

**„When does it stop? Does it ever stop?” – The
Business of Being a Guy: Men and Masculinities in
Carol Shields’s novels**

by Małgorzata Maria Camastra

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the portrayal of men and masculinities in Carol Shields's novels. There is a conspicuous gap in the scholarly research on Shields's oeuvre which significantly sidelines her male characters. The focus of academic interest often falls on the author's engagement with feminism, almost solely concentrating on her female protagonists. Along with new developments in masculinity studies I give prominent attention to men in Shields's novels to illustrate how the feminist standpoint is filtered through masculine perspectives. The aim of this thesis is to show how the presentation of male characters in Carol Shields's novels refracts wider societal changes and evolving theoretical paradigms of masculinity, and to trace how these portrayals evolve as a consequence of social developments. The thesis also stresses how Shields's novels become increasingly experimental, partially embracing postmodern ideas and techniques and combining them with questions about the position and situation of women and men in society. Only by reading male and female characters together, the thesis argues, are we able to build a holistic picture of Shields's literary achievement.

Even though, on the surface, Shields's narratives feature most average male characters – white, middle-class, heterosexual North Americans – the protagonists and their constructions vary considerably from one narrative to another. Shields published her first novel in 1976 and her last in 2002. Thirty years of her writing career coincide with a turbulent period in the social life of the Western hemisphere. The emphasis of this thesis is on how Shields's

novels engage with the changing intellectual environment of second- and third-wave feminism, masculinity studies and postmodernism. Construction of gender in the novels changes: it becomes much more complex, less defined and more open to (re)interpretation. In novels such as *Swann*, *The Republic of Love* or *The Stone Diaries* we witness the emergence of postmodern masculinity which is fragmented, self-questioning and unstable. Men's stories become increasingly complex as filtered through numerous layers of narrators' and focalisers' lenses. Also male characters gain more potential as protagonists achieve the capacity to reinvent themselves and their stories. However, as depicted in the novels, a postmodern man still occupies a dominant social position over women and still blames his mother for his failures in adult life, in spite of socio-political changes. As such Shields's works express great sadness and disillusionment with feminism's failure to allow women to assume equal status with men; however, the texts never blame men openly for social imbalance. Rather, Shields's protagonists are united in their inability to control their stories and it is the social system that oppresses and limits women and men. Finally, the thesis shows the author's great skill and deep engagement in revealing the workings of the twentieth-century North American culture which reshapes definitions of what a man and what a woman is at a given time in history. Shields's novels uncover and expose the mechanisms behind such artificial and arbitrary constructions which are often blindly accepted as the only true norm.

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INTRODUCTION

Men. These curious upholstered assemblages of bones, the fearful mortality that attends them, the clutter of good luck and bad, the foolish choices, the seeds of the boys they'd all been – and those seeds sprouting inappropriately even as their hair thins and their muscles slacken. Fighting for a little space in the world. Needing a little human attention. Getting it up, getting it off. When does it stop? Does it ever stop?

Carol Shields, *Larry's Party*

This thesis focuses on the portrayal of men and masculinities in Carol Shields's novels. There is a conspicuous gap in the scholarly research on Shields's oeuvre which significantly sidelines her male characters. The focus of academic interest often falls on the author's engagement with feminism, but almost solely concentrating on her female protagonists. Along with new developments in men and masculinity studies I find it of utmost importance to give prominent attention to men in Shields's novels and show how the feminist standpoint is filtered through masculine perspectives. By placing emphasis on men I intentionally introduce a new problem into the debate, which is that male characters in Shields's novels bring about an element of uncertainty and suspense to the texts' gradual feminist engagement. Only by reading male and female characters together are we able to see a holistic picture of Shields's literary achievement. I will also stress how the author's feminist consciousness, which grows throughout her writing career, finally arrives at a stage of bitterness and disillusionment in her last novel. I will contrast Shields's early novels with those written after 1983, when they clearly get more complex and experimental. Her writing becomes more conscious of gender and possibilities of open reinterpretations of feminine and masculine identities. The thesis will

also stress how Shields's novels become increasingly experimental, partially embracing postmodern ideas and techniques and combining them with questions about the position and situation of women and men in society.

Even though, on the surface, Shields's narratives feature most average male characters – white, middle-class, straight North Americans – the protagonists and their construction vary considerably from one narrative to another. Shields published her first novel in 1976 and her last in 2002. Thirty years of her writing career coincide with a turbulent period in the social life of the Western hemisphere. My other emphasis will be on how Shields's novels engage with the changing intellectual environment of second- and third-wave feminism, masculinity studies and postmodernism. Construction of gender in the novels changes: it becomes much more complex, less defined and more open to (re)interpretation. We witness the emergence of postmodern masculinity, which is fragmented, self-questioning and unstable. However, as depicted in Shields's novels, a postmodern man still occupies a dominant social position over women and still blames his mother for his failures in adult life. The novels express great sadness and disillusionment with feminism's failure to allow women to assume equal status with men. Shields introduces different narrative techniques, voices and perspectives; she starts rewriting popular genres, playing with readers, and demanding more and more careful attention and engagement. Her texts clearly engage in postmodern debates concerning reality and representation, identity, performativity and performance.

In this Introduction I will discuss in detail all the trends, changes and developments that influence Shields's writings. I will concentrate on the postulates and problems of second-wave feminism and contrast them with the

ideas of third-wave feminism. I will discuss changing views on gender and its construction, and a considerable part of this Introduction will be devoted to the history and findings of men and masculinity studies. These will also serve as the main framework for my analysis of Shields's changing male protagonists within the new socio-cultural contexts. I see issues of masculinity as the main focus of this thesis and a basis for alternative interpretations of Carol Shields's books. I also devote a separate section to the problem of women mothering men as it highlights a double portrayal of women as victims but also as subjects perpetuating an unequal system. Another section of this Introduction will discuss the main ideas and trends in postmodernism and will explore the relationship between postmodernism and feminism. Finally, I will highlight elements of Shields's biography that informed her understanding and interpretation of the discussed trends.

Second-wave feminism, masculinity studies and Shields's position

The development of second-wave feminism initiated a new interest in and curiosity about men. The universal "man" and his superior position began to be questioned, which opened a discussion of what constitutes masculinity, how it can be defined and how it relates to femininity. Before I address the actual studies of men, I will concentrate on the women's movement, beginning with a definition of feminism and feminists from two different sources.

According to American social activist bell hooks, "feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (1), while Rosalind Delmar, a British feminist, defines a feminist as "someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have specific needs which remain

negated and unsatisfied, and that the satisfaction of these needs would require a radical change (some would say a revolution even) in the social, economic and political order” (8). What emerges from these two statements is the common theme of oppression, exploitation and discrimination, but also an active approach undertaken in order to change the status quo. These assumptions are common to all phases of development of the feminist movement.

Feminism has been divided into three stages called “waves,” which, as Nancy Hewitt suggests, were not only introduced to mark “distinct eruptions of activism across time” but also because “feminists in each wave viewed themselves as both building on and improving the wave(s) that preceded them” (2). The first wave of North American feminism is roughly understood as the time-span between the Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Convention in 1848 and the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. The main focus of the first wave was women's suffrage, and it is mostly presented as an all white middle-class movement. Feminist activism in the 1960s and 1970s is called second-wave feminism and its advocates “insisted that they were broader in their vision, more international in their concerns, and more progressive in their sensitivities to race, class and sexual politics than early feminists” (Hewitt 2). Finally, the third wave emerged in the 1990s and new activists considered themselves more inclusive of transnational, multiracial and sexual politics than their foremothers. Quite a clear conventional division of the feminist movement and its goals is seen in many writings on the subject. For example, just the list of contents in Rory C. Dicker's study entitled *A History of U.S. Feminisms* provides a conventional overview of the topic: Chapter 2 First Wave feminism: Fighting for the Vote, Chapter 3 Second Wave Feminism:

Seeking Liberation and Equality and Chapter 4 Third Wave Feminism: Embracing Contradiction (vii). However, many researchers have highlighted the inadequacy and simplification implied in such divisions.

Because Carol Shields is perceived as a second-wave feminist, the Introduction will deal more closely with this phenomenon and it will point towards third-wave ideas which are to be traced in Shields's later novels. Second-wave feminism started as a result of women's disillusionment with their role. Brought up to be happy housewives, many of them graduated from colleges and worked before getting married. They were better prepared to be their husbands' companions than their mothers and grandmothers, yet they were faced with the same fate as the earlier generation. As Sara Evans points out: "the social isolation of modern housewives and the automation of housework, combined with a rising awareness of what they were missing 'out there' produced, inevitably, a high degree of loneliness and boredom" (9). Women were increasingly aware of their underprivileged situation and gradually less and less prepared to accept it. In 1963 Betty Friedan published her famous book *The Feminine Mystique* in which she defined "the problem that has no name" (13), that is, women's growing dissatisfaction with their lives and yearning for more than just being a good wife and mother and performing only servicing roles for the benefit of their family. As Evans sums it up: "Both in the home and outside it, women experienced themselves in new ways, discovering their capacities; yet they remained enclosed in the straitjacket of domestic ideology. ... In a rapidly changing world ..., few were ready to face the unnerving necessity of reassessing the cultural definitions of femaleness and maleness" (11). In such circumstances an increasing number of women

started expressing their discontent, which initiated the second outbreak of feminist activism called second-wave feminism. The movement once again aimed at bringing about equality for women in the social structure.

According to Barbara Ryan, second-wave feminism can be divided into three time periods: “the organising stage (1966 to the mid-1970s), the unity mobilization period (1975-1982), and the post-feminist era (1982-1990)” (3). From the point of view of multiracial feminists, time periods would be slightly different, where the late 1960s and early 1970s would mark the origin of the multiracial feminist movement, with the mid-1970s, 1980s, and 1990s as its height (based on Thompson 46). One of the most famous slogans of second-wave feminism is “the personal is political.” All of a sudden women’s private lives were of public concern. According to Imelda Whelehan, consciousness-raising at that time was

particularly effective in feminist politics because it necessitate[d] the scrutiny of one’s private life and therefore [gave] the lie to the notion that this area of human experience is, or should be, beyond the purview of political intervention. The evasion of ‘domestic’ issues in politics had excluded women for centuries. (13)

The new perception of women depends on bringing the private realm to public attention and considering its importance for society as a whole. Obviously, the private includes all men in women’s lives, which initiates a whole new perspective on power relations and moves women from a position of social non-being to a position of significance.

In order to take that position, women have to overcome oppression and the claim of second-wave feminism is that women are oppressed. The concept of oppression is significant for my analysis as Shields often deals with the problem. Novels written at different stages of the author's life reflect her changing ideas and thoughts on the topic. Women in her novels are oppressed by men, fate, social constraints, work, financial issues, and an inability to express their needs and to participate fully in their own lives. Feminists, in order to fight oppression, find it necessary to define the oppressor as well as the source of oppression, which appears not to be so straightforward. Division in the feminist movement is brought about by the fact that "a woman" is not a homogenous category and the early movement failed to notice the differences between women, sacrificing them for the notion of "sisterhood." Also the problem of social class disturbs many women. In Whelehan's words:

An illusion of solidarity had been created because during the '70s feminism remained, primarily, the province of highly educated, white middle-class heterosexual women. What seems to create the main antagonisms within feminism is the fear that feminism, in common with other radical societal perspectives, will inevitably replicate social hierarchies, thinly veiled by the rhetoric of universal sisterhood. The increased presence of warring female identities necessarily shifted the terms for debate – women could no longer be certain that they meant the same thing when discussing their own experiences of social oppression. (129)

Different women bring their own stories and experiences into the movement, which can no longer claim to be homogenous. The above mentioned oppression and its source vary for women of different backgrounds, class, social position, education and ethnicity. Such division starts to emphasise that the aims of the whole feminist movement will be diverse for different participants.

In the 1980s and 1990s, as the politics of identity develops and becomes more complex, greater and graver differences within the movement are exposed. It transpires that women from different feminist organisations have even less in common with one another. This brings about another problem, namely that certain groups of women tend to oppress others. It entails the question of whether all women will understand equality in the same way and seek to attain the same ideal. 1990s feminism not only underlined all the antagonisms within the movement and stressed the need to acknowledge differences but also took on board the problem of women as victims. Whelehan's analysis points out that feminists started calling for the women's movement "to dispense with the 'luxury' of victimhood" (140), which perpetuated women's oppression and to assume a new position of strength. This aspect will most clearly apply to Shields's later writings, especially *Unless*, where she deals with women as victims of completely different oppressors. She contrasts her protagonist Reta – a Canadian writer who realises the tragedy of social inequality that determines women's lives even after all the feminist struggle – with a nameless Muslim woman whose religion and social status deny her any form of self-expression.

All of the differences within the movement lead to the conclusion that we cannot really talk of “feminism;” rather, we need to address “feminisms.”

Rosalind Delmar states:

Over the past twenty years a paradox has developed at the heart of the modern women's movement: on the one hand there is the generality of its categorical appeal to all women, as potential participants of the movement; on the other hand there is the exclusivism of its current internal practice, with its emphasis on difference and division. Recognition and commitment to heterogeneity appear to have been lost, and with those a source of fruitful tension. (11)

Feminism has heavily influenced the lives of individual women and men but has not managed to disturb “the foundations of Western democracy which resolutely centred upon ‘public’ man and ‘private’ woman” (Whelehan 12). Initially women were lacking the “correct discursive apparatus” (12), and once feminist studies became an established part of academic scholarship they opened themselves to male inquiry and criticism.

Some feminists concentrate also on men as victims of oppression. Marilyn French, in an interview for BBC Radio 4 in 1992, expressed her sympathy with the difficult situation of men. She saw patriarchy as the source of oppression of both men and women:

[Y]ou have to continually remind women that they are inferior and you have to continually teach men that they are superior. We all know how you make a man out of a boy. You brutalize him. You send him to a public school, or to the army, or to any

of the institutions that make men of boys. And we all know what is involved in them: brutalization. You brutalize a boy to teach him this is what it means to be a man. You either brutalize or get brutalized. (Murray, bbc.co.uk)

That is how French perceives the perpetuation of patriarchy, which harms both young men and women. As a result, she sees feminism's role in challenging the very principles on which western society is constructed. Again, a similar trend is pursued by Shields, who, in her later novels, exposes both women and men as victims. French also adds:

Even men who don't feel any special hatred for women, who maybe like women, who love them and who don't go out of their way to harm women, get caught up in [the process] because the systems are in place to make men superior to women and those systems systematically discriminate against or exploit women so that in order to end them you have to make a special effort, you have to do something extraordinary. (Murray, bbc.co.uk)

To paraphrase French's words, men are part of the system where they become programmed to behave in a certain way, and unless the very foundations of modern societies change there will be no real equality. A very similar opinion is expressed by another feminist bell hooks. She stresses the fact that men benefit from patriarchy most, but it comes to them at a price:

In return for all the goodies men receive from patriarchy, they are required to dominate women, to exploit or oppress us, using violence if they must keep patriarchy intact. Most men find it

difficult to be patriarchs. ... They are not certain what will happen to the world they know most intimately if patriarchy changes. So they find it easier to passively support male domination even when they know in their mind and hearts that it is wrong. (IX)

The above quotations partly aim at excluding men from the realm of guilt by stressing their factual lack of power to overcome social conventions. Men oppress women but as individuals they are unable to bring about any change. Shields's last novel, *Unless*, paraphrases French's and hook's words. The female protagonist – a wife, a mother and a writer – talks about the inability of her partner to understand the problem of women. It is not because he has any desire to oppress them, but due to the way society is constructed:

Because Tom is a man, because I love him dearly, I haven't told him what I believe: that the world is split in two, between those who are handed power at birth, at gestation, encoded with a seemingly random chromosome determinate that says yes for ever and ever, and those like Norah, like Danielle Westerman, like my mother, like my mother-in-law, like me, like all of us who fall into the uncoded otherness in which the power to assert ourselves and claim our lives has been displaced by a compulsion to shut down our bodies and seal our mouths and be as nothing against the fireworks and streaking stars and blinding light of the Big Bang. That's the problem. (269-270)

Shields's last novel expresses disillusionment and loss of faith in the idea that women and men can be equal. Women are programmed to "shut down [their]

bodies and seal [their] mouths and be as nothing.” In the course of the thesis I will point out how Shields’s feminist consciousness was growing and changing to finally arrive at the stage of pessimism in her last work.

Before I proceed to a summary of masculinity studies, which evolved as one of the responses to feminism, I would like to highlight consciousness-raising moments in Carol Shields’s own life. One cannot overlook the fact that Shields, who as a young woman dreamt only about “being in love and having a house, the whole *Ladies’ Home Journal* thing” (Wachtel 34-35), gradually became a very self-conscious modern woman and an open advocate of feminist ideas. As she recalls in her article for *The Independent*:

By my mid-forties, my life was changing but I don’t think I realised it at the time. I still had one of my five children at home. ... I’d published four novels by this time. They were fairly conventional. Therefore, I was surprised by the reception my books were getting. Writing you expose something about yourself that even you don’t know is there. It was certainly pointed out by the reviewers that these were feminist books.

(Shields, “Eight” 10)

Shields highlights that she was already writing about the changes and uncertainties she was observing around her, without realising that her impressions were a part of a larger movement. She was being perceived as a feminist writer before she would interpret her work as such herself. She sees the 1983 “Women and Words” conference in Vancouver as a breakthrough moment in her understanding of what was happening in her life as well as in her novels. Eight hundred women gathered to talk without men’s interruption

and interpretation. The experience was so overwhelming that for the first time Shields was not able to share it with her husband and for the first time worried that the impact might disrupt her comfortable family life. As she writes fourteen years later about the experience, she sums it up with hindsight:

I'd always written about women's experiences but in some way this conference was my validation. I returned with faith in what I wanted to write about. I discovered that women could have as authentic voice as a man, and just as strong. At that point the problem for women writers was that we just didn't trust our own experiences. (Shields, "Eight" 10)

This breakthrough is clearly visible in Shields's novels, which, after 1983, get more complex and experimental. The writing is more conscious of gender and the possibility of open reinterpretations of feminine and masculine identities.

Shields's feminism was constantly changing throughout her life and writing career. At first it was completely unrealised, then she started engaging in feminist ideas expressing hope about the changes in gender order, and finally she went back to the unrealised second-wave feminist dreams about gender equality. As she admitted:

I've always been interested in the lives of women and I've never doubted that they have value. But I can't really remember when I became a feminist. I think I'm one of these women in between, too late to be an old-style woman and too early to be a new-style woman. I'm always going to defer to men to a certain extent and I can't get over it. I regret that. (Wachtel 39)

Such understanding of her own position in relation to changing feminism has a great influence upon the ideas expressed in her novels. She is forever patient with and very understanding of her male protagonists, and even though in her last novel she expresses open anger towards the privileged masculine position, still she never blames men. In her novels it is the oppressive socio-cultural system that becomes a common enemy of men and women.

Changing perceptions of masculinities, development of masculinity studies and Judith Butler's gender performativity

One of the long-lasting consequences of second-wave feminism is not only the emergence of a New Woman but also, inevitably, a New Man as her partner and companion. In this part of the Introduction I will discuss the history of North American men and American manhood, explain the reasons why masculinity studies became so prominent in the last decades and outline the contemporary status of a North American man. In the course of the thesis I will be pointing out how Shields's novels, which predominantly deal with women and feminist issues, also follow the trajectory of a New Man. The detailed discussion of the novels stresses the aspect of instability and uncertainty projected and portrayed by Shields's masculine characters. A clear line will be drawn between the issues raised in masculinity studies, such as a crisis theory (including the idea of masculinity as crisis), the notion of performativity and performance, gender construction as valid only in a particular place and at a particular time, and the way in which Shields's narrators understand and display masculinities of the novels' protagonists.

I would like to start with the premise that, in Anthony Rotundo's words, “manliness is a human invention. Starting with a handful of biological differences, people in all places and times have invented elaborate stories about what it means to be a male and female. In other words, each culture constructs its own version of what men and women are – and ought to be” (1). Following on from that statement the first part of this analysis will deal with different constructions of gender, followed by a short history of North American masculinity. The thesis will then discuss the reasons for such a huge interest in masculinity studies over the last decade and finally some of the prevailing models of American masculinity in the present along with their problems.

Michael S. Kimmel in his book *The Gendered Society* stresses that the debates over gender differences are in fact struggles for power. He argues that “gender difference – the assertion of two qualitatively different natures – is the result of gender inequality, not its cause. Gender inequality produces difference, and the differences produced are then used to justify gender inequality” (xi). The perpetuation of gender inequality leads to artificial manufacturing of greater gender differences. Only by stressing differences in qualities and abilities between men and women, but also among men and women, is gender inequality possible. It is a vital assumption that enlightens the answer to the question of why we are unable to produce a society in which men and women of different political and social background and sexual orientation could be treated equally.

Also differences in gender between two cultures, and between different historical periods of the same culture, are often greater than the differences between two genders. If so, in order to understand gender we need to take into

consideration social sciences and history but also differential socialisation. People are brought up and taught to be different in gendered terms. It is not their innate quality. Kimmel also reminds us that the perception of gender changes over the course of a person's life. Society has different expectations of men and women at different stages of their lives. Following on from the previous statement, women and men of different races, social position, sexual orientation and creed will pursue and exemplify different definitions of masculinity and femininity. Thus we must speak of masculinities and femininities in the plural. In Kimmel's words: "gender must be seen as an ever-changing fluid assemblage of meanings and behaviours" (*The Gendered* 10).

Obviously, it is still the case in contemporary society that the privilege of being non-referential belongs to white, middle-class, heterosexual men. They are the generic people with "the privilege of invisibility" (Kimmel, *The Gendered* 7). They do not have to think about their gender; they are "the norm" against which all other types of masculinities and femininities are measured and judged. In 1963, the sociologist Erving Goffman came up with a definition of hegemonic masculinity, that is, the ruling masculine ideal to which men should aspire:

In an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports... Any male who fails to qualify in any one of these ways is likely to view himself – during moments at least – as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior. (128)

At every moment in history there is such one virtually unattainable masculine ideal. The impossibility of becoming the model results in masculinity crisis, which I will discuss in more detail below. For now, it needs to be stressed, following Kimmel's argument from his other book, *Manhood in America*, that although “we must speak of masculinities ... all American men must contend with a singular vision of masculinity, a particular definition that is held up as a model against which we all measure ourselves” (5). There is always one particular vision of masculinity that is the dominant version at a given time and, as Bryce Traister conversely informs us, “one is left wondering where all the masculinity has gone” (291) simply because men are always out of sync with the contemporary model. We are aware of the definition, yet men are always incomplete, inconsistent and incoherent with respect to it. It transpires that the ideal does not find its embodiment in the real world, always leaving men in a struggle for masculinity, the consequence being a constant search by men for their masculinity model. This quest is beautifully captured in Shields's novels where masculine protagonists are (almost) never complacent with their position as men and always embodying certain change and ongoing development.

Contemporary masculinity researchers and theorists agree on a complexity and plurality of masculinities. The idea that gender characteristics are not innate but imposed by society comes from the work of anthropologists observing tribal societies with their completely different ideas on gender. The work of Margaret Mead is often quoted in gender and masculinity studies as it shows how different cultures impose completely different expectations on the sexes. In the years 1931-33 Mead worked on an anthropological expedition in

New Guinea and managed to observe three contrasting tribes living in one another's proximity. Stark differences in their sex-patterning reveal the falsity of our society's assumptions of what it means to be a man or a woman. *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* presents an account of culture and customs of three completely different tribes. The first one, the mountain-dwelling Arapesh, expect women and men to act in a way we in western societies expect women to behave – that is, in a gentle and nurturing way. In the second one, the river-dwelling Mundugumor, both men and women are expected to be aggressive and virile, which we would define as masculine attributes. And finally the third tribe, the lake-dwelling Tchambuli feature male and female traits as reverse to our expectations. The Tchambuli men are gentle, wear curls, go shopping and are emotionally dependent, while women are energetic, dominant and impersonal. Mead's work negates biological determinism, which often serves in our culture as a justification of women's discrimination. She concludes:

The material suggests that we may say that many, if not all, of the personality traits which we have called masculine or feminine are as lightly linked to sex as are the clothing, the manners, and the form of head-dress that a society at a given period assigns to either sex. ... We are forced to conclude that human nature is almost unbelievably malleable, responding accurately and contrastingly to contrasting cultural conditions. The differences between individuals who are members of different cultures, like the differences between individuals within a culture, are almost entirely to be laid to differences in

conditioning, especially during early childhood, and the form of this conditioning is culturally determined. Standardised personality differences between sexes are of this order, cultural creations to which each generation, male and female, is trained to conform. (262-263)

Thus, from earliest childhood different agents of socialisation mould people to become men and women according to their society's standards. Once again we are left with the proposition that power relations artificially create the subordinate status of women in our society.

The status of women is historically sanctioned, and there are a few ideas why it is so. Some suggest the rule of capitalism as a main reason. Private property and inheritance needs a housebound woman who will bear the rightful inheritor. The arrival of the concept of trade to North Americans, instead of just tending to one's own piece of land, once again urged men to leave the house and travel, while women were left to take care of the household. Also, to quote Kimmel: "one of the key determinants of women's status has been the division of labour around child-care" (*The Gendered* 53), that is, the lesser the man's involvement in rearing his offspring, the lower the status of women tends to be. In societies where women solely bring up children, boys must define themselves in opposition to and negation of their mother and everything feminine, which can lead to exaggerated masculinity (i.e. hypermasculinity). Such men often fear and denigrate women. Also some cultures introduce initiation rituals: for example, a boy's circumcision is meant to cement the bond between father and son and sever the ties to his mother, while female circumcision deliberately impedes their sexual functioning and sexual pleasure.

Some societies negate the possibility that a woman can give birth to a 'real' man, and thus only male initiation rituals can make him into one.

Anthropological studies also enlighten research into gender by providing examples of societies where the norm is constituted by more than two genders and where homosexual practices are socially sanctioned. Again it stresses the arbitrariness of our culture's sense of right and wrong in establishing its own definitions of a norm and a deviation. I find it important to at least enumerate some of the other genders, as described by Kimmel in *The Gendered Society* (59-61). Some Native American cultures (e.g. the Navaho) have a third gender usually for those whose sex is unclear at birth, although one can also choose to become a *nadle*. A *nadle* performs tasks of both men and women, and most often decides to live as a woman (women in Navaho society have a higher status). In Southeast Asia and the South Pacific some tribes have a gender of *berdache*, that is, members of one biological sex who adopt gender identity of the other. Berdaches are not treated as deviants, which would be the case in our culture, but are revered as possessors of special powers. One more example is the Mohave who accept four genders: male, female, *alyha* (a man who lives like a woman) and *hwame* (that is a woman who chooses to live a life as a man). In the view of the multiplicity of genders accepted in other cultures, our strict division into male and female seems narrow-minded, limiting and simply based on false principles.

A similar situation pertains to homosexuality, which in some societies is viewed as a norm. An extreme case involves the members of the Sambia tribe (Papua New Guinea), where young boys fellate older men and drink semen in order to become real men. Less stark examples include tribes in

which homosexual marriages are accepted (the Lango in east Africa, Koniag in Alaska and Tanala in Madagascar) or where homosexuality is practised before heterosexual relationships (to avoid teenage pregnancies) or where bisexuality is practised throughout the lifespan (Aranda of Australia, Siwans of Northern Africa and Keraki of New Guinea). Again we are faced with the fact that homosexuality exists in every society and only the treatment of it changes. Some societies readily accept variability, whereas others subdue homosexuals and treat them as subordinate men or women. Still others, such as in Saudi Arabia and orthodox Muslim states, outright persecute and punish homosexuals, in extreme cases applying the death penalty.

While discussing gender and gender divisions it is necessary to mention the theories of Sigmund Freud on the subject. Freud believed that anatomical differences led people towards different personalities. However, they were not programmed at birth; rather, different childhood experiences shaped and conditioned differences between men and women. Freud believed that gender identity was the most important part of personality development. *The Gendered Society* notices three areas of Freud's legacy that are important to gender studies: gender is acquired and shaped by experiences, thus Freud separates gender from biology; gender identity is linked to sexual orientation, thus homosexuality is a developmental issue; and Freud restates all the gender stereotypes about appropriate feminine and masculine behaviours (69).

Freud's theories had a remarkable impact on contemporary studies and assumptions about gender, and the idea that parents are responsible for their children's successful attainment of gender proliferated. In 1936 Lewis Terman and Catherine Cox Miles devised masculinity-femininity tests measuring

children's successful attainment of the desired gender. At the same time, the idea of Male Sex Role Identity was born. I will discuss both phenomena on the basis of theory of “male sex-role identity (MSRI)” as researched, described and finally criticised by a social psychologist Joseph Pleck. I will concentrate mainly on his 1983 article, “The Theory of Male Sex-Role Identity: Its Rise and Fall, 1936 to the Present,” which gives a brief synopsis of the phenomenon. Pleck defines sex-role identity by saying that “for individuals to become psychologically mature as members of their sex, they must acquire male or female “sex-role identity,” manifested by having the sex-appropriate traits, attitudes and interests that psychologically “validate” or “affirm” their biological sex” (21). Pleck explains that many pitfalls await a young male trying become a real man:

Many factors conspire to thwart the attainment of healthy sex-role identity, especially for males (e.g., the actual or relative absence of male role models, and women’s changing roles). The resulting problems for males include effeminacy and homosexuality (too little masculinity), as well as hypermasculinity (too much masculinity). (21)

The situation described seems very straightforward: either boys learn the role and become “real men,” or their mother will spoil it for them and they will not attain the exact amount of masculinity in order to be properly masculine (the influence of mothers on the development of boys’ masculinities was scrutinised at that time). The language I am using in the previous sentence is aimed at reflecting the lack of scholarly research and firm groundwork for such theories. This heteronormative theory does not explain how masculinity can be

measured and how much of it is enough, what masculinity is and what are the “sex-appropriate traits, attitudes and interests.” Yet, such ideas were widely accepted and developed further. American scientists at the beginning of the twentieth century worried about effeminate men inadequate to be drafted to the army or to establish and lead their families. Thus, they devised a way of measuring how masculine or feminine one is by introducing “masculinity-femininity” (MF) tests which were based on the notion that “Men (and women) are psychologically normal to the extent that they possess these sex-appropriate characteristics and psychologically deficient or abnormal to the extent that they do not” (24). Such tests were supposed to show in a simple way who is “normal” and who is a “gender deviant.” After the Second World War the problem became more complicated as women learnt more independence from men and many men noticed problems with the adjustment to the ‘male’ pattern. That is when the idea of maladjustment was blamed on mothers. A concept of “identification” was introduced to MF tests, in which the main worry was projected onto men for whom the process of identification was much more difficult than for women (absent fathers and a childhood dominated by women equals lack of an immediate role model). R.W. Connell supplements and explains the theory from a more recent functionalist perspective, saying that such a sex-model was subject to change “whenever the agencies of socialization [would] transmit new expectations” (*Masculinities* 23). Connell concludes that

the first generation of sex role theorists assumed that the roles were well defined, that socialization went ahead harmoniously, and sex role learning was a thoroughly good thing. Internalized

sex roles contributed to social stability, mental health and the performance of necessary social functions. To put it formally, functionalist theory assumed a concordance among social institutions, sex role norms and actual personalities.

(Masculinities 23)

Connell points out that the theory does not leave any place for differentiation among individuals. It treats masculinity and femininity as two opposites without taking into consideration the plurality of masculinities and femininities.

Gender theories develop along with the changing labour market, social norms, technological developments, etc. Gender definitions also change with age during a person's life. At this point it is useful to outline a more detailed history of North American masculinity and conditions that have been shaping today's status quo. Anthony Rotundo starts his project entitled *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* by stating the same assumption I have been discussing so far:

The response of this book to the quest for true manhood is that manliness is a human invention. Starting with the handful of biological differences, people in all places and times have invented elaborate stories about what it means to be male and female. In other words, each culture constructs its own version of what men and women are – and ought to be. (1)

Rotundo takes as his starting point the cultural, historical and social conditioning of gender and does not attempt to answer the question of what “real” manhood means. The book discusses the changing perception of

masculinity and evolving masculine patterns from the seventeenth century until today. Rotundo admits that his work describes three phases of development of the Northern middle-class, which is a proportionately small group that exerted enormous economic power to “imprint their values on the nation” (2).

The first phase identified by Rotundo is *communal manhood*, which characterised colonial New England. A man's position was clearly defined by the social status of the family he was born into, not by his personal achievements. His identity was inextricably connected with his duties to his own community, and his fulfilment was through public usefulness. The ideal of communal manhood was “closely entwined with the needs and expectations of a man's neighbours” (2). If a man's enterprise flourished, he was an asset to the whole community who were his customers and creditors. If he failed, it was always a public concern as it also affected everyone around him. Men in New England were also characterised through contrast with women. Puritans believed that God arranged all living things in rank order and a man was second to Him, while women were treated as inferior, less virtuous and credited with lesser reason.

In the late eighteenth century a new form of manhood started emerging, that of *self-made manhood*. Along with the birth of republican government, the spread of market economy and the growth of middle-class, men started rejecting the idea that their birth and family status gave them a fixed place in society. They no longer felt strongly a part of their community; rather, the emphasis shifted to self-development. Men started seeing their masculinity as something to be achieved on their own, and they started to arrive at self-fulfilment through personal success in business and professions. According to

Rotundo, “male passions were now given a freer rein. Ambition, rivalry, and aggression drove the new system of individual interests, and a man defined his manhood not by his ability to moderate the passions but by his ability to channel them effectively ..., the old male passion of defiance was transformed into the modern virtue of independence” (3). Work became both a passionate outlet for a man and his source of self-definition. A new role was assigned to women as well. They were now seen as guardians of morality, and their responsibility was to keep the social community together by controlling male passion and promoting among men the idea of self-denial. Women were now seen as different to men but not inferior, and manhood was defined in opposition to boyishness, that is frivolousness and the lack of “worthy aims.”

The shifts in the ideals of manhood also entail a change in the position of a father. Until the early eighteenth century, patriarchal values dominated. However, by the mid-eighteenth century there was no more land available, and a father could not give his son a plot of land; as a result, he lost his authority. In the nineteenth century, the father was the head of the household supporting his family financially, but he also participated in raising his sons and preparing them to enter into the world of work. But in the early twentieth century, the model changed along with the man's professional engagement outside the household. Now the woman took over the responsibility of raising both her female and male children.

Looking for the sources of and inspirations for today's masculinities we must take into account the trends and changes taking place in the late nineteenth century. To quote Rotundo: “the male body moved to the center of men's gender concerns; manly passions were revalued in a favorable light; men

began to look at the “primitive sources” of manhood with new regard; the martial virtues attracted admiration; and competitive impulses were transformed into male virtues” (222). So the obsession with how men look, the return to the core of masculinity and the submission to the chief leader that we have been observing throughout the twentieth century are not new phenomena. They were initiated in the nineteenth century and have been emerging periodically with new strength and in new guises. In the second half of the nineteenth century the definition of manhood abruptly shifted from an emphasis on strength of character to physical strength. The male body became the focus of masculinity, and a strong character was now seen as closely linked to a strong body. The second change in the ideal of masculinity was the re-evaluation of the so-called “primitive” passions. Ambition, physical assertiveness, lust and greed, previously regarded as negative male traits at the end of the century, became his source of pride. Rotundo notices that “men compared themselves readily to 'primitive peoples” (227), a trend that will be repeated in the 1980s in the form of a mythopoetic movement. Two other important aspects of late nineteenth-century masculinity were the acceptance of submission (e.g. the cult of a military leader) and competition. All of the above were practised and developed through the practise of sports that were becoming more and more popular.

Finally, with the emergence of industrial economy, many big firms and corporations emerged, which led to a massive increase in men working as executives, salesmen and clerical workers. The lowest positions in such companies were slowly being taken over and female presence in men's workplace became ubiquitous. The old male asylum became a place they

needed to share with women. Women working with men, women becoming primary carers of male children (both at home and in early-school education) and guardians of morality (questioning the rationale behind all-male leisure activities), started causing men to feel insecure. Such developments initiated masculinity crisis, again a cliché term so prominent in masculinity studies today. Kevin White enumerates other reasons leading to the early masculinity crisis. Not only did the Self-Made Man turn into a bureaucrat, but also, with the closure of the frontier, he started feeling trapped with no new territory to move to and take over. The crisis of faith caused by Darwinism also made its contribution to the feeling of insecurity. After 1900, with Victorian ideals and morality wearing off, there was no new ideal for the men to follow.

Along with the emergence of the market economy, where everything can be bought and sold, masculinity also became a priced commodity. Following fashion and the latest trends could place a young man in a hierarchy, which in turn could determine his sexual success with women. Fashionable, good-looking men able to pay for dates were labelled more masculine. Advertisers perpetuated this trend by choosing young men as their target. In 1899, Bernarr Macfadden took over *Physical Culture* magazine in order to promote healthy lifestyles, that is, physical activity and a healthy diet. His message was “Weakness is a crime” and soon his readership reached an audience of 150,000 (White 27).

The 1920s marked the emergence of a “sexualised society,” including new roles for both men and women. Victorian ideals surrounded sexuality with silence but with the emergence of new standards the public discussion of sex became ubiquitous, placing further emphasis on men's physicality and

performance. Ultimately, according to White's analysis, after The Second World War sex became an obsession and a mass market for erotica and pornography flourished. Men's chief fear became impotence. Men's heterosexuality was their central characteristic and the pressure to be sexually potent was enormous. Homosexuality was feared and it was always presented as negative. The new type of woman ubiquitous after World War II blurred the distinction between a "good woman" and a "prostitute" and men were confused as to how to treat her. As the emphasis was on primitivism and passion, very often

men were left to their own worst behaviour. They proceeded to treat middle-class women much as they had been socialized to treat prostitutes. They used lewd language to describe middle-class women; they paid for "dates" and expected "thrills" in return. When thrills were not forthcoming, they protested.

Increasingly, men, frustrated in dealing with the New Woman, rejected the commitment to marriage that was expected of them.

(White 148)

The rise of popular culture, new magazines and films aided the change in moral standards. More was expected of men and they in turn wanted easy relationships with women. The New Women expected to be treated as equal partners but this often resulted in men being confused about their role. This combination of factors led to a crisis in masculinity standards and a confusion as to what a man should be like in the first half of the twentieth century.

As indicated previously, television and magazines became the main channel of suggesting what a "real" man should look like and do. Commercial

magazines and films started manipulating common social consciousness and imposing their ideas in a mechanical manner. In the 1950s, portrayals of a happy traditional family dominated. Mass media presented a working father, a full-time housewife mother and a group of their happy children as the desired ideal. Such a presentation served two purposes: on the one hand, people tired of World War II wanted to re-establish traditional Canadian family life. On the other, it was a way to encourage women back into the house and leave the professional scene to men. Television presented the 1950s as “the world of gruff, kindly male providers and kittenish women-children, a world where the daily working grind was men's domain and women frittered their time away figuring out ways to spend men's money decorating their houses (while a maid took care of all the cooking and cleaning, of course)” (Bordo 113). Such a picture shows a perfect harmony where men have no financial problems and can pay for their bored wives' whims; by implication, they do not want intellectually demanding partners.

However, in such portrayals not only women were infantilised, but also the portrayal of a family man was being led into dire straits. Suddenly, men started wearing aprons and being even pushed around by their wives in certain comic representations. This image had to crack, which is portrayed in one of the best known films of that era *Rebel without a Cause*, released in 1955 and directed by Nicolas Ray. The movie ponders a young son's (Jim, played by James Dean) scornful rejection of his father's ineptitude and subservience. In 1953 Hugh Hefner launched the first issue of *Playboy* and in so doing he declared a “war of independence” for men. As Susan Bordo notes, Hefner “called on men to declare their 'membership in a fraternity of male rebels,' and

described the magazine centerfold as a 'symbol of disobedience' ... for men of course” (120). Bordo also points out that we witnessed a gender protest in the sixties on both sides: men with *Playboy* and films like *Rebel Without a Cause* and women with Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (discussed in more detail in the part of this Introduction dealing with feminism).

In the 1950s we also witness the emergence of new men in plays and films. Marlon Brando in 1951 played Stanley Kowalski and in so doing embodied a new type of man, with a perfectly sculpted body, daring, full of contempt and outright aggression towards women. He instantly became an icon and symbol of desire imitated by young men. Another type of masculine ideal initiated by TV is the already mentioned James Dean – young, sensitive, gentle and sexually ambiguous. The sixties focused on a female body, and beautiful and sexy men disappeared from mass culture. A new kind of hero was featured in films, “whose principal role [was] to release the repressed sexuality of the heroine, by means of his pure, unadulterated maleness” (Bordo 149). Finally in 1977 Tony Manero from *Saturday Night Fever* (played by John Travolta) introduces another new ideal of manhood: perfectly built and sexy, just as the men in films twenty years earlier, but also unashamedly careful about his looks and spending most of his money and time on his image. Bordo points out that until then such characteristics belonged only to gay men or ethnic minorities. What is more, Travolta was shown in the film wearing his briefs only and, as Bordo notices, “Manero was, in many ways, the cinema equivalent (reassuringly straight and working class) of the revolution that Calvin Klein was making in more sexually ambiguous form in the fashion world” (198), that

is introducing a man as a sexual object rather than subject. The male body became a commodity and could now be subject to an objectifying gaze.

Bordo in her analysis also points out how in the 1990s the ideal of huge penises became a common theme in films, TV programmes and advertisements. The introduction of viagra once again directed everybody's attention towards the penis and phallic metaphors. Bordo compares penis and penile metaphors to “biometaphors” present in the animal world (longest tail, biggest horns, and brightest colours); however, the phallus is a different matter. Although like such metaphors the

phallus stands for a superiority that is distinctively connected with maleness ... unlike them, the phallus stands, not for a superior fitness of an individual male over other men, but for *generic* male superiority ... that is not just biological, but partakes of an authority beyond ... [and] proclaims its kinship with higher values – with the values of “civilisation” rather than “nature,” with the Man who is made in God's image, not *Homo sapiens*, the human primate. (89)

The phallus stands for male superiority over women and weaker less powerful men. Phallic masculinity is strong and erect and embodies exemplary masculinity.

Arthur Flannigan-Saint-Aubin notices a very interesting phenomenon concerning masculine metaphors. He points out the one-sided picture given by the metaphor of the phallus based on the erect penis without taking into any consideration male testicles. He stresses that only by encompassing both metaphors – that is phallic and testical/testerical masculinity are we able to

compose a holistic picture of a man. The testicular masculinity is “characterized by testiness and all that being testy implies: petulant, fretful, insolent, temperamental, morose” (250). These adjectives we customarily associate with lack of masculinity and such traits are undesirable in a man. Saint-Aubin notices the need to acknowledge this inseparable part of masculinity if we want to get a real picture of a man. Such a holistic treatment of a man is very useful to the analysis of male characters in Shields, as her novels often pay more careful attention to those characteristics of men that are the taboo that is their softer and more feminine side. Also, a soft penis cuddled by a female partner after it has performed is present in two of her novels, *Happenstance* and *Larry’s Party*.

Before outlining the stages in academic masculinity studies, I will reiterate the reasons for the contemporary interest in men and manhood as subjects of inquiry. The main incentive, as has already been pointed out, was the new feminist analysis of gender roles. The second reason was the emergence and growing prominence of gay and lesbian studies, which intensified interest in masculinity and femininity analyses. Bryce Traister also points out the postcolonial aspect of the phenomenon that is the inclusion of different versions of masculinity in the gendered canon. The proliferation of film studies similarly boosted the portrayal of men and masculinities in mass consciousness. Finally, the “menz” movement (in England known as “laddism”), which urged men to retrieve their primitive masculinity, prompted academics to reply to its regressive politics (277-278).

Contemporary masculinity studies can be divided into three stages, which have been named the three waves of masculinity studies by Tim

Edwards. Obviously, the terminology copies the waves of the feminist movement; however, the timelines are different. The first wave developed in the 1970s, the second a decade later and the third in the 1990s. As Tim Edwards explains, the 1970s studies wanted to show, on the one hand, that masculinity relies on socialisation and the following of prescribed patterns, but on the other hand that such “processes [are] limiting and perhaps even harmful to men in terms of their own psychological and even physical health” (2). Boys were encouraged to participate in sports and competitions while any signs of “weakness,” such as crying, were discouraged. Moulding boys into the roles of men often meant “[trapping them] within a position not of their own making and chained to a series of hopelessly unrealistic expectations that undermined both their physical health and physiological happiness” (105). This statement resonates with the interview with Marilyn French cited earlier. Critics of the sex-role theory questioned the constant pressure on men to perform in a certain way. However, one must not forget that the incentive for the critique came from a feminist rejection of the sex-role model which instructed women to assume a subordinate position to men, and a corresponding belief that sex-role models were harmful for both men and women because they expected total conformity to unrealistic and unnatural demands. I will also discuss their destructive impact on mother-son relationships later in this Introduction.

Men’s responses to feminists’ ideas were twofold. First, a small Men’s Liberation Movement developed in the United States; its main goal was to free men from the constraints of male sex role as well as introducing “healing techniques” which were supposed to help men traumatised by the experience of being forced into unnatural frames. A number of books and articles about men

were published criticizing male sex-role (with titles like “Warning: The Male Sex Role May Be Dangerous to Your Health” by Jo Belswick, which appeared in 1971 and “The Inexpressive Male: A Tragedy of American Society” by James Harrison published in 1978) and counselling groups were established. Secondly, as Imelda Whelehan in her analysis of second-wave feminism notices, some men wanted to help and support women but were unsure how to do so. She stresses the counter-productiveness of men’s guilt and the misconception that pro-feminist men should perform a “servicing” role to the women’s movement (183).

The 1980s saw what Edwards calls the “second wave of men’s studies of masculinity” which was even more critical of male sex role and centred on masculinity as performance, where “men were seen to essentially ‘perform’ their masculinity through success at sports, in their careers, or through their sexual conquests” (105). The differences between men were noticed and researched, as well as power relations between men. Connell distinguishes four kinds of relations between men: hegemony (the masculinities that accept a leading position in social life), subordination (Connell claims that homosexual and feminine men are subordinated), complicity (men who participate in the hegemonic project but are not “the frontline troops of patriarchy”) and marginalisation (of ethnic minority masculinities or as a hierarchical division between subordinated masculinities) (based on Connell 76-81). Edwards stresses that another important aspect of the second wave of masculinity studies was its exposure of the fact that many men would still comply with and even positively reinforce the status quo.

Finally, the third wave of masculinity studies overhauls the concept of masculinity as such. In Edwards' words it

is clearly influenced by the advent of post-structural theory, particularly as it relates to gender in terms of questions of normativity, performativity and sexuality. ... A common theme, [as in the case of feminism], is the importance of representation and its connection with wider questions of change and continuity in contemporary, and in some more historical, masculinities and identities. (3)

This phase addresses complex questions concerning what can be classed as masculinity. It denies the idea of a fixed sex-role and performance, but explores the question of performativity.¹ The idea of deconstructing masculinity as such is the same as in the case of postmodernist feminism which, in its full phase, "threatens to explode the category of 'woman'" (Evans 7). The third wave of masculinity studies also introduced the notion of the "fragmented self" which is different for every individual, shaped by the surrounding culture, personal preferences, nationality, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. Also the general social and cultural changes in the 1990s conditioned a new model and understanding of masculinity. As Edwards notes, the

traditional understandings of masculinity centred on work and formal public life have begun to break down and are being replaced by more media and image driven notions of masculinity that centre on matters of how men look and, more

¹ Performance works in terms of "putting on a show" and implies the separation of the "real" person and performed *persona*. Performativity in contrast rejects such separation for it does not embrace the idea of an underlying "authentic" person; there is no distinction between the performer and the performance for all is performative (based on Edwards 99-100).

particularly, lead to an undermining and indeed blurring of boundaries concerning sexuality. (107)

As we can see, a lot happens between the 1970s and 1990s and the perceptions of masculinity (singular) and then masculinities (plural) change dramatically. Rigid male sex-role model – based on quite vague common knowledge that a man should be physically and mentally strong, able to head his family, have a job and a respectable position in society – is replaced by model of fragmented self-representation with fluid and constantly changing masculinities. The initial strong opposition between masculinity and femininity softens but never disappears completely.

Another prevailing idea surrounding masculinity studies is the concept of “masculinity in crisis.” The changes in perceptions of masculinity, modern demands and new domestic realities brought about by feminism resulted in confusion. As Victor Seidler relates,

As men, we’ve responded to the women’s movement in different ways. Some of us ignored it, thinking it would disappear. Some of us felt it was a dangerous distraction from the central issues of class politics. Some of us were simply excited by it, but we were all, in one way or another, threatened and confused by it, as soon as it touched the everyday reality of our relationships. (*Recreating* 64)

Men reacted with panic and confusion to the changes. Suddenly, they lost the guiding principles formerly passed from generation to generation which almost unambiguously prescribed what it meant to be a man. Edwards sees this crisis of masculinity as a combination of two factors: a “crisis from within” and a

“crisis from without.” He explains that “on the one hand, the crisis of masculinity may refer to the *position* of men, often perceived as being undermined in relation to institutions such as work, the family, education or even representation. On the other hand, the crisis of masculinity refers more precisely to men’s *experience* of these shifts in position” (16). The new situation of men is problematic to themselves; it is not protected by patriarchal arrangements and thus exposed to criticism and subversion. Connell describes crisis tendencies as even more complex and resulting from many external factors. First of all, he defines masculinity as “a configuration of practice *within* a system of gender relations” (*Masculinities* 84); this suggests that as a configuration of practices and not a coherent system, masculinity as such cannot be in crisis. However, gender relations can and do exhibit numerous tendencies towards crisis. Connell identifies three structures of gender relations and shows contemporary tensions among them. The first crisis tendency he sees is in “power relations,” where there is still unresolved tension between patriarchal power and the movement for the emancipation of women. Although very often the balance shifts towards equality, still in many countries or institutions women’s equal position is only theoretical. The next tension exists within “production relations” as many women are now legally employed and officially contribute to the world economy. However, patriarchal control of wealth is still preserved through inheritance and tradition, and it is virtually impossible to break the pattern. Finally, “relations of cathexis changed with the stabilization of gay and lesbian sexuality as a public alternative within the heterosexual order” (85). Women began to demand sexual pleasure and took more control of their own bodies, which in turn affected both heterosexual and

homosexual practice. The notions of masculinity in crisis, men in crisis and a crisis in power relations translate onto representations of men in literature, which is clearly visible in Carol Shields's novels.

Another issue to be discussed in this Introduction is the idea of gender performativity which is best developed by Judith Butler in her influential *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Butler's premise is that second-wave feminism failed to account for differences between women and assumed their total unity in the name of a fight for the cause. She points out that universal femininity does not exist, and, as a corollary, neither does universal masculinity. She begins by questioning the "reality" of gender – a line of thinking which influenced the third wave of masculinity studies and postmodern feminism – and she exemplifies it with drag and transsexuality where it becomes unclear which gender is real and which performed. It is a provocative argument that overthrows the reader's perception of what seemed to be naturalised knowledge but appears to be a revisable reality. Masculinity theorists reiterate Butler's claim that "it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (4-5). However, she goes much further and suggests "a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders" (9). She concludes that "when the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as female one" (9). Such an assumption radically changes our

perspective on all attempts to classify masculinity and femininity. Butler rejects any endeavour to regulate and categorise gender identities, explaining:

If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman, it follows that *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. ... Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. (45)

In a strange way Butler's idea is evocative of sex role models where in order to be a "real" man or woman one had to follow a certain pattern. However, the difference here is that there is no fixed gender pattern and even more importantly Butler breaks the tie between sexed body and gender role. Gender is always in flux, in process, never complete and thus impossible to measure or test. Butler adds: "If gender is something that one becomes – but can never be – then gender is itself a kind of becoming activity, and that gender ought not to be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing or a static cultural marker, but rather as an incessant and repeated action of some sort" (152). This statement stresses again the potential in gender studies if its new status is adopted. Gender is not fixed; it is beyond any definition and it is in constant action and change.

All the feminist, masculinity and gender theories to which I have referred so far are very important for approaching Shields's representations of

masculinity. Carol Shields's first two novels published in the late 1970s, which lack the depth of social and linguistic analysis of society found in her later novels, nevertheless initiate criticism of the idea of a male sex role. In *Small Ceremonies* (1976) and *The Box Garden* (1977), the three prominent male characters display a mismatch between the prescribed male sex role and their own experience of masculinity, which leads to their personal crises and dissatisfaction with the quality of their lives. The confusion of the 1980s, the contradictory directions for masculinity's development and havoc introduced into men's orderly lives by the second wave of feminism is captured in *Happenstance* (*A Husband's Story* and *A Fairly Conventional Woman*, published respectively in 1980 and 1982) and *A Celibate Season* (written and rewritten in the 1980s but published much later in 1991).

The next phase in Shields's writing displays a more mature self-consciousness as a feminist and a writer. *Swann* (1987) and *The Republic of Love* (1992) engage in feminist rewriting of popular genres and postmodern experimentation with the narrative voice. Thus the portrayal of masculinities is much more complex. The protagonists are torn between different gender roles; they openly question the idea of representation and address the question of performativity and performance. *The Stone Diaries* (1993) is seen as the most postmodern of Shields's novels and plays with the reader's ability to patch together various pieces of information in order to capture the fragmented representation of men and women finally united in their common inability to control their lives. *Larry's Party* (1997) is an attempt to define postmodern masculinity. Larry Weller's masculinity is in constant flux and he is forever trying to learn and adapt to new life situations. Shields's last novel, *Unless*, is

the final and the strongest statement of her feminism. She questions the extent of the changes in the lives of women and highlights the continued and prevalent male dominance. Yet she does not attack her male characters, but rather shows them participating in a sense of loss.

Shields's postmodernism

My analysis of men and masculinities in Carol Shields's novels will not only be guided by developments in masculinity studies, but also by the author's growing engagement with the postmodern. Undoubtedly, Shields's writings are not totally experimental. They retain fairly conventional plots, grammar and sentence structure. However, gradually her novels adopt more and more postmodern techniques. She introduces different points of view in the *Happenstance* novels and then employs multiple narrators and different focalisers in *Swann* and *The Republic of Love*. The novels start to feature polyphony of voices and fragmentation of subject matter. Progressively, the plot requires more active involvement on the reader's part, offering different versions of the same story which redefine, reconfirm and ultimately undermine it. The author starts inserting different genres and registers into the novels creating the so-called carnivalised literature. She introduces the mystery of the author into *The Stone Diaries* and employs elements of the novel's self-reflexivity. The texts start questioning the existence of reality and proclaim the power of language as the creator of possible worlds. For the purpose of this Introduction, I will only briefly discuss the main premises of postmodernism while the details of techniques used by Shields will be analysed in the individual chapters.

Postmodernism cannot be defined precisely and various theorists stress different aspects of the phenomenon. Jean-François Lyotard describes postmodernism broadly as “incredulity towards metanarratives” and explains:

This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. ... The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements – narrative but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. (xxiv)

According to Lyotard, postmodernism resists the idea of a possible underlying great narrative with its totalising nature and claim for universal truth. The grand narratives are being replaced by local narratives characterised by diverse and always locally legitimated language games (an idea borrowed from Wittgenstein). Lyotard explains the concept of language games as “various categories of utterance [which] can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put” (10). This new approach to narratives results from changes in the status of knowledge caused mainly by technological transformations and developments. Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself and becomes a necessary commodity in the competition for power. Another thinker, Frederic Jameson, defines postmodernism as “an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (ix) and goes on to explain that its nature lies in discontinuity, the search for the moment of change and not its outcome.

Postmodernism is visible in philosophy, history, psychoanalysis, political philosophy, dance, art, and architecture. However, for the sake of my

argument I will give prominence to postmodern literary and gender theory, starting with the writings of Linda Hutcheon. She is a Canadian thinker who published numerous books on postmodernist issues, including a 1988 work specifically dealing with Canadian novels, *The Canadian Postmodern*. In *The Politics of Postmodernism* Hutcheon claims that postmodernism “takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement. ... Postmodernism’s distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale ‘nudging’ commitment to doubleness, or duplicity” (1). What it closely shares with contemporary theories of gender is its undermining of what we take as natural and universal, exposing it as cultural and imposed. Postmodernism deals with the “investigation of the social and ideological production of meaning” (6) and plays with the notions of truth and reality. It assumes that all our knowledge of the world derives from “a network of socially established meaning systems, the discourses of our culture” (7). Hutcheon sees postmodern confrontation

where documentary historical actuality meets formalist self-reflexivity and parody. At this juncture, a study of representation becomes, not a study of mimetic mirroring or subjective projecting, but an exploration of the way in which narratives and images structure how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self, in the present and in the past.

(7)

This aspect of postmodernism is clearly present in Shields’s novels. The recounting of a story stops being a reflection of what we see as everyday “reality,” but becomes an exploration of how much of ourselves we invest in the decoding of it. Different people with various experiences, expectations and

vocabulary will see it differently and this in turn will affect their understanding of themselves.

Postmodernism displays both continuities and discontinuities with modernism, as Tim Woods points out in his analysis:

Postmodernism is a *knowing* modernism, a *self-reflexive* modernism, a modernism that does not agonise about itself. Postmodernism does what modernism does, only in a celebratory rather than repentant way. Thus, instead of lamenting the loss of the past, the fragmentation of existence and the collapse of selfhood, postmodernism embraces these characteristics as a new form of social existence and behaviour. The difference between modernism and postmodernism is therefore best seen as a difference in *mood* or *attitude*, rather than a chronological difference, or a different set of aesthetic practices. (9)

Woods sees in postmodernism a continuation of modernist ideas taken with a new spirit and also challenging “the psychological realism in modernist fiction” (50).² Postmodernism celebrates “the fragmentation of existence and collapse of selfhood” and takes pleasure in further deconstruction of the notions of “reality” and representation. Shields’s novels partially embrace these ideas, combining them with questions about the position and situation of women and men.

Ihab Hassan, who was one of the pioneers of the term “postmodernism” in the 1960s, devises an exhaustive table which compares and contrasts the

² This point is one instance where Carol Shields’s novels cannot be defined as fully postmodern, as they often continue to display psychological realism.

main ideas and predicaments of modernism and postmodernism. In his graphic illustration, postmodernism always stands in opposition to modernism. While modernism represents order, purpose and a closed form, postmodernism celebrates chaos, random play and anti-form. Modernism is hierarchical, self-centred and celebrates art as object; postmodernism seeks anarchy, dispersal and emphasises the process of artistic creation, not its product. Modernism aims at interpretation and wants metaphors; postmodernism is against interpretation, thriving on misreading and metonymy. Finally, Hassan points out that modernism is “Genital/Phallic” while postmodernism is “Polymorphous/Androgynous.” The table is a clear illustration of how far postmodernism distances itself from modernism and how it seeks to destabilise all the established norms and introduces chaos to all attempts at ordering and measuring “reality” (91-92). Hassan also devises the term “indeterminance” which aims to designate “two central, constitutive tendencies in postmodernism: one of indeterminacy, the other of immanence” (92). Such a collection of characteristics of postmodernism clearly shows how it reflects the fears and hopes of people lost and confused in the twentieth-century reality where we can do and control so much and yet we fail in the attempt to define, understand and categorise surrounding reality.

Brian McHale, in his *Postmodernist Fiction*, stresses that the referent of the term “postmodernism” does not really exist and what we describe by it are only “discursive constructs” (4). There are many possible constructions of postmodernism, some more accurate than others, but none of them can be described as right or wrong. McHale tries to capture the idea of postmodernism (or POSTmodernISM) using the concept of the dominant, which he defines

following Roman Jakobson as “the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components” (6). McHale argues that we need this concept to answer the question of what underlies all of the catalogues of postmodernist features listed by its researchers. All of them, McHale notices, are based on oppositions to modernist features, yet postmodernism cannot be said to be in opposition to modernism. Here the idea of the dominant should help and he attempts to define the dominant of modernism as: “*epistemological*. That is, modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as ... ‘How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?’” (9). However, he notices that the very same text can shift from being a modernist to postmodernist one.³ The narrative breaks down, knowledge gives way to speculation, the reliability of the text diminishes, possible worlds emerge and the characters of the novel start to fictionalise themselves. McHale’s conclusion is that the postmodernist dominant shifts from the modernist when the “problems of *knowing* [become] problems of *modes of being*” – it is a shift “from an epistemological dominant to an *ontological one*” (10). Knowledge stops playing the crucial part and this occurrence opens the text to unlimited and unrestricted speculation. Such a shift allows for the projection of multiple worlds in literature, supposition about the relationships between them and consequences of possible merging and crossing of the borders between these worlds. McHale sums up:

Intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they “tip over” into ontological

³ In this instance McHale uses W. Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* as an example of such a text.

questions. By the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip over into epistemological questions – the sequence is not linear and unidirectional, but bidirectional and reversible. (11)

This statement once again stresses the interconnection and inseparability of modernism and postmodernism. McHale distinguishes a thin line, a passageway between the two that can be clearly traced in fiction. I will refer to McHale's ideas in individual chapters, especially in my analysis of *The Stone Diaries* where his exhaustive analysis of "Chinese-box worlds" proves a useful tool in decoding Shields's novel structure. The notions of postmodernism are significant to my thesis as a whole because Shields gradually utilises more and more postmodern elements; consequently, her male characters become increasingly complex, less reliable and open to numerous re-interpretations.

Feminism and postmodernism

The development of second-wave feminism and postmodernism, and the relationship between them, are of great importance for my thesis. Many scholars argue that they are natural allies; others point out that the main postulates and aims of each exclude the other. In this section I offer an assessment of the arguments raised for and against the notion of postmodern feminism.

Linda Nicholson, in the Introduction to the collection of papers entitled *Feminism/Postmodernism*, describes a common ground for both:

Feminists, too [like postmodernists], have uncovered the political power of the academy and of knowledge claims. In

general, they have argued against the supposed neutrality and objectivity of the academy, asserting that claims put forth as universally applicable have invariably been valid only for men of a particular culture, class and race. (5)

She points out that the notions of “objectivity” and “reason” always express the interests of a particular group of men at a certain time in history. The concepts were by no means universal and that is why they allowed an unequal distribution of power. Consequently, the new movements exert a different kind of influence on the academy and assert their own claims to knowledge.

Another affinity between the two movements is that postmodernism offers feminists ideas about method, namely warns them against generalisations and suggests more detailed and specific criticism. In Nicholson’s words:

“postmodernism is not only a natural ally but also provides a basis for avoiding the tendency to construct theory that generalizes from the experiences of Western, white, middle-class women” (5). In a joint paper with Nancy Fraser, Nicholson gives more reasons why the relations between feminism and postmodernism should be explored further:

Both have offered deep and far-reaching criticisms of the institution of philosophy. Both have elaborated critical perspectives on the relation of philosophy to the larger culture. And ... both have sought to develop new paradigms of social criticism which do not rely on traditional philosophical underpinnings. (19)

Both of the movements are opposed to the “God’s eye view,” which asserts the ability to transcend any limitations and provide a completely neutral

perspective. All knowledge and scholarship come from a particular place and time and express the interests of particular groups. The question of situated knowledge is never openly addressed and discussed in Shields's novels, but her later writings signal the problem. Most of Shields's women (and, as a corollary, men) share the same social background, class, race and sexuality, yet she gradually introduces racial, sexual and religious minorities to her stories and touches upon different problems they have to deal with.

Jane Flax notices that postmodernism and feminism share "a profound scepticism regarding universal (or universalizing) claims about the existence, nature and powers of reason, progress, science, language and the 'subject/self'" (193). Christine Di Stefano elaborates this idea and points out that if gender is the problem behind such scepticism, maybe it should be given up altogether in favour of multiple differences (66). Nancy Hartsock, however, warns against this tendency: "Why is it, just at the moment in Western history when previously silenced populations have begun to speak for themselves and on behalf of their subjectivities, that the concept of the subject and the possibility of discovering/creating a liberating 'truth' become suspect?" ("Foucault" 106). This seems to pose a fundamental problem in trying to combine postmodern and feminist politics. Feminists will never want to give up the category of "woman" since all their ideology is built around it. Without "a woman" feminism would have to turn into a completely different movement. As Imelda Whelehan points out:

No matter how enchanted one might be by the postmodernist redefinition of the categories masculine/feminine, and even male/female, feminists need to be able 'crudely' to assert that

woman as category, encompassing the action and reaction of 'difference' in its many semantic layers, remains the subject and Subject of its political discourse. (211)

In other words, feminism can gain a lot from postmodernism but can never entirely encompass its underlying ideas. One more argument against feminism engaging totally in the postmodern is the fact that "postmodernism emerges as a very male-identified reaction to modernity" and thus "feminism's stake in modernity – or any perspective on male systems of power – can only be partial" (199). Feminists must be careful to distance themselves from the structure of male power, and not try to claim their part in it.

Mothers, motherhood and mothering

Shields's writings concentrate on the modern family and comment on both Freudian ideas of the mother's responsibilities, and Canadian mid-century variations on mother-blame. As subversive representations of traditional patriarchal accusations against mothers appear very often in Shields's novels, I will summarise the most important issues researched by Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Chodorow argues that the patriarchal model of the family and differentiated division of genders is perpetuated by the way women mother. They are held responsible for the successes or failures of their children in adapting to the demands of society and, as a corollary, they are responsible for helping to perpetuate their own oppression and subordinate position. The mother is seen as having power over the adult life of her children. Chodorow states that "the character of the infant's early relation to its mother profoundly affects its sense

of self, its later object relationships, and its feelings about its mother and about women in general” (77). The theory claims that from the earliest days the mother plays a determining role in whether or not her son will have successful relationships with women as an adult. Because mothers used to provide almost exclusive care of the baby they were also responsible for its own definition of itself; for example, a loving mother instils a sense of a “loved-self” in the child, while a rejecting mother produces someone who “drives love away.”⁴ The importance of this early relationship to the mother continues later in a child’s life and the child’s relationship with the mother is “the foundation upon which all his future relationships with love objects are based” (79). Chodorow’s work is instrumental in revealing the mechanics and dynamics of this type of reproductive gendering and Carol Shields’s novels very often comment on and play with the notion as well.

An important element of Chodorow’s analysis is not only mother-blame but also mother-guilt. A mother is aware of all the theories around her mothering and is informed that if she fails to care for her infant according to prescribed norms, her child will suffer and will not be able to participate in society appropriately. The responsibility and pressure imposed on a mother are enormous. The situation is especially difficult with sons. Daughters learn how to be mothers directly; boys need to learn how to be men through the negation of everything feminine that is everything they experience in their everyday lives as small children nurtured primarily by their mother. The absent father (the care is almost exclusively done by mothers) is idealised and a boy at some point must reject his mother who symbolises regression and everything that is

⁴ Chodorow’s book appeared in 1978, so by no means does it represent the situation in 2013; however, it was very influential at the time and I read many of Shields’s characters as directly responding to the issues raised in Chodorow’s book.

not masculine. Since the boys must “fit in well” into society, women must mother them into the position of male superiority. In Chodorow’s words:

Women’s mothering in the isolated nuclear family of contemporary capitalist society creates specific personality characteristics in men that reproduce both an ideology and psychodynamic of male superiority and submission to the requirements of production. It prepares men for participation in a male-dominant family and society, for their lesser emotional participation in family life, and for their participation in the capitalist world of work. (180-181)

Traditional mothering patterns perpetuate an unequal distribution of power. The mother is seen as inferior to the father and a young man who wants to be successfully socialised has to detach himself from her and follow the father who symbolises progress. Due to the frequency of absent fathers, mothers are often the only available role models in Shields’s writings, to mention the most prominent titles: *The Republic Of Love*, *Larry’s Party* or *Unless*. These texts playfully reveal the mechanics of reproductive gendering, undermine the notion of mother-blame and mother-guilt and mock the idea that the son’s relationship with the mother fully determines his future relationships with women. This argument will be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters.

The need to change mothering patterns is also widely discussed by contemporary feminists. In a collection of essays entitled *Mothers and Sons: Feminism, Masculinity, and the Struggle to Raise Our Sons* published in 2001, contemporary mothers talk about their experiences of instilling masculinity in their sons. Andrea O’Reilly, the editor of the collection, points out that “in

order to change the way men experience and define masculinity, women must change the way they define and experience motherhood” (5). She stresses that in order to stop the perpetuation of patriarchy the institution of motherhood must be reorganised. Only in this way can women initiate the change they need themselves and want for their children. Another important premise of the collection is to undermine the idea that sons must reject their mothers in order to “achieve psychological wellness and maturity” (3). On the contrary, the contributors argue, such forced disconnection from their mother harms men psychologically. O’Reilly claims: “the masculinity our culture requires boys to assume is harmful to them and society at large” (3). This statement mirrors my earlier analysis of the changes within masculinity patterns and the problems of modern men, and Marilyn French’s idea of “brutalisation” as a means of successful socialisation into gender patterns. Even though the sex-role model has been severely criticised there are still unwritten laws on how to be “masculine;” one of them is a certain form of dominance over women. As Cate Dooley and Nikki Fedele point out:

Boy culture focuses on who is in the limelight. It says “be first”, “win.” It is built on a competitive, power-over model, in which there are winners and there are losers. Boy culture encourages young men and boys to take pride in expressions of non-compliance and disrespect, to act out, and to pretend not to care about their failings. (190)

Masculine culture is still highly competitive, even though it now allows other forms of dominance than it did sixty years ago. No longer is physical strength the only measure of a man; success can take other forms, such as IT expertise.

The necessary change in mothering patterns, no matter how clearly articulated, is not easy to be carried through. Nurturing mothers do not want their sons to be ill-adapted to the society they live in and, consequently, they are scared to break the pattern which perpetuates the status quo. In O'Reilly's words: "while mothers may reject patriarchy and its constructions of masculinity, they realize, consciously or otherwise, that their sons must take their place in that world" (95). They do not want their sons to be alienated from the culture they live in and that is why they still raise them according to patriarchal demands.

Carol Shields very often refers to mothers and mothering in her novels, and mothers are extremely important to the shape her male characters take. The novels comment on the notion of mother guilt for their sons' failures in adult life and sons blaming their mothers for ill-adaptation to society, and for their difficulties in forming successful relationships with women. Shields's mothers are often "stifled" by the guilt, which demonstrates how strong the grip of traditional patterns on women is and how devastating for them is the thought that they could "ruin" their sons' adult lives. The problem is openly verbalised in *Larry's Party*. Larry's mother worries:

[Larry]'s blowing a little tune into his empty beer bottle.

Is there room in the tilting, rotating world for a thirty-year-old man who sits blowing into a bottle? He thinks this, and so does his mother, who reaches over and takes it from him, not so much with an air of rebuke as with resolution, and places it under the counter. What deprivation, her expression asks, what

injury has stalled her son at the age of thirty? Something's been subtracted too soon, but what? And is it her fault?

Of course it's her fault. (47)

Every problem their sons encounter makes them feel guilty. They do not even question their responsibility which shows clearly that there is a long way to go before they will be ready to change the mothering pattern completely.

All of the discussed elements inform my analysis of masculinity patterns in Carol Shields's novels. The thesis will unfold chronologically, signalling the linear relationship between the changing masculinities in the novels and social and critical developments in the world, in gender and literary theory and in Carol Shields's own life. Chapter One concentrates on the first two novels, *Small Ceremonies* and *The Box Garden*, which present quite a schematic male character construction, reflecting masculinity patterns of the 1970s. Chapter Two discusses the importance of a split narrative voice and two perspectives on a breakthrough moment in a traditional household, namely when "the lady of the house" discovers her professional and artistic potential and realises that there is life for her outside her house. This discovery has a huge impact on the husband, which I will discuss in detail by analysing *Happenstance* and *A Celibate Season*. In Chapter Three and Chapter Four I will deal with Shields's much clearer and more conscious engagement in postmodern techniques, rewriting the popular genres of detective novel and popular romance in *Swann* and *The Republic of Love* respectively. I will show how such development provides a deeper dimension to her male characters and enhances their complexity. Chapter Five will concentrate on male characters in Shields's most famous novel, *The Stone Diaries*, as filtered through many

perspectives and told by multiple narrators. *Larry's Party* will be discussed in Chapter Six which will highlight different aspects of postmodern masculinity and gender uncertainty. Finally, the last and the shortest chapter of my thesis will be devoted to *Unless*. It will focus on men's involuntary oppression of women today and concentrate on the novel's open disillusionment with the impact of feminism on everyday lives of women. The Conclusion will tie together once again all the issues raised in the Introduction and discussed in the main body of the thesis in order to highlight the main findings of the project.

CHAPTER ONE

Her ideas about him: Masculinities created by first-person female narrators in *Small Ceremonies* and *The Box Garden*

Carol Shields's first two novels do not lend themselves as well to complex textual analysis as her later works. They were written before she started experimenting with postmodern techniques such as multiple narrators, inserted narratives or self-conscious characters. However, in focusing attention on the portrayal of men in *Small Ceremonies* and *The Box Garden*, one can easily trace echoes of contemporary changes and worries connected with the new structure of family, the shifting position of men and women and the fluctuating definition of masculinity. As both of these novels have first-person female narrators, the portrayal of masculine characters becomes inevitably filtered through and manipulated by a feminine perspective. Shields devises her later novels in a similar fashion and a feminine slant in male characters seems to be her signature. The *Duet* novels (published together under this title in the UK) provide the reader with interesting stories of contemporary men as seen by women. My analysis of the first novel shows how changing male subjects escape female classification and triumph over their own narrator, Judith. She is introduced as a new-type woman with her own creative job; even so, she appears to be very limited in her understanding of modern gender trends and is unable to accept the new roles of men. The chapter also shows how the narrator of the second novel finds her way to self-development and self-understanding as a woman through men in her story. She is initially lost and rejected, but

gradually, through her growing understanding of the workings behind masculine patterns and men's power, she arrives at her self-realisation as a woman. In *Small Ceremonies*, masculine subjects completely escape the narrator's idea of them and emerge victorious from seemingly crippling situations, while she is just forced to accept it. In *The Box Garden* the female narrator changes and understands herself better as a woman; however, the change involves adjusting to men who are always following their own path.

In *Small Ceremonies* the three men in focus—Judith's husband Martin Gill, a family friend Furlong Eberhardt and her English landlord John Spalding—all go through a period of difficulties, mostly professional, but incomprehensibly to Judith manage to retain their strong masculine position. Neither of them really goes through a major masculinity crisis, so prevalent in the sociological analyses of the time. *The Box Garden* documents the growing self-consciousness of Charleen, the female narrator, and her changing perception of her two partners. As a result of her slowly realizing the nature of her mature femininity, she is able to discover and understand new trends in masculinities better. She sees the two male partners in contrast with each other and understands how the two different masculinity types are necessary to her full realisation as a woman. Both novels undertake the topic of new men and masculinities and completely different definitions of them. Confused in the emerging new social order brought about by feminism, they all try to fit in and establish their own masculinity patterns. The female narrators, however, will inevitably impose their own judgemental version and interpretation of the male histories.

In order to explain in detail what kind of filtering perspective is imposed by the female narrator of the novels, first I will sketch the political and sociological background of the period discussed that is the 1970s. Unquestionably it is a time of significant debates about equality of the sexes. Feminist organisations were fighting for equal rights for women, and the 1970s saw four major issues being debated at that time: reforming of the law of rape,¹ the question of safe and legal abortion, equal wages and the feminisation of poverty. By that time women were already pursuing professional careers and distancing themselves from the model of a perfect housewife represented by their mothers' generation. The women's health movement directed public attention to female bodies as a corollary to "shifts in social behaviour, especially with regard to female sexuality" (Schulman 174). Obviously, feminism affected men as much as women, and in Schulman's words,

Men had to face new social conditions: renegotiating family roles at home and confronting women in the workplace, the political arena, the club, and the classroom. By challenging ideas about femininity and women's nature, feminist thinkers also made it clear that conceptions of masculinity were up for grabs. Americans' most basic notions of manhood needed to be worked out; they could no longer be assumed. (177)

So the major issue of the 1970s was the reinterpretation of men's roles in light of the feminist movement and the enacting of new adequate masculinity patterns. In *Small Ceremonies* Shields does not yet deal openly with the

¹ New laws barred the cross examination of victims about their previous sexual history, dropped requirements for third-party witness testimony, hospital services for rape-victims were improved and over 400 rape-crisis centers were established; similar efforts were launched to halt domestic violence.

masculinity crisis stemming from the feminist movement. The question will be brilliantly discussed in her twin novels *Happenstance*. Here, however, the reader witnesses certain beginnings of male uncertainties, difficulties and problems. They are caused, respectively, for Martin by difficulties on professional grounds, for Furlong by fear that his true nationality will be revealed and for John from his artistic inability entailing problems with his sexuality, health and well-being. I will discuss these three characters, referring to their short crises with two different theories. In the first case I will focus on men's relation to work and professional career, also paying attention to successful blurring of the boundaries of feminine versus masculine behaviours. In the second and third case I will venture into sketching out of the notion of masculinity as performance fully and exhaustively developed in Shields's later novels, especially in *Larry's Party*. In *Small Ceremonies*, even though the performance of masculinity is secondary to the performance as an artist, embodiment of Canadian ethos or unacknowledged genius, it inevitably intertwines with the notion of new masculinities.

Martin's crisis is rather imposed on him by the female narrator's expectation. Judith is a biographer unable to get to the core of her subjects' lives. When she writes about Susanna Moodie, she comes to the conclusion: "[Moodie] was so shrewd about her fellow Canadians that she enraged them, but nevertheless seemed to have had little real understanding of herself. Is it any wonder then ... that I don't understand her?" (Shields, *Small* 168).² A similar situation applies to the depiction of her husband in the narrative.

Initially, Martin is completely predictable, on the verge of being boring. He is

² In the course of this Chapter I will be referring to the original book titles, that is *Small Ceremonies* and *The Box Garden*, even though as *Duet* they are referred to as *Judith* and *Charleen* by the British publisher.

statistically definable and Judith predicts: “Prospects: getting older. More of same. One or perhaps two more promotions, continued fidelity” (107).

However, upon discovering bundles of coloured wool in Martin’s drawer Judith’s complete picture of him is shaken. She frantically attempts to push the occurrence into frames of definable statistics. She recalls:

What on earth had I expected – that Martin had slipped over the edge into lunacy? That, saddened and trapped at forty-one, he might be having a breakdown? Did I think he nursed a secret vice: knitting instead of tipling? Or perhaps that he had acquired a mistress, a great luscious handicraft addict whose fetish it was to crochet while she was being made love to. (90)

Ideas that occur to the narrator revolve around stereotypical perceptions of masculinity. Finally, Martin confesses that his new project on Milton involves weaving. He has designed a graphic diagram of themes in Milton’s poetry. Shields plays here with the moment of confusion. Women in the 1970s fully participate in professional lives, and in her novel she gives a stereotypically housewife’s activity to a male scholar who uses it in his work. She also supplies two possible reactions to such an occurrence.

On the one hand, Martin’s wife is shocked. Shields in this early novel mocks female reaction to the unexpected development of a new, more open and less compartmentalised masculinity. Martin crosses the old boundaries and takes to weaving, while Judith reacts stereotypically:

‘Martin, you’ve always been so sensible. Can’t you see that this is just, well, just a little undignified. I mean, I just feel it’s beneath you somehow. ... Look, Martin there’s another thing.

And I hate to say this because it sounds so narrow-minded and conventional, but I, well, the truth is – I can't bear to think of you sitting here in your office weaving away. I mean – do you know what I mean? – do you – don't you think it's just a little bit – you know – ?

'Effeminate?' he supplies the word.

'Eccentric. It's the sort of thing Furlong Eberhardt might dream up.'

'And I suppose you think that reference will guarantee instant dismissal of the whole idea.'

'Oh, Martin, for heaven's sake, do what you want. I just hate you to look ridiculous.'

'To whom? To you?' (94-95)

This lengthy passage needs to be quoted in order to explain in detail the reverse gender tension. A man, taking up a typically feminine activity, is instantly scrutinised by his wife. Judith is a scholar and a representative of a new generation of women; thus it is a play that Shields offers her readers. The novel does not feature a man who stereotypically scorns his wife's wish to pursue a professional career. Here the situation is reversed: a seemingly forward-thinking wife cannot accept her husband's interest in a traditionally feminine activity. The game does not end here, for on the other hand, thanks to his innovative approach to Milton's poetry, Martin gains wider recognition in the academic world and even features on TV. What Judith sees as unmasculine and beneath Martin, the rest of the world accepts as innovative. As his professional career gains thanks to weaving, paradoxically, he gets even closer to the

patriarchal ideal of successful masculinity of a man with a good position in a professional world. In a way, Shields's novel suggests a certain natural predisposition of men to emerge victorious from various oppressions. What starts off as a sort of professional crisis (Martin's paper gets rejected) leads to a spectacular victory incomprehensible to Judith. From the other side, however, Judith as a new type of woman displays a very stereotypical way of thinking. Upon discovering Martin's "new hobby" she admits: "It might even be better if he did have a mistress. One could understand that. One could commiserate; one could forgive. But what can be done with a man who makes a fool of himself – what do you do then?" (96). The female narrator is not able to classify and thus deal with the unexpected turn. Shields semi-mocks woman's inability to accept the reversing gender order and gives her readers a new perspective on the problem. The trend might be that women get masculinised and men feminised, and both genders will find it difficult to accept the new reality. In the case of this early novel Shields concentrates more on the female reaction towards new masculinities and the sad reflection that transpires at the end of the story is that the spouses are never able to communicate so closely again. Stereotyping and imposed patterns of behaviour give way to a new flexibility which the female protagonist struggles to deal with and accept.

My analysis of the text mainly deals with sex and gender problems. It is nevertheless useful to combine it with Alex Ramon's analysis of sameness and otherness in the novel. Ramon stresses the fact that Judith the biographer constructs her view of her family based on her assumptions and observations of them. Upon realising that something escaped her attention she is at a loss to recuperate the wholeness of her narrative. Judith the narrator is also the

narrator of her own life and she sees her family in the following manner:

“Husband, children; they are not so much witnessed as perceived, flat leaves which grow absently from a stalk in my head. ... It seems they require someone, me, to watch them; otherwise they would float apart and disintegrate” (*Small* 27). The reader is presented with Judith’s double creation: of her narrative and of her family seen as only existing in moments available to her. When she misses the fact that Martin is working on his weaving, she is shocked: “*Where was I, his wife, when he wondered about that?*” (92). She is angry as her attempt at bringing wholeness and perfect harmony to her family’s structure fails. In Ramon’s words:

The subsequent *increase* in Judith’s anger reveals that her attitude has less to do with Martin’s furtiveness (or concern that the tapestry will embarrass him professionally) than with the test being offered to her perception of him: the sheer idiosyncrasy of the project challenges the subjective “total image” of Martin which she has constructed. (Ramon 31)

Ramon explains in detail how Judith, from one side, believes that a first-hand experience of people allows her to inhabit their lives; she says of her biographical subject Susanna Moodie: “Five minutes with her and I could have wrapped it up” (Shields, *Small* 189), while from the other side she slowly realises that every member of her family has a life inaccessible to her and lived outside the range of her observation. From the point of view of my analysis the concept of Judith trying to access the “other” fully is also crucial in terms of gender conflict. The female narrator projects her pre-conceptions about

masculinity onto her described subjects and in so doing renders her own task of objective representation impossible.

I will also go a step further than Ramon's analysis and state that Judith is aware of her limitations and she even voices her concerns. She once admits having heard Martin lecturing from behind a closed door, and she later explains to him, "You were a stranger. Of course, I realized it was just the novelty of the viewpoint. Coming across you unexpectedly. In a different role, really. It was just seeing you from another perspective" (37). At this point the narrator seems rather enchanted with the phenomenon, which opens her ways of creative interpretation. She accepts "otherness," that is, that some aspects of her subjects' lives are beyond her reach, but she is not challenged by it. At a later stage of the novel we read that "Martin's fringe of marginal notes and messages reminded me – yes, I admitted it – reminded me that he possessed an existence of his own to which I did not belong, which I did not understand and which – be truthful now, Judith – which I did not really want to understand" (105). She withdraws, and just as she is unable to produce an original plot and write a novel, so is she incapable of venturing into the unknown. It is a difficult passage to interpret because it does suggest Judith's openness and acceptance of the other life of her husband; however, in the light of her rage and frustration at discovering his weaving venture it suggests her complete rejection of her partner's life beyond her gaze. The tension is built around the notion of accepted norms and the new, and in the novel it is the female narrator who has problems with encompassing the change.

Judith's need to classify and categorise people limits her ability to comprehend and accept their difference. She neatly files Martin away: "I have

you pinned down, Martin. You see, you are statistically definable, but where do we go from here?" (104). The narrator is unable to move beyond this point. She seems to be so obsessed with living other people's lives that she has no time to find another way of artistic expression. She lives the lives of her children, of her husband, their friends, Furlong, John Spalding and his family. She wants to see her husband as predictable and unchallenging, an "unblushing male" as defined by Erving Goffman in 1963:

A young, married, urban, northern heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports. Every American male tends to look out upon the world from this perspective ... Any male who fails to qualify in any one of these ways is likely to view himself ... as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior. (Goffman 128)

Judith notices the divergence when she narrates that Martin is no longer young: "He is not, in fact, in any of the categories normally set aside for the young, no longer a young intellectual or a young professor or a young socialist or a young father" (Shields, *Small* 9). At this early point in the novel the narrator confesses the beginnings of the problem of classification. Martin's model masculinity will be questioned. But it starts probably earlier for Judith, who mentions her university friend's reaction to her arrangement to marry Martin: "How could anyone fuck a Milton specialist?" (107). The remark is only quoted and not elaborated on, but it signals her future husband's divergence from a "perfect male" standard. Once again, the remark is made by a new type of woman majoring in modern poetry, and once again a woman rejects the possibility of

new type of masculinity. Martin as an academic and white collar worker is already partially suspect according to patriarchal standards, plus the fact that he specialises in Milton suggests that he might be completely out of sync with the unblushing male standard. However, Shields by introducing Martin's original way of dealing with Milton's poetry, once again plays a trick on any existing preconception.

New men are also being questioned for their lack of technical skills. As Judith notices,

On Martin's side of the family, no one has the slightest degree of mechanical ability. His grandfather never even learnt to drive a car, and his father cannot do the simplest household repairs; he is even somewhat vain about his lack of dexterity. ...

It is only natural that Martin has inherited the family ineptness – how could it be otherwise? – but unlike his father, it is not a source of pride with him. Handymen are expensive and unreliable nowadays, and professors do not earn large salaries ... When he looks at Richard he must see that his son will be heir to his inabilities and subject to his niggling expenses. (105)

Throughout Shields's corpus, primary protagonists are contrasted with previous generations of men, usually their fathers, who come from very traditional backgrounds and hold stereotypical views concerning gender and the division of labour. In this early novel, however, Shields introduces characters going against the current. Martin's father and even grandfather defy certain ideals of early twentieth-century masculinity, which signals a new type of men. They are curiously proud of lacking certain skills so characteristic of

the stereotypical male according to male sex-role ideal. Surprisingly, Martin as the man who seems to have a right to diverge from the sex role, as the times he is presented in negate the culture of sex-role typing, is conversely embarrassed by the fact of doing so. Shields mixes different strands of masculinity studies and introduces deliberate confusion. What should be more acceptable for men after the feminist movement and the emergence of new studies of masculinity gains uncertain status in her novel. Martin is unable to fix things around the house, thus he needs to pay another man to do the work, which results in his feeling less masculine. However, the idea of weaving, which serves the purpose of his academic research, does not seem unbecoming to him. It is also worth noticing that the incentive for Martin's weaving comes from the graphic representation of world power, which he noticed in his father's study. Yet again an inheritance from the previous generation is stressed.

A new type of man finds a different language of self-expression. It is conspicuous that Martin does not talk to Judith about his work, and she does not require such information from him, as we learn from her conversation with another patient at the hospital. He asks: "You mean you don't ask your husband what he did all day?" and Judith's reply is: "no. I don't think I ever do. Poor Martin" (30). It is not surprising then that Judith does not know about Martin's enterprise. She does not ask and he feels insecure of his wife's reaction to his feminine activity, thus a communication gap appears between the two. When language is not enough, and the new vocabulary of men and women has not been established yet, men find other ways of expression. As Sarah Gamble notices about the creativity of Martin's venture: "For a brief moment, inspiration erupts from the confines of language and the artificial

distinctions of genres and creative forms, becoming something which is genuinely inventive” (Gamble 45). The inability of language to express emotions pertains also to the new gender arrangements and the confusing imbalance between the masculine and the feminine. The new emotions and experiences cannot be openly expressed in the old terms, and new forms of communication need to be employed. So the representation of Martin’s masculinity in this novel is based more on feminine realising of a change that happened without her involvement. The full predictability of Judith’s husband falls apart as she realises that Martin has another life that she has failed to notice and participate in. The change happens deeply inside the masculine psyche as he seeks new ways of expressing the change, uncertain of the feminine reaction of his wife. In Judith’s eyes Martin gets more feminised; however, the change goes beyond that. He is a symbol of new masculinity transcending the borders of the female taboo. Shields portrays a deep concern with women who need to learn a new language and new ways of understanding of their husbands and partners. Also she signals the transitory period where they find it difficult to communicate, and expresses a minor concern over such situations. As the protagonists of *Small Ceremonies* also feature in the plot of *The Box Garden*, the reader finds out that the lack of communication and silence between partners deepens.

The unpredictability of men pertains also to other characters in the novels, not as close to Judith as Martin. Furlong Erberhardt is a family friend/acquaintance. He is a writer and a Canadian icon, embodying, on the surface, the Canadian ethos. But he really is a great pretender. He easily manufactures novels that join the Canadian literary canon; he uses national

themes and plays with traditional plot of a man against nature. Faye Hammill explains in her book *Literary Culture and Female Authorship in Canada*, “As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Furlong has deliberately included a number of conventional Canadian symbols in order to profit from government policies of cultural nationalism. ... The climate fostered by such literary politics is taken advantage of by Erberhardt, whose overtly ‘homegrown’ books guarantee him support from the establishment” (Hammill, *Literary* 118-119). As the government promotes the national themes Furlong mercilessly uses the system. His novels resemble one another but they are successful because his readers see him as a man who “actually comprehends the national theme ... [w]hich is shelter. Shelter from the storm of life” (Shields, *Small* 122). Paradoxically, Judith discovers that Furlong actually is an American citizen who fled to Canada in order to avoid being drafted for the Korean War. However, from the point of view of my analysis, what matters is Furlong’s gender performance and the female narrator’s reaction to it.

Furlong’s presentation in the novel changes as Judith gradually loses her total picture of him. Once again, her male subject gradually escapes the frames she has prepared for him. Furlong is seen by Judith as harmless and unmasculine, and she feels her power over his weaknesses upon discovering his first small lie about his true name. When Furlong’s mother lets it slip that his real name is Rudyard, Judith muses: “Rudyard. Rudyard. I think of it quite often, and in a way I love him, Rudyard Eberhardt. More than I could ever love Furlong” (34-35). The narrator feels that she has power over Eberhardt and it makes him weak in her eyes. That is why she can “love” him, which stands for a sort of pity and mother-love. At the beginning of the novel Furlong is

harmless for Judith; he is presented as an innocent novelist in his fifties still living with his mother and worshipping her. His novels are successful and schematic, and Judith, with no effort, is able to predict what the next one is going to be like. There seem to be no secrets about Furlong. Judith's daughter accuses her of not treating the writer seriously:

'You think he's a dumb corny romantic. Flabby. Feminine.'

'Paunchy,' I help her out.

'You see,' her voice rises.

'Predictable. That's it, if you really want to know, Meredith.'

(32)

Predictable and feminine Furlong is a weak man for Judith. She feels dominant over him. She studies his photo on the cover of his latest book, and she knows that it is only a pose, that he designs and stages his image:

Beard and moustache, of course. White turtleneck exposed at the collar of an overcoat. Tweed and cablestitch juxtaposed, a generation-straddling costume testifying to eclectic respectability.

A pipe angles from the corner of his mouth! ... Everything in place.

The picture is two-colour, white and a sort of olive tone, bleeding off the edges, *Time-Life* style. Behind him a microcosm of Canada – a fretwork of bare branches and a blur of olive snow, man against nature.

His eyes are mere slits. Snow glare? The whole expression is nicely in place, a costly membrane, bemused but kindly,

academic but gutsy. The photographer has clearly demanded detachment.

The jacket blurb admits he teaches creative writing in a university, but couched within this apology is the information that he has also swept floors, reported news, herded sheep, a man for all seasons, our friend Furlong. (34)

The narrator analyses the photograph, interpreting all the signs of a staged personality. Furlong in the photo is supposed to embody the “universal Canadian experience” of an everyman, a man against nature, a man of all trades and everybody’s friend. The description of the photo is also important in terms of what kind of masculinity Furlong wants to present. A successful masculinity can be “produced” in various ways. Furlong does not really match the “unblushing American male” description – he does not establish a family, he has not got any record in sports, he is not young and his heterosexuality is being subtly questioned by the narrator. His masculinity type is built and expressed around his writing. Being such a successful novelist he gains people’s respect and attention, which distracts them from his apparent “shortcomings”. Elements of masquerade and clothes as its signifiers are also very often discussed in Shields’s novels, most prominently in *Larry’s Party* where clothes signify not only Larry’s changing social status but also subsequent stages in the development of his own mature masculinity type. In the case of Furlong’s photograph we also witness the immense importance that his clothes, facial hair and a pipe exert on the message “eclectic respectability” he wants to project. They are an inescapable and inherent part of the staged pose as a man, a writer, a Canadian and a friend.

The narrator also admits in the early chapter of her novel that there is something about Furlong that “make[s] the people around him feel alive. There is an exhausted Byzantine quality about him which demands response, and even at that moment ... I was swept with vitality, almost drunk with the recognition that all things are possible. Beauty, fame, power; I have not been passed by after all” (24). The female narrator suggests that being around Furlong makes people (or it might just be women as it is her impression) feel better about themselves. Judith mercilessly reveals her judgmental opinion of Furlong’s masculinity and suggests that if a man like this can be so successful, so can anybody else. This complacent view of herself gets ruined when she finds out that Furlong stole the idea for his new book from her and that he does not see it as a theft, and does not want to apologise. Judith is enraged because she realises she loses control of her subject. Not only does he trick her, but also he refuses to feel guilty for what he did. When Furlong seems so harmless and almost invisible as a man, Judith “loves him;” when he emerges much stronger and confident in his niche she starts to treat him with negativity, which is clearly reflected in her narrative. All of a sudden he is full of “spots of commonness.” She rages:

Furlong suffers more than anyone I know from this exact and debilitating malady. Witness the framed motto he once had in his office, and witness also the abrupt banishment of it. Observe the clichés on his book jacket, remember his cranberry-vodka punch, his petty jealousies of other writers, his dependence on nationality which permits him his big-frog-in-little-pond eminence.

His sophistication is problematically wrought; it's uneven and sometimes, when instinct fails, altogether lacking. He can, for instance, be too kind, too lushly, tropically kind, a kindness too rich and ripe for ordinary friendship. And, in addition, he is uncertain about salad forks, brandy snifters, and how to use the subjunctive; he finds those Steuben glass snails charming and he favours Renoir; he sometimes slips and says supper instead of dinner, and, conversely, in another pose, he slips and says dinner instead of supper; he is spotted, oh, he is uncommonly spotted.

...

He has a passionate and pitiable desire to be loved, to be celebrated with expletives and nicknames, to be in the club. And then, an alternating compulsion to draw back, to be insular and exclusive and private. (124-125)

After this outpouring of new judgements in the form of Judith's dialogue with herself she concludes:

Don't you like him at all?

Like him? I do. No, I don't, not now. I suppose I'm fond of him. But no matter how charming he will be in the future, no matter how he disclaims his act of plunder and he will, no matter what amends he will make for it, I will not be moved. I don't know why, but he will never, he will never be someone I love. Only someone I could have loved. (125)

So the female narrator sees in Furlong the desire to please and to be loved.

When she discovers his secrets she refuses to "love" him as a form of

punishment. The male protagonist escapes the frame of predictability she prepares for him and thus will be seen and presented in a different light from now on.

However, that is not the end of Judith's disappointments. When she confronts Furlong about his "theft" of her plot and expects him to feel guilty and apologise, it turns out he is reluctant to do so. Comfortable enough in his position of an established writer, which, as previously stated, places him in the realm of masculinity fulfilled through work and professional success, he protects himself and refuses to feel threatened. This once again overthrows Judith's expectations of him and her view of Furlong as weak and maladjusted. After launching her attack on Furlong and his easy defence, she is "hopelessly confused. It is unbelievable that he should be sitting here beside [her] smiling. That he has shaken off every particle of guilt like an animal shaking water from his coat. [Her] mouth is open; [she] is literally gasping for air; [she] cannot believe this" (144-145). The narrator describes a clash between her expectations and Furlong's reaction. Symbolically, Erberhardt's self-composure indicates his full assimilation of certain trappings of performance which constitute a coherent wholeness. Faking it and borrowing from others is an element of his masculinity-type, the masculinity of a successful professional realised through work. It also points in the direction of a strong position for men once again, versus the still unestablished and uncertain role of modern women. Men's behaviour frustrates the female narrator. Confrontation with Furlong and a panic attack connected with Martin's "unmanly" behaviour make her angry and vulnerable. Symbolically, she even gets physically ill. It

seems to be a move touching stereotypical cords of weak women unable to deal with difficulties. After the illness she is still vulnerable, and confesses:

I was continually on the verge of weeping.

Tears stood like pin pricks in the backs of my eyes. I was prepared to cry over anything. Martin called from the university to say he would be staying late to work. He didn't say what he would be working on, but we both knew; and when I thought of him in his cork-walled solitude, selecting and blending his wools, threading his needles and weaving away, woof and warp, in and out, I wanted to sob with anguish. (118)

She describes her bodily reaction towards the new situation. Men are not affected while Judith is unable to cope with her subjects' total evasion of her.

Finally, the narrator expresses a similar disappointment towards the third male character prominent in the novel, John Spalding. It seems that he is completely "fabricated" by her as his story, until the final chapters of the book, is Judith's speculation. Initially, she does not meet him personally. He is the landlord of the English house that Judith and Martin stay in for a year. Via objects found in the house, notes and Spalding's unpublished novels, Judith creates a picture of a broken man. As a biographer she manipulates the material and adjusts it to fit her theory of Spalding's failure as an "unblushing" male. First of all, in her opinion his masculinity cannot be realised through work. He writes novels which always get rejected by publishers. From his notes she infers that he suffers from megalomania, which is an indirect reflection of Judith who seems so sure that she has "pinned down" and understands the men in her life. She quotes Spalding: "This constant rejection is finally taking its

toll. I honestly believe I am the next Shakespeare, but without some sign of recognition, how can I carry on?" (44). This excerpt from Spalding's diary is followed by another, equally condemning the man: "Constipation. It seems I am meant to suffer. An hour today in the bathroom – the most painful so far. It is easy to blame I. Fried bread every morning. I am sick with grease. I am losing my grip" (44). The two quotations out of context suggest Spalding is acting like a self-obsessed hypochondriac. He stands for a parody of the concept of "masculinity in crisis." Spalding's "suffering" is ridiculed even by his wife, which is visibly stressed in another quotation: "have not heard from publishers yet and it is now three months. No news is good news, I tell I. She smirks. Bitch, bitch, bitch" (44). Judith completes a picture of an unsuccessful artist, suffering physically and being humiliated by his wife. The man she creates can be pitied, which is what the narrator needs to fulfil her own ambitions.

Judith also discovers signs of Spalding's unsuccessful sex-life, strewn about the flat like a mouldering marriage map; ancient douche bag under a pile of sheets in the airing cupboard; *The Potent Male* in paper-back between the bedsprings; a disintegrating diaphragm, dusty with powder in a zippered case; rubber safes sealed in plastic and hastily stuffed behind a crusted vaseline jar; half-squeezed tubes of vaginal jelly, sprays, circular discs emptied of birth control pills – didn't that woman ever throw anything away – stains on the mattress, brown-edged, stiff to the touch, ancient, untended. (41)

This passage disqualifies not only Spalding in terms of a successful male – the trappings of his sex-life are mouldering and seem to be ancient – but also Isabel Spalding whose image is far from a perfect housewife. The narrator sees the Spaldings as an awkward and ill-adjusted couple. But she admits that she is partial in her judgment:

Poor John Spalding, how I added him up. ...

The task of the biographer is to enlarge on available data.

The total image would never exist were it not for the careful daily accumulation of details. I had long since memorized the working axioms, the fleshy certitudes. Thus I peered into cupboards thinking. 'Tell me what a man eats and I will tell you who he is.' While examining the bookshelves, recalled that, 'A man's sensitivity is indexed in his library.' While looking into the household accounts – 'A man's bank balance betrays his character.' Into his medicine cabinet – 'A man's weakness is outlined by the medicines which enslave him.' (40-41)

So Judith the biographer admits that she creates the picture of her subject based on clichés and stereotypes. Since she does not meet him at that point in time she is free to fantasise about him. And precisely because he is not able to defend himself, he easily falls prey to her drive to treat men as subjects and confirm her theory that they all undergo masculinity crises to some extent. However, John Spalding, just like Martin and Furlong, disappoints her. When he comes to visit the Gills towards the end of the novel, he is a different kind of man than Judith wanted him to be. Once again the male character escapes Judith's judgement and frames prepared for him in her narrative. He appears to

be robust and self-confident. His novel just got accepted for publication. Judith is tricked twice since his successful novel is about the Gills' stay in England. Judith, who stole one of Spalding's plots for her novel, is now robbed of the rights to her own story.

All the three male characters, even though narrated by Judith, are in a way larger than she expects them to be. As a modern woman she predicts men's insecurities in the new era. Feminism entailed a shift in men's position, often with unclear direction for them. The concept of men in crisis is ubiquitous in the late 1970s. Yet, the female biographer of Shields's novel, so prepared to see men in such a light, is constantly disappointed. Shields brilliantly captures the still strong position of men and the uncertainties and insecurities of women. Judith feels protective towards her male subjects as long as she feels her power over them. According to her judgement they should be confused, rejected and lost in the changing gender order. Yet, when it appears that they are fairly confident in their new ways and easily find their niches, they are successful professionals with new ideas, acknowledged and valued in their circles, she panics. Shields's novel shows that it is a modern woman who is still at a loss to adjust fully. Men adapt quickly and remain strong, while women want to predict and come up with logical conclusions and ultimately they fail in their judgement. Judith's story shows how women are tricked once again by failing to spot the moment of masculine triumph over them.

Shields's second novel, *The Box Garden*, is a continuation of sorts of *Small Ceremonies*. Once again Shields employs a first-person narrative, and the narrator is a woman, Judith's sister Charleen to be precise. This female narrator focuses on two men: her ex-husband, Watson Forrest, and her partner,

Eugene O’Neil. Their characters are built in opposition to each other, presenting different types of masculinity: the first one is a failed idealist, the second a successful professional. The situation is different to the one the reader senses in *Small Ceremonies* because Charleen builds the characters without preconceptions about them. Thus, she is not as disappointed with them as Judith. Judith starts as the all-knowing and all-encompassing narrator who gradually loses control over her subjects; with Charleen, the situation is reversed. She does not prepare any frames for her male characters and thus discovers them freely and slowly while discovering herself. Her self-confidence and self-understanding grows gradually throughout the narrative, and it is projected onto her perception of the men in her life.

Watson, on the surface, represents the culture initiated in the 1950s that Barbara Ehrenreich calls the male “flight from commitment.” According to Ehrenreich, when men realised that getting married and having dependent wives did not need to be their priority they started procrastinating and engaging in new countercultures. The idea of fighting “the establishment” dominated and in the early 1980s. Ehrenreich writes of this trend, “The man who postpones marriage even into middle age, who avoids women who are likely to become financial dependents, who is dedicated to his own pleasures, is likely to be found not suspiciously deviant, but ‘healthy’” (12). It is a statement very critical of alternatives to the traditional nuclear family, so ubiquitous nowadays but fairly new and shocking sixty years ago. Shields employs a character, who after initial marriage, is not able to fit into the conventional constraints of society. He abandons his family and moves to a hippie commune. The whole process, however, is more complex. As Charleen sees it, the change within

Watson was happening gradually and had a broader context. In this case the concept of performance is crucial. Watson is represented as a male character in constant crisis. As Charleen recalls, he could never fit into a particular masculinity pattern. His life-story, similarly to Larry's from *Larry's Party*, is divided into stages. However, in Larry's case the male character is looking for his own pattern to follow while Watson forcefully and deliberately imposes certain roles upon himself and adjusts. As the narrator understands in hindsight:

Watson ... was a man without a centre; he took on a colour of whichever landscape he happened to stumble across.... [He was] like an actor who plays a number of roles one after the other, roles which he takes up energetically but later, with a kind of wilful amnesia, shakes off and denies. ... Watson's first incarnation I can only theorize about: he must have been a sort of child prodigy hatched into an otherwise undistinguished Scarborough family, bringing home to his bus-driver father and seamstress mother miraculous report cards and brimming with a kind of juicy, pedantic, junior-sized zeal. But by the time I met him, he had left that scrubbed good-son image behind and transformed himself into a studied, lazy dreamer of a student, tenderly anarchic, determinedly bumbling and odd. Oh, very, very odd. A structured oddity, though, which both thrilled and terrified him; he needed someone, me, to bring reality to the role. Later, as a married graduate student in Vancouver he had stunned me with a whole new set of mannerisms and attitudes;

he literally fought his way into all-roundedness ... I had not quite loved his Young Professor Self, his two year retreat ... into piped and tolerant middle-class academe. ... It had been during that period we actually bought a house with a garden. And actually conceived, with brooding deliberation, a child. ... But already he was on his way to his next creation: rebellious young intellectual. ... As he careened towards thirty, he seemed to dissolve and reform with greater frequency, and each reincarnation introduced a new, more difficult strain of madness.” (Shields, *The Box* 347-348)

Watson constantly puts on a performance and, as the narrator notices, it is a very conscious and carefully rehearsed one. Each new incarnation is marked by external signs: he changes the way he speaks, behaves and dresses. He deliberately alters modes of being, always uncertain of his performance. At another stage his clothes will be a tangible sign of his new role. The narrator is devastated upon realising that he consciously chooses to bring her into his life as an element of his masquerade and then to leave her and their son in order to forget and shut himself from that stage in his life.

Watson represents another male character ill-fitting with the male sex role and seeking his alternative version of masculinity or trying to escape any rigour of regulated social context. However, he even goes beyond that. In the face of hippie culture disappearing and its members returning to more conventional lifestyles, Watson goes “East” towards Eastern meditation and religion and he finally becomes a recluse, calling himself Brother Adam. The route Shields chooses for her protagonist shows a certain pattern: in trying to

negate the Establishment, Watson falls into a trap of blindly conforming to new fashions and alternatives. He is frightened of remaining behind, always struggling to present himself as somebody else, but always somebody to be admired for his spirit. By trying to escape conformity he in fact conforms to alternative lifestyles. And just as being a hippie he will not wear a necktie as it symbolises enslavement to the capitalist society, he will elect to conform to wearing a signifier of hippie culture – a headband. Charleen hates it as it represents his desperate struggle to project his image of a free person by enslaving himself into another pattern with its strict rules. As she tells her sister, she is physically sick when she sees Watson with his head band on:

I wouldn't have minded if someone had given him the head band, one of his students maybe, but what killed me was the deliberation of it all, that he woke up one day and decided to go to a store – it was at Woolworth's – and buy himself an Indian head band. And then picking it out and paying for it and then slipping it on his head. And looking at himself in the mirror.

(288)

This passage evokes again the issue of masquerade and the role it plays in gender construction. The headband is a symbol not only of belonging to a certain social group but also of a type of man Watson wants to pass for. It is a free-thinking model defying the Establishment and all forms of its domination. The necessity to use a headband to show affiliation to a particular lifestyle shows the ultimate failure of the concept of freedom. Clothes seem to be necessary attributes not only of image-building but also of masculinity projection. Watson ends up alone surrounded only by mirrors that will

constitute the audience for his performance in order to make it meaningful. By constructing a male character like Watson, Shields shows a very confused masculinity type unable to be successful. Watson does not grow into his roles but deliberately prepares them for himself and denies himself any right to act outside the script. As Brother Adam, a recluse living in his solitary confinement, he seeks contact with Charleen but then retreats and escapes into his new incarnation.

Eugene O'Neil, in contrast, represents a very schematic and predictable character. A divorced orthodontist with two children, he is longing to commit again and support Charleen emotionally and financially. It seems that he needs a patriarchal family to fulfil his image of successful masculinity. Shields's choice to introduce his ex-wife as an angry feminist who leaves him for the Women's Movement is quite significant. In this early novel the reader senses Shields's initial distancing from feminism. As she admitted, she was "one of these women in between, too late to be an old-style woman and too early to be a new-style woman" (Wachtel 39), always deferring to men. Although she introduces Eugene's ex-wife Jeri through his accounts, so the source is unreliable, the picture is backed up by numerous examples that unequivocally condemn her. The feminist type is portrayed using popular stereotypes about angry and disappointed women joining the movement. The reader finds out that "she was always something of a bitch" (235), "she seemed to be mad at the whole world" (236) and "she was just plain angry. An angry, angry woman" (237) forever complaining in public places and unpleasant to others. It seems that she leaves her husband out of her anger and desperation and turns against all men. In Jeri's case the feminist cause is not a woman's standing up to

injustice but simply a way of letting go of her innate anger. Such a female character is a counterpart to Watson. Shields shows that both men and women find it difficult to adjust to the changing world, which results in huge frustration for them.

Eugene and Charleen represent similar, very moderate types. They are both social “losers ... The hapless rejectees, the jilted partners of people stronger than [themselves]” (235), which is why they can make a future together. Moderate Eugene can project a very successful masculinity type thanks to his well-paid professional career. In the new society men are most often defined by what they do and how much they earn, and as “masculinity is shaped, not in a relation to a specific *workplace*, but in relation to the *labour market as a whole*, which shapes [men’s] experience as an alternation of work and unemployment” (Connell, *Masculinities* 95), Eugene fits in the labour market perfectly. He earns “respectable” wages, so can fit into the model of modern masculinity. Shields decides to play with the reader even further and when Charleen’s son gets kidnapped Eugene surprisingly comes out as a charismatic type able to control a difficult situation. He surprises her: he is not as predictable as the narrator assumed, and she finds the element of uncertainty, so appealing to her in Watson, also in Eugene. The contrast between the two male protagonists is quite schematic and Charleen’s decision not to wait for Watson any longer and finally “accept” Eugene is rather mechanical. She confesses about Watson: “in an entirely hopeless way I know I am still half-expecting him to turn up, remorseful, shriven, redeemed. Why else am I keeping Eugene waiting if not for my poor bone of expectation?” (Shields, *The Box* 350). But when she finally meets her ex-husband again after

years, she is disappointed with his inability to change and lets him flee into his new hopeless incarnation. Not surprisingly, at this point Eugene is more appealing as a partner. Suddenly, she sees him in a different light: “Something happens: I look at Eugene in a frenzy of tenderness and begin to be happy” (393). It will be a beginning of a new relationship for them in which she accepts Eugene’s protection and traditional model of a family.

As I stressed in the Introduction to this thesis, Shields places a lot of emphasis on the relations between generations: the difference between her male protagonists and their fathers, and their relationship with their mothers. At this early stage in her writing she is not yet focusing direct attention on such issues. The reader of *Small Ceremonies* does not find out much about the male characters’ parents apart from the fact that Martin’s father is also a scholar and along with his mother they share a “perfect accord with which they underscore their son’s ability” (*Small* 91). However, paradoxically, they seem to understand their son better than his wife does. They are not shocked at his weaving idea and what is more, the enterprise is initiated as a response to a diagram Martin sees in his father’s office. The compromise between the two generations seems to be easier than between the husband and wife. In the 1970s the gender gap presents a much bigger issue than a generation gap. Judith and Charleen’s father gradually withdraws from existence, leaving no traces after himself for he had no stories to narrate in his life, while the mother rages with a never-ending drive to change, move and control others. The influence of language and its development on the evolution of male protagonists will be closely analysed by Shields in her later novels, for example *The Stone Diaries* and *Larry’s Party*, however in this early novel she signals the importance of

narratives to the characters' existence. The two sisters' drive to be creative and tell stories stems from their upbringing deprived of this privilege. Judith in her story reports: "My sister Charleen, who is a poet, believes that we the two sisters turned to literature out of simple malnutrition. Our own lives just weren't enough, she explains. We were underfed, undernourished; we were desperate. So we dug in. And here we are, all these years later, still digging" (*Small* 54). So their family legacy is their hunger for stories and narratives which spurs their creative expression. The only father who is represented in detail, and contrasted with his son and the new generation he stands for, is Eugene's father. Eugene is successful in his orthodontist's profession and via this route he realises his accomplished masculinity while his father, as is very often the case with Shields's characters, represents the previous era. He stands for the patriarchal type whose hard physical work and subordinated wife mark his traditionally successful manhood. Eugene's view of life is always filtered through the limitations of his father, for whom he feels pity. His "reflections are necessarily rimmed with regret, for his father, a hard-working farmer on a piece of worthless land, lived a life of unrelieved narrowness" (*The Box* 251). The new generation understands the tragedy and narrowness of the old. There was no room for free-thinking and choice, and everybody had to fit into unified standard of the prescribed sex-role. The most pitiable story that Eugene recalls is when his father decides to teach him about the nature of sexual intercourse and becomes humiliated by a woman putting on "The Hole Show." He feels sorry for his father and the values he stands for and affirms the superiority of the model he pursues.

The two novels clearly deal with the difficult issues between men and women in the 1970s. However, in *Small Ceremonies* Shields puts more emphasis on the difficulty the female narrator is having with defining male characters. They are more elusive more than she projects, and the tone of the novel points in the direction of a forever stronger position of men even when they are dealing with contemporary crises, an issue that will be conspicuous throughout Shields's corpus. Paradoxically, Judith – a new type of woman – has more problems with accepting the new masculinity patterns and the easiness with which they become the norm. *The Box Garden* deals with the issue differently. Charleen learns to understand the types of men in her life but she does not impose a designed frame upon them. The novel shows the process of discovering two very schematic masculinity types. On the surface one is charismatic and the other predictable; yet, it appears that Watson will never be able to find a comfortable masculinity for himself, while Eugene with his successful profession, resourcefulness and good understanding of his inheritance will be a man to rely on. The overturning of gender roles, the difficulty in accepting them on parts of both genders, contemporary family crises and the emergence of new indefinable masculinities are topics discussed in all of Shields's novels. The next chapter looks at the *Happenstance* novels and *A Celibate Season* and focuses on the complete reversal of traditional gender roles within a new-style American family, and potential difficulties and communication gaps it entails.

CHAPTER TWO

Post-modern construction of realities, feminism and the emergence of new masculinities in *Happenstance* and *A Celibate Season*

The *Happenstance* novels and *A Celibate Season* mark a new step in Shields's experimentation with narration and the point of view. They are both concerned with the postmodernist relationship of art to the outside world and the different constructions of reality that art allows, the impact of language upon social concerns and the workings "between art and the structures of social and cultural power" (Hutcheon, *The Canadian* 9). The novels focus on the growing tensions between genders, on changing family structures and shifts in social and economical power. They employ various narrative techniques to provide the reader with contrasting or complementary points of view to enable him/her to evoke their own understanding of the stories and the presented reality. Different narrative voices manipulate the reader's understanding of the story and thus encourage the enactment of their own version– the process of creation resultant from active participation of the writer, the reader and the text.

The novels brilliantly capture tension connected with second-wave feminism. Women disillusioned with their roles as the "happy housewife heroine[s]" want to reach beyond immanence (Friedan 30). In so doing, they temporarily gain more self-confidence and they start believing in the possibility of a different life, while their husbands temporarily lose their ground and feel threatened. However, I assert that the novels project initial failure of the movement's impact on individual households. Female characters in

Happenstance and *A Celibate Season* are given a chance discover their artistic and professional potential, yet they are forced to go back to their roles as wives and mothers. Men, on the other hand, as it is the case of male characters in *Duet*, come out victorious and more powerful. Women and men redefine themselves given the new socio-political situation of the 1980s, but women, in spite of their gains, need to take a step back, while men once again stay ahead. Social arrangements still need redefinition in order to let women fulfill their roles outside their households. These novels initiate the discussion of the wives' potential and ability to pursue their careers, which is hampered by the fact that they are not relieved of their full-time jobs as housewives and mothers. Their husbands are happy to single out advantages from their partners' achievements (e.g. financial profits), but are not willing to give up their privileges. As a result, again men benefit from gender arrangements, while women are forced to pay a double price for having a glimpse into a more just world that could be theirs.

The *Happenstance* novels consist of two books initially published separately, with a three-year break between them, focusing on the same time span and on the same family but the stories are told from two different perspectives: that of a husband and that of a wife. Different narrators and focalisers change the gender balance along with the emphases of the stories and, as a result, present different realities. His-story is confronted with her-story. *A Celibate Season* introduces yet another dimension of narration as it is in an epistolary form documenting the correspondence of a married couple during a temporary separation due to work commitments. The novel was produced as a result of genuine letter exchange between two writers, Carol

Shields and Blanche Howard, in which Shields decided to write the part of the husband. All three novels, via their experimental construction, their unconventional narration and subject matter, engage in discussion of postmodernism, feminism, and primarily of the emergence of new models of family life and men's confusion and loss in the new reality. Shifting narrators and focalisers allow the author/s' play with conventional expectations and attempt to show how the emphasis changes according to gender perspective.

The construction of the novels is inextricably connected with the topic. They all document a temporary separation of married couples whose initial division of labour was fairly conventional for their times. The *Happenstance* novels were conceived and published between the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, while *A Celibate Season* was written in the mid-1980s but then constantly reworked, updated and finally published in 1991. Separated by less than a decade they already present a different balance of power within a typical household. *Happenstance* presents an arrangement in which the wife is a traditional mother and housekeeper. The husband is better educated and he works professionally, being the sole provider for his family. In *A Celibate Season* both the husband and the wife work professionally (he is an architect and she is a lawyer), which already marks a more modern relationship. The spouses here are presented as believing themselves to be very open-minded towards gender equality. Jock (Jocelyn Selby, the wife) writes in one of her letters about the conversation she had with a fellow commissioner concerning their teenage son:

George and I had a coffee together and I told him about Greg's sudden surliness, and he said, "Do you think it might have something to do with the changed role models?"

I said no, that I've always worked (outside the home, I'd better train myself to add that when Jessica is around), at least since Greg was quite young.

"Maybe", George said, "he can manage his mother in a secondary role, eh? But not in the breadwinner's shoes."

Good Lord, I thought. Our children would be much too enlightened for that, I mean, remember when we got Mia the truck for Christmas and gave the Cabbage Patch Doll to Greg? Remember the disbelief – nay, outrage – on the faces of The Mothers? (Remember – oh Lord – how fast truck got traded for doll?) Society's expectations again – with the added weight of not one but two dedicated grandmothers. (58-59)

The above quotation shows the shift from a more traditional family model as presented in *Happenstance* and suggests a deliberate overthrowing of gendered preconceptions. It also hints at the clash of generations where "The Mothers," who represent the older generation, would not support the modern approach to gender liberation and would instigate the return to more traditional arrangements. The generational gap will be discussed later in the chapter, but for now I would like to highlight the time of the narration, that is the time when the roles of the spouses get reversed.

Brenda Bowman (the wife from *Happenstance* who slowly becomes a semi-professional quilter) temporarily leaves her traditional space, that is her

home in Chicago, and goes in a new professional capacity to a National Handicraft Expedition in Philadelphia, leaving her husband behind to take over the household responsibilities. Jock from *A Celibate Season* moves from her home in Vancouver all the way to Ottawa to serve as a legal counsel on a government commission on the feminisation of poverty. Brenda leaves for four days and Jock for ten months but the implications are similar. The women abandon the traditionally feminine realm of existence, that is the house, and men take over their responsibilities and temporarily become “the ladies of the house.” During that time the women come to understand their opportunity for a redefined place and role in society enabled by a growing prominence of feminism. Such reversing of roles leads to insightful reflections about the possible development of gender order and its implications. Further, the post-modern narrative techniques enable a construction of a story with multi-layered points of view in order to throw into question the validity of singular narratives and perspectives. Such questioning of established norms also applies here to social conventions and the established standard gendered order.

Happenstance emphasises such reversing of roles and its consequences but also shows how the core of the traditional structures resists gender equality. There are new possibilities for a woman who realises her talent and ability to be independent (and not only defined in terms of her husband); and new possibilities for a man who discovers his potential to change. The husband, Jack, initially is presented as lost, uncomprehending and unable to participate in real-life events. He is “a secondary-source man” (Shields, *The Husband's* 119), listening to the accounts of others but isolated from the happenings themselves. He is contrasted with his wife who, in his opinion, is better

prepared to deal with modern requirements. The male-focused narration in the early stages of the book points out that

Jack lacked, it seemed, Brenda's talent, the specialized sensitivity to qualify as decoder of modern life; his conclusions were slower to ripen, and Brenda's pronouncements, though delivered with chiming friendliness, carried with them a faint whiff of custodianship. And the suggestion that he, Jack Bowman, was something of a social retardant, a woolly academic type for whom she was, nevertheless, willing to take responsibility. (29)

But during the course of the story the male character changes. He experiences a moment of "random illumination"¹ which enables him to overcome the initial difficulties and find a way forward. There is a hope that he successfully adapts to the new reality; "[Jack] had lost his faith; but had undergone a gradual and incomprehensible mending of spirit. It could happen again, he saw. And again" (193). It implies that the partial reversal of roles is not only of benefit for women but also it gives a new perspective and possibility of development to men.

The story is somehow different for Brenda. Initially a full-time housewife she learns about her artistic and professional potential. Realizing that she is able to define herself outside the traditional role of a wife and a mother she is allowed to choose something more than the domestic. However, the narrative points to quite a conservative approach. Brenda, who initially got

¹ Carol Shields's concept relating to "miraculous" moments of transcendence.

married because she “wanted to have a pink kitchen” (*The Wife’s* 109), continues to prize the safety of domesticity:

She has been one of the lucky ones, and in her handbag she carries charms to protect her: snapshots, a tarnished French coin, her mother’s old thimble, a newspaper clipping announcing Jack’s appointment to the Elm Park Heritage Committee. Even her keyring jingles with good fortune, promising provision, enclosure, safety. (113)

The story introduces a female construction feeling safe and comfortable in her traditional space. In spite of professional success she is sceptical of its possible implications. Seeing her quilt displayed on the exhibition among other quilts she feels it is vulnerable out of its safe place that is her workroom in her house. Hutcheon cites that “for biological and social reasons, women have had a different relationship to creation and being an artist than men have” (*The Canadian* 112), which suggests a similarity of a creative process to childbearing and homemaking. This relationship is symbolically represented in Brenda’s case as her quilt, the labour of her love, was born in her house and the creatrix worries over its safety in the outside world. It is a part of her creation, just like her children are, and she would like to carry it to safety. When Brenda watches the workmen handling her quilt in an instrumental way, devoid of affection,

A sharp longing for home strikes her, and she yearns for her backyard with the stillness of elm and oak and leafless hedge, for Hap Lewis with her rich, nutritious laughter, for the hanging plants leafing out, even for the children’s voices below, arguing,

yelling, but making the walls vibrate and breath. *The Second Coming* seems lost in this enormous exhibition hall. Brenda would like to carry it away, off to her hotel room, put it on her narrow bed, lie down on its bracing squares of yellow. (*The Husband's* 120)

Her artistic creation comes as naturally as giving birth and raising children. The two, being so close in nature, will not allow the woman to have to choose between them as in the feminine context they are knit together. Brenda, even though changed, will go back to her old responsibilities and her old role of a wife and mother. Yet, she will be conscious of her double nature and her creative powers. Before falling asleep she will experience

the return of her younger self, the Brenda of old – serene, unruffled, uncritical, untouched by darkness or death or complex angers – a self that is curiously, childishly brave. The visitation is usually short in duration, but cordial. Brenda, older, less happy, but unconquerably sane, greets her old ally and merges with her briefly. Then, in the minutes before true sleep comes, she lets go, and drifts away on her own. (*The Wife's* 197)

It shows the consciousness and self-understanding of the existence of two Bendas: one, the Brenda of old dreaming of a husband and a pink kitchen; and the new self-conscious Brenda, the artist, a woman knowing her worth and potential but deliberately choosing to be home.

The swapping of traditional gender roles is more complicated in *A Celibate Season*. Here the tension between the domestic and the professional has more dimensions. Jock, the wife, is a new type of professional woman who

contributes regularly to the household income by working outside the house. The story starts when the husband, Chas, is temporarily unemployed and the weight of supporting the family financially falls entirely on the woman's shoulders. A wife and a mother, Jock, travels all the way to Ottawa to work for the government in order to earn her family's living. The tension over the household territory unfolds with the husband comfortably taking over and slowly imposing his new vision of the house. He even symbolically moves his drawing table into the kitchen – a sphere traditionally associated with women – and finally rebuilds the house without consulting the wife. Jock, although claiming in her letters to be finding her life's fulfilment while working for the commission: "I feel, maybe for the first time, like a legitimate person who has serious work to do. Yes, I do – I feel *legitimate*" (Shields, Howards 120), wants to keep "her" house intact as if symbolically projecting her return to the old arrangements. When she comes home for Christmas and finds the house rebuilt she is furious. Later she writes:

Of course I'm sorry for the way I acted – bursting into tears in your very own home whose every corner you've mopped, scrubbed, painted, and loved, and whose interior reflects your soul just as faithfully as the clothing you wear and the shade of lipstick – I can't go on.

To walk into a place you've longed for every day for four months and to find it has disappeared, overlaid by a jumble of two-by-fours and plastic sheeting that barely keeps the gale force winds at bay – God, you'd have cried too if you hadn't been the creator/destroyer. Sorry. (107)

The authors introduce the danger coming from the changed gender roles and the confusion to which they lead. Chas feels very comfortable as “the lady of the house,” even realizing that his newly found part-time job is “cutting into [his] time” (135). Yet, ironically, Chas is surrounded by an army of women helping him with cooking, cleaning and taking care of the children. He happily waits for his wife’s paycheques; “have you heard any more about your pay coming through?” (55), and engages in composing poems in the meantime. His confession, “Can you imagine a grown man spending an entire morning writing four lines?” (72) suggests his awareness that he is leaving behind the role of a stereotypical “male.” *A Celibate Season* goes a step further than *Happenstance* in its envisioning of potential negative consequences of the new gender order and presents a more bleak vision of the new marriage. Whereas the man here finds a comfortable way to enjoy all his patriarchal privileges and even more, the wife adds to her responsibilities, in the meantime losing control of the house. Both novels suggest the inherent inability of women to leave the domestic behind and their disagreement with the new order introduced by their male partners.

In *A Celibate Season* this tendency is portrayed even more visibly as the woman verbalises her discovery of a new self and of her potential. She consciously wants to choose the professional over the domestic. As we read in one of her letters: “But if I get the appointment, I know it would mean more time away from home and of course that worries me. But it would mean more money for weekend visits, and – oh, hell, I don’t know. I just can’t help yearning after it. In spite of what it might do to us. And already has” (172). The authors construct a mother and wife who wants to work beyond the realm of

the house. Working on the commission makes her “feel legitimate” and she believes that what she does bears more significance than everything she has achieved so far: “the Commission has been ... the most tremendous experience of my life” (120). Even though the female character seems ready to choose career over her family, she is not given a chance. She does not get selected to do further work on the Commission and has to head back home.

The novel portrays a vicious cycle and certain gender predestination. The man manages to keep all the privileges to himself and emerges victorious (he establishes his own business, his first poems get published and he even manages to engage in a threesome before his wife returns). The experience of the months apart also helps him find his own way in life, and after the publication of the second poem he writes to Jock: “I, too, felt suddenly legitimate. I know now what you meant, Jock. I felt new-born” (217). And it is the female character that is forced to give up the adventure and go back to the domestic. The woman is not allowed to enjoy her legitimacy and in spite of the ironic and sometimes comical tone of the story the final message seems to be quite sad. Jock confesses in an unsent letter how she feels about going back home: “I was reluctant to go home to Vancouver, ... I was scared to death to go home to Vancouver. ... there might be nothing there” (209). But she goes back, “resuming [her] life, chafing under its restraints perhaps, but relishing its familiarity” (212). The reader of both of the novels senses the underlying notion of the domestic as the safety zone for women, to which they always return despite their new realisations and discoveries. In this way the novels show a clash between feminist ideals and practice that will be highlighted in all Shields’s texts.

The *Happenstance* novels and *A Celibate Season* offer the reader a unique ability to see the story from both gender perspectives. Following the post-modern notion that telling of a story is always inaccurate and that the process of recording is inseparable from the process of inventing, the stories offer different versions and diverse perspectives on events described. Such a construction shows that there is no one version of a story as every participant sees and understands it differently. This idea ties postmodernism with feminist standpoint theory which emerged roughly at the same time as the discussed novels were conceived. As standpoint theory noticed, the “social location of women and other oppressed groups could be the source of illuminating knowledge about themselves and the rest of nature and social relations” (Harding 4). The novels draw on that possibility, presenting the story from a man’s and a woman’s point of view and showing how the story possibly differs. The books embrace the notion of knowledge as always socially situated and that “different experiences enable different perceptions of ourselves and our environments” (7). The characters in the stories change their understanding of their immediate reality, of themselves and of each other as a result of completely new experiences following the separation.

The *Happenstance* novels offer a unique insight into certain situations as seen through the eyes of the husband and the wife, and explore their diverse comprehension of them. Alex Ramon notices that even though the spouses in these novels perceive many elements of the surrounding reality differently, and have faulty preconceptions about themselves and each other, the reader is able to perceive their inherent similarities and the unity of experience. Ramon dwells on the notion of “separateness” and shows how “a number of

disparities, misunderstandings and failed remembrances relating to the characters' *personal history*" (Ramon 50) create the impression of characters' isolation from each other. He explains how crucial the two parts of the story are to each other:

The novel seems to present public history as a masculine discourse and contrast an isolated male character with a socially adept and communicative female. *The Wife's Story*, however, challenges such simple binaries. Indeed, one of the principal revelations of this text is that, in contrast to Jack's claims for Brenda's sense of estrangement – his view of her as "*on that side*" – Brenda is experiencing a sense of "estrangement" and "dislocation" which is analogous to Jack's own. (51)

The characters fail to perceive the obvious similarities which Ramon calls unarticulated "similarities in male and female 'emotional experience' of the world" (52). He also challenges Sarah Gamble's suggestion that "Brenda's story ... offers a completely contrasting perspective on events" and that the characters' "separate points of view on the same events are entirely different" (Gamble 48), which in his opinion is "to ignore the doubleness of Shields's perspective and the affinities which the companion form is once again used to construct. The protagonists' failure to realise the connectives in their separate formulations of their past should not deter readers from such a 'realisation'" (Ramon 53). The balance between sameness and difference here is very difficult to establish. Even though the characters experience similar emotions they fail to recognise the affinity with the other one. Shields always insisted on the similarities, rather than differences between women and men. Reflecting on

the writing of *Happenstance* she said: “I really do think that men and women are more alike than we admit” (Wachtel 42). *The Wife’s Story* offers an explanation, a correction of certain misunderstandings but one has to bear in mind that the texts initially were a separate beings, existing on their own and thus leaving more room for independent interpretation.

In *A Celibate Season* the two authors come up with two different voices but again the spouses come through similar phases. As was mentioned before, they both set off from a seemingly liberal view on gender and the position of men and women in the family. They both agree on the separation and the changed gender roles and decide to keep in touch by writing letters. What becomes more and more significant with each letter is the lack of real communication between them. They just inform each other about their decisions, disregarding the opinion of the other. There is no real dialogue between the spouses; there seems to be a constant exchange of monologues, as it is at one point noticed by Chas: “Tell me something, Jock – do you actually read the letters I write to you or do you have your secretary file them away still sealed in envelopes?” (Shields, Howards 174). The spouses somehow ignore what the other has said which seems to be due to the fact that they temporarily inhabit two completely different spheres. As Wilson Yates notices: “The enemy of dialogue is monologue. ... Monologue constricts, abstracts, objectifies, casts the other into social roles, and presumes power over the other. It creates a closed world. By contrast dialogue creates a world that is open, responsive, unfolding” (Adams, Yates 20). The letters composing the novel constitute monologues rather than dialogues in relation to each other. The world envisioned in the letters is closed and constricted. It is based on

preconceptions and objectifies the addressees. The recipients of the letters have no voice that cannot influence the other “reality.” The spouses inhabit two different places physically and figuratively and even when they try to intersect in one of them it results in a failure; Jock on coming back home for Christmas break is so infuriated by the changes in the house that she is not able to communicate and have sex with her husband, and by the time they meet in Winnipeg it is Chas’s turn to be unresponsive.

Even though both characters go through similar changes in their personal developments they are unable to recognise the affinities. The epistolary form of the novel helps the reader realise how the words hit the vacuum and how the spouses slowly come apart when in fact the experiences they are going through could be potentially bringing them together. This somehow has been verbalised in one of Jock’s letters: “Yes, sometimes it seems to me that men and women advance through time along parallel lines that obey the laws of geometry and never truly intersect” (Shields, Howard 86). Women and men follow the road to self-fulfilment, but even though they head in the same direction, it is always done separately. The factor that does not allow them to realise and appreciate the similarities is the socially encoded gender order where women and men are made to occupy different spheres. For example, as feminist theorist A. Jaggar paraphrases Nancy Hartsock: “Women’s domestic work mediates much of men’s contact with natural substances; women cook the food that men eat and wash the toilet bowls that men use. This sexual division of labour hardly permits women to think in abstractions” (Jaggar 58). Women do not lack the ability to deal with the abstract but they have been traditionally forced into the realm of immanence.

Men enjoy their privileged position because women do the work that facilitates “man’s occupation of the conceptual mode of action” (58). Masculine (or: phallocratic) domination makes it incredibly difficult for women to make their own informed choices. They are forced into following a certain pattern and even when they break away from the cycle it is only temporary. The novels’ heroines are expected by society to come back to their “responsibilities” that make men’s lives easier. Men in both novels emerge victorious. Even though they go through a period of turbulence and swapping of gender roles, they end up in their own privileged position, as is the case in *Small Ceremonies*.

Another point worth paying attention to in the masculinity/femininity context would be the nature of relationships between men as contrasted with relationships between women. As the two genders inhabit different realms of everyday reality the natural consequence should be a different importance and ordering of their gendered friendships. Women’s intimacy gets contrasted with men’s homosocial bonds. Women in *Happenstance* communicate with one another but stop their conversations when a man is around. When Jack wants to find out about the nature of women’s bonds he does not get an answer, rather his long-term friendship with Bernie Kolz comes under assault:

‘What do you talk about all the time?’ he’d asked her.

‘Everything,’ she’d answered. And then, seeing his expression, smiled cannily and added, ‘well, almost everything.’

‘Such as?’

‘It’s hard to say.’

‘Why?’

She looked at him. 'Well for one thing, we don't assign topics the way you and Bernie do.'

Her tone was reasonable but pointed. Her eyes watched his. He knew, of course, he has always known, that she lacked faith in his friendship with Bernie. 'Is Bernie really a *close* friend?' she'd asked him not long ago.

'Of course he's a close friend. Jesus.'

'How can he be if you never really talk?'

'We talk. You know we talk.'

'But you never...you never reminisce.' (Shields, *The Husband's* 48-49)

Here again the affinity between the man and the woman is not possible. Brenda questions the nature of her husband's friendship with Bernie because it's different from her friendships with women. However, the reader of both parts of the story is able to see again the similarity of all-male and all-female friendships. The idea of the untold, unverballed connection is crucial to both of them. In the story where Jack is the focaliser the narrator describes moments in which Jack and Bernie reach an intimate understanding beyond words:

the Fridays, at their best, had given him some of the most profoundly happy moments of his life. ... On good days, on lucky days, the antiphonic reverberations heightened like sex his sense of being alive in the world, of being, perhaps, a serious man, even a good man. He felt strange pricklings at the backs of his hands, and a pressure in his chest of something being satisfied and answered. Not that the satisfaction was actually

sexual; it was something else, something different but akin to the kind of ecstasy he felt lying in bed with Brenda ..., the singular and untellable sense of arrival. (54-55)

The homosocial context of male friendship is clearly highlighted in this passage. It suggests that with Bernie Jack arrives at satisfaction akin to the sexual act with Brenda. In a way it points to the fact that the male protagonist is not able to communicate with his wife beyond the realm of the domestic. It might be due to gender difference but also an educational one. Jack does not see Brenda as an equal companion for a conversation; conversely Brenda does not believe in any substance at the core of her husband's friendship with Bernie. Jack fails to notice, however, that his wife finds her own language and a form of artistic expression. Quilting becomes not a harmless hobby, as he envisaged, but a fully developed art form worth considerable sums of money as it appears.

Shields provides also an insightful analysis of female friendship. Brenda experiences an understanding akin to the one existing between her husband and his friend, with her neighbour Hap Lewis. Hap is a woman sharing Brenda's immediate reality, that is gender, class, education and sexuality, and thus understanding the significance of the changes going on in women's lives at the described period of time. Hap instantly recognises the energy and the message encoded in Brenda's new quilt - the expression of a new understanding of a feminine self – the meaning which her husband is unable to perceive. She says: "I mean, Brenda, you've done it. You know what I mean. There's something so contained about this, not quiet exactly, but you know, slow-moving, like someone trying to say something, but they can't get

the words out. ... Energy contained – you know what I mean? About to jump out at you if you let it” (*The Wife’s* 19). Brenda feels enormous gratitude, recognizing the fellow creature that inhabits the same spiritual mode. They become metaphysically united:

They stood for a minute longer, holding the quilt up to the window. Brenda had the dizzying sensation of something biblical happening: two women at the well, gathering light in a net. Neither of them spoke, and the silence seemed to Brenda to be unbreakable and dipped into earlier memories of happiness.

(19)

The above quotation evokes a biblical scene of fishermen/apostles catching fish/souls in the net. The task historically and traditionally assigned to men now becomes a privilege of women as they gather light, symbolizing a new discovery, access to knowledge and a new understanding that has been granted to them.

This type of closeness and unconditional understanding as exemplified by Brenda and Hap is only possible between characters sharing the same reality. That is also the kind of bond that will not exist between a man and a woman as their worlds are too far apart. The placing of Jack and Bernie’s friendship in the context of class and gender reflects Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s statement that

changes in the structure of the continuum of male ‘homosocial desire’ were tightly, often causally bound up with the other more visible changes; that the emerging pattern of male friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry, and hetero- and homosexuality

was in an intimate and shifting relation to class; and that no element of the pattern can be understood outside of its own relation to women and the gender system as a whole. (1)

It implies that the homosocial is based on the isolating of a certain group of people from the rest. In part it is the difference from the other sex, in part the class and economic inequality that makes certain bonds impossible and others extremely strong. Drury Sherrod, a social psychologist researching friendship patterns, sheds some light on the possible explanations of the shape of male friendships and reminds us of the story of such relationships. The concept of the old-style male friendship comes from pre-industrial revolution times when getting married was treated very instrumentally and most marriages were arranged. Women and men had nothing to share on an intellectual level. All-male bonds were formed as men could lead informed conversations only with other men. The situation slowly changed and the post-industrial revolution marriages were constituted on different premises and thus “the new marriages allowed men to rely on women for emotional support, at the same time that the changing nature of work was making it harder for men to receive that support from other men” (232). Shields's novel comments on the changing male bonds. On the one hand, Jack believes in the possibility of intellectual connection only with Bernie, but, occasionally he is offered a glimpse of the superficiality of the arrangement. Jack slowly realises that in the post-industrial economic reality his friend is his potential opponent. What he does not realise yet, is that his artistic wife is ready to be his closest companion;

Occasionally Jack saw himself and Bernie as they really were, absurd and a little pitiful in their scrambling for the big T Truth,

a couple of self-conscious, third-rate, Midwestern pseudo-intellectuals, tongues loosened on cheap wine and cliché nihilism, playing a game in which there was more than a suggestion of posing. Much more. (Shields, *The Husband's* 54)

The implication of posing in a way negates the spiritual understanding and suggests a flaw in the male friendship. There is no similar suggestion concerning the friendship of Brenda and Hap, so the tone suggests a certain inability of men to spiritually unite. Shields herself admitted that one of the main focuses of the first part of *Happenstance* was the analysis of male friendship: “what do they mean? What do these silences between men mean? Does this mean that the friendships are superficial? In fact, I never quite resolved that one” (Wachtel 44). The mode of narration, especially paired with the other narrator focalizing on the woman, leaves the question open to the reader as well. But there is another interesting aspect of the above quotation, which is the implication of two different versions of the same friendship. Jack the focaliser projects the image of his relationship with Bernie from two contrasting and contradicting angles and the reader is left with the puzzle of which version to trust. Also the notion of performance is signalled here, but will be fully developed in Shields’s later novels, for example *Swann*, *The Stone Diaries* or *Larry's Party*.

A Celibate Season also engages in the discussion of friendships, although the epistolary narrative somehow limits the possibilities of interpretation. What the reader is not given insight into are any previous existing friendships of the Selbys, just into the ones developing at the time of the narrative. Chas slowly develops a friendship with his elderly neighbour Gill

Grogan but it seems to lack the depth of the long-term relationship of Jack and Bernie. Chas and Gill are rather forced by circumstances to keep each other company (Gill being a lonely widower and Chas temporarily “abandoned” by his wife and often neglected by his children and The Mothers). There is no real communication between the two. Again we witness an exchange of monologues as Chas reports their “reunion” meeting:

We discussed the weather. We discussed you and how you were coming with your French. ... We discussed the Lions and, after, the Canucks. Treasury bills are now a good investment, he informed me. ... I told him about my Creative Connections class and asked him if he knew the work of Austin Grey. “Who?” he barked politely. (Shields, Howards 106)

It points to the vanishing importance of homosocial bonds, especially if one bears in mind that Chas’s new friendships will be with women: his cleaner Sue and his poetry teacher Davina. Jock, on the other hand, confesses that she misses gossiping with her girlfriends: “If you were there, Chas, you would have accused us of gossiping, and we were. It felt wonderful – made me realize how much I’ve missed Beth Ticknow, and Margie and Gwen, and everyone at home, our lunches, our good long jabbers on the phone” (103). It points to the feminine ability to communicate contrasted with masculine inability to really converse. While away, Jock establishes a new relationship with a commissioner, Jessica, but the reader and the addressee of the letters are not given a full account of it. Jock withdraws from a comprehensive comment and there is only a suggestion of a developing affinity even beyond the realm of friendship. Jessica’s farewell note to Jock says: “I LOVE YOU” and Jock

confesses that “This has shaken me more than I like to admit” (223). There could be a lot of potential in these relationships but unfortunately the epistolary form “inhibits the kind of writerly engagement possible in the *Happenstance* texts, since it prevents access to the interior voices of the characters and restricts the capacity for effective social comedy” (Ramon 102). The form restricts the possibilities of interpretation, providing the already digested and analyzed material in the form shaped to the addressee. However the narrative hints at a possibility of a homosexual bond between the two women.

The concept of homosocial as applying to the authorship of the novel has been discussed by Manina Jones in her analysis of *A Celibate Season*. Jones reminds us of Shields’s drive to explore the masculine side in female-authored literature and highlights the existence of a homosocial context to the authorial collaboration which “destabilizes ... the straightforward readings” (180) of the relationships presented in the text. It is certainly true as the two authors, genuinely separated, decided to take on roles of the two separated spouses going through a period of celibacy in which sex (or the absence of it) features quite prominently. Jones also tries to explain Shields’s insistence on writing the man’s part by saying that “certainly, her contribution of Chas’s letters is meant to use the forum of correspondence to dilate upon the relative nature of the marital roles and gendered responses of an ordinary man, to comment, in other words, on the discursive production, in the textual exchanges of the daily mail, of a daily male” (176). This observation fits perfectly with the argument about the post-modernist construction of the novel and its characters. “The male” is presented/produced via discourse, he is built

by words and that is a certain choice of language that creates the novelistic reality and its protagonists.

The *Happenstance* novels and *A Celibate Season* also engage, to varying degrees, in a debate on the generation gap between the “war generation” and the emerging types of new masculinities and femininities. As already has been stressed, the new generation is presented as attempting to be more open and trying to follow new patterns of gender order. Jack Bowman, for example, is constructed as a character consciously cutting himself off from the ideals of his father. He is proud of his upward mobility, which is highlighted by the different type of profession he pursues. He is the first white-collar worker in his family as contrasted with “his own father: forty years of standing all day in rubber-soled shoes, sorting letters into little wooden slots; retirement at sixty had been a deliverance” (Shields, *The Husband's* 11). The reader, however, has to bear in mind that the focalizing consciousness of the story is Jack and the father is not given a voice of his own. Jack, during a time of uncertainty, wants to reassure himself of his superiority (which he also does by comparing himself to masses of “wretched and nameless” (11) physical workers who tear up the streets in the morning). Thus, the concept of “deliverance” from work seems to be very close to the male focaliser himself. When he tries to work on his book, “buried alive in the dark, lonely den” (36), he waits for somebody to save him, and when his friend Bernie knocks at his door he welcomes the sound with, “Thank God, thank God for Bernie, the afternoon was saved, *he* was saved” (43).

Jack also treats with disbelief and even outright hostility his father's new hobby of reading and following the modern self-help books with alluring

titles, like: *Take Charge of Your Own Life*, *Living with Passion*, *Imaginative Marriage and How it Operates* or *The ABC's of Loving Yourself*. He reflects:

... what was his father doing reading these books that advocated new systems of thought, new lifestyles and modes of behaviour, new freedoms and possibilities that he could not possibly achieve or even entertain at this time in his life? Did his father – his father! – really want to find a new creativity in his marriage? Did he really give a fuck about reconciling his goals with his self-image? It was crazy, crazy; it was a new American form of masochism, the new perversion of the old American dream. For the life of him Jack couldn't understand what his father was doing reading all those books. (92)

Happenstance presents a man who, caught in a moment of uncertainty, projects his fears onto his father. He used to be a head of a traditional American family with his wife acting as a full time housewife. In the face of the new developments, that are his difficulties in advancing his professional career and the unexpected artistic success of his wife marking her independence, he realises the need for a change. The old gender order is being overturned and men like Jack need to readapt, which they do unwillingly. What Jack calls “the new perversion of the old American dream” is in fact a new reality that men need to learn to embrace. Feminism brought about significant changes to the lives of women but that entailed major changes for men. A woman filling in her tax form opens up a new chapter in the life of all her family, a chapter of new possibilities for the husband as well if he manages to open up and welcome them.

The novel not only shows, in a subversive way, similarities between two generations of men but also affinity between the old men and the new women. Brenda, a type of woman who, after spending all her life letting herself be defined in terms of her husband, suddenly discovers a new independent side to life and does not want to admit even to herself the full impact of it as it could mean that “all her life had been a mistake” (Shields, *The Wife's* 50). She is the one who, contrary to her husband, sees how close her fears and uncertainties bring her to those of her father-in-law.

[Brenda] had come to this awkward age, forty, at an awkward time in history – too soon to be one of the new women, whatever that meant, and too late to be an old-style woman. ... She thought of Jack's father, whose lament ever since she'd known him was that he had been too young to fight in the First World War and too old for the Second. ... He had been ‘cheated by time’, he said, and she too had been cheated. Jack would call it historical accident, happenstance. There she had been, diapering babies, buying groceries at the A & P, wallpapering bathrooms, while other women – who were these women? – fought for equal rights, while a terrible war raged, while the country teetered on the brink of revolution. She had seen it all – but all of it on television and in the pages of *Newsweek*. A cheat. But probably she had chosen to be cheated. The coward's way out. Brenda could never make up her mind if she was the only one on the planet to suffer this particular species of dislocation or if the condition was so common it went unvoiced. (85-86)

Brenda and her father-in-law have been both “cheated” by time, but Brenda feels the dissonance between the happenstance (historical accident) and a semi-conscious choice “to be cheated.” The title of the novel is “Happenstance” which suggests it is a story about historical accidents, random events that shape people’s lives regardless of their gender or age. But if one goes back to the original publication of the novels *Happenstance* was the title of today’s *The Husband’s Story* while *The Wife’s Story* was “born” as *A Fairly Conventional Woman*. It may suggest that the husband’s story is a pure happenstance; what happens to Jack is a historical accident, while the woman gains a new perspective and sees for the first time a possibility of a choice. This possibility is disregarded and she “chooses to be cheated” many times for she sees her place according to traditional values – at home by her husband’s side.

A Celibate Season also points to certain, often unrealised, similarities across generations where the separation of the modern couple is paired with the separation of their parents during the war. Jock’s decision to go to Ottawa is compared to Chas’s father’s decision to enlist for the war and her infidelity and metaphysical connection with a male commissioner and poet Austin Grey is doubled with her mother’s affair with a young soldier. Both women decided to end their affairs and return to their old lives in the name of “sacrifice and duty” (Shields, Howard 222). In a way, similarly to Brenda, they “choose to be cheated” and even though they realise that there are other possibilities lying ahead, they will decide to stay/go back home. The novels suggest that a woman’s choice is much more complicated; it is a certain choice without a choice as Jock’s mother explains: “When you’ve got a family, Jocelyn, you have responsibilities beyond your own wants and bit of excitement. You make

a decision the day you bring a child into the world, and if you've got the right stuff you'll stick to that decision" (221). This passage shows again a conservative view on the traditional family, according to which a woman, "if [she's] got the right stuff," will not abandon her family and her place is with her children by her husband's side. It is an essential underlying argument present in all Shields's novels. Women will always be featured as limited by certain conditioning and never able to free themselves from social constraints. Shields's early texts signal new possibilities for women, her middle oeuvre is hopeful about the gains of feminism, and finally she returns to a bleak disillusionment with women's position in her last novel. Men portrayed in the novels will always be confused and lost in the face of all social, cultural and gender changes, however, they will always be in a privileged position in relation to women and will always constitute the universal referent to the feminine "other."

Happenstance and *A Celibate Season*, similarly to Shields's other novels, also analyse the significance and meaning of clothing. Clothes, which sometimes perform the function of gender masquerade and at other time point to a social status (like in *Larry's Party* or *Small Ceremonies*), here symbolically, allude to changes in the social status of men and women. The male narrator of the first part of *Happenstance* talks about Jack's extravagant purchase of a suede vest. A sixty-dollar garment bought on "impulse or something" (*The Husband's* 73) symbolises Jack's longing for a new social status and a new position in society. His unwillingness and outright inability to wear it suggests his metaphorical inability to take a step forward in the direction of modernity. This idea of "growing into one's clothes" will be later

developed by Shields in *Larry's Party*. From the other side there is the woman, Brenda, who in preparation for a new step in her life, that is her independent trip to Philadelphia where she will not be defined in relation to her husband any more but will be seen as an artist and “*a quiltmaker in her own right*” (73, author's emphasis), buys herself a red coat for which she pays a considerable amount of money. Contrary to the male character, the woman will put on her new garment, treating it as something precious but practical. Just as the novel features a temporary confusion and suspension in traditional families, the new clothes “get away” from their owners. Jack's friend borrows his virginal vest and spills wine on it while Brenda's coat mysteriously disappears. They are both returned to their owners at the end of the stories, when they are accepted matter-of-factly, as Jack and Brenda will have undergone changes distancing them from their old selves and shifting their order of values. *A Celibate Season* does not feature a similar allegory of growing into or out of one's clothes; however, the reader finds out that Jock, similarly to Brenda, buys herself an expensive new outfit for her journey to Ottawa. She writes:

There I'll be, all got up in that great grey suit from Chapman's
– Mother tried her damndest to wheedle the price out of me,
but I refused to blow my cover, in my suitable navy-blue blouse,
navy-blue pumps (and matching soul) – clutching my Lady
Executive Briefcase, stumbling in and introducing myself to
Senator Pierce – oh Lord! (Shields, *Howards* 12)

New expensive clothes symbolise uncertainty, reverence, but also apprehension of what is coming and of what is going to happen. They express a hope but also a confirmation of willingness to take a next step into a new chapter of life.

Both novels focus primarily on the changing gender order during the 1970s and 1980s. They feature the new position and self-consciousness of women and the emergence of new types of masculinity. But they also show how the core of the traditional structures resists gender equality even in the face of global changes. The multiple narrative form gives the reader access to numerous possibilities of interpretation but also points to the fact that there is no correct version of the story, that the limitations of the language do not allow for one to one correspondence and that “some connection between perception and the moment itself would fail, would always fail” (Shields, *The Husband's* 193). Men in the stories are confused at the new arrangements but easily find themselves comfortable again and benefit from their wives' liberational experiences.

CHAPTER THREE

“Maloney, Jimroy, Hindmarch, Cruzzi: A Mystery” – In search of a mirror character construction in Carol Shields’s *Mary Swann*

“The charm of falsehood is not that it distorts reality, but that it creates reality afresh.”

Carol Shields

Whereas *Happenstance* and *A Celibate Season*, discussed in the previous chapter, mark a development in Shields’s experimentation with narration and points of view, the publication of *Swann: A Mystery* in 1987 shows her full engagement with the postmodern. The multiple voices in the text offer different representations of the story which as a result is constantly redefined, reconfirmed but also undermined. The author utilises polyphony and heteroglossia in order to convey the complexity of narrative possibilities and to make the whole idea of the reading of the story parallel to the solving of the mystery. Shields employs postmodern parody aiming to juxtapose, in Linda Hutcheon's words, the “sense that we can never get out from under the weight of a long tradition of visual narrative representation” with “losing faith in the inexhaustibility and power of these existing representations” (Hutcheon, *The Politics* 8). That is why a seemingly uncomplicated plot, four people trying to solve the mystery of the life and death of the obscure poet Mary Swann, becomes a multilayered and irresolvable quest aimed at patching together different pieces to make “real” sense of the story. The reader is an active

collaborator in the process of the story-making and there is no clear resolution to the mystery at the end of the novel.

*Mary Swann*¹ also plays with the idea of how language influences our perception of the experienced world and how our cultural background forms our understanding of it. The main emphasis of this chapter is to show how Shields's various postmodern techniques impact the construction of female and male characters in the novel and what is Shields's version of a "postmodern masculinity." As *Happenstance* and *A Celibate Season* take different approaches to the construction of gender difference, here the interdependence of masculinities and femininities is even more complex. There is no clear-cut role reversal or overcoming of stereotypes. However, the characters are very dynamic and, as the reader gradually discovers different sides to them, their secrets and guilty consciences, his/her assumptions are being constantly overturned and juggled. In *Swann*, the two most prominent male characters, Morton Jimroy and Frederic Cruzzi, are aware of their existence on two levels. They consciously build "necessary illusion[s]" around them in order to "continue [their] lives" (Shields, *Swann* 80). But every now and again they are given a chance to see themselves from a different and barer perspective and that 'reality' is unbearable to them. Women in their lives are indispensable elements of a better imagined world that they build for themselves. The second crucial ingredient of their illusions is words; language shapes their understanding of the incomprehensible. Similarly, female protagonists in *Swann*, even though they are strong and independent, need their masculine counterparts in order to find their completion and fulfillment as nurturers.

¹ The title of the novel differs depending on the publisher, *Mary Swann* being the title of the UK version.

Mary Swann has attracted quite a lot of critical attention as it seems to be a pivotal text in Shields's career. Previous criticism focuses on *Mary Swann* as a feminist appropriation of the detective novel (Godard, "Sleuthing" 45), which I will discuss in the next section of this chapter. Also Foucault's author function in the novel is discussed by Brian Johnson who explains how "we impose an image of the author onto the text of our own making" and how this "author-function ... precisely describes the process of author construction" (Johnson 165), which also constitutes a starting point for my analysis of the rediscovery of the detectives themselves. Susan Elizabeth Sweeney sees the novel as a manifestation of feminine ambivalence toward narrative authority (Sweeney 19-32), and finally Kathy Barbour focuses on the novel's deconstructing conventions of realism, the authorial language games and purposeful misleading of the reader, which will partially constitute my focus also (Barbour 269). My aim is to demonstrate how all these processes and techniques employed by Shields influence the portrayal of masculinity (but also femininity) in the novel, and to show how the new picture enlarges on and departs from the ideas on men and women that Shields conveys in her earlier works. As the guiding principle of my thesis is to show the continuum and change in the male character construction in successive novels, *Swann* is especially important as the experimental narrative form brings new aspects into the question of female versus male character construction. The division between male/female character constructions is built on a much less clear contrast; there is no reversing of roles and the task of reconstructing female and male patterns in the novel is much more complex and less conclusive. Shields

plays a continuous game with the reader and constantly destabilises any ideas that the recipient of the story gathers along the way.

The four narrators and focalisers² in *Mary Swann* each project a different representation of events and a different set of speculations dependent on their needs, experiences, gender and mastery of language. Although the main story purports to uncover the truth about Mary Swann, while (re)constructing their subject the four protagonists reveal much more about themselves than about the poet. The rediscovery of Swann, inseparable from the changing representations of the different tellers of the stories, shows how linguistic and social context influences and modifies the meaning, how “facts” can be appropriated and how they gain different meaning depending on the historical, social, cultural and gender context. In *Happenstance* and *A Celibate Season*, the emergence of new models of masculinities and femininities is based on a quite clear reversal of traditional gender roles, but in *Swann* it becomes much more complex. The female protagonists at the outset of the novel already represent new types of women. Sarah Maloney consciously projects her feminist image of an independent scholar, while Rose Hindmarch instinctively finds ways to overcome traditional perceptions of the role of women in society by keeping her own identity and name as well as holding professional posts in her community. At the same time male characters are introduced as less self-conscious and more confused. Morton Jimroy and Frederic Cruzzi both declare themselves to be men of words, but struggle to define themselves in relation to women, art and language.

² Only one of the four protagonists narrates her section in the first person; the rest of them constitute the focalising consciousnesses of their parts.

However, the reader finds that all of them elude any clear classification, especially when confronted with the self-reflexivity of the novel and the characters' own supposition that they are actors in a play. Each protagonist at some point voices the suspicion that they are taking part in a staged performance and that their life is guided by a script. Shields introduces a postmodern notion of simulacrum to the novel; each story is a reflection of a non-existent reality and its characters are allowed to have an occasional glimpse into their staged existence. Shields pushes the boundaries of the narrative even further and completely undermines the story/stories in the final section which constitutes a film script. At that point figuratively all of the protagonists are given a script to recite from and they have to double-act. It is a doubling back device as the actors of their own plays become actors in a final film that unites all four of them. What is more, the protagonists of the film script, even though they bear the same names, differ from those the reader has met. This is most clearly visible with Sarah Maloney who projects herself as a feminist, while in the final section she is a much more traditional type, a family-oriented woman laughing at her old self. It raises a question of the narrators' credibility, the credibility of the stories and their tellers. Instead of a conclusion the reader arrives at another mystery which adds to the confusion. All this might suggest Shields's actual flirtation with, but also distancing from the postmodern where everything is only a representation and where truth and referential reality do not exist.

As every scholar who offers a commentary on *Swann* agrees, the central mystery of the book is not the murder of Mary Swann and the quest for the killer, but the search for Mary Swann the author. The need to find out how a

person deprived of basic cultural incentives managed to write poetry that attracts more and more scholarly attention seems to be the preoccupation of all the characters. The four narrators struggle to reconstruct the life and writing genius of the elusive poet about whom nobody really knows anything certain. A game of guessing, speculation and appropriation begins with every teller struggling to prove that their ideas about Swann are/must be the “right” ones. Their attempts at the reconstruction of the poet’s life and death might be compared to the writing of a novelistic history. The narrators, like historians, are trying to prove that their discoveries are solidly grounded in historical data they gathered, but inevitably they manipulate the evidence. Bringing together the question of biographical reconstruction and history writing, Shields stresses that they both are similar to fiction writing where the author is free to invent. According to Linda Hutcheon:

Historiographic metafiction self-consciously reminds us that, while events did occur in the real empirical past, we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning. And even more basically, we only know of those past events through their discursive inscription, through their traces in the present. (*A Poetics* 97)

The same applies to Shields’s characters reconstructing the past. They will only choose certain facts and group them together in a way that will make subjective sense to them, which reveals another problem at stake in the novel, that is the fact that the types of work they all do used to be thought of as ‘objective’ or at least neutral, while here they are all clearly manipulating the evidence to compose a picture suiting their own needs. The open manipulation is facilitated

by the fact that there are only three things certain about Mary Swann: she lived on a remote farm in Nadeau, she wrote poetry and she was murdered. Her whole life is a vast field for speculation. Even though there are some scraps of information that might lead to discoveries of some truths about Mary, they are gradually destroyed by the scholars as they do not fit into their vision of the poet. Her rhyming dictionary ends up in a bin, her diary never sees the light of day and the only remaining photograph of her is blurred and unclear. Shields in this way comments on unethical acts committed by scholars who strive to achieve success in academia by all means. It suggests that at least a part of scholarly discovery is manipulated or invented outright. Mary Swann, the central figure of the text who might or might not have been a genius, is completely obliterated from it and so is her original work. Instead of facts and solid proofs we get four different characters building their own completely subjective stories. The novel, apart from being a postmodern version of a detective story, is also an extensive debate on the question of biography writing but also on the drive of academia to include minor writers into the literary canon by any means.³ The whole “Mary Swann industry” is highly speculative and reveals many dishonest practices in the drive to promote a questionable talent. In addition to widely discussed questions of biography and scholarly appropriation, Shields’s novel meditates upon how all available knowledge reflects the interests and values of specific social groups. The reader ends up with numerous representations which, according to postmodern rhetoric, “create ‘true fictions’ which paradoxically fix and falsify reality” (Hutcheon, *The Politics* 92). There is no answer to the question of what “reality” is and

³ Faye Hammill’s discussion in “Influential Circles: Carol Shields and the Canadian Literary Canon.”

what constitutes “true fiction” and thus the novel is very open and lends itself to countless interpretations.

The form of the novel is very dynamic and experimental. The narrative is divided into five main parts. The first four are separate stories with different narrators, each having a different relationship with Mary Swann the person and the poet. The last part takes the form of a film script in which all the characters meet and together take part in a unified search for the lost poet and her oeuvre. The first four parts are in turn divided into subchapters with different types of narration and encompassing different literary forms (including letters and poems). The first one, the narrative by Sarah Maloney, is the only one rendered in the first person and subchapters there are only numbered. The other three sections take their protagonists as the focalisers of a third-person narration. The second part constitutes an undivided whole, while the other two break up into subchapters with their own titles. The final section, as has already been stated, has no narrator as it is in the form of a film script. Here the power is given to the director who controls the actions of the actors. Such a construction serves numerous purposes but firstly it is aimed at destabilising the novelistic reality and highlighting its possible complexity.

Researching the development of male and female character presentation in the novel requires close attention to all the stylistic and ideological techniques employed by the author. First, the choice of genre requires a comment. Shields turns here to the mystery novel but reworks it so that it serves her needs. Barbara Godard, analysing feminist rewriting of popular fiction, offers a broad commentary on the reworking of the crime novel taking Shields’s book as one of the exemplary texts. Her premise is that

women's parodic re/writing of narratives reveals women's engagement with narrative as a critical strategy, designed to expose the positioning of woman as silent other on whose mutilated body the narrative is constructed in dominant discourse and to posit alternate positionings for women as subjects producing themselves in/by language. ("Sleuthing" 45)

She stresses the possibility of shifting the female position from being an object to becoming a subject, thus deliberately emphasizing the problem of silencing women in literature. Godard stresses also the linking of gender and genre in feminist literary theory and argues that feminist writers turn to writing popular fiction because it frees both the author and the reader from the constraints of realism. However, when Godard discusses Shields's novel itself she concentrates on the reconstruction of Mary Swann the poet, the person, the woman, the victim: "The novel lays bare the process of construction of a character through the analogy of the construction of a literary text. Character, we become aware, is the product of social discourses which make our textual encounters into ironic games between verisimilitude and truth" (56). Thus she points out how the reconstruction of Mary Swann is a mere projection of the narrators' and focalisers' ideas, needs and speculations.⁴ However, a crucial point is also that not only does the figure of Mary Swann get reconstructed and reinvented, but also all of four protagonists. Sarah Maloney, Morton Jimroy, Frederic Cruzzi and Rose Hindmarch are presented in a mirror image of the reconstruction of Swann. Their ideas about the dead poet are projections of themselves and their needs, thus their characters can be inferred from them.

⁴ An idea developed also by other critics, e.g. Brian Johnson, Faye Hammill.

The process of mirror construction applies to all of the characters in the novel and involves the reader's conscious collaboration in the process.

Also the authors of *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hard-Boiled Tradition* stress the analogy between genre and gender and explain why feminist rewriting of popular fiction was so prominently developing alongside feminism. This is important in Shields's case as after appropriating the detective novel she chooses to work with a romance (*The Republic of Love*).

Walton and Jones claim:

Like genre, gender is socially generated, but it is not a simple set of rules, nor is it established on an uncomplicated model of production and consumption. It is, rather, a regulating, contradictory, and transformable set of discursive practices that may be negotiated and renegotiated by different people in different contexts. Gender is, in addition, "practised" – but never perfected – in the everyday lives of individuals in ways that are central to their sense of who they are and what they can (and are allowed to) do. It, too, constitutes spaces of negotiation where change can be effected. (84)

Genre and gender are socially generated and fluid and such a renegotiation of masculinity is an underlying assumption of this thesis. Just as the perceptions and roles of men were shifting, conditioned by the growing prominence of feminism and changing status of women, so parallel male characters in Shields are displaying new masculine qualities. It is not surprising then that the author portraying such developments will utilise one of the genres corresponding to

the changes. The flexibility of the new detective novel made it possible to bring to the fore new discoveries connected with gender roles and gender doubts.

As already mentioned, the novel features two male and two female protagonists. Each of them is given their own part of the narrative, but as the constructions of those narratives differ so does the presentation of characters. The readers are given the most intimate insight into Sarah Maloney's inner thoughts as her narrative is rendered in the first person. In Rose Hindmarch's part, although narrated in the third-person voice, the reader is treated as part of the community and often addressed as "you," for example: "And why doesn't Rose confide any of this to you? You've known her for years, all your life in fact" (Shields, *Swann* 131), which allows a closer relationship with the character. However, we are much more distanced from the masculine narratives. They are filtered through a third-person narrator, thus given insight only into the situations s/he chooses for us. Because the main focus of this thesis is the way Shields constructs masculinities in her novels I will start close textual analysis by comparing and contrasting the two male focalisers and their stories, and ultimately sketching a definition of Shields's postmodern masculinity. Then I will turn to the female narratives and show how the representation of women differs from that of men and what its implications are. The figure of Mary Swann is the common denominator for all the four protagonists and their relationship with her defines them.

The two male focalisers are a biographer Morton Jimroy and a journalist and retired editor Frederic Cruzzi. Jimroy prepares to write a biography of Mary Swann, while Cruzzi is the first and only publisher of her work. It transpires that it is the intention of both of them to manipulate the truth

about the poet as it serves their personal needs. Cruzzi is guilty of destroying and then writing anew Swann's poems, while Jimroy wants the biography to redeem him. With Jimroy it is not only the case of "abducting" Swann⁵ but also reinventing himself as he is presented as a lost character, unable to come to terms with his own emotions, personality and masculinity. The reader is introduced to the character as he moves from cold Winnipeg to sunny California to spend a year researching his new book (Mary Swann's daughter lives there and he hopes to find out as much as possible from the relative of the dead poetess). This year is supposed to bring a purifying change to Jimroy's life. Separated from his wife and disgusted by the biographies he has written, he wants to refresh his image by writing about an obscure female poet: "The decision to write about Mary Swann had been made sitting in his Winnipeg study. (Audrey had departed). He had felt a momentary sense of elation, the by-now-familiar nascent ritual. A new beginning. Rebirth. The egg, the genes, the reaching out" (87). After the failed marriage (with Audrey) he hopes to reinvent himself and Mary Swann is to be his new mother, nurturing him and showing him the way forward. The very outset of the narrative signals that a lot will be demanded from Mary Swann. She will have to be a spiritual guide for the new Jimroy.

The reason he is so desperate for a mother figure also lies in the discoveries he has made while writing his previous biographies of Ezra Pound and John Starman. Jimroy's revelations on the biography writing process show

⁵ This term is borrowed from Helen Buss, who reads *Swann* in the light of Epstein's article "(Post)Modern Lives: Abducting the Biographical Subject." Buss argues that the so-called "cultural recognition process" manipulates factual data in order to make the subject more accessible to contemporary reader. She goes on to explain that: "Epstein names this process 'abduction,' a complex process by which biographers, while seeking to represent their subjects must, by necessity, exclude and/or revise portions of the subject so that she can be "recognized" by current commodification standards" (Buss 428).

how much the biographer himself is present in each story he is writing. The boundary between the objective and the subjective and between the historical facts and fictionalisation blurs when Jimroy starts seeing himself in each of his biographical subjects. Writing about them is like looking in the mirror and all his personal frustrations and disappointments are projected onto Pound and Starman. As he finishes these biographies, Jimroy recognises his own monstrous self in them:

Flinching only slightly, Jimroy observed the disgust he felt, and indeed he recognized a moral ungainliness in himself that vibrated with a near-Poundian rhythm. His original attraction to the old fart, he supposed, must lie in this perverse brotherly recognition. Like persons who in secret sniff the foul odours of their bodies, he had been mesmerized by Pound's sheer awfulness, by his *own* sheer awfulness. (84)

The attraction to the subject stems from "brotherly recognition" which later Jimroy projects onto John Starman, and finally even onto Mary Swann. The "brotherly" recognition changes into motherly, which entails also the shift in gender. Jimroy needs Swann as a mother figure but also as a female element of his own sexuality, which will be discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs. Returning to his earlier biographies, his negative view of himself gets strongly translated into his work. As a result each biographical subject becomes a version of Morton Jimroy and he always ends up "looking in a mirror" (85). Finally, unable to find satisfying connections with Swann the person and Swann the poet, even his "Mother Soul" becomes his enemy (106). As Judie Newman points out: "the subject of the biography may transform the

life of the author – as in the famous example of André Maurois, who saw in Shelley a mirror of his own youthful emotions and wanted to tell the story of Shelley’s life in order to liberate himself” (Newman 164). Jimroy comes to despise himself and all the negative emotions are transferred onto his subjects. And vice versa, all the “monstrosities” of his subjects become his own.

Swann is to be the “Mother Soul” for him. He believes that “The discovery of her poems a few years ago had rescued him from emotional bankruptcy, and at first he *had* loved her. Here was Mother Soul. Here was intelligence masked by colloquial roughness” (Shields, *Swann* 87). Jimroy is desperate for a female spiritual guidance and for a mother-figure. He needs her to lead him but also protect him just like a mother does. Jimroy also believes that the need is mutual, that Swann needs him to discover and protect her; he boldly confesses that “he would take revenge for her” (87) as if confusing the roles of mother with damsel in distress. Jimroy is a male character marked by a failure: he is unable to relate to women in reality; he cannot perform sexually. Yet an obscure female poet is to become his Mother Soul, rescuing him from emotional bankruptcy. His two male biographical subjects burdened him with feelings of guilt and that is why he hopes that the female author will bring a necessary relief and a gentle touch.

The novel suggests Jimroy’s longing for an affinity with the feminine element. The narrator often reveals Jimroy’s inner thoughts about “the membrane of sweetness that encases his heart” (89) and that there is a “pool of unformed goodness at the bottom of his being” (116). Shields constructs a very complicated character. It is probably the most fragile of her male protagonists; he represents the least secure and the most self-contradictory type of

masculinity. He is portrayed as a man striving to live in the sphere of words and art where he would be able to express himself truly and without pretension. Only poetry reaches to his true being. In Jimroy's section we read that:

When he thought of the revolution of planets, the emergence of species, the balance of mathematics, he could not see that any of these was more amazing than the impertinent human wish to reach into the sea of common language and extract from it the rich dark beautiful words that could be arranged in such a way that the unsayable might be said. Poetry was the prism that refracted all of life. (86)

He is the character that comes closest to the possibility of another existence in the sphere of words. This compensates his inability to relate to the "reality" in which he is placed. He is a masculine character desperately seeking love and platonic relationship with women. Yet, all his relationships only develop in the sphere of his fantasies. He married Audrey because she "invited his tenderness" and "he wanted to protect her from herself" (102) but also because in Audrey he recognised the same state of "woundlessness" from which he suffers and "instead of being repelled by it, he had reached out, a man who at forty was in danger of drowning" (103). Life with Audrey gives him the happiest moment in his life, yet he is not able to make Audrey understand how important she is for him and stay. Jimroy cannot perform sexually but this is not projected as his greatest failure. On the contrary, when he realises that his wife accepts his inability to have sex, his narrative becomes lighter. When

he had been free to withdraw his hand from the damp coarseness of Audrey's pubic curls ... the relief was awesome. ... The

failing between them was recognized and at once surrendered to. Afterwards they lay quietly in the dark, their arms around each other, the happiest hour Jimroy has ever known. Plenitude. A richer verdure, richer than he had ever imagined from his reading of love poetry. ... Dear Christ, what happiness. (104)

The passage shows Jimroy's first "sexual" experience which, even though failed, brings about the state of happiness. Shields presents an unconventional masculinity. Jimroy sees monstrosities in men; he is not able to relate to women and only poetry comes as a solace. The narrator suggests that he is constantly in love, yet he does not attempt to build a relationship. That is why the dead Mary Swann is a "safe" woman to be obsessed with, and so is Sarah Maloney as long as their contacts are limited to letter writing.

It seems Jimroy cherishes a platonic relationship with Sarah, which for him is nevertheless full of erotic desire and replaces real physical closeness.

When living away from home Jimroy:

needs the letters more than ever now that he has been uprooted; they stabilize him, keeping away that drifting sadness that comes upon him late in the evening ... It's then that he likes to reread her letters, letters that pulse and promise, that make his throat swell with the thought of sex. ... They bring him – what? – solace. And connection with the world, a world redolent with intimate pleasures, sight, sound, touch, especially touch. His tongue tests the sharpness of his teeth. He imagines Sarah Maloney's soft lips, and how they must enclose small, white, perfect teeth, opening and speaking, her teasing voice. (78-79)

Jimroy fantasises about Sarah and the letter reading seems to compensate for the lack of physical closeness. Once again a character builds a staged “reality” for himself and accepts an illusion which is necessary for his existence. Words connect him with the world of intimacy and become a substitute for it. Shields plays, however, with the notion of representation and her protagonists are constantly aware of being “played” and manipulated. We read: “It is not quite sane, Jimroy knows, these images, this caressing of a strange woman’s words, but the warmth they carry has become a necessary illusion, what he appears to need if he is going to continue his life” (80). Without the relationships with Maloney, Swann and his ex-wife (to whom he makes regular silent calls) there are not enough contexts for his story and that is why he would be in danger of being obliterated just like Mary Swann. His narrative concludes with Jimroy’s definition of happiness:

This is happiness . . . , these scrawled notes, these delicate tangled footnotes, which, with a little more work, a few more weeks, will evolve into numbered poems of logic and order and illumination. The disjointed paragraphs he is writing are pushing toward that epic wholeness that is a human life, gold socketed into gold. True, it will never be perfect. There are gaps, as in every life, accidents of silence and misinterpretation and the frantic scrollwork of artifice, but also a seductive randomness that confers truth. And mystery, too, of course. Impenetrable, ineffable mystery. (119)

Morton Jimroy, a Swann detective, voices the idea behind postmodern appropriation and history writing. What matters is the mystery, the unknown, the unverifiable. The character realises that “his life may be foolish, it may be misguided and strange and bent in its yearnings, but it’s all he has and all he’s likely to get” (119). The novel strikes a positive chord when the male character finds a comforting niche in his novelistic space.

Frederic Cruzzi, in contrast to Jimroy, maintains intimate physical relationships with women and is entangled in a constant battle between his two loves: women and words. He was happily married for many years and now as an eighty-year-old widower he still engages in sexual relationships. Cruzzi, unlike Jimroy, touches women rather than only imagining them. Yet he is also conscious of those illusions that keep him going. He is the publisher but also creator/destroyer of Mary Swann’s poems and he is a very important character to the whole mystery of Swann as not only does he meet her personally, but also he is the only person who actually reads the original poems of Mary Swann. Immediately after his reading of them, they get defiled by oozing fish guts that his wife Hildë put in the bag with poems, unaware of its content. As the main concern of the postmodern is the “questioning of what reality can mean and how we can come to know it” (Hutcheon, *The Politics* 32), the whole chapter with Cruzzi as a focaliser concentrates on postmodern question about reality. This focalizing consciousness cannot be trusted for many reasons: he feels guilty about the destruction of poetry, about a violent assault on his wife, about possibly being partially responsible for Mary Swann’s death.

On the day of the encounter with Swann he is also feverish and later drunk. But what is most important of all, Cruzzi is in love with words. With

their help he wants to build the reality around him and thus the reader has to be wary of his account. The Mary Swann he meets and the one he talks about is a representation of his erotic desire mingled with the desire for a mastery of language. When Mary Swann knocks on Cruzzi's door, Cruzzi instantly feels invited to participate in a play, a masquerade akin to those of Sarah, Rose and Morton. He welcomes the terrified woman and almost obsessively takes care of her. When he makes her sit in a chair and personally removes her rubber boots he "feel[s] like an actor in a fine old play" (Shields, *Swann* 210). And then "he, still relishing his actor's role, continued to rub her feet between his hands, conscious of her acute embarrassment and also of his strange happiness" (210). Here Mary Swann, unlike Jimroy's Mother Soul, for Cruzzi is a sexual object and as a woman an object of love. In spite of her ungainly looks he finds her gestures "sensual, for some reason, this touching of the ears. [He was] hoping she'd do it again" (213). Swann is a woman and as such Cruzzi the male desires her. What is also significant about the encounter with Swann is the fact that the actor continuously keeps rehearsing how he will recount the scene to his wife, how to translate what is happening into words. Thus, the situation gets even more complex as the staged representation will be again interpreted and represented with the use of words. The reader faces the problem of a double representation.

Double representation is also present in the next scene in which Cruzzi gets a glimpse into another reality he is a part of. It happens in rage upon realising that his wife has destroyed the bag containing the poems. Instantly the darkness, or whatever it was that engulfed him, had dissolved for the briefest of moments, and what he glimpsed was

the whole of his happiness revealed in a grotesque negative image. He was a man weakened by age and standing in a remote corner of the world, a man with a sore throat, a little drunk, and before him, facing him, was a thickish person without beauty. Who was she, this clumsy, clown-faced woman, so careless, so full of guilt and ignorance? (220)

The next passage mixes the two representations of Cruzzi's world. When for a moment it seems that Hildë might not have destroyed the poems and that they might be safe, Cruzzi's imagined haven returns. However, now it is defiled and not trustable any more. We read:

Air and lightness returned. Lightness mixed with love. He lurched his way to the kitchen, unsteady on his feet, hideously giddy with something sour rising in his throat. His body seemed to drag behind him, an elderly man's deceived body that had been shaken and made breathless. (220)

Even though the paragraph starts with "air and lightness" the reader senses it is not true as there is "something sour in Cruzzi's throat" and all his body shakes. It seems as if the character is given a momentous glimpse into another "reality," which shakes his whole world of representation in which he feels comfortable and secure. Finally, Cruzzi strikes at his wife in an outburst of uncontrollable rage, but later explains "he had not, he said, now firmly in the grasp of reason, struck out at *her*. He had struck at some fearful conclusion" (221). It seems to be an act of desperation at realizing how the inhabited reality is only a fragile arrangement, pretence and a representation. Shields mixes in Cruzzi's narrative different versions of possible originals and their

representations and introduces a tension between the two by allowing them to interchange.

The chapter with Frederick Cruzzi as a focaliser also engages in the debate about words/language and their influence on the experienced world. Cruzzi's father seems to be an advocate of the theory of verbal cognition when he tells his son "that love would not exist if the word *love* were taken from the language. At the time he had nodded agreement, happy to be included in his father's solemn abstractions, but destined to outgrow them" (206). However, in his adult life Cruzzi stumbles upon sensations that cannot be represented by language:

Once in a while, walking like this in shadowed woodland at three o'clock on a winter afternoon, or hearing perhaps a particular phrase of music, or approaching a wave of sexual ecstasy, Cruzzi has felt a force so resistant to the power of syntax, description or definition, so savage and primitive in its form, that he has been tempted to shed his long years of language and howl syllables of delight and outrage.

Outrage because these are moments of humility, of dressing down, of rebuke to those, like Cruzzi, who perceive reality through print, the moments when those who are proudly articulate confess their speechlessness. (206)

This is an example of the idea that language does not equal a transparent one-to-one correspondence with or reflection of referential world. The narrative reflects the postmodern paradox when it juxtaposes the idea of possibilities and power of language with its limitations. Also Cruzzi's lover, Pauline Oulette,

expresses a similar preoccupation with the limitations of language. She justifies what happened between them by saying: “What I know is that words are rather pathetic at times and that what we need most is to reach past them and touch each other” (193). Yet another level of representation of fictional reality might be distinguished in Cruzzi’s dreams, which once translated into words take on a new shape and lose their original meaning: “Cruzzi himself, ever the editor, was sometimes guilty of polishing his disjointed dreams for Hildë’s benefit, giving them a sense of shape and applying small, elegant, decorative touches” (196). Language here serves to represent and control what is subconscious and uncontrollable. But also the passage again stresses the existence of two representations of Cruzzi, “Cruzzi the husband” and “the editor,” who both manipulate the recounting of the dreams. However the content of those dreams is once again very sensual, for Cruzzi travels in them “across a landscape of undiscovered female bodies, breasts, clefts, thighs, ankles ...” (196). Consequently, ecstasy does escape linguistic correspondence and as such cannot be accurately described.

Postmodern masculinity then, according to Shields, is a constant balancing between the world of words and women. Only occasionally the two will meet and combine into a perfect whole. The balance between the two male protagonists differs since Jimroy immerses himself solely into words, while Cruzzi constantly shifts between words and physicality. Both of them are aware of the limitations of existence and its mystery but Jimroy opts to be by himself while Cruzzi always needs a female counterbalance. Jimroy’s “chastity” is rewarded by the gift of poetry, while Cruzzi’s infidelity to words by lifelong female companions.

There is one more very important postmodern issue connected with Frederick Cruzzi's part of the narrative. Shields parodies the act of writing and originality. She juxtaposes inspiration with speculation. Cruzzi and his wife rewrite the destroyed poems of Mary Swann. They guess and invent and the result is "the manuscript," which paradoxically is not Mary Swann's manuscript but the Cruzzis' version of it. Linda Hutcheon reminds us that "Parody also contests our humanist assumptions about artistic originality and uniqueness and our capitalist notions of ownership and property. With parody – as with any form of reproduction – the notion of the original as rare, single, and valuable (in aesthetic or commercial terms) is called into question" (*The Politics* 89). Such a parodic rewriting/reverse plagiarism is highlighted by the Cruzzis' act. The poetry becomes available to everybody's input – an issue which is parodied in the last scene when a group of scholars symbolically re-invents the poems once again. This is another example of a double representation in the novel. The whole "Swann industry" is seemingly/probably based on a forgery and collaborative rewriting of a non-existent original. That is also why all the protagonists of the novel feel free to speculate about, appropriate and "abduct" Mary Swann and her poetry.

There is one more important male character in the novel that, just like the titular Mary Swann, never appears directly in the story: Brownie, Sam Brown, a dealer in rare books. He also wants to "possess" Mary Swann, as it transpires, but his motivation is not love of her poems but the financial value they might possibly represent. Brownie is the character who visits and follows all of the four narrators/focalisers and steals artefacts connected in any way with Mary Swann. He seems to be the most devious of the characters; he

apparently even confesses to Sarah that “he’d cheat his own granny to make a buck” (Shields, *Swann* 15). His approach to art is purely materialistic and the authorship of Mary Swann’s poems is of no consequence as long as the books represent good value for money. He is a character of paradoxes: on the one hand, so elusive that the reader never really meets him, on the other hand, completely transparent as a man of money prepared to do anything to get his material reward. He is the common denominator of all the narratives; he makes Sarah Maloney love him and abandon her feminist ideals (for even though she ultimately marries Steven it is a reaction after her disappointment with beloved Brownie); he is the punishment that Cruzzi’s guilty conscience has been awaiting; he steals from Jimroy what he had previously stolen from Francis Moore (a double theft reminiscent of *Small Ceremonies*); finally he wants to buy the murder scene – the Swanns’ farm near where Rose Hindmarch lives. In the ultimate section of the book he is recognised only by Sarah Maloney when he comes to the symposium to steal the rest of the items pertaining to Mary Swann.

There is a potential tension between Brownie the male opportunist and Mary Swann, a woman who posthumously exerts such a great power over women and men alike. It seems to be grounded in the field of gender power struggle. Brownie announces that Sarah’s “version” of Swann (“Your Mary”) “is a prime example of the female castrator” (13). As seen by Brownie, she becomes a symbolic oppressor of men. Brownie in contrast, is presented as an ardent male chauvinist. He wants to punish and subdue the symbolic Mary Swann and the very “tangible” Sarah Maloney. Tension between female and male appropriation of symbolic power accumulates and raises a lot of

uncertainty as to how it can be resolved. All the characters, regardless of their gender, want to use Swann to empower them in different ways. Brownie wants to be rich and in control but paradoxically Mary Swann's original work does not exist and as such cannot be had. Jimroy wants Mary to be his mother but also a mediator between him and women; in return he wants to manipulate available information about her in order to avenge her. For Cruzzi Mary Swann was to be a perfect embodiment of his two loves: women and words. Paradoxically, she does not make his life complete but brings about chaos and triggers the self-reflexive realisation of how fragile was the illusion he built around himself.

Who is Mary Swann for the female characters then? Chronologically, the first narrator of the book is Sarah Maloney who similarly to the male protagonists expects "help" from Mary Swann. Sarah hopes that her "discovery" and affinity with the dead poet will bring back her full engagement in life, but also advance her professional career as a scholar. She confesses that: "My greatest need is to feel that every part of me is fully in use, or *engagé* as people used to say a mere ten years ago, and that all my sensory equipment is stretched as nervously as possible between the state of apprehension and a posture of pounce" (28). This need suggests a transitory period in the narrator's life in which she wants new incentives and directions. Sarah's narrative is the most intimate in the book as it is rendered in the first-person. As argued by Joanne Frye, first-person female narration is very significant in female and feminist writing and the "narrating [feminine] "I" ... begins a redefinition of [a conventional] plot by expanding the subversive capacity inherent in her subjectivity" (J. Frye 56). Sarah is a young scholar who recently and quite

suddenly has become a feminist icon. Her PhD dissertation, published as a book, has become a best-seller and she has been dubbed the feminist voice “coming from naked need” (Shields, *Swann* 21). But Sarah from the very outset of her story is sceptical of that position. She feels she is not living a real life, that she is caught in the workings of a fairy tale. She narrates: “It happens fairly often, this sensation of being a captive of fiction, a sheepish player in my own *roman-à-clef*. My dwarfish house is the setting. The stacked events of the day form a plot, and Brownie and I are the chief characters, sometimes larger than life, but just as often smaller” (37). Following a certain script is an idea with which Shields plays further by actually inserting Sarah as a dramatic persona in the film script that later closes the novel. Sarah’s life feels “ludicrously untrue,” thus she is allowed to sense that she is only a construct, a representation. She is also the one who utters the most postmodern worry in the novel as she says: “Reality is no more than a word that begins with *r* and ends with *y*” (36). This statement acknowledges the existence of hyperreality/simulacrum and the character’s self-awareness. Sarah’s life is an image without a referent, which in turn will be processed into another image in the final section of the book. This parodic double representation hints at certain play with the postmodern here. How many times can representation be represented without becoming meaningless? “Reality,” being understood only as a word, also addresses the question of the influence that language exerts on our perception of the world. “Reality” is only a linguistic concept which will be understood and represented differently; the representations of such reality are limitless.

Sarah stresses the importance of the “equipment” to keep up the pretences of her performance. Her part of the narrative starts with the first transformation that is Sarah contrasting the appearance of her old self with the feminist writer she has become. Thus she stresses the easiness with which she pretends that she can change the “reality” about herself and her life:

As recently as two years ago, when I was twenty-six, I dressed in ratty jeans and a sweatshirt with lettering across the chest. That’s where I was. Now I own six pairs of beautiful shoes, which I keep, when I’m not wearing them, swathed in tissue paper in their original boxes. Not one of these pairs of shoes costs less than a hundred dollars. ... I’ve read my Thoreau, I know real wealth lies in the realm of the spirit, but still I’m a person who can, in the midst of depression, be roused by the rub of cashmere scarf in my fingers. (11)

Expensive clothes in this context mark a climb not only in her social but, even more so, in her financial status. The narrator also admits the pleasure she takes in being the owner of such specimens and how the hint of luxury can reward living a life of an actor in a staged play of her new life. It is worth stressing that a similar process of self-reinvention with the help of clothes is described in Morton Jimroy’s narrative. After his luggage goes missing on the way to California, Jimroy buys himself a set of new cheap clothes; “the colours pleased him, these minty green pants and a second pair in a sort of salmon. He had also bought himself a minimal supply of underwear, some white socks – when had he last worn white socks? – and a pair of pyjamas made in Taiwan” (72). Jimroy’s new clothes mark a certain downgrading. He chooses cheap

colourful garments that might help him with the transition from being “narrow” and “looking like a bloody monk” (his wife’s accusations) to becoming a new, freer self.

Sarah Maloney as a new type of woman and a feminist certainly breaks conventional standards. The reader is yet again exposed to a dynamic character construction. The parodic representation here juxtaposes Sarah the icon of feminism versus Sarah the woman longing for love and protection of men, and for a traditional family. Even though she achieves professional success as a dedicated feminist, she does not genuinely believe in many feminist assumptions. She distances herself from other women wholeheartedly involved in the movement and she claims to need men, even though she admits:

Most of the men I know are defective. Most of them are vain.
My good friend and mentor Peggy O’Reggis lives in a universe in which men are only marginally visible. Ditto, my lawyer, Virginia Goodchild, a committed citizen of Lesbos. At least half of my graduate students are determined to carry their own tent pegs, to hell with the male power structure and to hell with penetration as sexual expression. They’ve bailed out. All these women send me invitations, literal and subliminal, but something in me resists.

Genes probably, or maybe conditioning. (36)

This passage shows a curious distancing of a character like Sarah from a notion of the self-sustainability of women, or at least from lesbian sexuality. It conveys a certain doubt in and defiance of life arrangements without men and presents quite a stereotypical take on feminists and lesbians. It is another

example of the novel's emphasis on categorising. The reader is led to believe that Sarah is an educated and informed feminist, while from the paragraph we find out how ignorant she is of other women's realities.

Sarah, unconventionally as a result of a failed love affair, establishes a fairly traditional family. However, strangely for Shields's writing, there are no happy families in *Swann*. They are marked either by violence or indifference (Howie and Jean Elton – Rose's neighbours, Mary and Angus Swann, even Frederick and Hildë Cruzzi, and Audrey and Morton Jimroy). Shields destabilises marital arrangement, reveals it as artificially constructed and potentially dangerous. It seems that, as Sarah gets older, she moderates her youthful ideas about male and female power and at the end of the novel she seems to have undergone a complete change. However, the reader cannot be sure what is really happening with Sarah, as the confession that she is completely abandoning her earlier ideals is revealed in the last part of the book that is the film script. Shields plays with her character: first she gives her most prominence as Sarah is chronologically first and the only first-person narrator in the book. Then, in the film script, Sarah Maloney the *dramatis persona* completely undermines the credibility of Sarah the narrator. Such treatment of the character brings about an even stronger realisation of Shields's postmodern deconstructing of reality and playing with the notion of truth. Even the conversation in which Sarah reveals her new changed self is presented very light-heartedly. Sarah talks to a stranger on the bus who recognises her face from the book cover:

FUR COAT: You sounded, in the book, I mean, so ... (she searches for the word) so positive about everything.

SARAH: My wise days. (She smiles.) Actually I'm a little less positive now. About everything. A little more flexible, I've been told.

FUR COAT: You still feel the same way about female power? That a militant position offers our best –

SARAH: Yes. Absolutely. But with certain exceptions –

FUR COAT: What about men?

SARAH: Men?

FUR COAT: What I mean is, do you still feel the same about them? In your book, in the middle part, you talk about men as the masked enemy and –

SARAH (smiling, shrugging, acknowledging a joke on her younger self): I just got married. Last week.

FUR COAT: Ah! So you do believe in love.

SARAH: Love?

FUR COAT: Love and marriage. That they don't necessarily cancel each other out as you said in –

SARAH (with confusion): That's a tough one.

FUR COAT: And what about your idea that marriage is a series of compromises that necessitates –

SARAH: Actually, this is my second marriage. But this time it feels better. (She says this wistfully, her brightness clouded by a drop in pitch that suggests a fugitive sense of fear or uncertainty).

FUR COAT: What about motherhood? How did you put it?

“Motherhood is the only power conduit available to“

SARAH (shrugging again, confidingly): I’m

pregnant. (248-249)

The Director’s Note to the film script stresses that the last chapter focuses on acts of “cannibalism” and in the quoted passage the old Sarah gets “eaten alive” by the new one. Every single one of her deep convictions that guided her youth is now overturned and ridiculed by her new more-experienced self. However, what connects the two Sarahs is the lack of certainty. Sarah the narrator is hesitant about her ideas and fame as a feminist icon; the new Sarah again is characterised by “a fugitive sense of fear or uncertainty.” The novel suggests the character’s inability to fit in and be convincing in any context. The ideology she tries to represent does not equal deep convictions and everything seems to be based on assumptions. Men and women, love and marriage, feminism and motherhood cannot be clearly defined, categorised and understood; everything is subjected to constant renegotiation, the novel suggests.

The other female protagonist in the novel (apart from Mary Swann who is only present in the accounts of others) is Rose Hindmarch. She is a Nadeau librarian who claims to have known Mary Swann. While the reader is firstly led to believe that Sarah is the most obvious and prominent feminist of the story, the part of Rose changes that assumption. As Kathy Barbour has noticed, Rose is the one in the narrative who keeps her “womanly identity” and independence. When the local women donate a hand-made quilt to the Mary Swann Memorial Room it is signed by the authors using their husbands' names. In Barbour’s words: “Their signatures – ‘in simple chain stitch’ – show them

all to be yoked to husbands whose names they use as though they had no identities of their own: 'Mrs. Frank Sears, Mrs. Homer Hart, Mrs. Joseph H. Fletcher, and so on'. Near the centre of the quilt is the single embroidered butterfly, with the signature and female identity: 'Rose Hindmarch'" (Barbour 269). In Nadeau, a small place where most women are housewives, Rose is an exception. She holds a number of posts; she "wears a number of hats" (Shields, *Swann* 123). She is the town clerk, a librarian, a curator of the Nadeau Local History Museum, a church elder in the Nadeau United Church, and a village councillor. Rose does not believe in God but she treats very seriously her position in the church as she is the only independent woman on the board, the other woman being "Mrs. Homer Hart (Daisy)" (124). Rose is presented as a good, helpful person, in her uncomplicated way sensing the injustice of patriarchal arrangements. Even though her independence is not a conscious manifestation of feminism, Rose is conscious of the existence and the workings of power. Rose the atheist is for example aware that she has to participate in a show in the church but also that it is the only way to participate in hierarchical power.

Rose, of the two female protagonists, is even closer to voicing the idea of life as a performance. Whereas Sarah fearfully senses that she is a part of a play, Rose fully realises the workings of a performance. It is especially clear to her when she wears her hat of the village councillor:

Her position is a complicated one, for she must report to somebody in a sense; first the library report, then the report of town clerk, then the museum report. For the last twelve years she has also served the council as recording secretary, and this

places her in the ludicrous position of writing up minutes in which she herself is one of the starring actors. She writes: “The minutes were read by Rose Hindmarch, and then Rose Hindmarch presented the interim library report,” just as though Rose Hindmarch were a separate person with a different face and possessed of different tints of feeling. The Rose she writes about is braver than she knows herself to be. “Stout of heart” is how she thinks of her, an active woman in the middle of her life. (This much is true; Rose at fifty *is* in the middle of her life; her grandmother lived to be a hundred and her mother eighty-five. Those are her other hats, you might say, daughter, granddaughter, though she no longer is obliged to wear them).

(125)

Rose’s reading out and reporting to herself, but in a different capacity, is a parodic portrayal of how society is organised on superficial arrangements; how people become conflated with their roles and how important the role of language is in society. Rose is conscious of the possibilities of fiction and the ability to project oneself as a different entity with different qualities. It points to the self-consciousness of the novel as fiction. According to Hutcheon: “a self-reflexive text suggests that perhaps narrative does not derive its authority from any reality it represents, but from ‘the cultural conventions that define both narrative and the construct we call ‘reality’” (*The Politics* 33-34). The cultural conventions allow Rose to change her capacity and the performative speech acts influence her reality (when she announces her different roles, she becomes a different impersonation). However, regardless of all the pretences

she is able to build using the power of language, Rose deep inside “has always known, not sensed, but *known*, that she is deficient in power” (Shields, *Swann* 165). This notion signals Shields’s later preoccupation with the lack of female power, a topic which she fully develops in her last novel.

Rose, by taking on different roles but also by utilizing performative speech acts, is able to influence the reality around her; by changing her hats she can stage herself as braver and more active because such is the possibility of the narrative. By uttering certain words she is allowed to change her capacity. She recognises the power of the personal to change the “world around;” she understands that her different roles give her more respect and people treat her as somebody superior. As a young girl she becomes a local telephone operator and stereotypically she should have stayed in her job until she got married and took over the responsibilities of “the lady of the house.” In her drive for respectability she applies for the job of town clerk because then she stands the chance of challenging the gender order, as “even the men in Nadeau respect her calm rows of figures and her grasp of recent by-laws” (125). Wanting recognition as someone with superior knowledge she becomes the librarian, for it gives her “an unearned reputation for being a scholar” (125). However, Rose acknowledges the need to escape from the limitations of her little town and its citizens, and she also finds a way to do it. The new celebrity, Mary Swann, whom Rose “knew” personally, becomes a pass to a new brighter future. As we read: “Curiously enough, this new historical interest has not so much explained the past to Rose as it has opened the future. Her life has changed. She has connections in the outside world now, the academic world. Quite a number of scholars and historians have come to Nadeau to call on her” (126). She is also

ready to “abduct” (as Buss would have it) Mary Swann to serve her needs. She will invent her friendship with Swann and make up the memorial room in order to attract more attention to herself.

However, just as the author plays with the narrative voice, she also plays with Rose’s feminism. After arriving at the conclusion that Rose is the embodiment of the subconscious feminism, aware of the power of words and the necessity to perform one’s role in society and to overcome gender imbalance, we face the suggestion that the shape of Rose’s life comes from her inability to fulfil her feminine roles of a wife and mother and the emptiness left by this absence needs to be silenced and filled in with other activities:

What a dirty shame she never married: this is what Nadeau people occasionally say, but Rose has never inspired that pity. Some delicacy of hers, some fineness of bodily tissue or sensibility, the way she moves her hands down an open page or pronounces certain words – with an intake of breath like a person caught by surprise – make it appear that she has *chosen* to remain unmarried. (126, author’s emphases)

So Rose really has not chosen to be independent to keep her own name. She does not want to admit it, but it is a sort of failure that haunts her life. Rose admits that her life, in spite of her local “professional success,” is in fact empty:

A woman of many hats, then, which she feels herself fortunate to own and which she wears proudly, almost vaingloriously, though there are moments when she experiences an appalling sensation of loss, the naggy suspicion that beneath the hats is

nothing but chilly space or the small scratching sounds of
someone who wants only to please others. (126)

When Rose walks back home from work she returns to loneliness, a certain non-existence as at home she does not wear any of her hats. For other women her march through town announces that their husbands will be returning home shortly and another part of their day will begin. However, even though Rose's life is never significantly intertwined with a man, it is a man that "saves" her from a very intimate feminine oppression. At fifty years old Rose starts suffering from excessive bleeding and when she believes that her time has come her male friend Homer Hart takes her to a gynaecologist who assures her that the problem is not serious. Thanks to Homer a life of new possibilities begins and Rose confesses: "just when I thought everything, *everything* had stopped, it all of a sudden just started up again" (242). Ironically, in her life devoid of men, it is a man who makes her new start possible and helps her forget "how lonely she is, and that she is one of the unclaimed" (171). Here we see the similarity between Rose and Morton: they both need a counterbalance of the opposite sex, but they are not ready for everything a relationship entails. A simple reassurance and support is enough. The novel stresses how male and female elements need each other and how, in spite of all the differences, they experience the same needs and longings.

Mary Swann or Swann: A Mystery is a complex narrative engaging in a number of discussions. The multiple voices in the text contribute to and take sides in the discussions about reality, its representation, the power of language over the cultural and the inability to conclude any story. The novel also shows how various standpoints bring different meanings and different understandings

of the same issues. The stories of men differ from those of women but paradoxically they are very close as they fall into the same traps. They similarly appropriate, manipulate and edit the events and they all show how the “past cannot be described objectively,” how the “present will always mediate [the] past” (Hutcheon, *The Politics* 161) and how they never have the final say in their narrative. All of the detectives fail to reconstruct Mary Swann but they learn a lot about themselves. In the final section, as Brian Johnson notices, all the Swannians admit to being guilty of overt appropriations of Mary Swann and “ultimately, then, the power struggle in *Swann* gives way to a relinquishing of power in which the critics temporarily cease their furious and self-interested author construction” (Johnson 226). They realise that while appropriating Swann they lost her and all the evidence of her existence. The novel also marks Shields’s shift into a more pessimistic tone about the powerlessness of both men and women, which will be so prominent in *The Stone Diaries*.

CHAPTER FOUR

Neither a romantic hero nor a fairy-tale ogre? Postmodern masculinity in

The Republic of Love

The Republic of Love is a postmodern variation on a popular theme: romantic love. After rewriting detective novel in *Swann*, Shields engages with another popular genre in order to allow her text more flexibility and parodic distancing from the rigid constraints of realism. As I have already discussed in the previous chapter, the rewriting of popular genres is a popular practice by feminists that serves the purpose of providing alternative realities to those assigning women a position subordinate to men. In *The Republic of Love*, however, Shields not only reworks the popular romance but also embraces fairy tales and myths about mermaids. All these elements are combined to create a multidimensional novelistic space where “anything can happen” (Shields, *Republic* 182). The two protagonists, Tom Avery (a forty-year-old radio host and three-time divorcee) and Fay MacLeod (a thirty-five-year old single folklorist researching mermaids), are placed in multiple contexts – some more realistic and some more imaginary – and thus their characterisation is dynamic. I argue that both characters – by inhabiting so many plains of existence that are the narrative itself along with embedded fairy tales and myths – are self-conscious constructs, understanding the importance of their roles in those schemata and performing them full of doubts. They are aware that they lack their own integral identities and they consciously follow the prescribed paths of romantic lovers, Cinderella, ogres, and mer-people. They

even invent romantic love between them in order to keep the story going. Tom is a representative of the confused postmodern masculinity based on constant performance and chasing after prescribed roles. Yet, he is also presented as a very stereotypical character expecting his patriarchal privileges to be fulfilled. Fay, on the other hand, is one of Shields's typical new women. Even though she is an independent and experienced female, she cannot find fulfilment on her own. She longs for a partner and a family at the same time being conscious that such union will come at a price of losing independence. The novel closes stressing tension between love and entanglement, and love and completion, which are not achieved in this romance with a seemingly happy ending.

To start with, Fay and Tom are the lovers of this unconventional romance but they are often described as seeing themselves as participants in a fairy tale. The reader is left with the impression that they are both "mer-people" captured in their "mer-condition," identified in the text as "solitary longing that is always being thwarted. No, not thwarted – denied" (203). The mer-condition, in a way, is responsible for a certain paradox in the text, which seems to be a romance without a love story. Shields presents the relationship of Tom and Fay as constantly relying on reaffirmation from others and on tangible reminders of their affection (such as a wedding invitation). But even the external reassurances fail and the lovers separate for a time. Formulaic romance demands that the story should conclude in a marital union. *The Republic of Love* follows the prescription, but the moral of this story seems to be "love renewed is not precisely love redeemed" (364). Shields plays with the conventions of unconditional love, love at first sight and the idea of only one "Mr Right" fundamental to the romance genre. In such a "game" the

protagonists instantly become unreliable as romantic lovers. This aspect of the novel opens up a field of possible new interpretations of Shields's female and male characters. The underlying romance/fairy tale/myth strands relate to my claim that Tom is an example of postmodern masculinity. I argue that the fragmented and displaced presentation of Tom, the double vision of the characters and the proposition that they see themselves as actors in different roles reflect fundamental postmodern worries. As masculinity always needs to be looked at in connection to femininity I will analyse both protagonists in close detail; however, my main focus will be the development of the male character. Tom is envisaged as a postmodern man characterised by all the contemporary insecurities relating to gender performativity and representation. The novel tackles in detail questions of identity and performativity in social context and reveals how powerful society is in conditioning certain inescapable patterns.

The structure of the novel reinforces the fragmented representation of the characters. The chapters consistently alternate between the two focalisers, a technique already used in *Happenstance*, which utilises two different focalisers for the two parts of the book. However, here the perspective shifts constantly from one chapter to another, which blurs the difference between female and male experience. Shields introduces a number of marginal characters into the novel, each bringing in a different story, many featured only once. Not unusually for Shields, she also uses numerous types of discourse within the novel, such as rhymes, newspaper articles, obituaries, letters and notes. The polyphony of the narrative accentuates the complexity of representation. The characters are built from fragmented accounts of every single voice in the text

and end up being only “a jumble of other people’s impressions” (9). The aim of this chapter is to analyse the different strands and the different techniques Shields employs to shape her protagonists and to contrast them with prescriptive formulas for popular romance heroes, fairy-tale protagonists and mythical creatures. I will show that none of the readily available patterns apply unconditionally to Tom but that they all contribute to representing the concept of postmodern masculinity. I will discuss the ideas of representation and performativity in their postmodern context, how feminists use romance and the fairy tale to challenge conventions and how studies of late twentieth-century masculinities find their reflection in the novel. In this respect I will exemplify how *The Republic of Love* tells a story of a postmodern man, a representative of the third wave of studies of masculinity that is “clearly influenced by the advent of post-structural theory, particularly as it relates to gender in terms of questions of normativity, performativity and sexuality” (Edwards 3). I will demonstrate evidence for *The Republic of Love* as a romance lacking a love story and show that such a paradox acts as a starting point for ideas like “non-guy men” and modern mermaids, historically symbols of sexual ambiguity. I will discuss Taïna Tuhkunen’s definition of Tom as a modern merman but also the idea that the novel is about “a sunken, rather than a fallen, republic, a ‘big wide radioland’, where the postmodernist view of the displaced, disillusioned, disconnected, and deeply distressed North American city-dweller is playfully yet no less critically challenged” (Tuhkunen 112). Displacing, disconnecting, fragmenting, but also overturning and parodying will be key terms guiding my analysis of Tom Avery as another example of Shields’s masculinities.

As Faye Hammill argues, *The Republic of Love* is a parody of a popular romance. She writes that “Shields’s purpose in introducing critical difference into her romantic novel is to offer alternative versions of the love story, releasing it from conventional, idealized fictional patterns and incorporating into it elements of unpredictability, complexity, provision, and comedy” (Hammill, “The Republic” 69). Shields’s novel is neither a radical example of feminist rewriting of traditional stories nor an experimental postmodern form, but a romance with a difference. It overturns some of the assumptions of formulaic romance and adds linguistic depth. Here, unlike Harlequin or Mills & Boon romances, it is not the storyline that is of utmost interest to the readers but the undertones that tell a different tale. The superficial plot envisages the two protagonists to whom we are introduced and follow until they meet and fall in love. Then they decide to get married; there are some complications and the wedding is called off, but everything ends happily and Tom and Fay are united.

But the other story concerns a contemporary woman and man trying to fit into the postmodern context of the late twentieth century. Fay is a fully emancipated woman with her own independent income, hobbies and sexual experience. The story reveals her constant struggle with the choice she needs to make between total independence and connection with someone. The tension revolves around postmodernity and tradition, domesticity and the professional world and new gender relations. On the one hand, Fay longs to have somebody by her side as she admits: “when pushing up against the world, she needs companionship ...the addition of another person can lighten the most routine work and make ordinary experiences luminous” (10). The heroine who sees

herself as a “jumble of other people’s impressions” (9) needs a companion to complete her identity. On the other hand, she is petrified at the thought of losing her total independence. United with Tom at the end of the story, she reminisces about the moments before the marriage:

the conjoined life and its unscrolled intimacies were weighed against a singular satisfaction, and found wanting – too full of domestic spoilage and cluttered history, too burdened with risk and danger. To love or not to love; it was not a proposition but a subtle threat, although the yield in terms of happiness or sorrow came to the same thing. (364)

For the female character, this romance is not about idealised love but about a struggle to bring balance into her existence.

For Shields’s romantic hero the story is a little different. It starts by evoking his nearly magical childhood of being a demonstration baby at the Home Economics Department, University of Manitoba, where he was pampered by twenty-seven young girls (his adopted mothers) when his own mother was hospitalised. All Tom’s adult life seems to be a struggle to return to this state of unconditional happiness and the first chapter ends with his confession: “Such love, such love – ah God, he’d never know love like that again. ... They loved him just for being alive, for doing nothing to deserve their love” (3). For the male character this is a story of his quest for the lost love of his childhood, his struggle both to be someone’s number one and to have somebody who will take care of him. The last notion is a reflection of Tom’s longing for old patriarchal arrangements: “He was entitled to a few

comforts. There was something oxlike and docile about him, yes, but wasn't he entitled to a vision of plenitude and order, clothes freshly washed, freshly ironed?" (142). It is clear that not only do the romantic protagonists not share the same vision but they are also quite different from typical romantic lovers. Their different aims and ideals bring tension to the story from the outset, and it seems to be a different tension to those envisaged by the formula of a popular romance.

In order to better define Tom and Fay as a romantic (anti)lovers I will point out the main characteristics of such protagonists based on different studies of the romance genre. In this way I demonstrate how *The Republic of Love* reflects different aspects of developing and changing romance literature, finally to arrive at the book's convergence with – but also dissonance from – a popular romance. "Romance" is a broad term that can be generally applied to a literary genre that emerged in twelfth-century France and was written in the "romance" languages as opposed to most of the texts that were Latin. Barbara Fuchs explains that "these poems are typically concerned with aristocratic characters such as kings and queens, knights and ladies, and their chivalric pursuits. They are often organised around a quest, whether for love or adventure, and involve a variety of marvellous elements" (4). This is the beginning of romance, a genre that will undergo many changes before it becomes today's popular romance. Northrop Frye, who researched the history of romance, also stresses of early romances that "romance is a story of the hero who goes through a series of adventures and combats in which he always wins" (67). In this case a romance hero is a warrior who undertakes a quest in a mythical world, and his success "derives from a current of energy which is

partly from him and partly outside him. It depends partly on the merit of his courage, partly on certain things given him: unusual strength, noble blood, or a destiny prophesied by an oracle” (67). The description shows clearly that such a hero is not an ordinary person. There are mythical forces working around him that give him his special status. The heroine, according to Frye, must be by all means virginal, but virginity is also understood in “male-oriented conventions that the heroine of romance is supposed to carry out her tactics [to win her hero] in low profile, that is, behave with due modesty” (79). The heroines are not denied volition; they know precisely what they want, but they simply have to be less open and more manipulative.

In a way Shields’s male protagonist reflects such assumptions, so he can be seen as a continuation of the traditional romantic lover in contemporary literature. Tom’s “magical” childhood seems to influence very strongly his quest to establish a successful relationship in the future. His objective of recovering the lost love of his childhood is doomed to fail from the outset (unlike original heroes who always succeed). It is one of the characteristics of traditional romance that the hero idealises his past and undermines the value of the present. Northrop Frye also adds that “a hero may lose his luck in various ways: sometimes through a self-destructive quality in himself, expressed by such words as “fey” or “hybris”, sometimes through the kind of accident that is clearly not quite an accident” (68). Shields’s story reverses the traditional plot. The hero is unlucky in his quest (he gets hastily married and then divorced three times unable to find fulfilment) and meets “FAY,” who is a sign that his good fortune has come (at least momentarily). The heroine of *The Republic of Love*, however, does not resemble a traditional one. She is unsure of what she

wants, changes her mind, and a union with the hero is understood by her as partial surrender of her own identity. She is also too independent and sexually experienced to qualify as a female protagonist of a traditional romance.

The romance genre evolves and it transpires that slowly the focus of the story moves from the hero onto the heroine. The form and language changes and gradually the notion of a novel is separated from romance but the two interchange for a while. In an attempt to distinguish the novel from a romance, a number of characteristics were contrasted. For example, according to Clara Reeve's definition,

The romance is an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things. The novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it is written. The Romance in lofty and elevated language, describes what never happened nor is likely to happen. The Novel gives a familiar relation of such things, as pass every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friend, or to ourselves. (110-111)

What transpires is that the unreal and magical elements are characteristic of a romance whereas the novel relies on realism. Again, *The Republic of Love* bears characteristics of both. On the surface a contemporary story of two professionals, it gets skilfully combined with elements of the magical: for instance, the most important events of the story happen in extreme temperatures, and Fay's father returns home after a wheel from a plane goes through the roof of his rented flat. What is interesting in the attempts to separate out romance from an early novel is the fact that the type of hero they feature, paradoxically, unites them. In both he is on a quest to find and free his

princess; in a romance he is a knight and in early novels a gentleman. On his way, he has to overcome obstacles and defeat giants and dragons, which, in novels, are swapped for austere guardians and maiden aunts (Reeve 110-111). As both genres continue to develop separately, romance increasingly becomes associated with “low” culture (being passed-down to ladies’ maids), while the novel with “high.” Further, the later development of romance in a “Gothic” tradition renders it a part of mass literature. During Romanticism, romance is re-discovered and favoured for its “nostalgic purchase on times gone by, idealizing what it imagines as the organic culture of a romance past, and its seductive appeal” (Fuchs 122-123). Poets of the Romantic period are lured by magical past and the chivalric times gone by and thus idealise the genre.

Today, romance is mostly associated with the mass-produced Harlequin and Mills& Boon publications that are a pop-culture version of the genre. Janice Radway’s study *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* compiles a contemporary picture of romantic lovers based on these stories and their readers' understanding of them. She did her research on patterns involved in reading popular romances among the women of Smithton community (Midwestern town in Missouri), and she quotes directly what the women have told her.¹ The Smithton women concentrate mainly on the superficial plot and take interest only in the story level. Their romantic heroes are built on contrast. While the heroine is expected by the readers to be innocent, alluring in appearance, “naturally feminine” and a “true woman”

¹A very homogenous community of housewives who would passionately devote themselves to romance reading during their free time. Radway introduces the place as: “Surrounded by corn and hay fields, the midwestern community of Smithton, with its meticulously tended subdivisions of single-family homes, is nearly two thousand miles from the glass-and-steel office towers of New York City where most of the American publishing industry is housed” (46). Radway quotes directly what the women have told her without attempting at defining and qualifying the terms and I repeat them as such as well.

(Radway 127), the hero is built in opposition to her. He is characterised by “spectacular masculinity”, “purity of maleness” and he is “a man among men” (128-129). The Smithton romance readers rely on the stereotypes and patriarchal classifications of the early 1980s when the study was conducted. For the target readers, “true woman” and “spectacular masculinity” are self-defining patriarchal terms symbolizing the traditional belle and the macho-man. At more or less the same time, another study of romance was published in the UK, namely *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, edited by Jean Radford. An essay by Ann Rosalind Jones deals with Mills & Boon romances and popular romance heroes in relation to the growing prominence of feminism. She claims:

The texts prove that the genre is flexible, but not at every point.

One instance: I doubt that the romance format will ever allow writers to challenge the conventions through which the hero is constructed: he is still older, richer, wiser in the ways of the world, and more experienced sexually than the heroine. The ideology of Mills & Boon may be more rigid (and oppressive to men) than the guidelines through which heroines are produced. And the focus on men’s power in the public realm, even if it is temporarily laid aside in the privacy of love scenes, has other consequences for the genre. (214)

So the hero of the novel stays more or less the same. He needs to be all-powerful to instil a sense of well-being and protection in his heroine. The formula of popular romance has evolved since that time, but such findings show how slowly some aspects of the genre were influenced by the rise of

feminism and changes in society. However, Jones gives numerous examples of how feminist issues are indirectly addressed in the novels. Romance is seen as a “survival manual” for women and as such it shows them the way to win social security, by being able to “negotiate the conflict between male-desire and long-term commitment” (199). Also, on closer inspection it transpires that even the most conventional plots are able to reconstruct relations between the sexes. The heroine is usually seduced by the hero’s transformation from being brutal and indifferent to becoming gentle and nurturing. The heroine in the novel often collapses, faints, is ill and at that point the hero takes care of her.

In Jones’s findings:

Scenes in which the heroine is held, rocked, fed, bathed and doctored are very common; the narrative emphasizes the hero’s unsuspected skills as caretaker rather than seducer, and the heroine is positioned not as victim but at the center of expert care and attention. If the hero collapses, his temporary helplessness reverses whatever master/slave combat the preceding narrative has set up, while the heroine’s response to the emergency represents her as cool-headed, capable, even heroic. (200-201)

Thus, there are visible changes in relations between the hero and the heroine. Just as the target readers were undergoing changes in the gender order very slowly and reluctantly (the target readers are women traditionally taking care of the household and relying on their husband’s financial income) so too did their romances. Today, romantic heroines are even more independent, sexually

experienced and sometimes more financially or professionally powerful than the hero.

The Republic of Love features potentially plausible contemporary romantic lovers, but the story itself lacks the necessary element of a romance: romantic love. I assert that the affection featured in the novel is calculated, weighed and carefully planned and as such does not qualify as romantic love. Tom and Fay are both working professionals of average beauty, past their youth, with the baggage of sexual experience, but who find loveless sex unsatisfactory. The narrative just before Tom and Fay meet suggests that they are both tired of the way they have been living, and they are both desperate for a new turn in their lives. Fay, after separating with her lover Peter, tries to adjust to being single again and finds it difficult. The breakthrough in the solitary direction she is initially willing to take happens during a baby-shower. She reminisces that she

cut into her cake with a fork and struck a silver dollar, which declared her the next to become pregnant. Fay looked around the darkening porch and thought how happy she was to be here. There is nowhere else I'd rather be, she said to herself, and meant it. But the minute she opened the door of her apartment she began to cry. (148)

The passage stresses the tension between isolation and connection. In this instance Shields's story seems to suggest a traditional view on women's happiness, which assumes that in order to reach fulfilment they should become mothers. The undercurrent of the story at this point seems to be that Fay will never be happy until she settles with a partner and establishes a family (but as

is not uncommon in Shields's stories this assumption will also be undermined).

During this period of vulnerability Fay meets Tom; he soon declares that he loves her and they decide to get married. It seems like a formulaic romance plot but it does not turn out to be one.

Tom, before meeting Fay, also speculates that he needs to change his life (still in suspense after his last divorce three years before) and that "all he needs is a theory to set things in motion" (24). Falling in love seems to be a perfect solution and the "theory" for the unhappy and temporarily impotent Tom. Thus, the two protagonists are determined that finding their "other halves" will heal them; when they meet they are desperate to make their story into a romance with a happy ending. However, the moment Tom and Fay decide to get married the affection seems to vanish. He needs constant tangible reassurance that he is in love (he posts the wedding announcements everywhere he goes in order to be able to look at them, and Fay's wedding list reassures him that it is all happening), while Fay needs acceptance from others. She is not able to commit until she gets her auntie Onion's blessing (as a matter of fact the lovers are reunited on Onion's instruction). The reader knows that Tom is driven by the need to be taken care of and to be unconditionally accepted, while Fay aims to fulfil the traditional female role of a wife and mother but proves reluctant to give up her independence. In the final chapter, narrated from Fay's perspective, we read that her union with Tom, the potential happy ending, is already problematic for Fay:

Love renewed is not precisely love redeemed, and Fay seems less able than Tom to chase that thought away; she is, after all, a woman who sees life in symbolic images, and the image she

will never be able to absorb completely is that of herself, an exhausted, desperate, aberrant creature, slumped in Tom's doorway, pleading for admission. (365)

The displacement implied by the way Fay sees herself in hindsight as a different creature suggests a shift and cooling down after her goal of reuniting with Tom is achieved. Fay does not agree with the despair and reasoning that guided her earlier self to Tom's doorstep. They are both full of doubts about their reasons for getting together so hastily.

The above quotation will also serve here to initiate another discussion of double representation in Shields's characters. Fay, for example, confesses that she is fortunate "to possess this kind of skewed double vision. To be happy. And to see herself being happy" (75). That is, however, another double game that the author of the text and her protagonists play on the reader. Fay, when she utters these words, is consciously trying to project the image of a happy woman when in fact she is obsessively cleaning in order to forget about her loneliness. But this character is also allowed to voice real postmodern fears concerning identity:

She is sick of her identity; in fact, she's afraid of it. She has all the identity she wants, all she can absorb. Daughter, sister, girlfriend, all her Fay-ness, and all of its tints and colors, her clothes, her bed sheets, her cups and saucers, her writing paper. This looks just like you, people tell her. This is your sort of book, your sort of movie, the kind of thing only you would say. Fay McLeod. Yammer, yammer, yammer. She's sick of the woman. ...

She's learned, too, how unstable identity can be, how it can quickly drain away when brought face to face with someone else's identity. ...

It was exhausting, the battle to give yourself a shape. It was depressing, too, like an ugly oversized dress you had to go on wearing year after year after year. (154)

This quotation engages in the discussion of identity, representation and performativity. Fay is only a reflection of other people's impressions of her; such identity is unstable, flexible and depends on the spectator's gaze. It proves to be a core difference between character construction in a generic romance and in Shields. Popular romance characters are not self-reflexive, and they adhere to the old conventions of humanist individualism and the notions of identity that go with that. Fay also knows that in uniting with a partner she will have to take on another identity, and it will be the end of her quest for finding the true self.

Similar questions, but shaped differently, bother the male character. He ponders what it means to be a man at the end of the twentieth century. The preoccupation in postmodern studies of masculinities is "the importance of representation and its connections with wider questions of change and continuity in contemporary, and in some more historical, masculinities and identities" (Edwards 3). Tim Edwards points out that masculinity studies also emphasise the element of "artifice, flux and contingency concerning masculinities" (3). Shields's novel can be treated as another voice in the postmodern masculinity debate. Tom, not entirely a romantic hero, voices concerns over what makes a man these days:

THIS BUSINESS of being a guy, it never let up. In the morning getting out of bed, he left his pajama tops buttoned, just yanked them over his head, balled them up, rammed them under his pillow. Was that being a guy? Or did guys buy those knitted pull-over pajamas? Or sleep in their underwear like his stepfather, Mike? Or in nothing at all, damp skin, sweaty genitals, and chest hair, like Burt Reynolds? (44)

After this impression, Tom goes on to quote the things that a “guy” should eat, fancy, what kind of tip he should leave. Tom is conscious of gender performativity and cultural signals that guide the shaping of his masculinity. Yet, he does not take the whole process seriously: “Oh Christ, he was boring himself stiff” (40). Shields’s protagonist realises that he has a “self” to shape, adapt and promote: “All I have is this self. Not another thing. Just this irreducible droning self” (44); he also realises that it is a conscious and demanding process. He can choose from available models of what he calls “guy” or “non-guy men,” but in any case what follows will be a performance. The “non-guy men” are those men who do not try to look and behave like Burt Reynolds, just like the participants of a religious parade that Tom witnesses: “Such manly, non-guy men ... so closely barbered, so clean and beefy and calm and beating their drums for their Lord Jesus” (45). It transpires that the “non-guy” men are the ones who do not make a conscious effort to project their image of masculinity. The question of which image is more successful remains unanswered, like all the questions of what it means to be a man at the end of the twentieth century.

Tom is neither a “guy” nor a “non-guy” man. He sees himself in terms of a participant in a fairy tale, far from being the Prince Charming of the story. As a successful radio host, he advertises his late-night show on huge billboards around the city. Tom sees the depiction of himself on the advertisements in terms of a ghastly beast:

HIS NOSE – FAIRLY STRAIGHT, decently modelled ..., terminating in nostrils deep and dark as caves. The self-mocking mouth widened-out gigantically, ready to eat whole sheep and goats, or children, in a single bite. The Avery eyes, famous for mischief and blueness, full of brio and fake tenderness, blinked turquoise like a pair of comic-strip lakes. Anyone driving over the Norwood Bridge in the center of town came face to face with the continent of Tom Avery’s chin, the long left basin of his ear, his hugely combed strands of hair. An obscenity, this aggressive billboard merriment. A paper-faced ogre whose morality was clearly an invention of chance and default. (81)

This is only a start of the self-hate list. Tom Avery defines himself as an ogre, a beast posing a threat to the city. His face is parodically enlarged and scary. On the one hand, he seems ready to devour the city; on the other, he is only a “paper-faced ogre,” which makes him pretentious but harmless. Therefore, he is not even convincing in fairy-tale terms. Tom continues with the litany of hatred towards the photo, the face in the photo, or Tom Avery himself:

HE HATED IT. The size of it. The indecency. It was altogether too public. It lunged at motorists, at perfectly nice guys driving by in their cars, guys who had a right to look up and see

someone maybe drinking orange juice or reaching for a tea bag. God. It was a shocking face, irresponsible, far too much protoplasm hanging on to the edges, a fake Olympian, a greaser, a hoser. (Would you buy a used crutch from this man? Are you kidding?) Tom Avery, he's our man. Yeah, yeah. Smarm. That's a leer you got, fella. It made him sick just to look at it... Weary, bleary, arghhh, get rid of this creep. He's a menace to the environment, an insult to the calm daily river of traffic. (83)

Why does Tom hate the poster so much? Does it reflect all the insecurities that Tom embodies? Tom accuses himself of being a fake, of taking on different roles and disguises but not really being himself, whatever that would mean. He sees himself as a threat, a menace, and a beast precisely because he is a fake. He cannot be trusted because he does not trust himself. Such tension around self-identity is synonymous with postmodern masculinity as presented in literature. Postmodern men are reflections, performers, usurpers, who are in constant flux, always readapting, always taking on different shapes.

In the first part of the billboard description, Tom sees himself in terms of a fairy-tale monster, an ogre. *The Republic of Love*, apart from taking the form of a popular romance, also utilises elements of fairy tales. Tom sees himself as an ogre, but for Fay (at least initially) he seems to be Prince Charming. When she reflects on their first meeting and tries to describe it to others, the story unfolds in a Cinderella manner:

She's obliged to produce the low-art time capsule in which she arrived some weeks ago at her nephew's birthday party, balloons, cake ice-cream, the whole thing, and how Tom Avery

happened to be there to pick up his godchild . . . , and, well after the party was over, he offered her a lift home, only he didn't have a car, it was like a musical comedy in a way, and so they walked home. (247)

The whole fairy-tale context has already been prepared and introduced. Tom Avery, as already mentioned, had an almost magical childhood and twenty-seven mothers. What is more, his home town is called Duck River and it can be reached by Grey Goose Bus. For Fay, "the naming of this place sounded . . . like the opening line of a very long story that she would soon be hearing, that she would be learning by heart, and that would become before long a part of her own story, a story that will contravene and replace the abstract narratives she has been constructing for herself these last weeks" (232). So it is also the heroine's wish to be a part of this fairy-tale narrative. Even the name of the heroine is suggestive, a homophone of 'fey' or a synonym for fairy. And the word 'fairy,' as Marina Warner explains, "in the Romance languages indicates a meaning of the wonder or fairy tale, for it goes back to a Latin feminine word, *fata*, a rare variant of *fatum* (fate) which refers to a goddess of destiny" (14-15). Fay spends most of her time researching mermaids, mythical creatures that she is trying to categorise and understand. After meeting her "Mr. Right," her friend assures her that "There's someone cut out for everyone" (251); she confesses that she had never been able to commit because of the unattainable ideal her parents' marriage presented but "now, suddenly, the spell is broken" (244). The contemporary Sleeping Beauty wakes up to live happily ever after with her Prince Charming. Also, as is common in Shields's plots, Fay's parents unexpectedly break up after long years of a seemingly perfect marriage, with

her father claiming that he was “smothered. There wasn’t any air” and that he will not be going back as “There isn’t any love left” (318-319). The confession once again puts the notion of romantic love in question as it is prone to vanish unexpectedly.

As I have already stressed in the introduction, *The Republic of Love* is an example of a feminist rewriting of a popular genre, in this case popular romance and the fairy tale. A similar procedure has already been discussed in the previous chapter on *Swann*. In this section I would like to complete the discussion by adding some more ideas voiced by Barbara Godard and Marina Warner. Godard explains that

Feminist writers frequently employ highly coded popular genres, such as science fiction, fantasy, utopian fiction and the whodunit to hypothesize alternative reality constructed by the conventions, and which locate sexist ideologies and practices as structural determinants of that reality. These subgenres accommodate a variety of strategic purposes: to uncover sexist discourses which generate characterizations of women as weak, stupid, passive, and receptive; to represent situations of sexual equality which implicitly condemn the inequality of their own society and the practices which structure it; to uncover the fact that sexism is a social pathology and not a behavioural defect of aberrant individuals; and to question the narratives which operate on us from childhood as conduct guides (“F(r)ictions” 120)

Shields takes on the formula of popular romance and adds elements of fairy tale in order to construct a postmodern reality. By bending the conventions and introducing unexpected elements she escapes rigid frameworks and allows a possibility of new worlds. That is why her romantic lovers are suspect from the very beginning as the theme of love at first sight and the theory of only one Mr. Right is seriously undermined. The characters need to doubt their own construction, their “Fay-ness” and “Tom-ness,” in order to be able to settle down and compromise in a marriage. Marriage is not presented as the promise of eternal bliss, but rather as a difficult pact in which the two individuals are asked to give up their independence, and here relations between the sexes are examined once again. The man is desperate for the union for he sees it as a necessary element to his comfortable fulfilled life. The woman is reluctant and scared as marriage means giving up some of the privileges of feminist right to independence. Shields is not radical in her rewriting, but she wants to be realistic and offers a possible contemporary romance of two people approaching middle age who are ready for a change or commitment in their lives, suggesting that such a decision necessarily entails a compromise.

Again, the fairy-tale elements bring in more possibilities of incorporating feminist readings to the story. As Warner points out in her exhaustive study of fairy tales and their tellers, women of various social backgrounds choose to retell fairy tales to give them a different emphasis and in that way to revolt and protest against gender injustice. As she gives examples of two female seventeenth-century Parisian poets and writers, she signals that already at that time they would retell fairy tales to give them a feminist emphasis:

These tales are wrapped in fantasy and unreality, which no doubt helped them entertain their audiences – in the courtly salon as well as the village hearth – but they also serve the stories’ greater purpose, to reveal possibilities, to map out a different way and a new perception of love, marriage, women’s skills, thus advocating a means of escaping imposed limits and prescribed destiny. The fairy tale looks at the ogre like Bluebeard or the Beast of ‘Beauty and the Beast’ in order to disenchant him; while romancing reality, it is a medium deeply concerned with undoing prejudice. Women of different social positions have collaborated in storytelling to achieve true recognition for their subjects: the process is still going on. (24)

The fairy tale has always been a powerful medium of female expression, Warner explains. Even the earliest female storytellers had power over young people to tell them their version of stories. With the passage of time women started purposefully manipulating the tales to convey their own message, and the phenomenon continues. Recent examples include the rewriting of fairy tales by Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter. Shields utilises only certain elements of fables, but in this way the story is even more open to reinterpretation.

While I have been paying most attention so far to the romance structure and fairy tale elements in the story, Taina Tuhkunen in her study notices the importance and prevalence of myth in *The Republic of Love*. Tuhkunen sees the novel as a “deliberately fishy, watered down version of a love tale” (108), in which Tom is presented as a “potentially traumatized and tragic Oedipal

hero, endowed with peculiar voice that has got just 'a bit of infrared in it', ... developed into a modern merman, a delightfully unpretentious male protagonist who shows amazing disinterest in 'pen envy,' in the power of the so-called male gaze" (103). I agree that another possible dimension of Tom's postmodern masculinity is seeing him as a potential merman. The "mer-condition" is prevalent in the novel, and the characters are often denied their volition and left waiting for what is going to happen. Fay researches mermaids but fails to notice that Tom is enchanting her with his merman's voice. As she listens to the radio

drifting toward sleep on her bunched pillows, [she] feels the music merge with Tom's voice, a voice that surprises her by becoming a slidy tenor with pliant honeyed bands of laughter. His loose tensionless melody seems after a while to form a long seamless wall she's feeling her way along. She melts in and out of consciousness, shifts on her pillows to find a cooler spot. She's come to understand love's crippling inability to look at itself but knows with certainty that Tom Avery is her star-spangled man. (267)²

Tom has power over her, the power to enchant her, so she will give up her independence in order to be with him. Is it masculine power over women? The question remains unanswered. However, at the end of the story, Fay sees herself as a mermaid:

In the days before she married Tom Avery there came to her vision ... of how it might actually feel to be a mermaid, adrift in

²Star-spangled man gestures towards US symbolism however in this context I would not go into a detailed analysis of a potential connection between manhood and nationalism; rather Tom as a star-spangled man is her private hero in this very moment.

cold sea foam and endlessly circling the confused wreckage of floating timbers and drowned, scattered human bodies, her pale hair painted the same translucent blue as her element.

It seems to Fay, who judged herself harshly during that disordered period, that the traditional mermaid was her spiritual sister – plaintive, coy and greedy. Her shimmering frontality, taunting mouth, phosphorescent torso, and thrusting tail – these bodily parts gave off the fishy perfume of ambiguity. (364)

In this passage the emphasis is on female ambiguity. Fay, comparing herself to a mermaid, reveals her indecision but also deliberate manipulation. While getting Tom back she was “coy and greedy,” aiming to satisfy her own unclear urges and unconcerned with the possible implications for both of them. Just like a mermaid drifting among debris, she might have been the rescuer or the symbol of doom, in any case relishing the pleasure in her power over the shipwrecked. As a merman, however, Tom has proven to be a strong opponent, for she does not take into consideration his power over her: his “midnight voice, the remembered covering of flesh across his back” (364), but also the fear of loneliness and regret instilled in her by her always strong and independent aunt Onion, who after living all her life without formal attachments warns Fay against a similar mistake. The passage illustrates the momentary balance between the two mer-creatures. They both need each other for different reasons but neither will commit totally. A modern merman is full of contradictions and the term can stand for postmodern masculinity as such. Based on oppositions and a lack of conclusions, characterised by loss, uncertainty and insecurity, such a character construction encompasses all

postmodern worries concerning men, a topic which will be continued in Shields's later novel *Larry's Party*.

Apart from the notion of Tom as a modern merman I would like to also develop Tuhkunen's idea of Tom as a potentially traumatised Oedipal hero. In *The Republic of Love* Shields plays with the Freudian notion of the Oedipus complex. Tom was nurtured by twenty-eight mothers and "a zero of a father," defined only as "misplaced sperm on a misplaced night" (142). He himself stresses the impact of such a childhood, his constant quest for the lost love of his mothers, which is only Tom's imagination for he was too young to remember that "charmed time" (2) himself and, as a result, blames his upbringing on his failures in adult life: "Should he bring up the twenty-seven mothers? A marriage counsellor once suggested his trouble dated from that time, that some kind of psychic confusion concerning women had been engendered" (241). Tom, a representative of postmodern masculinity, does not want to take responsibility for his own life, a theme often tackled in Shields's texts. When he was a child his mother would do everything for him and surround him with obsessive care and his reaction is summed up as: "what could he do but obey?" We read:

"DON'T STIR YOURSELF," Tom's mother used to say to him when he was growing up. It was one of her expressions. Don't stir yourself, I'll get your socks, your glass of milk, your book, your pencil, your pillow, your aspirin. Sit tight, don't exert yourself, let me, let me sew on your button, polish your shoes, bake your favourite dessert. Sit back, be comfy, let me do it.

What could he do but obey? ... Why should he stir himself when this deft, energetic, wily mother of his was so insistent, and when doing things for him gave her so much pleasure – for years, her only pleasure. (68)

Shields uses a parody of mother–son relationships to portray the state of contemporary masculinity. Today social assumptions blame women as easily for their sons’ problems as it was the past. In earlier patriarchal arrangements, mothers were held responsible for their sons’ successful socialisation (as the fathers were never present at home). They had to provide care but also suitable feminine and masculine models for a young man to distinguish between and follow. Here, the blame is playfully projected on the mother for she failed to provide little Tom with a masculine model, which left him at the Oedipal stage of the unlimited, unconditional and safe love of the mother. What is more, she gets married when Tom is already an adult and suddenly abandons him, so the process of his socialisation starts far too late. The parodic and mocking tone of the text clearly plays with such notions.

Tom’s three failed marriages are also described in a way that makes them seem to be parodies of the institutionalised union. As Tom confesses to Fay: “I think that for some reason, I was always meeting unhappy women. Maybe I was even drawn to them” (242). Vulnerable Tom chooses even more vulnerable women. In all marriages, Tom seems to be a transitory period after which his wives are ready to take a further step, always leaving Tom behind. His first wife, after divorcing Tom, embarks on a successful professional career and becomes a lesbian. It seems that the relationship with Tom influences the decisions to change her life completely and that traditional family is not what

would make her happy. She also uses physical violence towards Tom and she breaks his rib during a love act. What hurts him even more is not the physical pain but the fact that

Sheila had not reacted with commiseration or guilt, not Sheila.

No she had crowed in a kind of mirthful triumph, had bitten her lower lip, teased him, made sly jokes about Adam's rib, about the general frailty of men. He had held himself carefully away from her, feeling himself grow stiff and vulnerable. It had lasted for days, months. It became a habit. (238)

This passage illustrates a gender power struggle and that positions some contemporary women as triumphant. Paradoxically, they are the women who decide to ban men from their lives. Tom, when confronted with a powerful and overwhelming female, does not know how to react. That is a situation his mothers did not prepare him for as they themselves did not have such power and did not envisage the need for such tools. It is also a criticism of men still unable to relate to new women and who, in the face of confrontation, withdraw. It is also a humorous description, a cartoon-like example of situational humour where the victory of a woman is illustrated by the painful humiliation of her male partner in an intimate situation.

Tom's second wife was "hooked on tranquilizers, sleeping pills, and codeine" but she also hurt him physically. For example, she once struck him in the middle of the night with a belt "because a voice had directed her to do so" (141). It is another humorous scene humbling our hero. Once again a woman abuses him physically and once again he lacks the means to defend himself. It is a reversal of stereotypical roles as it was (and still is) more common for men

to abuse women. Also the standard of popular romance hero entails strength and implied brutality,³ whereas here, the hero is vulnerable and the women are presented as his oppressors. Tom is too trusting of women's nurturing qualities, and his expectations of a very traditional view of women clashes with the strong, independent and aggressive women he attracts. His third wife, however, is devoid of energy, willing to spend days lying on the bed and reading magazines. This marriage fails as well because they both lack the willingness to communicate and they both remain passive and waiting. Not surprisingly, after separating from Tom, Suzanne (the third wife) "wakes up" in a new relationship. The three marriages serve as a parody of marital arrangements and also a covert criticism of men's over-reliance on women. Tom passively waits for things to happen to him instead of actively participating in solving the problems and working his way through the new gender arrangements. The parodic edge here focuses on the criticism of 1960s mothers for failures in their sons' successful socialisation and the men's belief that their mothers are to blame for their adult mistakes.

Tom Avery is another example of Shields's skill in constructing masculine characters. Thanks to the use of a romance formula with elements of myths and fairy tales, Shields is able to build a convincing creation which reflects many of the postmodern questions about masculinity. Shifting between the factual (like the setting of the novel in Winnipeg), and the imaginary or improbable demands flexibility and engagement from the reader. Presenting Tom Avery in so many contexts and in so many potential roles vividly

³As already partially discussed, according to Radway's study: "every aspect of [the hero's] being, whether his body, his face, or his general demeanor, is informed by the purity of maleness. Almost everything about him is hard, muscular, and dark." Radway also stresses "the terrorizing effect of his exemplary masculinity" (128).

illustrates the complexity of the term masculinity but also the concept of performativity. The novel stages a series of different ways of conceiving manhood/masculinity and even demonstrates some of the contradictions inherent in them. Both of the characters, Tom and Fay, struggle to give shapes to their being, and this effort is never concluded. Tom is an example of what a postmodern man could be read as: a romance hero, a fairy tale ogre, a merman, a successful professional, an unsuccessful lover, a son, a friend and a victim. However, the main emphasis of the story is the lack of any clarity and the blurring of conventions, as symbolised by the mermaid, the symbol of sexual ambiguity, of “sexual temptation or sexual virtue, some paradoxical and potent mixture of the two” (Shields, *Republic* 97). The questions concerning the novel’s protagonists are open to reinterpretation and reinvention. Tom and Fay get married in the end, the sightings of mermaids are rationally explained in the last chapter (as manatees, dugongs or simply visions of drunken and bored sailors) but the text ends with a mermaid again:

Her face is blurred. Her abundant hair gestures toward sexual potential. In one of her hands is a comb, representing love and entanglement.

The other hand, which is uplifted (waving or perhaps beckoning), symbolizes a deep longing for completion, the wish for rapturous union, a hunger for the food of love. (366)

Such a conclusion suggests a potential opening of another story and a cycle of never ending possibilities for these unconventional romantic lovers for the “hunger for the food of love” still has not been satisfied.

CHAPTER FIVE

Locked in Chinese-Box Worlds of Her-Story. Masculine Constructs in *The Stone Diaries*

Male characters in *The Stone Diaries* are much more enigmatic than in other Shields novels. This 1993 text shows the author's boldest engagement with the postmodern. On the surface, the novel follows the prescriptive schema of an auto/biography of Daisy Goodwill Flett. It runs chronologically: the first chapter is entitled "Birth, 1905," the last "Death" and the reader is told about the main protagonist's life every ten years. However, the paradox of this particular life story is that its main subject seems to have a marginal position in a text populated with other characters. So Daisy's narrative is primarily characterised not only by her own symbolic erasure from the text but also by her conscious manipulation of the material included in the story. This carnivalised¹ novel abounds in inserted narratives, such as letters, recipes, lists and paratextual devices such as photographs. Significantly, the narrative voices constitute the biggest enigma in *The Stone Diaries*. The novel is narrated in both the first and the third person, thus making it difficult for the reader to understand who really tells the story of Daisy's life and how reliable the narrating persona is. The male characters in the book are filtered by multiple

¹ Brian McHale characterises "carnivalized literature" following Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas, saying: "Where the traditional genres of official literature are stylistically homogeneous, carnivalized literature is heterogeneous and flagrantly 'indecorous', interweaving disparate styles and registers. Where the official genres are typically unitary, both generically and ontologically, projecting a single fictional world, carnivalized literature interrupts the text's ontological "horizon" with a multiplicity of inserted genres – letters, essays, theatrical dialogues, novels-within-the-novel, and so on. Carnivalized literature, in other words, is characterized by stylistic heteroglossia and recursive structure – features we are already familiar with in postmodernist fiction" (171).

feminine consciousnesses and their stories are tailored in order to show how, on the one hand, they are a limiting force in women's lives, but on the other, how they are necessary referents for the recording of women's existence. The numerous narrative perspectives and postmodern devices result in a fragmented construction of men who are also faced with their own weaknesses and the inability to challenge the limiting forces of gendered society. The portrayal of men is ambiguous: they are the oppressors of women but they themselves are also oppressed and their lives are presented as constant struggles to re-invent themselves and bring a coherent whole to their life-stories. *The Stone Diaries* is a novel that re-creates and re-invents the past – parts of which are supposedly historically documented by inserted real events – in a way that demonstrates a unified experience of an everywoman in the twentieth century. In doing so, it also provides a powerful portrayal of postmodern men as perceived and judged by the female narrators of the text.

My focus will be the representation of men and masculinities in the novel as filtered through this complex feminine perspective. There are four main male characters that I concentrate on: Daisy's father figures – Cuyler Goodwill and Magnus Flett, and husbands – Harold Hoad and Barker Flett. Their status in the novel is highly problematic. The three generations of women try to recreate possible origins and life trajectories of Daisy and also show the impact of men on her and her impact on them. Women re-invent men by allowing them the freedom of constant change and by giving them feminine fragility. Such male protagonists find creative ways of expression through the love of nature, art and words. They travel and in so doing they mark their separation from their background and unwanted memories. On the one hand,

men serve a very instrumental role of being witnesses and reference points for Daisy's life. On the other, they provide a wider perspective on the imbalance within gender hierarchy and the suppression and silencing of women. They are also constructed in such a way as to present their own powerlessness in the social organisation of the world where, in Marilyn French's words, "systems are in place to make men superior to women and those systems systematically discriminate against or exploit men so that in order to end them you have to make a special effort, you have to do something extraordinary" (Murray, bbc.co.uk). This novel does something extraordinary: it rewrites a part of history entirely through the lens of women who are finally allowed to comment on what they see and how they feel about men, and who far too often do not allow themselves their own voice.

As a starting point for my analysis of men and masculinities in *The Stone Diaries* I wanted to take a fairly recent article by Brenda Beckman-Long entitled "*The Stone Diaries* as an 'Apocryphal Journal'" and her innovative analysis of the other first-person narrator in the novel. This discussion is crucial to lay the groundwork for my analysis of masculine constructions in the novel as it asserts that they are filtered by feminine consciousness and shaped according to women's needs. Beckman-Long claims that the story of a life of Daisy Goodwill Flett is compiled by her granddaughter, Judith Downing, aided by her daughter Alice (Judith's mother) and her niece Victoria (Judith's cousin). Together the three women "think back through their mothers"² and write a story that reflects elements of the unified female experience of women of a certain class, sexuality and background. The first part of Beckman-Long's

² Idea that Beckman-Long takes from Virginia Wolf's *A Room of One's Own* and points out that Shields also used it in her essay "'Thinking Back through Our Mothers: Tradition in Canadian Women's Writing."

article concentrates on women's resistance to autobiography as a masculinist discourse, which performs the role of feminist critique. She takes an idea that "the techniques of autobiography [are] the space into which the writing subject disappears" (129) from a feminist theorist Leigh Gilmore, and she claims that autobiography as a gendered space can be challenged as is the case in *The Stone Diaries*. It is difficult not to agree with this idea as *The Stone Diaries* plays with auto/biography as a genre and constantly blurs the borders between the two and shifts perspective. The subject of this "unauthorised biography," as Beckman-Long calls it, is on the one hand absent from her narrative, but on the other, her story is a powerful representation of a life of an everywoman deliberately refusing to be classified according to masculinist guidelines for women's stories.

Beckman-Long is also the first critic to analyse the significance of the epigraph to *The Stone Diaries*, which is Judith's poem and Judith, as it can easily be traced on the family tree, is Daisy's granddaughter. I employ this idea as one of underlying concepts of my analysis. After a short discussion of the poem, Beckman-Long concludes that its lines suggest that Daisy is the subject, rather than the speaker in the narrative. The poem is written by Judith, taken from "The Grandmother Cycle" and it talks about a woman – about a "she" – whose life can be constantly reinterpreted and re-valued depending on the circumstances. I believe that this idea of Judith controlling the narrative brings together the two so-far unconnected strands, namely the significance of the granddaughter's presence in the epigraph and the questions about the other first-person narrator whose perspective is broader, who provides scholarly, quasi-philosophical comments from a time perspective and who knows a lot

about Daisy's experience as an everywoman but fails to supply certain details. However, in my opinion, the article investigates proofs for its premise overzealously. On the one hand, Beckman-Long provides all the possible sources that could have been the evidence of Daisy's life to her granddaughter, as her journals, notebooks, letters and also the living memory of her friends and relatives. However, she goes too far trying to even find evidence for journals in which Daisy described her own birth. As it is meant to be an "apocryphal journal" many elements might be supplied or invented by Judith and not obsessively sourced from Daisy only.³

Beckman-Long evidences Alice's and Victoria's influence on the story, carefully pointing out elements of Russian literature and limestone imagery in the text (Alice is a scholar of Russian literature and Victoria is a paleobotanist). Agreeing that it is Judith, Alice and Victoria who write this multiple-voiced biography, it needs to be remembered that the three women decide what to include in Daisy's "biography," what to omit and what information to supply or fabricate. "Thinking back through their mothers" they compose a story of their own lives and experiences. I corroborate the idea of *The Stone Diaries* as being a collective work of women from different generations; women who resist and at the same time reconfirm gender stereotypes, who understand gender inequality, "the misalignment between men and women" and at the same time their "deep, ... common distress" (Shields, *The Stone* 359) shared with men.

³ I have a similar reservation about Magnus's story which again could be reinvented by Judith herself from the scraps of information she was able to get hold of. The idea that Magnus's books and family papers "though left on the train station in Thurso, might have been retrieved and inherited by his only living relative, Daisy" seems a bit farfetched and unnecessary. Also the article treats all this "investigation" too literally as it even reminds the newspaper accounts of the Goodwill Tower, which as the text itself suggests was only "[dreamt] into existence."

Initiating the discussion of masculine representation in this “apocryphal journal” I follow this quotation from *The Stone Diaries* suggesting how the characters of Daisy’s two fathers have been reproduced in this meta-autobiography:

... Daisy, now retired and living in Florida, has become preoccupied in her mature years with the lives of her two dead fathers: Cuyler Goodwill, her blood parent, and Magnus Flett, her father-in-law. But Victoria’s aunt pursues her two departed fathers in an altogether different spirit than the usual weekend genealogist. She’s more focused for one thing, and, at the same time, more dreamy and ineffectual, wanting, it seems to Victoria, to pull herself inside a bag of buried language, to be that language, to be able to utter that unutterable word: father. It’s true Aunt Daisy has read a few works of social history, memoirs, biography – ... – but she does not go on detective outings to local libraries and graveyards, and she has not travelled to her birthplace, Tyndall, Manitoba, to visit the famed Goodwill Tower built in memory of her own mother; she imagines, anyway, that the structure has been sadly vandalised ... She sits comfortably, very comfortably indeed, on the flowered settee in her Florida room ... and thinks about her two departed fathers. That’s as far as she goes: she just thinks about them, concentrates on them, dwells on them. For her grandniece, Victoria, the two fathers are described, but never quite animated; their powers are asserted, but not demonstrated. Aunt Daisy

mulls over their lives. She wonders what those lives were made of and how they ended: noisily as in the movies or in a frosty stand-off? Of course, she doesn't do this all the time – only at odd moments, late in the afternoon for instance, when the day feels flattened and featureless, when she's restless, when she feels her own terrifying inauthenticity gnawing at her heart's membrane, and when there's nothing of interest on television. (266-267)

This lengthy passage is crucial to understanding the process of re-creation of men in the story. The narrator points out clearly that the protagonist of this meta-autobiography does more than just “enlarg[e] on the available material;” she fabricates it. She is not interested in collecting any facts, but rather in inventing them in order to silence “her own terrifying inauthenticity” (282). At this point the novel's postmodern self-reflexivity is revealed. Daisy knows that she is a part of a script; she is a character in a book and she is born and exists only in its language, which is why she looks for her ancestry in language as well. She wants to call somebody “a father” but the referent of the term does not exist unless she summons him to life. She also understands that her survival depends entirely on the readers. That is why she needs to keep them interested in her story so that they do not put the book down, which would bring about her complete obliteration. It is Daisy who has to make sure that she is not “erased from the record of her own existence” (76). The plane of this existence now is the text where “she would continue to live all her life” and thus she needs to rescue her story “by a primary act of imagination, supplementing, modifying, summoning up the necessary connections, conjuring the pastoral or

heroic or whatever” (76), whatever is necessary to make the story interesting to the reader who is the only one who can rescue Daisy from disappearing completely.

This self-reflexivity of the novel is one of the most conspicuous postmodern elements in *The Stone Diaries* but there are many others. Apocryphal histories are characteristic of postmodern trends as they deal with revisionism and blurring of the gaps between the referent world and its alternatives. Brian McHale points out that “Apocryphal history contradicts the official version in one of two ways: either it *supplements* the historical record, claiming to restore what has been lost or suppressed; or it *displaces* official history altogether” (McHale 90). Daisy’s story as retold in hindsight is full of supplement and alteration. The supposedly “official” records are few (for example Daisy’s letters and journals) and the history needs to be reinvented. The narrators have all the freedom to fabricate this unauthorised record of Daisy’s existence.

Another postmodern device introduced in the novel is erasing the already established elements of the story in order to remind readers that they are actively participating in the construction of the “reality” of the text. One of the examples might be the “Goodwill Tower,” which constitutes an important element of the narrative full of symbolism and metaphor. We are told it was built by Daisy’s father while grieving over his wife’s death and that it brought him fame and recognition. However, at an early point in the novel we read that Daisy, in order to “hold on to her life ... would have to rescue it by a primary act of imagination ... even dreaming a limestone tower into existence” (Shields, *The Stone* 76). It means that in fact the tower is an element invented

and imposed onto the story's reality and, as a corollary, its aftermath must have been invented as well. The whole strand of the story becomes destabilised. McHale's discussion of "Chinese box-worlds" provides a useful framework in analysing the controlling ideas of the novel's postmodern construction. Shields herself alluded to the box-worlds in the context of *The Stone Diaries* in one of her interviews. She explained the structure of the novel to be "a box within a box within a box. ... I've made the big box; Daisy is the box inside, and the box inside Daisy is empty. ... Others tell the story. That was the trick I had to keep in mind as I was writing" (Parini, nytimes.com). The box within a box within a box refers to the complex narrative structure of the text. McHale distinguishes five possible elements of such a self-encompassing structure: infinite regress, *trompe-l'oeil*, metalepsis, characters in search of an author and abysmal fictions. At least the first two are present in Shields's novel, which I will discuss in the following section.

Textual infinity appears where numerous narrative levels enable infinite regress. In *The Stone Diaries* we have possibly many narrators who at times seem to merge into one. The novel starts with a first-person narrator soon to be joined by a third-person narrator, then a possible third narrator emerges (another first-person narrator) to finally arrive at multiple voices in the letters and comments. As previously mentioned, critical discussion of the novel's narrators is extensive. Whereas Simone Vauthier sees two third-person narrators – an external biographer and a critic – and the first-person narrator, Winnifred Mellor asserts that the first-person narrator splits into two narrators – possibly both of them being Daisy but separated by a time-span – and a third-person narrator. Some scholars believe that the story is told entirely by

Daisy, whose voice is displaced into third person. Katherine Weese sees *The Stone Diaries* as “a fictional autobiography, narrated throughout by Daisy herself, who adopts multiple voices in the act of employing various feminist narrative strategies to restore voice and visibility to her apparently voiceless invisible character” (2). David Williams sees Daisy as the only narrator of her story representing the idea of multiple selves and inventing the accounts of witnesses of her existence which guarantee her survival. Lisa Johnson sees the narration as Daisy’s fragmentation of the self, while Wendy Roy points out that

The assessment of Daisy as unreliable autobiographer appears to come from the ironic voice of an intrusive, judgmental, outside narrator, but that voice may be Daisy’s displaced into the third person to allow her to comment on herself. As the narration shifts from first- to third-person, Daisy appears to be taking literally the autobiographical convention of a hidden third-person narrator who turns the self into an object to be investigated. (121)

It can be inferred from all of the above comments that narrative structure of *The Stone Diaries* is a challenging enigma. There are as many theories about the possible narrators as there are critics. None of the speculations is in/correct; they all add to the process of reading as decoding. Once again it highlights the postmodern aspects of the text. The reader is encouraged to take active part in de-coding of the story and at the same time there will never be a unified answer to the question about the narrative levels that Shields devised. My analysis favours Brenda Beckman-Long’s analysis in some aspects as it is the only one

that pays attention to the potential significance of the epigraph to an understanding of the narrative structure.

Another element of postmodern Chinese-box worlds is *trompe-l'oeil*. McHale defines it as a device that deliberately misleads “the reader into regarding an embedded, secondary world as the primary, diegetic world” (115). It is not as clearly present in *The Stone Diaries* as in more experimental texts; however, the reader does get transported between different realities when through Daisy’s eyes they are allowed to “peek through a keyhole” and watch Daisy’s parents even before they met and as she witnesses her own birth. Also, she is able to comment on events even after her recorded death. The balancing of the narrative levels also runs parallelly to the temporal movement of the story. Even though the narrative appears to be chronological, it occasionally shifts back to the characters left behind at an earlier stage (for example, to Barker’s and Magnus’s stories). Also, more importantly, reading *The Stone Diaries* as a collective unauthorised autobiography we need to be able to read the present circumstances of the women involved through the prism of the past events narrated. If we saw Daisy as the only narrator of the text, it would be her interpretation of the past. The story’s potential complexity increases, if we take Judith, Alice, Victoria and Daisy as the contributors. Then the collective experience of three generations of women is translated into the potentially (un)true past events.

Such female rewriting of past events and inevitable filtration through the prisms of present situations is commented on by Joanne Frye. She writes about women’s narratives, paying considerable attention to the female first-person narrator. Through its inherent subjectivity such a narrator allows

women to make the stories their own and frees them from the constraints imposed by men who write only about their projection of women. Frye also comments on the interaction between past and present experience in first-person narratives.

For the narrative agent, the past exists in continual interaction with the present; memory functions both to shape the personal paradigms by which she orders and organizes present experience and to supply different information when she restructures her temporal paradigms for examining past experience.

As she shifts the narrative lens by which facts become events in a story, the narrator-protagonist changes the very nature of the “event” – its meaning, its place in a causal pattern, its temporal significance. When she shapes her story according to a female experiential perspective, even the events acquire new definition.

(57)

This situation is even more complex and challenging if we agree that it is Judith who actually writes the story because she, using the first-person narrator who “pretends” to be Daisy, projects a story filtered at least twice. First, taking ideas from Daisy’s “real” accounts (journals and notes which will already interpret what happened) and then processing them once again through the prism of her present situation and experience. The reading of *The Stone Diaries* as a novel which wants to reinterpret female experience across the century “challenging perceptions of women’s life and life writing,” is heavily influenced by the present experience of the narrator/s.

This brings me onto another postmodernist element of the novel: the subjective handling of the past in this novel must be looked at from the perspective of a postmodernist re-presenting of the past. As Linda Hutcheon points out, one of

The issues raised by postmodern fiction [is a] ... paradoxical confrontation of self-consciously fictive and resolutely historical representation. The narrativisation of past events is not hidden; the events no longer seem to speak for themselves, but are shown to be consciously composed into narrative, whose constructed – not found – order is imposed upon them, often overtly by the narrating figure. The process of making stories out of chronicles, of constructing plots out of sequences, is what postmodern fiction underlines. This does not in any way deny the existence of the past real, but it focuses attention on the act of imposing order on that past, of encoding strategies of meaning-making through representation. (*The Politics* 63)

This confrontation of fictive and quasi-historical representation is clearly present in *The Stone Diaries*. The readers are guided into believing that they are reading an autobiography or a diary but at the same time they are alerted that this diary is full of “supplementing, modifying, summoning up the necessary connections, conjuring the pastoral or heroic or whatever ..., getting the details wrong occasionally, exaggerating or lying outright, inventing letters or conversations of impossible gentility, or casting conjecture in a pretty light” (Shields, *The Stone* 77). The story is being recreated and rewritten constantly. Some of the issues never come to the fore (like Daisy’s sexual experiences and

childbirth) and some are erased (like the Goodwill Tower). All the analysed aspects of the novel's construction influence the composition of the fragmented and unreliable male characters. In the following section I will look closely at the four male protagonists and the elements of their biography that have been selected for the story.

Daisy's father, Cuyler Goodwill, is presented as a character capable of spectacular transformations that make his life more pronounced and more clearly defined. A comprehensive provenience of Cuyler is reconstructed from highly unclear sources. Even though Shields inserts a photograph of his mother in the middle of the book the text itself does not talk much about her. Whether Cuyler would have told Daisy about his youth remains questionable, for it would deal with a period difficult to describe since it occurred before he became articulate. It must be pure speculation and invention that allows the narrator to say so much about Goodwill's early years. We read that "his family, the Goodwills, seemed left in the wake of the stern, old, untidy century that conceived them, and they give off, all three of them, father mother, child, an aroma of impotence, spindly in spirit and puny of body" (26). So they are the remnants of the previous century unable to accept the new world with its fresh spirit. The family does not socialise and is not liked by local society, perhaps because "they might contaminate the others with their peculiar joyless depletion" (27), as the narrator suggests. Their house is dirty and poorly maintained, and their bread is "heavy, uneven, scarce" (26). Young Cuyler is presented as an impotent member of the family, never taken into consideration and never taking the initiative to change anything.

This depressing picture initiates the narrator's reflection over wasted time and people's helplessness and inability to celebrate their life. She says

It has never been easy for me to understand the obliteration of time, to accept, as others seem to do, the swelling and corresponding shrinkage of seasons or the conscious acceptance that one year has ended and another begun. There is something here that speaks of our essential helplessness and how the greater substance of our lives is bound up with waste and opacity. (27)

The narrator here laments the unaccounted years from Cuyler's life; unaccounted for and thus erased. If there is no witness or written account of a life, it vanishes; it is wasted, the novel suggests. It is interesting that there is no comment at all on Daisy's "wasted" years between her first and second marriage. Her second husband expresses incomprehension of what she could potentially have done with all that time. We read that "One thing puzzles Barker Flett: he cannot understand how Daisy's nine years of widowhood were spent (in much the same way Daisy is unable to imagine how her father's youth in Stonewall was passed – year after year after year)" (154). And Daisy is not able to give a satisfactory answer. So the gaps and lost time in her life are matched by the early life of her father that is also unaccounted for. However, she is in the privileged position of the teller of the story and she is free to "rescue [the moments] by a primary act of imagination, supplementing, modifying, summoning up the necessary connections" (76). Men in the story do not have this ability and what we are told of them will be the narrators' speculation and outright manipulation.

We are told that Cuyler's life takes a sharp turn when he meets his wife Mercy. The narrator reinvents the man as somebody who learns articulacy and passion for his new life. He is awakened from his impotence in all of the senses of the word and engages in a passionate relationship with his wife (at least passionate on his part). The narrator assures us that "[he] was changed. The tidal motion of sexual longing filled him to the brim, so that the very substance of his body seemed altered" (34). Cuyler, as a result of physical love, learns a whole new language of "passionate expression" (35), something he did not think himself capable of. He masters it in an attempt to "test his strength" (32). The narrator claims that Cuyler feels that

it is a miracle enough to find that love lies in his grasp, that it can be spoken aloud, that he, so diffident, so slow, so thwarted by the poverty of his own beginnings, is able to put into words the fevers of his heart and at the same time offer up the endearments a woman needs to hear. The knowledge shocked him at first, how language flowed straight out of him like a river in flood, but once the words burst from his throat it was as though he had found his true tongue. (35)

So the newly learnt language enables his transfer into a meaningful existence. The wife becomes his point of reference; he becomes "a husband. A lover. He is awaited" (26). As he walks back home from work at the quarry he feels "himself grow taller, bigger, stronger as he moves closer to home, closer to the man he is about to become" (26). Unfortunately, his carefully defined status does not last for his wife dies in childbirth and Cuyler does not see the infant as a potential companion for discussion. The child is not able to share or

understand his language so he gives her to the neighbour to take care of and he falls silent again. At this point, the narrator decides to fill the following nine years with Cuyler's possible passion for meditation and the building of a monument in the memory of his lost wife. The tower enables his artistic and spiritual expression during the time when he cannot use language. The narrator tells us that "He has come to believe that the earth's rough minerals are the signature of the spiritual, and as such can be assembled and shaped into praise and affirmation" (63). So his newly discovered affinity with God is marked by his art. He carves every stone that constitutes the tower, and, as the narrator purports: "What he feels when the finished stone slips finally into its waiting space is the hand of God upon his head, the Holy Ghost entering his body with a glad shout" (65). So, after discovering God in sexual passion, he finds Him yet again in art. Cuyler's potentially mundane and schematic existence is taken to another level by artistic expression. However, paradoxically, the tower which is an ultimate expression of his creative powers leads to his fall. It attracts a lot of attention from the outside world and Cuyler becomes a local celebrity. He returns to spoken language as his passion; however his new words lose any meaning and become just a noise.

Cuyler's move from Canada to the United States marks another stage in his life. He re-invents himself again and becomes an articulate speaker, a successful businessman, a father to Daisy and a husband to Maria who is many years his junior (and an Italian who does not speak a word of English). Cuyler "assaults" Daisy with his speeches and does not allow her her own voice. He talks for hours during their first journey together when they travel to the United States. He bores everybody with his long presentations – "not always (it can be

confessed) with substance” (86) – during luncheons, meetings and Daisy’s graduation from college. He talks “against all ... terror” (88), he talks in new situations, and talking becomes his way of living. Soon his words become his tool of oppression of women; words with which he “talks over” the women in his life and subdue them.

Suddenly, the narrator undermines what she established before, for now she suggests numerous possibilities for how Cuyler has learnt such skills for prolific expression. One of them is the earlier mentioned love for his wife Mercy and that is what the narrator asserts is Cuyler’s version:

Cuyler Goodwill himself believes (though he does not bruit this about, or even confess it to himself) that speech came to him during his brief two-year marriage to Mercy Goodwill. There is the sheeted width of their feather bed, his roughened male skin discovering the abundant soft flesh of his wife’s body, enclosing it, entering it – that was the moment when the stone in his throat became dislodged. ... Words gathered in his mouth then, words he hadn’t known were part of his being. They leapt from his lips: his gratitude, his ardor, his most private longings – he whispered them into his sweetheart’s ear, and she, so impassive and unmoved, had offered up a kind of mute encouragement. At least she had not been offended, not even surprised, nor did she appear to find him foolish or unnatural in his mode of expression. (84)

Cuyler talks, or sometimes just produces noise, a “bruit” and Mercy is silent. He takes it as an encouragement while the reader might interpret it as her

feminine suffering, confinement, entrapment and the inability and impossibility of its expression. It is one of many examples of women's silencing in the novel. Cuyler in this case does not want to oppress Mercy, but neither does he seek to understand her; as a result of his ignorance and indifference he creates a situation of dominance. Then the narrator claims that Cuyler's articulacy comes from his readings of the Bible another activity he took to after his wife's death. King James's scriptural rhythms "entered his body directly, their syntax and coloring and suggestive tonality. How else to explain his archaic formal locutions, his balance and play of phrase, his exotic inversions, his metaphoric extravagance" (85). The narrator paradoxically suggests that the new language is not Cuyler's form of expression but that it is the other way round. Cuyler is a tool of the language which speaks through him. Language as the reality-shaping force, and as the beginning and essence of all narratives it has an unlimited power over its subjects, that is the characters in the novel. As the female narrators use the tool, other characters become instrumental. The narrator hints to the reader: "Language spoke through him, and not – as is the usual case – the other way round" (85). The narrator also speculates that it might also be Cuyler's growing popularity that spurs his talents for oratory. Many people visit the "Goodwill tower" and ask him questions or conduct interviews. He becomes a local celebrity: "This was his moment, and he must have recognized it. His tongue learned to dance then, learned to deal with the intricacies of evasion and drama, fiction and distraction. His voice, you might say, became the place where he lived" (85). What is significant here is the narrator's assertion that the character himself does not recognise the shaping and life-giving force of language but relishes the superficial that is the voice

itself, the noise, the bruit. It is a trick played on the reader once again, as the narrator distinguishes the importance of language on the novel's self-reflexive reality, while mocking the male character who relies on the meaningless, that is the noise, not the language as a vehicle carrying a meaning. It is also significant that in his dying moments there is nobody around Cuyler, nobody he can talk to, and at this point he finally starts reflecting on his life in silence.

The narrator also points out the ease with which Cuyler Goodwill is able to change his identity and how his life is compartmentalised.

Cuyler Goodwill ... travelled in his long life from one incarnation to the next. In his twenties he was a captive of Eros, in his thirties he belonged to God, and, still later, to Art. Now, in his fifties, he champions commerce. ...

And he is oddly unapologetic about his several metamorphoses, rarely looking back, and never for a minute giving in to the waste and foolishness of nostalgia. (91-92)

None of the women in the narrative is given a chance to alternate between her roles so easily and without any consequences. Cuyler also, when he speaks "about living in a progressive country" or "being a citizen of a proud, free nation", ... is referring to the United States of America and not to the Dominion of Canada, where he was born and where he grew to manhood" (92-93), which "elides both the psychological experience of migration and the legal process of becoming an American citizen" (Roberts 2). He becomes a sort of comic-book hero encompassing all the elements of the American Dream, taking on and off his various incarnations as he pleases.

Daisy's father-in-law, Magnus Flett, also undergoes many changes. However, his story seems to be based solely on speculation. Daisy never meets Magnus Flett and her husband loses touch with him as a young man. There are no documents or written accounts of Magnus's life; yet, the narrator presents a complicated and incredible life story. One of the very few facts established in the novel is that Magnus's wife leaves him and decides to live with her son in Winnipeg. It is important to devote just a few sentences to this female character as her story inevitably shapes and conditions Flett's presentation. Clarentine is a representative of an early feminist. Her story illustrates what Betty Friedan will later call "the feminine mystique,"⁴ the nostalgic feeling that there needs to be life beyond housework, beyond being a wife and a mother. Slowly, she understands that the pattern she is following is not enough, so she starts giving herself to moments of contemplation; "she stares and stares at the shadows of the caragana blowing across the path, or sitting on one of the kitchen chairs, locked into paralysis over her mending basket, watching a fly creep across the table" (Shields, *The Stone* 11). These moments give her pleasure and an illusion of another life; "It is frightening, and also exhilarating, her ability to deceive those around her; this is something new, her lost hours, her vivid dreams and shreds of language, as though she'd been given two lives instead of one, the alternate life cloaked in secret" (12). This is a double vision of herself akin to those of Fay from *The Republic of Love* or Sarah and Rose from *Swann*. The character is conscious of other possibilities and other modes of being beyond the prescribed script. These moments also give her physical pleasure; a

⁴ A notion defined by Friedan as "a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique. I wondered if other women faced this schizophrenic split, and what it meant" (9).

replacement of sexual ecstasy which she never experiences: “Whatever it is that encloses her is made up of tenderness. ... There’s no face or voice to it, only a soft, steady, pervasive fragrance, a kind of rapturous wave that enters her throat, then moves downward through her body, bringing tightness to her female parts and the muscles of her softened thighs” (12). This aspect of her life is similar to Morton Jimroy's from *Swann*. He also never experiences sexual pleasure, yet he is visited by huge tenderness located somewhere deep inside him. Clarentine's longings and a discovery of her other life is unacceptable to the traditional conservative society and, as she gathers strength, she leaves her husband. She takes with her Daisy, a new-born daughter of her tragically deceased friend, and establishes a flower business in Winnipeg. She becomes a new-type of woman, leaving her confused husband behind, embarking on a new more-self conscious life and earning her own income.

Clarentine’s story is verifiable in the narrative space, and on its basis the narrator reconstructs, or outright invents, Magnus’s story. Subversively, a story of a man is shaped to fit in with a story of a woman. The father-in-law is a figure that fascinates Daisy. Left by his wife who, contrary to socially established norms, decides to fight for the right to be defined on her own not just as “other,” the male character is confused. He has followed traditional arrangements which are supposed to guarantee him a clean house, a warm meal and a night company, but it is all abruptly taken away from him. Magnus is rough and practical, while Clarentine wants passion, romance and fulfilment. Daisy the narrator decides to invent a different side to the man and improvises a story of his great love for his wife, which he is unable to express as he does

not have the means to do so. He becomes a quasi-tragical hero for Daisy, while Judith – the other narrator – is more sceptical. Judith subversively comments on the opinion that Magnus’s life has been a misery: “the poor man, the unfortunate soul, his tragic lonely life. A life that carries in its blood a romantic chill, *or so some might think*” (94, emphasis added). It suggests that this narrator does not share the romantic vision of Magnus’s life. She is sceptical of the story which her grandmother finds so compelling and important to the shape of her own life.

We are told that after Clarentine has left, Magnus waits for her. When he finds a basket with her romance books he starts reading them in order to understand what her longings were and what he neglected to do for her. He wants to welcome her back home with the phrases learnt from the novels:

if by chance his wife should decide to come home and take up her place once more, he would be ready. If this talky foolishness was her greatest need, he would be prepared to meet her, a pump primed with words full of softness and acknowledgement: O beautiful eyes, O treasured countenance, O fairest of skin. Or phrases that spoke of the overflowing heart, the rising of desire in the breast, the sudden clarities of one body saluting another or even the simple declaration of love. I love you, he whispered, into her waiting ear. I worship your very being. (101)

But Clarentine does not come back and Magnus decides to embark on a reverse migration and sets off back to the Orkneys. Similarly to Cuyler, he decides to move from one country to another to mark a change in his life. However, Cuyler’s movement is a progressive venture into the New World, while

Magnus regresses trying to start his life again at his birthplace. The two fathers seem to be inverted images of each other with Cuyler pushing forward and not paying attention to the needs of those around him, and Magnus presented as a possible counterbalance, as an unfulfilled male character that Daisy needs in her story in order to redeem men. From the unfeeling husband, Magnus becomes a romantic hero. Going back to the Orkneys is supposed to have a purifying effect on him. During the sea voyage he is constantly sick and as a result “He vomited out the memory, erased it. He vomited out the sum of his pain and disappointment, his three sons, his disloyal wife; he vomited out the whole of his humiliation, so that when *Louisa* arrived finally at Liverpool, he stepped out on to firm land light as a boy” (138). Metaphorically the container of Magnus’s existence is emptied out and ready to be filled in anew.⁵ Daisy narrates: “he’s waiting for the bare Orkney landscape to rise up and inform him, to advise him, of what he must do next” (95).

Similarly to young Cuyler, elderly Magnus becomes a local celebrity. Cuyler’s fame is sparked by the building of the tower in the memory of his lost love; Magnus becomes famous in his old age because he memorises the whole of *Jane Eyre*, one of the romantic novels he has found in his wife’s sewing basket. Both feats are questionable; both are a speculation. As I have already pointed out at numerous occasions, Daisy “dreamt the tower into existence” so its aftermath must be fictional as well. The idea of Magnus becoming a romantic celebrity might be sparked by a clash of Daisy’s hopes with the reality of meeting her father-in-law. As an elderly aunt she travels to the Orkneys with her niece, and instead of a romantic figure she has been

⁵ The metaphor of a box reappears in the text. Apart from Shields’s post-modern construction of the story which has been described in the first paragraph of this chapter, it returns as a metaphor of Cuyler’s, Magnus’s and Daisy’s lives.

imagining, she encounters an unresponsive “breathing cadaver.” The old Orkney-man introduced to her might or might not be Magnus, however one thing about him is certain, namely that in his earlier days he had been able to recite Brontë’s narrative. It might be an incentive for Daisy to invent this romantic story of the two misunderstood lovers: Clarentine and Magnus. She is disappointed with her discovery and she understands that once again acts of imagination and supplementing will be required of her,

She would like to have said the word “father”, testing it, but a stiff wave of selfconsciousness intervened.

She believes, though, what she sees in front of her. She believes the evidence of her eyes, her ears, her intuition, that mythical female organ. Naturally it will take some time for her to absorb all she’s discovered. A conscious revisioning will be required of her: accommodation, adjustment. Certain stray elements which anomalous in nature, even irrational, will have to be tapped in with a jeweler’s hammer. Reworked. Propped up with guesswork. Balanced. Defended. But she’s willing, and isn’t it what counts? (307)

What has Daisy discovered? She is unable to utter “that unutterable word: father” (266) which she hoped would bring a wholeness to her life and guarantee her place in the narrative of her life. Most critics stress Daisy’s search for her lost mother in the attempt to fill the void at the core of her life. I would like to point out that Daisy’s connection with her fathers is equally important. Daisy is not guaranteed a place in her story unless she can account for her fathers by whose names she is defined. She is either Goodwill or Flett;

her children are Flett or Goodwill (Alice changes her name into her mother's maiden name). It is through men that women are given their recorded place in patriarchal society. Daisy believes that her connection with her fathers is more important for the narrative of her life than the connection with her mother, which has a more personal value. It is through men and the privilege of their stories that women can continue their existence even after their death.

The importance of men in Daisy's life goes beyond her relationship with the fathers for she is married twice, she gives birth to a son and the narrative suggests that she has one love affair. In this section I will concentrate on the two husbands, Harold A. Hoad and Barker Flett, and analyse their influence on Daisy's story or, conversely, how Daisy's story affects their representation. Twenty-two-year-old Daisy marries Harold Hoad because he poses a challenge to her and she wants to change him. Also because "it is 'time' to marry" and "she feels her life taking on a shape, gathering itself around an urge to be summoned. She wants to want something but doesn't know what she is allowed. She would like to be prepared, to be strong" (117). Daisy wants to be summoned, for the social norms prescribe a role of a wife and a mother for her. As a woman she believes that her role is to serve and help, so Harold seems a good choice and "[s]he honestly believes she can change him, take hold of him and make something noble of his wild nature. He is hungry, she knows, for repression" (117). The process of a narrative reconstruction of Harold's story seems to be partially based on newspaper clippings and old family documents. The unfortunate marriage, which finished during the newlyweds' honeymoon, and Daisy's failure even to mention this

period of her life to her children leaves a lot of room for speculation and invention.

Harold is constructed as a highly unhappy character unable to break away from the constraints imposed on him by the family's secret (his father's suicide) and his mother's obsession with making up stories. Presumably, his father's death was a result of incurred debts and an affair. However, Harold's mother does not allow her children even to suspect the truth. She re-invents the story of her husband and informs her sons that he was losing his sight, and, unwilling to be a burden to his family, he decided to take his own life. Mrs. Hoad is ironically presented as a mother obsessively trying to protect her sons from a difficult reality and, as a result, failing them. I will give closer consideration to this figure at a later stage of this chapter, but at this point the important element is the fact that Mrs Hoad is an active story-maker while Harold passively follows the script she prepares for him. The narrator of *The Stone Diaries* speculates that Harold must know what really happened with his father, and how all the virtues that his mother attributes to him and his brother are either substantially exaggerated or outright invented. However, he chooses to passively collaborate in his mother's fantasy, at the same time feeling a deep fear that he is not be able to accept the truth. The narrator informs the reader that he is obsessed with his father's death but a

congenital cynicism was rooted in his heart. It would never go away. He feels sure that his own life will be a long waiting for the revelation of a terrible truth which will be both welcome and dread.

Meanwhile he hungers for details, all of which are denied to him, or which, rather, he feels he has no right to demand. ... He needed to know but at the same time his neediness shamed him. What kind of morbid creature was he? Wasn't this unseemly, unhealthy, grotesque, this unnatural slaving after documentation? Wasn't this, well, unmanly? Unmanliness – in the end the questions always came down to that. (110)

Harold longs for but, at the same time, dreads the truth. His life story is never his own as it is set out and constantly guided by his mother. He is placed in a double feminine perspective, that of Mrs. Hoad and the female narrators of the book. Yet, the character senses that there could be another dimension to his narrative and on the one hand he would like to reach it, but on the other he is scared.

He is a male protagonist unable to articulate his needs, a case often present in Shields's novels, however pertaining to female characters. Harold, forced into conventional norms of masculinity patterns is told that "slaving after documentation" is unmasculine. Unmanliness is one of the greatest threats to men. Mr. Hoad is presented by the female narrators as a very self-conscious and tragic character. He is unable to find his own masculine expression in the female narratives that surround him and he takes to drinking. Finally, it is asserted that he commits suicide. Such a male character might have been constructed as a response response to the narrator's feeling disadvantaged as a woman. We read:

Men, it seemed to me in those days, were uniquely honoured by the stories that erupted in their lives, whereas women were more

likely to be smothered by theirs. Why? Why should this be?

Why should men be allowed to strut under the privilege of their life adventures, wearing them like a breastful of medals, while women went all gray and silent beneath the weight of theirs?

(121)

So here the roles get reversed. Harold is not allowed to “strut under the privilege of [his] life adventures;” he is placed in a feminine position of silence ‘beneath [their] weight.’ Women’s experiences are much more personal and most often undocumented. However, the text suggests that there are equally many men's stories that are undocumented or documented incorrectly as they are shaped through narratives of social norms and conventions of given time periods.

Harold, in order to escape from his mother’s stories, is perpetually drunk. Daisy is placed in this context as a force that is supposed to save him. We read: “He knows how much he needs her. He longs for correction, for love like a scalpel, a whip, something to curb his wild impulses and morbidity”, but also “He is hungry, she knows, for repression” (117). The insertion “she knows” suggests the ambiguity. It is the narrator’s idea of what is best for the male character. Both spouses, Harold and Daisy, are represented as knowing about Harold’s “softness.” Marriage is supposed to make him “a man” in patriarchal terms. “Love like a scalpel” is like corrective surgery. Presumably it must be painful and it needs to cut him off his nature and his mother's story. It is supposed to make him forget his fear of admitting his own vulnerability. Daisy thinks that he wants to be repressed and that he wants to forget about his “unmanliness” and striving for the truth. I would even suggest at this point that

Harold is allowed a moment of self-reflexivity and he suspects that he is only an element of somebody else's story. He is petrified not at the notion of accepting the truth of his family's history, but rather the truth of his own limited and confined construction. Hence the fear that his own life will be "a long waiting for the revelation of a terrible truth which will be both welcome and dread" (109). Marriage obviously does not save perpetually drunk Harold from his fate, and during the honeymoon he falls out of a window. Daisy's involvement in her groom's death seems unclear. She sneezes and he falls out of the window. In the end he has been an element of her story and she had a right to remove him from it and start a new chapter for herself. Ironically, the chapter of the novel following Harold's death is entitled "LOVE, 1936."

Finally, the most peculiar masculine character in the novel is Barker Flett. He is Daisy's guardian and, much later, her husband. He is a son of the obscure Magnus and the first feminist in the novel, Clarentine Flett. Barker's story could be easily divided into two chapters separated by his marriage to Daisy. The story once again is presumably reconstructed from first-hand memories of his daughter Alice and from letters Barker wrote to Daisy. However, most probably the recollection of his early years is mostly based on speculation and creative re-writing. Barker as a young man separated from his family to pursue academic career. His story is built on constant contrasts: between his love for his private work – that is collecting, researching and painting lady's slippers – and duty, that is teaching at college and researching hybrid grains; between his love for his own company and the necessity to live with his mother and her adopted daughter Daisy; between the air of a mysterious and solitary man he wants to project and the vivid interest he raises

among his young female students; and finally, between his love of ascetics and his regular indulging in physical pleasures.

The narrator speculates that Barker, just like the fathers, needs to reinvent himself at some point but for him the incentive is his fascination with a perfect “petalled organism,” that is an orchid:

The intensity of his gaze on this single living thing awakened in him other complex longings. He ached anew for release from his body – those ladies from Higgins Avenue – and the obliteration of all he had found brutal in his life so far, beginning with the dumb, blunted angers of his parents and brothers, a family from whom the supports of education, culture, and even language had been withdrawn. He longed to separate himself from the mean unpaved streets of Tyndall, Manitoba, where he spent his boyhood, and from the crude groping for salvation and sex he apprehended everywhere around him. Bliss lay in the structure of this simple flower he was attempting to reproduce on a sheet of white rag paper: a petalled organism, complete in itself, obedient to its own rhythms and laws and to none other. Years later, looking back, he remembers how tenderly he held the watercolour brush in his hand, how the sun falling through the windowpane struck the top of his wrist and the edge of the water glass, and how the whole of his existence lightened correspondingly. (46)

Barker is obsessed with the flower’s perfection. It inspires and nourishes his creative longings and brings some moments of transcendent understanding and

order to his life. The orchid elevates his existence and gives it an artistic dimension. It is contrasted with his rough upbringing and it brings new quality to his life.

The construction of Barker is fragmented and at different stages of the text we find its different elements. Halfway through the novel the reader is informed that the whole botanical world, neatly ordered and classified, becomes Barker's elected shelter from the troubles and imperfections of the real world. Just like Cuyler Goodwill finds his own mode of expression in sexual act and then in art, and just as Magnus learns the whole new language from romance novels grief-stricken after his wife's departure, so Barker learns the language of the natural world: "This miniature world, slime molds, algae, became his elected tongue – the genetics of plants, its odd, stringent beauty" (143). Yet, the narrator somehow ironically points out that Barker is troubled by his human imperfection and his mismatch with the harmoniously ordered natural world. Neither art and nature, nor regular visits to prostitutes fulfil his longings. Soon, his new obsession becomes the incestuous desire for the eleven-year-old Daisy. The narrator is certain of the sexual nature of Barker's fascination with the girl: "Daisy ... translated her uncle's long brooding sexual stare, for that was what it was, into an attack of indigestion" (77). The same moment is narrated from another point of view taking Barker as a focaliser: "He is also disturbed, though has yet to acknowledge it, by the presence of eleven-year-old Daisy Goodwill in his household, ... the unnatural yearning he experienced recently when he entered her darkened sick room and observed the sweetness of her form beneath the sheet" (68). He is unable to comprehend his fascinations and urges, and he seeks salvation via imagining "the separate

layers of his brain; there are spaces there, cavities that exist between the forces of sex and work. What is he to do with these voids? Other people know. He's never known" (142). The quotation evokes a striking similarity to another of Shields's male characters that is Frederick Cruzzi from *Swann*, who makes a similar distinction between his love of women and the love of words, but only both of them combined form the essence of his existence.

Barker's fascination with the girl is akin to his obsession with the orchid. Both objects of desire are innocent and in a way dependent on him. He worships the two of them but both seem to elude and betray him. They are symbols of innocence, but they generate fraudulent desire and attract corruption. Even the orchid, as he finds out, stimulates sexuality:

he has been reading about a pollinating mechanism in which a male insect is attracted to certain small orchids, the lip of which simulates the sexual parts of the female insect. As a man of science, Flett finds the phenomenon obscurely disturbing, particularly the copulative gestures the excited male performs at the edge of the mute petal. (67-68)

In a way, natural world betrays Barker who sees the reflection of his own troubled sexuality even in the nature's perfect arrangements. Desire surrounds him and it is an inextricable part of his life. He reflects that

into this system [the organisation of the botanic world], which is not nearly as neat and logical as he had once believed, has crept the fact of Daisy. She sits far out at the end of one of the branches, laughing, calling to him. He sometimes shuts his eyes and wishes her gone, but she remains steadfastly there, a part of

nature, confused with the subtle tendrils of sexual memory; he could no more ignore her presence than erase a sub-species of orchid or sedge. (143)

Natural world, which was supposed to be a perfect escape from flawed reality, is all of a sudden shaken by Daisy's presence. She seems to exist in-between both worlds, being at the same time part of surrounding reality but also bearing signs of natural perfection. She is an embodiment of his intimate longings and from the moment of this realisation, Barker will be waiting for Daisy to become his wife. Paradoxically, the two do not get married until Daisy is thirty-one, so a long way from Daisy the child desired by Barker's younger self.

Curiously enough, the second part of Barker's story is much less analytical and becomes schematic and predictable. Presumably, this is the part of his life that the narrators Alice and Judith could verify, which means it left not much room for invention and speculation, and thus ceased being of interest to the female authors of the story. Daisy and Barker lead a fairly conventional and schematic life. She is the housewife and he works, travels and still visits prostitutes. They regularly have sex; however, the passion young Barker felt towards the under-aged Daisy, the urge to "crush her young body close to his, her delicately formed shoulders and budding breasts" (111) has dwindled and is now replaced by "a few minutes of rhythmic rocking" (191). When he is sixty-five he watches his own life from a distance. This family man, a husband and a father of three very young children, is "a voyeur in his own life, and even now he watches himself critically: paterfamilias, a man greeting his family at the end of a working day, gazing into the faces of his children and beyond them

to the screened porch where the supper table is set” (161). He is allowed to watch his own life and his performance as a father from a distance. He is unable to connect with his role as a family person and “his old temptations – solitude, silence” (163) frighten him. At this point of his life he also suddenly realises his connection and similarity to his long-gone father: “Nothing divides them now but geography; if it weren’t for the width of the Atlantic Ocean, the two of them could stand side by side in old age, more like brothers than father and son, their blood thinned down to water and their limbs diminished by idleness” (162-163). He slowly comes to an understanding that, in spite of all his efforts to cut himself off his origins, his father is part of him. He is his father, just like Daisy “has given birth to her mother” (191). The characters invent other characters and thanks to them the stories of previous generations are not erased. A similar notion about creation is expressed by Cuyler: “the human and the divine are balanced across a dazzling equation: man’s creation of God being exactly equal to God’s creation of man” (67). They are both makers and their existence is always mutual; there is no God if there is no man to believe in him, but God is believed to be a man’s creator. Barker, by realising his striking similarity to his father, announces Shields’s male character to come that is Larry in *Larry’s Party*.

Finally, we learn more about Barker’s affection for Daisy from his farewell letter to her. He confesses his love for his wife even though he never named his affection during their years together. He writes: “Between us we have almost never mentioned the word love” (198). He goes back to his collection of lady’s slippers and suggests that Daisy might want to sell them in order to have money to travel. We learn that the only argument the Fletts’ ever

had was over the collection. Daisy felt “repugnance ... for the lady’s slipper morphology, its long, gloomy ... stem and pouch-shaped lip” (198). Was Daisy jealous of Barker’s affection towards the orchid? She finds the shape worrying. The orchid’s shape is sometimes compared to male genitals⁶ and Barker in his youth was suspected of being a homosexual: “For years there have been whispers in the city that he is a homosexual, a rumour that, thankfully, has never reached his ears, for he would have been bewildered by such an allegation. He feels nothing for the bodies of men” (112). Perhaps Daisy had similar worries. We are not sure which narrator asserts that “he feels nothing for the bodies of men” and if we can trust this statement. Barker is unable to define himself within the available frames of the narrative and searches for other ways of expression. Akin to Cuyler he engages in sexual ecstasy and turns to art. Just like his father he decides to become a husband and a father but towards the end of his life he senses that he failed his beloved Daisy. When he retires he feels emptiness and uneasiness, which he believes unites all men at this stage in their lives. The son of a first self-conscious feminist in the novel struggles to bring a coherent pattern to his life’s trajectory by taking on different roles at different times. However, just like other female and male characters in the novel he is never “at peace” always trying to escape social confines imposed on him as a man.

Barker’s story also plays with the notion of mother’s guilt. Barker as the focaliser expresses his ambiguity towards women: “Toward women he

⁶ A lady’s slipper as a strong sexual metaphor was later used in 2000 by Barbara Kingsolver in her novel *Prodigal Summer*. Just like Barker worships the perfect shapes of the orchid, the lovers in Kingsolver’s novel observe the flower “dozens of delicately wrinkled oval pouches held erect on stems, all the way up the ridge. ... ‘Who named it *that*?’ [Eddie Bondo] asked, and laughed - they both did - at whoever had been the first to pretend this flower looked like a lady’s slipper and not a man’s testicles” (165).

feels both a profound reverence and a floating impatience, and from his random reading on the subject, he understands that this impatience stems from a resentment toward a punishing, withholding, enfeebling mother, the mother who gives and then withdraws the breast” (112). Shields in her novels often aims to subvert a notion of mothers being responsible for all potential failures of their sons. A mother as a sole carer is supposed to provide her son with a negative model and show him how to become a “real” man through negating everything feminine that she herself represents. If her son is to have any emotional problems in his adult life, it will be blamed on the mother and her faulty mothering. Here the Freudian idea of a “punishing mother” appeals to Barker as a potential answer to his troubled masculinity. However, further on we read that “he remembers his own bustling, narrow-chested little mother, her attention to the cost of articles, to the contrivance of her own life, he feels only warmth” (112). Mother guilt is presented ironically in the passage. Barker wants to blame an unfeeling mother, which is a popular thing to do, but he has no grounds for it. He feels “only warmth” towards Clarentine and is not able to remember any neglect in her mothering process. A similar tension is projected when Mrs. Hoad is described as guilty of her son's alcoholism: “her creative explanations had the effect of making Harold perpetually drunk. He stumbled under the unreality of her fantasies” (110). Shields plays with the notion of mothers’ responsibility for their sons’ adult life choices and offers a critical commentary on the phenomenon. Ultimately, always mother-son relationships play crucial part in her male character construction.

Male characters featured in this “apocryphal journal” are multidimensional constructs. Postmodern techniques involving numerous

female narrators and language games aimed at a re-construction of a male character play a crucial role in this collective life story of three generations of women. On the one hand, men serve here as witnesses and reference points for the generic life-story of a woman living in the twentieth century. On the other hand, even though enacted by female narrators, male characters still have the power to limit the possibilities of women's influence over their own stories. They define women and control social space women live in. Yet, individual characters are represented as powerless and unfulfilled. They constantly search for a better script to follow, but their choices are as limited as women's. The narrator concludes with the vision of "the deep, shared common distress of men and women" and with a pessimistic observation of "how little they are allowed, finally, to say" (359). Men are the limiting and controlling element in women's stories, but in turn they are controlled and limited by social arrangements. The narrator does not see male characters as oppressors and treats them leniently. They are also only pawns in the social matrix; simply the role they are given is much more generous than that of women.

CHAPTER SIX

Larry Weller's masculinity maze: men in the twenty-first century according to Carol Shields's *Larry's Party*

Larry's Party is Shields's pivotal text in terms of her analysis of contemporary men. Larry Weller, its main protagonist, embodies all her ideas, guesses and worries about masculinities at the end of the twentieth century, many already expressed through her previous male characters. On the one hand, the construction of Larry Weller seems to be fairly straightforward; he is a middle-class, middle-of-the road, white, heterosexual, working male. On the other hand, the creation is highly complex as it conveys the idea of a postmodern masculinity based on contradiction, uncertainty, duplicity, performance and inconclusiveness. Larry is an everyman and even though he is the focalizing consciousness of the novel, he is constructed and narrated from a female perspective. Significantly, the novel can also be seen as a partial response to *The Stone Diaries* – it constitutes a sort of male version of Shields's previous book – particularly as it is a play on biography. Larry's masculinity is being constantly redrafted, revised and undermined as his life trajectory develops. In every chapter of the book he is somebody else, which is signified by his being newly introduced every time with his changing job status, the clothes that he wears, the vocabulary that he develops and the women he surrounds himself with. My assertion is that Larry never arrives at a comfortable conclusion about what masculinity is. Yet, the end of the novel

marks a certain momentary settlement for Larry who gains a clearer understanding of his position, needs and achievements.

Throughout the narrative Larry constantly readapts and draws on his evolving circumstances to follow or escape currently available patterns. He rejects the values represented by his parents' generation but does not replace them with any new conclusions, which adds to his temporary sense of loss. He is also a traveller looking for universal values transcending common bonds of gender. In so doing he often withdraws into the world of nature and art in order to escape social patterns. As always in Shields's texts there is a lot of gender tension here and my reading is that women are indispensable to Larry's existence as a man as they shape and guide him to the point that he is never able to function on his own. However, I argue that Larry is not a passive character; on the contrary, he very consciously manipulates his story and makes informed decisions that guide his choices. There is no conclusion to the novel, Larry's life turns a perfect circle and he goes back to the point where he started, although better prepared for the roles of a husband and a father.

I will analyse Larry's road to masculinity partially through a prism of a statement taken from Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner, two influential sociologists researching men and masculinity in contemporary society. In the introduction to their collection of essays entitled *Men's Lives* they claim: "Men are not born, growing from infants through boyhood to manhood, to follow a predetermined biological imperative encoded in their physical organisation. To be a man is to participate in social life as a man, as a gendered being. Men are not born; they are made. And men make themselves, actively constructing their

masculinities within a social and historical context” (Kimmel, Messner XX). It is quite intriguing to put the quotation together with its original version, which is Simone de Beauvoir’s statement, that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (295). The resulting conclusion is: one becomes a woman, but men are made. Men “make themselves” which implies an effort for one to be a man. A reflection of this idea is visible in Shields’s novels, especially in *Larry’s Party*. Larry’s life journey is a road to masculinity which is never defined and as such cannot be attained. The protagonist needs to make conscious choices; he rejects the old-style patriarchal masculinity with male sex-role as a model. He strives to break free from certain social conventions in order to find out what is of real importance and necessary to his becoming a man. He sets off on a quest to find his masculinity path and the journey seems to begin anew in every single chapter of the book.

In the Introduction to this thesis I briefly describe three waves of masculinity studies based on Tim Edwards’s analysis. *Larry’s Party* undoubtedly deals with the issues connected to the third wave which addresses complex questions of what can be classed as masculinity. It denies the concept of rigid sex roles and performance, but explores the question of performativity. The idea of deconstructing masculinity as such is similar to postmodernist feminism which also, in its full phase, “threatens to explode the category of ‘woman’” (Edwards 7). It introduces the notion of the “fragmented self” shaped by surrounding culture, personal preferences, nationality, class, ethnicity, sexuality. Larry’s masculinity is constantly being learned and performed; however, the character is conscious of his stylisation and struggles to be able to define the essence of masculinity. All the above ideas partially

derive from Judith Butler's notions of gender as performance, explained in detail in the Introduction to this thesis. Just to elaborate on what has been said, Butler claims that males have no sex: "To be male is not to be "sexed;" to be "sexed" is always a way of becoming particular and relative, and males within this system participate in the form of the universal person" (154). As a result only females are sexed and they are relational to and their construction depends on "the universal person" – a male. As it becomes clear the categories of sex and gender are not easy to classify and describe. They are subject to constant changes and resignifications and, as it transpires from the novel, Larry tries to define his masculinity primarily with the help of the women in his life. It is common for Shields to show how inextricably connected the new models of masculinities and femininities are. However, towards the end of her writing career she was becoming less hopeful about women's ability to prevent themselves from being only relational.

The fragmentation of Larry's gender construction is paired with the idea of representation, so important for postmodern theory. As Linda Hutcheon explains:

What postmodern theory and practice together suggest is that everything always was 'cultural' in this sense, that is, always mediated by representations. They suggest that notions of truth, reference and the non-cultural real have not ceased to exist ... but that they are no longer unproblematic issues, assumed to be self-evident and self-justifying. The postmodern, as I have been defining it, is not a degeneration into 'hyperreality' but a questioning of what reality can mean and how we can come to

know it. It is not that representation now dominates or effaces the referent, but rather that it now self-consciously acknowledges its existence as representation – that is, as interpreting (indeed as creating) its referent, not as offering direct and immediate access to it. (*The Politics*, 32)

My point here is that Larry's masculinity is a self-conscious representation. It questions the norms and the possibility of 'reality' and it interprets and creates its referent. The reintroduction of Larry at the beginning of every chapter suggests that his status is in constant flux. Larry is presented as being conscious of the workings around him and tries to readapt his image to fit the new setting. The narrator allows him to understand the influence of his evolving language upon the construction of his narrative. Larry also consciously questions his performance as a husband and a father, he ponders different sexualities and deliberately marks his evolving masculinity by changing the way he looks (this will be discussed later). At different moments represented in the novel, the narrator highlights Larry's staging of his masculine condition, as for example when he is forty years old:

As for himself, he's persuaded that he'd only been pretending to be lost at forty, a man on the verge of nothing at all. He's been rehearsing the condition, trying it on for size, as if he could with this sham despair propitiate the real thing – which will come, which will surely come. The arrow is already in flight, he knows that much.

For the moment, though, he's safe. A tide of balance has miraculously returned, and he's back to being Larry Weller

again, husband, father, home owner, tuxedo wearer. An okay
guy with work to do. So far, so good. (Shields, *Larry's* 181)

So the character is self-conscious of a kind of double masquerade he is performing. From one side, he pretends to fit a common pattern with men going through or being on the verge of a phase of crisis approaching their forties. From the other side, he implies that the roles he is performing at the given moment constitute only a part of his staged existence and also belong to a collection of patterns that sometimes he chooses to follow but at times consciously and meaningfully rejects. Larry embodies a universal longing for a sense of arrival. The female narrator, however, sees such journey differently for men and for women. As it is not uncommon in Shields's novels there is a traceable longing for equality. Men have more time, more options, and wider perspectives. Women are often only relational and partially able to make conscious choices. I argue that Larry, from the end of chapter one, knows his destination and chooses his life to be a journey symbolically marked by the jacket he finds, tries on and gets rid of at the beginning of the story.

Firstly, I will look at Larry's journey through the prism of the construction of the novel. Larry's self-conscious representation is paired with the postmodern construction of the whole novel. The polyphony of narrative voices, sometimes difficult to define, makes the representation more complex. As Linda Hutcheon stresses:

[metafiction's] subversion of the stability of point of view, the inheritance of modernist experiments ..., takes two major forms. On the one hand, we find overt, deliberately manipulative narrators; on the other, no one single perspective but myriad

voices, often not completely localizable in the textual universe.
... In place of anonymity, we find over-assertive and
problematizing subjectivity, on the one hand, and, on the other,
a pluralizing multivalency of points of view. (*A Poetics*, 160-
161)

In the case of *Larry's Party* there is one narrator, however the focalisers are many. Even though the reader is led to believe that throughout the text it is Larry's character that will constitute the only focalizing consciousness, suddenly it appears that the perspective shifts onto other characters, at times unidentified ones. This combined with the fact that the figure of the narrator as the biographer is a woman,¹ subverts the perspective on the main character. The assumption that a female biographer tells the story is also crucial to my project as I keep stressing the importance of a female element in Larry's male construction. Just as in the case of *The Stone Diaries*, where all the narrators are women, in *Larry's Party* the text becomes influenced by female understanding. Women choose what will constitute the life story, what will be revealed and what will stay hidden. Also, Carol Shields as the author of the book, rather than insisting on the universal experience uninfluenced by gender, signals that the story is filtered through a female perspective. In her 1997 interview with Eleanor Wachtel she said: "Men have always been a mystery, the great mystery for me, the unknown. I don't understand men. I don't know how they think, what their bodies feel like to them. So why not spend some time considering that mystery?" (Wachtel 70). So *Larry's Party* is an

¹ Coral Ann Howells in her article "Larry's A/Mazing Spaces" proves her claim that the private, domestic and intimate experiences selected to be present in this particular biographic story imply that the biographer is a woman, a notion I agree to and employ in my analysis.

experiment, the author's guessing game on what men are really like, or maybe rather on what women think that men are like.

The novel is divided into fifteen titled chapters that cover twenty years in Larry Weller's life. It is impossible to talk about *Larry's Party* without attaching importance to the ubiquitous mazes, literal and metaphorical. Larry is fascinated by mazes, becomes a maze maker and his whole life and the road to conscious masculinity takes the shape of a maze, in fact at one point even Larry's body is described as an "upright walking labyrinth" (Shields, *Larry's* 269). The chapters of the book are constructed as self-contained mazes and each chapter starts with a pictorial epigraph representing an actual maze. The narrative of the story resembles a labyrinth with its numerous analepses, prolepses and doublings back on itself. It is not surprising that most of the work done on *Larry's Party* concentrates on the significance of mazes and labyrinths in the text, for example Dee Goertz undertook a task of finding out which mazes the pictures represent and presented her findings in her article "Treading the Maze of *Larry's Party*."

Coral Ann Howells, in her article entitled "Larry's A/Mazing Spaces," argues that Shields's narrative continually plays across two different concepts of space as lived material space and symbolic space (as defined by Henri Lefebvre). In this way we not only witness Larry's mobility in physical and social spaces but also have insight into his subjective life. Howells stresses that Shields writes another unconventional biography that includes the subjective and the undocumented. She singles out three transcendental moments in Larry's life that, unconventionally for a biography, show the most important moments of Larry's subjective life: the first visit to Hampton Court maze, the

construction of the McCord maze in Toronto and finally the reconciliation with Dorrie during the party. Most emphasis is given to the first experience about which Howells writes: "Slipping out of the shell of his own identity, [Larry] manages for a moment to transcend the socially scripted boundaries of his identity, with all its restrictions and responsibilities, as he slips across the borders between realism into spaces of imagination and desire" (Howells, "Larry's" 124-125). This moment is also crucial to my analysis of Larry as a self-conscious construct trying to free himself from certain social limitations and will be an underlying theme throughout the remaining part of this analysis.

This observation is closely connected to the aspect of Larry that I am primarily interested in, that is his pursuit of masculinity. When Larry gets lost in the maze he experiences illumination and freedom, as all the puzzles of his identity momentarily fall into place. At that stage he knows that he will finally arrive at the point of salvation and self-understanding. Shields records this precious moment in Larry's life and suggests that at the time of the illumination sex and gender issues do not matter. In order to experience the ultimate understanding of the world the bonds and restrictions of sex/gender need to cease to exist. The constant struggle to conform to the rules of gender differentiation looms like a waste of time and a futile effort. Shields often referred to such transcendental moments of understanding as "random illuminations," which "are very difficult to shape into language that doesn't sound utterly insane. I think that is why we don't always even recognise them, let alone share them" (Wachtel 92). Yet, she tries to capture them in her novels, her characters experience them and they illuminate their path forward, just as in Larry's case. From that moment Larry's drive for artistic self-expression will

start, unfortunately at the cost of personal relationships. Only when Larry is ready to encompass every sphere in his life into a manageable whole, and when his fear of underperformance as a hu/man will be gone, is he able to settle down and perform his role as a husband and father. (That moment will constitute Howells's final "a/mazing space").

Overall, the journey he takes enables him to understand his place in the novel's reality. He procrastinates on purpose and takes pleasure in his mazing journey. When in the first chapter he takes someone else's tweed jacket by mistake, he feels ready to move into it, yet he throws it away: "It seemed like something alive. Inside him, and outside him too. It was like an apartment. He could move into this jacket and live there. Take up residence, get himself a new phone number and a set of cereal bowls" (Shields, *Larry's* 12). It implies Larry's readiness to manipulate his own representation and ability to swap roles. He decides to postpone the moment of "comfortable residence" and sets off on a quest. So he resolves to get rid of the jacket, once again very self-consciously and deliberately: "He didn't know if he was making a mistake or not, getting rid of that jacket, and he didn't care. The jacket had to go" (13). Leaving the jacket symbolises Larry's freedom and openness. The protagonist chooses not to be restricted and easily-definable and "walk[s] straight toward the next thing that was going to happen to him" (13). The narrator only notices that the focaliser of the novel deliberately opens a story for himself. She does not comment on it but Larry's easiness and matter-of-factness of the choice is visible. So, paradoxically, Larry who will be often portrayed as passive and who lets things happen to him, also consciously chooses such a path.

Previous criticism on *Larry's Party* also includes different readings of the protagonist's journey to a sense of completion. Patricia-Lèa Paillot offers an incredibly detailed analysis of *Larry's Party* as a biography situated in a highly geometrical sphere where shifting perspectives remain Larry's prism of understanding. Larry's journey to self-understanding only finishes when all the various geometries presented in the novel converge during the party. I agree with the statement that Larry would be an extremely ordinary and boring construct without his specialised identity "which renders the character exceptional and serves as the structural frame of *Larry's Party*" (Paillot 157). Such a post-modern reading of the protagonist's construction adds to the multiplicity and complexity of the possible analyses and as such only reconfirms my assertion that Larry's character is forever evolving. Lorna Irvine analyses Shields's unique skill in providing both subjective and objective narratives at the same time through the use of different voices and shifting focalisers. She calls *Larry's Party* a "body-text," in which "the author slices through Larry's memory, metaphysics, and body, allowing the reader repeated glimpses of a character viewed both objectively from above, sideways and even underneath and more intimately and subjectively from inside the very body-tissues the CAT-scans are meant to illuminate" (Irvine 141). Simultaneously the reader is drawn to the protagonist's intimate spaces but also scientifically detached from him.

However the most useful for my research is Coral Ann Howells's earlier article entitled "Identities Cut in Freestone: Carol Shields, *The Stone Diaries*, and *Larry's Party*." In it she engages with the concept of masculinity construction as foundational to a man's sense of identity. Howells's idea that

Larry learns to become a man “through the process of socialization within the normative heterosexual framework of his family and community” (Howells, *Contemporary* 93-94) echoes the theories of masculine construction I presented at the beginning of my work. In her analysis Howells pays a lot of attention to clothes “as the signifiers of gender” (95) and traces how Larry dresses at different stages in his life and how it reflects his masculine position and gradual self-understanding. On the whole, she argues, clothes perform the function of masquerading, dressing up, assuming an identity that is not yet there. We read: “At the age of forty-three Larry has learned to wear the costumes of successful masculinity, though the dimension of masquerade is still evident as his clothes are used to map not only his changing social identities but also his subjective life” (95). The way the protagonist looks reflects the stage of his search. The first chapter of the book ends with Larry taking by mistake somebody else’s tweed jacket, an expensive one, too big and too costly for this young man. Larry feels unprepared to wear such an outfit and gets rid of it, but the scene symbolises the beginning of his quest for masculinity – the beginning of the process of growing into such clothes – which will mark his maturity. The discussion of clothes as signifiers of gender shows that Shields again decided to play with the notion of masculinity. In the following section I start discussing the importance of women on Larry’s development and I will expand on Howells’s ideas pertaining to Larry’s gender construction and the significance of clothes joining it with the “female” strand.

Another axis of my analysis of the postmodern construction of Larry is his relationship with women. It starts with the oedipal attraction to his mother, evolves through relations with older female friends from work, and finally

arrives at dependence on his wives and lovers. Along with these primary relationships I will trace Larry's changing jobs, social status, relationship with his father and son and his developing vocabulary. All the factors taken into account "make" Larry but also Larry is a self-conscious construct who understands the principle of his post-modern representation as the sum of everything that happens in his life and of everyone appearing in his story. Georgiana M. M. Colville in her essay "Carol's Party and Larry's Shields: On Carol Shields' novel *Larry's Party*" pays attention to the novel as an example of women-looking-at-men in the context of Canadian postmodern and Canadian irony. Her conclusion about Larry is that while the women who surround him evolve, mature and get stronger as they grow older, Larry only develops physically. She writes: "[Larry's] passivity, a traditionally female trait, becomes increasingly apparent. In this context, the narrator/implicit author's discourse could best be read as mothering/ "maternant," albeit tongue-in-cheek and perpetrating Larry's regression" (Colville 95). My reading of Larry is slightly different. He is a highly independent character who sets himself a goal at the outset of the novel and consequently journeys to reach it. He does not try to accelerate the story, but also he never loses sight of his destination. He uses women in his life, learns and draws strength from them, builds his masculinity in opposition to their femininity and moves forward.

I will start this multidimensional analysis of Larry and women by looking at his relationship with his mother. First of all, it seems that he is not able to get rid of his oedipal attraction to her into his late adulthood. Following Nancy Chodorow's analysis, such a condition stems from the exclusive care that mothers provided in the 1950s and 1960s. Children would identify

themselves as one with their mother, and their development as independent beings would depend on their separation from her. Finally “mothers ... come to symbolise dependence, regression, passivity, and the lack of adaptation to reality. ... It is by turning away from our mother that we finally become, by our different paths, grown men and women” (82). Chodorow’s theories and the after-effects of Freudian psychoanalysis were widespread in the times when Shields was writing her novels and the construction of Larry can be read as a partial response to those ideas. Larry in his youth seems to be overly passive, letting his mother do everything for him and expecting her to act that way. Another character over-reliant on his mother is Tom Avery from *The Republic of Love* as discussed in detail in Chapter 4. Larry’s construction echoes the earlier character as his mother chooses his clothes, college course and a future career for him:

His mother phoned Red River College one day and asked them to mail out their brochure on the Furnace Repair course. She figured everyone’s got a furnace, so even with the economy up and down, furnaces were a good thing to get into. Well, someone must have been sleeping at the switch, because along came a pamphlet from Floral Arts, flowers instead of furnaces. Larry’s mother, Dot, sat right down in the breakfast nook and read it straight through, tapping her foot as she turned the pages, and nodding her head at the ivy wallpaper as if she was saying, yes, yes, floral design really is the future. (Shields, *Larry’s* 8)

She makes decisions for her son who will comfortably live with his parents until the age of twenty-six.

Here I would like to make a point with reference to the previously mentioned aspect of clothes in Larry's development. His outfits until the final chapter are always chosen by the women in his life. The protagonist is never happy with these choices, yet he is never ready to make his own selection. Until he arrives at a point of tranquillity and self-understanding such decisions will never be his even though he constantly stresses the discrepancy between what he wears and how he feels about the clothes. The process starts with his mother:

She bought all his clothes These clothes were never quite right. ... Humiliating. His high-school cords were a putrid shade of brown. His jeans were too wide in the seat and too bright a blue, not one of the approved makes, not even close. He hated these clothes, but loved his tireless mother, and wouldn't have dreamt of showing his disappointment. Chiefly, he didn't want her to know that he cared about such things. It was her belief that men shouldn't pay attention to the clothes they wore. Men were above such concerns. They lived outside the secret knowledge of women, of weave and wear, of color, quality and laundry instructions and the small intuitive grasp on buttonhole excellence or failure. (238)

So initially Larry wears clothes selected for him by his mother. They are not his choice; they are humiliating for the young man yet he does not want to hurt his mother's feelings but also does not want to go beyond the scope of masculinity shaped for him by her. According to the masculine pattern Dot Weller wanted to instil in her son, men should not pay attention to clothes as

they are part of the feminine domain. As the protagonist marries his first wife Dorrie, the reader is told about one particular garment she buys for him, that is an expensive Italian shirt; “His special shirt, his non-Larry shirt” (235). Once again Larry feels that a kind of masquerade is imposed on him. He does not want to wear it and pushes it to the back of his closet for it sparks a new worry in him: “Where would he wear such a shirt? And would he spend the rest of his life tripping over new forms of self-consciousness?” (235). The shirt stays with Larry for many years and even into his second marriage. It instils in him a preoccupation with what kind of man he is expected to be and whether he will ever be able to adapt. Women love the shirt but his father sums it up by saying: “Looks like you went and forgot to take off your pajamas” (236). Larry is caught between the two extremes: women’s wonder over the garment and his father’s utter rejection of it. At this stage Larry is not able to shape his definition of masculinity with its external signifiers and is worried about the long journey to self-discovery. His second marriage runs parallel to his more and more prominent social and financial status and thus he acquires new elegant clothes. Here another significant part of wardrobe is highlighted, that is buying maroon silk pyjamas. Beth talks him into getting a pair in Paris and he feels ridiculous in them. The pyjamas paired with the fact that he and Beth are mechanically trying to conceive a child at this time, makes him feel “like someone in a porno film” (237). Once again he is out of place and out of sync with his own needs. As a symbolic punishment for the feminine imposition, he tosses the pyjamas around the bedroom and imagines the maid folding them neatly every day under the pillow. Larry is frustrated by his own inability to define himself and by the female power over him.

Obviously, the complex relationship with his mother is not only symbolised by her approach to Larry's clothes. Shields once again, as she does with Barker in *The Stone Diaries* or Tom Avery in *The Republic of Love*, wants to play with the notion of guilt and blaming mothers for their children's failures. In Larry's case he claims that he inherited from his mother her constant fear and suffering and certain nostalgia.² From childhood his life has been stained by a tragedy: "he has a mother who cries in her sleep. A mother who's missing the kind of cold, saving curiosity that would hold her steady after a tragic event and whose contagion of grief has spread to him. Through her milk, through her skin and fingertips" (48). So in a way Larry is his mother and he embodies her anxiety; he is still inextricably connected with her as if via an invisible umbilical cord through which he still nourishes himself. Shields wonderfully portrays both sides, a typical man of his generation, confused and ill-adapted to late-twentieth-century reality trying to find out what went wrong in his upbringing that made him the kind of man he is, and a typical baby-boom mother, always preoccupied and believing that she has to sacrifice her life for her family, worrying about her grown-up children and blaming herself for their ill-adaptation:

[Larry]'s blowing a little tune into his empty beer bottle.

Is there room in the tilting, rotating world for a thirty-year-old man who sits blowing into a bottle? He thinks this, and so does his mother, who reaches over and takes it from him, not so much with an air of rebuke as with resolution, and places it under the counter. What deprivation, her expression asks, what

² Larry's mother deadly poisoned her mother-in-law with ill-preserved runner beans.

injury has stalled her son at the age of thirty? Something's been subtracted too soon, but what? And is it her fault?

Of course it's her fault. (47)

This short excerpt shows how brilliantly Shields uses the possibilities of post-modern narration to present multiple voices without clearly ascribing them to characters. She uses a mix of two, or three focalisers, that of Larry, his mother, and a biographer. There is no clear line between what Larry thinks and what his mother thinks. It is unclear who expresses the last "Of course it's her fault," which is a common denominator for the mother, son and collective consciousness in North American society in the 1980s. It is the mother's fault, her own aspirations, inadequate knowledge of how to present her son with "proper masculine" models according to the prescribed social norms, that causes her child's failure and suffering. It is a lesson given to women forgetting their place in the patriarchal order. Shields seems to laugh and make her readers realise how easily such a version is accepted without questioning. Larry's stagnation is clearly caused, Shields demonstrates, by his unwillingness to take a step ahead, by his insistence on finding blame in his upbringing, by his inability to recognise that he needs to act for himself. The situation is somehow summed up in the paragraph:

And so Larry knows his mother's suffering. He's always known it, filling in around the known bits with his imagination. He would like to put his arms around her, and she would like this too. But he doesn't know where to begin, doesn't know if she knows that he knows or how much he knows or what weight he attaches to it. So he's silent and she's silent. He sits fiddling

with his beer bottle, until it's firmly taken from him, and she checks the clock for the umpteenth time, as if each ticking minute places an extra weight on her sadness. (48)

There is silence between the son and the mother. They both understand each other's situation but lack the ability to verbalise it; as a result it will never be resolved.

Larry gradually shifts from still being a part of his mother to embodying characteristics of his father. He recalls always being his mother's boy: "Heir to her body, her intensity, and to her frantic private pleasures and glooms" (21), growing long hair and following a floral arts course at college much to his father's discontent. However, upon becoming a husband to his first wife Dorrie he notices that "his father had moved in beneath his bones" (22). The new realisation suggests that once he commits to taking responsibility for Dorrie and their unborn child, Larry ceases to be the image of his mother and finds himself in sync with his father. It once again plays with Chodorow's ideas where separation from the mother signifies successful socialisation and masculine maturity. Larry, before developing into a self-conscious character escaping masculine conditioning, initially repeats all the schemata and fits into the envisaged patterns. First, he blames his mother and then repeats the model prepared for him by his father. He is alerted to the pattern when, for example, he finds himself patting his new wife with a "husband's pat." He is astonished at realising

its cruel economy and monumental detachment. It was a sign of someone who was distracted, weary. He'd seen his father touch his mother in exactly the same way when she fell into one of her

blue days. Only patting wasn't really the same thing as touching.

Patting a person was like going on automatic pilot, you just reached out and did it. (33)

So becoming a husband means for Larry becoming like his father and now repeating his patterns. The thought is unacceptable for him as he realises the falsity of the arrangement and of his own actions, and he tries to get rid of his father inhabiting his body now. Also the whole idea of being a husband and father weighs on him and instantly he rejects it, filling his head with shrubs and greenery: "he'd found he could dispel the [father] face by filling up his head with the greenness of hedgerows" (31). He consciously replaces his imperfect status as a husband and father-to-be with the perfection of nature.

Once again such a flight resembles that of Barker Flett who, in a desperate attempt to cut himself off from his upbringing and the social requirements imposed on him, withdraws into the natural world of orchids. Nature for both of Shields's protagonists symbolises the detachment from the social and an attempt to return to the essence of humanity but also one's own masculinity. Larry, the young husband and father-to-be, upon getting lost in Hampton Court maze, begins his self-conscious journey against societal expectations. "He observed how his feet chose each wrong turning, working against his navigational instincts, circling and repeating, and bringing on a feverish detachment. Someone older than himself paced inside his body, someone stronger too, cut loose from the common bonds of sex; of responsibility" (36). So Larry deliberately gets lost and purposefully chooses the wrong paths. It brings him freedom and self-oblivion. He arrives at a state where he is not limited by any social constraints. Gender and masculinity,

fatherhood and family are not an issue: Larry knows that he will be making his own choices. The protagonist understands the artificiality and superficiality of his marital arrangement. Love that he is supposed to feel for Dorrie will have to be guarded but it is exposed and prone to damage: “He felt the fourteen days of his marriage collapsing backward and becoming an invented artefact, a curved space he must learn to fit into. Love was not protected” (36). Marriage means responsibility which he will want to escape just like any other form of limitation and definition.

As signalled before, Larry’s mother only sets off the “wave” of femininity surrounding and shaping Larry’s character. It continues at college where he is one of the two boys in his class and becomes the centre of attention. Instantly he is seduced by Sally Wolsche who provides him with his first sexual experience. From a boy spending time away from his peers, watching TV with his parents, suddenly, as a result of his sexual initiation he feels that “Everything in his life could be revised now, given the hard waxed shine of pertinence and good faith. He could do what his fellow human beings did, what they were meant to do. He was like other people, he was going to be able to live in the worlds in the same way other people lived” (131). The encounter is a breakthrough moment for Larry. Akin to Cuyler Goodwill's first coitus in *The Stone Diaries*, it opens a whole new world for him. The journey to becoming men in a reproductive sense begins; it is the closest encounter with the natural world, completely apart from any social orders or limitations. So a union with a woman is necessary to men’s self-fulfilment and it is via physical closeness with her that the conscious road to masculine fulfilment starts. Sally is the first acknowledged female element in Larry’s life (apart

from his mother) that changes its current. She is “a random force, a zephyr, who by chance crossed his path” and “rescued him from shame” (127); shame of both: inexperience in sexual performance and of not belonging to the group of initiated men.

Sally is the first driving force to his awakening, changing the focus of his life’s trajectory and initiating the beginning “of a larger female tide that washes over him and makes his existence bearable” (140). In *Larry’s Party*, Shields does not analyse male friendships as closely as she does, for example in *Happenstance*, but concentrates on female-male relationships. Larry’s closest friends are women. As a young florist his closest companion is the older Viv; later he always keeps in touch with Lucy Warkenten. They both are friends but also crafters, they are both older and Larry draws his strength from those relationships. At some point he realises that “the important conversations of his life will always be with women” (179). So, the narrator purports that women are necessary and inseparable elements shaping the male character’s life and his masculinity. Yet, Larry constantly moves on and follows the paths of his life’s maze on his own, women coming and going. In a way he uses them, taking what he needs at a given point in his life and then enters the next chapter.

However, it needs to be pointed out that Larry has male friends, for example a school friend Bill Herschel but also his gay friend Larry Fine, who is portrayed as emasculated and feminine. He wears an apron, sews his own curtains and names everything he owns with female names. The narrative goes:

Thank God for Larry Fine. ... This Larry has thick,
thick wrists covered with mats of hair, but he is a good mile and

a half from being a traditional hetero type. He bakes, he wears aprons, he sews his own curtains. Last Christmas he made Larry Weller a shirt out of green linen. He names everything he owns. ... Larry Fine is probably a little in love with Larry Weller. They both know this, but it doesn't matter and it doesn't stop them from enjoying a beer together. (256)

Larry Fine brings a necessary balance to the protagonist's life. He keeps him company and he makes him feel loved. He also makes Larry understand new masculine patterns and gives the name "Larry" some "gender stretch" (257). It is significant that Larry Fine, just like Weller's women, gives him a piece of clothing; in fact he is the only one who makes a shirt for him and we are not told of the beneficiary's disapproval. Shields's protagonist is not homophobic and friendship with a gay man does not pose a threat to his masculinity, a factor which would often make such a relationship impossible. Michael Kimmel in his article "Masculinity As Homophobia" stresses that the greatest threat to a masculine position of power is to be called gay, that is why heterosexual men choose to stay away from homosexual men for fear of being considered homosexual. For Kimmel

Homophobia is the effort to suppress the desire, to purify all relationships with other men, with women, with children of its taint, and to ensure that no one could possibly ever mistake one for a homosexual. Homophobic flight from intimacy with other men is the repudiation of the homosexual within – never completely successful and hence constantly re-enacted in every homosocial relationship. ("Masculinity" 232-233)

Weller's friendship with homosexual Larry implies how comfortable he becomes with his masculinity as he is not threatened by the idea that somebody might think he is gay. It is also interesting that the narrator at some point chooses Larry Fine, the representative of an alternative masculinity, to say that: "There's a sense in which, deep down, all the men in the world are named Larry" (Shields, *Larry's* 261). It suggests an underlying factor that unites all men regardless of their sexuality or social class. They all share the same worries and they all have to make a similar life journey.

At this point it needs to be mentioned that Larry Weller becomes curious about transvestitism and he even tries on his wife's robe. We are told: "He wonders what it would be like to [dress in women's clothes], especially how the smooth press of fine-mesh nylon would feel running up against his calves and thighs" and when he puts on Beth's robe "What precisely had he felt with the silky fabric swishing around his knees? Nothing much. Shame perhaps. A kind of satisfaction too" (239-240). So, Larry is testing his masculinity and checking it against feminine attributes. He likes the ability to play outside social conventions and, conversely, in this way he strengthens his position as a man.

As I pointed out earlier, upon getting married to Dorrie, Larry realises that he is not ready for the commitment and is unwilling to accept his new "face" as a husband and a father. He learns that "love was not protected ... It sat out in the open like anything else" (36) and he keeps losing it. He and Dorrie evolve differently and move away from each other. He develops his passion for shrubbery and mazes and builds his new vocabulary around it. He learns new sophisticated words as if to separate his world from Dorrie's and

lives in the world of his work and hobby. In a way, their honeymoon visit to Hampton Court maze brings Larry to the realisation that he does not have to follow the prescribed rules and at this point a slow erosion of his marriage begins. When he reminisces years later: “he felt a joyous rising of spirit that was related in some way to the self’s dimpled plasticity. He could move beyond what he was, ... he could become someone other than Larry Weller, shockingly new husband of Dorrie Shaw, non speculative citizen of a former colony, a man of limited imagination and few choices” (217). Paradoxically Larry realises that this moment sparked his departure from his present self and initiated his journey into self-discovery as expressed by his new passion for mazes and labyrinths. However, it also means the beginning of the collapse of his marriage.

Five years later Larry separates from Dorrie. His newly acquired vocabulary surrounds him: “What he felt was the steady, tough pummelling of words against his body: *knowledge, pain shame, emptiness, sorrow*, and curiously, like rain falling on the other side of the city, that oxygen-laden word *relief*. A portion of what he knew was over. *The end*” (97, author’s emphasis). The protagonist strikes a pose expected by social arrangements: he cries and howls but “he distrusted slightly the state of his own wretchedness, which felt mechanically induced and inflated ... and found himself shaken by the fear of artifice, in much the same way he had been wracked by the slipperiness of his love for Dorrie during their English honeymoon” (111). Larry understands the elements of performance and the staged reality in which he participates. The final moment of illumination at this stage is his class reunion. From a teenager unable to connect with the world now he feels a part of the group and “he

senses that his life is quietly clearing its throat, getting ready, at last to speak” (118). That is how the “first marriage” chapter ends and a reader gets the impression that from here on Larry will participate consciously in his life. He changes jobs and moves to Chicago. He is ready and excited. During his drive to the US he feels sexy and sexually aroused; we read: “he felt sexy all over at that moment, even the points at the back of his scalp and under the skin of his fingertips. His penis jumped in his pants” (125). He feels ready. Yet, as I will soon prove, he only moves to another stage of his performance of another Larry. The protagonist’s development and mastery of language as well as his movement from Canada to the United States is evocative of Cuyler Goodwill’s story from *The Stone Diaries*. Both gradually discover themselves through verbal expression and both move into a new stage of their lives: a different location, a more successful job and a new relationship.

Larry’s second wife – Beth – is completely different to Dorrie. Dorrie is a saleswoman and coupon cutter without sophisticated vocabulary. It seems that Larry’s developing career and vocabulary distance himself from his first wife as he refuses to acknowledge her needs and her own development. He sees his wife’s educational and intellectual shortcomings and develops in opposition to her. His second wife is the next step in his development, a kind of role model. She is a third-wave feminist, “which means she’s anxious to understand the mysteries of men as well as women” (139), and she is a scholar who researches women saints. She is beautiful and takes good care of herself. Together they form an intellectual couple. While with Beth, Larry earns a diploma in landscape design, becomes self-employed and earns good wages. He acquires sets of elegant clothes and shoes and masters the ability to sit still:

his wife, Beth (his second wife, actually), has noted Larry's postural feats with a measure of pride: the way he can sit for an hour or more without twitching or scratching, composing his limbs so that he becomes a benign, amiable statue – at a backyard barbecue, for instance, or at a public lecture, it doesn't matter which – without crossing or uncrossing his legs in the tiresome way that more nervous, more self-conscious, and more appeasing men do (205)

So Larry is not an appeaser; inside he is a rebel disagreeing with conventions, yet he has mastered the art of performance. On the surface, sitting still could be understood as an expression of perfect calm and full agreement with one's surrounding context, yet in Larry's case we are told it is only a pose, for inside he is ready for the next turn against the current. For the time being he becomes part of the life that comes with Beth. His wife introduces him to the new world where he obediently learns the rules that society imposes on him. It is another paradoxical situation and a trap that Larry falls into. Escaping from the confinement and responsibilities of his first marriage, he falls victim to even stiffer rules governing his second relationship. He escapes from the family home and also from the family he has established in order, as it transpires, to live somebody else's life. However, this marriage presents a different stage of the protagonist's understanding. This time he enters the new arrangement more self-consciously and deliberately, agreeing to give the performance required for this role. The protagonist takes on a new role of a settled, well-off intellectual directed and limited by his wife's expectations: "a comfortable man, comfortably settled, yet Larry himself would say, if asked – but no one so far

has asked – that he’s been parachuted into a life whose contours are monumentally out of whack with those he once knew” (208).

Larry never feels perfectly comfortable with his new roles. Their falsity make him feel constantly under threat:

every minute of every day, in fact – he prepares himself for exposure and ruin: he has no university degree to fall back on or boast about, he has never read Charles Dickens or Ralph Waldo Emerson, he’d be more than half-stumped if asked to locate the state of Nebraska on a map So how is it he projects such an air of confidence when, at the same time, living a fraction of an inch from public humiliation? Do other people exist this close to the flame of extinction? (208)

Larry is petrified at the fragility of his life’s arrangements. He feels a cheat living a life so out of sync with what he knows and is used to. The whole new world that comes along with Beth is tempting and alluring to Larry, yet it scares him as he will never be able to become an inherent part of any arrangement. However, the rhetorical question “Do other people exist this close to the flame of extinction?” suggests an affinity with all humans who, in some ways, live always a fraction away from humiliation like frauds or imposters. Larry understands the workings of such performance and as such is more conscious of the role, but also of a need to find his own self in the process.

Suddenly, there comes a moment of breakthrough if not balance. Beth does not get the Guggenheim fellowship for which she has applied but the next day Larry does. She is devastated and he tries to comfort her, “speaking in a falsely ringing male voice that cantilevered, it seemed to him, over a swamp of

dishonesty – but whose, his or Beth’s? The balance between himself and his wife had shifted subtly, that much was clear. He had in some way betrayed her. And she would be a long time forgiving him” (214). In the light of the above quotation, it can be inferred that Larry betrays Beth constantly. He adopts a role that fits Beth’s world and becomes a constant actor in it, never feeling safe and comfortable. But that is what Larry’s second wife expects from him. She demands the ordered life of a middle-class couple that involves seeking intellectual thrills and showing themselves in appropriate places. Larry is supposed to fit a frame. The double trick on Larry is, not only as I mentioned before, the fact that in escaping the confinement of a familiar life with Dorrie he becomes entrapped in a foreign life with Beth, but that this time he is conscious of the workings behind such roles and deliberately takes it on. However, his own volition and the way he expands beyond the expected frame of a good-looking and amicable husband of a scholarly wife, is a shock to Beth. He is not expected to go beyond his role, and the fact that he does initiates the erosion of his second marriage. However, for Larry relationships with women merge into one coherent whole: “In the mist of his subconscious his now-wife, Beth, and his then-wife, Dorrie, merge: a pair of sea creatures, sisters, all skin and clefts and tender seeking hands” (141). His two mermaids, symbols of temptation and doom – mythical figures already employed by Shields in *The Republic of Love* – form in this case a unified consciousness and complement each other. They are both part of Larry and he is part of them. He takes from them what he needs and moves on, untempted by their voices. He never inhabits the same plane as his women and he only pretends to be a part of their social arrangements.

In the latter sections of the novel, twice-divorced Larry arrives at a stage of troubling tranquillity: “the problem is, he doesn’t know how to be the person he’s become, but this could change tomorrow. For the moment, there he sits behind his own face. He’s dressed, he’s on time. What a surprise. What a bad surprise too” (269). What constitutes the surprise? Larry’s constant quest for self-realisation seems to have stopped without reaching any satisfactory conclusion. He arrives at some kind of destination, where he is not happy. He hides behind his own face, but once again he pretends and waits for something to happen. There is no action, no script and Shields’s protagonist stops developing. He needs a feminine incentive to make another move in life; we read that “his throttled, misshapen, and discontinuous life might yet be rescued. As it was this very minute by a woman called Charlotte Angus. When he least deserved it. ... For no reason that he can imagine, she’s reached toward his living body and offered herself” (278-279). Women rescue Larry from stagnation. However, paradoxically Charlotte helps him reconnect with his first wife. She co-organises a party at which Larry meets again both of his ex-wives. It is at a point in his story where both physically (after a period in a coma) and emotionally

he is recovering; in a sense he spent his whole life in a state of recovery, but has only begun, at age forty five, to breathe in the vital foreknowledge of what will become of the sovereign self inside him, that luxurious ornament. He’d like that self to be more musical and better lit, he’d like to possess a more meticulous sense of curiosity, and mostly he’d like someone,

some *thing* to love. He's getting close. He feels it. He's halfway awake now, and about to wake up fully. (284)

The protagonist senses that he is getting close to the moment of enunciation. His journey is about to end and in order to accomplish his comfortable settlement he needs love. Every chapter of the book and each Larry presented in them is a stage in the process of becoming. *Larry's Party* is a novel about a man in a constant state of becoming in line with societal expectations. Towards the end of the novel this self-conscious character slowly arrives at a comfortable position where his life's story constitutes a coherent whole. Although it is not openly stated, the reader learns that Larry reunites with his first wife whose journey is as long as Larry's. He arrives at a point where he can capture love and is ready to be a husband and a father. However, there is no sense of a clear conclusion as a moment of temporary arrival occurs in the novel several times. The number of Larry's incarnations can be unlimited and the reader can imagine the chapters that could potentially follow "Larry's Party, 1997."

As I stressed in the introduction to the chapter, Larry's life trajectory is also shaped by his job. At every stage of his life his job defines his social status. The very fact that Shields's male protagonist is a florist at the outset of the novel makes him a creation going against the masculine tradition. Larry becomes a florist in the early 1970s when such a profession would be considered highly "unmasculine" and "appropriate for homosexual men."³ Shields's novel plays with this notion: in Larry's class in college there are only two boys and one of them is gay. The representative of the previous generation

³According to a research conducted in 1973 and quoted by Gregory K. Lehne (239).

in the novel, Larry's father, has a similar opinion of the job: "he was thinking that flowers were for girls, not boys. Like maybe his only son was a homo and it was just starting to show" (8). However Larry is very successful in his job and then he develops his maze-hobby into a financially rewarding career.

Stu Weller is more characteristic of the previous generation who earned his living using his physical strength and the power of his hands. But while Jack Bowman's father in *Happenstance* is a postman, Stu is already a pseudo-artist producing unique hand-made custom coach buses. There is another trick played by the author on the reader. It is Larry's mother, a housewife entirely devoted to her household and family, who chooses a floral design course for her only son. Larry is successful in his job and quickly gets promoted, yet as his passion for mazes develops and his first marriage fails, he changes profession and becomes a maze designer. Married to his educated feminist wife, he also earns a degree and sets up his own company. It gives him financial stability and recognition, and surprisingly finally fulfils his father's expectations of him. Larry, who initially fails his father's strict world-view and is always aware of it, finally impresses his father by his achievements and financial success:

His father ... would have been bug-eyed to see his only son zooted up in a penguin suit ... – his son, the high roller. A regular toff. Off to a cocktail party, out to an exhibition of architectural drawings. How had this happened? Was this the life that Larry Weller signed up for – Larry, son of the late Stu Weller, master upholsterer for a Winnipeg bus factory? (165)

Larry's life trajectory and his representation as a man initially falls short of his father's generation expectations. However, the end-result, his financial position, his ability to take care of family and his professional acclaim, are in accordance with the old goals, even if just achieved by more modern means.

There is one more aspect of Larry's construction that I would like to describe briefly. I have already introduced elements of his relationship with his father but it is also important to stress his changing perception of his own son. Larry never seems to be sufficiently prepared and ready for the role of a father. He loves his child but he is not able to build any bond with Ryan. While he is married to Beth, he reminisces about how he used to take little Ryan by the hand and walk along his garden maze. He wonders "that such innocence ever existed. And he can't imagine why he hadn't felt himself the happiest man in the world" (148). Larry is at that point in the situation which seems to be the goal of a man's life. Yet, it all happens too early for Larry and he is not able to acknowledge and appreciate his role as a husband and father. After the divorce Larry very rarely sees his son who sometimes comes to visit him in Chicago and the situation is always awkward. Larry knows the script: he is the father who misses his son and is exhilarated to see him. However, it is another role that he needs to take on. "Every day during the visits Larry pumps up his fatherly love afresh, creates it artificially by stirring love's reasons into the dialogue and dust of his head – yes, I love this kid; of course I love him, what kind of a parent fails to love his child?" (193). Larry questions his imperfect love for his only child and is petrified with his own failure to accept the child unconditionally. There are moments when "a bright flare of authentic love bursts through and becomes for a moment or two and unstinting flow: the real

thing” (193), but they are short and he keeps losing them. Larry’s entire journey can be summed up as looking for “the real thing.” He keeps finding and losing track of what he strives for and what he wants to achieve. Larry also feels guilty for his son’s failures, which shows a new generational issue as before only mothers would be blamed for their children’s shortcomings. So he participates in guilt. When Ryan is born Larry understands what being a father means: “that savage desire to protect. To watch out for danger” (195). However, living far away from his family, Larry fails as a father. He does not know his son’s victories and worries and is not there to protect him. There is no real connection between father and son and their meetings are superficial. Both of them play their roles but they very seldom are father and son.

The moment of Larry’s arrival at self-understanding and symbolic reconciliation between Larry and his first wife Dorrie takes place during the titular party. The gathering also provides the occasion to collect together ideas about masculinity in the twenty-first century. Persistent questions are asked and there follows a range of inconclusive answers to which there is no comment from Larry. The crucial question of “What’s it like being a man these days?” is asked. A number of answers from men follow, such as: “We are no longer providers and guardians”, “And we don’t belong to lodges any more. That used to be a part of the male support system”, “A man these days is no more than an infrastructure for a penis and a set of testicles”, “Today, and I think you’ll agree, a man’s position has become entirely reactive. We have to take our signals from women or we’re out of the game”, “Being a man in 1997 means walking on eggshells” (318-320). Beth sums the discussion up by saying: “both men and women – ought to cherish this period of confusion. Our

present period of discomfiture – well, it’s a great and ecstatic gift. We’ve had 5000 centuries of perfect phallic clarity. Everyone knew the script. Men buttoned themselves into their power costumes” (321). This collection of loose ideas coherently supports the representation of different generations of masculinities throughout Shields’s oeuvre. The old model of masculinity, represented by the protagonists fathers’ generation, shows quite a clear script they follow. They head and support their family, usually perform physical work and their wives stay at home and raise children. Such a traditional model clashes with all the dilemmas Shields’s male protagonists struggle with. As feminism changes the traditional family structure and gender division, confused men often react against women’s needs and demands. They are lost, but then such a moment of confusion opens a whole new range of possibilities. Larry is a prime example of a male construct who takes all the confusion in his stride. He is allowed on a journey to self-discovery escaping any established pattern in the long run. All of Shields’s male protagonists are new types of men trying to break free from social confinements in different ways; however Larry is a fully self-conscious construct deliberately following and then denying certain roles. He is allowed most; the narrator gives him all the freedom to pick and choose what will constitute his next chapter.

At the end of the novel Larry is reunited with Dorrie. He realises:

They are, in this alternate version of reality, partners in a long marriage, survivors of old quarrels long since mended. The journey they appear to have taken separately has really been made together. After all, after all. So this is what has happened. Their parents are dead, the years have flown, and they

themselves are parents of a beloved son who is in difficulty.

(328)

So it is not only Larry who needs to undertake a journey in order to learn how to be a man, a husband and a father. Dorrie also learns her role. They both grow up and mature. The emphasis of the novel is on the masculine journey, but all of the characters change in the course of the novel. Larry is a man throughout the novel, yet uncomfortable with the different roles that he needs to take and thus he rejects them and moves on. This postmodern character is self-conscious of his life as a performance and different stage costumes that he puts on. Paradoxically, he goes back to the starting point but after twenty years feeling ready for a traditional role as a husband and a father as is not uncommon with Shields, the reader is left with an open ending. While it seems that the story is brought to a conclusion, we read the exchange between the two ex-spouses:

“Tell me Larry – do you still want to be lost?”

“No, not any more. I want – “

“What?”

“To get myself...found.” *This is not quite true, but what’s true he doesn’t yet trust.* (336, emphasis added)

Larry keeps to himself the realisation that his journey is not over and he will never be found. Masculinity cannot be captured, defined and adjusted to. It is an individual journey of each man that lasts throughout his lifetime, the novel seems to conclude.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Unless society changes ... Carol Shields's final ideas on gender inequality and the power of men

The last chapter of this thesis deals with Shields's ultimate novel which shows the author's return to second-wave feminism, her disillusionment with the superficiality of feminist achievements and a very schematic treatment of her male protagonists. *Unless* sums up Shields's ideas on life, death, suffering and the underprivileged position of women. As with her first two novels the narrative is written from a first-person female perspective and, as a result, the story is filtered through very subjective female narration. The trauma Reta (the narrator) is going through – which is connected with the estrangement of her oldest daughter – provides the starting point for reflections about women's suffering and their inability to fully participate in the distribution of power. The novel focuses on women but Shields creates important male characters that act as a backdrop for her female protagonists. In an attempt to highlight the subjugation of women, the three most prominent male characters appear very schematic and rather predictable. They are not as complex and multi-dimensional as other masculine constructs in her books. The novel does not dwell on the mystery of men, as *Larry's Party* does, but rather it shows them as a common enemy of women. They follow simple patterns that are easily contrasted with female experience of social injustice. Even though most of male characters in the book feel powerless as faced with social arrangements, the very same social arrangements hand over power to them as a group. Shields

does not accuse or blame men; rather, she highlights the way in which even the contemporary social structure allows only them to enjoy their unquestioned position of the “universal” while a woman still lives as the “other.”

In *Unless*, female characters are multi-layered and contemplative constructs while men do not lend themselves to a complex structural analysis. There are three clearly defined types of them: Tom, the narrator’s husband, is the example of a man ashamed and intimidated by his power over women who withdraws from the gender struggle and in so doing supports the status quo; Arthur Springer, the most malleable of Shields’s creations, acts as an example of men who consciously oppress and subjugate women; and Ben Abbott, a young student, who does not realise his masculine omnipotence yet but the narrator implies that by his ignorance he already participates in the unequal distribution of power. Men do not understand the “feminine mystique” which might have changed its name but throughout the decades is still prominent. The leitmotif of the book is Reta’s confession about her lifelong partner:

Because Tom is a man, because I love him dearly, I haven’t told him what I believe: that the world is split in two, between those who are handed power at birth ... and those like ... me, like all of us who fall into the uncoded otherness in which the power to assert ourselves and claim our lives has been displaced by a compulsion to shut down our bodies and seal our mouths and be as nothing against the fireworks and streaking stars and blinding light of the Big Bang. (Shields, *Unless* 270)

Even at the beginning of the twenty-first century men take life and their right to develop for granted while women still have to struggle for the right to express

themselves and assert their right to a meaningful existence. The novel tells a story of ordinary lives which have not changed that much over generations, despite small victories on the gender battlefield.

Bethany Guenther in her essay entitled “Carol Shields and Simone de Beauvoir: Immanence, Transcendence, and Women’s Work in *A Fairly Conventional Woman*, *The Stone Diaries*, and *Unless*” quotes de Beauvoir:

The situation of woman is that she ... finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. They propose to stabilise her as object and doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and for ever transcended by another ego (*conscience*) which is essential and sovereign. The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego) – who always regards the self as the essential – and the compulsion of a situation in which she is the inessential.

(Beauvoir, 29)

Men’s work allows them “an expansion of existence” while women’s daily lives force them into “immanence.” Immanence is the domestic, the reproduction, the natural everyday existence of an Everywoman. Guenther shows how Shields allows her female characters to access transcendence by means of their creative work. They are writers and artists and in that way enlarge their existence. However, the emphases of my project are male characters created by Shields. They are guaranteed transcendence and, following from Beauvoir, “[e]very subject plays his part as such specifically through exploits or projects that serve as a mode of transcendence; he achieves

liberty only through a continual reaching out towards other liberties” (28). However, in the case of *Unless*, the reaching out towards male liberties is not as visible as the fact that men do not have to do anything in order to doom women into immanence. The way society is constructed gives them the unlimited right to enjoy access to transcendence while women need to find alternative ways to reach out towards the liberation from immanence. Men in *Unless* do not reach out and do not develop. They regress in their assumption of power and support the social order by accepting it, whether consciously or passively.

Shields’s novels show how feminism has changed the lives of individual women and men, but, as Imelda Whelehan writes, “[feminism] had not succeeded in disturbing the foundations of Western democracy which resolutely centred upon the ‘public’ man and the ‘private’ woman” (12). *Unless* sums up all the ideas and failed expectations of feminism. As Whelehan states, “all feminist positions are founded upon the belief that women suffer from systematic social injustices because of their sex” (25) and one of the main problems of second-wave feminism was defining “the oppressor” and the source of oppression of women. *Unless* presents men as harmful mainly because of their passivity and ignorance (with the exception of Arthur Springer who openly bullies Reta). The main oppressor, as also suggested in other Shields’s novels like *The Stone Diaries*, is the social system. Any feminist success must depend on changing men’s lives outside the domestic domain. Reta begins one of the chapters saying:

I need to speak further about this problem of women, how they are dismissed and excluded from the most primary of entitlements.

But we've come so far; that's the thinking. So far compared with fifty or a hundred years ago. Well, no, we've arrived at the new millennium and we haven't "arrived" at all. We've been sent over to the side pocket of the snooker table and made to disappear. No one is so blind as not to recognise the power of the strong over the weak and, following that, the likelihood of defeat. (Shields, *Unless* 99, author's emphasis)

Women are made to believe that they have achieved so much while in fact they have not achieved a status equal with men. The disillusioned narrator writes desperate letters to different editors and authors pointing out how blatantly they exclude women from greatness. She never mails the letters as she does not believe they will be understood or make any difference to all-powerful men. It is only a way of verbalising her frustration. In them she points out how important researchers quote only male findings, how on the lists of great writers there are only men's names, and how female disfigurement resulting from mastectomy is treated unquestionably with disgust by men. Men hold power and only occasionally give women a glimpse of it when it serves their purposes. In this light it is challenging to analyse Shields's construction of men in *Unless*. The female narrator filters the story through her eyes; she sees men's weaknesses and their faults, and yet feels their power over women and grieves over the situation.

Tom Winters is not a prominent character in the novel. He is a good partner for Reta, a good father of three daughters and a respectable doctor for his community. In his case the reader observes a certain form of withdrawal from the structure of male power. He works professionally and in his spare time continues with his research on trilobites, creatures extinct for 250 million years. The work he does on them relies on speculation as soft parts of the creatures have not been preserved. So, on the one hand, his research is very factual, but on the other it requires guesswork and speculation just like a biographer's work, which Shields deals with in some of her novels, like *Small Ceremonies*, *Swann* and *The Stone Diaries*. Here the mock-biographer is Tom, but he is not given his own voice in the narrative and he is not allowed to talk about his problems and hopes connected with the project. How meaningful is it to his story? Reta observes:

No one has ever seen a trilobite, since they exist only in the fossil record, but the sections of its bony thorax recorded in stone were so perfectly made that, when threatened, these creatures were able to curl up, each segment nesting into the next and protecting the soft animal underbodies. This act is called enrolment, a rather common behaviour for arthropods, and it seems to me that this is what Tom has been doing these past weeks. I clean my house and he "enrols" into a silence that carries him further away from me. (64)

Tom withdraws from the world. Reta and Tom's daughter chooses to live in a shelter and spend all days begging in the streets of Toronto with a sign "GOODNESS" on her neck. Reta comes to the conclusion that it is Norah's

realisation of the position of women and their inability to participate fully and equally in the world that drives her to the street. Tom wants to find a medical explanation, a trauma that would justify her erratic behaviour. But in so doing he withdraws. There is no common language between the partners to talk about their daughter's ailment. In the end both of them are right: Norah suffers from a shock after she witnesses a Muslim woman's self-immolation and desperately attempts to save the nameless martyr, which comes as a final blow after her gradual realisation that in the world's hierarchy women do not have their rightful voice.

Reta does not say a lot about her life partner. They meet in the seventies, make love and stay together. They never get married. Tom bears some resemblance to Shields's other male protagonist Watson Forrest from *The Box Garden*. Both of them are rebels against the system in their youth and both pay a lot of attention to clothes as signifiers of their ideas and political position. While Watson finally escapes family life and ultimately any social life as such, Tom establishes a family. Reta tells us:

When he was a student he was in rebellion against the established order, way over to the edge of the left. He didn't attend his own university graduation, because the ceremony involved wearing academic dress. For ten years the only trousers he wore were jeans. He doesn't own a necktie and doesn't intend to, not ever – the usual liberal tokens. His instincts are bourgeois, but he fights his instincts. That is, he lives the life of a married man but balks at the idea of a marriage ceremony. (72)

Tom is presented a former young rebel who partially comes to terms with the necessity of fitting established gender patterns. However, he is shown to stress his youthful ideas by signifiers of his protest against the order in which he lives. The fact that he does not own a necktie and wears only jeans resembles Watson's masquerade with his headband. Watson performs an alternative masculinity by defying certain patterns but falling into a trap by following self-imposed ones. Tom is more moderate; however, the text signals he is also at a loss to determine whether he fits the established order or not. He is the most compassionate of Shields's characters. She creates a protagonist who "enrols" because he is not able to voice his concerns. He suffers because of the "ubiquity of loneliness" (72), because of his daughter's estrangement, because involuntarily he is a part of the oppressive system. He is one of the men described by Marilyn French in the interview quoted in the Introduction to the thesis:

Even men who don't feel any special hatred for women, who maybe like women, who love them and who don't go out of their way to harm women, get caught up in it because the systems are in place to make men superior to women and those systems systematically discriminate against or exploit men.

(Murray, bbc.co.uk)

And even though from the earlier quotation in which Reta expresses her concern that Tom does not know about the way "the world is split in two" the author suggests that men like Tom subconsciously know it. He is a character who understands social structures and, feeling helpless about the system he almost withdraws from existence and, in the narrator's words, "he thinks about

trilobites all the time. While he's checking out a prostate gland or writing a prescription for asthma drugs, a piece of his mind holds steady to the idea of "500 million years ago" (Shields, *Unless* 72). 500 million years ago there was no power structure, no social order and no confusing patterns to follow; life's controlling idea was adaptation and survival.

Both of the protagonists, Reta and Tom, find the idea of trilobites fascinating and alluring. Reta compares her needs to adapt with the ability of trilobites:

No one knows a thing about the trilobite brain or even how they reproduced sexually. All the beautiful soft-tissue evidence has rotted away, leaving only the calcium shell. ... But it is known that most trilobites possessed eyes, except for one species which is blind. In this case the blindness is thought to have been a step forward in evolution, since these eyeless creatures lived in the mud at the bottom of a deep body of water. ... The blind trilobites were lightened of their biological load, their marvellous ophthalmic radar, and they thrived in the darkness. When I think of this uncanny adaptation, I wonder why I can't adapt too. All I wanted was for Norah to be happy; all I wanted was everything. Instead I've come to rest on the lake bottom, stuck there in the thick mud, squirming, and longing to have my eyes taken away. (112)

Reta and Tom long for the simplicity of the natural order. Social order is presented as harmful and unjust for men and women as it goes against natural predispositions. The female narrator tells her story from the underprivileged

female position and describes the trauma of women of different generations (Danielle Westerman, Lois, herself, her friends, her daughters) who cannot escape the fact that “they are doomed to miniaturism” because they are women. Reta sees her husband as an involuntary oppressor who, upon realising his destructive role as a man and his inability to escape the system, almost completely withdraws from participating in the distribution of power and muses instead on the order lost millions of years ago. Paradoxically, his stance only supports the system and does not change anything.

The narrator points out the differences between men like Tom and men “who make life out of dislocation” (231). Reta believes that her partner “burrows into the idea of home.” The narrator sees him as a man perfectly content with his role as a partner, father and a professional. According to her, he is perfectly comfortable with his masculinity and does not need any extra external signifiers of his position as a man. Reta notices:

We are two people in a snapshot, but with a little cropping we could each exist on our own. But that’s not what we want. Hold the frame still, contain us, the two of us together, that’s what we ask for. This is all it takes to keep the world from exploding. There’s that tan jacket of his, a windbreaker with its zipper and smooth microfibres, nothing to call attention to itself, the most generic of garments. On the other hand, there are men, the composed, noisy men from Bay Street, who choose bright colours, teal or tangerine, for weekend wear, or else the skins of animals, goats, sheep, and so forth. They are men spangled with epaulettes, toggles, tabs, and insignias, the breezy rapists from

the Nautica ads, cool and criminal in their poplins, shellacked with light, but they know they are in costume, that they've made an effort that other men, men like Tom, aren't forced to make.

(231-232)

The narrator clearly talks here about the idea of masculinity as performance and clothes and fashion are described as its signifiers. However, she claims that Tom is a man who does not need any external visible markers in order to display his masculinity. Thus she implies that he is confident in his being a man, this kind of self-confidence is akin to the one Larry Weller arrives at a certain point in *Larry's Party*. As such, he can be a woman's friend and does not seek to display his power over her. The case is different with the colourful and loud men "from Bay Street." They need to display and assert their masculine power. The narrator throughout her story divides men into groups and categorises them. Tom is the "good one" who does not go out of his way to harm women and display his privileged position in the social order; however, "because [he] is a man" he will never understand fully women's suffering. And there are the "bad men" ready to oppress women, overpower them and display their power by all means.

The element of clothes as signifiers of performance touched upon by Reta in the above passage is quite stereotypical. Glamorous, fashionable and handsome men are seen as the ones whose masculinities are lacking their gender essence and they have to make up for it by means of an outside show. Tim Edwards analyses masculinity as performance and the role of fashion in this phenomenon, and comes to the conclusion that "fashion has much to do with matters of performance, often demonstrating the artifice and contingency

as well as the fluidity of appearances and identities that are in turn strongly related to questions of race, sexuality and indeed gender” (113). He notices, however, that fashionable and dressy men are seen as,

somehow not fitting in, particularly in terms of rumbling any wider belief in masculinity as a form of profoundly ‘un-self-conscious being-ness’ or in undermining the notion that ‘real’ men just throw things on or just *are* men. ... The problem here, however, is that one can equally argue that such displays of the artifice and performance of masculinity precisely reinforce the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ masculinity or, more specifically, between acting or *doing* masculine and *being* masculine. (113)

It is precisely the same distinction that the narrator of *Unless* makes. She classifies men like Tom as the real ones and fashionable men as those who need to perform their masculinity. Tom is a man, while they only try to be men. It is an arguable claim to make and as I pointed out earlier, all the masculine characters in the novel are very schematic. They are either innocent or outright evil. It needs to be reminded at this point that Shields often deals with the relationship of clothes and masculinity. Not only do they signify the characters’ changing social status but they are also elements of masculinity as performance, as for example Tom Avery’s dilemma about “being a guy” or Larry Weller’s problem with “being dressed” by women in his life.

In complete opposition to Tom stands the nearly grotesque representation of Reta’s new editor, Arthur Springer. Shields ascribes all the negative and destructive characteristics to this construct. He becomes the

embodiment of a male enemy, who, because of his ignorance and assertion of unquestioned male power, oppresses and traps women. While Tom's character embodies all the worries of modern masculinities, but is not able to act outside of the prescribed social conventions and through his passivity supports the system, Springer is evil incarnate. He relishes his power as a man and an editor. He bullies Reta into sending him the draft of her novel, disturbs her Christmas holidays and wants her to change the emphasis of her new book. He never lets her finish her sentence, always interrupts, always leads the conversation that is convenient for him. He tries to silence the female author, attempting to make her take a pseudonym that would imply a male writer and redraft her book in such a way that the unlikeable male character Roman becomes the moral centre of it.

Reta, while writing her novel, goes through a phase of analysing the position of women in today's world and comes to the universal conclusion that men limit women, even if only by their ignorance and inability to understand the world's structure. The male character of her novel is very self-centred and takes for granted that his fiancée Alicia must adapt. Reta decides that Alicia must not marry Roman as it will bring about her annihilation as an independent being. In order to "secure her own survival" (Shields, *Unless* 256) she needs to break the engagement. Springer sees Roman as the moral centre of the novel and his quest for self-discovery as the canvas of the book. If the book is to be a "gilt-edged" type it needs to be about a man. Springer confesses: "I am talking about Roman being the moral centre of this book, and Alicia, for all her charms, is not capable of that role, surely you can see that. She writes fashion articles. She talks to her cat. She does yoga. She makes rice casseroles" (285). The

narrator tries to explain that it is “because she is a woman” but Springer, talking from the privileged position of power, does not accept it. Paradoxically, Reta herself notices how she gave Roman a complex vocation and an interesting family history while making Alicia a fashion writer. Upon realising that she herself has trivialised her heroine, she desperately attempts to give more prominence to Alicia’s job: “I pretend, when she writes about gloves or handbags or shoes, that she is looking at the history or the *philosophie* of these objects” (268). She pretends and contemplates “sending” Alicia to do a doctorate, but knows that it is impossible unless there is a trauma, unless something happens that would overturn her heroine’s life. Contemplating Alicia, Reta really contemplates women’s position in today’s world and concludes that society needs shock therapy if women are really to be given their own voice and the right to choose for themselves. And there is Springer who wants to annihilate Alicia as the moral centre of the novel. There is a double power struggle: that in Reta’s novel and that between her as the female author and her male editor. Reta as a woman is guilty of passing all the weaknesses onto her heroine. If the author finds power that she can transfer onto Alicia, there might be a shift in the book’s balance.

Another accusation of male power is made by the fact that Reta’s first book, all along classified as light fiction, all of a sudden, gets elevated to the level of “brilliant tour de force” when reviewed by a male dean of humanities. Reta worries, “The name [of the reviewer] Dr. Charles Casey will be printed in the same size type as the name Reta Winters, but I am trying not to think what that means” (318). Once again, a woman is doomed to miniaturism and a masculine voice has a power to decide how her work will be perceived and

understood in the literary world. The name of the reviewer will be as important as the name of the author.

The last male character to whom the novel gives some prominence is Ben Abbot – a young student and an ex-boyfriend of Reta’s estranged daughter Norah. He is innocent and at a loss to understand what has happened with his girlfriend. But it is precisely this ignorance and lack of understanding of women’s universal suffering that makes him already guilty as a man. He sees Norah’s gradual withdrawal and is not able to help her. Norah suffers because of her love for the world and because of the gradual realisation that as a woman the world would not love her back as much. She quits university after clashing with her Flaubert course teacher and co-students over *Madame Bovary*. As professor Hamilton relates the problem to Reta: “Norah saw Madame Bovary as a woman blandly idealized by Flaubert, and then reduced to a puff of romanticism, and capable of nothing else but kneading her own soft heart. Your daughter’s view ... was that Madame Bovary was forced to surrender her place as the moral centre of the novel. Others, needless to say, disagreed” (217). Needless to say, Norah experienced the isolation and subjugation of women. Her boyfriend, unable to understand her ailment, becomes a natural enemy to her. Reta analyses:

He’s young and he’s tasted disappointment; he has a girlfriend whom he may or may not love, and she has left him to live on the street. They’ve invested more than a year of feeling in each other – of absorption, of fantasy. This is stuff for crabbed old age, not for a young man with a young man’s yearning for satisfaction and a belief that he’ll get what he deserves. He’s

approached love with a young man's wonder and gratitude, only to find its abrupt withdrawal. (201)

Ben, in a way, experiences a similar disappointment to that of women who realise their powerlessness. Both young men and women have dreams they hope will come true. Young women slowly realise how their ability to fulfil their fantasies is limited by their social position, but in the case of youth Shields unifies both genders. Ben experiences a similar disappointment to Norah. Reta wants to blame him for his lack of understanding and the inability to keep Norah safe, but then realises that his innocent vision of a happy relationship has been broken as well and his suffering is similar. Because he is a young man he will soon realise that he has much more power but at this stage he is presented as somebody almost equally at a loss as Norah. However, according to Reta, because he is a man he is also guilty of causing Norah to suffer. It is once again a straightforward generalisation present throughout the book. Men, no matter what their age, occupation and attitude towards women, are seen as the enemy. It is not plainly the fault of men but of the social system that discriminates one sex against the other and requires of men and women different patterns of adjustment.

A very simple pattern of male-female differences in ordering the world is exemplified by Tom and Reta's friends, Colin and Marietta Glass. Shields creates a traditional seemingly happy marriage and introduces an element of surprise: Marietta, an obedient wife, leaves her husband for another man. She explains that Colin, a physicist, was too absorbed in his work to be a real partner. Colin is shocked for he never suspected that there was anything wrong with their marriage; however, the occurrence does not bring about any change

in him. One evening Colin visits Reta and Tom and becomes vividly engaged in explaining the theory of relativity to Reta. He is totally engrossed in his speech, while Reta's mind wanders thinking about his personal situation and the way he treated his wife, how drily he used to talk to her, how he expected his little comforts from her. Colin's preoccupation with the global is contrasted with Reta's concern over personal relationships and what causes them to disintegrate. Finally, she attempts to bring the two topics together and understands that the theory will not bring either Norah or Marietta back, but nevertheless asks: "Would you say ... that the theory of relativity has reduced the weight of goodness and depravity in the world?" (Shields, *Unless* 22). Her question is abruptly rejected as being silly and womanish. The simple story once again highlights the different emotional spheres inhabited by men and women. Men deal with facts, science, cause and effect. Women seek warmth and understanding. Nevertheless, women facilitate men's road to greatness. They do the shopping, cook, raise children, wash and iron men's clothes. Even though Colin does not change his attitude, his wife comes back to him to continue with her servicing role. The pattern present in Shields's novels is repeated once again: after a woman is allowed a glimpse of passion and freedom, she is brought back to her dailiness and "stabilise[d] ... as object and doom[ed] ... to immanence" (Beauvoir 29).

The book talks about women and their disappointment. It is Shields's most open feminist statement and accusation. Unfortunately, the male protagonists here serve only as a background. Women are disappointed as they cannot find their voice and assert their position in today's world. Regardless of all the changes they are still primarily doomed to immanence. For the first time,

Shields also points towards the inequality among women as well. There is a black woman, Reta's friend, who sees the oppression on a larger scale because she is a woman and because she is black. There is the nameless Muslim woman who commits suicide by self-immolation in her silent, and yet powerful, protest against discrimination because of sex but also because of religion. In *Unless* there is a diversity of female experiences, even if only touched upon, however the analysis of men at the outset of the twenty-first century is much less complex. Men form a nearly homogenous block because of their power to hurt and oppress women. They are partially being justified because it is the social system that predestines them to greatness and transcendence, yet at the same time they are being strongly accused of not doing anything to change it. So from one perspective, once again women and men are united in their inability to act against the prescribed norms; from another, *Unless* much more openly expresses anger at the position of women and accuses men of accepting and enjoying the gift they do not deserve more than women do.

CONCLUSION

“Do you think her life would have been different if she’d been a man?”

“Are you kidding!”

Carol Shields

Carol Shields might well be criticised for creating a very narrow type of a male character. The reader of her novels finds very few marginal examples of alternative sexualities, race, social background or creed. The Shieldsean protagonist is white, heterosexual, middle-aged, and middle-class. He is the most privileged human being as emphasised and elaborated on in the Introduction. All other men and women are always relational to him; he is the everyman, “the norm.” In criticising Shields for choosing this overprivileged type to be her “leitprotagonist,” we have to praise her for studying him so carefully and tirelessly, and ultimately admitting that he will always escape her grasp. As the author herself admitted in an interview conducted after the publication of her most compelling study of men in *Larry's Party*: “I didn't come up with an answer [of what it is like to be a man in the last days of the twentieth century], although I may have come up with a few shady insights. I think a lot of men are feeling threatened. I think they're feeling disoriented, puzzled about what it means to be a man” (Wachtel 88). As this thesis has shown such tension and confusion within male characters is felt throughout Shields's oeuvre. Her male protagonists are always lost and confused as to which masculinity pattern to follow. However, they generally assume a superior position to women, and even if there is a period of doubt or loss, they ultimately find a comfortable pattern for themselves.

In Shields's work, "the business of being a guy" is an ongoing and conscious process because the characters constantly have to re-evaluate their priorities and beliefs. With each new situation they develop, change and readjust. Ultimately, they always move forward and conquer new planes for their existence. Alex Ramon concludes his study of Shields's fiction saying that "a character's customary sense of narrowness and limitation in their lives or personalities has the capacity to yield to a sense of plenitude and possibility" (179). It is also partly a conclusion of this thesis; however, this study has emphasised that while men seize "plenitude and possibility" and make it work to their advantage, women are only allowed a glance at their potential and then they have to take a step back and return to the realm of the domestic. At home they find some potential for creative expression, through cooking or gardening for example, but they are confined to a limited space while men can explore borderless territories.

By exploring such elements as the gradual change in the structure of Shields's novels and their increasingly frequent use of postmodern techniques and devices, the thesis has shown how the character construction becomes more complex and how it conveys contemporary worries connected with fluctuating masculinity and femininity standards. Starting with quite a straightforward and fairly simple scheme for the first two novels, Shields constructs rather predictable and uncomplicated male and female characters. Even so, after 1983 as her novels gain more narrators, different focalisers, embedded narratives and multi-layered plots, the protagonists cease to be easy to grasp and classify. They become more self-reflexive, as for example all the characters in *Swann*, and often narrated by an opposite-sex narrator whose

perspective is filtered through the lens of their gender, as in the case of *The Stone Diaries*, *Larry's Party* and *Unless*. The stories are delivered in the form of an increasingly complex puzzle that not only the reader, but also sometimes the narrator struggles to put together (as in *The Stone Diaries*). Male characters often escape the female storyteller's understanding of them, as it is already the case in *Happenstance* and *A Celibate Season*.

Female characters in Shields's novels are allowed an insight into their capabilities beyond the sphere traditionally assigned to them and they learn that they can succeed on a professional level. Even so, cultural and social arrangements force them back into the confined sphere of the domestic. This is openly the case in the *Happenstance* novels and *A Celibate Season*, but a similar problem is still signalled in *Swann* and *The Republic of Love*. Shields's heroines are also presented as more analytical and inquisitive, while their male counterparts are more impulsive and less anticipatory of the consequences of their actions. As a result, the haunting conclusion present in all of Shields's novels is that women always remain in their underprivileged position, while men benefit from every situation, even those that are potentially destructive. Female characters are torn between their desire to be independent and self-determining, and their almost purely biological need to be nurturers that is wives and mothers. Biological duty is also sanctioned and facilitated by social arrangements, which at the same time limit female character's access to the realm beyond the domestic. Shields also analyses a subsequent paradox in a female condition, which is the heroines' inability to frame their own satisfactory identity. They often feel incomplete without a partner and their own family, yet the thought of uniting with a man is inextricably connected

with a decision to surrender at least a part of their own identity. The novels do not come up with any satisfactory solution for female characters. They are either denied completion, or need to be relational to the male other.

The study has also emphasised how the fluctuating portrayal of male characters in the novels reflects the changes in the perception of men and masculinities between 1970s and 1990s. The three waves of sociological masculinity studies as described by Tim Edwards start with the 1970s emerging criticism of socially constructed masculinities and male-sex role models. In the 1980s' the emphasis shifts on the plurality of masculinities and power relations among them. Finally, 1990's witness a near deconstruction of "masculinity" and result in an emphasis being placed on the notions of performativity and performance. Shields's novels follow a parallel trajectory. The early ones deal with male sex-role models and the masculine characters either conform to the norms or deviate from the pattern. Paradoxically, in the first novel Shields introduces confusion of the female protagonist connected with her husband going against the prescribed masculine schemata. Martin employs a traditionally feminine task of weaving in his academic work and in doing so, he causes his wife's estrangement. Although Judith is a professional writer, and as such she already represents the new type of women fulfilling their potential outside the domestic, she is not able to accept the new masculinity which transcends the borders between masculine and feminine. Her husband is presented as more open-minded, uninhibited and forthcoming in the new social situation. In her second novel the author introduces another male character who finds it difficult either to conform or to openly rebel against the masculine model. Watson Forest from *The Box Garden* tries to follow certain patterns but

ultimately rejects them and almost religiously replaces with the trappings of counterculture. He tries to be a good student, later a young husband and a father, quickly to realize that he is not able to fulfill the obligations. In escaping from traditional roles, he conforms to other scripts. He becomes a hippie leader, a recluse and a Buddhist monk. Watson is an example of masculinity that needs to conform to a pattern, but already questions the frameworks offered by the previous generation and struggles to find a satisfactory replacement.

From 1983, Shields's male characters are already more complex and they openly question their old position in gendered society. They sense threats from the growing self-consciousness and self-reliance of women. They also experience the workings of power relations among men more clearly, just as indicated in Tim Edwards's second wave of masculinity studies. Jack Bowman from *Happenstance* is presented as a character who starts feeling insecure in every sphere of his life. His wife gains new life as an artist and thus discovers her new capacities, which necessitates Jack's redefinition of his position within the home. In the professional sphere a challenge is posed by his female colleague, and finally Jack realizes and he is envious of a more privileged position of other men, like his sporty and financially successful neighbour Larry Carpenter.

From 1992, along with the lines of development of the third wave of masculinity theories, Shields's novels offer a further complication of narration and character construction. Masculine characters start unabashedly questioning what it means to be a "guy," a problem directly addressed in *The Republic of Love*. Tom Avery asks what a man should look, be and behave like in order not

only to be perceived but also to feel like a “real man.” The emphasis is placed on performance and its attributes. The novel presents different models of masculinity and directly plays with the notion of the social “norm.” Finally, in 1997 Shields publishes *Larry’s Party*, a novel that openly dissects the condition of a North American everyman at the end of the twentieth century. The character of Larry Weller continues and develops all the worries and doubts signaled by the male protagonist of *The Republic of Love*. Larry is conscious of constant social demands placed upon masculinity and actively treads his path to fulfillment as a man. He takes on different roles and in every chapter tries out different concepts of performance: he is a young suburban husband in Canada, a middle-aged husband of a younger scholarly wife in the United States, and finally an ageing single man looking back at his life. From the outset of the novel, he gradually achieves professional success and his changing material status entails elevating of his social status. All these changes are clearly marked by external signifiers, such as his new hairstyles and the mode of dressing. Both characters, Tom and Larry, exemplify Judith Butler’s 1990 idea of gender as a “becoming activity” (Butler 152) and in doing so reflect the notions prominent in gender discussion at the time of the conception of the novels.

While *The Stone Diaries* brilliantly deals with the idea of telling stories and the infinite possibility of their transformation and modification, it also gestures towards the idea of masculinity deconstruction. Manipulated stories feature male characters who constantly reinvent themselves, or are reinvented by the narrator. They swap their masculinity-types just as easily as they change professions and addresses. In *The Stone Diaries* Shields destabilizes any

reliable versions of the characters and their stories. Only in her last novel does Shields return to fairly uncomplicated male characters, representing both openly “bad men” and unconsciously “bad men.” In *Unless* men exert their power over women either openly, by silencing them, or covertly by accepting the unfair social system oppressive to women. Here male characters serve as mere shadows for the main problem, which is the enormous disillusionment with gender structure expressed by a grief-stricken female narrator of the novel.

The thesis, by stressing elements of performance in male character construction, has also highlighted the importance of clothes and physical appearance as necessary elements of putting on a gender show. Different stages in the characters' development, most often connected with their upward movement on the social ladder, are usually marked by different styles of clothing and new accessories that they use. Clothes also symbolise passivity and entanglement when they are chosen and imposed by another character in the story. Although the importance of clothes is most clearly visible in *Larry's Party*, from the very first novel Shields pays attention to them. They always perform a symbolic role, starting with the first novel and the carefully stylised image of Furlong Erberhardt on the cover of his book. Here clothes along with his posture and the setting are supposed to make him into a Canadian iconic figure. Watson Forrest's hippie headband implies his inability to free himself from social constraints, whether mainstream or countercultural. Both spouses in *Happenstance* novels buy new clothes, a fact that underlines their new state of mind, and both garments significantly disappear or get damaged. Sarah Maloney in *Swann* marks her change from a young student to a successful

lecturer by swapping sweaters and jeans for luxurious shoes and expensive outfits, while Jimroy, upon losing his luggage on his way to the USA, buys himself cheap but colourful garments, which make him happy. Even in her last novel, Shields stresses what an important role casual clothes play for the established doctor and a family man. By wearing jeans and refusing to wear a necktie, Tom claims to defy the establishment to which otherwise he adheres. His silent rebellion coincides with his role of a passive oppressor of women; he disagrees with the injustice but mutely accepts his privileges. Finally, clothes in Shields's novels are also signifiers of gender and can become an element of taboo, especially when clothes characteristic of one sex are worn by the other, as in the case of Larry putting on his wife's robe. By no means is this thesis exhaustive on the subject of clothes. However, it highlights their importance for the male characters' construction and identifies a potential productive area for future analysis.

This study has also shown how the novels convey ideas and changes connected with second-wave feminism and how the author reacts to the development of the contemporary social situation. Second-wave feminism starts as a result of women's rebellion against being "the happy housewife heroine[s]" (Friedan 30). They realise there is life beyond their family and household duties, and they start fighting for new social structure that would let them develop professionally. Women discovering their capacities outside the realm of the domestic find new ways of expression and arrive at a new self-understanding. Shields's books gradually show such a trajectory. Her first two novels already have heroines who work professionally and they do not deal with the tension caused by women discovering their new capacity. However,

her subsequent *Happenstance* novels brilliantly present a moment of family transformation. Brenda Bowman is a natural second-wave feminist; without realising it she actively takes part in the struggle to allow women their say outside the domestic and to be free to express themselves creatively. Upon discovering her potential as an artist for the first time she ventures out of the house in her professional capacity. Consequently, her husband needs to take care of the children and the house for the first time, so the roles get symbolically swapped. A short trip becomes a milestone in the female protagonist's self-perception and, as a result, the male character is at a loss to understand the new self-confidence and sexual energy of his wife. Yet, Shields does not allow her characters any greater revolution in their household. Brenda returns to her old responsibilities and Jack achieves professional success. However, the implication is that the balance has been shifted, even if just a notch. A very similar story is featured in *A Celibate Season*, but even though here the story happens on a larger scale and spans over a much longer time, the family also ultimately returns to their initial status quo.

A different take on feminism is presented in *Swann*. The novel features two independent female characters: Sarah Maloney is a successful scholar and Rose Hindmarch is a working professional identified by her own name (as opposed to other women in her community who are known by their husbands' names). They both project images of successful women who achieved success beyond the realm of the domestic, but the novel suggests that they are both unfulfilled. *Swann* stresses tension between women's need to be independent and their need to nurture, and male characters' confusion as to how to treat such women. They are either scared of them (Jimroy) or violent towards them

(Angus Swann, Cruzzi); they either worship them or patronise them. The unsolvable dilemma between separation and connection is also present in *The Republic of Love* where the female protagonist wants to keep her own independent identity but paradoxically is not able to feel complete on her own.

Shields's female protagonists become more conscious of their capabilities and venture into the outside world. They are increasingly independent and find fulfillment in their professional jobs and artistic enterprise. Their male partners observe and learn to understand the new situation. Masculine characters are forced to adapt, which leads to their confusion and a sense of loss when their patriarchal privileges are being partially limited. Nevertheless, the conclusion of Shields's novels is always the same: men retain their advantaged position over women who return to the realm of the domestic and the position of immanence. The tension thus grows as women are more conscious of their capacities and fully understand the injustice of their situation. However, Shields's novels do not blame individual male characters for oppressing women. Following such feminists as bell hooks and Marilyn French, they seem to blame the system and they express compassion for men who are also oppressed. Men hold power collectively while individual men feel powerless. The system forces them into certain roles to which they must adapt. Following such patterns is a struggle for men who must constantly act and perform roles imposed on them by social conventions. Individual men feel powerless and guilty, even though collectively they retain the position of strength and control. Shields's novels brilliantly portray the situation in which men and women are united in their inability to act outside of the prescribed roles and they are all victims of social oppression.

Finally, the thesis has stressed the shaping force women have on male characters. First of all, they are often narrators or focalisers of the texts and as such they are the makers, or at least the filtering perspective, of men's stories. The first-person female narrator of *Duet* and *Unless* presents male characters entirely as seen and understood by women. Similarly, third-person female narrators of *The Stone Diaries* and *Larry's Party* present masculine characters as seen through their prism and, in the case of the former novel, directly point to the constant fabrication of male characteristics by female tellers of the story in order to fulfill their narrative needs. Female characters in the novels are partners, wives, friends and acquaintances of men. They are an inseparable element of each masculine creation, as is evident in the most notorious example, *Larry's Party*, with Larry's constant immersing in the "female tide" and reading for direction from its currents (Shields, *Larry's* 140).

This study also emphasises the influence of male characters' mothers on their sons. Most of Shields's male protagonists are placed within a family setting with a nurturing mother at the centre. The close relationship with a mother reflects upon the character's adult life. Shields's mothers feel constantly responsible for their sons and forever guilty for their failures, while male characters find it easy to blame their mothers and upbringing for their masculine problems. Such is the case in *The Stone Diaries*, where Barker Flett and Harold Hoad are the characters whose failures are comically projected onto their mothers. Tom Avery in *The Republic of Love* has twenty-eight mothers in total and no father to match their impact. As a result, the novel half-mockingly suggests that he is unable to build a successful relationship with a woman as his demands are too high, but also because being pampered by so many

mothers encoded into Tom too much trust in women's benevolence. Larry's mother feels constantly guilty for her son's personal failures, and even Tom in *Unless* blames his mother for instilling fears in him by being a neglectful housewife. Such treatment of mother-son relationships and the emphasis on mothers' guilt is a comment on the global situation that places the burden of raising children on mothers with fathers being distant from the process.

The underlying purpose of this thesis is to show how Shields's novels define, construct and present masculine gender and how the idea of plural masculinities develops and fluctuates throughout her oeuvre. In a way, the novels echo and support Anthony Rotundo's claim that "manliness is a human invention. Starting with a handful of biological differences, people in all places and times have invented elaborate stories about what it means to be a male and female. In other words, each culture constructs its own version of what men and women are – and ought to be" (1). Every story discussed in this study shows the author's great skill and deep engagement in revealing the workings of twentieth-century Northern American culture shaping a definition of what a man and what a woman is. The novels uncover the mechanisms behind such artificial and arbitrary constructions often blindly accepted as the only true norm. And as the balance of society changes, so do the demands towards men and women. As a result, definitions of masculinity and femininity fluctuate. Thus, throughout the thesis the question posed in the title, "When does it stop? Does it ever stop?" (*Larry's* 331) is being tirelessly answered in every single chapter, since none of the male characters concludes his journey. Simply, it just never stops. Rather, as this study has shown, "masculinity" in Shields's fiction is presented as a construct that is subject to constant change and renegotiation.

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