protagonist who is a mixture of Morag's childhood friend Eva and of Morag herself. It is the publication of this novel that finally allows Morag to leave Brooke. Through writing, Morag, in effect, rewrites her female destiny. As Coral Ann Howells explains, for Morag "writing is the means through which she achieves not only her imaginative freedom but also her freedom in the real world" (47).

Writing, in fact, enacts a sequence of events that lead to Morag's pregnancy. After Pique's birth, Morag is able to create the character of Mira, a character who, as Morag recalls, one critic described showing "an interesting development from a child-like state to that of a limited independence and the eventual possibility of spiritual maturity" (332). This description mirrors Morag's own state, her own existence at the time of Mira's creation. Mira is a displaced Morag. She is the site wherein Morag might uncover/recover and examine her own life. Simultaneously, without Morag's life there would be no Mira, no *Prospero's Child*, no narrative.

David Williams asserts that, "Morag's life unexpectedly imitates art" (88). Conversely, Morag's art imitates her life. It is largely this registration of contradiction and complexity, of struggle and synchronicity that situates *The Diviners* firmly within the genre of female *künstlerroman*. By developing Morag as mother, Laurence is able to clearly depict the struggle between gender and her artistry. As Laurie Lindberg explains, "Although Morag and Pique have experienced times of separation, the very real bond between them is deepened and strengthened by Morag's ability to put feelings into words. Words have helped Morag come to terms with herself as well as with other" (200). Pique

is interruption and inspiration, she is the symbol of Morag's femininity, but she is also the stuff of Morag's 'real' life, a life that unfolds against and alongside Morag's writing.

III *Round and Round and Round We Go, Where We Stop...*

The unfolding of Morag's life as woman and her maturation as a writer is presented using circularity. Laurence begins the novel with middle-aged Morag; her role as artist is clearly established after the publication of three novels. It is from the conclusion that Morag looks back on her life. Like Elaine, Morag begins with earliest memories and retrieves not just events and emotions but also the language of the different stages in her development (New 79). Morag uncovers and recovers the events and the struggles that brought her to her current state of what Elizabeth Potvin describes as "a fully-developed matriarch, a woman unafraid to go deep into her past" (34). This charting of the past is also an attempt to explain, justify and prove her development as "a creative artist, shaper of her own destiny" (Potvin 34). Finally, in revisiting the past, Morag is also revisioning it (hence, the recurring phrase "The River of Now and Then," which, as David Lucking points out, symbolizes the past and the present). While "one consequence of this is that the past is no longer viewed as being immutably fixed and beyond the reach of human intervention" (Lucking 195), I would argue that the circularity of *The Diviners*, in particular, but also of the female *künstlerroman* in general, has its drawbacks. These drawbacks, which include the entrapment and limitation of material, emerged in our earlier discussion of Shields' *Unless*, a novel that rejected the typical circular structure in favour of episodic form. By further examining these problems in context of Laurence's novel, we can illuminate the flaws in her representation of female artist.

The Diviners is divided into five parts. Each of these parts is further divided into chapters; moreover, the chapters themselves consist of present and "Memorybank movies." By organizing the book in this way, Laurence is demonstrating Morag's desire to order her life through fiction. Controlling and containing the past by organizing, writing, and in this act rewriting it, art becomes Morag's tool of empowerment. "Snapshots" and movies are narrator-Morag's means of maintaining distance between herself and the Morag of the past. The larger divisions of chapters and five titled parts are her way of compartmentalizing and thereby understanding her life. However, as Laurence makes clear with the first section's title "The River of Now and Then," as well as the final section in which the "now" and "then" converge, through the act of narrating the 'then' Morag has in fact been narrating the 'now.' *The Diviners*' circularity has allowed Morag to come full circle.

The problem with coming full circle, however, is that, ultimately, it means arriving back at the same spot where one began. The implications or consequences of this return or this repetition are two-fold. First, there is a sense of stasis attached to Morag's compulsive writing and rewriting of the past: "The films were beginning again. Sneakily unfolding inside her head. She could not even be sure of their veracity, nor guess how many times they had been re-filmed, a scene deleted here, another added there. But they were on again, a new season of the old films" (28). While Gayle Greene might argue that this constant return to "the old films" is an act of agency as it allows Morag the opportunity to re-film, delete and add, there is another side to this return. Morag may revise her past, may even recreate it, but in the end she will always be working with the same material. As Williams suggests, this is a "ritual of repetition" from which Morag

neither develops nor transforms (90). Her act of agency, her rewriting is, then, limited by her choice of subject matter. As Ronald Labonte puts it, Laurence's "characters' minds remain self-contained" (108). The circularity of Laurence's narrative, indeed the circularity of the female *künstlerroman* in general, is in some ways a trap, an inescapable structure of return, and return, and return. Round and round and round we go.

Where we stop is the second problem of circularity or, rather, it is the stopping at all. Although Laurence's clear establishment of Morag as a developed mother and artist is, on one hand, necessary to the security and purpose of the female *künstlerroman*, it also lends the text a sense of conclusion, of finite characterization that seems contrary to the purposes of a narrative about development. *The Diviners* may explore the past changes and revelations of its female artist, but Morag of the present is at risk of being merely a vehicle or mode of access to her earlier narrative. This prompts David Williams to describe Laurence's *künstlerroman* as "programmatic," "static," or "closed" (90). Morag's past may be open to change, but, as Williams asks, "what about her present?" (88).

IV *Mother – in medias res*

Until now I have been arguing that the Morag of the beginning of *The Diviners* is the Morag of the end. That is, Morag of the present is the fully developed female artist and, thus, represents the conclusion. There are several critics who would disagree with me. Michele Lacombe and Marian Engel have described Laurence's novel as an epic. As such *The Diviners*, like *Unless*, should begin *in medias res*. However, Williams and Leona Gom (who asserts that "Morag grows and learns…throughout the second narrative

level [the past], but does not move toward a significant character development on the first level; she has, in a way...already 'arrived' when the novel begins" [56]) are firm in their belief that *The Diviners* begins at the end. In Williams' words, Morag "knows the whole story before she ever begins to repeat it. And so it isn't 'natural.' No wonder she can't grow any more in the telling" (90). I am going to complicate this by positing that, in terms of her development as a writer, the circularity of the female *künstlerroman* does render Morag of the present a type of conclusion for the story of Morag as artist. However, the story of female development in Laurence's *künstlerroman* begins *in medias res*. This beginning is created by Laurence's decision to make Morag a mother, to place that role in crisis by having Pique run away and, most importantly, to have Morag try to understand and improve her relationship with her daughter.

Like Shields' Reta, Morag of the present is struggling with her daughter's departure/rejection and is questioning her capabilities as a mother. Making Morag a mother and placing that role in jeopardy allows Laurence to disrupt the circularity of the female *künstlerroman*. After finding Pique's letter, Morag is irrational. "Pique was eighteen. Only. Not dry behind the ears. Yes, she was, though" (3). Morag is also introspective: "Something about Pique's going, apart from the actual departure, was unresolved in Morag's mind" (5). Morag of the present-tense sequences is preoccupied with the sorting or 'resolving' of these emotions and, when Pique returns, Morag as mother is again faced with adjustments and conflict. Pique accuses Morag of having her for her "own satisfaction" and Morag realizes that the accusation is "partly true. To have someone of her own blood" (235). Later, Morag worries that she is interpreting Pique through her own experience (237). Morag feels "indecision all around" (236), but "what

she felt, more than anything was relief, that Pique was home. Alive" (239). The importance and effect of Pique upon Morag is a far cry from Atwood's Elaine, who mentions her daughters only in passing and with the undertone of a task completed.

Despite the tangle of emotions, despite the internal contradictions Morag experiences around her daughter, by the end of *The Diviners* Morag and Pique reach an understanding of sorts. They reach a resolution, the cause and result of which is Morag's self-discovery, her recovery and revisioning of her maternal role: "The hurts unwittingly inflicted upon Pique by her mother...Morag had agonized over these often enough....Yet Pique was not assigning any blame – that was not what it was all about....Morag reached out and took Pique's hand, holding it lightly....Pique's fingers tightened around Morag's, then let go" (441). Unlike female *künstlerromane*, such as *Cat's Eye*, at the outset of *The Diviners* Morag's female role (in this case, motherhood) is not completely developed or established. Therefore, the present sequence, the conclusion of *The Diviners*, is rendered both insecure and less limited by Morag's struggle to revise and fulfill her maternal obligations.

V *Laurence's Alteration to Circularity*

V.1 *A Woman Writing About a Woman Writing*

In a letter to Clara Thomas, Laurence once commented:

> The problem of form, it seems to me is always the problem of selection....I don't think of form as something imposed upon a novel, but as its bone, the skeleton which makes it possible for the flesh to move and be revealed as itself....I am sometimes occupied with thoughts of the sort of form which will be *certain* to get across what I want to get across. Naturally, this sort of form doesn't exist—or not for me anyway. (Laurence in Thomas, *Margaret Laurence* 10-11)

Creating a protagonist whose role as female, as mother, is still evolving only partially alleviates the problems of a circular narrative. In terms of Morag the artist, Laurence's *künstlerroman* still begins at the end. With this comes the sense that Morag the writer is fully developed, is concluded. As we have already discussed, this finite depiction of the artist heroine is limiting and even antithetical to the entire point of the female *künstlerroman*. Shields combats this problem by rejecting circularity and instead constructing *Unless* using an episodic narrative structure. Laurence's solution – that of having the protagonist of her novel write the very novel in which she is protagonist – is more complicated and, in the end, more fraught with problems.

The artistic development of Morag of the past-tense sequences is identified or connected to the process and production of fiction. Therefore, a clear indication of dynamic artistry, as opposed to the limited outcome of the standard female *künstlerroman*, is having Morag of the present- and even future-tense creating a novel.

While *The Diviners* does employ the typical circular structure, the developed artist looking back on her growth into artistry, Laurence also allows Morag the opportunity to look forward, to explore and express her on-going narrative. She does this by deviating from the circularity of the standard female *künstlerroman*. Laurence creates a circle inside a circle inside a circle, ad infinitum. In other words, Laurence creates a *mise en abyme*.

Although the stories of Morag in the past certainly chart her evolution as an artist, Morag's "Memorybank Movies" and her "Snapshots" also draw attention to the process of creating, of writing fiction. They point to the tenuous nature of truth, to the writer's ability to imagine and construct narrative or reality. Moreover, they mimic; they are a microcosm of the entire novel. In her memories Morag is rewriting various sections of the past, but it is this continual revision, this self-narration that forms *The Diviners*. That is, what we are reading in this novel is Morag's creation of this novel. The final "private and fictional words" Morag is about to write in the novel's last sentence are clearly the very words that we are reading (hence the title of Coral Ann Howells' text *Private and Fictional Words*). Diane Elam defines this technique, the *mise en abyme*, as "a representation in which the relation of part to whole is inverted: the 'whole' image is itself represented in part of the image" (27).

Let us return momentarily to Shields' Reta who worries about becoming a woman writing about a woman writing about women writing, yet simultaneously contributes, becomes a part of this "infinite regression in representation" (27). Why does Shields voice concern over the *mise en abyme* for women writing and writing about women? Is the *mise en abyme* useful for the female narrative or is it problematic? Examining

Laurence's use of the *mise en abyme* structure will help to answer these questions. It will also confirm these concerns.

V.2 *The Mise en Abyme as Improvement*

There is good reason for Laurence's disruption of the female *künstlerroman*'s circularity with her addition of an additional layer, upon layer, upon layer. First, the *mise en abyme*, because it is a structure of infinite representation, allows for infinite possibilities of women. Further, it points to the importance of infinite questioning with no conclusive answer: "each new attempt to determine women does not put an end to feminist questioning but only makes us more aware of the infinite possibilities of women" (Elam 28). Morag, in the book we are reading, is a representation of Morag in the book we are reading is a representation of Morag in the book we are reading. Theoretically, this makes her impossible to pin down as a subject. The *mise en abyme* destroys any notion of a finite, concluded Morag by destroying any notion of a 'real' Morag.

Second, as Elam points out "each additional image changes all the others in the series without ever completely filling up the abyss, which gets deeper with each additional determination" (30). That is, with every representation of Morag there is a possibility of slight change. This possibility is mirrored in the earlier Shields' quote, in which Reta describes herself as "a woman writing about a woman writing about *women* writing." As our vision of Morag becomes multiple, future development/changes in representation are suddenly possible. Indeed, myriad possibilities appear for Morag of the past, present and future.

> Laurence's last novel is doubled in its moment of origin even as it is being written. When Morag goes to put the final period to her book and to inscribe its title, she in fact brings to a close the novel we are reading. But the closure is not final [. . .] the work in progress of the fictional novelist remains open to the world in its undecidability. (Godard 41)

Laurence's creation of a protagonist who is not just a writer but a writer who is within *The Diviners* actually engaged in writing *The Diviners* helps combat the challenges of the female *künstlerroman*'s circularity, its sense of entrapment, limitation, and conclusion. The addition of the *mise en abyme*, Laurence's revision of the female *künstlerroman*, alleviates many of the problems of circularity: "What women have been will, in turn, be retroactively altered by that which they have yet to be" (Elam 30).

V.3 *Improvement or Abysmal Mis(e)take?*

Some critics have argued (Christian Bök, Christl Verduyn, Susan Ward) that Laurence endows the female protagonist with agency, that Morag is controlling her life-narrative by writing it herself. I would assert, however, that in terms of Morag as mother the *mise en abyme* is detrimental. This is, in large part, due to the fact that every character is flattened by the repetitive exploration of the creation and process of fiction. Reflecting on the experience of writing a novel, Morag states, "They'd been real to her, the people in the books. Breathing inside her head" (58). Because *The Diviners* is the book that Morag is writing, however, this comment in fact highlights one problem with the *mise en abyme*: suddenly the 'reality' of the people in Morag's life is questionable. Were they ultimately only people "breathing inside her head?" Each character is not only a character in

Laurence's book, but is also a character in Morag's book. Thus, they are doubly removed, doubly constructed, written and rewritten.

Pique, then, becomes an insubstantial addition to Morag's story. Allan Bevan explains this as simply a consequence of Pique and Morag's relationship at the level of plot: "Pique is a bit of a mystery to her mother and so remains one to the reader as well" (215). Ultimately, Laurence's revision of the female *künstlerroman* renders Pique an artistic device, merely a character in someone else's self-narration. This flattening of Pique lends gravity to her angry declaration, "*You aren't my mother. I haven't got a mother*" (99) because, in a profound sense, it is true. Pique does not have a mother; she has an author.

What Morag really gives birth to, what she really nurtures or *mothers,* is her book. In effect, Morag mimics the portrait-of-the-*male*-artist, wherein actual labour and childbirth is replaced by the birthing of a novel. Therefore, the very patriarchal genre that *The Diviners* as female *künstlerroman* is working against is, at this level, validated by Laurence's adoption of the *mise en abyme*. More importantly, by making Morag a mother (to Pique), Laurence ends up alerting us to Morag's real maternal role (to her novel) – a role that recalls the traditional *künstlerroman*, thereby jeopardizing *The Diviners*' feminist ideology.

That is, the choice of revising the circularity of the female *künstlerroman* by having Morag engaged in writing the book we are reading undoes the 'female' Morag, the Morag as mother. If Morag is indeed a writer, and if the novel we are reading is the one she is writing, then Pique is not the only character who is flattened. Morag is writing herself, an act that, in the end, makes her only her own piece of art: "Without consciously

acknowledging it, Morag in her writing thus follows Wilde's advice to 'Create yourself. Be yourself your poem.' She is her own aesthetic creation" (Williams 88). Any sense of a dynamic maternal subjectivity is jeopardized the moment Laurence places Morag as mother in the hands of Morag as writer, making the portrait-of-the-mother a product of artistry. As Williams points out, "the old writer has little to learn in writing *about* her first novel that she didn't discover the first time....Morag, in other words, can only pose in her last novel as a novelist; there is no real tension left between her art and her life" (90).

If Williams is right, if there is no real tension or no struggle left to be fought between art and life, then Laurence's *mise en abyme* has, in extending representation *ad infinitum*, collapsed a fundamental aspect of the female *künstlerroman*. A crucial difference between the traditional (male) and female *künstlerroman* is their exploration of life/art division. While the protagonist of the traditional portrait-of-the-artist novels may face an internal division, a sense of doubleness, there is only one destiny allotted him: that of the artist. What sets the female *künstlerroman* apart is a sense of dynamism. The female artist is not just doubled but is invariably pulled in multiple directions. The life/art division for her is more complex as life is tied up with both her own and societal or cultural expectations. As we have seen, the standard female *künstlerroman* explores its protagonist's self-realization, not just as artist but as *female* artist. It is her life as a female that is interruption and inspiration to her art, and it is her art that is interruption and inspiration to her life. This sometimes conflicting, sometimes synchronistic, relationship between female and artist and its exploration is one of the key elements that motivates and differentiates the female *künstlerroman* from its patriarchal predecessors.

Laurence does create a protagonist with female obligations and artistic inclinations and she does develop a sense of tension and dependence between the two. Further, Laurence's choice to make Morag a mother lends real credence to her gender, regardless of whether it is symbolic or well-developed at the level of plot and characterization. Beginning in the middle of Morag's story as a mother (that is, beginning with Morag's role as mother/female in crisis) is a clever departure from the standard female *künstlerroman* as it lends a sense of continuance and openness to what is generally a conclusive circularity. However, Laurence's addition of the *mise en abyme*, while it resolves some problems of the female *künstlerroman*, ultimately re-frames the portrait-of-the-mother within the portrait-of-the-artist. Everything that Morag is (as a female), all that constitutes her life, is contained within her 'private and fictional words.' I would even argue that Morag as writer/artist is also placed within her own words. The *mise en abyme* of *The Diviners*, then, takes the female protagonist right out of the equation, leaving a novel that is, in the end, only about a novel.

CHAPTER THREE

I. *The Mise en Abyme as an Ironic Structure*

> "During the really bad days," Alice said, "I'd open the door to go for a walk and I'd be slammed back."
>
> "Slammed back?" Stella said.
>
> "Yes. Almost as though there was a big wind out there pushing against me. Like coming around a corner on the ferry sometimes. Whenever I'd try to do something independent I'd be slammed back" (195)

The *mise en abyme* is an ironic structure. While it promises infinity, as we have seen with *The Diviners*, the *mise en abyme* simultaneously encloses or entraps its subject. Representation can only ever represent representation, deferral can only endlessly defer; as George Hartley puts it: "strictly speaking, *there is no beyond of representation*" (4). In his *Critique of Judgement*, Immanuel Kant discusses the immanent limitation of the abyss. Representation, he argues, must forever operate within the confines of our discursive ability and knowledge (30). The subject of the *mise en abyme*, then, is *always already* limited by the language and/or culture upon which it must rely for its own presentation. Time and again, the subject struggling for independence from representation is destined to be 'slammed back' into the abyss.

This is the irony of the *mise en abyme*; it is a structure of infinite limitation. As such, contrary to Diane Elam's argument, it is perhaps not the most suitable or effective choice for the feminist novel. The possible disjunction between the *mise en abyme* and feminism becomes clear upon examination of concrete examples. Laurence's partial adoption of the *mise en abyme* as a mode of improving the static circularity of the

standard female *künstlerroman* ends up creating another form of stasis. Morag, the female artist, becomes forever contained within her own novel. She becomes a character within a character within a character, which is a position that makes it difficult for her to point beyond herself and her own narrative. More importantly, Morag the female artist is not only infinitely contained; she is also to a certain extent overshadowed, obscured, even erased by her own words. *The Diviners* is, on one hand, a limited narrative with a protagonist who undergoes limited, if any, development (recall Williams' argument that Morag has little to learn in writing about writing her first novel). However, on the other hand, Laurence does not rely solely on the *mise en abyme*. Morag's story and character are, therefore, not entirely stagnant.

As a mother, Morag of the present-tense sequences is in crisis due to the departure of Pique. Throughout the novel, her relationship with Pique and her own perception of herself as mother undergo crucial changes. The progression of Morag as artist is also highlighted in the present through the clear charting of Morag's writing process and through the proof of her productivity in the very book we are reading. Finally, by retaining the chronology and circularity of the standard female *künstlerroman* Laurence is able to provide a detailed description of her protagonist's evolution into female artist. Therefore, despite the infinite limitation of the *mise en abyme*, *The Diviners* is still a female *künstlerroman* because it charts the development of the female artist figure.

II. *How Thomas Alters the Künstlerroman*

II.1 *Fragmentary Time and Voice*

Intertidal Life is on shakier ground. Like Laurence, Thomas uses the *mise en abyme*, the novel within a novel technique. However, unlike Laurence, Thomas does not provide her story with a sense of chronology. In other words, Thomas' novel lacks the clear before (undeveloped) and after (developed), of the standard female *künstlerroman*. This fragmented time is further complicated by a fractured narrative voice. Thomas switches between first- and third-person, the narrator is both 'Alice' and 'I.' For example, mid-way through *Intertidal Life* one paragraph begins "I've been thinking" and directly below it is a second paragraph beginning "Alice received a letter" (104). If Laurence's revision of the female *künstlerroman* is subtle or tentative, then Thomas' is so complete that she renders the genre unrecognizable. Gone are the standard circularity, chronology, and art-life struggle. The story of Alice cannot be properly called a story: there is no progression, no development, nor is there a beginning, middle or end.

II.2 *Thomas' Mother Protagonist*

The other manner in which Thomas' novel differs from that of Laurence's (and Shields', for that matter) is in its presentation of motherhood. Although Thomas is clearly interested in the mother's perspective, I would disagree with Linda Hutcheon's assertion that *Intertidal Life* "is specifically a portrait of the artist as mother" (*The Canadian Postmodern* 112). As opposed to the characters of Morag and Reta, Alice's role as a mother never seems connected to her role as artist. The tension between female

(represented by motherhood) and artist that was so important to the other two novels, and that is so important to the female *künstlerroman* in general, is lacking here.

There are two reasons for this lack. First, Thomas' project is far-reaching (perhaps over-reaching). She is not only interested in re-representing or revisioning the representations of Mother that proliferate Western literature and culture; rather, through the text and intertext of *Intertidal Life*, Thomas is aiming to investigate and rewrite the representations of women in general. Thomas gives no more weight or detail to Alice as mother than she does to Alice as (ex)wife, lover, friend or explorer. Moreover, none of these roles or relationships, including that of motherhood, is developed in any formidable way. This brings us to the second reason for the absence of the mother-writer problem in *Intertidal Life*. Alice is different from the protagonist of the standard female *künstlerroman* and from the mother-writer protagonists of *The Diviners* and *Unless* due to Thomas' structural combination of fragmentation and the *mise en abyme*. The fragmentation makes any development and solution of the mother-writer conundrum impossible as it renders the measurement of progress impossible. The *mise en abyme* that Alice is trying to write the mother out of, by revising and rewriting representations, reasserts itself through Thomas' novel within a novel technique exposing Alice's reliance on the very cultural representations (their language and forms/literature) that she is trying to escape. Alice as mother, then, remains not only undeveloped, but also one-dimensional, flat, a mere representation infinitely limited by the abyss.

II.3 *The Inevitability of Representation*

It is not just the mother figure who Thomas, in trying to investigate and escape the abyss of representation, ends up further entrenching. Thomas clearly chooses to use the *mise en abyme* in order to point to several representations of women within Western culture. *Intertidal Life* is an attempt to reevaluate and rewrite other literary representations, which include the female character within the romance novel and the quest/explorer narrative. Alice, as a writer, has access to the literature that has produced these limited representations and Thomas attempts to present her as capable of and engaged in writing her way out of these representations. Despite Thomas' positioning of Alice in the ideal position to question and revise female roles, the constant evocation of the parameters of these roles and the novel within a novel structure undo the very project for which Thomas' employs them. The structure of the *mise en abyme* results in Alice simultaneously writing herself back into representation. Alice is "slammed back" by the very abyss of representation that she attempts to get beyond because there is no beyond, a fact that is foregrounded or even caused by Alice's reliance on the same language and culture that she is trying to rewrite. The representation that Alice is trying to write has, in effect, already written her. This idea that Alice was defined long before she seeks to define herself is alluded to by Alice's name. 'Alice' is a reference to Lewis Carroll's work, in which a female child is trapped within a world that she does not understand but is not allowed to question. Alice's married name (which she chooses to keep, a fact important in itself), Hoyle, is a reference to *Hoyle's Rules of Games*, a male-authored book detailing the system of regulations by which a (the) game is played. The full name

of Thomas' protagonist points towards her state of primary and perpetual entrenchment within cultural representation.

It is this constant and inescapable limitation of the abyss that flattens Thomas' protagonist and rids the text of the life-art tension typical of the portrait-of-the-artist novel. Alice's story, her roles, and her life are contained infinitely within literary representation, both that which Alice is writing and that which is writing Alice. Furthermore, Thomas' elimination of the standard female *künstlerroman*'s circularity in favour of fragmented time and narrative voice results in the elimination of any benchmark by which the progress of Alice as a female (lover, friend, mother) or as an artist might be measured. Without the life-art struggle and without any sense of her female artist figure's development, Thomas' revisions to the standard female *künstlerroman* result in a novel that is perhaps not really a portrait-of-the-female-artist at all.

III. *Alice, the Female Artist of Previous Criticism*

The argument that *Intertidal Life*, due to its *mise en abyme* structure and fragmentary style alters the *künstlerroman* beyond the point of recognition is a major departure from previous criticism. Tünde Nemeth applauds Thomas' choice of the fragmentary subject and time, positing that it is this alteration to the unified subject and chronological account of traditional (patriarchal) narrative (28-29) that allows Alice to "shatter" the image of woman (27). It is Thomas' combination of fragmentary narrative and the novel within a novel technique (the *mise en abyme*) that Nemeth claims results in Alice, the writer, writing herself out of bounds and limits (27). Leslie-Ann Hales also argues that Alice, through writing, is able to free herself from patriarchal confines.

According to Hales, Alice's dynamic relationship with words/language alerts her to its tyranny and ultimately liberates her from the "unexamined, 'unheard' words that have been defining her" (78). Perhaps Thomas does break the limits of previous narrative conventions and question the language in which they were constructed, but does Thomas really "deconstruct the stereotypical 'image of woman' in patriarchal discourse" (Nemeth 27)? Does she really free her protagonist (and by extension women) from the authority of the patriarchal sign system (Hales 78)? Or does Thomas rather foreground the stereotypes, the words of patriarchal discourse and further entrench Alice within them through Alice's writing and rewriting of the same allusions in the same language, culture and medium (literature) in which they were first created?

Linda Hutcheon argues that, yes, Thomas does foreground the traditional conventions and discourse; however, she only does so in order to then subvert them. In both *The Canadian Postmodern* and "'Shape Shifters': Canadian Women Novelists and the Challenge to Tradition," Hutcheon claims that Thomas' novel investigates the relationship between women and art (as opposed to that between men and art). It is Alice's role as a writer, Hutcheon asserts, that allows her to question this relationship and "make this kind of analysis" ("'Shape Shifters'" 222). Not only is *Intertidal Life* a *künstlerroman*, but also according to Hutcheon Thomas' use of irony renders her novel postmodern and feminist (*The Canadian Postmodern* 7 and 108). As opposed to the modernist/realist novel (Hutcheon uses *The Diviners* as an example), *Intertidal Life* challenges conventions (*The Canadian Postmodern* 20). It "sets up and subverts the powers and conventions of art. It both uses and abuses them in order to suggest that we

question both that modernist autonomy and any realist notion of transparent reference" (*The Canadian Postmodern* 2).

Hutcheon, then, recognizes that Thomas is investigating representation or how female self-perception and self-narration are "fixed through and by representation" (*The Canadian Postmodern* 111). Hutcheon also recognizes which themes or literary genres (exploration, romance, daughter fiction) Thomas is examining; she identifies the multiple literary and cultural allusions that form Thomas' analysis. However, Hutcheon never explains or proves how Alice develops as a character (artist, adventurer, lover, mother) or how she changes the culturally based gender representations that she is questioning. Hutcheon never gives the specific ways that Alice transforms both herself and conceptions of women; therefore, her argument that *Intertidal Life* is a female *künstlerroman* suffers. As it is impossible to prove that a novel without a developed or developing female artist is a feminist revision of the *künstlerroman*, the absence of any clear development on Alice's part creates a hole within Hutcheon's analysis.

In her 1996 article, Jacqueline Buckman elucidates this gap in Hutcheon's discussion of *Intertidal Life*. Hutcheon, Buckman points out, bases her argument on the erroneous assumption that Alice is able to stand outside of her narrative and maintain a position of critical distance (72). As Buckman points out, this detachment is not as consistent as Hutcheon portrays. Rather, throughout *Intertidal Life* there are "oscillations...between feminist and patriarchal stances" (72). These oscillations lead Buckman to argue that "a feminist critique is not sustained in this novel" (79). However, this lack of consistency is not a problem, but instead "accurately and honestly depicts the situation of women living under patriarchy" (86). Further, Buckman posits, it allows

Thomas to explore and rework the male artist novel, highlighting the challenges for the female artist inherent in the tension between the autonomy necessary for creativity and the duties and expectations of wives and mothers (80).

I would argue that while Thomas certainly identifies some of the challenges for the female artist, these challenges are never really dealt with by the text. Instead, the literary or cultural allusions are generally left to speak for themselves. For example, the etymology of certain words is presented throughout the text, often as a signal for what has preceded it or for what will succeed it. However, Thomas rarely probes or disputes the meaning of these words, of language. Any investigation or rewriting is implicit, a fact that causes what Buckman kindly labels "oscillations" and what I would label undeveloped or unclear arguments. Throughout *Intertidal Life* Thomas hints at a deconstruction of representation that is never followed through. In fact, in the hinting at and in the allusion to these cultural representations, Thomas ensnares her female protagonist and women in general within the very vision that she is trying to revision.

IV. *Thomas' Re-representations*

IV.1 *Mothering*

For our purposes, the most important revision that Thomas attempts is to daughter fiction. As with *The Diviners* and *Unless*, Thomas' novel is told from the perspective of a mother. Laurence and Shields, however, create a relationship between the mother heroine and her children and develop the mother's perception of herself as mother. Alice Hoyle constructs herself as mother through literary allusions and cultural references. It is within these representations of motherhood that Alice remains fixed. As Caroline Rosenthal

observes, "Thomas' novel deals with how Alice Hoyle is framed into conservative notions of motherhood that she wishes to change but cannot abandon" (25). Although I would disagree with the notion that Alice wishes anything, as this assumes Alice is presented as a real, complex female character, Rosenthal is certainly accurate in her depiction of Alice as 'framed' by representations.

One important example of this framing is a section reminiscent of Atwood's *Life Before Man* in which Thomas writes out the definitions for the actual words 'mother' and 'mummy.' In addition to their usual meanings, these words also mean 'moldiness' and 'dried up body,' respectively. Alice, thinking of identifying herself as Hannah or Anne's "mummy" when she calls her daughter's school, makes the connection between the definitions clear: "All wrapped up in her family" (136).

However, Thomas does little to demonstrate that as a mother Alice does not fit this definition. Instead, Thomas continually evokes cultural and literary allusions of the mother's biological destiny, one tied to home and family, with little to no argument or even questioning of them. Alice often draws a parallel between the mothering of her children and her cat's mothering of her kittens. At one point, Alice wishes that she too were covered in fur and could gather her children under her the way Tabby does with her kittens (31). The implications of this comparison are twofold in terms of the maternal stereotype. First, it conjures the image of the suffocating mother, smothering her children with affection and love. Second, it points to an instinctual desire within the mother to be rendered immobile/static through this love and devotion to her children. Later in the novel, Raven and Alice's children make candles and Alice is struck by the sudden image of her cabin burning with her children trapped in side. Alice recalls the rhyme: "Ladybird,

ladybird fly away home. Your house is on fire and your children—" (111). Again, Alice is placing herself as mother firmly within the natural world. This positioning evokes conceptions of the natural woman or natural mother as one who is permanently attached to her home and children. The idea of 'natural' mother is contrasted with the 'unnatural' mother, the woman who rejects these representations that Alice seems to align herself with. Reflecting on the suicide of a mother in her neighbourhood, Alice comments that, "Mothers didn't do things like that" (243).

Children, according to Alice's cultural references, tie the mother to earth, forcing her to be responsible and selfless, and there is no sense that Alice has any opinions to the contrary. Morag presents both the positive and negative side of mothering, particularly in relation to writing, and Reta enjoys and accepts her children's dependence on her. Alice, however, seems to neither struggle with nor wholly perform her role as mother. The fragmentary narrative and fractured narrative voice make it difficult to determine Alice's stance or whether there is any development in her relationship with her children or her relationship with herself as a mother. The only clues to Alice's maternal identity are the cultural references she recalls, all of which conform to the image of mother in patriarchal narrative and in daughter fiction. *Intertidal Life* describes the mother in the terms above (biological destiny, attached and confined to the house, or suffocated yet trapped within her role) and also recalls the image of "the giant shadow mother" of daughter fiction, a figure that Alice worries she will become (181). As there is no concrete proof that Alice expands or discards these descriptions, Thomas' mother protagonist inevitably finds herself defined by the same representations that she is supposed to be redefining.

This inevitable entrapment of Alice within the cultural references she is supposed to be rewriting is tied to Thomas' evoking (through Alice's reliance on representation) and revisioning (through the novel within a novel structure) of the *mise en abyme*. Jacques Derrida argues, "the *operation* of the *mise en abyme* always occupies itself...with somewhere filling up, full of abyss, filling up the abyss" (37). The trouble with an abyss is that it can never be full. In fact, as Elam points out, the *mise en abyme* is a structure of constant deferral and displacement. It is groundless (24); the more that we try to fill the abyss (with representations) the emptier or the more groundless it becomes. Literature that employs or takes part in the *mise en abyme* is engaged in exposing the emptiness of representations. In order to expose the groundless, or the lack of solid ground, this literature must itself take part in the very filling up of the abyss that it is exposing. Further, it must do so in a deliberate or self-conscious way, exposing its own representations as empty.

This emptiness points to the main problem with Thomas' decision to combine a revision of the representation of mother with the structure of the *mise en abyme*. There is a hollowness that plagues Alice's role as mother. In *The Canadian Postmodern*, Hutcheon argues that as a postmodern writer Thomas first establishes the tradition and then subverts it: she 'uses and abuses.' However, novels written from the perspective of the mother and exploring the mother's identity could not, even today, twenty years after the publication of *Intertidal Life*, be labeled a literary tradition. There are simply not enough of them, and critics have hardly begun to recognize their existence let alone examine their contents. Furthermore, there is not a long enough history of mother fiction to be able to determine with any accuracy concrete and consistent characteristics that

would be necessary for the establishment of a genre. The story of the mother, as yet, is neither a coherent nor a convincing one. Therefore, Thomas is deconstructing a narrative that has never really existed. The *mise en abyme* may open into infinite possibilities but there is another side to infinity. As the failure of the mother narrative in *Intertidal Life* demonstrates, the abyss is also emptiness upon emptiness. It is a structure of displacement and through it Thomas ends up perpetuating the displacement or deferral of the mother's story.

IV.2 *Failed Romance*

Shortly after the publication of *Intertidal Life*, Thomas published an article entitled "A Fine Romance, My Dear, This Is." The article has much in common with Janice A. Radway's *Reading the Romance*. Both authors investigate the why of the romance novel. Radway claims the role romance plays is that of a barrier between housewives and their families, placing the housewife "temporarily off-limits to those who would mine them for emotional support and material care" (12). Thomas and Radway are also interested in analyzing the features of the successful romance; for example, as Thomas states, the female protagonist must be "pretty without being beautiful" (5) and "there is *always* a happy ending" (6).

Thomas begins these reflections on the romance novel with a quote from *Intertidal Life*. For the article, Thomas' novel is a way into the romance. However, the reverse is also true. That is, for *Intertidal Life* the romance novel is a way into Thomas' literary re-representation of sex, love, and marriage. Thomas signals this connection and revision by having Alice and her youngest daughter, Flora, read *Harlequins*, an activity

which began as "a joke" and "was still more or less a joke" (12). The ambiguity of 'more or less' points towards something more serious than a 'joke' and, certainly, Thomas has chosen the romance novel with a purpose. The disintegration of Alice's relationship with Peter (as well as her sexual encounters with Raven and Selene) render *Intertidal Life* a failed romance.

Alice could never serve as a *Harlequin* heroine. Thomas gives us very few details about her appearance; in fact, the only clue comes at the end of the novel from Flora who says "You're very nice...You're a bit fat, but you're funny and kind and an awfully good cook" (261). Nor could Peter serve as the romantic hero, with his indecisiveness, his impotence (with Anne-Marie) or his repressed aggression (he gives Alice a black eye [85], but it seems arbitrary and is certainly not an act of passion). The romance novel requires a steadfast, monogamous, yet ardent love, but Peter and Alice both have intercourse with and even develop feelings for other characters. Further, the feelings between Alice and Peter are not those of romance novel passion; as Alice explains, "[t]heir relationship wasn't intense. There was neither intense love nor intense hate" (36). Finally, there is no happy ending; in fact, there is no ending at all, an inevitable effect of Thomas' fragmentary narrative style.

Through first establishing a connection between the romance novel and then breaking all of its conventions, Thomas is attempting to question its veracity and revise the cultural representations created within the romance novel. Thomas' revision is marked by Flora's simultaneous reading of *Nurse Prue in Ceylon*, a *Harlequin*, and Flaubert's *Mme. Bovary*. The picture each novel paints of the woman in love is drastically different. By aligning the two, Thomas forces the reader to wonder whether Alice is a

romance novel heroine or a tragic Emma. Ultimately, it becomes clear that Alice is neither. It is Peter, not Alice, who is adulterous, and Alice considers but rejects suicide. "The real estate lady had called this place Lover's Leap but when asked she didn't know of any lovers who had actually done it. Should Alice be first? She got back in her car and drove home" (28-29). However, it is through these literary references and their comparison with Alice that Thomas is able to point to the inadequacy of the cultural representations of the female lover.

What the alternatives are, however, remain unclear. Once again, this is the result of Thomas' choice of fragmentary style and *mise en abyme* structure. Because there is no timeline, no obvious sequence of events, it is difficult to determine any sort of development or resolution of Alice as lover. She will seem to be making progress, to be moving away from cultural ideology, for example stating: "He was so careful with the word 'love' these days. 'Stingy' might be a better word" (73). However, in the following pages there is a return to the abandoned conventions: "There was an eagle and his mate, Mr. and Mrs. Eagle, high up on the ridge in back of them. 'Did you know that eagles mate for life?' she said" (107). Further, because it is unclear who is speaking (fractured narrative voice) it is impossible to chart Alice's struggle with representation. Is it Alice who keeps returning to romantic ideals, or is it a distanced, third-person narrator who keeps "slamming" Alice back into the abyss?

This confusion is resolved by *Intertidal Life*'s novel within a novel structure. Thomas' structural *mise en abyme* inevitably limits Alice and aligns her with the very cultural references she evokes in order to revise. Alice's writing of herself merely fixes the events of her failed romance infinitely within the sphere of representation. She

becomes yet another 'type,' defined in and against the images of women that Thomas, through Alice, is trying to explode. Therefore, if *Intertidal Life* is a revision of or addition to the cultural representations of love (in particular female love), it is, at best, an un-sustained rewriting. At worst, Thomas' investigation of the conventional female lover in Western culture is so completely lacking in argument that every reference or allusion that Thomas calls up further establishes the abyss of representation.

IV.3 *Exploring the Quest Narrative*

Thomas' revision of the male exploration narrative meets with the same results. Signaling this revision, Thomas begins *Intertidal Life* with an epigraph taken from *A Spanish Voyage to Vancouver*. The subsequent sections of Thomas' novel are also marked by epigraphs from the same text. Clearly these are signposts intended to alert the reader to one manner in which Thomas intends to revise representation. *Intertidal Life* is going to work against the typical quest narrative convention of a male protagonist/hero. Alice will take the place of explorer and, like the crew of the Spanish Voyage, she will record the events of her journey.

This theme recurs throughout the novel. For example, Alice reads about voyages of exploration, the Northwest Passage, Cook and Bligh (69). She reflects on the common metaphor of woman as land and man as explorer, as the one who claims and cultivates the land (69-70). Finally, Alice asks whether it is the "turn of women, now, to go out exploring?" (69), and she ponders the feasibility of this change: "Would we take our children with us, on these voyages of discovery? FIRST MOM ON THE MOON. Would our lovers wait faithfully for us until we returned? (Would we really want to go?)" (70).

The narrative's answers to these questions, whether a woman is capable physically, mentally, and emotionally of discovery, are certainly not ones we would expect of a feminist revision of the explorer text.

Alice never seems to travel anywhere, except for the occasional ferry ride back and forth between the Island and Vancouver. Furthermore, in the last pages of *Intertidal Life* Thomas implicitly parallels Alice's narrative and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Alice, like Mrs. Ramsay, is not a part of the boat trip that finally arrives at the proverbial lighthouse. Instead, Alice is undergoing surgery (from which we are uncertain if she recovers) and it is her daughter Flora (much as it is Mrs. Ramsay's daughter Cam) who takes the oars and begins to row out to sea. Is Thomas saying that the hope for future female exploration rests with the new generation? Is she saying that Alice cannot explore because she is a mother, because she is a wife, a lover? Is Thomas saying that the very representations that Alice is trying to undo, through investigating, through *exploring*, are in the end triumphant and pull her down into the abyss, like her namesake falling into a rabbit hole, like Alice herself falling under anaesthesia on the surgeon's table?

How can *Intertidal Life* be considered a revision or even an investigation of the representation of women within the quest narrative if Alice never journeys herself? Alice's stasis is undeniable. Not only is there no physical exploration, there is little progress made internally as well, an absence of development that is exacerbated by the lack of chronology. Alice never gets anywhere, for the narrative keeps repeating itself or even moving backwards through time. Further, Alice is never able to journey outside of representation; in fact, the *mise en abyme* ends up asserting itself as Alice writes herself back into the abyss. In this structure of infinite limitation, Alice can only move backwards

and forwards through time and narrative, but she can never move beyond her story. Instead, the would-be explorer of *Intertidal Life* is ultimately immobilized by the very narrative techniques that are meant to recall, question and revision the representations of male and female roles within the history of exploration and its literature.

IV.4 *Portrait-of-the-Artist Novel?*

Perhaps Thomas' argument is that Alice explores in her own way, through reading and writing. If a woman is not able to explore in the conventional manner, then the representation of woman as Penelope, as loyal and grounded wife, or as land waiting to be colonized, can still be altered by suggesting that a woman can be an explorer through creativity and imagination. In both its protagonist's and its author's reliance on artistry as a means of revising patriarchal literary traditions, *Intertidal Life* does fit with the standard female *künstlerroman*. As a writer, Alice (much like Morag and Reta) is a figure of agency. She has the power to deconstruct language. She has the knowledge of previous literary and cultural notions of the female sex. Most importantly, she has the ability to rewrite, to construct her own vision of woman.

In places, Thomas' text seems to point towards the solution typical of the female *künstlerroman*: the artist creating herself and, by association, Woman, anew. Alice, in a short poem to Peter, questions and re-vises the conception of the female within the fairy-tale: "I pricked my finger/I fell down/but no prince came" (221). Singing camp songs with her daughters, Alice realizes the troubling message one conveys:

> Is it right to teach them such rubbish? To sing about a man without a woman...and conclude that if there's one thing worse in this universe it's a woman
>
> I said a woman
>
> I mean a woman without a ma-an
>
> Aren't I trying to demonstrate that ain't (necessarily) so? (108-9)

Toward the end of the book, Alice comes closest to revealing her manifesto as female artist: "it is amazing to me, she wanted to say to her daughter, how large we really are – what an enormous capacity we have for looking, reflecting, inquiring" (254). If, as a writer, Alice is equipped to reflect on and inquire about representations, a measurement of her progress or success as a female artist would be the creation of her own narratives, her own representations.

The problem is that Alice (unlike Morag and Reta who, in the course of their narratives, both produce and publish and mention previously published works) rarely seems to actually write. Certainly a great deal of time is spent describing Alice's preparations for working and the challenges to her writing. For example, the book in which Alice will work is described in detail: "It is much larger than the usual five-by-seven black-bound notebook" (30). Alice creates a sign that states, "NOT OPEN TO THE VISITING PUBLIC BEFORE 3:30 MON-FRI" (60) in order to avoid interruptions to her writing. Alice also spends a great deal of time outlining the obstacles to writing. Primarily the blame is placed on her friends interrupting her with personal problems: Anne-Marie (21), Selene (90), Trudl (218-219). Unlike Laurence's depiction of Morag's struggles, Thomas never presents Alice's children as an interference to her writing career. Despite

all the measures taken to begin the creative process, Alice is never shown actually creating. Instead, Alice confesses that "some days I just write my name over and over again" (61) and even fills the page with rows of ovals. Other days Alice just sits and does "nothing at all" (91) or naps and listens to opera (103).

The only proof that Alice does write is the book itself, and this is the very book that writes Alice into the abyss. Ironically, Alice's evocations of culture and literature reconstruct the conception of Woman they are recalled to deconstruct. The investigation of representations that form the majority of Alice's narrative, a narrative that is supposed to be a revisioning, in the end entraps Alice as mother, lover/wife and explorer. The same may be said of Alice as artist. She does make reference to the ideas of artistry and, particularly, the female artist within Western culture. For example, speaking with Trudl and Stella, Alice comments, "The woman artist has an even harder time...If she is to move forward at all she has to develop a layer of selfishness – self-is-ness – that has been traditionally reserved for men. But then the men, who feel 'despised and rejected,' accuse these women of being 'cold'" (173). Whether or not Alice ever develops or already has this 'selfishness' is impossible to determine as we rarely see her actually working and her relationships with others remain fairly flat. Certainly, her comment about the men's rejection of the female artist is born of experience (Peter refers to her novel as "bloody book"[21]), but Alice never seems to adjust to this rejection and never seems to develop independent of her relationship with Peter. In fact, later in the novel Alice confesses, "I want the whole works! I want to be with a man...*and* be writing my novel" (178). The trouble with Alice's illusions is that little is said to disprove their relevance and applicability. Instead, the representations of the female artist (primarily as an

impossibility in the face of their biological and emotional make-up) are yet another way that Alice is entrenched within the *mise en abyme* she is trying to write her way out of. Further, as we began to see with *The Diviners*, the novel within a novel structure renders the artist of the narrative relatively unimportant. *Intertidal Life* is not about the female artist's struggle and process to produce a work of fiction. Rather, it is a novel about a novel; it is literature about literature. The female artist is basically taken out of the equation, rendering the *künstlerroman* insignificant or nonexistent.

The other impediment to *Intertidal Life* as a *künstlerroman* is the lack of chronology and consistent narrative voice. As discussed with regard to Thomas' revision of the representations of woman (as mother, as romantic heroine, and as the new female explorer), because there is no benchmark by which to measure Alice it is impossible to determine her progress as a character and as a re-representation. The same problem occurs in terms of Alice the artist. Despite the emphasis on *Intertidal Life* as a portrait-of-the-artist novel by earlier critics (Nemeth, Hales, Hutcheon), ultimately there is no sense of Alice's development into artistry or a sense of her artistic process. Therefore, Thomas' novel cannot rightly be labeled a *künstlerroman*.

CONCLUSION

If *Intertidal Life* is not a *künstlerroman*, if it is not a book about a female artist or a book about motherhood from the mother's perspective, then why have I chosen to include it? Let us return, for a moment, to the introduction of this study. There I posed two questions: first, how do female authors deal with the mother-writer problem and, second, how does the mother-writer figure affect the standard female *künstlerroman*?

The answer to question number one is fairly straightforward. Each author deals with the mother-writer problem in a different manner. Shields foregrounds motherhood, Laurence presents the tension between mothering and writing, and Thomas eliminates or flattens both mother and writer with her excessive use of representative characterization. It is with question two, really a consideration that cannot be divided from the first question, that complexity or complications arise. Each author alters the female *künstlerroman* in a different way, each achieving different effects and producing different solutions to the mother-writer problem.

What I think most important, however, is that each author drastically changes the structure of the standard female *künstlerroman*. As Anne Cranny-Francis observes about feminist genre fiction: "Sometimes they [the texts] do not seem to function at all – as traditional generic texts....The feminist discourse, it seems, has structural, as well as semantic consequences for the texts in which it is encoded" (1). Shields switches to episodic form and begins her novel *in media res*, as opposed to the female *künstlerroman* that typically begins at the end and circles its way back to the beginning (the end). Laurence also partially begins *in medias res* and introduces the novel within a novel structure. Although all three authors make radical alterations on the standard female

künstlerroman, Thomas is obviously the extreme example. Her full reliance on the *mise en abyme* and fragmentary narrative alters the *künstlerroman* beyond recognition.

It is Thomas' absolute departure, however, that leads me to the final question that I would like to ask. Is the female *künstlerroman* really an effective narrative genre for presenting, exploring, or coping with the mother-writer conundrum or, more generally, the female artist's struggle? There is one key way that the standard female *künstlerroman* does not deviate from the traditional (patriarchal) portrait-of-the-artist novel. Both genres provide a solution or a conclusion to the life-art struggle. Shields, Laurence and Thomas, then, in revising a revision are also undoing the terminal or definitive nature of a solution. All three texts attempt to erase the sense of conclusion brought about by the character of the developed female artist. Through episodic structure, beginning *in medias res* or evoking and creating a *mise en abyme*, Shields, Laurence and Thomas try to open up the static circularity of the female *künstlerroman* and present the development of the female artist as an ongoing process. That is, through the story of the mother-writer these three authors expose the conclusive and exclusive tone of the feminist portrait-of-an-artist novel. They dissolve what has been falsely solved.

Intertidal Life is a radical example of this dissolution. Thomas' deconstruction of the artist novel, particularly its sense of order, closure and the conception of the story as isolated incident, creates a complete departure from narrative proper. On one hand, Thomas' techniques, her fragmentary style and her employment of the *mise en abyme*, seem to undo any feminist message. However, on the other hand, Thomas' revision of a feminist revision underlines the problems with the female *künstlerroman* and, in fact, points beyond this genre to a possible alternative for the story of the female artist. In what

literary form would the female artist figure, in general, or the mother-writer, specifically, be able to express her dynamism and her doubts without entrapment, without an ending? Thomas' novel can be read as a revisioning of several patriarchal genres: the explorer journal, the romance novel, or the *künstlerroman*. It is also a revision of the daughter fiction of earlier feminism. However, when seen as part of Thomas' body of work (all of which return obsessively to the same events and reflections), as Lois Gottlieb, Wendy Keitner and Virginia Tiger argue, *Intertidal Life* is also undeniably autobiography. To a lesser extent, the same could be said of Shields' and Laurence's novels. As Roy points out about *Unless*, there are several parallels that can be drawn between Reta's and Shields' life (130-131). While disputing that it was an actual autobiography, Laurence did refer to *The Diviners* as a "spiritual autobiography" (208). I am not arguing that these texts should be read solely as autobiographies, for they are clearly entrenched within the *künstlerroman* tradition. Rather, I am suggesting a possible alternative genre for the presentation of the mother-writer figure.

As with the female *künstlerroman*, the early instances of feminist autobiography were largely told from the perspective of the daughter (for example, Simone de Beauvoir's *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* and Nathalie Sarraute's *Childhood*). Therefore, the act of writing an autobiography in a mother's voice is, again, a revision of a revision. However, perhaps this is a revision better suited to the purpose of inscribing maternal subjectivity and asserting the mother's dynamism.

The term autobiography literally means 'self-life-writing' (Buss, *Mapping Our Selves* 14) and, as such, it renders its contents more factual than a work of fiction. This is writing about an actual life, a real self. At a time when Western civilization is in constant

turmoil and change, Alfred Kazin writes, the autobiography "can be an authentic way of establishing the truth of our experience. The individual is real even when the culture is not" (qtd. in Buss, *Mapping Our Selves* 116). Postmodernism, with its crisis of meaning and dissolution of the 'real' or 'natural,' on one hand, endows women with agency. On the other hand, because no 'real' or 'natural' mother was ever really established by previous narratives, the agency of postmodernism is useless as it only results in a movement away from the establishment of a complex maternal subjectivity. If Kazin is correct in his assertion that it establishes truth of experience, then the autobiographical genre alleviates this difficulty. Further, there is no proof of development or achievement as mother-writer necessary because it has obviously occurred and a balance has obviously been established if the mother-writer is actually writing this book. That is, if a text featuring a mother-writer is written by a mother-writer then the possibility or authenticity of this character/person/woman cannot be questioned.

Although, of course, postmodernism suggests that she can and should be questioned. Autobiography, as Kristi Siegel points out, "is largely an act of deletion and interruption....In short, an autobiography is a selective, packaged product" (21). Yet, instead of jeopardizing the possibility of success for the mother-writer figure, it is this very act of selection and deletion that foregrounds it. First, that the author has chosen to edit her life-narrative in such a manner as to highlight her role as a mother underlines its centrality and viability within the life of a female writer. Second, the autobiography "*creates* learning" (Siegel 27) or forces the 'auto' to relearn her life in the writing of it. Therefore, not only has the mother-writer survived and been foregrounded, the process of

mothering and writing becomes an ongoing action, one continually reflected upon, relearned, and reenacted.

The autobiography is not an isolated incident or narrative; it forms only a chapter of an individual's life. Further, the autobiography forces us to question what has been left outside the frame or, in other words, what has been edited and why. The tension between the chapters or the sections of life that are narrated and those that are not reminds the reader of other stories, other material. This reminder, in turn, dissolves any possibility of a conclusion or a final product. Unlike the closed and static female *künstlerroman*, the feminist autobiography has the potential to be an open and continuous narrative. The autobiography acknowledges there is no real solution to the mother-writer conundrum. Instead, it provides an alternative story wherein the mother-writer is constantly developing, constantly in process, and constantly engaged in writing and rewriting herself and her life both inside and outside the textual space.

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