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# DEMETER AND PERSEPHONE: THE MOTHER - DAUGHTER BOND IN TO THE LIGHTHOUSE, THE BELL JAR AND SURFACING

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The Demeter/Persephone myth is representative of story which has been often forgotten by our culture: that of the bond between mother and daughter and the significance of this as an empowering narrative for groups whose voices are not often heard, one which represents possibility of renewal and the search of identity for women. It is a myth which can be placed as a counterpoint to that of Oedipus, considered by Western culture as the universal passage for the individual from childhood into adult life, of fulfillment of identity.

After reviewing Freud and Lacan's theories of psychoanalysis, and also considering several studies which contrasted as well as complemented these theories, such as those of Melanie Klein, Nancy Chodorow, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Teresa de Lauretis, among others, Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse, Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar, and Margaret Atwood's Surfacing were examined. The narratives mentioned reenact the Demeter/Persephone myth in the relation of the protagonists with the women who played significant roles in their trajectories, and bring to light not only the importance of the bond between mother and daughter for the development of female identity, but also the multiplicity of different roles and potentials which are open to women outside the phallocentric system of language and representation. These novels can be seen as re-readings of the myth mentioned above, and indicate new forms of seeing women and their roles in

society, and different ways by which women are portrayed in narratives. Thus, narrative, subjectivity and ideology are placed together to form the basis of this work.

#### RESUMO

O mito de Deméter e Perséfone representa uma história que com frequência é esquecida pela cultura dominante: aquela que se refere à ligação entre mãe e filha e ao significado desta ligação em narrativas que podem dar validação a grupos cujas vozes não são ouvidas e que oferecem possibilidades de renovação para a definição identitária de mulheres. É um mito que se coloca como contraponto ao mito de Édipo, considerado pela cultura ocidental a passagem universal dos indivíduos da infância para a vida adulta, da realização de identidade.

Após a revisão das teorias psicanalíticas de Freud e Lacan, além da revisão de vários estudos que contrastavam ou complementavam estas, tais como os de Melanie Klein, Nancy Chodorow, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous e Teresa de Lauretis, entre outros, os romances To the Lighthouse, de Virginia Woolf, The Bell Jar, de Sylvia Plath, e Surfacing, de Margaret Atwood, foram analisados. As narrativas destas obras re-encenam o mito de Deméter e Perséfone na relação das protagonistas com as mulheres que tiveram papel significativo em suas trajetórias, e trazem a tona não somente a importância da ligação entre mãe e filha para o desenvolvimento da identidade feminina, mas também a multiplicidade de papéis e potencialidades diferentes que se abrem para as mulheres e que podem romper com o sistema falocêntrico de língua e representação. Estes romances podem ser consideradas releituras do mito, indicando não somente novas formas de representação

para as mulheres em seus papeis na sociedade, mas também apontando para formas diversas pelas quais mulheres são representadas em narrativas. Assim, narrativa, subjetividade e ideologia convergem para formar a base desta pesquisa.

#### INTRODUCTION

Often, when presenting a new idea, one must start out by telling an old, forgotten story:

Demeter, goddess of the cornfield, bore Core, her only daughter, when she was quite young. Her natural joyfulness was gone forever on the day she lost her daughter to Hades, who had fallen in love with the young girl. It is only after Core becomes queen of the underworld that her name changes to Persephone, which is how she is known to almost all until today.

Hades went to Zeus to ask his permission to marry Persephone. Zeus did not want to offend his brother, but knew that Demeter would never accept having her daughter taken from her to become Hade's companion. Therefore, he did not give Hades a straight answer and preferred to tell him that he could not say yes, nor could he say no. Hades felt encouraged to abduct the girl from a meadow where she was picking flowers, generally known, from information her priests gave, as located in Eleusis. Demeter looked for her daughter for nine days and nine nights, neither drinking nor eating. When she arrived at Eleusis, she was received by King Celeus, whose son Triptolemus gave Demeter precious information about her daughter's possible whereabouts. Some days before, his brothers, while tending their sheep and swine, had seen the earth open up and swallow one of their

pigs. They then heard the thud of hooves and saw a chariot being driven by a figure whose face was invisible, but who carried a shrieking girl in his arm.

Demeter went to Helius with this information and forced him to admit that he had seen Hades with Persephone. Demeter was sure Zeus was aware of this abduction and grew very angry. Instead of returning to Olympus, she continued to wander about and forbid the trees to bear fruit and the earth to give humanity any form of sustenance. Zeus sent a deputation of Olympian gods with gifts to Demeter to see if these would soothe her anger. However, Demeter would not give in and swore the earth would remain as it was until Persephone returned to her.

Zeus decided to ask Hades to return Persephone to her mother. He sent another message to Demeter telling her Persephone would come back only if she had not tasted any food of the dead. Since Persephone had refused to eat at all while she was with Hades, he was obliged to take her back to Demeter. At the last moment, when Hades and Persephone were preparing to leave for Eleusis, Ascalaphus, Hades gardener, told his master he had seen Persephone eat the seeds of a pomegranate. Therefore, she had tasted the food of the dead.

Demeter was heartbroken when she heard that Persephone would have to stay with Hades. She decided to never remove the curse she had cast on the land and not to return to Olympus. Zeus then persuaded Rhea, mother of them all, to convince Demeter to go back on her decision. A compromise was finally reached: for nine months of the year, Persephone

would stay in Demeter's company, while for the remaining three she would be Queen of Tartarus.

The myth of the goddesses, mother and daughter, though forgotten often enough nowadays, was still a part of the memory of several Greek villages in the XIX century. The inhabitants of these places would still depend on the image of Demeter and Persephone (portrayed frequently as the same, twin-like in appearance) for a positive result in crops. Mother and daughter personify not only fertility, but more specifically, the corn, symbol of renewal, of life. Thus, the mother, Demeter, represents the old corn which gives way (and birth) to the new corn, symbolyzed in Persephone. Life and death follow their course, and the power of these goddesses to stir up these elements of nature is shown in the myth and in the several rituals of prayer and thanks the Greeks adopted. These rites were called the Great Mysteries and were related to the corn, to fertility and to barrenness of the earth, which Demeter and Persephone personify. Human destiny is seen as analogous to the myth: death can be a new beginning, perhaps the hope for another existence, the possibility of renewal in the cycle of life.\frac{1}{2}.

Adapted from Robert Graves' <u>The Greek Myths</u>, Vol. I, Penguin Books, 1960 (the author's sources are varied: Aristophanes' *Frogs*, Homer's *Odyssey*, Hesiod's *Theogony*, the *Homeric Hymns to Demeter*, Hyginus, among others) and from Sir James Frazer's <u>The Golden Bough</u>, in a New Abridgment by Dr. Theodor Gaster, A Mentor Book, Signet Classics, 1964 (this author refers to the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* as the oldest literary document that refers to the myth).

The myth of Demeter and Persephone is representative of an issue that has not been approached quite as often as it should in Western culture - it certainly has not been approached from the angles through which it could possibly have been. This myth is representative of the mother-daughter relationship or, to extend the connection a bit more for the purposes of this work, of the relation between women, in which one can serve the role of mentor, muse, inspiration to another. In any case, the mother-daughter bond will serve as the metaphor of those relations that have been ignored or even forgotten, considered complex or difficult to deal with (in the eyes of psychoanalysis, for instance), but which bring up a myth that is a counterpoint to the traditional myths which present, in their narratives, the formation of the subject in our culture. It is, as Adrienne Rich has said, "the loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter (as) the essential female tragedy. We aknowledge Lear (father-daughter split), Hamlet (son and mother) and Oedipus (son and mother) as great embodiments of the human tragedy; but there is no presently enduring recognition of mother-daughter passion and rapture."2. This statement by Rich certainly rings true when one considers the lack of attention that has been given to the myth of the daughter's melancholic severing from her mother's affection and wisdom. It is, after all, in the acceptance, according to our culture, of the father's authority that the individual can operate in life and define him or herself as a subject. However, as we will see throughout

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Rich, Adrienne. Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution, W.W. Norton, NY, 1976, p.237.

the following pages, this simple transference of affection and orientation will present problems for the female subject. Its movement excludes a knowledge and a subjectivity that can be said to belong to women with exclusiveness.

Thus, questions are brought up when one thinks of how human experience and subjectivity are described. More conventional theories on these themes have become used to the term "human" without thinking of how often this neutral word is equated to "male" in the elaboration of the topics of identity, creating, in this way, a paradigm that would place the male as the reference from which the female would need to define itself, as the same, as different or as negative. However, though the definition of difference between male and female representations is evidently relevant to any study on how women write differently from men (how any work of art produced by a woman can be different), it is also important to analyze how the representations of women in our cultural system are defined by expectations, by ideology and how women describe themselves in regards to these expectations. It is based on this initial questioning that the idea for this research came up: what was it, if there was any element of difference, that could be said to belong almost exclusively to women's writing? In the elaboration of thoughts connected to this issue, the terms identity, the subject and the self surfaced together as the concerns not only of psychoanalysis, but also of feminism and literature. These three areas join in the elaboration of this work since the question "what makes the difference?" is at the core and presents itself as final product of my research.

As this question was turned around in my mind, a basic answer seemed to appear: identity for women needed first to be seen in its most basic form, in the connection that this woman established initially with her mother, in the possible function as a mother herself, and in the extended connections to other women in her life, be it friends, sisters, co-workers or lovers. This alone made way for fundamentally different ways of telling a story, not only between men and women, but also between women coming from different backgrounds and in different contexts. Consequently, one point of concern became the great difference that occured at the moment of separation from the mother for the boy and for the girl. Though this separation has always been equated as positive by science (psychoanalysis and psychology) because of its effects on identity formation for both sexes, it certainly became evident that it was an issue to be discussed in a completely different light for women because of the frequency with which it was seen portrayed in literature and in the discussions women have of the subject when talking about development of identity, independence, artistic creativity, relationships, etc. The topic of difference comes up more strongly, in connection to the topic of the relationship with the mother, in the writings of women than that of men. If the stories of men have been, traditionally, those of separation, of facing obstacles, of overcoming the enemy (seen, for instance, in The Iliad, The Odyssey, just to mention two classics), and these have been seen as the guiding narratives of our culture, those of women center around the trajectory of a female hero who must conciliate separation and merging, while searching for a voice of her own, one of resistance, in face of the overbearing patriarchal standards that dominate and appropriate the female voice as its own. Here, points such as the difference of knowledge, of the basis of truth, the importance of the canon come together and need to be discussed.

This issue will be approached then from an initial questioning of how our culture functions, as it is based on a logocentric view of the world and of knowledge itself. It certainly touches on the specificity of truth and what this possession of truth brings with it. Knowledge, and the power that comes with it, is central in the definition of what can be considered true and what is not. Thus, works of art, and consequently literary works, are included or excluded form the "tradition", in the same way as experiences, theories and many forms of knowledge are ignored, excluded, minimized or given the value of truth depending on the power they have. Language has an important role in this acceptance or not of truth since it is through discoursive positions that we speak and think of our role in society. The adoption of one form of discourse and not another derives from the possibility seen in that specific discourse of obtaining the necessary means (or power) to escape oppression, and marginality. It is also the means to recreate and redefine subjectivity, canon, culture and narrativity.

What one can question, then, with this discussion, is the so-called master-narrative to which Leigh Gilmore refers to in her text "The Gaze of the Other Woman: Beholding and

Begetting in Dickinson, Moore and Rich<sup>223</sup>; a narrative that holds the Oedipus myth as the central truth on identity formation and on how narrative should develop in Western culture. In order to reach this subject, one will need to approach some studies carried out today in the areas of gender and narrativity, first passing through central issues that are directly connected to this and which have been the concern of feminism for a long time. From psychoanalysis to philosophy, many theories have been established to define the place and subjectivity of women, and all have certainly attempted to cover the issue as completely as possible.

One basic critique that contributes in breaking with the structured theories on linguistics, psychology and philosophy developed throughout the twentieth century is that of deconstruction. Its contribution to many of the works of the feminist scholars that will be discussed here is evident. The fact that it delves into the functioning of the central truths of our civilization and brings these truths down to what they really are, mere constructs of Western thought, based on the presence of the word, explains, for example, the prevalence of this presence (symbolized in the phallus) for psychoanalysis. Thus, the supposed objectivity and neutrality of psychoanalysis is brought to question. To feminism the questioning, brought on by deconstruction, of the dominance of specific discourses that embody the logos of our culture is essential in rethinking the legitimacy of certain

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Gilmore, Leigh. The Gaze of the Other woman: Beholding and Begetting in Dickinson, Moore, and Rich in Engendering the Word (Feminist Essays in Psychosexual Poetics), U. of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1989.

experiences that have been put aside, such as those belonging to women, and of the discourses that give voice to these experiences. Language, as it was seen by structuralism, for example, builds around it an aura of truth and so-called objectivity. Based on Saussure's model for language, where a sign (signifier/signified) only means something in relation to other signs, i.e., within a system, and departing from ideas which aimed at systematizing literary studies, casting aside historical elements or any other external factor, while emphasizing form over content, structuralist studies intended to give literary studies the status of science. Thus, instead of focusing on the writer to find the essence of the work, the focus turned to the structure of that work, to its rules of functioning. This transformation was made so as to show the the neutral, impersonal aspect of literary studies. The reader, in this sense, would also have to respond accordingly, as an ideal reader: classless, ungendered, stateless, etc. In this way, all steps were taken to establish specific rules and modes of organizing the literary work, by attempting to diminish the human aspects of literary production disconnecting it from reality. In the structuralist idea of eclipsing the importance of experience in its relation to power and language, and taking language as an element to be studied in itself, structuralism has given literature and the study of literature some significant tools with which it can work out some of its complex problems, but it has, at the same time. set as secondary in importance some essential aspects, such as the fact that language is ideologically determined, that a text is not produced in mid-air, and that readers read from a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Derrida, J., <u>A Escritura e a Diferença</u>, Editora Perspectiva, São Paulo, 1971.

point of view which depends on the real world that surrounds them. Therefore, a revision of these ideas becomes central to feminist studies, especially when the focus is literature.

On the other hand, psychoanalysis is one of the founding theories of our civilization that utilizes myth, sexuality and the unconscious in its construction of how human development occurs. It has, with all the alterations and contributions that have taken place from its central configuration by Sigmund Freud until today, been taken as the truth on subjectivity. Even with all the current studies that have brought the psychoanalytic theory into perspective in a multicultural society at the doors of the twenty-first century, it still pervades the way we think of our individual development and the form in which our story is told. It also defines the story of development in more general terms as it has placed the Oedipus myth as one of the basic narratives of all times, a general guide to explaining the difficult task of human growth. Psychoanalysis, in this way, brings with it a discourse which defines human and universal as male, as we shall see; this male belongs, furthermore, to a specific class and race. In other words, it is a discourse which far from being neutral and objective (as scientific discourse intends to be), presents itself as patriarchal, bourgeois and white. That we can currently have this other vision can be seen as a contribution of so-called post-structuralist studies carried out not only by Derrida and deconstruction, but also by feminists such as Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, as we shall see throughout the development of this study.

The main goal, then, of this work, will be to see the subject of the mother-daughter bond through several perspectives that have approached it, but to mainly analyze the workings of this bond in the representations of contemporary narrative by women writers. Three authors have been chosen: the first is Virginia Woolf and her novel To the Lighthouse, first published in 1927, and already a book accepted by the literary tradition which defines the canon with the inclusion of the great masters of literature. However, one cannot forget that this is a relatively recent fact, since a simple observation of some of the anthologies and critical essays written since the publication of Woolf's novel will show us that there is a tendency to place her work in the shadow of the far more famous work of James Joyce, he a "true" genius of letters. Virginia Woolf herself was concerned with some of the very issues mentioned here, i.e., the problem of the exclusion of women from the centers of knowledge, the need to look back to our mothers, etc., and wrote several essays on these subjects. One of her main concerns was the need to express female thought in language, a language that could be our own and could differentiate itself from the language dominating literature. The narrative of the novel To the Lighthouse focuses on the internal experiences of the characters and disregards any formal chronological division. It culminates with Lily Briscoe's flow of consciousness as she brings thought through her painting. Thus, To the Lighthouse stands out as theory put into practice, if one can say so, in that it places face to face two types of experience in the figures of Mrs. Ramsay and Mr. Ramsay, and in

the fact that it delves into Mrs. Ramsay's importance as a source of inspiration for the creative force and for the life of Lily Briscoe.

The second choice for analysis is Sylvia Plath's only novel, The Bell Jar, published 1971 with the author's real name, but first published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas in London in 1963. Sylvia Plath uses the experience of a mental breakdown she underwent in 1953 after having spent the summer in New York participating in a special student program with the magazine Mademoiselle. Her intention was to shed a certain light on the difficulties a young girl has growing up and having to choose in America during the fifties. This novel was compared to Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye in its portrayal of youth's anguish in relation to its identity and place in society. Nevertheless, Plath felt a certain insecurity in regards to this first novel, which stemmed from her doubts as to whether the book was actually well-written and of any interest in relation to its contents. She also felt that these very contents would hurt many of the people around her when they recognized themselves in the characters she portrays so well - though the novel was actually fiction, and the portrayal of the main character's mother and friends were not directly based on the author's real mother and friends, many of the facts that occur in the novel actually happened with Sylvia Plath herself. Nevertheless, the novel presents contrasting and conflicting ways of seeing the world: on the one hand, the need of the young girl, Esther, to define herself as person with potentials going beyond the conventional behavior expected from a young woman in the fifties; on the other, those same conventional expectations represented by her mother, by her boyfriend and by friends around her. This central conflict leads the main character to a rejection of the expectations her mother has of her, and a subsequent attempt to find possible role-models in other women which will enable her to escape the feeling of entrapment that leads her to despair and attempts at suicide. Narrative in The Bell Jar reveals signs of the main character's gradual fragmentation and erasure in a culture that gives her no possibility of an authentic voice. The images and metaphors associated to certain experiences are extremely significant and reflect the concerns of Esther, the main character, in attempting to establish a ground for sanity in an environment that is hostile to whatever is dissident or critical of that culture.

The novel <u>Surfacing</u>, by Margaret Atwood, is the third work to be analyzed. It was first published in 1972, and like most of Atwood's works, deals directly with the freeing of the female subject (or the attempts to) from the constraints that surround her. The specific novel at hand deals yet with another subject of extreme importance to the research here: the surprising revelation of a bond that the main character had buried underneath years of forgetfulness: the one with her long-dead mother. The question of narrative appears here as well: the gradual loss of a structured discourse, of sentence formation that is conventionally acceptable occurs at the same time in which a rediscovery of the main character's creative forces takes place. This discovery occurs along with the revelation of the important role her mother had played throughout her life and which had been totally covered by years of distancing.

This work will be divided into four chapters; the first will present the theoretical basis for the analysis of the three novels referred to above. The question of how Western culture defines the choice of literary works that can or cannot be included as classics, or worthwhile as reading material that will be studied and taken as a model academically, for instance, will be discussed. It is also relevant to reflect on the meaning of terms such as the essence, the truth or the transcendence of the literary text, frequently seen as an entity standing alone, born out of some abstract element called genius. The Truth (the one and only possible way of knowing something) is often nothing more than an abstraction that has little to do with the many and varied truths of different groups in terms of cultural, racial, economic and social background. The issue of who is the subject of the text, of any text is important here. If we are to understand that there are different voices speaking from different texts, we must also understand the issue of the subject and how it is seen in our culture. The Oedipic triangle, as it was elaborated by Sigmund Freud in psychoanalysis, is taken as the basic narrative that determines the formation of the subject in our century. Thus, psychoanalysis has had a fundamental role in the way we feel identity should be formed - and since it is a science, it has been taken as the Truth on the matter. The significance of sight, of being able to define oneself due to the presence of the phallus permeates the work of Freud and, later on, of Jacques Lacan, and has an important role in the manner in which we define ourselves and in the way we analyze the world. However, though psychoanalyis is a science, it is not neutral, the subject of the Oedipus narrative is not

genderless, and the overall importance of the *presence* is possible because of the absence it contrasts with. The possibility of defining one's identity if one is a woman surrounded and overpowered by a narrative considered a founding block of our civilization and of identity formation, becomes an important issue which stands out especially in feminist discussions. Thus, the works of several feminists such as Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, as well as of several other women psychoanalysts, will give psychoanalysis a new perspective, one that will ask from where a woman can speak if she is always the object, the absence, the inspiration, but never the subject of a text, a voice, a presence of her own, the creator of art, as well as life. Besides these scholars who deal directly with psychoanalysis, the ideas of several theorists who work with gender studies in feminism and its implications for literature will be presented, especially those of Teresa de Lauretis and Rosi Braidotti.

The second chapter will deal with the novel To the Lighthouse, presenting the relation between Lily Briscoe, an artist, and the Ramsay couple. The combination of Mr. Ramsay's rational mind on the one hand, and his childish dependence on his wife on the other, are observed by Lily, who sees and analyzes the ways in which this man deals with his family. However, Lily specially observes Mrs. Ramsay's inspiring form of bringing beauty into everyone's life, including into Lily's art. The narrative of the novel is elaborated in such a way that it not only reflects the events taking place (it flows in and out of the consciousness of different characters, it reveals the pain and horror of war through a special use of imagery, it uses astounding images in the reflections of Lily as she goes through a

painstaking creative process and rediscovers the importance of Mrs. Ramsay), it also attempts to create the much sought-after unity referred to in the novel as being Lily's main concern in regards to her art. Virginia Woolf brings together in the novel the inner and outer world of the main characters, the concrete object of language into poetic and artistic form. Her attempt at this was mainly due to her vision of writing as a revolutionary as well as an artistic act. She defended the inclusion of the mundane in fiction, especially when this fiction was the product of women. Thus, she gives special importance to women's experiences and to the relationship between women — all of this was significantly included in her literary work. Her vision was an essential part of modernism as a whole, a vision that allowed the repressed to come out, the novelty of new narrative forms to evolve, that saw art as the salvation to the despair in which humanity had been placed due to the horrors of war and capitalism.

The third chapter will deal with <u>The Bell Jar</u>. In a world whose context is quite diverse from the one in Woolf's creation in <u>To the Lighthouse</u>, the main character, Esther, faces a severe crisis of identity and self-worth. The analysis here will focus on the difficulties of bringing together the necessity and love of artistic creation with the expectations of the fifties in relation to women and what their role should be. The gradual fragmentation of identity which Esther must deal with and bring together in order to become a functioning human being again, is the principal theme of the novel. Whereas Woolf could try to find in artistic creation a solution to her main character's doubts and anxieties, Plath demonstrates

very well in her novel the enormous barriers lifted before a young girl's development in the U.S. in the fifties if she did not adapt her identity to pre-determined roles. The mother-daughter relationship will also be singled out here as one fraught with difficulty. The precariousness of this relation will be influential in analyzing Esther's attempts at breaking out of the constraints around her.

The fourth chapter will be on Margaret Atwood's <u>Surfacing</u>. The period in which this novel takes place, the 70s, is of great importance in the evaluation of the main character's search for her identity as an artist and as a woman. The work done on this novel will focus on the greater range of possibilities that are open to the main character despite the initial lack of perspective. Though the main character is in search of her lost father, whom she has not heard of for a while and is said to have disappeared perhaps in the lake near her childhood home, her search takes her further, to her dead mother, whom she finds has left her a special gift, a lost link that will enable her to find a way out of her frozen despair and lack of hope. The narrative here also shows a great number of images that reveal the true search of the main character. It also grows more unrestrained as the character's search and discovery of her lost identity occurs:the narrative flows, loses grammatical coherence and becomes rythmic and fluid.

The unity of body and mind, of beauty and reason which is sought after in <u>To the Lighthouse</u>, is also the concern of Esther in <u>The Bell Jar</u> 0 and in the main character's search in <u>Surfacing</u>. How each of these novels presents and solves the equation is presented in the

chapters described. The recovery of the mother-daughter bond occurs as a reenactment of the loving and healing relation between Demeter and her daughter in the myth. In those narratives in which this healing can occur, the result is the recovery of self-esteem and the strength for artistic creation. Concomitantly, the narrative of these novels lose their restraints, following patterns of their own, and create metaphors of new significance. To what degree this takes place in each of the novels mentioned will be discussed.

#### I. THE DIFFERENCE OF VIEW

#### 1. Culture and Logocentrism

It is no novelty to any of us who are involved in literary studies today that the discussions concerning literature almost always center around the texts and their social, historical and political implications. Where before one had research and reading that was totally concerned with how to delve into the words themselves, how to transform the literary text into something at the same time objective and transcendent, now the main goal of most studies is to break down this pretension of objectivity, of an almost scientific view of literature.

In the tradition, the literary text, as New Critics, Russian Formalists and Structuralists initially contend, must rid itself of any subjectivity and take its place in the great tradition of literature as a transcendent object, through its language, its subject matter and narrative technique. The above mentioned theories came about in the XX century, along with modernism and its questionings, its disregard for the XIX and late XVIII centuries with their romantic and belletrist characteristics. It was in the post First World War period that academics worked hard to transform the study of literature into as highly an impersonal field as possible. Paradoxically, this scientificism of literature had its roots in an enormous hostility towards technology, industrialism and a growing materialism that was dominating

Europe and the United States specifically. The anti-romanticism of these academics who strived to make poetry as depersonalized as possible was, in fact, a romanticism in disguise, a longing for the past and a need to make the literature which would be considered great a part of a larger tradition, simply because, essentially, it was the expression of a universal human experience.

It is easy to see how this view of literature could define the selection of literary works that should be included in a list of the classics of Western civilization, the very expression of all that is felt as universal and lasting. The establishment of a literary canon has been the concern of all academics who wish to find a basic notion of what is worthy, what has value as an authentic work of art and what does not. The selection of these worthy works of literature must be traced in order for us to evaluate what the selection leads to. The basic consideration for the choice of classics is that they have that universal appeal which can be understood by any reader. The universality which literature depends on is based on an absolute Truth that is at the core of all our beliefs. The signs which transcend all others are those which any reader can unquestionably refer to without mediation, neutrally, since they are all metaphysical, related to a logos. Words like God, Freedom, Order, Power, etc. would be some examples of this transcendental meaning, placed at the origin of any other, superior to any other. It is based on this system of beliefs that Western culture operates, it is through works of art, including literature, that this system is expected to flourish. Structuralist theory did little to actually change this picture, and with its ideas strongly connected to semiotics and linguistics, attempted to push literature into even more formal restraints which were considered necessary in order for the study of literature to maintain its scientificity.

It is general knowledge nowadays that this system of diverse theories is not neutral and that great works of art have not only social, political and cultural forces imbricated in their production, but also an often unharmonious and conflicting relation of these forces. The subject of the literary text (as well as that of any text, one could say) must be analyzed carefully in order for one to ask from what specific position this subject speaks. The comprehension of who this subject is, from where s/he is speaking is essential. Theories on the subject and on identity consider the place of this subject to be defined primarily by the possession of language, by the possibility of affirmation through language. Thus, the importance of the unified and rational subject, able to express itself with the use of words, clearly and objectively. The values defended by this subject (who is the creation, after all, of an author – a flesh and blood person) seem to float above the text and are taken as natural, normal, in other words, as the truth about the world and about life. Nevertheless, one cannot forget the context in which this text was produced, from what position the author speaks, be it related to gender, class, race, social-economic group or religion.

In terms of narrative, of language, it is the Oedipic triangle that has been accepted as

the truth in regards to the speaking subject and to its formation of identity<sup>5</sup>. In a system that defines the logos as its foundation, the word should not only be as transparent and as neutral as possible, the way to the truth of all things, it is also always a presence, the substance of reason and subjectivity. The basis of this reasoning is the attempt to define what *is* basic, what is central to everything else. The "everything else" here is that which is secondary, negative and disruptive. Now, the Oedipus model has as its principle the *presence*, the possibility of *seeing* only what is there, and the superiority of this presence over whatever is *not* there, not visible. We cannot, in our civilization ignore this narrative anymore than we can ignore the scientific study that was carried on behind it. Through Freud's painstaking

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> The myth of Oedipus is representative of the narrative of overcoming obstacles, in which Oedipus, the male, must destroy the Sphinx (half woman, half beast) to conquer his position as king of Thebes. Robert Graves' retelling of the myth places a very interesting note: the priestess of the Sphinx, in this case locaste, as well as the Sphinx herself both killed themselves. Thus, he asks, was Oedipus invader of Thebes trying to supress the old Minoan cult of the goddess? Graves explains: "under the old system, the new king, though a foreigner, had theoretically been a son of the old king whom he killed and whose widow he married; a custom that the patriarchal invaders misrepresented as parricide and incest. The Freudian theory that the 'Oedipus Complex' is an instinct common to all men was suggested by this perverted anecdote". In Graves, Robert. The Greek Myths, Vol.2, Penguin Books, 1960, p. 13. The reference to Freud's use of the myth is appropriate here. In his studies on hysteria, Freud says that the legend of Oedipus should be taken as a poetic representation of something that occurs typically between children and parents: sexual attraction. To Freud, the Oedipus complex is the basis of his work on sexuality and identity, and he declares its universality when he says, "all those who are born on this planet confront the task of dominating the Oedipus complex; anyone who avoids doing so will fall victim to neurosis". In Três Ensaios sobre a Teoria da Sexualidade, Ed. Standard, vol. 7, RJ, 1972, p. 233. The Oedipus myth is the founding block for the understanding of male and female sexuality, according to Freud. It leads the individual to a definition of what he/she is sexually and in terms of identity as an adult. The passage through the Oedipus complex leads towards a heterosexual position, to the formation of the superego, to morality and religion. Oedipus' blinding of himself in the myth (having discovered he married his mother and killed his father) is associated to the castration complex which follows, according to psychoanalysts. Lacan, on the other hand, saw no universality in the adoption of this myth. To him, the story is in the unconscious of Western humanity, and finds itself in a much less important position in the myths of other civilizations.

rethinking of human psyche in the XIX and early XX centuries comes this myth that took on an importance in terms of the formation of identity that we must acknowledge. Psychoanalysis not only brought us a specific view on this formation, it also was seen as a the most scientific view (in other words, neutral, universal, ahistorical) of the self one could find. And, as Leigh Gilmore says, "Freud's 'Oedipus' has become the master narrative of sexuality in Western culture", the truth in regards to formation of identity, the place from where the subject speaks. Freud, and later Lacan, were the master figures in the establishment of a certain way of seeing human psyche, of reading literature and appreciating art, of analyzing the world. However, one cannot ignore that the subject of the Oedipus narrative is not genderless, that the conflict this (male) subject faces is based on the vision he has of a missing object which contrasts with the directness, the undeniable force of a specific presence. We will delve into this more carefully later on in this chapter.

The question posed then is from where does a woman speak when she is surrounded by presence? Language, the basic instrument of narrative in general, of the Oedipus narrative as well, and of psychoanalysis, would need ideally, if seen according to logocentrism, to be transparent and ahistorical and as neutral as possible in this context. Needless to say, language can never be this ideal object. It is fraught with words that have double meanings, with puns, with dubious connotations, with nonsense. Even the simplest and apparently most

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Gilmore, Leigh. The Gaze of the Other Woman: Beholding and Begetting in Dickinson, Moore and Rich in Engendering the Word, edited by Temma Berg et al, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1989.

direct attempts to express thought (which is language already "contaminated") are mediated by the possibility of failure. Thus, dealing with meaning, the ordered conception of logic which the subject should be able to express, is an enormous task. The importance of making clear, of expressing without doubt and trying to fill in gaps goes hand in hand with the Oedipic tale in which the gaze and the presence of the phallus builds a subject who is beginning to dominate the language system. It is the moment of separation between the "T" and the "you" (the son from his mother). The paradox is that it is in this moment of separation that language becomes forever alienated, limited by words. The very words that are supposed to be clear and direct are forever separated as well from direct experience.

The girl's attempt to fit into this system is blocked. First because she cannot establish exactly what her identity might be inside the parameters of the oedipal narrative. It is, after all, this myth that "establishes the primacy of the phallus and constructs a version of subjectivity based on the mastery that derives from the phallic privilege", in other words, what can be seen (the phallus) is valued over what cannot (female genitals) and, thus, privileges are granted to presence, sight and the authority derived from this, while the opposite, lack, the impossibility of seeing and knowing what is there, is considered a sign of inferiority. The paradox of this situation is that the ever-present phallus and the order based on its truth can only make sense if seen in contrast to the woman's castration. It is the non-presence that gives meaning to what is there, in the same way that one word has a meaning

in contrast to all the other meanings the same word can have, but which are not brought to use at the same exact moment.

The movement started by Jacques Derrida in the 60s was a break with all the structured theories on linguistics, psychology and philosophy that came before it. Deconstruction elaborated a sophisticated critique of those structures whose basic tenets were not questioned, truths that were at the basis of most theories but which were beyond any analysis. This way of thinking is obviously at the root of what was mentioned above: the center of our existence is constructed on essential truths, basic principles such as God, beginning, end, man, humanity, and so on. What deconstruction aims at is to explode these "truths" and reveal what they are in fact – constructions in language and of our Western culture. The logocentrism of our civilization, according to Derrida<sup>8</sup>, brings out the importance given to presence, to the word, especially the spoken word (which Derrida refers to as phonocentrism), and, in psychoanalysis, to the phallus.

However, what is seen in deconstruction is the impossibility of the sign ever obtaining full presence since a signification is always inaccurate, its "full" meaning is forever slipping away. The concept of complete or full meaning stands behind the idea which pervades our culture of having direct access to thought, of the importance of having absolute truths. What is seen as whole, a unit, such as what Saussure theorized in regard to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 84.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Derrida, Jacques. A Escritura e a Diferença, Editora Perspectiva, São Paulo, 1971.

the sign, cannot ever become that for Derrida. To him, the sign is always divided, never totally present except as difference. The term *différance* is used by Derrida to give us the ambiguous meanings (because we cannot hear the difference) "differ" and "defer" in French. The sign is always inserted in a system of differences and, at the same time, its presence, its meaning is always postponed. One reads the word inserted in a context and it may only make sense when we finish reading a whole sentence, thus, the idea of the meaning which is never totally there, which is always escaping definition and a final meaning.

Though there are specific signs which are of special value in our society, such as Freedom, Order, Authority, these are not at the origin of our system. One would like to imagine that they were, since the tendency is to always go back further and further to try to define a starting point for all things. However, these meanings are actually seen this way because they are placed in a special position, in a hierarchy. This way of thinking, attempting to order ideas according to what is at the foundation of everything, is what Derrida refers to as metaphysical. One term is "naturally" excluding another in a binary opposition in which the first term usually presents a positive quality, while the second is the negative. That these binary pairs are imbued in ideology is unquestionable. The superiority of one over the other is at the basis of our thought system.

What implications does this theory on significations have for culture and knowledge in general? The stability of knowledge is questioned, the possibility of absolute truths is destroyed. The attempts of presenting the "I" of speech or writing or thought as a unified

entity are bound to failure because the "T" presented to another is never the full representation of the self. The knowledge of something cannot be presented as a clear, unquestioned truth. Consequently, the unification of anything, I, the subject, truth, the essence of things is questionable. The establishment of one term that is superior to the other is a clear indicator of logocentrism's need to define an origin, a possibility of explanation to and stability in everything. What Derrida suggests is one must look for the ways to destabilize this logos since there is no logic to why one term is in a privileged position to another — it is a question of dominance, of an authority that a specific text has which is ambiguous, "erasable".

The importance of this form of thought to women critics and writers is unquestionable, in spite of the several criticisms it has received throughout the years. It has made it possible to ask from where a woman can speak inside a patriarchal, logocentric system of thought. If she is "underprivileged" in what we have seen before (she is castrated, in lack, unauthorized), what will be her position? That of the object of the gaze? That of inspiring muse, but not of the producer of any creative work? The avoidance of setting any hierarchical categories is an important step in considering women's position in Western

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Derrida's reluctance to deal with Marxist thought has brought on criticism from Frederic Jameson who poses the problem of a historical vision that deconstruction has not dealt with, and from Terry Eagleton who hits hard on the fact that according to deconstruction, literary texts have no relation to anything outside themselves and ignore the fact that exploitation does have an origin. He says: "many of the vauntedly novel themes of deconstruction do little more than reproduce some of the most commonplace topics of bourgeois liberalism..." in Sarup, Madan. An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism, The University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1993, p.55.

culture, especially in regards to philosophy and its preoccupation with defining the subject. Since it is man who defines himself as the subject (of discourse, of theory, of the gaze), the woman is the object. However, as one can conclude in a deconstructionist view of the subject, the object's position is actually of extreme importance: it is, after all, what can be traced underlying the significance of the subject. The definition of presence is only possible because of the opposite: the void, the lack, the absence represented by the object-woman. When, by gazing, he sees what he has (the ever-present phallus), the fear of loss is brought by what he imagines may happen (what has happened to the object of that gaze): a loss of the principle of difference between him and woman.

Consequently, language as constructed and used in society (as well as other systems) is based on this need to assert dominance, mastery, objectivity, in other words, to always take possession of truth, to always define one's special position. To affirm the so-called objectivity and truth of language is absolutely necessary if one intends to establish dominance. Thus, language is disguised inside this neutrality, becoming apparently genderless, raceless, classless, while a close analysis of any text reveals that the language is far from neutral. If one wishes to take an example, one can observe words that are used to refer to women (notice "spinster" versus "bachelor", "mistress" and 'master") and the special way in which language refuses to refer to women: the word "woman" turns into a more polite "lady", in the same way "negro" or "black" was replaced by "color". Language has also changed in the sense that words that were used to refer to more general

characteristics (for example "spinster" originally meant the person who spinned cloth) were given a specific connotation that is not only gendered but is also pejorative. Trying to remedy this bias of language with "politically correct" substitutions does nothing more than mask the problem. Words are not mere representations of objects and, "natural" words, outside patriarchy, do not exist. The relation between words, in the binary oppositions we have become used to, should be carefully examined so as to build a comprehension of how language functions.

The system of signs we know is constructed on arbitrary values: a word has a specific meaning or value in relation to a system of difference. One's use of language is important in giving us an identity – this is how we structure our thought. The linguist Beneviste<sup>10</sup> said that in language one establishes oneself as a subject inserted in a reality, a reality constructed by the subject's use of language. Thus, if this subject is taken as "naturally" masculine, being the male/female opposition marked by the presence and positivity of the first term, it is no wonder that woman's place in the system of language faces problems. Woman's position in this system is that of the other, the contrasting figure which serves as a counterpoint. The criticism of this dominance in language does not lie in the mere turning around of oppositions, it goes further into a study of how identity is formed in our culture and how women can find meanings that make sense to them, that are not always bound to the economy of the same. As Adrienne Rich says, quoted by Leigh

Gilmore, "revision (is) the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering the text from a new critical direction – [it] is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" What has been done to contribute to this revision will be seen in the pages that follow. It is essential, however, for us to take a deeper look into the theories on identity formation that have played an important role in our culture.

<sup>10</sup> Beneviste, Émile. <u>Problemas de Lingüística Geral I,</u> Fontes, Campinas, 1991.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Gilmore, Leigh. "The gaze of the Other Woman: Beholding and Begetting in Dickinson, Moore and Rich" in Engendering the Word (Feminist Essays in Psychosexual Poetics), edited by Temma Berg et al, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1989, p. 96.

## 1.1 REVISITING FREUD

The founding blocks in the development of Freudian psychoanalysis are closely interlinked: sexuality and the unconscious. Freud's ideas on sexuality were extremely positive in the sense that they emphasized the elaborate and sinuous paths human development needed to take in order to build a sexual identity. In this need to construct a sexuality, reproduction of the species plays a minor role, since pleasure derives from not only the concrete physical sensations, but also, and especially, from the imaginative constructions that are at play on (and that play with) one's body. Freud's ideas on the human psyche inaugurate a discourse which treats the subject scientifically (fitting into the order of the XIX century's praise for science and technology and the progress brought along with it), but which also breaks with the common view of the century of the unicity of human reasoning and the possibility of clear, unmediated knowledge of oneself. This form of thinking, after all, is somehow in alignment with and in contrast to the optimistic belief in the wonders of scientific and technological discoveries that had given the XIX century a sense of power - one could not actually ever know anything in an absolute way since one's own psyche had hidden compartments we could not unfold easily. In a sense, Freud's theory of psychoanalysis introduces society to the XX century with all its questionings on the importance of the human and his/her place in the world, which had their greatest expressions in the art and literature produced under the name of Modernism.

Sigmund Freud's work on human sexuality is clearly explained in the essays he wrote on the subject. One of the first of these was "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" published in 1905, in which he states that the definitions of "masculine" and "feminine", which to the common person seem so obvious in their content they would require little thought, are, in fact, complex constructs. To psychoanalysis the main point of interest will center around the generally accepted ideas which connect the "masculine" to activity and the "feminine" to passivity. To Freud, this will lead us to seeing the libido as "masculine", since this basic energy is associated to activity. In studies (and in the practice) carried out after Freud, this association will either be overlooked – the fact that Freud adopted "masculine" as an adjective to characterize the libido and that he initially states there is truly only one libido – or revised by those who cannot ignore that the choice of words, though used in connection with the respectability of science, represents the patriarchal positionings of the late XIX and early XX centuries, and, therefore, cannot be considered neutral or unbiased.

"Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" was altered in subsequent editions (from 1910 to 1924). Freud then states that it would be highly improbable for anyone to encounter a human being that was purely masculine or purely feminine – though this did not mean necessarily that an individual was manifesting a pathology. Conflicts would arise, though, in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Freud, Sigmund. Três Ensaios Sobre a Teoria da Sexualidade, Edição Standard Brasileira, Imago, RJ, 1972.

the individual's difficulty in accepting his or her own sex. From this conflict, certain manifestations of a troubled psyche could appear, such as hysteria.

The development of Freud's theories on female and male sexuality and how these manifest themselves is based on the belief, on both the part of the boy and the girl before puberty, of the so-called sexual monism - in other words, the existence of one and only genital, the penis. The explanation for the presence of the girl's clitoris was that it was a small or atrofiated penis. Even though before puberty there seems to be no defined difference between "masculine" and "feminine", around the age of three both the boy and the girl notice, through the act of seeing, a missing object on the girl's anatomy. According to Freud, this will lead to the fear on the part of the boy that he will suffer some sort of castration, and to envy on the part of the girl of the object she does not possess. Simultaneously, both will feel deep disgust in relation to women: the boy will wonder what was necessary in order for the girl to have suffered the loss of such a prized object; the girl will wonder why her mother did not give her what she so desires and, at the same time, will despise her mother for also not possessing a penis. The little girl then will actually wish she were a boy. Only at puberty will she discover a new element: the vagina. However, it is clear that, according to this logic, the unifying element in the story will always be the penis. It is the presence of this object that defines all of human desire.

In contrast to this, an addition made by Freud in 1923 to "Three Essays...", reinforces the theory that both the boy and the girl ignore the existence of any other sexual

Oedipus Complex, while, as Freud adds, "the effects on the girl are very little known". In other words, male sexual development is the basic principle that will reflect on social roles. It will define the masculine as active, while the subject will also be primarily this male. Femininity, on the other hand, will always be seen as the object, the contrast to this masculine principle of activity: remaining on the outside looking in, desiring what she does not have in such a way that it can paralyze her as a productive and creative being.

The Oedipus Complex mentioned before is one of the basic principles in Freud's theory and it has become a landmark in the discourse of the XX century. It is defined as a "set of amorous and hostile investments which the child makes on his parents during the phallic phase, the process which must lead to the disappearance of these investments and the replacement of these by identifications". According to Freud, this phase in the life of a child is so obvious, that anyone can identify its existence in his or her childhood if analysis is undertaken. Nevertheless, the basic characteristic of this phase is founded in male sexuality in which manifestations are clear, less likely to lead to the ambiguity seen in girls. The boy

<sup>13</sup> Freud,-Sigmund. Dois verbetes de enciclopédia, Ed. Standard, vol. 18, Imago, RJ, 1972.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Chemama, Roland, org. <u>Dicionário de Psicanálise Larousse/Artes Médicas</u>, Editora Artes Médicas, 1993, p. 55.My translation. Each phase in the libidinal organization of human development is associated to an erogenous zone and the choice of an object. It is in "Three Essays..." that Freud explains that manifestations in adults go all the way back to the specificities of childhood sexuality. There are basically two divisions: the pre-genital (oral and anal phase) and the genital. The oral phase connects sexual activity to cannibalism – it is during this phase that the breast will be given importance and begin to be felt as lost. The search of the sexual object is equivalent to finding the breast. The anal phase, or sadistic-anal phase, is associated to the body's separation from and retention of objects (feces, etc.). the phallic phase is characterized by the Oedipus

manifests a somewhat ambivalent initial identification with his father and a concomitant libidinal investment of the infant/child on his primary caretaker, the mother. The occurance of this complex is simultaneous to the phallic phase (at two or three years of age) in which the boy's discovery of sensual sensations associated to his genitals goes hand in hand with the desire he feels for his mother. He then wishes to replace his father at his mother's side – consequently, his father is no longer only a hero, but also a rival.

The boy's attitude in regards to his parents is, to say the least, ambivalent. The boy feels both femininely affectionate towards his father, consequently showing hostility and jealousy in relation to his mother, and hostile towards him in trying to be his mother's companion. According to Freud, this is explained by the basic bisexuality of all individuals.

The moment that ends with the Oedipus Complex is also of extreme importance, constituting a fundamental principle in psychoanalytic theory: the Castration Complex. There are actual traumas behind this complex: the fear on the part of the boy that he will lose his penis if he masturbates and, what is more important, the visualization of the female genitals, where he sees nothing. In the boy's mind there can be only one explanation: castration is a possibility. Consequently, either the boy goes back to identifying with his father, or he identifies with both his father and his mother. This re-identification with the father is the basis of the super-ego. In other words, paternal authority needs to be introjected

Complex and concentrates its pulsions on the genital area, i.e., the penis. These phases will lead to a latent phase, followed by puberty and the determination of sexuality.

in order to destroy the threatening aspects of the complex. Still, this introjection may never be a total success and this would explain the appearance of certain pathologies.

At first, Freud thought the girl's process of identity formation, or her "Oedipus Complex", was simply an inversion of what occured with the boy. However, this theory was eventually changed and Freud turned to the importance of the pre-oedipal phase for the girl's development. 15 With this idea in mind, Freud does, in fact, touch on a fundamental phase for a woman's subsequent elaboration of subjectivity/identity. What Freud finds puzzling is how the girl turns from her mother, as first love object, to the father. It is evident to Freud that the connection between mother and daughter is strong enough to make this break a bit more difficult than was believed. It is a bond that may never be completely severed. This fact reinforces the enormous importance of the pre-oedipal phase for women, and allows for a certain correction of the idea that the Oedipus Complex is universal. Though he actually sees the difference that exists between the boy's and the girl's development of sexuality, Freud still finds a way of including difference in the theory of the Complex by stating that the girl's sexuality is the "negative face of this (complex)" In any case, the only point of connection between a boy's Oedipus Complex and a girl's sexual development is based on transforming the latter into the negative of a very clear and positive development, which is that of the male. What Freud further says is that the primary love

16 Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Freud, Sigmund. <u>Sexualidade Feminina</u>, Ed. Standard, vol. 21, Imago, RJ, 1972.

between mother and daughter is complex, difficult to understand, "archaic and full of shadows". He places the origin of paranoia and hysteria in this phase — which in itself demonstrates that Freud did not (or could not, due to the context in which he lived) see that these manifestations brought upon women are greatly influenced by the subordinate position these frequently have in a male-dominated society. This brings about confusion in regards to their self-image and the possibility of a positive identity that is not associated to men.

What does happen in order for the girl to overcome a series of phases that lead to a change in the object of love is the recognition that she is in lack (or castrated). Her clitoris, the "small penis", is insufficent and must be renounced for normal female development to take place. She must transfer the pleasure derived from the clitoris to the vagina, or else frigidity and neurosis will ensue. Thus, as Freud sees it, she automatically sees the boy's superiority through the presence of the penis. However, this does not occur without a certain resistance, which will lead her to either "rejecting her sexuality, claiming for the penis, or accepting her femininity". as Chasseguet-Smirgel's reading of Freud goes. This renunciation of the first object of love, and of the external female source of pleasure (the clitoris), i.e. the breaking of female resistance, will make her an acceptable member of society. Eventually, the effects of this phase will be felt in a woman's life since her "super-

<sup>17</sup> Freud, Sigmund, Sexualidade Feminina, Ed. Standard, vol. 21, Imago, RJ, 1972.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Chasseguet-Smirgel, Janine. <u>Sexualidade Feminina</u>, Artes Médicas, Porto Alegre, 1988, p. 17.

ego will never be as strong, as impersonal, as independent of its affective origins as what is demanded on the part of the man".

In the end, it is clear that Freudian theory places women's sexuality as some obscure, complex entity made up of resistance and negativity. Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel states this quite appropriately when she says that "female sexuality is, thus, placed entirely under the sign of lack; a lack of the vagina, of the penis, of a specific sexuality, of an adequate erotic object, a lack of her own capacities invested in herself, and the need for, after all, the clitoris to 'lack'". In addition to all these missing elements, there is a final one: the lack of an appropriate super-ego.

In works that Freud wrote in his later years, he once again approached the subject of female sexuality. In further chapters of *Female Sexuality* <sup>21</sup>, he emphasizes that the preoedipal phase is of great importance to the girl and that it also lasts longer than he originally imagined. He states the greater tendency towards bisexuality in women, and the difficulty women have in pushing towards normal development due to the plurality of sexual organs that can give her pleasure. This existence, which to Freud is so full of complexities, may bring about conflict, but, on the other hand, it also holds in it a source of creativity, a privileged spot for productive forces to flourish.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Chemama, Roland, org. <u>Dicionário de Psicanálise Larousse/Artes Médicas</u>, Editora Artes Médicas, Porto Alegre, 1995, p. 57. My translation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Chasseguet-Smirgel, Janine. <u>As Duas Árvores do Jardim: ensaios psicanalíticos sobre o papel do pai e da mãe no psiqusimo</u>, Artes Médicas, Porto Alegre, 1988, p.37. My translation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Freud, Sigmund, Sexualidade Feminina, Ed. Standard, vol 21, Imago, RJ, 1972.

Freud recognized that the work he had begun was not over: some of the psychoanalysts who had studied with him would continue to study the question of female sexuality. Helene Deutsch and Jeanne Lample-Groot contributed greatly according to Freud, because they were women and could understand a woman's sexuality more clearly. Curiously enough, these two analysts, along with Marie Bonaparte, defended a very orthodox view. Deutsch, for example, insisted on the inferiority of the female sexual organs<sup>22</sup>. In addition, women should be careful not to express masculine traces of behavior and supress any manifestations of creativity, considered active and, consequently, masculine. Marie Bonaparte, in a more radical theory, comes up with the idea that the existence of two sexual organs is a punishment inflicted upon women by Nature and, thus, one must be eliminated (she uses the example of the ritual of excision of some African tribes to illustrate)<sup>23</sup>. A war against the clitoris must be proclaimed. And Lample-Groot insisted on a point that even Freud, though having proclaimed it more than once, considered a temptation to be avoided: associating masculinity with activity and femininity with passivity.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Deutsch, Helene. <u>La Psicologia de la Mujer</u>, Editorial Losada S.A., Buenos Aires, 1960.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Bonaparte, Marie.<u>La Sexualidad de la Mujer</u>, Hormé, Buenos Aires, 1961.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Lample-Groot, J. La Evolución del Complejo de Edipo en la Mujer in Rev. De Psicoanálisis XXXV, 5, 1978.

## 1.2. RECOVERING MOTHERHOOD

The criticism of orthodox ways of seeing female development first came from Karen Horney in works such as New Ways in Psychoanalysis. Because of her discoveries, Freud himself reviewed his ideas on female sexuality. Horney was skeptical of the totalizing truth of the Oedipus Complex - she argued in favor of analyzing the social context in which men and women act. Freud, after all, was a man, and as a man could only consider a woman's sexual organs as deficient. This disregard did not stem, however, from an actual deficiency, but from comparison to the man's own sexual organ and, what is more important, from his envy of the woman's capacity to have children. In addition to this, a man's primary caretaker is usually his mother - she was the source of everything that kept him alive. The food he needed, the warmth he required and even the affection any infant longs for came from this first woman. She also taught him control and disciplined him. Horney associates these activities to deep ambivalent feelings on the part of the male: he desires and at the same time feels agressive towards his mother. Thus, the envy of the penis is greatly exaggerated by most analysts, according to Horney. The emphasis on this envy is only a way of disguising the deep envy and fear of the man in relation to the female power of creating life and, in a way, of controlling it. Though the envy of the penis does exist, it does not originate from the fear of castration but from the social superiority of men who are generally in a position of authority in the family and in society as a whole. The girl's fear of castration is more likely

to come from the real fear of rape and from a fear of rejection that originates in the girl's relationship with her father (her father first seduces her and then rejects her). In sum, Horney's theory, though still in the psychoanalytical line, declares the masculine character of psychoanalysis, the secure form by which it finds an inferior place for women in order to cover up its vision of a threatening and powerful woman.

A more contemporary analyst, Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, after reviewing some of the works of renown analysts, from Deutsch to Horney, Freud to Karl Abraham, realized that when she exposed ideas on the girl's unconscious awareness of her sexual organs, she received reactions of either criticism or amusement from her audience. Chasseguet-Smirgel then comes to the conclusion that "femininity touched us all – including analysts – in those deep conflicts we have with the first woman we know: our mother, and in our own identification with her, regardless of our sex".

Chasseguet-Smirgel, as a psychoanalyst, goes into the theory to expose deep fears on the part of the man of being totally absorved and anihilated by women (seen as the mother), thus the necessity of humiliating and stripping them of any rights. In this sense, she reinforces Horney's position of seeing a compensation take place: I (man) fear your (woman) possible power, thus, I must submit you to an inferior position. It is obvious,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Chasseguet-Smirgel, Janine. <u>As Duas Árvores do Jardim</u>, Artes Médicas, Porto Alegre, 1988, p.15. My translation.

however, since in these psychoanalytic studies individual clinical cases are studied, that the focus of the analyst's attention are those borderline cases that require treatment.

As to penis envy, Chasseguet-Smirgel uses the story of Orestes to discuss the passage of power from the mother to the father. When Orestes decides to kill his mother Clytaemnestra who, in her turn, had killed Agammenon (Orestes father), in order to revenge his father's death, he is pursued by the Erinnyes, or the Furies, who ruled before Zeus. Orestes appeals to Athena, since she was born directly from Zeus's head, without the mediation of a mother. She defends Orestes against the justice of the Erinnyes who proclaim a new era in which blood ties will have little value. To them, Clytaemnestra's crime was not as serious as Orestes' because she killed a man who was not of the same blood as she. Orestes questions the blood tie that links him to his mother and Apollo defends his point by saying that it is the man who actually generates life, the mother is only a vessel. He then uses the example of Zeus to confirm this: did he not generate Athena all by himself? Thus, the Erinnyes are stripped of their prerogatives and were eventually reduced to the object of a cult without much influence.

What Chasseguet-Smirgel wants to say with this story is that Athena does not stand up for the mother's rights, on the contrary, she aligned with Zeus. This can be seen as an analogy for the girl's necessity to step back and defend herself from the strength of maternal power. This would be the origin of the envy of the penis. In any case, the passage of power from the mother to the father gives the dimension of the importance of this primary source

of power, the necessity one feels to escape from it precisely because of its almost always forgotten strength.

This leads us to another point exposed by Chasseguet-Smirgel in relation to Ferenczi's hypothesis of the human fantasy of a return to the uterus. To Chasseguet-Smirgel this fantasy is associated to the "desire of reencountering a smooth universe, without obstacles, without rough surfaces, or differences, identified as a maternal womb to which one can have free access, representing, in terms of thought, a mental functioning with no barriers, and with psychic energy flowing freely"26. This would constitute the archaic matrix of the Oedipus Complex. The real object of desire, for a boy and a girl, will primarily be the mother; the girl, however, will act out her rivalry towards the mother in wishing for the father's penis and her ability to generate life. During pregnancy, the daughter achieves not only a connection with her mother through the fetus, but also the penis she desires. Though the idea of a fusion with the mother and the importance of the primary object of love is a great step in understanding female subjectivity, it is still closely connected to basic psychoanalysis in maintaining the penis as an object of desire as well. One would have to ask if maternity, though constituting an extremely enrichening experience of revival of feelings towards the mother, is the only form of approximation to her body. In this sense, artistic work, which entails a breaking down of barriers, attempts, with a relative degree of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Chasseguet-Smirgel, Janine. As Duas Árvores do Jardim, Artes Médicas, Porto Alegre 1988, p.47. My translation

satisfaction, depending on the instrument used (paint, clay, music, words), to find a free, unmediated form of expression, a way of returning to that smooth universe of fullness mentioned before, whose memory one has as something distant, an echo of total union with the mother's body. When the means used to create is language, the written word, this satisfaction is evidently obtained with more difficulty due to the specific characteristics in regards to language mentioned before and which will always, in one way or another, interfere with total union and transparency. Thus, the need, on the part of the author to work in and through the very difficulties that block this union, using the ambivalences of language as well as possible in favor of the text.

The question of a possible source for creativity deriving from the maternal connection was discussed by Melanie Klein whose work deeply influenced the way in which mothering is seen in psychoanalysis today. Her interest was to describe the object relations of a child, i.e., "the child's relation to internalized 'objects', most often the breast or the mother as the child's first caretaker". In this sense, Melanie Klein's work centered around the significance of the relation of the child and its mother, especially the fantasies the child has of his/her mother. This shifts the focus from the father's importance to that of the mother, thus de-emphasizing the importance of the Oedipus Complex.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Doane, Janice and Hodges, Devon. <u>From Klein to Kristeva: Psychoanalytic Feminism and the Search for the "Good Enough" Mother</u>, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1992.

The infant's feelings in regards to his/her mother as a source of good things is full of anxiety, especially in reference to the breast, due to ever-present risk (felt by the child) of loss of these good things. The anguish felt is caused by the drives of life and death and is confronted with agression - thus, the infant is said to be in a "paranoid-schizoid" position at birth. Since the mother is perceived as containing good things, but also of being a threatening object due to the drives mentioned above (the infant itself projects the "bad things" onto the mother with his/her agressive feelings) processes must take place that will function as sublimation, a mediatization between the subject and the those drives. In any case, according to Klein, the first object of connection between the infant and the mother is the breast which, if introjected and established securely, is the basis for healthy development of the individual. The breast's role as giver of nourishment (thus as giver of life) sets a physical and mental proximity that, in a way, reminds the infant of the life led before birth. The fact that this pre-natal situation will never be fully recovered is, in a way, a source of the agressive feelings mentioned above. The proof of maternal love is a constant source of conflict that is initially centered around the breast as an element of connection with the other parts of the mother.

In Envy and Gratitude (1957), Klein states that her experience with patients demonstrated that the "breast, in its good aspect, constitutes the prototype of maternal

kindness, of inexhaustable patience and generosity, as well as of creativity"28. However, creativity cannot originate simply from the satisfaction of all the infant's desires (it would actually be impossible to satisfy him/her fully since the feeling of plentitude must deal with those of anxiety and destructiveness). The immediate satisfaction of the baby's needs does not allow for appropriate adaptation to the world and its frustrations. The infant will only learn to deal with frustration if it has not been anxiously (on the part of the mother) and immediately fed. Frustration leads to conflict, which can be beneficial in the development of a strong personality. And conflict, according to Klein, is often sublimated in creative forces. Thus, conflict, the impossibility of totally and fully recovering that primal connection with the mother, in its healthiest form, results in creative activity. There seems to be, in Klein's view, a delicate balance: on the one hand, internalizing a good object (which is seen as lifegiving) is the source of creativity; on the other hand, the frustration of having to give up the total possession of the mother is sublimated, if all runs well, into creative activity. In other words, the longing for the lost object, that can be felt to exist somewhere, stimulates the individual to produce somehow in his/her life.

The infant's feelings at breastfeeding are those of utter happiness (though shortlived) and will be the basis of all further happiness and feelings of oneness with another person. Klein even goes on to say that this feeling established with another is so complete at

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Klein, Melanie. <u>Inveja e Gratidão: Um Estudo das Fontes do Inconsciente</u>, Imago Editora Ltda., Rio de Janeiro, 1974.,p. 32.

times that it needs no use of words to be understood. This would "demonstrate its origin in the most primitive intimacy with the mother in the pre-verbal stage" 29.

Klein also gave importance to the necessity of elaboration of a good enough object to serve as basis for a strong ego. The ego will defend itself from the primal pull towards death, the constant conflict between love and hate, life and annihilation, by fragmenting in order to defend itself from the paranoia of the infant. The division between the good and bad object is allowed by the infant's capacity for preserving the good object at the core of the ego. Future integration will depend not only on this good object, but also on elaborating and understanding the bad. If the good object is not rooted firmly in the ego, idealization of the object might be a way to defend oneself from persistent and destructive feelings of anxiety. Identification is well established if the feeling of possessing goodness inside onself is strong. If this is not well settled, identification is conflicting: there is confusion between the object and the I. Thus, "the idealized object is much less integrated in the ego than the good object, since it originates predominately in the persecutory anxiety and much less in the capacity for loving" of the preserving of the preserving anxiety and much less in the capacity for loving" of the preserving anxiety and much less in the capacity for loving" of the preserving anxiety and much less in the capacity for loving" of the preserving the good object, and the preserving the good object, since it originates predominately in the persecutory anxiety and much less in the capacity for loving" of the primary of the good object, and the primary of the good object is much less in the capacity for loving" of the good object, and the good object is much less in the capacity for loving" of the good object, and the good object is much less in the capacity for loving" of the good object is good object.

Melanie Klein has a different view from Freud in relation to The Oedipus Complex.

There is a direct connection between envy and jealousy. Jealousy derives from rivalry with the father, who is seen as having taken control of the mother's breast. This would signal the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Klein, Melanie. <u>Inveja e Gratidão: Um Estudo das Fontes do Inconsciente</u>, Ed. Imago, RJ, 1974.,p.47. <sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.55.

Oedipus Complex in its initial stages. If the interference of the father occurs too early, before the depressive position sets in (in which the mother starts to be seen as a whole person), he will be seen as an intruder, and the first good object will not be well absorbed. In the depressive position the father's place cannot be that of intruder; he is actually in a position of combination with the mother. As Hanna Segal says on Klein's theory: "This phantasy [of the combined parents] appears first when the infant becomes aware of his mother as a whole object but does not fully differentiate the father from her; he [sic] phantasizes the penis or the father as a part of his mother; his idealization of her makes him see her as the container of everything desirable, breasts, babies, penises<sup>33</sup>. The depressive position marks a better understanding on the part of the child of the world around him and of the fact that he/she cannot possess the mother. The father's role is to gradually be the second object who will help the child go through this phase. The success of this whole process will depend on its satisfactory elaboration, i.e., that envy of the first object is not overbearing. Jealousy will be the element to replace envy and, since it is a much less destructive force directed more towards rivals (siblings, the father), the change is positive. The boy and the girl present different behaviors in relation to this change. The boy's position is much more typical of the Oedipus phase: his rivalry with the father brings about hate, since he feels the father possesses the mother. In the girl, jealousy replaces envy as she feels genital desire for the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Doane, Janice and Hodges, Devon. From Klein to Kristeva: Psychoanalytic Feminism and the Search for the "Good Enough" Mother, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1992, p. 9.

father which permits her to find another love object. "The girl wishes to replace the mother to possess and take control of the loved babies the father gives the mother" and, thus, identification with the mother can occur.

Klein's way of seeing penis envy is not at all the way Freud sees it. In her point of view, the fact that the girl supposes her mother possesses a penis at a certain point in her development is not as important as Freud would suggest. The desire for the father's penis is mixed with genital desires of wanting this penis to give her babies. This would be previous to any desire of having a penis of her own: the desire lies in the association of the penis with a baby. As to boys, Klein also presents an innovation: the envy of the breast which, if not well resolved, can bring about a series of pathological manifestations in adult life. The excessive envy of the breast can even become the envy of the woman's capacity for childbearing. The ways to neutralize this primitive feeling come in the form of a good relationship with the mother of his own children and in establishing his role as the father.

Until this point, the theories we have seen all contributed to psychoanalysis in that they maintained much of the original theory but introduced some innovations as to the development of female identity. The search for other routes that might question the basis of Freudian psychoanalysis was undertaken by several authors. Nancy Chodorow in The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender (1978) emphasizes the role of the mother based on an object-relations theory that is different from

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Klein, Melanie. <u>Inveja e Gratidão</u>. Imago Editora Ltda., Rio de Janeiro, 1974, p. 66.

that of Melanie Klein because it does not disregard the environment in which the relation between infant and mother occurs. Klein, though having contributed greatly to the understanding of how children might function, did not place her theory in a realistic situation, with real mothers. The mother in Klein's theory is fantasized by the infant, thus the abstract terms "good" and "bad" objects, breasts, mothers. To Chodorow, it is necessary to consider the cultural and social elements that influence the mother and the infant in their fantasies and in their concrete relations.

Chodorow first calls our attention to the importance of the initial relationship that an individual establishes with another individual: his/her bonding with the mother. It is based on this first connection that a sense of being is formed, and it is because of a positive feeling of comfort and retribution that a mother can offer that this individual can maintain a feeling of personal strength and confidence. Differently from Klein, however, Chodorow states that it is the mother, and not another person, that has this role in our society because we have historically given this role to women. The child's very existence is attached to the mother and, in the beginning, the feeling of fusion is strong. The relationships that will come up later will all depend upon this initial bond, and there will be an attempt to recreate the feeling with another person.

The basic difference between the feelings the infant has towards the mother and those he has in relation to the father is that his/her love for the mother is not based on any sense of reality. The mother, because of the feeling of fusion mentioned before, is not seen

as a separate person. The father, on the other hand, especially because he does not usually take into his hands the complete care of the infant (or even an equal share), is regarded as a separate being. Therefore, this love is based on reality. According to Chodorow, this has some consequences. She says, "in the first place, the child can reveal true hate and true ambivalence more easily in relation to a father, whose necessities can be different from his child's'<sup>33</sup>. The child's feelings towards the mother are more confusing, since it is very difficult for the infant to see his/her mother as separate from him/her. Since she is, after all, the person whom the child depends on for his/her very survival, this feeling does not express itself in total hatred; it is more ambivalent than that. The explanation for the father's right over his children in this society might have its origin in this absolute and unquestionable right that the mother has. Her control is natural, it does not require actual social granting. It is as if some kind of bargaining had taken place in order for men to have control over society, while women could keep at least an initial control over the care of their infants. This, of course, leads us to the story of Orestes and the transference of power (the power to decide society's rules) from women to men.

The most important aspect of Chodorow's theory is based on her study of the difference between boys and girls and their relation to the mother during the pre-oedipal phase. The girl's Oedipus is more than just a mere change of affection from the mother to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Chodorow, Nancy. <u>Psicanálise da Maternidade: Uma Crítica a Freud a Partir da Mulher</u>, Editora Rosa dos Ventos, Rio de Janeiro, 1990, p. 109. My translation.

the father, it is certain that this relation persists for a much longer time and with much more complex feelings than can be imagined. The boy's connection to his mother is cut off, to a certain extent, by the Oedipus Complex, and this defines his personality and development in a very different way than it does for the girl. According to Chodorow, since it is the mother that cares for the girl, the feeling of unseparability and lack of boundaries between mother and daughter is greater than with her son.

Freud himself was forced to change his view on the development of girls and came to the conclusion that the pre-oedipic period had a longer duration for girls, while the strong feelings the girl has for her father is necessarily preceded by an equally strong feeling for her mother. To him, "a pre-oedipic attachment between the woman and her mother greatly determines her subsequent edipic attachment to her father and her future relationships with men in general" Freud compared the discovery of the importance of this period to finding the Minoan-Mycenaean civilization as the basis for Ancient Greek civilization, since he needed to revise his idea that the Oedipus complex was the origin of all neurosis and identity in an individual's life.

Though there are different opinions in relation to the significance of this pre-oedipus for a woman's development, it is clear that the nature of the relationship with the mother is different for boys and girls in this period, and that this difference is greatly influenced by gender-related characteristics. A mother deals with her daughter differently because they

share a common gender, which Chodorow wants to make clear has very little to do with biological factors. She says, "I use the term 'gender' here to designate the special psychic structure and relational sense of the mother, her (probable) heterosexuality, and her conscience or unconscience acceptance of the ideology, meaning and expectations that will constitute a member of a gender in our society, and include the meaning of gender." The fact that it is hard to prove the difference of behavior the mother has does not mean that in clinical studies these differences were not found. What Chodorow did see was that these were very subtle differences and that, in some cases, the same maternal behavior resulted in very diverse effects in boys and in girls.

After studying several cases reported by psychoanalysts, Chodorow concludes that these differences do, in fact, exist. The longer duration of the attachment between mother and daughter, the feeling on the part of the mother that her daughter is an extension of herself can lead to strong symbiosis and, frequently, to a narcisistic projection of the mother onto her daughter. The question, once again, seems to report back to Klein's view of the adequate internalization of the good breast, or Winnicott's<sup>36</sup> "good enough mother" theory: the psychotic (or neurotic) mother that is not adequate in her behavior towards her daughter may cause a repetition of psychotic or neurotic symptoms in the daughter, with ego and ego-corporeal distortions. The way these daughters saw themselves and reality was paralyzed in

<sup>34</sup> Freud, Sigmund. The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex, S.E., London, 1924.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Chodorow, Nancy. Psicanálise da Maternidade, Editora Rosa dos Tempos, RJ, 1990, p.129.

a phase that should have already been surpassed: that of the infant who cannot survive without her mother as a ego-filter to reality. The mother might frequently not see her daughter as a distinct person way into a phase in which this distinction became a necessity for the girl's development. The fact that appears clearly is that this behavior might stem from a fear on the part of the mother in visualizing her daughter as good and bad at the same time, i.e., as a normal human being and not as an idealization or a possibility of making everything "wrong" turn "right". This obviously is connected to the difficulty the mother has in accepting these "good" and "bad" traits in herself. In this case, the mother can never be a positive mirror to her daughter. It is also noticeable that this positive image can never be constructed by a woman (for herself and for her daughter) in a society that will insist on defining motherhood and maternal feelings in a patriarchal setting which determines a specific way of behaving on the part of the main nurturer. That this primary care is seen as possibly the origin of all neurosis is in itself a problem.

This takes us to a criticism of the object-relations theory of Chodorow: the social setting that is given importance to is that of the pre-oedipal phase and its impact as origin. Though Chodorow admits that most psychoanalytic theories end up placing the pressure on the mother and her need to satisfy the infant's desires (making this a very tricky task), she does not release herself from the idea that these desires infants have are real. Who, after all, can actually say how much and what a baby expects from its mother? Chodorow ends up

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Winnicott, D.W. The Child and the Family, Tavistock, London, 1957.

determining (in spite of her efforts to give importance to society's role in this determination) what a mother should do: when to be attached, when to let go, how to be overall adequate. The solution for this, as ambiguous as it may sound, is that the burden be shared by men. Though the job seems tough enough for women (who are historically and socially used to it, even while having other interests and necessities such as jobs), men should also try to be adequate, inspite of their workload. Thus, the quest for perfection is reproduced and not questioned.

Ultimately, Chodorow sees female identity as having advantages in relation to the male because basically the mother establishes the female as a self from which the boy must differentiate. In other words, he will have difficulty because he must assert his difference in relation to the mother, while the girl does not face any such conflict. The Oedipus Complex is much less important to her, then, than it is for the boy. Her love for her father is only added on to that for her mother. In a way, there is a certain biologism in this explanation with not much influence of culture and language involved. Chodorow does not consider, for example, the power relations established in our culture that make the image girls have of their mothers not nearly as positive as it should. The importance of the phallus, after all, symbolizes this difference in power between the genders, and a simple attempt to make up for the lack women feel will not solve much. What Chodorow actually does is invert the Oedipus Complex, which is, in a way, some form of relief for feminists who find it important

to stake claims for women, but which, ultimately, does very little in helping to effectively modify power relations.

Juliet Mitchell, one of the first feminists to study Freud's theory and its effect on female development, wrote Psychoanalysis and Feminism (1974) to defend the idea that Freud did not intend to dictate how society should work, but actually described the functioning of the patriarchal family as the source of symbols shared by a specific community: that of our Western capitalist society. The Oedipus triangle, as shown by Freud, was not only the origin of all neurosis, it was at the bottom of religion, morals, society and art<sup>37</sup>. The centering around the Oedipus Complex establishes the law of the father and, consequently, patriarchal power. After all, the boy is taught that he will rule the family and, in analogy, society's rules, while the girl will find a submissive role that will fit into this scheme. To Mitchell, Freud's theory is actually quite innovative since it reveals the "law" under which women must live while nothing is done to change this. Though Mitchell gives psychoanalysis a social aspect which was missing in Chodorow herself, as well as in other studies we have mentioned, she is criticized for defending a Lacanian view to the extent that she ignores the fact that there is a bias in every concept, even those that seem neutral. She, as well as Lacan (as we will see in more detail later), sees the unconscious as an element that is not bound to history or society and its influence.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Freud, Sigmund. <u>Totem e Tabu.</u> Ed. Standard, vol. 9, Imago, RJ, 1972.

Marianne Hirsch<sup>38</sup> takes a step further and analyses the subjectivity of women under the scope of what the daughter sees and feels in regards to her mother. By using literature, Hirsch attempts to see the daughter's way of learning about her identity by looking at her mother. Gradually, however, she turns also to the maternal experience in order for both stories to be told. She sees the story of the mother-daughter relationship untold in all segments of society – there is a gap that would need to be filled with tales of this connection. Hirsch refers to Adrienne Rich and her analysis of mothers and daughters in patriarchal society to state that what Rich is looking for, the untold, absent stories of mothers and daughters, has actually been told in literature, by women writers, frequently in a language which draws upon a knowledge that is shared by two of the same gender.

Hirsch makes a brief sketch of the trends taking form almost twenty years ago in the association of psychoanalysis and feminism which still have effect today in the way one thinks of female experience. The basis of the first is Freud, with Chodorow being mentioned as one of the authors to go into the mother-daughter relationship; the second is founded on Jung's archetypal theories, while the third deals with Lacan's writings. It is this third study that we will go into at this point, since one of the basic ideas in Lacan is that the subject is constructed by language, and language is one of the main focuses we will have in the study of the novels selected.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Hirsch, Marianne. <u>The Mother/Daughter Plot:Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism</u>, Bloomington, Indiana U. Press, 1989.

## 1.3 LANGUAGE AND THE SUBJECT -LACAN

Jacques Lacan's ideas are essential to the development of this research since, by elaborating on Freud's initial works and by rereading his theory, they bring up interesting issue's on the subject and language which are later picked up by such scholars as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, as well as others.

First, we must say that, in a way, Lacan was adopted by post-structuralist studies, since he founded a new way of thinking the subject. His studies on the subject and the unconscious are based on his deep knowledge of philosophy (especially Hegel) and his work as a psychoanalyst. His dissertation, published in 1932, is the first work in a series of essays and articles published at first in journals and/or presented at congresses, that found no echo in the psychiatric community that existed at the time. Aditionally, Lacan's defense of the constant sliding of the signified under the signifier connects him to post-structuralism's criticism of Saussurian concepts of meaning.

Lacan's rereading of Freud actually eliminates references to anatomy and to instinct. The individual's passage from one stage to another is his/her attempts to structure him/herself – the same occurs in analysis. In this sense, pathological manifestations are not organic in origin, they are actually constructions, a form of discourse that needs interpretation. This will lead us to one of Lacan's basic ideas: the unconscious is structured

like a language. Everything we see and know, the fact that we are aware of things, all depends on language. The unconscious cannot exist without language.

Lacan's elaboration of the mirror stage explains the formation of the "T". In the beginning, the child in front of the mirror does not differentiate itself from the mother, or the adult with him. Then, the child realizes the reflection is not real, and, finally, the child comes to realize that the reflection in the mirror is his/hers and that it is different from the image of the Other. Before these mirror stages, the child does not see itself as a whole being, it in fact has a fragmented vision of itself. The mirror experience unites the image of the body and neutralizes the anxiety derived from the feeling of fragmentation. Though the child is already beginning to construct himself as a subject in the mirror stage, its feeling of fusion with the mother is still present: identification takes place with its supposed object of desire. Thus, the desire of the infant and of the mother is considered to be one. Basically, what the mother desires is what is lacking in her and what the child will wish to be: the phallus. The Oedipus Complex constructs itself in the interference of the father who takes away from the child the object it desires. The mother, on the other hand, is deprived of the phallic object as well. The child then identifies with the father, who is seen as possessing the phallus and is, then, the object of desire of the mother. In other words, the father reestablishes this object of desire which does not exist as the child itself anymore. The law of the Father is symbolically a castration and a determination of the mother's desire as not

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Lacan, J. Escritos, Editora Perspectiva, São Paulo, 1978.

deprived by the father. Thus, the child enters group life, social laws and organization and sees its place in the world. Acquisition of language goes hand in hand with this acquisition of culture.

What is more interesting is that the child passes from a question of being to that of having: the boy, more specifically, is no longer the maternal phallus and wants to have a phallus. The girl, on the other hand, also gives up being the maternal object of desire and sees the whole question of having as that of "not having". In this way, she can identify with the mother and look for the missing object where she is sure to find it: with the father.

Language, to Lacan, conditions the unconscious, which should be seen as a structure (similar to that of language itself). Certain manifestations of the unconscious (seen in slips of the tongue, jokes and dreams, for example) can be considered the underlying parts of discourse, as if conscious language had covered them up and one could only perceive them by reading between the lines. Since Lacan sees these manifestations of the unconscious as functioning in the same way as those mechanisms in language, i.e. metaphor and metonymy, he gives a great deal of attention to these mechanisms and compares them to Freud's condensation and displacement, and their role in proving the importance of the signifier over the signified, i.e., the fact that words are actually autonomous from meaning. The subject is under the rule of the signifier, even when s/he thinks s/he is not. The idea that the subject controls language and not the contrary is mere illusion, since in those places where we imagine language is loose, there is already a

predetermination of how we think of ourselves and the world around us. Thus, the subject is in language and cannot escape it: language is the only way of having access to the world.

Language has a great deal of importance in Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, as Madan Sarup in his introduction to post-structuralism and postmodernism explains. He refers to Lacan's ideas (quite different from Saussure's) on the impossibility of ever coming to an ultimate signifier, one that will be a "final replacement". The chain of signifiers is constant, since one signifier always refers to another and another, and so on. In this way, a word must be completed by another, a sentence can be completed by another, ad infinitum.

Lacan's ideas on identity are also of great significance. As Sarup says on Lacan's questioning of what it is to be conscious of onself, two basic concepts were created: the infinity of reflection and the dialectic of recognition. These terms are interconnected, the first deriving from Lacan's readings of Hegel's theories on the dialectics of identification of the self to the other, and the other to the self, which explains the very constitution of the subject to him/herself. To Hegel the three instances of the formation of consciousness leads to a final instance which is that of the consciousness' discovery of the other as a consciousness of itself as well. This results in the awareness of a multiplicity of consciousnesses, in the idea that desire is the desire for the other's desire, and that a consciousness can only recognize itself in the other because the other recognizes itself in it. Deriving from these ideas, we have Lacan's elaboration of the metaphor of the child before the mirror and the question of what it is that reflects consciousness back to us. In addition,

these terms refer to how we get the "knowledge of what we are from how others respond to us" Though Winnicott refers to the stability of identity which is acheived by the infant looking at its mother, Lacan says that this stability is mere illusion due to the mistakes that can occur in how others see us. We have a notion of our identity, but this rarely coincides with reality.

There are a series of losses that the subject must face throughout his/her development. The first takes place at birth: not only does the infant separate from the mother, it realizes it cannot be both male and female. The second loss occurs in the passage of the child's libido from incoherence to culturally accepted drives. This phase has much to do with the discoveries the child makes of its own identity. The mirror reflects back an image that gives the fragmented subject a notion of wholeness. At the same time, this feeling is disrupted by the sense that the reflection in the mirror is the Other. So, the image is both intimately connected to the subject and a stranger. The term Lacan uses to define this process of identification and misinterpretation of identity is the Imaginary.

The imaginary is an instance before the symbolic order in which language forevers cuts the subject from basic drives and needs. It is pre-Oedipal and is marked by a desire on the part of the self for fusion with the Other. The self perceives its image as mixed with that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Sarup, Madan. <u>An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism</u>, The University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1993,p. 12.

of others and introjects a picture of itself as a composition of misrecognitions, thus, not forming a unity in terms of identity.

The symbolic order will be established with the Oedipus complex through the acquisiton of language. The Law of the Father will make sense of the lack brought on by the continual replacement of signifiers only through its replacement of the phallic mother. Thus, while the imaginary is associated to transgression of those laws which allow for the survival of humanity, the symbolic refers to the limits imposed and established by the laws. The whole purpose of the symbolic pattern is to permit the infant's entrance into civilized society. It allows the individual to hold the image of the mother in his/her unconsious, though she is absent in the real world. This relation between the object which is only represented and that which does not exist is the symbolic. It is closely associated to desire.

Desire is the motor of humans – one of our main concerns is finding ways to satisfy a yearning based on past experiences. Thus, to a stimulus, an answer is needed; if it is hunger, then food, via the mother when we are infants, must be provided. With this satisfaction, through the mother, another stimulus is placed, since it is "the maternal presence (that has) generated a new stimulus, since this representative now generates, one can say, libidinal hunger". The fact which becomes evident is that desire, as Antonio Cabas states,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Cabas, Antonio Godino. <u>Curso e Discurso da Obra de Jacques Lacan</u>, Col. Biblioteca Freudiana Brasileira. Editora Moraes, São Paulo, 1982, p.46.My translation.

transgresses the simple organic necessities, such as the need for food. Thus, satisfaction of desire, through any object, is not able to soothen every tension we manifest:

Of all objects, it is impossible to think of one which, effectively, can supress all stimuli. This is because each object supresses one stimulus but not all at the same time. The only object which is capable of supressing all stimuli simultaneously is death.<sup>42</sup>

In this sense, the intention of human existence is to find that original state of grace in which perfect balance and lack of tension was the rule. While there is a lack, a gap in existence, living is possible. The perfection yearned for is found only in "Mother Earth", which according to Cabas' reading of Lacan, is timeless.

It is obvious that Lacan's theory received criticism and rereadings from diverse sectors interested in cultural, social, psychological, historical and economical issues, to name a few. However, from a feminist point of view, the basic criticism stems from some questions asked, such as: since it it the Phallus which becomes the dominant signifier, where do women find their place as subject? How can women have access to language based on an economy of having or not having? Language exists before the birth of the child and already it determines its identity and the relationship it will have with the world around it.

## 1.4 THOUGHTS ON THE IMAGINARY - KRISTEVA

If Lacan reread Freud, many other authors have also revised Lacan to a greater or smaller degree. One of the first we must mention is Julia Kristeva whose focus on the mother digresses from Lacan's account on the individual's development. Kristeva's original studies in linguistics were soon connected to those in psychoanalysis, feminism, sexuality and love. Similarily to Lacan, then, Kristeva focuses a great deal of attention on the significance of language in the development of the subject in such works as Le Langage, cet Inconnu and La Revolution du langage poétique, among others. However, Kristeva's main attention is directed towards the pre-Oedipal bond and all the libidinal drives flowing in this stage. Lacan did not believe one could actually know what lied beyond the mirror stage, while to Kristeva this only meant that what was there had been repressed by the symbolic. To her, language derives from this stage, from the maternal pre-symbolic. In the same way, when the Oedipus phase sets in there is already a psychic structure that has been established. The father appears, but only afterwards; "the mother has a desire for something beyond herself, and this desire directs the pre-oedipal child to an ideal pre-linguistic identification ... with an 'imaginary father'". The mother desires something she does not

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Cabas, Antonio Godino. <u>Curso e Discurso da Obra de Jacques Lacan</u>, Col. Biblioteca Freudiana Brasileira, Editora Moraes, SP, 1982, p. 47..My translation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Nye, Andrea. <u>Teoria Feminista e as Filosofias do Homem</u>, Editora Rosa dos Tempos, Rio de Janeiro, 1995, p. 173.

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have and becomes an abject mother, undesirable and unpleasant. To Kristeva, the abject

must be dominated in order for the formation of the ego to occur. The subject's fear of the

abject stems from a fantasy of possibly disappearing because of the invasiveness of the

mother's relation with her child. The mother's role, then, is to contain a language that must

eventually be repressed in order for the child to grow normally.

Kristeva's views on the connection between the imaginary and the symbolic are different

from Lacan's since she sees no absolute break between them. Actually, the pre-symbolic

erupts in many ways: first, one may, of course, see this in the more irrational manifestations

of psychotic and borderline patients, whose self presented formation problems going way

back to the pre-oedipal period. Kristeva also sees poetry as a way out for the repressed

imaginary.44 Poetry plays with words in terms of rythym, ryhme, musicality, repetition,

meaning, nonsense. In a way, poetry not only can be a call back to infantile language, it also

recalls, according to Kristeva, cults and rituals of primitive times, in which birth, fertility and

death were celebrated. In poetry, grammar can be subverted, sense is not necessarily direct

and clear. Poetic language as a whole is present in women's lives since they are infants and

for them, particularly, the possible illogicity of language is less of a problem than it is for

men. Some important qualities present in poetry, including gesture, chant, and lulling

sounds, recalls mothering and its pleasures.

<sup>44</sup> Kristeva, Julia. <u>Revolution in Poetic Language</u>, Columbia U. Press, New York, 1984.

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Kristeva included linguistic terminology in her theory of the subject. She uses the term semiotic to refer to the pre-oedipal period's drives and all its "polymorphous erotogenic zones, orifices and organs" It is this material that must be placed under restraint in order for normal development to take place. The child feels, at this phase, both comforted and threatened by the mother's body, and its attempts at subject formation are constantly put to the test. At the same time the infant feels this series of drives which flow through it without any specificity or aim, it must learn, through symbolic control, to direct these drives. This space, or locus characterized by the fear of annihilation, is called by Kristeva the chora, taken from Plato. This chora is the place for subversion of all that is rational, however, it is also a threat because it can lead to inertia and death.

The connection of the semiotic with the avant-garde is made evident in Kristeva's theory. The artists of these avant-garde productions, however, do not limit themselves to women, since Kristeva mentions Mallarmé, James Joyce, Artaud among others, all of which break the rules of coherence. This is because to Kristeva, sexual difference is non-existent in the pre-oedipal phase. For girls there is a choice to make: either the girl will choose to identify strongly with her mother, thus becoming alienated from the symbolic order; or she will identify with the father and be included in the symbolic, i.e., find her place. Since the mother's body is both feminine and masculine in the pre-oedipal phase, both men and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Sarup, Madan. <u>An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism</u>, The University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1993, p. 124.

women can be excluded from the symbolic and, thus, create works of art that are avantgarde. Curiously, however, she does not mention women artists in her list of the avantgarde.

All in all, Kristeva's main concern in regards to the maternal turns to a specific prelanguage which, she admits, risks sliding into metaphysics. However, as explained in Doane and Hodges' book on psychoanalytic feminism, Kristeva's obsession, as well as the obsession of the melancholic, "with the mother as primal object is a requirement of Western metaphysics and subjectivity. This requirement, she insists, encourages a capacity to feel pain as truth, a capacity that also facilitates a desire to dissolve sadness in endlessly individualized discursive performances<sup>7,46</sup>. Kristeva sees artistic production as a way to sublimate this pain, which is brought on by the separation from the primal object, lost forever. Thus, suffering does have a link to the feminine side in all of us, a thought which does not do much to enable women to escape a certain pre-conception of what is essentially feminine. Unfortunately, Kristeva connects the "feminine", especially in male writers, to a great deal of pain (perhaps pain in pleasure?), while giving men the capacity to use this pain in artistic creation and not women. The depressed woman seems to be confined in her depression, while the man is liberated by art.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Doane, Janice and Hodges, Devon. <u>From Klein to Kristeva</u>, <u>Psychoanalytic Feminism and the Search for the "Good Enough" Mother</u>, the University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1995,p. 68.

1.5 FEMINISM AND THE QUESTION OF DIFFERENCE- CIXOUS, IRIGARAY/DE LAURETIS, BRAIDOTTI

Besides Hélène Cixous' association to Derrida's theory of deconstruction, the most significant idea in the development of her studies is the defence of a style of writing related to the body. In the "Laugh of the Medusa", Cixous writes that woman in writing "must write herself", must be drawn back to writing as she must also recover the body she has lost control over. Cixous also sees the need to destroy the past, in similarity to Derrida's espousal of deconstruction of forms of authority and binary oppostion. At the same time, Cixous' "woman" is the one to go against the man of patriarchal rule, and though she is not homogenous, on the contrary, she is multiple and unclassifiable, she must have one common goal with all others, which is this struggle against patriarchy.

Cixous' text itself is a flow of words that represents the liquid, never-ending boundary of women's bodies. Her style reflects what she defends: that any writing derived from a woman's creative mind must also flow from her limitless body and form the multiplicty of its functions. Since writing has been used to reproduce the system, it is an obligation that this woman's writing be constantly breaking away from convention, undermining the rules established by literary canons. It is culture that determines how women relate to their bodies,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Cixous, Hèléne, *The Laugh of the Medusa* in New French Feminisms, ed. Elaine Marles and Isabelle de Coutrivon, Shodken, New York, 1980, p. 245.

a culture in which rules are set by men, thus, a writing that can break away, provoke a change in the way this culture functions is of absolute importance to women. The same can be said of a woman's speech since writing and speaking are intertwinned to Cixous - in fact, writing is a prolongation of a woman's voice. Basically, the voice for a woman is always evocative of a primeval state which reaches back to her mother, through the memory of sounds, rhythms and song. Cixous associates the relationship a woman has with her voice with the positive relationship she has maintained with the "mother" as a source of good things. She says, "there is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink" 148.

It is in this sense that Cixous' work presents relevant aspects to the analysis undertaken in this research: the significance she gives to the maternal aspects of the relationship between women. She goes as far as to say that women, even if the result of bad mothering, have a spring of good possibilities, of self-love that can be activated in their favor. The positive aspects of this idea is that the mother in this case is not the overbearing woman that suffocates (often a portrayal in our culture), but that source that allows woman to reach out to language and all its richness of metaphor and rhythm. Thus, the mother is a source of nourishment that can reestablish dignity and self-respect to a woman's life.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Cixous, Hélène. *The Laugh of the Medusa* in New French Feminisms, Elaine Marles and Isabelle de Coutrivon, ed., Shodken, New York, 1980, p. 251.

It is this that will operate any change in systems: women's possibilities of reinventing themselves because of the prodigy of their drives. It is here that social change can occur. Cixous refers then to a different form of exchange from that which man has been accostumed: one not based on guarantees of return, but on giving freely. This she associates to the rejection of security in terms of identity and the plurality of subjects created by women.

The basis for women's writing is totally dissociated from the masculine "masturbatory" form of writing, i.e., one that glorifies the reduction to one and only one evident sexuality. Cixous' idea of bisexuality is not that of totality, in which two parts can make a whole, but one that does not eliminate difference and multiplicity of desires. She defines it thus: "Bisexuality: that is, each one's location in self (répérage en soi) of the presence ... of both sexes, nonexclusion either of the difference or of one sex, and from this 'self-permission', multiplication of the effects of the inscription of desire, over all parts of my body and the other body" Thus, at the same time, Cixous' form of seeing writing destroys the traditional Freudian concept of bisexuality by redefining it in order for it to function in femininity, and it also rediscusses the concept of the unitary subject that holds a stable identity.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Cixous, Hélène. *The Laugh of the Medusa* in Elaine Marles and Isabelle de Coutrivon, ed., Shodken, New York, 1980, p.254.

Cixous considers feminine writing special because it has not lost its contact with the body and with the power of the voice. The language of women can be transgressive in this sense: it does not fragment and systematize what belongs to speech and what does not, what is of the mind and what pertains to the body. It must go beyond the conventional categories of what is male and what is female and "write the body", in her words. By doing this, women can recover their lost bodies, bodies that have been covered up, made up and molded because women have learned to feel shame and contempt for what they are. To Cixous, women's contacts with their bodies have been made shameful and have been belittled, thus the repression that has such an effect on women's language.

Our language has been, for so long, the language of men. The role of women writers would be to take over this language, in which she has been placed as signifier, and invert its possible meanings, making her text become explosive. Cixous states that "a feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive" consequently, it is her responsibility not to be trapped in a masculine language. To her, the writer who says her text is neither feminine nor masculine is only playing, perhaps without knowing, inside the dominant male form of writing. Though Cixous sees this kind of work in men writers such as Poe (who experiment with subjectivity), her great discovery was the fiction of the Brazilian novelist Clarice

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Hélène Cixous. *The Laugh of the Medusa* in New French Feminisms, Elaine Marles and Isabelle de Coutrivon, ed., Shodken, NY, 1980, p.258.

Lispector, who has dealt with language and subjectivity much in the same way as she herself has.

Luce Irigaray's work also has many references to Derrida, as well as to Lacan and Freud. Similarly to Cixous, she also defends the idea of the feminine writing, the *écriture de la femme*, which would disrupt male logocentrism. Irigaray's critique of Western philosophy and psychoanalysis led her to establishing the need women have of not only creating a language of their own, but also of defining their identity inspite of the great problem of how to go about it when we are already rooted inside an economy based on patriarchal rule.

In her book Speculum of the Other Woman, Irigaray begins by exposing Freud's ideas on mothering and female development not in a way that will simplify his theory, but in order to show us the intricacies of psychoanalysis and how it determines the way we accept this theory. Her reading between the lines is closely related to Derrida's deconstruction theory in that it slowly reveals the backbone of our society's functioning. To begin with, Irigaray questions the fact of there not being a clear knowledge, on the part of the girl, of her sexual organs in their plural forms, clitoris, vulva, vagina. To her, the girl is certainly aware of their existence and of the pleasure derived from them. Freud would simply ignore their existence because there is nothing to compare with these in terms of male pleasure. Certainly the girl would have to abandon all pleasure coming from this multiplicity of organs with the establishment of the Oedipus complex, in order for her to be included in the Law of the Father, which gives sense to everything.

Irigaray's main concern when critiquing psychoanalysis is to find the importance of the lost relation between mother and daughter. To her, it is contradictory that Freud refer to this original love as the source of all desire, only displaced by that of the father, when it is necessary, for normal development to be assured, that this love turn to hate. It is only in this way that the father can become the desired object of the girl's affection. The mother is, after all, such a disappointment to the girl, not possessing what she desires, not being able to fulfill her needs, that she turns to her father. He, on the other hand, sustains the desire, seduces the girl in a way, but cannot fulfill her wishes either. He forbids it by his word, which is law. The contempt the girl feels for her mother's lack is also felt in the discomfort and shame she feels towards her own sexual organs and towards her body in general. Thus, the female body can never be positive, never be the source of pleasure.

The lack of the female, which is basic in the phallic order, exiles the girl from her mother's body, since there is nothing else there to see, to report, to observe. This would end the story for the girl, if not for a small detail which Freud, at the end of his life, considered undeniably difficult to understand: this story did have another story underneath it, a pre-history of the girl's bond to her mother, the pre-Oedipal phase which still needed uncovering. Perhaps, in this pre-history, another economy could be found for the woman's identity. In any case, the lack referred to before was still considered the crucial point in female sexuality, and could not be ignored. This is the cruxis of the phallologocentric culture: everything being based on the possibility of seeing, of gazing upon, leads to the

absolute discomfort with what cannot be seen. It is best, under our society's rules, to place this unseeable hole which women possess under surveillance, says Irigaray, so the prevailing order does not lose its dominance. The lack, after all, is a challenge to the imaginary regulated by sight, by the positive and by rules of possession. In addition to this, the horror caused by this "hole" causes a certain "unheimlich" feeling. What before was the origin of everyone, may cause an ambiguous feeling of comfort and familiarity, on the one hand, and fear on the other. The recognition of this certain unfamiliarity does not lead society to revealing and attempting to understand a different economy, not necessarily ruled by the desires and by the unity of the phallocentric order. There is necessarily only one desire, which is male, and, without a question, the multiplicity of desires women present, the fact that these desires do not direct themselves necessarily to the male is threatening to the unity of male desire. There is, therefore, only one desire, one that is linked to appropriation and imposition.

This impossibility of the woman making her mark, according to Irigaray, due to her nonsymbolization except as object of discourse, results in the several symptoms so frequently attached to women: hysteria, depression (or melancholia, as she refers to it), schyzophrenia, paranoia, etc. It is obvious why these symptoms appear: not being able to represent her desire, neither herself, castrated, repressed in her original love for her mother, forbidden to desire her father, but made only to desire him, something must come up in the form that it may – it is the body that will show the signs of this nonsymbolization.

In one of the most important chapters of Speculum, "Any Theory of the 'Subject' Has Always Been Appropriated by the 'Masculine", Irigaray goes into the lack of representation women face as non-subjects of discourse. That she is the eternal object of discourse is clear, and her role is the mirroring of the male subject, the maintenance of the illusion that all is stable and unified. However, as Irigaray says, this object "is not as massive, as resistant, as one might wish to believe"51, and attempts to appropriate the object are met with failure. All in all, every theory of the subject, in which evidently pychoanalysis is included, has as its main objective "only to scrutinize the history of (the) subject ... without interpreting the historical determinants of the constitution of the 'subject' as the same', and to never delve too deeply into the possibility language offers to analyze its link to repression, especially that of the maternal origin, restating repeatedly the discourse already there, the unitary, logocentric sameness. The speculum is an instrument of scrutiny, of observation, of gazing upon the object with the greatest of care, but it is also an instrument of dilation, of penetrating in the interior and exploring the object further. Thus, the goal is to feteshize the object in all forms possible. Irigaray's conclusion to this is that even if the exploratory project of male desire were to sucessfully be "unveiled to his sight", he would not have anything more than before. Actually, he will only have eroded even more his place of desire, the place which he believes to contain the answer to the mystery. The mystery can only have

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Irigaray, Luce. Speculum of the Other Woman, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1986, p. 134. <sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.139.

an answer that he already knows, at the risk of blowing to pieces the very system that is at the basis of our culture's beliefs.

It is not enough, says Irigaray, in order to be the female subject, to take over the word and use it. The occupation of this place is definitely linked to changes in social practices. It is of extreme importance to understand that "part of the definition of woman-as-subject is that women must be involved in the making of cultural and political reality"53. In regards to language more specifically, both Cixous and Irigaray defend a deep criticism of the form in which the structure of language functions. To them, language, as it is, does not have the purpose of communication, but of perpetuating sexism. A criticism of patriarchal society is intimately linked to a questioning of the language upon which this society is based. Consequently, the ideological components of grammar and semantics need to be analyzed in depth in order for one to understand and, perhaps, correct the prejudice contained in language. It is clear to these authors that this is so if one reminds oneself that the basis of our knowledge system, that of science and of logic, is connected to the basis of how our language functions. Thus, the participation of women in the political and economic areas of our society will never be of any use if the basis upon which these areas rest is not changed and restructured. In this way, Irigaray specifically proposes, as a form of criticism, the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Sarup, Madan. <u>An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism</u>, University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1993, p. 121.

development of speech which is external to these political, economic theories, external to theories dominated by our society in general.

The focus shifts once again, and more radically so, when one analyzes these attempts to escape Western culture's attachment to patriarchy, to find a narrative that can elude this master narrative. If Irigaray and Cixous suggest perhaps that marginality is the solution, it is evident that this solves only partially the problems of women as subjects of discourse. Being on the outskirts is subversive in that it escapes attempts at definition and theorization, but runs the risk of keeping women, especially women artists, still attached, because of difference, to the Western narrative they would need to get away from. Again, the significance of the relation between women must be focused. When Irigaray and Cixous refer to the love and identification between daughter and mother they are absolutely correct in emphasizing this relation and its importance in the development of female identity. It is undeniable that these scholars make it a responsibility of any feminist theory to offer ways of rethinking how the female subject can be expressed, and how to make female knowledge legitimate. What needs to be done should not make female experience and knowledge fall into marginality since it is doubtful that any action in the direction of change can occur when focused only on the outskirts. Again, being on the outskirts means being paralyzed in the place of the different without ever finding an escape. It also inevitably places the female subject as totally dependent again of a male-oriented language, theory and representation of herself.

Thus, feminist studies have turned their attention to how gender can get away from the eternal position of sexual difference, dominant in the studies carried out in the 60s and 70s, to the way gender is represented, constructed and built into a system. In this sense, the work of Teresa de Lauretis and Rosi Braidotti offer keen observations into the issue of gender and how it can help feminism escape phallocentrism and the margins as well. To Teresa de Lauretis, one of the central points that must be observed in the study of gender is that the difference between women was rarely studied when "difference" was the question. The emphasis always had to do with "difference in relation to men", especially in regards to signification and discourse. To de Lauretis, this keeps feminism chained down to Western patriarchy, "contained within the frame of a conceptual opposition that is 'always already' inscribed in what Frederic Jameson would call 'the political unconscious' of dominant cultural discourses and their underlying 'master narratives'"54. To her it is of the utmost importance to see the differences between women and within women if one is to go beyond the usual views on gender. Besides, another difficulty that arises with this emphasis on sexual difference alone is that gender needs to be crossed with other forms of social representation such as class, race, religion, work relations, sexual orientation, etc. In this way, there could be an escape from the unitary or bidimensional form of seeing the subject into a multiplicity of forms.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Lauretis, Teresa de. *The Technology of Gender* in <u>Technologies of Gender</u>: <u>Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction</u>, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1987, p.01

De Lauretis starts her discussion on gender from Focault's notion of technology of sex, stating that, like sex, gender is the result of several technologies (cinema, science, law, education, academic theory, daily practices). However, she goes one step further by placing gender not only as the product but also as part of the process of these social technologies since, in her words, "[Focault's] understanding of the technology of sex did not take into account its differential solicitation of male and female subjects" and did not consider the very different ways discourse and practices are determined in relation to sexuality for men and women.

From this point on, de Lauretis develops the ways in which gender, though having effects on the material life of individuals, is a representation, constructed by all the instruments which Althusser named the "ideological state apparati", and by the very institutions and instances which would not normally be considered so evidently influential in its construction such as the academy, the avant-garde, intellectual circles and feminism itself. Gender is also, according to de Lauretis, "like the real ... not only the effect of representation but also its excess, what remains outside discourse as a potential trauma which can rupture or destabilize, if not contained, any representation" 56.

Althusser's definition of ideology also serves as an analogy to the definition of gender.

When he says that ideology's main function is the establishment of concrete individuals as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Lauretis, Teresa de. *The Technology og Gender* in <u>Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction</u>, Indiana U. Press, Bloomington, 1987, p. 03.

subjects, one can transfer the basis of this statement to gender as well, only it will read "gender has the function of ... constituting individuals as men and women"57. The shift is evident. Whereas Althusser's theory of the subject derived from ideology is taken from Lacan's ungendered subject (there is no inclusion of the female as subject in any way in the realm of theory), the word "concrete" gives gender the only possibility, it seems, to inclusion in some sort of system. However, if one were to take the definition given by Althusser of ideology not as the real relations that define the lives of individuals, but "the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live and which govern their existence",58, one would have, as de Lauretis observes, that theory and philosophy can only represent this imaginary relation, and are, consequently, uncapable of seeing their role in the ideology of gender. Althusser's developments on ideology have become themselves a technology of gender, exercising "control over the field of social meaning".59

Furthermore, Althusser says ideology has no "outside", i.e., it is so well constructed that the individual inside it cannot see how caught up s/he is in it. The only way one could see ideology as the imaginary relation mentioned above would be through science. Now, in regards to the female subject, there is a slightly more complex consideration. The female subject is different from Woman (the essence of all women, be it Nature, Mother, Evil, etc),

56 Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 06. <sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

but she is also not to be confused with the concrete beings that are "defined by the technology of gender and actually engendered in social relations<sup>260</sup>. What de Lauretis wants us to see is the female subject as in the process of being defined, more of a theoretical construct, similarly to Althusser's idea of the subject, i.e., " a way of conceptualizing, of understanding, of accounting for certain processes, not women"61. One must be able to see and understand the several complexities of the representation of Woman and the evident contradictions of this with the situation of "real" women as subjects. Thus, women are "inside and outside gender, at once within and without representation"<sup>62</sup>, that is to say, we see ourselves caught inside ideology as the imaginary Woman, but we certainly know we are not that, though it is a form of being seen. We are also, and especially, the real beings that are constructed by social relations, gender being the principal factor, as well as race and class and all the other multiple forms by which we relate to the real world. The task of feminist studies today would necessarily take into account this position of inside and outside, understanding its implications for women and their role in society. It is of no use to simply reduce gender to "différance", see it as "purely discursive effects", as it is of no use to attempt to simply demand equality for males and females, thus ignoring the fact that gender relations exist regardless of this equality.

fo Ibid., p. 10.Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Thid.

The sexualization of the female body has been the subject of several "technologies", using Focault's term (ideas that can be found in his The History of Sexuality), and it certainly is the object of techniques used in our culture in order to legitimize a discourse that has the power to define it. It has certainly been seen in cinema where feminist film theorists have focused on the forms by which specific cinematic codes and techniques "construct woman as image, as the object of the spectator's voyeuristic gaze". Cinema's theorization has revealed the role it has as a technology of gender on the one hand, and its concern with the ways in which the representation of gender is elaborated as well. It has also focused on the spectator, on how the movie is seen by the individual, which is evidently determined by the gender of this individual. According to de Lauretis, cinema has taken the study of gender beyond Focault's theory because it considers the specificity of male and female sexuality in a way that Focault did not. To de Lauretis, sexuality's male and female representation, and the way in which it is constructed, is simplified in a male-dominated society to focusing on only male sexuality. It is clear that the construction of sexuality reads like the construction of a story in patriarchal society, which frequently describes narrative, the telling of the story, as similar to the pleasure of sex, of revealing the truth, of learning the origin.

The link between narrative and ideology has become more and more evident in studies carried out today which deal with how narrative is structured, and what sort of processes are at work in the production of texts, therefore it is of extreme importance to see closely what

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

is behind the telling of stories and also behind the theories created to legitimize the forms in which stories are told. Narratology, the science of studying literature in the light of structuralism, directs its attention to myths as basic variations of the same theme. There were constant, universal structures that aimed at organizing the ways of the world. Thus, narrative is defined as making sense out of the world that surrounds us, and what we can observe is that this sense is derived from very specific models that places the hero as the subject, always male, and the obstacle which the hero must overcome as symbolized in several ways by the female. Myths are constructed in this fashion, and one of the most famous myths that can exemplify this is that of Oedipus. The Sphinx, half beast, half female, presents the riddle (the obstacle) which Oedipus must answer on the way to completing his destiny. That the story of the Sphinx is never told, because she is the background, or better yet, takes the place of space and object in the story, is not brought up. Thus, narrative, which makes sense of life, reenacts a drama that departs from sexual difference, placing the subject as male and the object, the female, as a counterpoint to his story. The reader is already, in the act of reading, restricted to one or the other position.

What de Lauretis wants to make clear in her exposition of narrativity and ideology is that not only is the myth itself representative of the fixed definition of the specific sexual places in a story, but that the views held by those who study narrative reinforce this mechanism and lead us to asking how female readers can identify with the role alloted to them. If we take, for example, psychoanalysis again and its link to narrativity, once more it becomes evident

how the use of narrative structures are significant in the patient's telling of his/her story, and the dependency of psychoanlysis to the Oedipus narrative. It is this myth that Freud chose to symbolize "Everyman's passage into adult life, his advent to culture and history". revealing the necessity of searching for a male origin and completing the necessary tasks that will lead to the future, while at the same time it represents the impossibility of ever going back in time. It is a story, like most, that requires from the male hero the confrontation of obstacles, their defeat and a subsequent elevation to a position of greater wisdom and stability. The analysis of Dora, carried out by Freud and described in his study on hysteria, attempted to place the history of this patient within the typical Oedipal framework of the sexual attraction between daughter and father. However, despite the emphatic affirmation of this tale being typical, it is one that was not concluded. Dora did not finish her analysis and, in this way, refused to comply to what the analyst wanted from her. The narrative, after all, would need, in order for it to conclude accordingly, to fulfill the expectations on the part of the analyst (Freud), who controls the comings and goings of the patient's text. Dora refuses to do so, thus her story is incomplete.

Freud's story of how femininity is developed, already known to all of us, by following the Oedipus narrative is one of great peril and suffering, as well as doubt and self-recrimination for women. The story of identity and sexuality, in this sense the story of male desire,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Lauretis, Teresa de. <u>Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema, Indiana University Press, Bloomington,</u> 1984, p. 125.

requires from woman that she answer to it, either willingly or by coercion, but that she answer nevertheless. And the coercion can be obtained through ideology, or through economic restraints, or any other form. In the narrative governed by Oedipus, "situated within the system of exchange instituted by the incest prohibition where the woman functions as both sign (representation) and a value (object)"<sup>65</sup>, woman is present as support to the myth created by man.

This leads once again to Leigh Gilmore's text "The Gaze of the Other Woman" and to the possibilities of reverting the position of object of a narrative, of support to the male myth. What Gilmore sees as a way out for women's creative production is present in narratives (she focuses particularly on the works of Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore and Adrienne Rich) that do not necessarily visualize the muse, the other, as an opponent to be battled, destroyed, but as an ally which inspires the richness and unfamiliarity (in traditional terms) of the symbolism used. In Dickinson, for example, Gilmore sees the poet in search of the muse who enchants and seduces without any feeling of threat being awakened in the poet. At the same time, the use that is made of the term "dark" is far from the expected idea of terror or death that engulfs the poet. On the contrary, it is felt to be extremely beautiful, sensual, without a sign of peril. This and a series of other inversions, seen in several poems,

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p.140.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Gilmore, Leigh. The Gaze of the Other Woman: Beholding and Begetting in Dickinson, Moore and Rich in Engendering the Word (Feminist Essays in Psychosexual Poetics), edited by Temma F. Berg et al., U. of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1989.

leads us to see language in a totally new light in which sound is given precedence over sight, in which the initiation of the young poet is not that of a subordinate, but of an equal. The precursor can show a way into language that is playful, that refers to an identification that, in Freud's theory, would be dangerous: this first woman, or mother, remains as the girl's first love, never to be disdained even with her later bonding to her father. The same is seen in Moore and Rich, who, in a similar way to Dickinson, cast an appreciative look at the other woman, the mother, the friend, never once afraid of being dragged down by narcissism, never being threatened by the Sphinx's riddle. The narrative that allows this opens the doors to possible transgression, thus, tales must be told that are outside the tradition and which give women not a sense of lack, but of cumplicity.

The questions Rose Braidotti asks reflect the same preoccupations: where do we find the words to say what has been ignored in a narrative that gives so much importance to battling and overcoming the other? The metaphor of the mother, according to her, can be seen as possessing two sides, one which legitimates patriarchy and the role of women in our society (a technology of gender which places women in an established role); the other seen as a new paradigm, as can be found in the works of Irigaray, for example. In a system that places the Name of the Father as an essential mark, placing the mother (or the figure of the other woman) in a supportive, positive position can legitimize a knowledge that has been placed on the margins for too long.

Thus, a discourse that escapes the phallocentric order is the task to be faced not only by feminists, and theorists of language and literature who deal with women's issues, but also by the woman artist attempting to find her place and language in an artistic tradition that is ruled by sameness. In analyzing the works of a few women writers who in their texts "tell tales outside the oedipal", one will perhaps redirect the way in which experiences are told, and in which interpretation of texts can be carried out. The direction taken by Western thought has lost the possibility of a more plural and richer form of observation and analysis. It will be the task of the next chapters to attempt to focus on the representation of the experience of women and see the inspiration this has brought not only to their development but also to the narrative employed in the novels chosen.

## II. TO THE LIGHTHOUSE: UNITY AND BEAUTY

## 1. The Artist's Utopia

Virginia Woolf, at the beginning of this century, was one of the most preoccupied writers when it came to reflecting on what women needed to do, and how they could go about doing so, to strengthen their position in a society that had pre-determined what roles were right for them. Her ideas of more than fifty years ago still continue to haunt the concerns of feminists and writers today – questions such as the need to look back and find the existence of our "mothers" or "sisters", writers (artists, scientists, etc.) that were already there opening the way; the possibility of one movement (feminism) joining with other social, political movements in order to gain forces, the creation of a language, a narrative and/or a style that could express the specificities of female experience – all these points, and all the problems connected to them, are still reflected in current discussions. Virginia Woolf's debate continues, in general, to be our debate, and her contradictions are also, to a great extent, still ours. As Mary Childers says, quoted in an article by Ellen Carol Jones, "her (Woolf's) limits are so interesting because we have not yet surpassed them; they can help us focus on the persistent obstacles to feminist theorizing of the intersections of class, gender

and culture"<sup>67</sup>. The debate has evidently shifted from obtaining advantages for women as a whole group to seeking to overcome the gender issue as isolated from class, race, culture, in order to reveal that the risk of falling into yet another hierarchy (that of some groups of women over others) is not impossible. Still, this shift, as we have seen in de Lauretis' discussion, brings on not a simple lumping together of irreconcilable and contradictory forces, but the actual possibility of opening the debate to yet unimagined levels.

Still, it is in Woolf that these concerns are voiced with view of such possibilities for, perhaps, the first time. Her questionings were not only in the order of the important basic economic and social differences between men and women, differences which kept women under restraint, but also in the maintenance of a symbolic system that curtailed and established previously what a subject would or could do to be at the beck and call of the dominant ideology. Woolf is already, in her essays and in her literature, escaping the convention and placing the "T" of western thought in check. She is certainly, then, the predecessor of scholars such as Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray. She has already placed the binary oppositions debated by Derrida under scrutiny; at the same time she brings up the myth that Freud recognized as being fundamental to Western civilization (Oedipus) under new light, in one of her finest novels, To the Lighthouse, as well as beautifully portraying

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> Jones, Ellen Carol, *Figuring Woolf* in Modern Fiction Studies, West Lafayette ,vol. 38, no. 4, Spring, 1992, p. 6.

the relation between mother and daughter (again, the core of the Demeter and Persephone myth), in ways that might not have been imagined before.

Woolf and the group she was a part of (Bloombsbury) were, at the beginning of the twentieth century, in the eye of the storm, so to speak, of the great transformations that were taking place not only in cultural terms, but also in regards to the political, economical and social scene of the time. The turn of the century in England is especially marked by a sense of definite change with the end of Victoria's reign: it is as if the more stable and traditional values upheld so staunchly throughout the long Victorian period were giving gradual signs of debilitation already seen at Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897. The complexity of this change cannot be dealt with in a few lines, but it certainly involved the growing unrest in the economy, in the social demands and in the consequent political results that took place in the XIX century. England moves very quickly from its agressive expansionist politics to a position of being severely criticized for its imperialistic stand basically in one century. The role of intellectuals is that of a critical view of their country and government which marks a very different position on the part of most artists at the turn of the century: artists feel a distance from the court and from high society, a distance which is maintained not only to mark their independence from the ruling class, but also because of an almost total lack of identification with this class. The alienation of the artist occurs also in relation to her/his reading public, since a sense of values being shared between reader and writer is felt to have been lost somewhere along the way by the end of the XIX

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century. The onset of World War I and its posterior effects on the spirits and minds of intellectuals also has a result in the artistic production of the time – T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* is one example that expresses the spiritual sense of loss and depression faced by

the individual at the beginning of the century.

The remaining truth for literature is that the isolation felt by the writer in regards to the rest of humanity is the stuff with which s/he must deal when creating her/his work. Virginia Woolf herself felt the shift from general to more personal notions of value and tried to find a way of her own to solve this in her fiction by using devices usually used for poetry to say "this is my set of values, this is the way human questions are perceived by me". Experiences within the novel with the multiple and constant flow of consciousnesses of different characters also changed views on time, space and the truth of what was being said. Of such matter was the work of Virginia Woolf who experimented a great deal with these new elements, adding to them her own special poetic touch and her specific concern with the matters of her day, especially the issue of women and their role in society. In any case, even with the mounting tensions of this era, the general view of artists was that there still could be some sort of redemption for humanity in art. This was a belief upheld by Woolf (at least for a while) and is an ever-present feeling in the fiction and in the essays she produced throughout her lifetime.

In A Room of One's Own (1929), perhaps her most famous essay on women and fiction, though her tone is at times ironic, her questionings bring up issues that have been

partly solved, perhaps, for a still small percentage of the female population today (namely, their financial independence), while others are still roaming in our minds, such as the looking-glass role women have in "reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" 68. Woolf's point is that one's superiority is based and defined on the other's inferiority, an idea of fundamental importance in the concept of binary oppositions and which Derrida's theory of deconstruction elaborated, and which was further developed and/or criticized in the theories of many other scholars, feminists or not. Thus, a certain mockery, a tearing down of the pillars of truth, in the form of the canons and protected shrines of patriarchy, is a constant presence in Virginia Woolf's thought. Taking this deconstruction of the "sacred" canon further on, one can see that for Woolf art is not a mysterious product of individual genius, but the collective struggle of a whole group. In the case of men, this collectivity was and is possible not only because of individual effort but also because of a common history that has permitted that men study, work, take control of their lives and, consequently, produce not only fiction itself, but the theories upon which this fiction is based. The voice that establishes the truth of fiction is a male voice constructed on the other gender's silence and anonymity. In this sense we come to the issues that are still debated today regarding the inclusion of women's perceptions of truth, brought in by the telling of their experience and their stories, that redefine human experience as not only male, not only filtered through a male standpoint.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Woolf, Virginia. A Room of One's Own, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., New York, 1957, p.35.

Carol Gilligan in the introduction of her book In a Different Voice: Psychology Theory and Women's Development, refers to this when she mentions the typical male story as that of the hero facing the obstacle (and this, once again, is seen as the basic pattern for Western narrative in general), while the stories women tell are usually about facing separation and merging, about the importance of relationshps and establishing a connection. Thus, the unitary or universal subject of Western culture is necessarily placed by Woolf and by many others after her, as having a gender, as facing specific problems and having unique experiences that certainly define ways of seeing the world that differ from the male point of view. Appropriating the specificities of this experience (or the plurality of experiences that exist) and defining the diverse forms of narrative that structure these experiences in order to place them in a more evident role in our society, and in the world of fiction being created today, is still one of the tasks facing feminism and feminist studies today.

Woolf's beliefs - her utopic belief, some would say— in the importance of creating new possibilities for language and narrative, of breaking down rules of patriarchy and, thus, finding new roles in society that do not restrict action for women *or* men - are contained in the notion of androgyny, an idea which she gave great relevance to. To her, the androgynous mind is in a privileged situation since it is able to understand both the male and female spirit, looking from afar and at the same time feeling close at hand all that rules both genders. It is quite a contradictory notion, but has possibilities linked to it that are

also contained in the ideas of Kristeva, Irigaray, Cixous and Derrida, Androgyny is deconstructive because it encourages an implosion of a well-defined set of rules and coherence – for fiction specifically this breaks down rules of traditional narrative and of the unitary subject. Androgyny is as far away from any notion of a concrete delimited form of subject as can be, and it is this possibility which attracts Woolf to it. In a sense it is tied to Kristeva's argument of the revolutionary act of writing carried out by the modernist artist: this artist is in close touch with the semiotic drives that rule the pre-oedipal phase, allowing the unconscious to freely bring out the more "irrational" flows of the mind. Thus, the rational, coherent structure valued by Western culture, which in truth is actually giving value to the male as universal and all-defining, is re-evaluated to include a plurality of experiences and feelings not at all determined by a coherent and structured "T". It is clear that the concept of androgyny presents several contradicions in that it can easily be seen as the joining together necessarily of two sexes into one, instead of the breaking down of opposed genders, and the consequent taking in of the differences more than the similarities in an attempt to get away from a universal (or the idea of a unified subject) which actually is only a cover for those rules and conventions acceptable by a patriarchal society.

To Kristeva also, the differences are not to be seen as mere opposition, but as a "process of differentiation" that can manifest itself in poetry, in art, in music. Though Kristeva does not use the term androgyny, she does refer to the fact that all subjects contain a bisexuality which allows them to explore a plurality of positions and significations

that are not included in the unitary world of patriarchy. In the same sense, Virginia Woolf refers to the mind's capacity of taking in heterogeneous sources of stimulation that are unified, though not in the homogeneous way Western culture emphasizes. She refers to this issue in A Room of One's Own when she speaks of the unity of the mind in its capacity of coming together at a specific point but, at the same time, of not really having a unity in terms of its state of being. To Woolf, it is in this sense that one can think back through our fathers and mothers, and in the case of women writers, the mind's possiblity of directing itself towards the mother is truly significant. The importance given by Woolf to the maternal influence in the production, for example, of works of art will be further developed in the following pages.

Before moving into this subject, however, it is essential to understand a bit more of how Woolf's idea of androgyny is linked to woman's privileged position as a being at the same time in and outside male ideology, the dominant discourse and phallocentricity. If, as a child, a woman must overcome the extraordinary flow of drives that characterize the semiotic phase (in Kristeva's term) in which all subjects feel a close tie to their mothers in order to enter normal development (the symbolic which Lacan refers to), she also never severs the bond with her mother's body completely. Though boys and girls are expected to do so, the girl's bond with her mother remains in a state which can never be cut short completely. Thus, it is easy for women to think back, as they write, for instance, through their mothers, feeling a link towards not only real mothers, but also those adopted, so to

speak, along the way and who can also set an example. It is this peculiar situation which gives women, in Woolf's words, that surprising "splitting off of consciousness ... when from being the natural inheritor of (that) civilisation, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical"69. She can never totally exclude the fact that, as her mother's daughter, she is both in and out of this civilization. She is the inheritor of a set of rules and conventions that define her, but it is not only this that defines her: her close connection to her mother, the special bonding that occurred before the establishment of language and of the "I", is also present and needs dealing with. It is a woman's special privilege, in Woolf's way of seeing things, to be inside and outside. It is this that also opens to the possibility of a plural androgynous mind. It is exactly this that Cixous mentions when she speaks of bisexuality and women's special relation to it. If, on the one hand, men have been accostumed to a one to one relation of exchange, to the reductionist view of sexuality as unitary, it is women's advantage that they can operate within this splitting of consciousness and provoke, perhaps, even social change, not to mention the breaking of rules in artistic terms. This privilege can be explained in part by the special relation which women maintain with their mothers and, in a sense, with their bodies (their own and their mother's).

Women's capacity to constantly re-discover her mother and her mother's body is also in Melanie Klein's definition of the Good Mother. A woman is ascertained of a general sensation of goodness linked to her mother which will always be a source of power. It is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup>Woolf, Virginia. A Room of One's Own, Harcourt, Brace and World Inc., NY, 1957, p. 101.

clear that Klein's view suffers of a certain abstraction which disregards aspects of real mothering. Cixous' theory, as well, contains a utopian view of what female creativity is since it does not always look into the reality of society and its contradictions. The same criticism can be made of Woolf's concept of androgyny. Elaine Showalter comments on this when she says that though Woolf is "the architect of female space, (this space) is both sanctuary and prison". Showalter points out that Woolf's concern with androgyny stemmed from her own personal conflict with the issues of sexuality and, more specifically, femaleness. To Woolf, in Showalter's view, femaleness and death went hand in hand due to the deaths both of her stepsister in pregnancy, and of her mother. Woolf seemed to present symptoms that were very common in young girls or women who had great difficulty in handling the modifications taking place in their bodies and the natural manifestations of this body. To Showalter, androgyny was a tranquil space far from the contradictions of femaleness, transcending the eternal opposition between the sexes and its constant battle, at least in the literary and artistic field, over canon, truth and knowledge. To Showalter, this was the ultimate retreat, not a victory.

Toril Moi, whose work <u>Sexual/Textual Politics</u>: <u>Feminist Literary Theory</u> has been extremely helpful in its review of ideas going from Woolf to Irigaray, passing through Kate Millet and Simone de Beauvoir, sees Showalter's comments basically as a result of her

Nowalter, Elaine. A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1977, p. 264.

exasperation with Woolf's narrative in <u>A Room of One's Own</u>. To Moi, the strategies Woolf uses cannot be overlooked simply because they do not present clear political tones to them, which is what Showalter expects. According to Moi, Showalter's ideas about a text is that it should necessarily be a product of a writer's experience. Though it is certain that this is true to a point, since it is evident that one writes more and better about what one knows, restricting the term "experience" to the strictly realistic social events that one lives might exclude the richness of texts such as those by writers like Virginia Woolf, a modernist, if one must define a school of thought and practice for her work. Thus, Showalter sees Woolf's work as being too loose – distant from the unified subject which is the norm in literature, and which usually does not make the reader so uneasy in regards to questions of identity (of characters, for example), place and events in the narrative. What Toril Moi sees underlying this criticism of Woolf's ideas and of her text is a defense of the traditional ideology which depends on the exact definition of the subject as a powerful and active entity in art.

## 2. The Artist's Vision: To the Lighthouse

## 2.1. Husband and Wife

In To the Lighthouse we have a good example of the ways in which the traditional view of the ever-active "T" is imploded. The vision of androgyny and its possibilities is presented by Woolf in the novel, along with the worlds that are represented by Mr. Ramsay on the one hand, and Mrs. Ramsay on the other. The real innovation in Woolf's writing is not merely that she presents the male world of Mr. Ramsay as that of the ego, always affirming its importance, and that of Mrs. Ramsay as that of femininity, subordinated and oppressed by the masculine world, but that she is often subverting the expectations of the reader in regards to language and in regards to the special position usually granted to the main characters in more conventional types of texts. Thus, one can see, as Toril Moi points out, the deconstructive character of Woolf's text, refusing to grant any essential meaning to language as well as refusing to abide by the rules of identity as having an essential metaphysical quality to it. In this sense, it is in To the Lighthouse once again that these aspects can be seen.

Virginia Woolf's practice of literature seemed always to aim at joining together her concerns in regards to feminism, language, modernism and the possibilities (political and social) of a future for men a women in our society. Her constant concern with the notion of

androgyny and its privileged perspective of being able to include a plurality of sides and, at the same time, of forming another reality, unified, but not in the traditional sense, is reflected in her several novels. In To the Lighthouse, this joining together of concerns is associated to the importance of Mr. And Mrs. Ramsay's roles as father and mother/female figure to Lily Briscoe in her attempt to complete not only her work of art, but also in defining herself and her role as artist and woman.

Basically, when one reads about the central theme of To the Lighthouse, it seems to come down to drawing "a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together", as Woolf herself said in answer to a question about the meaning of the characters' arrival at the lighthouse at the end of the novel. This central line and its association to the existence of the lighthouse throughout the narrative brings up more than one possibility of interpretation which always leaves the reader with "a sense of tantalising but never quite delivered significance"72, placing the novel in a curious position of being art and of speaking of art at the same time, according to Makiko Minow-Pinkney. Dozens of articles and chapters have been written about this search for unification in the novel, a unification associated to androgyny, which rejects Mr. Ramsay's exaggerated concerns with his ego and the rational, while it embraces the subversive elements in Mrs. Ramsay's so-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Minow-Pinkney, Makiko. Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writings in the Major Novels, The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1987, p.84.

72 Ibid., p.84.

called trivial activities, in her reproductive capacity and in her love and willingness to include others in this feeling.

The first part of the novel presents the ever-present contrast between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay's relation to people and to the world itself. Mrs. Ramsay's irrational comments about the fine weather and the possible trip to the lighthouse that will take place the next day bring only joy to her son James. However, this feeling of elation is brought down constantly by the true, but kill-joy comments of his father on the impossibility of this trip taking place since the weather will not be fine. Mr. Ramsay's dry comment (as well as his mere presence) has the effect of a death sentence, and his figure is described as "lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one, grinning sarcastically"73, taking special pleasure not because he has simply disillusioned one of his children, but especially because he must, he has the obligation of showing how right he is in contrast to his wife's completely irrational remarks on something that cannot happen. It is Mr. Ramsay's role to show life's difficulties and the truth of everything whatever the cost, even if it means trampling on a child's feelings. Mrs. Ramsay's main concern, on the other hand, is not with the factual truth of her husband but with the feelings of others. She has a constant concern with protecting others, not only her children but also the guests she invites to her summer house, from the ugliness and suffering of life. To her, there is no intrinsic value in exposing everyone to the crude

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Woolf, Virginia. <u>To the Lighthouse</u>, Grafton Books, London, 1988, p.10.All future references to the novel will be taken from this edition.

facts of life - she sees this exposition as mere cruelty. It is not that Mrs. Ramsay does not want to see reality, - in fact, she knows exactly where the weak spots of those around her lie and what the world can bring of suffering to all - it is simply that truth can lie in some other realm to her, where beauty can exist and where the chaotic fragments of reality can be brought together and made whole again. In this sense, one can agree with Maria Dibattista when she says that "Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay share, in fact, the same vision of life and nature as essentially hostile realities to be withstood and transformed by the effort of human will and human imagining", though the first cannot see beyond his rationality as an instrument in this transformation, while the latter represents the possibility of transformation through the creative mind, and ultimately, in Lily's recovery of Mrs. Ramsay's figure through art.

Thus, Mrs. Ramsay's vision is one that can go beyond the "ugly academic jargon, that rattled itself off so glibly" in Mr. Tansley's discourse, to see the difficulties and the hurt behind the man of intellect. It is this view that touches Mrs. Ramsay and prompts her to reach out and place everyone under her protective wing. She sees nothing idealized in people, on the contrary: it is because she is able to see the deepest recesses of a person's soul that she can accept and feel compassion for all. It is this same feeling she has for people and their emotions that brings out the strangest emotions in others too. Tansley, rational, arrogant, petty in his comments about women's incapacity in becoming real artists and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> Dibattista, Maria. *To the Lighthouse: Virginia Woolf's Winter's Tale* in <u>Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity</u>, edited by Ralph Freedman, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1980. P.161 – 188.

intellectuals, sees Mrs. Ramsay as not only beautiful, but feels dignified simply by walking beside her, by being in her company.

The initial scene, then, of the father, mother and son together in the midst of a sort of struggle as to the possibilities of going to the lighthouse is truly rich in detail and significance. Mr. Ramsay's irritation with his wife's insistence on giving James hope of a trip to the lighthouse is contrasted with his own necessity that she give him hope as well. The eternal necessity Mr. Ramsay has of reaffirming himself in the "I" of the rational, structured subject is symbolyzed in his figure, already represented in classical phallic metaphors such as a knife. However, Mr. Ramsay's maintenance of this posture depends greatly on Mrs. Ramsay's support of him. The insecurities of Mr. Ramsay in regards to his capacity as a recognized intellectual (at the basis of his ego) bring out his constant necessity to state the truth, to tell others where reality lies – thus his small pleasure in bringing his son to the facts of the weather and the impossibility of what his wife is promising. He needs Mrs. Ramsay to reassure him, however, as much as any of the children do, which she does without questioning too much. Mrs. Ramsay sees her husband as a great mind, even though she can also see his weaknesses which include an intense necessity for approval from others and a suspicion that he will never achieve real genius. In this secret knowledge one has of the other's strength and weakness, Mr. and Mrs Ramsay have built a code of relating to each

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> p. 17.

other which is clearly and stupendously symbolized throughout the novel, but which reveals its intricacies in a more specific way in chapter seven.

The chapter mentioned above is a part of the novel to which most references are made in the literature that deals with To the Lighthouse. It is more evident in this part than in any other, perhaps because of the concentration of symbols referring to the couple, the undoing of binary oppositions by the frequent reversal and mixing of the typical masculine and feminine symbology. If at one moment Mr. Ramsay is effectively direct and cutting (as cutting as a knife's blade) in his certainty of the facts, furious at his wife's "irrationality" which made her tell the children all sorts of "lies", at others he is presented as needy and irrational himself in his hunger for constant support and praise. It is this aspect of his character that calls Lily Briscoe's attention: how could Mr. Ramsay be "so brave a man in thought (and be) so timid in life". Mr. Ramsay's need makes him step in and break the intimacy and bonding taking place between Mrs. Ramsay and James, which is described in chapter seven. To Mr. Ramsay's demand for sympathy, Mrs. Ramsay answer is described in the mixture of both masculine and feminine images. She, who "had been sitting loosely" straightened herself "to pour erect into the air a rain of energy, a column of spray, looking at the same time animated and alive, as if all her energies were being fused into force, burning

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> p. 45.

and illuminating ... and into this delicious fecundity, this fountain and spray of life, the fatal sterility of the male plunged itself, like a beak of brass, barren and bare"<sup>77</sup>.

In addition, the symbol of water, of the fountain, associated to feminine fertility and creativity is contrasted to Mr. Ramsay's sterility, as Norman Friedman notes. At the same time that Mr. Ramsay is the male "barren and bare", a beak made of a sterile and cold material, Mrs. Ramsay is associated to water with shoots up in the air, "erect", a "column of spray", symbols which transform her fecundity into something active and full of energy as opposed to the typical passive feminine role of receptacle of male's more active sexual intrusion. As Minow-Pinkney says

Different aspects of the male sexual act are split apart and attributed to characters of the opposite sex. Ramsay retains only its physically penetrative side, that aspect which, when isolated, can be seen as a brute violence forcing its way into the delicate membranes of the female. The more 'positive' side of the male sexuality, the ejaculation of the fertilising seed deep within the female is projected on to Mrs. Ramsay. In this divorce between 'form' and 'content', Ramsay retains only the physical husk of the act, while his wife appropriates its inner procreative kernel. 78

'' p. 38.

Minow-Pinkney, Makiko. Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major Novels, The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1987, p.90.

Thus, the binary opposition is destroyed in the interchangeability of masculine and feminine symbols; the text takes on its subersive role, as Cixous puts it, and explodes the conventional expectations: that which is so straightforward and penetrating in Mr. Ramsay's intellectuality is, in face of Mrs. Ramsay's role of sustenance and fecunditity, a mere simulacrum of activity. Her tendency to create certain fantasies for her children to believe in, her so-called lies and her attention to others feelings seem to be that aspect in her which really supports those around her, including her husband and life itself.

The reenactment of the Oedipus scene shows Mr. Ramsay asking for special attention from his wife, while James, his son, is feeling a deep hate for his father for taking his mother's attention away from him. James sees his mother being taken away from the small circle of comfort and love that had been built around them, symbolyzed in his position between her knees, in her telling him a fairy tale and in her knitting of a sock. All these activities seem to make one see Mrs. Ramsay as a creator of life, of embracing those who care to be near her into a circle of life. It is exactly this embrace which Mr. Ramsay is seeking, "to be taken in within the circle of life, warmed and soothed, to have his senses restored to him, his barrenness made fertile, and all the rooms of the house made full of life..." Mrs. Ramsay's knitting is also a symbol of her great ability to join people together into this circle and, as Maria Dibattista notes, "her serene act of knitting (is) the sign of her

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> p. 39.

creative urge to unite the separate strands of life into a seamless unity..."80. This same unifying power can be seen later on in the wonderful dinner party that Mrs. Ramsay offers her guests and family.

If on the one hand the knitting has this apparent healing power, it is with needles, which she "flashes" with utmost confidence and vigor, that she carries out this bringing together of forces. It is in this combination of symbols - the healing comes in the form of these sharp, clicking instruments - that lies the impact of the language used in the the novel. With her needles clicking, "she created drawing-room and kitchen, set them all aglow; bade him take his ease there, go in and out, enjoy himself". in sum, she builds an entire world around her husband's lack of confidence. Though he is seen, especially in James eyes, as representing "the beak of brass, the arid scimitar of the male, which smote mercilessly, again and again, demanding sympathy". the words are ambiguous here, since "beak" and "scimitar" are added to "arid" and "brass", words associated to coldness and infertility. Mrs. Ramsay is described as rising "in a rosy-flowered fruit tree laid with leaves and dancing boughs..." bis whining about being a failure she has a simple solution: "Well, look then, feel then" take in what is not learned or considered adequate in the academic circles. The very aspect of Mrs.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>80</sup> Dibattista, Maria. To the Lighthouse: Virginia Woolf's Winter Tale in Viriginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity, edited by Ralph Freedman, University of California Press. Berkeley, 1980, pp. 161-188.
<sup>81</sup> p. 39.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

Ramsay's personality which her husband despises is the thing he needs most when in doubt about his own capacities.

All of this can be seen as a lack in Mr. Ramsay, a lack which always makes Mrs. Ramsay feel, though she is exhausted physically and emotionally by the end of her contact with her husband, exultant at her success in creating one more moment of serene beauty for him. The truth is expressed in Lily's words as she observes Mrs. Ramsay talk to Charles Tansley: "She (Mrs. Ramsay) pitied men always as if they lacked – something – women never, as if they had something"85. In this feeling of plenitude we have the opposite of the lack described in psychoanalytical theory, it is not women who are in need of completion, since Mrs. Ramsay has both masculine and feminine images associated to her, it is men also who, in their barrenness, contain a void that needs filling in. The narrative of To the Lighthouse undoes the ordinary hierarchies of active/passive, male/female, and according to Minow-Pinkney, "the text dismantles these hierarchies to the point where the excluded term becomes the inner truth of its opposite, where people at last acknowledge that 'he depended on her",86

The same undoing takes place in relation to the truth/lie opposition. Mrs. Ramsay, for all her "lying" about the possibility of going to the lighthouse, about her husband's quality

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> p. 39. <sup>85</sup> p. 80.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>86</sup> Minow-Pinkney, Makiko. Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major Novels, The Harvester Press, 1987, p.91.

as an intellectual, knows, or senses at times, the bare facts about people and things. She has very unpleasant feelings which are not expressed fully due to the truth they contain. Though her husband, for example, is greatly considered in the university, and his lectures are always attended by many students interested in listening to him, she knows that his dependence on her stops her from revealing the truth in regards to expenses around the house, in relation to the real value of the books he writes. She was, after all, "afraid that he might guess, what she a little suspected, that his last book was not quite his best book"87, and that the daily chores and worries could not be openly expressed to him. The burden of carrying this alone made it impossible for her to find that perfect unity in their relationship, "the pure joy of the two notes sounding together". the same unity to which Woolf refers to in A Room of One's Own when she speaks of observing two people coming together when catching a taxi-cab. It is this image which motivates her to put together her ideas on the unity of the mind and, ultimately, that of androgyny.

It is this ambiguous relation between truth and fiction, facts and lies, the rational and the irrational which appears at all times in Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay's descriptions in the text. While the husband thinks of the greatness of the world, going over questions that were very familiar to his academic mind ("if Shakespeare had never existed, he asked, would the

<sup>87</sup> p. 41. <sup>88</sup> Ibid.

world have differed much from what it is today?" Nrs. Ramsay cannot but wonder at the pettiness of people, including herself, and of "human relations, how flawed they are, how despicable, how self-seeking, at their best" 90. Both are able to see truth, and this is where the representations of the couple could complement each other: it is not the wife who is irrational and the husband who is rational, and, in this sense, her truth can be discarded as nonsense. It is simply a matter of different ways of seeing the truth about people and the world, in all the greatness and in all the pettiness, and of being in different subject positions altogether. The story of human greatness, of the building of civilization and the conquering of progress has another side to it which conventionally does not appear. It is this side, a part which belongs to the imaginary and at the same time is downto-earth, which Mrs. Ramsay recovers for the text.

<sup>89</sup> p. 43. <sup>90</sup> Ibid.

## 2.2 A Mother/Woman's World

The creative power of Mrs. Ramsay lies in her bringing together of elements that form a perfect moment in time. This moment is not concrete, it will vanish as absolutely as it came into existence, but its permanence will remain in the mind of those around her, especially in Lily Briscoe's attempt at completing her painting and, at the same time, finding a way of life that can be fulfilling to her.

It is important to observe Mrs. Ramsay's complexity in full, featured at several points in the narrative. Though she has a clear sense as to what her obligations as a wife and mother are, Mrs. Ramsay is revealed to us as being far more than that. There is a part of Mrs. Ramsay which is preserved, intimate, closed and silent, but which enables her to define herself beyond those acceptable roles she must hold. She is a mother and wife dedicated to her family, as we have seen, but she cannot be reduced to these roles.

From the very beginning one can find Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts in regards to charity as going far more deeply than what would be expected from a Victorian lady and the obligations towards the poor: she wished "to cease to be a private woman whose charity was half sop to her own indignation, half a relief to her own curiosity". <sup>91</sup> The cruelty and sufferings of the world are questions which she does not shy away from, neither does she have any illusion that her mere obligation of social contribution will solve anything in the

long run. Her keen perception does not allow her to cover reality: charity is not a solution to problems in society that run much more deeply.

What was covered by the social, affable and affectionate ways of Mrs. Ramsay could not and was not revealed to most of those around her. Thus, the knowledge she has of her husband's weaknesses and the meaning she gives to his life and to his work are not an enormous issue to Mrs. Ramsay - she has found an almost perfect balance between the exterior and the interior person she is. Nevertheless, her face, in all its beauty and serenity, at times reveals depths of sadness, almost unperceived by most, hidden secrets and feelings that Mrs. Ramsay is sure never to disclose. The doubt to most remains: was there nothing behind her perfect beauty? Mrs. Ramsay's silence is like a tomb, her real emotions, if she shows any gloom, are described in a scene as "bitter and black, half way down, in the darkness, in the shaft which ran from the sunlight to the depths, perhaps a tear formed ..."92, a tear which is soon absorbed by the steadiness of the lady who securely knows where she stands. The truth of life was evident to Mrs. Ramsay: it was hostile, ready to tear a person down through illness, death and insecurity - but this is no reason for one not to live every moment as fully as possible.

Mrs. Ramsay's need for being by herself is expressed well in chapter eleven, where she reveals a desire to be alone not with her thoughts, necessarily, but just with her silence.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>91</sup> p 14. <sup>92</sup> p 31.

These moments present themselves as a refuge from demands others make, from "all the being and the doing"93, from the representation of ourselves to others. Mrs. Ramsay is shown to be quite aware of these representations: she finds the surface of what people reveal to others as only a cover-up to all that really goes on beneath: the darkness, the complexity of humans, the freedom. The loss of being, the "losing personality" is not a threat to Mrs. Ramsay. To her, with it, "one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir" and the peace and feeling of eternity which comes along is welcome, as welcome as the last stroke of the Lighthouse, to which Mrs. Ramsay feels attached to. These moments of losing onself bring with them an association between object (the thing she is looking at) and herself which brings comfort: she is the stroke of the Lighthouse as she sees it passing through, the light there reflects the light in her eyes and cleanses her of any unreal or fake situation. The isolation described makes Mrs. Ramsay feel in touch with those objects around her, unifies her to nature and to herself in a way which nothing else can. She feels annoyed, for instance, at catching herself thinking a cliché such as "We are in the hands of the Lord", and wonders what on earth could have made her say anything so insincere. To Mrs. Ramsay there is no comfort in the notion of God or in any religious faith, there was too much baseness and suffering in the world for her to hold any belief in a Lord. In this idea she demonstrates her unwillingness to abide by the rules which establish religious faith as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>93</sup> p.60. <sup>94</sup> p.61.

the basis for any person to be considered moral and good, she rejects the necessity of her role as wife, mother and social being having any association to religion. The inner life she sustains has no need for this kind of lie.

The dinner party is one of those privileged scenes in the text in which we can see Mrs. Ramsay's action in merging those around here, joining together the different and, at times, antagonistic feelings that build up, and creating a vision that is hers alone, of perfect beauty and transcendence. Though she initially feels a certain incapacity to act upon the separate individuals whom she wants to bring together, she gathers her strength in those very elements mentioned before: her forces go much beyond the simple role of hostess and lady of the house. The dinner party brings language and action together, in complete union, in a rhythmic motion that joins the color, the movements and the voices of those sitting around the table. Mrs. Ramsay sees this as she observes the candles on the table, their flames making all those present visible to her, as they spoke of whatever it was that interested them. At the same time the colors of the fruit dish at the center of the table stand out in yellow and purple. All this makes Mrs. Ramsay think of the "arrangement of the grapes and pears, of the horny pink-lined shell, of the bananas" as a "trophy fetched from the bottom of the sea, of Neptune's banquet"95. The light that shines gives objects and people special size and depth, and Mrs. Ramsay sees that Augustus is able to perceive that too. That his way of appreciating was different from hers does not seem to matter in the least since

"looking together united them". 96 At this special moment, one which will result in triumph for Mrs. Ramsay, the world represented by Mr. Ramsay's ego, by the actions of the world outside the house, is left in the background. This is the main motor one can observe throughout the novel, but its best representation is found here when food, drink and pleasure all come together.

The offering of food in such a creative and delicious way is an artistic moment for Mrs. Ramsay – it gives her the opportunity to call those around her and show them what she can do, as if she could say "see, taste, smell, take the greatest pleasure out of this which I can offer to you". Using Melanie Klein's theories in combination with Virginia Woolf's use of art, creativity and eating in To the Lighthouse, Patricia Moran refers to the power granted to women as maternal figures in the act of feeding. Hysteria, says Moran, according to Klein, is located "not in sexual desire for the father or his agents but in oral desire for the mother and her surrogates"; in this way, "Klein shifts the father to the periphery of the daughter's narrative and simultaneously inscribes a figure of the mother within it, a figure of the mother that is ... a figure of hunger". The scene of the dinner party remains forever after in Lily Briscoe's mind as one of the great instances of Mrs. Ramsay's accomplishments, not only because of the food itself but because of the significance of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>95</sup> p. 90

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>97</sup> Moran, Patricia. Virginia Woolf and the Scene of Writing in Modern Fiction Studies, West Lafayette, vol. 38, no. 1, Spring, 1992, pp. 81 – 100.

whole event as a moment of creation and beauty. The memory of Mrs. Ramsay will remain in such a moment and will inspire Lily's completion of her artistic work.

Maria Dibattista speaks of the dinner party scene as "an expression of the total form of love, a secular equivalent of the love feasts of religious communities", and while the company taking part of the dinner resists the merging efforts of Mrs. Ramsay, in the end the individuals present will give in because "the egotistic 'I' that resists the impulse to merge and flow with life is here a negative attribute ... (and) the male principle of resistance is not the subject of heroic contemplation, but of satiric observation"98. Mrs. Ramsay sees the party specifically as a celebration of the love of the characters Paul and Minta (bringing them together had been her work), as she "peered into the dish, with its shiny walls and its confusion of savoury brown and yellow meats, and its bay leaves and its wine"99. While she revels in the aroma, texture and rich color of the food, in its confusing mixture, she is excited by the thought that they could be celebrating a festival of sorts, one that only love could deserve. The feeling is odd, for she is invaded by two emotions, "one profound - for what be more serious than the love of a man for a woman, what more commanding, more impressive, bearing in its bosom the seed of death"100, while the other

<sup>98</sup> Dibattista, Maria. To the Lighthouse: Virginia Woolf's Winter Tale in Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity, edited by Ralph Freedman, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1980, p. 177. <sup>99</sup> p.93. <sup>100</sup> Ibid.

leads her to almost mocking love as she sees "these people entering into illusion glittering eyed"101. A ritual is taking place, nevertheless.

The female principle of merging is placed in the foreground here, while the traditional importance given in narratives to the hero's necessity of facing obstacles in order to assert individual value is considered ridiculous. This is seen clearly, for example, in Charles Tansley's keen necessity to take a stand against Mrs. Ramsay's pity, a feeling she has, as was mentioned before, in relation to men in general, due to their lack. It is this lack that becomes evident in the scene of the dinner: the efforts on the part of Tansley to assert his presence are all portrayed as lame and almost silly. William Bankes, though older and less cynical about life, also displays a need to dispel the uncomfortable feeling he has in talking to Mrs. Ramsay. She is cajoling him into speaking with her by using what is called her "social manner". While he understands that when "there is a strife of tongues at some meeting, the chairman, to obtain unity, suggests everyone shall speak in French" and is willing to go along with Mrs. Ramsay's chairman attitude of imposing the much desired unity and order required through small talk, still he finds it all boring and cannot see anything but shaplessness in the event, fragments that need some bringing together to make any sense. While he sits there, he ponders: "He wanted somebody to give him a chance of asserting himself<sup>102</sup>, and this need makes him almost physically ill.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>101</sup> p. 93. 102 p. 85.

Throughout all these displays of male ego present at the party, which bring out a desire, perhaps, to strike a note a bit more strongly, to the point it might even hurt Mrs. Ramsay (a price to pay, after all), there is also some quality in Mrs. Ramsay that brings out the need in men to protect her from harm, to control their impulses. This may stem from the way she inspires those around her to fusion, against destruction, because of her maternal instincts. This is felt more specifically by Lily, as we shall see shortly, as well as by Mr. Ramsay and James, as we have seen before. Eternally turning to her for support and comfort, these characters will need to find, in the last part of the novel, a way of bringing Mrs. Ramsay back into their lives in order to solve questions that will remain pending. For now, during the dinner party, those present feel her presence and her intention of merging and fostering as coming from a mother that is at the same time wonderful and aweinspiring. As says Jane Lilienfeld, the dinner party "clothes Mrs. Ramsay as the simultaneously Great and Terrible Mother", and through Lily's eyes, she is "the container for the life she warms at her party", she is seen exerting "her powers to the full to keep her guests unified and safe from the 'watery vastness' outside the candle-lit windows" 103. More than the food's symbolic importance, the presence of Mrs. Ramsay, her voice, the color and sound of her, all seem to nourish the guests, specially Lily, and the memory of this will be ever-lasting, though the evening can never be. In this light one can see Mrs. Ramsay as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>103</sup> Lilienfeld, Jane. 'The Deceptiveness of Beauty': Mother Love and Mother Hate in <u>To the Lighthouse</u> in Twentieth Century Literature, Hempstead, vol. 23, no.3, Oct. 1977, p. 355.

a powerful mother-figure, bringing those around her to attention in order to celebrate the union taking place at the party and, at the same time, the union she has imposed on the couple Paul and Minta. In both aspects she has triumphed: she will, by the end of the dinner, have been successful in her need to bring all to safety through the reunion around the table, and by extension, through her presence. She will also have kindled the strangest and frailest feeling there can be between a man and a woman: that of love.

With this in mind, Mrs. Ramsay has been watching Lily, seeing her as a sort of outsider to the feeling of love that has started between Paul and Minta. Comparing Lily and Minta, she thinks: "... of the two, Lily at forty will be the better. There was in Lily a thread of something; a flare of something; something of her own which Mrs. Ramsay liked very much indeed, but no man would, she feared" Thus, though Lily will probably never inspire the feeling Minta has inspired in Paul, unless a very special man comes along, Mrs. Ramsay has a feeling of intense pride in Lily. There is a very special quality in Lily which makes Mrs. Ramsay feel that her future will be better than that of the other woman. There is something in the younger woman that does not inspire pity, even though she will not have the love of a man. Lily does not seem to need this to assert herself, there is no need for a man to make her become someone. Though Mrs. Ramsay immediately after having had this feeling of pride goes back to thinking that Lily must marry Mr. Bankes (in her usual habit of fixing unions between couples), she has seen for a moment what Lily will find in the future: a way out of

the conventional and frequently crippling relation between men and women, often trapped inside stereotypical roles, through the completion of her painting. In this, Lily will find alternatives, "a dissolution of the masculine/feminine opposition" that can open new spaces through art, through creation.

Through art, in her painting, Lily will create what Mrs. Ramsay has created in her life, in her love for others, symbolyzed very intensely in the dinner party: a moment of beauty, of transcendence. This will be Mrs. Ramsay's legacy: her image will follow those around her into the future, it is her way of influencing others. When the dinner comes to its final moments, Mrs. Ramsay has a feeling of having reached a secure spot. It is a feeling of great joy to her, she feels almost afloat and "hovered like a hawk, suspended; like a flag floated in a element of joy which filled every nerve of her body fully and sweetly..."106. Images of the food she serves are mixed with that of eternity and stability. She has reached a point which words cannot express. It is only a moment, a mere flash of safety and comfort that stands bravely against the outside world, but Mrs. Ramsay feels "there is a coherence in things, a stability; something ... is immune from change ... Of such moments ... the thing is made that remains for ever after. This would remain." The beauty and unity created by her dinner party would remain, and this lets her rest at ease. The flow of the conversation (those

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>105</sup> Emery, Mary Lou. "Robbed of Meaning": The Work at the Center of <u>To the Lighthouse</u> in Modern Fiction Studies, West Lafayette, Vol. 38, no.1, Spring 1992, pp. 217 - 234. <sup>106</sup> p. 97. <sup>107</sup> Ibid.

around her are speaking of math, history, literature) is smooth and easy, though she cannot (and does not want to) totally understand what is being said. The secure feeling she has allows her to let the conversation flow to the climax of the evening which is the recital of a poem by her husband. At the start she only senses it is poetry because of the rhythm and the sound of his voice, reaching her in a sad tone. The words do not matter, the sounds come and go musically, regardless of their meaning they are the natural ending to the perfection of the evening. Thus, Mrs. Ramsay feels as if she is being payed homage to and stops as she is about to pass the threshold, waiting "a moment longer in a scene which was vanishing even as she looked, and then ... shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past." 108

Mrs. Ramsay knows that the future of those present will be forever marked by the memory of that night, of her transforming the antagonism of the separated individuals into the unity of that perfect dinner, ending with poetry and beauty. As she goes into her younger children's room, once more her power of transformation is shown. The animal head nailed to the wall in the bedroom, which had been scaring Cam, is instantly and magically covered and changed into something Mrs. Ramsay convinces her is beautiful and fantastic. The words of Mrs. Ramsay take on a certain rhythm, monotonously repetitive and nonsensical, lulling Cam to sleep. James, who likes the head and does not want to see it taken down, is convinced by his mother that no harm has been done to the skull. Thus,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>108</sup> p. 103.

Mrs. Ramsay's magic is having made two children happy without antagonizing either. The rationality of the father does not have a chance of penetrating here, a rationality that would only spoil the moment for all. It is through the creation of a fantasy that the mother is able to soothe the children's fears, and Mrs. Ramsay feels angry at her husband and Tansley's insistence in destroying this in their lives. The rational is useless in her point of view when it comes to children and trying to keep them happy. It works very much the same in adult life as well - it is, after all, not rationality which brings joy to people, but their fantasies, dreams and imagination.

The same giving in to the mere rhythm of words and their sounds takes place as Mrs. Ramsay enters the room where her husband is reading. She sits and takes a book herself. Her reading is initially nothing but a series of movements, flashes of colors – she does not pay attention to the meanings of the words, only "turned the page, swinging herself, zigzagging this way and that, from one line to another as from one branch to another, from one red and white flower to another ..." As she reads, experimenting with language which Kristeva refers to as the semiotic, she feels she is reaching a higher level, one of beauty and clarity, offering itself in the form of poetry and art. Thus, though the words are evidently also at a symbolic level, they are being experimented here not in what they actually mean, but in their form, color, sound and texture. This is what is provoking the utmost pleasure in Mrs. Ramsay.It is the culmination of a perfect fusion, which joins inner

and outer worlds, goes on at the dinner table, and which now brings beauty to the recesses of her mind

The destruction or fragmentation of this world of beauty and perfection which Mrs. Ramsay attempts to create is taken to extremes as it is metaphorized in the second part of the novel, "Time Passes". The illusion of permanence, of beauty standing still, which is steadily built up in the first section, comes to an end with the eruption of war, symbolyzed as a long night, a flood of darkness. Shapes and colors are lost in the darkness which covers everything and swallows "... a jug and basin ... a bowl of red and yellow dahlias ... the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers"110. This change is seen in the transformation that takes place in the Ramsay's summer house: the floors, the wallpaper, the furniture everything contained in and around the house slowly decays and is abandoned. The house, which symbolyzed the mother and the protective haven she created, will be forgotten with the outburst of war and the death of Mrs. Ramsay. Thus, fragmentation is the dominant force, cruel facts and death come to destroy the beauty and safety of the Ramsays' world. The rhythm of the narrative seems to follow the change that takes place in events. If in "The Window" the consciousness of the characters is revealed in a flow of sensations, loose thoughts and easy rhythm, this second part reveals a tension brought on by an external, factual narrator who informs the reader, in parenthesis, that Mr. Ramsay "stumbling along a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>109</sup> p. 110. <sup>110</sup> p. 117.

passage, stretched his arms out one dark morning", however, since Mrs. Ramsay "[had] died rather suddenly the night before ... they remained empty"111. Death is notified along with the joyousness of certain events, such as Prue's wedding ("[Prue Ramsay, leaning on her father's arm, was given in marriage that May...]") Prue's death ("[Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth ...]"112) as well as Andrew's death in the war ("[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was insantaneous]"113). The narration of these events is given as if they were secondary to the change and destruction taking place in the world at war. It is, nevertheless, through the description of the empty and abandoned house that the horror of war is represented, its disruption is analogous to the tragedies that disrupts the life of the Ramsays. The images used to describe this disruption speak, for example, of "the cries of birds, ships hooting, the drone and hum of the fields, a dog's bark, a man's shout" 114, indicating that there is no space anymore for the relative peacefulness of the past. Throughout this destruction, however, the narrative also refers to dreams that persist, declaring that "good triumphs, happiness prevails, order rules", inspite of the horror taking place. Mrs. Ramsay's presence is still felt, though still very weakly, in the shawl she had used to cover the skull in the children's bedroom, in her magical covering up of reality in the

p.120.
112 p.123.
113 p.124.
114 p. 121.

name of her children's comfort. A renewed interest in art is also briefly mentioned in the form of Mr. Carmichael's publication of a volume of poetry, perhaps as an antidote to the terror of war. These small displays of the better moments which civilization can produce do not have any effect however until Lily Briscoe awakens from the symbolic long and dark night. Thus, Mrs. Ramsay's presence is not felt completely ("idly, aimlessly, the swaying shawl swung to and fro"115) until Lily comes back to the house with a question on her mind, which she tosses back and forth and can find no immediate answer to: "What does it mean then, what can it all mean?" 116. Lily, alone at breakfast, is also faced with another question, an odd echo of the beginning of the first part of the novel: What does one take to the Lighthouse? The third section of the novel, naturally called "The Lighthouse", will bring together Lily's search for answers to the "meaning of it all", and the insistence on the part of Mr. Ramsay that he take James and Cam on a trip to the lighthouse.

The third part of the novel is marked constantly by Mrs. Ramsay's presence in the very fact that she is not there. She would certainly know what to take to the lighthouse, and this is the reality of Mr. Ramsay who feels terribly abandoned by his wife. The words "Perished. Alone" are repeated, translating his feelings and his need for sympathy, which he looks for in Lily. It is this third section which seems to re-establish the order that had temporarily been lost, to reveal that perhaps, as James Hafley suggests, "Mrs. Ramsay's 'lies' are ... the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>115</sup> p.128. <sup>116</sup> p. 137.

truth" and can refute Mr. Ramsay's pessimism and his facts. In Lily's completion of her painting, pieces and fragments which seemed to hang loosely and without meaning, will come together and make sense.

While Lily ponders on how to make sense through her painting of all the odd bits and pieces of feelings she has, Mr. Ramsay is battling with the silent and resistant spirits of his two youngest children which he intends at all costs to take to the lighthouse. He is, in sharp contrast to Mrs. Ramsay, in an extremely stubborn and persistent mood, depressed at being left alone, thus forcing both James and Cam to be at his command and accompany him on the journey. This contrast is so evident that Cam is made to realize that "this was tragedy – not palls, dust and shroud; but children coerced, their spirits subdued" in other words, she acutely misses her mother and laments her death, but the actions of those who live on take on an importance that had not been felt before. As Maria Dibattista says, "the father's attempt to subdue the child's spirit is the true threat to life, for it is he who would block and shut life off form its renewing source – the will of children, which is inseparable from the will to futurity." In any case, as Dibattista later states in this same article, the result of this trip to the lighthouse has, as its basis, a reference to the Oedipus myth in which James ultimately, having won his father's approval takes his place in the symbolic order, while Cam

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>117</sup> Hafley, James. *The Creative Modulation of Perspective* in <u>Virginia Woolf: To the Lighthouse - A Selection of Critical Essays</u>, ed. Morris Beja, Casebook Series, McMillan Education, 1970.

<sup>118</sup> p. 140.

Dibattista, Maria. To the Lighthouse: Virginia Woolf's Winter Tale in Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity, edited by Ralph Freedman, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1980, p.183.

decides to rely on the protection of the masculine world and feels secure and relieved with this fact. Reaching the lighthouse has this effect in the narrative, however it is counterpointed by the simultaneous completion of the painting on shore by Lily, who finds the center of her work as the Ramsays descend fron the boat. In the two acts, a tribute to Mrs. Ramsay is being carried out, not only in the external happenings (the presence of the painting, the trip to the lighthouse), but in the attempts to complete or bring back Mrs. Ramsay's presence.

## 2.3 The daughter's inheritance

Lily's painting represents the attempt at unity, at bringing together art and beauty, which seems to be present so easily in Mrs. Ramsay's life. Lily's questions about the meaning of it all are present from the very beginning, her bewilderment at the effect of Mrs. Ramsay on those around her, the certainty that this woman held some sort of secret which was, at times, beyond Lily's comprehension. Parallel to this feeling of wonder, Lily senses a meaning is there that explains the world, gives sense to its comings and goings, and this meaning is represented in Mrs. Ramsay. Love is part of the equation: the love between the Ramsay's, first of all, but also the love she sees coming out of Mr. Bankes' eyes when Lily watches him observe Mrs. Ramsay. Lily is struck by the intensity of this feeling, but sees how different it is from the love between the husband and wife. For Bankes seems to have that "love which mathematicians bear their symbols, or poets their phrases" and this bears in it a non-possessive stand, abstraction and not physicality.

The attempts, then, on Lily's part, to capture whatever it was in Mrs. Ramsay that could stir up this kind of emotion, are all present in her art. The subject of her painting is Mrs. Ramsay, sitting at the window obediently still, with James and Mr. Ramsay at her side requiring something from her as well. The representation of this is in the form of color and texture, of shade and shape, an abstraction that should reveal its subject. However, Lily

suffers with the failure of her painting. The forms and colors seem to resist her will and confirm her worst fears, expressed in Charles Tansley's provocative taunts that women could not paint - who, after all, had heard of any well-known women artists?

Lily's frustation at looking at her painting is clear: she would like to penetrate into that essence which Mrs. Ramsay contains which makes her different: beautiful, refined, good, but at the same time commanding, willing all around her to marry, as if, magically and simply, marriage could solve it all. Nevertheless, next to Mrs. Ramsay, Lily felt foolish - that something in the older woman could not be grasped at completely. That she was maternal was clear enough, that she was a gifted hostess also, that she was the backbone for Mr. Ramsay was sensed by Lily as well. However, this was not the "thing" that made her different. Lily is sure Mrs. Ramsay has a secretiveness which must be understood - through this understanding Lily feels her painting will make sense, will cease to be unbalanced.

Thus, Lily sits close to the older woman, "with her arms round Mrs. Ramsay's knees, close as she could get", trying to imagine "how in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman ... were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell out could teach one everything"121. The main concern for Lily, however, is not necessarily the knowledge that can come inscribed "in any language

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>120</sup> p.47, <sup>121</sup> p.50.

known to men"122, but unity. Thus, Lily associates to Mrs. Ramsay the image of a dome, a secret- sacred place mesmerizing one's attention and attracting one in the same way bees were attracted to the hive full of honey.

This difficulty in achieving unity arises in the painting as Mr. Bankes questions Lily's use of a triangular purple shape she has placed on the canvas. The abstraction of the picture is questioned, after all, it is not an expected representation of a mother and child. Lily explains only her need to place light and darkness together, to place mother and child in these abstract forms. Her vision is evidently untraditional. She tries to express this when she says, "but the picture was not of them ... or not in his sense. There were other senses too in which one might reverence them."123 The abstraction of her work, however, contains in it a puzzle: how to balance the dark with the light, the shapes and masses?. "How to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left"124 is the question - the answer seems unclear, but evokes Woolf's own comment on drawing a central line down the middle of her novel to hold everything together. This image of bringing things together with an element of expressive unity is recurrent throughout the novel and is summed up in Lily's painting.

Throughout the scene of the dinner party, the view of what is going on is shifting from one participant to the other, but the constant shift which takes place between Lily and Mrs. Ramsay's view is by far the most important here. If Mrs. Ramsay pities Tansley, and senses,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>122</sup> p.51. <sup>123</sup> p.52.

more than she knows, that his cutting remarks come as a result of that lack in men (thus, greater must her pity be), Lily observes and has her own keen impressions to turn this way and that in her mind. Charles Tansley's comments on the inability of women in the artistic and intellectual fields are also seen by Lily Briscoe as what they really are: a desperate need, through the confrontation with women, of putting them down, to make himself important. Lily's thoughts are present throughout the dinner party, and she reflects in regards to Tansley, how useless it was to bother about his offensive and disagreeable comment, "since clearly it was not true to him but for some reason helpful to him, and that was why he said it ..." 125. Having had this thought, Lily decides to pump up his masculine ego and at the same time mock his pettiness - she asks him, in ironic-seductiveness to please take her to the lighthouse, thus placing herself only apparently as the coy little woman, all the time knowing she was fueling Tansley's irritation. Regardless of this, she senses his need to place himself in the conversation around him and knows "there is a code of behavior ... whose seventh article ... says that on occasions of this sort it behoves the woman ... to go to the help of the young man ... so that he may relieve the thigh bones, the ribs of his vanity, of his urgent desire to assert himself..." Lily, however, does nothing to relieve Tansley, she merely smiles.

Lily sits and watches the comings and goings of male actions in their attempts to overcome their feelings of inadequacy- and she knows. She feels the tension of the men in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>124</sup> p.53. <sup>125</sup> p. 81.

the room trying to impose their will to lead, but, at the same time, showing their desire to flee the room, to get away from the dangerous powers of Mrs. Ramsay to weld them all together under her protective wing. She watches Charles Tansley's desire to respond brutally to Mrs. Ramsay, as he "raised a hammer, swung it high in air" steadying himself to violently assert himself. However, this show of power, violent as it may seem, falls short - he cannot bring himself to attack his hostess. There is something at the same time poweful and delicate in Mrs. Ramsay that cuts the action short. He sees her as a "butterfly", too beautiful and fragile to be hurt.

Lily's observation of all the happenings around her is of extreme importance: through her eyes we see the absurdity and the magnificence, for instance, of the feeling of love, here represented in Paul and Minta; and we will see the magnificence that lies in Mrs. Ramsay's personality. It is almost frightening to Lily, the magnetic influence this woman has on others. At the same time, Lily feels that compared to this abundance of feeling for others, her own life is small and meagre. She feels, also, the paradox of love in the union between Paul and Minta: it is ridiculous and, at the same time, a glory to be in love. Lily would like to be included in this miracle that makes one seem almost heroic, though she also feels a certain horror at the unscrupulousity and degradation one faces when under its influence.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>126</sup> p. 85. <sup>127</sup> p.85.

She is, thus, taken to think about her painting, as if there could be a solution in her art to the division she feels at this moment. Lily thinks:

Such was the complexity of things. For what happened to her, especially staying with the Ramsays, was to be made to feel violently two opposite things at the same time (...) and then they fought together in her mind, as now. It is so beautiful, so exciting, this love, that I tremble on the verge of it, and offer, quite out of my own habit, to look for a brooch on the beach; also it is the stupidest, the most barbaric of human passions (...) and if you asked nine people out of ten they would say they wanted nothing but this; while the women, judging from her own experience, would all the time be feeling, This is not what we want; there is nothing more tedious, puerile and inhumane than love; yet it is also beautiful and necessary.<sup>128</sup>

Lily has a mixed feeling of attraction and disgust as she sits watching the game of seduction that goes on between Minta and Paul, between Minta and Mr. Ramsay (though only a game in this case). She wants to be included in this adventure but, at the same time, feels a shudder as she thinks of the risks one must faced when exposed to the game. Her thoughts on her painting run parallel to her musings over love. She imagines moving the tree to the middle as she breathes in relief at visualizing a solution to all of this dilemma in finding

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>128</sup> 1988, p. 95.

the right balance and unity in her art. This would save her from the degrading aspects of love and marriage. She would find her own special way of doing things, of taking risks, of going into emotions that she must handle.

Thus, the dinner party comes to an end as Lily sees all the separate forces that had been joined together fall apart naturally, one person going here, the other going there, while Mrs. Ramsay sails off too quickly, in Lily's view. The moment has passed, the retrieval of that sensation will be taken up by Lily in the future.

Lily Briscoe, not the natural daughter of Mrs. Ramsay, will prove to be nevertheless the true inheritor of her vision of beauty and unity. Analogously, Lily will represent the ideal of androgyny celebrated by Woolf, of the joining together of both feminine and masculine attributes to form another vision of life and the future. Though, in Mrs. Ramsay's ponderings, Lily would never marry, "she was an independent little creature" traits which altogether pleased the older woman. This is practically the first sort of information the reader has of Lily, already an indication of her tendency to distance herself from the more conventional expectations on women. The completion of her painting is the basic issue on Lily's mind from the start as it figures as the metaphor of balance and beauty that she must bring into her life. In this sense, marriage (the traditional ideal sublimation of energy, love and future for a woman) is not a part of Lily's vision. Her eyes are looking for that way to place the diverse forms and masses on her canvas into harmony, in the same way she intends

to lead a life that can overcome the barriers of the past and the present as to what women should do. In any case, one of the first images that come to her mind as a solution to her painting is that of the tree, during the dinner party, which she decides to place in the middle, a thought which, in the midst of her anxious reflections on the grinding toil of love as it is presented traditionally in Paul and Minta's union, makes her spirits rise "at the thought of painting to-morrow"130. Thus, the future will be contained in Lily's image of mediation, of balance. The flow of language in the final pages of the narrative bring images and thoughts together to reveal this vision. And, through Lily's recovery of Mrs. Ramsay's fertile and powerful presence, this new vision will make sense specifically to the formation of a new woman who is comfortable with this fruitfulness of the female activity, though not in the conventional forms that were considered important before.

Thus, the first important step in bringing together all the separated fragments that did not seem to make any sense before in Lily's painting is the acceptance on her part of those nurturing aspects of Mrs. Ramsay that she saw with such critical eyes before. The fertility and creativity demonstrated by Mrs. Ramsay seemed dangerous to Lily who watched the older woman being constantly surrounded and needed by those in contact with her. Lily only realizes the significance of these qualities when she herself feels the urge to call out to Mrs.Ramsay for help, for the inspiration she needs to finish her work. It is then that Lily sees

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>129</sup> p.21. <sup>130</sup> p.87.

the "positive essence of Mrs. Ramsay" and is able to "dissociate the powers of fertility and nurturance that Mrs. Ramsay represents from the negative manifestations of these qualities within the patriarchally defined roles of wife and mother" Lily can see nurturance not as the male-centered world defines it, but as some source of much needed renovation that can carry within it the seeds to the future.

If the Oedipus myth can be seen working in the text, that of Demeter and Persephone runs parallel to this, in the bond that exists between Mrs. Ramsay and Lily which is recovered and brought to life in the last part of the book. Throughout the novel, the images associated to Mrs. Ramsay depict her as the maternal figure associated to the waters that can fertilize the aridity of the masculine world, to the offering of food and drink to the hungry and thirsty, to the celebration of love – the fruitfulness between a man and a woman – to all those images which contrast with the cold sterility of men. Mrs. Ramsay sees men as beings to be pitied, she is at times angry and shocked at their insensitivity, and feels they certainly lack qualities which women have in abundance. The myth of Demeter and Persephone enhance a bond which cannot be experienced by men, thus, Lily at first feels terribly disturbed by Mr. Ramsay's presence as she attempts to get to work on her painting, and sees him almost as a dead weight, ready to fall straight down on her. Lily thinks, "That man ... her anger rising in her, never gave; that man took. She, on the other hand, would be

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>131</sup> Pearson, Carol and Pope, Katherine. <u>The Female Hero in American and British Literature</u>, R.R. Bowker Company, New York, 1981, p.213.

forced to give. Mrs. Ramsay had given. Giving, giving she had died – and had left all this"132. The final words in this statement are revealing, however, of the true result of Mrs. Ramsay's giving (in giving freely and, as Cixous mentions, outside the economy of exchange): there was something there, some essence of Mrs. Ramsay which could not be erased and which Lily would find out eventually, as she attempts to complete her work. Lily, on the other hand, feels stale and useless, as if all through her life she had been "playing at painting, playing at the one thing one did not play at ..."133. The sterility of the male world is felt by Lily also, though she knows she has the weapon to change this feeling. The possession of a brush, of the tool to transform an idea into art, into beauty, is felt as a great responsibility. Nevertheless, Lily is forced to give by turning her attention away from this when Mr. Ramsay imposes his presences on her, not allowing her to go on with her work until she has done her part: she must give him what he wants (attention, care, nurturance), learning through this what Mrs. Ramsay's experience in life had always shown. Lily turns to Mrs. Ramsay's figure as she braces herself and faces Mr. Ramsay.

Though Lily finds it hard to give in totally to the traditional feminine role expected from her in the giving of sympathy to Mr. Ramsay (she cannot bring herself to say anything soothing that will satisfy his ego), she does find something in her that finally does the trick: she praises his boots, ashamed at her lack of tact, but still causing the necessary effect on

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>132</sup> p. 140. <sup>133</sup> p. 141.

Mr. Ramsay. Thus, Lily has felt the first instant of Mrs. Ramsay's influence: Lily can actually feel sympathy for this man, she experiences a cozy, warm feeling that makes her quite happy with herself, though she cannot explain why. She begins to wonder why the children are so resistant to their father's plan to go the lighthouse and, finally, feels a bit placed aside when Mr. Ramsay, having heard what he desired, no longer needs her sympathy. She is, in fact, practicing an art at which Mrs. Ramsay excelled: that of caring for others feelings. Lily lacks the experience of caring which the older woman had, and which is terribly missed by those who have survived her. Nevertheless, Lily has touched on an aspect of Mrs. Ramsay which many others had not perceived. The ease and unity of her life lay in the question of the connection of two Mrs. Ramsays: one was the exterior being she was with others, nurturing those around her, thus, joining herself to the other, being a social creature. The other was the private Mrs. Ramsay, if one can call her that. The preservation of this interior being allowed the exterior one to thrive. She nurtured herself and, consequently, could create beauty and art in her life, without strife, without destroying the egos and dreams of others. This is how, in effect, Mrs. Ramsay could be a mediator in the patriarchal culture she lived in. She was the ideal mother and wife in a Victorian society which gave much value to this. However, she was also able to establish an inner life through the acceptance of many complex and enrichening sides of her being.

Lily is taken to thinking how ineffective her actions really are in face of Mrs. Ramsay's lasting effect on people: she realizes the vast difference there is between her imagining ways

of completing her painting and the actual taking of the brush in hand. Once again, the presence of the paintbrush brings her to the reality and responsibility of her task. Whatever she decides to do will need dealing with, will leave its mark, whether it be to a great number of people or to only one or two. Nevertheless, Lily has the strong sensation that "the risk must be run, the mark made" and with this on her mind, she begins to move her brush with rhythm on the canvas. The movements Lily makes seem to take on a life of their own, though they emanate from her body and mind. This bodily effect on painting is mentioned by Minow-Pinkney – the closeness of the body's movements and rhythms are immediately felt on the canvas, as color, texture and tone come together in a pre-verbal state which recalls Kristeva's idea of the semiotic. Lily's sensations as she paints reveal the necessity of giving form to art, since it cannot live on mere ideas alone. This task is placed as a challenge before her, to scrutinize the object she has in her hands, though she is so close to it. The act of painting is then associated to images of life pulsing, of a birth, of a sexual act, of pleasure in its more basic forms:

For the mass loomed before her; it protruded; she felt it pressing on her eyeballs. Then, as if some juice necessary for the lubrication of her faculties were spontaneously squirted, she began precariously dipping among the blues and umbers, moving her brush hither and thither, but it was now heavier and it went

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>134</sup> p. 147.

slower, as if it had fallen in with some rhythm which was dictated to her ... by what she saw, so that while her hand quivered with life, this rhythm was strong enough to bear her along with it on its current.

Lily feels alive with this movement, her mind active, creating images, and

throwing from its depths, scenes, names and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space, while she modelled it with greens and blues.<sup>135</sup>

Thus, Lily's act of painting mixes images both of male and female content – her brush can be seen as a phallic figure, its dipping here and there lubricates the painting, the heaviness of the rhythm is one she is learning to master. Also, the painting is compared to a being coming to life in her hands, an image associated to birth, which is again referred to in the loose ideas and images coming to her mind in the form of a fountain of water, both phallic for its powerful thrust upwards, and feminine for its being an image of fertility and renovation.

Simultaneously, the images that come to Lily's mind are almost all of Mrs. Ramsay and her everlasting effect. In the memory of a morning in which Mrs. Ramsay, Charles Tansley and she were at the beach, feeling and fact come together and bring to her mind a moment of happiness and peace. Charles and Lily playing together under Mrs. Ramsay's laughing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>135</sup> p. 149.

presence: this is an example in Lily's mind of Mrs. Ramsay's influence over situations and people, her bringing unity where there otherwise would have been strife. This image, recalled as Lily dips into the paint and stains the canvas, remains in her mind "almost like a work of art" 136. The notion strikes her as being oddly true: Lily stops and realizes that her question on the meaning of it all has been somehow answered: there was no overall meaning, only those small instances of magic and happiness that could be brought on by a person. In this sense, Mrs. Ramsay's mothering was art: she could transform a transitory moment into something permanent, a memory living on in the mind of those who knew her. Lily realizes that this is what she wanted to do with her painting, to give form to what had no form, to put theory into practice, say, as Mrs. Ramsay did "Life stand still here".

As Lily goes on painting, she has Mrs. Ramsay's constant presence at her side and imagines conversations she might have if the woman were alive. She remembers the love between Paul and Minta and how it was celebrated by Mrs. Ramsay at the dinner party (never mind that the pair found a solution to the marriage which would be considered a failure in Mrs. Ramsay's terms), and how she had decided then and there never to be involved in such an emotion. It was at that moment in the past, once more, that Lily had also made a decision in relation to her painting - a theoretical one, but nevertheless a decision – that she would move the tree to the center. In a sudden rush, a feeling comes over her that takes her back to the afternoon in which Paul and Minta had fallen in love. It is such a strong

<sup>136</sup> p.150.

feeling it almost sweeps her off her feet, making the balance between life and death precarious. The images violently flow into her mind and are filled with color and sound:

Suddenly, as suddenly as a star slides in the sky, a red dish light seemed to burn in her mind, covering Paul Rayley, issuing from him. It rose like a fire sent up in token of some celebration by savages on a distant beach. She heard the roar and the crackle. The whole sea for miles round ran red and gold. Some winy smell mixed with it and intoxicated her, for she felt again her own headlong desire to throw herself off the cliff and be drowned looking for a pearl brooch on a beach. And the roar and the crackle repelled her with fear and disgust, as if while she saw its splendour and power she saw too how it fed on the treasure of the house, greedily, disgustingly, and she loathed it. But for a sight, for a glory, it surpassed everything in her experience, and burnt year after year like a signal fire on a desert island at the edge of the sea, and one had only to say 'in love' and instantly, as happpened now, up rose Paul's fire again ... 137

Lily sees and indirectly experiences these emotions of the past so strongly she can smell and taste them: the passion is primitive and absolute, it almost drives her to madness and death. Lily senses that her renunciation of the power of love, a power that Mrs. Ramsay celebrates as absolutely necessary, has given her the potential for another source of love and beauty,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>137</sup> p. 163.

which is her art. Still, she feels that the abysmal terror that overtakes her in relation to love also brings on the sensation of pleasure and greatness.

Such sensations that come to Lily are almost impossible to express in words; she feels she "wanted to say not one thing, but everything" about Mrs. Ramsay and about life itself. She sees the urgent necessity of expressing these emotions, but asks "how could one express in words these emotions of the body? express the emptiness there?" 139. The anguish Lily feels is intense, she cannot at first believe that the whole answer to "the meaning of it all" can be contained in the small daily acts, in the "miracle and leaping from the pinnacle of a tower into the air" - she longs for some kind of safe haven that will protect her from the pain of acting, choosing and creating, the very things Mrs. Ramsay did daily in her life. As Lily is overcome with emotion at both the meaninglessness and the full signification of life, seen through Mrs. Ramsay's example, through her eyes, she cries out for the woman, an almost primal call which represents everything she longs for and which words cannot express, a call that reveals her feeling of loss of this maternal figure and the need to recover her in order ot fill in the yearning. The numbness she had felt over the years, even after having heard of Mrs. Ramsay's death, has finally left her and she can now mourn.

Lily's pain lessens as she visualizes Mrs. Ramsay as a mother-goddess of fertility, "raising to her forhead a wreath of white flowers ... across fields among whose folds, purplish and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>138</sup> p. 165. <sup>139</sup> p. 165.

soft, among whose flowers, hyacinths or lilies, she vanished." 141 She has an intense sensation of life bursting out at the seams in which she finds herself speechless. It is not that there are no words, but simply that there is no need for any, as if they were all too full of meaning and at ther same time too lame. The images that express this mood are extraordinarily clear and light, as if Lily herself were one of the boats on the bay:

> One glided, one shook one's sails (there was a good deal of movement in the bay, boats were starting off) between things, beyond things. Empty it was not, but full to the brim. She seemed to be standing up to the lips in some substance, to move and float and sink in it, yes, for these waters were unfathomably deep ...142

In a certain sense, Lily's moment alone brings to mind Mrs. Ramsay's moments of being, the feeling the loss of personality and the peacefulness close to paralysis. Though the language brings in it a sensation of comfort and pleasure, as if one were engulfed in a womb, it also recalls the paralysis of death, of being left without words, if one does not move on. Thus, these moments of closeness to oneself, and to the mother's presence, are on the limit. One can feel the danger of losing identity, of falling into a void of madness. These moments can also reveal themselves to be enlightening, pleasurable, and full of beauty. The apparent

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>140</sup> p. 167. <sup>141</sup> p. 168.

reference to Freudian regression to the womb must be seen, in this sense, from a different point of view. The possibility of loss of identity is replaced by that of coming to terms with one's self and self-knowledge. There is no idealization of a perfect fusion as once existed between mother and daughter, since the innocence and primitiveness of that original union is impossible to reenact completely. Lily's feeling of being engulfed in waters is directly associated to Mrs. Ramsay's water symbols seen earlier in the novel. Thus, Lily feels she is both a part of the water in her capacity to "fertilize" through the creative work she is developing, as well as being generated inside a mother's "unfathomably deep" liquid womb, ready to give birth to herself. This sensation of rebirth of oneself, in contrast to being given birth to, is represented in Persephone's return to her mother from the land of the dead, a time in which all of nature, all of Demeter's creative forces are liberated and are given as a blessing to the world around her. From the dark passages of "Time Passes", in which the devastation and sterility of war is symbolic of Demeter's sorrow at the loss of her daughter, to the recovery of the daughter-mother bond of "The Lighthouse", we can see the figures of Demeter and Persephone interchange between the characters of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily. Mrs. Ramsay is both Demeter in her frutifulness and grace, in what she has to offer to those around her, and Persephone in her foreboding knowledge that one day she would not be around, and that the ways of the world were intensely complex and could engulf the protected world she lived in. Lily, on the other hand, is Persephone in that she is initially

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>142</sup> p.177.

"dead" to the feelings she has for her long-lost mother and needs to recapture the relationship in order to create. She is also Demeter since she brings the figure of Mrs. Ramsay back from the dead to stand beside her and help her create the solution to her painting. Thus, both Mrs. Ramsay and Lily experience the fruitfulness of art, though in quite different ways: as an artist, Lily needs to find the right balance, the coherence that will bring all the fragments and pieces of her vision together onto the canvas; Mrs. Ramsay did the same when she brought people together into her circle of protection and communion. Not only do they share a common experience in this aspect, but they also share a common feeling of the outside world interfering at times with their inner thoughts. As Minow-Pinkney states, this "is a matter of gender rather than history, of being a woman in any society rather than being a member of this one at this moment. Women's intellectual capacities are in constant tension with the mundane round of the domestic world they maintain." <sup>143</sup> Mrs. Ramsay often reflected on the complexities of the world and on the minds of men, but, at the same time, she was constantly in touch with the daily tasks that needed her attention. It was actually through them that she was able to carry out her vision of beauty and unity. It was also through her inner world that she could find a refuge for herself, away from the demands of others. Lily, on the other hand, feels this split inside her – her ideas on the balance between

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>143</sup> Minow-Pinkney, Makiko. <u>Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major Novels</u>, The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1987, p. 103.

thought and action, represented initially by the worlds of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, reflect directly on her painting.

When Lily looks at her painting again, she is still in search of the right component to make it express a balance. A new color, the right tone, the exact line in the exact place which can bring something new to the work, but which, at the same time, can bring parts together into a coherent unity - this is what Lily has been after all these years. On the surface she appears to be doing nothing, since she is not actively working on the painting: she looks "at her picture, which she was not touching, however, with all her faculties in a trance, frozen over superficially but moving underneath with extreme speed."144 Lily would like intensely to understand what things meant exactly to Mrs. Ramsay: by trying to achieve that essence in her, Lily gradually feels immersed in that kind of knowledge which Mrs. Ramsay represented. The feeling of floating in a liquid substance, the knowledge that cannot be expressed in any language, then the certainty that "fifty pairs of eyes were not enough", that "one wanted most some secret sense, fine as air" - all this was so significant and so contrasting to male knowledge, always prying, incisive and logical, always similar to a "beak" in the need to make its point. Lily's vision goes beyond this; she wants a fusion of the rational with the intuitive to form a mutiple view, a plurality that is seen in Woolf's idea of androgyny. The bringing together of parts, which is symbolyzed by Lily's finding of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>144</sup> p. 185. <sup>145</sup> p. 182

center in her painting, is representative of an androgynous view, one that goes beyond the stereotypical male and female roles. It is a vision that joins thought and action, that sees the logos of Mr. Ramsay's view and the multiplicity and diffusion of Mrs. Ramsay's, that accepts the wonder of ordinary experience. As Lily paints she thinks, "one wanted ... to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply, that's a chair, that's a table, and yet at the same time, It's a miracle, it's an ecstasy." Mrs. Ramsay's moments of solitude also brought in them this necessity to be close to the object at hand. In the case of the light coming from the lighthouse, as was mentioned before, it becomes evident: that final stroke, as Mrs. Ramsay would say, was hers. Not only was it hers, it was herself being reflected there. This is the stroke evocative of Lily's brush on the canvas.

Thus, in Lily's effort to find an androgynous ideal, the semiotic, which Kristeva refers to, and the symbolic come together. Lily directs the diverse and chaotic feelings she has towards one goal: her painting. It is a form of sublimating the pain she feels in relation to the loss of Mrs. Ramsay. Lily has found in Mrs. Ramsay that source of creativity which is, according to Hélène Cixous, at the basis of a woman's capacity to produce artistically. By connecting with Mrs. Ramsay, Lily has found a new possibility, one that goes beyond the conventional. It is neither totally masculine nor totally feminine (bisexual, in Cixous'words), but it was found partly through Mrs. Ramsay: in her beauty, in her easy way of dealing with people and solving problems, but also in her evasiveness, in her quick anger, in the knowledge that she

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>146</sup> p. 186.

had a darkness which one could not penetrate totally. Lily, who is used to giving enormous value to thought against the ineffectiveness of action, is obliged to open herself to Mrs. Ramsay's world of action, to her experience. In addition to this, Lily has come to terms with the Ramsays'marriage, with the connection between husband and wife, between the rationality of Mr. Ramsay and the imaginative world of Mrs. Ramsay. She has seen that under the surface, both contain what the other has: Mr. Ramsay needs reassurance and, thus, depends on Mrs. Ramsay's fantasy; while Mrs. Ramsay hides a much harder core under all her apparent irrationality. As Lily thinks back on the Ramsays' marriage, she sees its perfection and its great flaws, she sees Mrs. Ramsay's strength and her weakness. Lily's androgynous vision is actually a new definition of what it means to be a woman and to be in a relationship. Lily is then able to go beyond this form of living and find her own identity, her own way of being happy, and of creating beauty and permanence. Lily does not need to be in a relationship to define herself, she can do that regardless of any man. In this sense, she has redefined Mrs. Ramsay's view, and as she gives her painting the finishing touches, she realizes that a solution is possible. She can accept Mrs. Ramsay's vision and find her own as well. As Jane Lilienfeld says, "the single woman and the married woman are each enabled to reach beyond the domesic sphere and the life and work of the husband or lover to act in the world of maturity and decision" 147. In this way, Lily finishes her painting, giving it a final

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>147</sup> Lilienfeld, Jane. "Where the Spear Plants Grew: the Ramsays' Marriage in *To the Lighthouse*" in New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf, the McMillan Press, London, 1985, pp. 148-169.

stroke, in a similar form to the lighthouse's strokes in the night. The lighthouse is symbolic of the unity which both Mrs. Ramsay and Lily attempt to find: it too brings comfort and safety to those lost in the darkness. It is not only a phallic symbol but also a symbol of female action in its constant presence, in its soothing effect. Mrs. Ramsay had been referred to as seeing herself in the lighthouse, seeing in its stern presence her own presence, wanting to reach it as if she would reach her own home. In the exact moment in which Mr. Ramsay, James and Cam arrive at the lighthouse, Lily draws the final line in the center of the picture. She is exhausted, but satisfied as she says "I have had my vision". 148

This vision is at the basis of Woolf's text in To the Lighthouse. She also, in the midst of the transformations modernism was bringing to the world of art, defended not only the aesthetic innovations that ensued, but also that these novelties would reflect onto social and political changes as well, especially for women. Thus, Virginia Woolf attempts in her literary practice to create this new vision, not only by "imposing artistic form on the supposed chaos of the phenomenal world" but also by pointing towards alternatives for the woman artist, especially the woman writer. Woolf's defense of androgyny cannot be simplified – it is the concept that deconstructs the universalism of one identity, of the mind against the body, of all the binary oppositions that support our belief systems. It is here that her defense of the inadequacy of language comes in, as well as the need for women to have a chance to look

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>148</sup> p. 192.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>149</sup> Minow-Pinkney, Makiko. <u>Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major</u>

back and find mothers as well as fathers to support their ambitions. In this sense, for creativity to flourish, any artist would need to be androgynous, man or woman. Women, however, are constantly forced to mediate their capacities in both the male and female world - they can see themselves as outsiders and a part of the system. Thus, one can take the idea and ideal of androgyny a step further. In the elaboration of androgyny seen in To the Lighthouse, one must think of it as a form of mediation between opposite poles, between rigid barriers imposed especially in the Victorian society in which Mrs. Ramsay lived. It is the possibility of breaking down these barriers and oppositions, between the inner and the outer self, between the I and the other, the private and the public and, evidently, between man and woman. For women, this seems to be a locus of action, in the sense that women have a double vision, as was mentioned before. This is a privilege because it enables a woman to see beyond the dominant order and more easily experiment with plurality, innovation and diversity. It is necessary, however, to deal with this plurality and not fragment - because a woman's experimentation, her dealings with the semiotic, with the preoedipal, must fall back onto the symbolic in order for her to avoid psychosis, in order for her to have a language others can understand. In any case, this double vision allows women to be "in touch with the possibility of a utopian existence which lives at once desire and repression, summons jouissance and yet has voice in the socio-symbolic order "150". This

Novels, The Harvester Press, 1987, p. 4.

Minow-Pinkney, Makiko. Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major

utopia, seen by feminist theorists such as Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous, is also defended by Woolf: in her poetic discourse one can see its most evident example.

This is the same idea, taken a bit further, defended by Teresa de Lauretis when she refers to woman's situation inside and outside of gender, inside ideology and outside the imaginary representations constructed by ideology. Feminism as seen by Woolf did not take into account several factors which de Lauretis considers essential if it is to survive today - these factors go beyond the power of language and its discursive effect and take into account race, gender and class, for example. Nevertheless, de Lauretis sees an important link between narrative and ideology which can support Woolf's defense of a new language for women artists. Pointing towards changes in the way narrative is carried out (without the need of a hero facing the obstacle, without the linear plot tending towards a climax), de Lauretis suggests that the practice and the very study of narrative should go beyond the conventional and deconstruct the mechanisms that hold this traditional narrative together. Such is the case with Woolf's text. The lack of a plot with concrete marks that define it, the lack of a climax, the redefinition of values, the deconstruction of conventional binary oppositions, the theme centering around the artist's search for another woman's supportive gaze (thus defining herself and her work by standards that do not refer to the male, giving her a sense of fullness and not lack) - all these points are contained in Virigina Woolf's novels in general and especially in To the Lighthouse.

Novels, The Harvester Press, 1987, p.22.

## III. THE BELL JAR: CAPTURED AND BOTTLED

## 1. The Artist Coming to Grips with her Time

It is very ironic that Sylvia Plath's public reward for her artistic achievements should come only twenty years after her death: she received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1982. If there was one thing she had developed to its full and trusted that there was quality in, this was her poetry. Her experience had allowed her to feel this way, and, after years of submitting her work to publishers here and there, she had begun to feel due value was being alloted to her. The irony lies in the fact that her death should interrupt the ascending line that would have taken her to such a prize as the Pulitzer sooner or later. It was, in fact, a matter of time. It is ironic and tragic that Plath herself took her life in spite of all the apparent promise and the confidence she deposited in her career and in her future.

The quality of Sylvia Plath's poetry places her among the great young poets of her time, along with Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell. Besides poetry, she also wrote stories and articles, all the time searching for her own voice. As she herself expressed in her journal, "What is my voice? ... Woolfish, alas, but tough. Please, tough." This search for an artistic voice which could express a woman's world, in a woman's language, echoes a concern that Virginia Woolf herself had expressed in regards to women's artistic production, that there

must exist a female consciousness. Though Woolf's ideas on the androgynous mind seem to initially contradict the remarks she made on the differences between men and women's texts, the fact remains that the language of women became the central concern for many women writers in generations to come. Plath, influenced by Stevie Smith, Elizabeth Bishop and, evidently, by Woolf, found in her work that her experiences as a daughter, wife and mother would empower her to create not only an imagery associated to these experiences, but also to give the words themselves a rhythm, tone and musicality which allowed for greater freedom.

Besides these shared views, Plath and Woolf had a similar preoccupation in defining role-models which could be a support and guiding light for their work. Plath develops in some of her poetry of the last years, collected in *Ariel*, the strong notion of women surviving if they stuck together. She felt empowered by the knowledge that there had been some women writers before her who touched her directly, as well as some, such as Anne Sexton, whom she could relate to in the present. As Sylvia wrote to Sexton, she thought the poems written by the latter wonderful, masterful and "womanly in the greatest sense ... (and) ... so blessedly unliterary" The importance of the unliterariness of Sexton's poetry seems to indicate Plath's desire to make a clean break from rules and impositions of a poetic tradition dominated by the male presence, by the innumerous male writers and their frequent

Wagner-Martin, Linda. Sylvia Plath, Cardinal, London, 1990, p.155-156.
 Ibid. p.217.

authoritative voice. Nevertheless, as a young woman trying to find her way in her career and in her role as wife and mother, there were not many of these role-models whose steps she could follow. Sylvia's impression was that the professors she found at Smith College had, in order to pursue an academic career of excellence, given up on other aspects of their lives, namely those of wife and mother. It was frustrating, in a sense, to find such deeply rooted contradictions: everyone seemed to push young women to achieve academically, however, this did not mean women could be fully accomplished. Sylvia Plath felt keenly the dead-end roles offered to women in the society of her time, and felt she was both inside and out of the fifties' expectations as to what women should do with their lives. The conflict to her was to combine the expectations in regards to girls and the marriage market (she did, after all, want to get married) and her aspirations as a writer.

The Bell Jar deals with these concerns as one of its basic themes. Written at a very productive time in the first years of the sixties, it was published in January, 1963, under the name Victoria Lucas. It would only be published under Plath's real name, in the United States, in 1971, since it contained so many autobigraphical references and could end up, as it actually did, hurting many people in Plath's circle of relatives and friends. Satirical, comical, it received many favorable reviews and was compared to Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye in its portrayal of adolescent angst in the fifties. It also offers something much more important in literary terms: there had been very few female heroes created by women writers which could somehow mirror the situations and hardships of many teenage girls or young

Inness'comments on The Bell Jar in the Cliffs Notes, "there were no women counterparts to Huck Finn; there were no women Gatsbys or Holden Caulfields, or Christopher Newmans". Sylvia Plath knew all this and felt it was her obligation to "speak for the lives of the countless women she had known – women caught in conflicting social codes who were able to laugh about their plight". The recovery of this novel as an authentic work of fiction was fundamental in filling in the gap mentioned above. Possibly the difficulty in actually accepting this novel of Sylvia Plath's as fiction comes from the fact that it is a work which does not easily fit into a determined genre or under any classification, as we are accostumed to. As Cinthia Shwantes says in her doctoral work, Plath's text "cannot easily be labeled; thus it is more comfortable to look for biographical explanations to it" Nevertheless, it is an authentic novel of its time, giving voice to what had been little expressed before.

This world Plath describes in <u>The Bell Jar</u> is that of the fifties in America, a world in frank contrast to Woolf's beginning of the century England. Where there had been a vision, perhaps, of the possibilities still ahead, either in the political and social changes that Marxism seemed to bring about in the Soviet Union, or in that last resource that might still exist in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>153</sup> Inness, Jeanne. The Bell Jar: Notes, Cliffs Notes, Lincoln, 1993, p.13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>154</sup> Wagner-Martin, Linda. Svlvia Plath, Cardinal, London, 1990.

Schwantes, Cinthia. Interferindo no Cânone: A Questão do Bildungsroman Feminino com elementos Góticos, Programa de Pós-graduação em Letras, Doutorado em Literatura Comparada, UFRGS, Porto Alegre, 1997, p. 173. My translation.

Art (a promise of redemption in a world of destruction brought on by the War), we now have quite a different picture in the United States. Firstly, because it is the USA we are talking about: even in the twenties, it was a bit more optimistic a place to be than post-war England could ever intend to. Similarly to the atmosphere of the twenties in America, the fifties seemed to be a time of great prosperity (to a few) and promise (to some). However, there was a feeling underlying the economic boom of the fifties that did not fit in with the optimism that should be felt. The shadow of Communism, the constantly overlooked presence of the socially excluded and the often silent discontent of some "maladjusted" women were at the root of all evil that could ensue and destabilize what otherwise would be a perfect world. No matter that at the basis of this feeling of destabilization was the fear and insecurity brought on by the existence of the atomic bomb: not only did the Americans have it, but the enemy had its secret as well. A society of surveillance was established, an ironic counterpoint to the surveillance that was always associated to the enemy regime of Communism. This will, according to Pat Macpherson in Reflecting on the Bell Jar, have a direct effect on the formation of female identity at the time. The key expression in this system seemed to be "fitting in", in all aspects, be it at the political level, be it as a woman. As Macpherson states, "the cruellest assumption, to my mind, was the paradox that one's role came naturally, and failure to be fulfilled was a sign of sickness" 156. Thus, as a woman, one should always know what one's role was: that of wife and mother, though deep down

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>156</sup> Macpherson, Pat. Reflecting on the Bell Jar, Routledge, London, 1991, p. 3.

this woman could not fail to see her own dishonesty (she had, after all, been prepared for more and could do more). Nevertheless, anything beyond the expected would naturally have to be repressed: the existence of mental institutions, of books on childcare and of constant peer pressure were always at hand. The same would have to occur politically. Dissidence needed to be eliminated, conformity being the rule. Macpherson's interesting comment on this aspect of American culture is that "paranoia proceeds naturally from this basic psychic dishonesty, seeking only external screens on which to project the denied self and call it the Other." In this manner, Communism could fit the role of "enemy within", as much as mental breakdown could explain the "demon part" each woman would have to combat in order to feel happy.

The contradictions of such an era abound and lead to dramatic consequences for a number of women, represented in Esther Greenwood of <u>The Bell Jar</u>. The great project for women is that they learn to sell an image of themselves in an Age of Television and commercialism. The control over women's bodies and minds has found its media in advertising; every women has an obligation: not only to comply to public surveillance, but to watch herself for any possible flaw. Woman is a commodity as much as anything else is – her image must be seductive enough to be displayed on the marriage market, but she cannot take her seduction to the last consequences. Chastity is still a virtue, one to be respected, at least

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>157</sup> Macpherson, Pat. Reflecting on The Bell Jar, Routledge, London, 1991, p. 3-4.

for young women, after all. Thus, the commercialism of relationships is just one more aspect of a system that basks in the glory of capitalism.

Evidently, this is extended to Art as well. The naked truth is that it is all fine and well if a woman diddle and daddle in literature and art, but taking it seriously is a threat to femininity. According to Macpherson, this can be made evident in Mary McCarthy's novel The Group, where the Vassar grads all must come to terms with their brilliant educations and the role alloted to them in life. For Sylvia Plath, art was a crucial matter. First, she took very seriously her education and ambitions to become a writer; second, this could in no way be associated to crude commercialism; third, her success in life could not be a mere matter of family or career — she did, after all, believe it was essential for women to be fulfilled by career and family life. It is with this also that Esther Greenwood struggles.

The dramatic results of such contradictions inside a society are felt in the fragmentation in the identities of many sensitive and intelligent women of the time. The nervous breakdowns and hysteria that take place stem from a grim and cruel awareness of the several masquerades that must be performed in order to survive. In the fifties Woman is being constructed (as in any other time), as Teresa de Lauretis would say, "through the various technologies of gender (e.g., cinema) and institutional discourses (e.g., theory) with power to control the field of social meaning" 158, and, evidently, institutions such as marriage,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>158</sup> Lauretis, Teresa de. *The Technology of Gender* in <u>Technologies of Gender</u>; <u>Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction</u>. Indiana U. Press, Bloomington, 1987, p. 18.

motherhood and psychiatry fit extremely well inside the term "technologies", since they define not only what Woman must be, but also what she can desire. It is at this point that one can see where the role of wife-and-mother cannot escape what has been assigned to it in patriarchy. It has been subordinated to "Family ... (and) ... defined as femininity itself in the 1950s", while Freudianism (is) at the centre of femininity in the 1950s: maternity is female desire, all else is sublimation." <sup>159</sup>

Thus, the tyranny of the fifties is complete: women are left with not many role models to look up to, they are left speechless in their paranoia to conform or be expelled/executed/electrocuted. There is little support that mothers can offer. They also have been portrayed by the institutions (psychoanalysis, for example) as harmful to a child's development, if too close a relationship is maintained. In the case of girls, the conflict is even more serious. Hate has arisen, on the part of many young women, as they watch, often without being able to evaluate, the roles their mothers play. These are passive and reliant on patriarchy, encouraging their daughters to conform. At the same time, what could one expect in a culture that is fueled by its institutions to be mysoginist, to blame the mother, and woman, for all evil? In this mood, a woman's/mother's voice must be cut off, the stories and experiences she could pass on to her daughter and other women must be ignored since they might threaten the strict moral and gender codes established by a rigid society. It is in this dilemma that Esther Greenwood, the female hero of The Bell Jar, finds herself. Her

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>159</sup> Macpherson, Pat. Reflecting on The Bell Jar. Routledge, London, 1991, p.50 –51.

gradual fragmentation is a result of the oppressive society which surrounds her as much as it is a result of the difficulty in establishing any sort of close bonding with her mother. How Esther will deal with the recovery of her identity will be discussed in the following pages.

The novel The Bell Jar, differently from the one analyzed in chapter two, initially does not present the complexity of shifting points of views, or of a narration which presents a flow of consciousness that defies the more conventional realistic mode of a pre-modernist era. It is told in the first person, thus the narrator is Esther Greenwood telling her story, one which is inserted in a specific period of time which one can easily identify, that of the early 50s. Throughout the allusion of a few facts that are at the background of the narration (historical and social, as well as personal), we have the filter of one and only one point of view, that of Esther facing and confronting the events that take place. As the memories of the past experience are reported, these are interrupted by other memories that came before the initial one. Thus, the narrative is one of memories, a patchwork of interconnected events which come up as Esther, the narrator, remembers. Though the events that take place are chronologically set, the interrelated events (brought forward in order to illustrate or strengthen the various memories of her breakdown) form a complex net of events which form a text that moves forward and backwards in time, as these events come to the mind of the narrator.

## 2. Watching Oneself in the Mirror: The Bell Jar

## 2. 1 The Image of Perfection

Esther Greenwood is the narrator of a series of events which begin to take place during a summer she spends in New York City. The story is told from the point of view of a much older Esther, one who, as is implied in the text, has acheived a level of maturity and is able to look back at that summer with some level of distance. The older Esther is supposedly married and a mother, thus her experiences allow her to judge the younger Esther with some authority. This also allows a tone of irony to permeate the text, since Esther's distance from the harshness of being committed to institutions has given her time to re-evaluate her experience. Nevertheless, the Esther who tells the story is mature enough also to see the importance of that summer for her future, as she is able to recall vividly the feelings she had as a young woman setting out for the world.

The feeling of inadequacy which the narrator informs us is felt during the summer she spends in New York as student editor for a ladies' magazine is presented right at the start: though she has been invited to be a part of a group of selected few, she cannot feel more than nauseated and out of place. The electrocution of the Rosenbergs is constantly on her mind and, as she states comically, from the standpoint of a certain age and experience, "I'm

stupid about executions" 160. This is precisely what Esther has sensed: she shouldn't let such an event affect her, it doesn't seem to bother the majority, but she can't help it. The image of the Rosenbergs, sentenced to death by electrocution, haunts her because it is the sort of collective catharsis needed by a society in search of an outlet for its ingrained fear. It was, after all, as Jean-Paul Sartre said: Americans were "sick with fear ... afraid of the shadow of (their) own bomb." Esther is also sick with fear, as the execution of the couple foretells what she will go through, her musings on "what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves"162, will soon enough be answered when Esther suffers the punishment reserved for her "dissident", nonconformist behavior in electroshock treatment. For dissident, in fact, it is to feel so out of sorts in relation to the expectations of those around her, at least in the culture Esther lives in. Esther, as any other young American girl, should get married and have children, and preferably forget her intellectual ambitions of becoming a writer. Esther is reminded of Buddy Willard, her boyfriend, saying "after (she) had children (she) would feel differently, (she) wouldn't want to write poems any more" and feels threatened by a future that could be compared to "being brainwashed ... numb as a slave in some private totalitarian state."163 Curiously, this feeling of being submitted to the will of the state is the reflection of the feeling a whole community has in regards to their role as model American citizens: every

<sup>160</sup> Plath, Sylvia. The Bell Jar, A Bantam Book, Toronto, 1979, p.1.All future references will be taken from this edition.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>161</sup> Macpherson, Pat. Reflecting on the Bell Jar, Routledge, London, 1991, p.30.

p. 1.
163 p. 69.

one of the individuals in the United States at the time of the Rosenbergs' execution has been placed by the state as guardian and, at the same time, prisoner of an ever-watchful Eye that cannot tolerate difference, dissidence or critical thinking.

Esther's gradual feeling of sickness and entrapment is a result of her seeing herself not as others see her: she is a fraud, behaving, initially, as if everything were fine, but sensing that she is just playing a role. The truth is that Esther must go through her own private descent into hell before she can find her way. Her journey towards defining who she is begins with her observations of those whom she has had contact with at the Amazon Hotel, where she and the other girls participating as student editors are staying. Esther's feelings of inadequacy contrast sharply with the partying that goes on, either with the "slutty" Doreen, or with the "angelical" Betsy. These two girls have been described by critical literature as Esther's doubles, the first of a sucession of doubles who will project Esther's feelings and the image she has of herself. Gordon Lameyer sees in Doreen Esther's extroverted side; and points out that Esther is like a negative to Doreen's silver, bleached-blonde looks. Betsy, on the other hand, "with her cover girl beauty ... tries to 'save' Esther from Doreen" and bring her over to purity and innocence. Between these two, Esther cannot decide whom she will be like. Her boss, Jay Cee, poses as double for Esther's mother. She can be seen as rolemodel, surrogate mother and a projection into the future for Esther. Though Esther sees Jay

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>164</sup> Lameyer, Gordon. "The Double in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar"*, in <u>Sylvia Plath - The Woman and the Work</u>, Edward Butscher ed., Dodd, Mead & Co., New York, 1977, p.146.

Cee in a very positive way, since "she wasn't one of the fashion magazine gushers with fake eyelashes and giddy jewelry .... (and) had brains, so her plug-ugly looks didn't seem to matter"165, she also has ambiguous feelings towards her, as well as towards "all the old ladies I ever knew (who) wanted to teach me something ... I suddenly didn't think they had anything to teach me." 166It is very difficult for Esther to make a difference between the ready-made truths of her own mother and of women like Mrs. Willard, Buddy's mother, and the frank, successfully traced ambitions of women such as Jay Cee and Dr. Nolan, the woman psychiatrist who will treat Esther.

Gradually, Esther's feelings of detachment and fragmentation, which make her desperately feel she must hang on to someone she might emulate in a way, bring her to seeing herself in the mirror as a stranger, "a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face", or "the reflection (one sees) in a ball of dentist's mercury" Esther finds another personality for herself in Elly Higginbottom, her own creation, another double she uses in the most bizarre situations. The splitting off of Esther's personality into one, two or several reflections, either created by her own imagination or as an attempt to stick to the girlfriend she thinks might best save her from despair, is the clearest sign of the difficulty she is having in seeing herself and finding a style and a way of life that is authentic and true to her desire. At this point, Esther does not even have the slightest clue as to what that might

<sup>165</sup> p.5. <sup>166</sup> Ibid.

be. She only knows that she "wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions ... like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket."168

This is exactly the opposite of Esther's mother's advice to her. What Esther cannot see in her mother is a real support to her wishes and ambitions to live life the way she chooses. Naively, perhaps, Esther says, "I wished I had a mother like Jay Cee. Then I'd know what to do."169 Though it might be true that Jay Cee resembles more closely the kind of mother Esther feels would be useful to her, her remark denotes the desperate need for some other woman to tell her what to do, since she cannot make any decisions on her own without feeling intense insecurity. The truth is, Esther's slow desintegration is the direct result of a lack of appropriate and affectionate bonding with a network of other women, be it her mother, be it friends. Thus, Esther's sickness is the sickness of a whole generation of women who cannot rely on each other as help or as a support-net that will enable them to "shoot off in all directions". It is no wonder that, from Mrs. Greenwood, Esther gets nothing more than formulas on how to live, and practical advice on the importance of learning shorthand for a young woman's career. Mrs. Greenwood is a direct representative of the patriarchal culture Esther needs to understand so that she can survive in it.

It is important to see Esther's mother, a widow, more as representative spokesperson of patriarchy in the novel than as a positive nurturer for her daughter. Perhaps in the name of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>167</sup>I p. 15-16. <sup>168</sup> p. 68.

her own survival, Mrs. Greenwood has been the defender of "the traditional myths of womanhood" which Esther begins to see as empty of meaning. The conventional idea of marriage and motherhood defended by Mrs. Greenwood is seen as a trap by Esther. Though Esther's mother prescribes a stable, normal lifestyle to Esther, which would include a husband and children, the image of her own marriage to Esther's father is ambiguous and only gives Esther more doubts. Once again, the fragmentation beginning inside Esther is there, being duplicated in the gap between what her mother thinks is adequate and what reality shows. Esther reflects:

Hadn't my own mother told me that as soon as she and my father had left Reno on their honeymoon - my father had been married before, so he needed a divorce - my father said to her, 'Whew, that's a relief, now we can stop pretending and be ourselves'? - and from that day on my mother never had a minute's peace.<sup>171</sup>

The rosy picture of dinners, roses and wine which was sold to any young woman was evidently in direct contradiction with the realities of marriage. A woman is seduced into marriage and closes her eyes temporarily to the events that she knows will follow the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>169</sup> p.32.

Pearson, Carol and Pope, Katherine. <u>The Female Hero in American and British Literature</u>, R. R. Bowker Co., New York, 1981, p.193.

"happily ever after" of the stories. It is as if this self-delusion were a necessary strategy: one must convince oneself that though this thing called the (conventional) marriage is a trap for any imaginative woman, it is the only outlet allowed for her sexuality and need of affection. Esther has seen through this trick played on the middle-class woman, and sees her mother as the perpetuator of a lie. It is, in fact, a double restraint shown in <u>The Bell Jar</u>: the issue of gender and the issue of class. As Elaine Martin states, "there is something peculiarly rigid and inflexible about middle class values which has devastating results for (Esther) and (her) strained relationship(...) with (her) mother."

Thus, Esther's mother, along with others, such as Buddy Willard's mother, give Esther all she needs to turn away from a world that offers nothing but hypocrisy. Mrs. Willard presents an interesting example to Esther. Esther sees in the pretty piece of handicraft Mrs. Willard produces (a rug she is braiding) a wonder of color and texture, as well as a time-consuming activity: "She'd spent weeks on that rug, and I had admired the tweedy browns and greens and blues patterning the braid." To Esther, the rug Mrs. Willard is making is a product of her talent and, because of this, it should be hung on the wall. However, Mrs. Willard puts it on the floor, letting those around her soil and transform her work into nothing. By not giving it any value, she does not allow anyone else to give it any value. Thus, there it was again: what Buddy Willard had suggested about Esther's leaving her poetry behind after

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>172</sup> Martin, Elaine. "Mothers, Madness, and the Middle Class in *The Bell Jar* and *Les Mots Pour le Dire*, in *The French American Review*, v.5, no. 1, Spring, 1981, p 31.

marriage, is made evident in his mother's treatment of her rug. As a product coming out of a woman's hands and mind, her art, be it a rug, a painting, or a poem, will be made to mean nothing after she is married. Marriage, in Esther's view, and in the view offered to her in the society she lives in, is a dead-end for the display of any creativity which is not directly put to a practical use. Not that being single is the paradise of the woman-artist in the fifties either: the decision not to marry places a woman in a category apart from others. This woman not only does not fit in socially, she takes art far too seriously - thus, she is a double-freak. Nothing is lost by Esther's watchful eye.

Esther's ideas and doubts about sex are a direct consequence of her observations on the double standard being enacted in society. Buddy Willard's confession of having had an affair with a waitress infuriates Esther not so much because of the fact itself, but because of his pretended purity. This, along with all the other hypocrisies she observes, is the worst. It is a contradictory feeling, however, since Esther has always been the one who, when in the company of Buddy, has shown herself to be a seductive, worldly woman. Thus, Esther has also been playing a game of sorts, one in which she has a hard time not only understanding the rules, but keeping track of who she really is. Parallel to that, Esther is extremely naive about sex, and thinks nothing of Buddy's offer to bare his genitals to her. She immediately recalls her mother and grandmother's hints "about what a fine, clean boy Buddy Willard was,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>173</sup> p.69.

coming from such a fine, clean family..."174, in this way, relying on the exact same formulas her mother gives out and that she criticizes so much. However, once having seen Buddy's genitals, she can think of nothing but "turkey neck and turkey gizzards" feeling quite depressed about the revelation, as if she did, in fact, expect more. It is self-deception to expect more from a young man like Buddy, either in attitude or in ideas, and Esther evidently still lacks the necessary wisdom which would enable her to see that Buddy will live by nothing more than the rules. These rules are expressed perfectly by his own mother's moral maxims ("What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security"176) and reflect that very same double standard which Esther is finding hard to live with.

Esther's decision to lose her viriginity stems more from a desire to get even with Buddy than from any real wish of her own, and, so, once more she is quite confused in regards to her real feelings about the issue of her own sexuality. When the Russian simultaneous interpreter Constantin invites Esther up to his apartment to listen to music, she "decides" she will let herself be seduced, filling in the role of woman-of-the-world. Automatically she is reminded of her mother's advice about men: "(She) had always told me never under any circumstances to go with a man to a man's rooms after an evening out, it could mean only

<sup>174</sup> p. 55. <sup>175</sup> Ibid.

one thing."<sup>177</sup>. At the same time, she thinks she could get pregnant and, once again, it is her mother's ready-made advice that comes to her. Esther's amusing reminiscence of the article from *Reader's Digest*, "In Defense of Chastity", reveals, at the same time, how intensely her mother feels she must defend patriarchy's morals, and how far apart mother and daughter are to each other. The article's basic idea is that the world of a man is totally different from that of a woman, and it was best for a girl to stick to the rules of virginity until she was married and let her more experienced husband teach her about sex. To Esther's mother, there could be nothing better than to give her daughter a text written by an expert (a married female lawyer with children) as a good piece of advice. Esther can only think of what is lacking in the article: any consideration about a woman's feelings. One must say, as a consequence, that this is the one thing missing also in her relationship with her mother: any real contact with each other's feelings. Esther can see nothing but empty, sterile words coming form her mother's mouth, whether they express what Esther should do for a career, or whether they refer to what she should do about her sexuality.

Thus, Esther begins to see her mother as representing a system she wants desperately to abandon, though she cannot see where she could go yet. She is shown as feeling inadequate, not being able to see herself as a whole person, finding trouble making decisions, and seeing little support, especially from her mother, for what she would like to do, in other words, to be able to write, to love and to develop as a full human being. She begins to reject not only

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>177</sup> p. 65.

what society demands from her as a woman, she begins to see these demands as equivalent to her mother's. At one point, she sees her mother's insistence that she take shorthand as terrible as the experience she has had with studying Physics. The reduction of words into mere symbols, letters and numbers is too much for Esther, and she states, "physics made me sick ... what I couldn't stand was this shrinking everything into letters and numbers." 178, while the simple idea of having to go on with the same system in Chemistry makes her think "if I had to strain my brain with any more of that stuff I would go mad."179 Esther goes to extreme lengths in order to avoid taking the Chemistry class and comes up with a plan that convinces an entire Faculty Board of how unnessary it would be for her to oficially take the course. She dons the mask of pure scientist, one who will sit in and observe the class without the interest of getting a grade, while the whole time she feels like a complete fraud. During the class she writes sonnets and blocks out the nonsensical language of formulas that can drive her mad. Once more, it is this reductionary view of the world which Esther wants no part of.

Esther's need to find her own way of living is exemplified in her desire to find a language which can express her feelings. Nevertheless, the options before her drive her to many moments of silence. When one of the girls at the Hotel expresses her cruel indifference at the Rosenberg's fate, Esther is shocked but silenced. Buddy Willard's opinion about poetry (to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>178</sup> p.29. <sup>179</sup> Ibid.

him it is a piece of dust) diminishes Esther herself, to whom poetry is a great ambition. Yet, once again, Esther cannot find words to say what she thinks and, dumbfoundedly, she ends up agreeing with him. Another clear example of Esther's inability to operate, to take command of language so that it will function for her, is in the skiing episode. Despite her better judgment as to her interest and desire in learning how to ski, Esther lets Buddy decide that she will learn to do so. It is no coincidence that before remembering this event, Esther has been reminded of another fragment of an event: Buddy's stubborn cheerfulness when she insists she will not marry, and, at the same time, his categorical definition of her desire to have more than one option to deal with in life as neurotic (not surprising in an "either/or" society such as that of the fifties). To Buddy's categorization, Esther answers defiantly that she must be neurotic if this means wanting two mutually exculsive things at the same time. Her defiance, however, is nothing more than words, since she does not see the possibility of realization of her desire. Thus, defiant words are not even put to use when she realizes the foolishness of attempting to ski. The only instrument Esther feels she can use is mulishness, in other words, defiance through lack of communication in face of Buddy's insistence that she will learn to do what he wants her to. Deep down, Esther can hear her interior voice, one which is telling her what is best for her. However, the lack of possibly voicing out loud what she desires brings her to a disconcerting idea: that she might kill herself, destroy not only the inauthentic Esther which goes along with male desire (represented in Buddy's wish that she learn to ski), but, along with it, also the inner voice she knows is telling her the

truth. In a male world, it seems that Lacan's options for a woman are represented in Esther: either she speak the language of men, be silent, or go mad. Esther finds the use of words are difficult, awkward and ineffective, thus, she frequently has nothing to say. However, she is beginning to give signs of her enormous will to break with the conventions that hold her down, in spite of the risk of madness.

These begin with her symbolically shedding the squalor which represent her nauseating stay in New York. Her feeling of detachment, from reality and from herself, make her see herself as a distorted image in the mirror, foreign (a "Chinese woman") and blurred ("smudgy-eyed"). She decides to open the window to her room at the hotel and it infuriates her that she cannot open it as much as she would like. What most depresses her is the silence, however. There is the ordinary noise of the city, but as Esther says, "it wasn't the silence of silence. It was my own silence." This silence she refers to lies inside her and is eating away at her. The lack of a means of connection with the world around her force her into finding other forms of expressions, thus she feels the necessity of cleansing herself, of finding herself stark naked and up to her neck in very hot water. The sensation of being immersed in hot water represents comfort to Esther, as if she had been reborn. The metaphor evidently takes us to thinking of a mother's womb, warm and liquid, and of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>180</sup> p. 15.

Esther's necessity to reconnect to that comfort, in some way. At the end of the bath, she feels "pure and sweet as a new baby."181

At the same time Esther is filled with the need to find an identity for herself, or perhaps, to regain the one she has lost touch with, through these metaphors of rebirth, she is also reminded constantly of death. These two concepts, death and birth, are frequently made present to Esther, and they are always mediated by sexuality. Buddy's maleness is often proven by his knowledge of the scientific world, that same world Esther's instincts reject because of its reductionism. He takes her to the hospital where the student-doctors practice. The sight of cadavers does not affect her as much as the sight of jar after jar of babies, dead before they were born. This is just one of the gruesome experiences Esther goes through in which she puts on a brave face, a mask of scientific curiosity, while all the time feeling as reduced and dead as the objects being shown to her. Though the fetuses are in a liquid, there is nothing farther away from the metaphor of being immersed in comforting amniotic liquid, close to a mother's body, than this. The next event Esther faces is the delivery of a baby. The association made between sexuality, birth and losing contact with one's senses is made clear here. The woman delivering is drugged, her body is seen by Esther as fragmented and undignified, with "an enormous spider-fat stomach and two little ugly spindly legs ... (and) she never stopped making this unhuman whooing noise."182. Esther sees the whole process

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>181</sup> p. 17. 182 p. 53.

as a trap, the drug made to trick the woman into not remembering the pain, the position and attitude of the doctors and nurses seeming to place the woman, who was, after all, the main actor there, as a mere machine. It is as if the male world had taken the "birth privilege ... from women" while the doctors "take the sole responsibility for life"183, in Shanon Artrip's words. Esther's revolt is covered up by her silence, once again, the only resource she feels is left to her. However, she states in relation to the drug, "it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent"184, a pain killer which would alienate a woman from her own birthing experience. Esther feels there is something at odds in this whole situation, even more so when Buddy states his idea that women shouldn't be allowed to watch a delivery since it might turn them away from procreation. Esther understands that if an experience which is a fundamental moment in a woman's life is transformed into a solely medical ordeal, there would be no reason for her to go through with it: "For some reason the most important thing to me was actually seeing the baby come out of you yourself and making sure it was yours. I thought if you have to have all that pain anyway you might just as well stay awake."185 The way the birthing process is presented to Esther makes her see how incredibly senseless the world was in relation to a woman's feelings. Once again, it is the feeling of the girl (or woman) that matters for her. Buddy, as a perfect representative of this world of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>183</sup> Artrip, Shanon. The Girl in the Mirror: A Lacanian/Kristevian Study of Sylvia Plath's <u>The Bell Jar</u>, Radford University, Virginia, 1993, p.66.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>184</sup> p.53. <sup>185</sup> p. 54.

double standards and contempt for women, is a sinister reminder to Esther of what she is in for. In sum, as Pat Macpherson affirms, "the dead foetuses in jars that Esther saw on her hospital tour with Buddy represent both women as patients, subject to Male Medicine's persecutory experimentation, and women as mothers, frozen in their development as humans." Esther has been introduced to this world of mechanization and narrowness, but, as events turn out, not seen the last of it: she too will become an object of observation in a mental health system that almost transforms her into nothing, into ashes, after her first electroshock treatment.

The prevailing metaphor for this initial descent into her own personal hell is contained in a story Esther reads about a fig tree. After counting up all her inadequacies (not being able to cook, use shorthand, dance, sing, ride a horse, ski, speak German, among others), Esther feels totally out of place, "like a racehorse in a world without racetracks" with all her scholarships and prizes meaning absolutely nothing in a world which uses a completely diverse evaluation system, one she cannot seem to find her place in. She begins to see the fig tree as a symbol for her life, filled with potentials, but not one fulfilled. On each branch there was a fig representing one aspect of her life: one, a husband and children; another, a famous poet; another, a brilliant professor; still another, an editor, and another, trips around the world; and so on, fig after fig presenting to her an array of options. Esther sees herself

 $<sup>^{186}</sup>$  Macpherson, Pat. Reflecting on The Bell Jar, Routledge, London, 1991, p. 68.  $^{187}$  p. 62.

sitting hungrily under the tree, having to make choices, but completely paralyzed by the assortment of choices there were. As she says, "I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and one by one plop to the ground at my feet."188 Thus, though the fig tree is so symbolic of fertility, with its full ripe fruits hanging at easy reach, because roles for women have been fixed and defined by patriarchy as being either/or (but not too much), Esther is immobilized by all she would like to do on the one hand, and which stops her right in her tracks, on the other. As E. Miller Budick says, though the story of the fig tree has appealed to Esther so much she feels sorry when she reaches its final pages, it has been "contaminated" by her assessing her own inadequacies in the world of Buddy Willards:

> Forced to consciousness by the sterile, male-oriented act of adding up her assets and deficits (all according to sexist categories), the tree metamorphoses into a projection of female dependence on the male. The green, womb-like, even vaginal, figs of female procreativity hang helpless on the hard phallic branches out of reach for Esther, who sits immobilized in the tree's crotch, her own sexuality, as it were, made inacessible to her. 189

p. 63.

Budick, E. Miller. "The Feminist Discourse of Sylvia Plath's <u>The Bell Jar</u>" in *College English* (Illinois).

It is throughout the summer in New York, among recollections of the past, that come to her in bits and pieces, in the summer of the Rosenbergs' electrocution, and the gradual, slow fragmentation that occurs within Esther, that she will start to define, on her own terms (as much as possible), what she wants and does not want. Esther's fall into madness cannot be seen as a totally negative experience - it is exactly this which will bring her a gradual sense of who she really is. Esther is forced, in a way, to assume a position of paralysis, of denying any action in the culture which will give her only a small space in which she can move. Her final act in New York City is another metaphor for rebirth: she throws out the window of the hotel all the elegant and expensive clothes she had bought, all symbols of her body's confinement to a culture she cannot deal with. As she sits at the window throwing the pieces to the wind, it is as if she were shedding a skin she does not want, though not yet finding a new one to wear:

Piece by piece, I fed my wardrobe to the night wind, and flutteringly, like a loved one's ashes, the gray scraps were ferried off, to settle here, there, exactly where I would never know, in the dark heart of New York. 190

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>190</sup> p.91.

## 2.2 The Image Shatters

Esther's quest for a place and for an identity in an "either/or" society such as the one in which she lives takes her closer and closer to complete desintegration. The narration describes her return home as that of going back to the "motherly breath of the suburbs", Esther is seen as being faced with nothing to look forward to but her mother's practical advice and the overbearing example of the neighbor Dodo Conway, mother of six. In fact, the initial motherly images (Dodo's fertility and the presence of the main character's mother allied to good intentions) which greet Esther on her return do not hint at any fresh air which will relieve her growing despair. On the contrary, Esther is indicated as having feelings of suffocation and detachment, feelings that she is having to deal with. It is at this point in the novel in which the notion of suicide takes a concrete form and enters as a possible solution.

Parallel to the total breakdown which occurs with Esther, the issue of language has become paramount in her search for a way out of the suffocation she feels. If during the stay in New York Esther is either paralyzed by silence (or reminded of times in which she was not an active subject of her own words), now she is constantly referring to the unfamiliarity of language and finds herself trying to write her story, awkwardly, in need of finding a voice she does not feel she has. It is this finding a voice which is so difficult to define that is at the basis of Plath's novel - Esther's search is the search of many women writers, of many women artists. It seems evident that this search implies a trajectory which may lead towards

desintegration (a risky retreat that can bring madness) and then back towards the recovery of the female subject. This process took place with Lily in <u>To the Lighthouse</u> through the recovery of the figure of Mrs. Ramsay, then joined with that of Mr. Ramsay as counterpoint and complement (in the ideal of androgyny), and is gradually taking place with Esther, though here the recovery of the mother is presented as more problematic.

Thus, Esther's breakdown cannot be simplified into merely negative terms: though it is possible that it can bring total destruction, it is the only way Esther finds to make herself whole again. This wholeness is actually a redefinition of what the subject is. According to Shanon Artrip, it is not necessarily associated to that wholeness of the symbolic stage, since entering the symbolic will leave women with the problem of trying to define themselves as subjects (they are either the negative, the gap, or whatever the male imaginary makes of them). Artrip sees the wholeness Esther is after as the "whole that existed close to the mother's body prior to splitting at the mirror stage" 191, i.e., a unity which defies the symbolic because it goes far beyond the "I" which the male prizes so highly. What Esther is in search of will take her to what Kristeva refers to as the semiotic - a possible escape from the patriarchal world and all the expectations that surround her, an escape which is a necessary step towards Esther's recovery.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>191</sup> Artrip, Shanon R. The Girl in the Mirror: A Lacanian/Kristevan Study of Sylvia Plath's <u>The Bell Jar</u>, Radford University, Virginia, 1993, p.42.

The sucicide attempts are seen as a part of this escape, however, one is in doubt of Esther's real intentions of killing herself. It is more probable that Esther is attempting to destroy that side of herself which is attached to patriarchy, that attends to its demands, feels its tyranny. What she is looking for is the release of the imaginary, of that aspect in herself which can feel free to create and to live more in accordance to her own beliefs. Esther's identity is fragmenting first in the outer signs of depression: she does not change clothes or wash them, she does not even wash herself, she does not sleep and has nothing to look forward to, not having made the writing course she had intended to take once she returned to her hometown. A zombie has grown inside her, eaten away at that voice which before she could still hear, though she did not always follow its calling. Now, it is as if Esther had been left a shell, empty and useless. Esther feels her "voice sounded strange and hollow in (her) ears"192, and begins to refer to it as "the hollow voice" (my italics). Similarly, her hand is described as having a life of its own, as if there were no longer any central command over her actions. Thus, the fragmentation, which had already been represented in the double Elly Higginbottom (through which she can escape the suffocating culture she is in), now seems to have achieved her own body. The body she feels has been taken over by the tyrannical demands of society is adrift, left to its own devices. It is as if she were indicating that she could have no responsibility over a body which was not hers, but belonged to patriarchy.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>192</sup> p.97.

Consequently, the refusal to wash not only defies society's expectations, it is a statement of her desperate alienation from herself.

When Esther decides to write a novel, she is beginning to make a series of decisions she cannot keep, in a sucession of indecision and doubt that will leave her in a state of inertia. However, this novel, whose main character is called Elaine and reflects Esther herself, is felt to be lacking in voice as well. As Esther rereads the metaphor she has created in which Elaine is sitting while "drops of sweat crawled down her back one by one, like slow insects" 193, she feels initially proud of this moment of imagination, but soon has the impression these are not her own words she is reading, but the words of someone else, read a long time ago. Esther then realizes that perhaps what she is lacking is experience - this would make the novel sound more real to her. She has touched on a point which makes her wonder: what are the experiences she can talk about, not having lived and done enough, not having "had a love affair, or a baby, or even seen anybody die?" 194 Her mother's advice to learn something practical (shorthand) is the exact opposite of what Esther is looking for. She has expressed a desire to learn about life, to get in touch with what life can offer, without paying any heed to preconceived rules. Her mother has touched on the one thing which only makes words and reality become abbreviated into symbols, dried up and lacking in real meaning to her.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>193</sup> 99.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

The reading of Finnegan's Wake, by James Joyce, and the writing of her thesis are the next actions Esther jumps to. These come along with the plan of going back to college, or of becoming an apprentice to a pottery maker, or being a waitress in Germany so as to learn German. These options come unobtrusively into the narrative as a sort of reminder of the fig tree story, now at a special moment of desintegration of language for Esther. The high point of this becomes marked by the attempt at reading the jumble of words and letters of Joyce's work, since to Esther, trying to make sense out of the text is more than just a challenge, it is trying to hold on to some meaning - better yet, trying to find some sort of meaning in disconnected words. The feeling of being ill comes back to Esther as she says the words in the book out loud:

It sounded like a heavy wooden object falling downstairs, boomp, boomp, boomp, step after step. Lifting the pages of the book, I let them fan slowly by my eyes. Words dimly familiar but twisted all awry, like faces in a funhouse mirror, fled past, leaving no impression on the glassy surface of my brain.<sup>195</sup>

The zombie-feeling comes back to her, as well as the odd sensation of seeing everything in a distorted way. The letters themselves turn into creatures with "barbs and ram's horns ...(and)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>195</sup> p.102.

jiggle up and down in a silly way"<sup>196</sup>, finally becoming as unintellighe to Esther as Arabic or Chinese. Thus, this akwardness with language seems to be another aspect of the total alienation Esther feels in regards to herself. As Susan Coyle says, "running parallel to all the other dislocations she feels, she becomes alienated from language itself and it is just after this Joycean distress that she can no longer read....As Esther's inability to connect to the world through language symbols is explored, the metaphor used to describe it anthropomorphizes the symbols, in a sense."<sup>197</sup>

The first person Esther looks for in terms of professional help, Dr. Gordon, represents patriarchy itself as he questions her about her behavior. Right away Esther distrusts him, his looks, his youth, his picture-perfect family. The last straw for the young woman is represented in his question: "Suppose you try and tell me what you *think* is wrong" (my italics) - this is how Dr. Gordon approaches Esther's problem. Her mother, totally reliant on the male word, asks Esther after her session, "what did he say?", expecting a solution, once more, to come from male authority. Dr. Gordon's solution does come, and he expresses it to Mrs. Greenwood in private, something that once more infuriates Esther. The complicity between the doctor and her mother seem absurd to her, and she confirms her fears of being locked away when her mother informs her that the doctor suggested shock treatment at an

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>196</sup> p. 102

Coyle, Susan. "Images of Madness and Retrieval: an Exploration of Metaphor in *The Bell Jar*" in Studics in American Fiction, Autumn, v.12, no.12, 1984, p.163-164.

198 p. 106.

institution as a part of Esther's treatment. The distrust in relation to Dr. Gordon is extended to Esther's mother when Esther demands that the truth be told to her. Her mother's tearful reply that she always tells her the truth seem ironic in a way. The mother's word reflects the male word, of the dominance male knowledge has over the experiences and the knowledge of women - her mother demonstrates she cannot see Esther through and through and give her the confidence and support she needs. Thus, the questioning of how truthful her mother is appears as more than mere paranoia on the part of Esther, it is the expression of the daughter's frustration in face of her mothers lack of trust in her capacity to rely on more than convention.

Having eliminated speech as a means of healing for Esther, Dr. Gordon finds the only way to put his patient back onto the straight and narrow road of the female world is to use electroshock treatment. This solution is nothing more than this doctor's way of affirming his superior knowledge aligned to his scientific/neutral position in relation to Esther's suffering. The electroshock treatment brings with it more than only pain, it is representative of a total gap in awareness and possibility of speech. In addition, the treatment is associated to several images which come to Esther directly and through her memories. The nurse who prepares her for the session leans over her and the contact of "her fat breast muffled my face like a cloud or a pillow" thus, no comfort comes from this breast, which in its good aspects feeds or cuddles. The experience associates the breast to fear and possibility of suffocation.

Esther mixes her post-treatment feelings to those she had had when moving a lamp that once had belonged to her father. The lamp's cord, frayed and old, gives her a shock which burns a hole in her hand. The lamp, her dead father's relic, and the electroshock treatment, representative of Dr. Gordon, are as much of a punishment as Esther can think of for her deviance, for her attempts at questioning her role in society. The electrocution of the Rosenbergs had stood for the kind of punishment deviant thinking could entail in America in the fifties; now Esther is described as feeling her own skin dried out and parched, her nerves jolted, her bones shaken. The image that best expresses the feeling of energy being taken away is Esther saying she felt "the sap fly out of me like a split plant"200, as if not a drop of life could be left in her body. The female body is punished along with the mind, since Esther feels her brain has been emptied out also, drained of any thoughts and is now absent. It is Esther herself who feels absent, as if she were not able to find her center and define herself. Besides this, the maternal images and references in this part are either associated to death (the breast which can suffocate), or to a lack of comprehension or communication: Esther's mother is relieved to hear her daughter say she will not go back to Dr. Gordon's office. She smiles when she says to Esther, "I knew my baby wasn't like that"<sup>201</sup>, in other words, that Esther was not like the demented, horrible people with problems at the institution. To Mrs. Greenwood the problem of her daughter can be willed away as well, since she says to Esther

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>199</sup> p.117. <sup>200</sup> p. 118.

that she knew she would decide to get better. Once more, there is an inability to see her daughter as she really is, to see her depression as a symptom of her need for support and the possiblity of making choices in her life.

Esther's rejection of the roles she is expected to play finally come down to her attempts at suicide and all the interest she starts to feel in relation to death. She begins by reading about suicides and attempted suicides in the scandal sheets her mother refuses to acknowledge. The readings her mother approves of come in The Christian Science Monitor which "treated suicides and sex crimes and airplane crashes as if they didn't happen"<sup>202</sup>. Analogously, in a way, neither can Esther's mother acknowledge her daughter's difficulties. Life seems to be too hard when you cannot control it, and the only way Mrs. Greenwood has of diminishing her own anxiety in face of the new and daring is to ignore it. Esther is doing exactly this, by presenting her troubles in adapting to roles she cannot accept, she is demanding her mother's presence in more ways than one. Esther reads with interest about attempts at jumping off buildings, thinks of the Japanese and their ritual disembowlment, and considers disappearing by simply hitchhiking off to an unknown destination until she tries to make a start and take action into her own hands. Trying to cut her wrists ends up as a greater challenge than she imagines, simply because of the revelation that it wasn't exactly Esther, body and soul, she wanted to get rid of, it was something else, deeper and more difficult to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>201</sup> p. 119. <sup>202</sup> p. 112.

reach which she needed to purge from herself. To Esther, suicide is a form of expression, a way of making herself be seen and heard without the use of symbolic language. It is as if Esther had abandoned any hope of translating her suffering to others and decided to use another type of language, dangerous and difficult, to get herself across.

Thus, Esther's lack of union with her biological mother is transformed to attempts at reunion with a maternal force that can be found in death, the death of what Esther rejects in herself, and the rebirth of a new Esther. The considerations on how to die are not a real expression of Esther's wish to terminate her life; they are, in fact, the wish to find a way of life that is an adequate option for her ideals and purposes in life. The images that come up when she is in the presence of water are particularly significant: As Esther sits on a log on a sandbar she knows will be covered in water, she remembers that "in the crook of its inner curve (it holds) a particular shell that could be found nowhere else on the beach"203. The shell she is reminded of is "thick, smooth, big as a thumb joint, and usually white, although sometimes pink or peach-covered. It resembled a sort of a modest conch."204 The conch's form is allusive to the womb, a trompe-like object that Esther thinks of in detail. However, as the water starts advancing and touches her toes, she feels discouraged by the cold she feels and by the idea of what the ocean contained in its depths: white fish, sharks teeth and whales' earbones in the cold water. When she is at the beach on a double date with her friend

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>203</sup> p. 124. <sup>204</sup> Ibid.

Jody, once again the presence of the water is beckoning her forward, and Esther suggests that she and her date, Cal, swim as far into it as they can. This seems to happen at a moment when, suddenly, Esther feels she is breaking down under the weight of her friends' presence. As she swims far from the shore there is a booming, the constant sound of her heartbeat going I am I am I am. The monotonous repetition of the sound eliminates the commmas in the phrase, and its logical organization into a sentence, or in a context, is forgotten. It is as if Esther's desire to redefine herself is only a sound, a beat that pulses in her constantly, but without form or a definite objective. Her attempts to drown herself at this moment are all fouled by the water's insistence in spitting her up; thus, she gives up for the moment before finding a way that she thinks will work more definitely.

Her visit to her father's grave, which she had never visited before, is followed by another attempt at suicide, this time the one which almost succeeds. The memory of her father's abandonment through death, along with her mother's lack of true bonding with her, are, after all, at the basis of Esther's disintegration. Thus, it is no coincidence that the memory of her father should also surface at such a moment in her life. Most of the information about her father is filtered through her mother, since he had died very early in Esther's life. In addition to this, Mrs. Greenwood had not allowed Esther to be present at the funeral, nor had she cried for her dead husband, thus, through her act, not allowing her daughter to mourn either. The chance of female bonding is lost at a moment in which this bonding can be associated to supporting each other when pain is an inevitable part of life, such as is the case with death.

As she arranges her flowers on the grave, Esther loses herself in the pain of not having her father, and allows herself to cry everything her mother had refused to. The mourning here is, on the surface, for her dead father, but the constant reminder of her mother's alienation from her, from whom she actually is and how she feels, makes the pain double.

The following episode, described by most of the literature dealing with The Bell Jar as the rebirth scene, describes Esther's determination in carrying out her plan, a determination that contrasts with all the indecision that had stood for Esther up to that moment. With fifty sleeping pills in her hand and a glass of water in the other, Esther descends to the cellar of her house, having chosen a secret, almost unreachable dark crevice in the wall to climb into in order to carry out her suicide plan. The images here are rich with references to a return to the mother's womb; the description alludes to an insect involved in cacoon-like material, or to Esther shrouded by her black coat as if she were a cadaver, and to her positioning herself like a fetus, involved in darkness and comfort. The images are quite comforting, death is not violent in any way, nor could it be, which would have been the case if the means of dying had been a knife or a gun (which Esther shrugs off as being the way a man would end his life when Cal suggests it as a good way of killing oneself). "The dark felt thick as velvet ... cobwebs touched my face with the softness of moths ..."205 Esther remembers as she downed the pills. The wrapping of the coat around her was like being wrapped by "my own sweet

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>205</sup> p. 138.

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shadow<sup>206</sup>, and sliding into sleep/death is depicted as being touched by soft wavelets on the

shore, drawing back and forth: "The silence drew off, baring the pebbles and shells and all

the tatty wreckage of my life. Then, at the rim of vision, it gathered itself, and in one

sweeping tide, rushed me to sleep."207 The awakening again alludes to water: "The silence

surged back, smoothing itself as black water smooths to its old surface calm over a dropped

stone."208 The imagery of water is associated to that of the hole into which Esther has

crawled, and to the darkness which she feels enveloping here. The passage that follows

describes Esther's rescue as if she were being reborn:

A cool wind rushed by. I was being transported at enormous speed

down a tunnel into the earth. Then the wind stopped ...

A chisel cracked down on my eye, and a slit of light opened like a

mouth or a wound, till the darkness clamped shut on it again. I tried to

roll away from the direction of the light, but hands wrapped round my

limbs like mummy bands, and I couldn't move .....

Then the chisel struck again, and the light leapt into my head, and

through the thick, warm, furry, dark, a voice cried,

'Mother! '209

<sup>206</sup> **p**. 138. <sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> p. 139.

The references to a womb-like environment are perfectly fitted to what is taking place: Esther's dissociation has reached a peak. The fragmentation of self is analogous to that of a newborn baby, since it is not "I" that cries out, but "a voice", coming from an indefinite source. The rejection of everything she had struggled against, plus the indecisions and difficulties in defining herself, along with her loss of familiarity with language have come to this: the rejection of the symbolic, patriarchal world. It is as if she were returning to fusion with the mother's body. The fact that Esther has had such an experience is explained by Kristeva's opinion that there is no total break between the imaginary and the symbolic. Access to the pre-oedipal period, or the semiotic, is what makes art possible. It is also what may cause a complete loss of the subject to psychosis, shizophrenia and death, and this is why the subversion of the symbolic order always presents a possible threat. Esther, one must remember, feels she would like to kill something inside herself, though she does not want to kill all of herself. The way to do it, since no other access is possible (her writing, her intellect and her desires are belittled by those around her and by herself) will entail, possibly, a complete loss through death. Nevertheless, like Persephone, Esther must be reborn and through her suicide attempt she is actually demonstrating her need to survive, to be brought back to a new life.

The path that Esther must follow from here onto the end of the novel is one of redefinition of herself as a subject, of adopting some female role model which might replace

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>209</sup> p. 139.

the mother-figure and of deciding which is her role in life, a life that she will choose to live, as much as possible, according to her own rules.

## 2.3 Picking up the Pieces

"That's me,' I thought. 'That's what I am.' "210 expresses much of what Esther will be trying to define in the post-rebirth period, as she slowly recovers an image of herself which is not only authentic, but which also attempts to go beyond the conventional expectations of her society. Esther's task will be to represent herself, make a mark somehow which will enable her to sort out those symptoms of desintegration she has faced. The implosion of the "I", which occurs in the slow process of breakdown she faces, is for Esther only a stepping stone for her to reconstruct herself as a speaking subject, as the subject of her own desire. In a way, Esther begins this new process very much in the same way a baby does as it discovers language and begins to have a notion of the "I" as being itself.

Thus, Esther's request for a mirror when she is at the hospital recovering from her traumatic experience is another attempt at pulling herself together, observing who she is. The mirror can recover, in part, a unity which already existed before the symbolic, one in which there was a sort of symbiosis between mother and child, though never in the same way. The mirror given to Esther does not reflect her own image, however, it only shows her a picture. In it she sees a person which she cannot recognize as herself: it is a man or a woman, with hair that remind her of an animal (a chicken) and the coloring of some sort of monster (due to the several bruises she has suffered). It is as if, having come back from a

dark underworld, after having been reborn, Esther's struggle first leads her to "reject() her sexual identity, accept() herself as a monstruous aberration." Esther's smile, however, is reflected and she breaks the mirror when she throws it down on the floor. This little show of rebellion represents Esther's refusal, as of yet, to reinstate herself in the symbolic, a necessary step if she is to function at all. The elaboration must, after all, bring something back from the experience of fragmentation and attempt at recovering the mother to the symbolic order. Esther, the artist, is yet to be born in a slow painful process which is not completed, in which all the semiotic drives mentioned by Kristeva can be placed into art.

The mirror episode is received by her mother with a mixture of reproach and annoyance as she informs Esther that she will be transferred to what she euphemistically calls a "special ward" in another institution. She scolds Esther for not behaving better and, when Esther tries to confide to her mother some specific suspicions she has about the doctors, Mrs. Greenwood draws back and says, "Oh, Esther, I wish you would cooperate. They say you don't cooperate. They say you won't talk to the doctors or make anything in Occupational Therapy ..."

The cooperation Mrs. Greenwood is requesting from Esther is one of fitting in, of obeying the rules that have established and should be followed. Nevertheless, Esther's mother decides she will help her daughter find a better clinic for her to recover in.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>210</sup> p.141.

Stewart, G.B. Mother, daughter and the birth of the female artist in Women's Studies: an Interdisciplinary Journal, Flushing, N.Y, vol. 6, no.2, 1979.

212 p.146.

Before Esther is moved to another hospital, however, the image of desintegration and recovery takes on another form: after purposefully breaking the thermometers a nurse has placed near her foot, she hides a ball of mercury in her hand and secretly admires it, realizing she may have some control over its fragmentation and fusion: "If I dropped it, it would break into a million little replicas of itself, and if I pushed them near each other they would fuse, without a crack into one whole again."213 It is as if she had a found a secret solution to her own question of identity and she smiles at the discovery. Esther is gradually learning to take control over her life, by placing bits and pieces of her past, of whom she is, of those figures that surround her and can be a role-model, and of what she has imagined her future to be, together, in order to recover a certain unity. For the moment, the only feeling of unity is one of suffocation, of paralysis under "the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air ... "214, as Esther regards the change from one institution to another. To her, it matters very little where she is being taken - the bell jar still dominates her existence. As she closes her eyes, she thinks: "The air of the bell jar wadded round me and I couldn't stir."215

It is at this moment that the figure of Dr. Nolan comes in. The association Esther makes between Dr. Nolan and her mother is immediate and direct: "I was surprised to have a woman. I didin't think they had woman psychiatrists. This woman was a cross between

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>213</sup> p. 150. <sup>214</sup> p. 152. <sup>215</sup> Ibid.

Myrna Loy and my mother."216 The relationships Esther establishes with women in this part of the novel are representative of her need to find role-models and to connect to the female world, one that does not necessarily divide between Doreens and Betsies. She tries to make contact with Miss Norris, another patient, dressed in purple, with a cameo brooch and the air of a schoolmarm. The woman's initial silence does not deter Esther from following her to the dining room, sitting with her there and keeping her company. As Esther says, "we didn't speak, but sat there, in a close, sisterly silence, until the gong for supper sounded down the hall." The silence of one woman is not lost on the other, the lack of language is what they have in common, a shared knowledge. Esther, after all, has experienced this enstrangement from language all too well, the silences and unintelligible sounds were there, either in her inability to respond to people, or in her attempt to read and write, or, even, in her strangled desire to ask Dr. Gordon about the shock treatment he would apply. Like modern Procnes<sup>217</sup>, these women have had to use silence, sounds, screams and, eventually, their art to get across to others. For Esther this will especially ring true: Procne's cry for help to her sister Philomela is secretly and elaborately woven into a robe intended only for her to read. Such a use of language, shared between women, is at the core of Esther's art as a writer, as

<sup>216</sup> p. 153.

My use of the myth of Philomela and Procne is taken from Robert Graves' work The Greek Myths in which he explains that the common exchange of names as to who lost her tongue is due, according to this author, to a mistake: "All mythographers but Hyginus make Procne a nightingale, and Philomela a swallow. This must be a clumsy attempt to rectify a slip made by some earlier poet; that Tereus cut out Philomela's tongue, not Procne's." From The Greek Myths, volume 1, Penguin Books, London, 1960, p.165..

it was the concern of Plath herself. That there can be such sharing between women is a novelty to Esther who is testing not only her abilities but also her trust in others.

Dr. Nolan is the first person who appears in Esther's new life who is able to reach out to her and give her some new perspectives as to what women can do for themselves. Dr. Nolan allows Esther the chance to somewhat challenge not only patriarchy itself, but also her own mother as the representative of the rules of patriarchy. It is as if the doctor took the pressure off Esther, lowering expectations and demands made on her while, at the same time, opening up potential doors to the future. At the same time, she is able to establish meaningful conversation with Esther who, until this moment is seen as isolated and incommunicable in relation to others. Dr. Nolan also seems to bring back the possibility of language making sense; she brings her back into the symbolic world enrichened and empowered, to a certain extent, by her own experiences, not diminished by them. Nevertheless, Esther's new experiences, specially in the sexual arena, are often scary and potentially risky, which gives her recovery an ambiguity that remains until the final pages.

The experience Esther has had with electroshock therapy under Dr. Gordon is seen in a new light with Dr. Nolan. In the first place, the two women talk about the treatment - Dr. Nolan is, thus, able to reassure Esther that she will be notified beforehand if she is to undergo any electroshock treatment while under her care. The fact that Esther feels betrayed by Dr. Nolan before she actually has electroshock therapy is more due to her own expectations and fear because of her previous experience than because of Dr. Nolan herself.

Where Esther expects two attendants to drag her out of the room, she has Dr. Nolan's warm, motherly embrace to comfort her and cajole her into trusting her again. When Esther sees how concerned the doctor is about her, she is able to regain her confidence in this woman, not without first extracting a promise that she would be by her side throughout the whole ordeal. Like a mother, "Dr. Nolan took out a white handkerchief and wiped my face. Then she hooked her arm in my arm, like an old friend, and helped me up..."218, recalls Esther. Nevertheless, the ambiguity is present even here. Though Esther is comforted by Dr. Nolan's motherly, friendly presence, she cannot help feeling that she "hung on to Dr. Nolan's arm like death..."219 and that when she is on the table waiting for the treatment to start, there are sinister, "masked people flanking the bed on both sides."220 Esther's contact with death is too closely related to the image of the mother to be separated: it was present when she attempted suicide (death and symbolic birth were simultaneously present), it was also there when "Miss Huey began to talk in a low, soothing voice, smoothing the salve on my temples and fitting the small, electric buttons..."221. Thus, motherly comfort is not totally free from the threat of death and pain. Nevertheless, the immediate result Esther feels when she awakens from the treatment is that "the bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air."222 Besides this relief from the suffocating air of the bell jar,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>218</sup> p.173. <sup>219</sup> p. 174.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>222</sup> p. 176.

Esther is given her share in the responsibility for the treatment: when asked if she would have electroshock sessions for a long time, Dr. Nolan responds that it depends on both of them.

Dr. Nolan's role as mentor/mother/friend/psychiatrist is relatively successful if one considers her help in giving Esther a space in which to speak out her fears and hatreds, such as what she feels about her own mother. She also enables Esther to choose freely when and with whom she will begin her sex life with by prescribing a diaphragm for her, thus eliminating the risk of unwanted pregnancy from the picture. Nevertheless, Dr. Nolan presents us with some questions as to her role as mother-figure. First, because Esther herself is not absolutely sure she can trust her, which is the case with her electroshock treatment. Second, Dr. Nolan's treatment does not seem to include a chance of going too far beyond expectations that society already has about women: she does not make Esther question what lies beyond her own mother and the role she plays; she gives her a possibility for birth control, but does not necessarily go into the risks and pleasures, physically and emotionally, of one's first time. In other words, though Esther is given a more active role and has suffered a great deal in order to free herself of some of the restraints she feels, she is not fully aware of what she must give up in order to reach maturity. The fig tree metaphor haunts Esther's future: the concern of having it all, or trying to juggle all the female roles that Dr. Nolan stands for is at the core of the novel. One cannot but find it ironic that even this "having it all" is soaked in patriarchal expectations of what women should be, as all these years of women's rights have attested to. Thus, the feeling Esther has of the bell jar having been lifted, but still hanging suspended there somewhere, is the ultimate symbol of ambiguity. In any case, it is Dr. Nolan who is ultimately present when Esther reaches the final stages of her stay at the clinic, a supporting hand and the closest to a mother-figure she has ever allowed anyone to be.

Much of the literature that deals with <u>The Bell Jar</u> has seen Joan Gilling, an old friend and inmate at the clinic, as one of Esther Greenwood's doubles. Along with Doreen, Betsy and Elly Higginbottom, Joan is seen as one of those figures onto which the character of Esther can project herself. According to Jeanne Inness, "Joan is very much the psychological double of Esther; they are both over-achievers, they are both unconventional young women." Shanon Artrip reminds us that Joan represents female sexuality expressed freely in her lesbianism, something Esther cannot do because of all the repressive mores which she feels so keenly: she secretly envies the tenderness shared between women and, as this critic says, "this is the tenderness that Esther longs for, but Joan Gillings seems to be the only character with whom Esther can share this genuine intimacy." To Pat Macpherson "Joan introduces choice for Esther, the choice of the 'third sex' alternative to celibacy or heterosexual subordination to the first sex. Joan arrives to play her double in identity

Inness, Jeanne. The Bell Jar: Notes, Cliffs Notes Inc., Lincoln, Nebraska, 1993, p.54.
 Artrip, Shanon R. The Girl in the Mirror: A Lacanian/Kristevan Study of Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar, Radford University, Virginia, 1993, p.24.

crisis..."225 To Macpherson, Esther is stimulated by Joan to reconsider the possibilities of relationships with others, however, Joan also serves in the role of being the "man-hater and feminist, leaving Esther free of those damning associations with penis-envy."226 Thus, Joan is seen competitively, as much as any other woman in the novel and must be eliminated, as she in fact is, so as to leave Esther purged of all the "negative" aspects of her sexuality.

What actually can be seen here is the enormous difficulty and the intense ambiguity Esther feels in regards to women she associates with even in this second half of the novel which deals with her rebirth and consequent renewal of identity. The search for a network of women friends and/or mentors is felt to be necessary in order for Esther to strengthen herself and feel more confident to face the demands of society, however, one always feels a division in Esther. Though she says about Joan that "we were close enough so that her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry black, image of my own"227, and Dr. Nolan's answer to her question about what it was that a woman looked for in another woman is intriguing (Tenderness), she also feels repulse and tells Joan to her face, "...I don't like you. You make me puke, if you want to know."228 Thus, although Joan might serve as a mirror in many ways to Esther's progress and to her shortcomings and insecurities; although there is a revelation of the possibility of bonding between women represented in Joan's sexual preference, which

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>225</sup> Macpherson, Pat. Reflecting on *The Bell Jar*. Routledge, London. 1991, p.84. <sup>226</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>227</sup> p. 179. <sup>228</sup> p. 180.

does not limit this bonding to sex, but appeals to the cumplicity, love and tenderness that might arise between women, be they lovers, sisters, friends or mother and daughter, Esther is wary of other women even while she is beginning to trust and love Dr. Nolan. As Esther ponders when Joan says she likes her: "Why did I attract these weird old women? ... they all wanted to adopt me in some way, and for the price of their care and influence, have me resemble them."229 Women in general can be included in this assertion since all women Esther comes into contact with are seen as figures she might possibly emulate. At the start, it was either Jay Cee or Betsy or Doreen, or even Dodo Conway. Now, as she sheds off the old Esther's skin completely, she is trying, first, to find her own particularities of identity, trying to be a poet, but without giving up on being a wife and mother in the future; attempting to be sexually active in an age that stresses not the action of women but their passive reliance on men. On the other hand, she is looking towards others who can acknowledge these desires and give her a sort of stamp of approval. However, she feels ambiguous about the influence that one woman or the other might have on her and has a tendency to discard their experience and knowledge and what these can contribute to her life.

As Esther recovers and faces another rebirth, in terms, when she leaves the asylum and all the experiences she has gone through, she begins to decide what she will do about her life and what it is that will bring her freedom. This freedom is one that can defy Esther - thus,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>229</sup> p.180.

she will try to place it in her choice of a sexual partner, in choosing to have a career and in experiencing everything she possibly can as a woman. However, the choices may prove to be double-faced, while the image of the bell jar hanging over her head is never once abandoned or forgotten.

Esther's first sexual encounter is worth some analysis. As a ritual of initiation, it echoes the violent abduction of Persephone by Hades in its somewhat unfortunate results for the main character. Evidently, Esther is shown as being given the opportunity to choose when she is fitted out for a diaphragm and feels free from the necessity of marrying a Buddy Willard sort of guy. However, her choice of first sexual partner is hardly the best once one considers the consequences of her experience. Though Esther's reasoning in the selection of a mate is partly right ("I felt the first man I slept with must be intelligent, so I would respect him."230), she is misled by the choice to a certain extent. Irwin's intelligence, which is the very quality that Esther considers essential, is dry and arid in his lack of any real interest in Esther's bleeding after sex, which he dismisses as a normal consequence of defloration. It takes Esther no time to realize she is seriously hemorrhaging, and she then looks for help in Joan. Though Esther's tone is casual and even slightly disconsiderate of Joan's help, since she does not tell her friend exactly how she got hurt, this is the first person she goes to in the emergency. Joan is also a bit lost as to what she should do to help Esther, but, nevertheless, she is at Esther's side when she is being stitched up by the doctor. The stitching functions as

a pseudo-recovery of the Esther who existed before, just as the recovery of Persephone by her mother is also only partial (a few months here, a few months there). After all, if Esther will not go back to being a virgin in any sense of the word, Persephone does not either. In the same way, Joan is the woman (a curious Demeter figure) Esther turns to to help her out of her predicament, a substitute-mother, the one who is at hand, at any rate. Thus, Irwin, the man chosen to deflower her, is also as bad a choice as any Buddy Willard would be: she cannot trust him, since she does not let him find out too much about herself and does not allow him to help her. He, on the other hand, shows a reputation of being a gentleman with a purpose, that is, to take as many "ladies" to bed as possible. He consequently feels very little connection to Esther and passes her on to another when faced with a predicament such as her bleeding. One can recall Hades and his predicament: that of having a weeping girl on his hands, one who will not be his willing lover, and having to face the society of Olympus and the stir his abduction of Persephone has caused. Irwin's washing of his hands (not wanting to face society's usual demand that he do the right thing and marry, not wanting to assume responsibility for the damage he caused) is a reflection of Hades's actions. Esther's experience at losing her virginity is ultimately everything she had always secretly known: behind the seduction of wine and dinner was frustration, pain and insecurity. The problem evidently lies in Esther's unconfessed reliance on the whole seduction scene and on the lack

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>230</sup> p. 186.

of a moment in which she could actually share experiences with other women, such as Dr. Nolan, Joan, and even Doreen, Betsy and her own mother.

Joan's suicide is representative at this point of the sacrifice of women who not only show excessive intelligence, but also go against the mainstream in sexual terms. Thus, though Esther finds her identity and comes to terms with herself as she finds out about Joan's death, the images present at this moment are ambiguous at many moments. Her mother's image appears before: "My mother's face floated to mind, a pale, reproachful moon...". Her mother's reaction to Esther's stay at the asylum is that everything can be disconsidered, treated as a bad dream. In fact, having had a daughter comitted is this mother's nightmare, it is comparable to having a statement of insanity signed, a fearful, but very concrete proof of the daughter's presence as Other, strange and distant, and the Same, a part of the mother's body and a result of her emotional bonding - or lack of one.

After Joan's death, Esther feels more whole as she listens to her heart once more beat out the words "I am, I am, I am", this time with commas, paused and certain. She feels free of Buddy Willard's judgement as to who would possibly marry her now - she does not really care much. She feels her experiences are a part of her without exception, whether her mother can accept that or not. It is Joan, the real outcast, that is being buried, and not she. It is true that Joan in a way is sacrificed in the name of everything Esther is looking for, however, Esther cannot ignore the truth as she says: "I wondered what I thought I was

burying."232 Esther is not fooled, she knows how important Joan has been to her, though she has tried to dismiss her; and she demonstrates through the use of the word "thought" that she is not really certain things have been completely solved and placed behind her.

The cure of Esther Greenwood is represented by her being brought face to face with the board of doctors who will approve her dismissal from the asylum. Dr. Nolan assures her she will be there, right beside her as she departs into the world. Though Esther is described as being excited she will be out in the world, a certain insecurity is also conveyed and is a counterpoint to her excitment. She thinks to herself: "How did I know that someday - at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere - the bell jar, with its stiffling distortions, wouldn't descend again?"233 Esther is partly right to fear the future - though she is optimistically portrayed as having achieved a new understanding as to whom she is and what she wants and does not want, she will still have to deal with the same society that had a hand in making her feel so inadequate and fragmented. It is as Elaine Martin says, "Plath's heroine ... returns from the new freedom and insights afforded by therapy into an unchanged world. She is forced to resurface where there are no airpockets."234 The risk of having the bell jar's suffocating presence descend again is looming large in the future, one which Esther sees as filled with questions with no easy answers. Thus, though she can be seen as having

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>231</sup> p.193. <sup>232</sup> p.198.

Martin, Elaine. "Mothers, Madness, and the Middle Class in The Bell Jar and Les Mot Pour le Dire", in The French American Review, vol. 5, no. 1, Spring, 1981.

somewhat achieved a level of trust in the future, doubts still haunt her mind. One can see these doubts partly as a result of her feelings that the roles open to her are limited, and being artist, mother ,wife, woman are not all available. In addition, her isolation will continue to be great, especially without the reassuring presence of other women with whom she could share her experiences. In any case, Esther has not totally acquired the habit of trusting other women, and, so, her feelings of isolation stems both from the context she lives in and from herself individually.

She has also not been able to see her mother as an individual, going beyond the mother-stereotype culture has created and which Mrs. Greenwood is an adequate advocate of. In other words, Esther feels shaky about her position because she has not questioned the basis of those expectations society has of women, expectations which include herself and her mother in the same dilemma. Macpherson emphasizes this in her work, Reflecting on The Bell Jar, when she says that the novel exposes the mother-daughter bond in all its complexity and ambiguity, especially when the the background considered is that of the 50s. Since the daughter is unable to completely recover her mother because of the hatred, distrust and guilt which serve as barriers created by a specially misogynist period, this daughter's total recovery is bound to fail. As representative of a generation which battled to distance itself as much as possible from the pattern of womanhood offered by society (at least the dissatisfaction was present in the minds of many women), Esther Greenwood is the young woman trapped inside a system that submits her desire to that of the all-knowing male

presence (present in the boyfriends, in the doctors, even in the mythical father who has died). Esther's mother, on the other hand, complies to this male world and trusts its judgements. She is not able to advise her daughter in any way which defies the norms of society, especially in giving her confidence to pursue the artistic career she desires. This is, after all, a desire which has little practical value to her eyes. Since darkness and pain will certainly be present as a part of this art, Esther's mother acts as a barrier to the expression of this feeling in any form.

Therefore, art is dissociated form the feeling of self in a young woman, and is seen as not the natural form this woman has to express her emotions. These should be reserved for motherhood at best. The paradox is that the image of motherhood given is contaminated - it implies in being like those mothers that are hated. Macpherson states: "Art, like human beings, like destiny, is viable only in the public sphere - of men. The tasks, creatures and fates in the domestic sphere are stunted - and female. The 'really gruesome cases' that frighten Esther are mothers." It is impossible to recover motherhood in a culture that reviles this institution, treats it as an institution, thus normatizing what is acceptable and what is not. There is no motherhood in this case, only abstract notions of what it should be.

In spite of the overall tone of optimism at the end of <u>The Bell Jar</u>, one is left to wonder how far Esther will be allowed to move, and how far she will feel able to move from under the presence of the bell jar. The fact is, the mother puzzle is not solved throughout the story,

and is not solved in the end. This mother is a burden left behind, not being seen in her humanity - flaws and limitations being a part of this humanity. The final message, though as a whole quite satisfying, is as follows: a mother is a dubious and suspicious way to resolution.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>235</sup> Macpherson, Pat. Reflecting on The Bell Jar, Routledge, London, 1991, p.68.

## IV. SURFACING

## 1. Identity and nationalism

One cannot fail to notice in Margaret Atwood's work the close relation of several equally important themes that are dealt with simultaneously: she is concerned with identity, ecology, nationalism, women, men, native society and culture, myth, urban life and more. These themes come together as the major forces which are at work in society today, especially that of Atwood's native Canada.

Canadian culture, economy, society and politics play an important role as the background for several of Atwood's works, either explicitly, as in the case of <u>Surfacing</u>, or more indirectly, as in <u>The Edible Woman</u> and <u>Cat's Eye</u>. It is evident that any culture will always offer a substantial and crucial setting for the work of an artist - it is, after all, in that specific context which he or she will spin out his or her art, it is that culture which has influenced and produced his or her work and given it its specificity. It has been observed, after all, in <u>To the Lighthouse</u> and in <u>The Bell Jar</u>, and will not vary in the case of <u>Surfacing</u>.

Atwood, as a writer, feels the immediate responsibility of her task: to give others a realistic view of this situation and, in general, of the society in which we live. As she says:

I've implied that the writer functions in his or her society as a kind of soothsayer, a truth teller, that writing is not mere self-expression but a view of society and the world at large, and that the novel is a moral instrument. *Moral* implies political, and traditionally the novel has been used not only as a vehicle for social commentary but as a vehicle for political commentary as well. The novelist, at any rate, still sees a connection between politics and the moral sense, even if politicians gave that up some time ago. By "political" I mean having to do with power: who's got it, who wants it, how it operates; in a word, who's allowed to do what to whom, who gets what from whom, who gets away with it and how.<sup>236</sup>

It is clear from this statement that Atwood's view of politics takes into consideration the various factors already mentioned: the social, cultural and economic, the overlapping variations of these on the relation humans have with each other and with their natural environment. Everything is political because everything is a question of power. The actors vary, but the roles played do not, at least not much.

It is necessary to remember that the relation between the US and Canada is determined by power - many have gone as far as defining it as a colonial type of dependence. Analogously, one can see this same relation of power between men and women, the white

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>236</sup> Woodcock, George. <u>Introducing Margaret Atwood's Surfacing</u>: A Reader's Guide, ECW Press, Toronto, 1990, p. 29

man and the innuits and other indigenous tribes of Canada, between industry and the preservation of the environment, between commercialism and art. One can also see the interdependence of many of these factors with each other: consumerism has determined values, has befuddled our brains as to what is actually important, has redefined human relations and those with nature, has given profit the upper hand in determining what will be discarded and what will be kept, what is "artistic" and what is not. Atwood is not afraid to deal with these subjects to the point of being didatic. She is concerned with revealing something to the reader, something that will change the perspective the reader has. She is aware of the writer's inescapable responsibility with what she or he sees, with her/his "immediate surroundings", as she says, with the alienation of humans in regards to each other and nature, the alienation of a country in regards to its cultural production and its specificity. There is an evil she associates to Americans, not as individuals, but in attitude, the attitude of consuming, of being the predator, of standing for the first and foremost defender of capitalism in the world and of the lifestyle it produces.

The issue of Canada's role as a gigantic, potentially rich country caught in a special relation with its neighbor and bearing on its shoulders a past associated to European culture is seen by most Canadian intellectuals and artists as one of utmost importance if there is any intention to delve into the specificities of the nation's culture. Imperialistic, colonialistic are the definitions to watch as one studies opinions on Canada's position in relation to the countries that influence its past and present. "On the margin" would be another term that has

often been used to refer to this nation's place in cultural terms. It is no wonder that parallels can be traced between the historical and cultural context of Canada and that of women. As Sandra Goulart Almeida says, "woman's position in relation to a patriarchal tradition of authority and the investigation on politics of gender are connected to Canada's situation in face of American cultural imperialism and the ambivalence as to its British and French heritage and experience"237. In the same article, the author mentions Atwood's opinion that cultural colonization is directly associated to sexual subordination, and in Canada's specific case, the feeling of victimization Canadians feel in relation to Americans is similar to what women feel in relation to male authority. Though one must be alerted in regards to the oversimplifications this analogy can entail (such as associating woman to nature, man to culture/civilization), the comparison can be an indicator of attempts to find a voice (or several voices) which Canada as a nation, and women, can use to state claims, leaving the victim position behind. In any case, Atwood sees, according to Eloína Prati dos Santos, the Canadian psyche as being "schizophrenic, divided by deep ambivalence: 'while on the one hand we claim ardent affection for Canada, on the other we maintain the position of critical and distant observers" The ambivalence felt is a part of Canada's reality, its need to survive a necessity when one considers the giant neighbor and its force - all this is tied up

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>237</sup> Almeida, Sandra R. Goulart, Entre a Escrita e o Espaço: paisagens femininas canadenses in Fronteiras.

Passagens, Paisagens na Literatura Candadense, Maria Bernadette Porto (org.), EdUFF/ABECAN, RJ, 2000, p. 212.(my translation)

Santos, Eloína Prati dos, Mary Swann ou A reinvenção da poeta canadense in Fronteiras, Passagens, Paisagens na Literatura Canadense, Maria Bernadette Porto (org.), EdUFF/ABECAN, RJ, 2000, p.228. (my

with the need to forge an identity, a need to find one's self in the midst of divided feelings. In the same article, the above mentioned author touches on issues that will be important in Surfacing: survival means finding one's identity, fighting against American domination is associated to fighting the overbearing male whose authority has defined one's experiences. Experience is, after all, what defines us best.

The interconnection of these various themes mentioned is as present in Atwood's work as the connection that can be found between her poetry and her prose, between her prose and her criticism. Her private world is contrasted and mixed with the public world, one populated by myths and battles that can go very far; the other, a world that is ruled by a specific order and reason. The similarities between the poetry and the early novels of Margaret Atwood were not pointed out by many of the critics who analyzed her work, "though Robin Skelton isolated an element strongly present in <u>Surfacing</u> when reviewing Atwood's two 1970 collections (<u>The Journals of Susanna Moodie</u> and <u>Procedures for Underground</u>) in the Malahat Review (January 1971) when he detects in them 'a certain gothic enjoyment of the unameable terror and the hallucinations of solitude." That this solitude is yearned for by a main character who is a woman and whose experiences in her work as an artist and in her personal life leave her scarred cannot be disregarded.

translation)

Woodcock, George. <u>Introducing Margaret Atwood's Surfacing: A Reader's Guide</u>, ECW Press, Toronto, 1990, p.18.

However, though Atwood has been regarded by many feminists as speaking of a woman's issues to women in general, one cannot forget that this is one of the topics this writer deals with - it is as important to her as the issue of ecology and of Canadians as a nation. One must recall, at this point, the situation of the seventies in relation to the decades that had preceded it, its gains and reconsiderations especially in regards to the feminist movement. If the fifties of The Bell Jar are shown to be restrictive politically, socially and culturally, the seventies has benefitted from the several movements for civil rights and political and civil disobedience that exploded more radically in the 60's. Thus, from the disappointment middle-class women felt inside the home (the special lure of the suburbs in the fifties had guaranteed a happiness which could not be obtained), expressed especially in Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique, the women's movement organized itself around the issues at hand during the sixties: war, ecology, nuclear power and the fear it provoked, black power, marxism, etc. There was an awareness on the part of several segments in the movement that linking feminism to other movements would strengthen its ability to achieve political gains. Though the association of feminists with other groups could frequently be frustrating, one result that came out of this experience was the gradual shift in several of the strands towards a more revolutionary feminism. The seventies emerges in this scenario as a decade of consolidation of the movement, of a certain maturity in its basic ideas. It had reached this level of maturity also because of the realization that the idealism manifest in the decades stretching out from the beginning of the century up to the 60s, had somehow met its

nemesis. In other words, the practical conquests women (and other groups) had won, did not make it easier to choose the several directions one could take. The difference was that now the "punishment" for attempting to embrace as much as possible and empower onself was much more subtle and trickier to deal with.

Even if George Woodcock affirms that Atwood has demonstrated resistance to being associated too closely to the woman's movement - by showing "the kind of reservations which one often encounters among writers who are reluctant to see their political and social inclinations, based on natural sympathies, constricted into the conduit of a party line"<sup>240</sup> - one must not disconsider or take too lightly the fact that her works deal essentially with the situation of women, and that her concerns, as mentioned before, are directed towards the power game at work in the world. Thus, Marge Piercy believes that the search for identity which can be seen in the works of many women writers, is also central in Margaret Atwood's work:

... with her insistence on nature as a living whole of which we are all interdependent parts, with her respect for the irrational center of the psyche and the healing experiences beyond logical control, her insistence on joining the divided head and body, her awareness of roleplaying and

Woodcock, George. <u>Introducing Margaret Atwood's Surfacing</u>: A Reader's Guide, ECW Press, Toronto, 1990,p. 20.

how women suffocate in the narrow crevices of sexual identity, she is part of that growing women's culture already ..."<sup>241</sup>

The fact is, though Atwood might not fully acknowledge her association to institutionalized feminism because she is wary, as she says, of forming a possible new ghetto, the character in Surfacing is female, she has suffered forms of domination, and she is in search of a self she feels is loose and fragmented. In addition, along with these points which are also present in the two novels analyzed before, in chapters two and three, the main character in Surfacing has an initial intention to find her lost father, a search which is soon shown to be covering the forgotten relationship with her mother, already dead. The two parts of her search (first, her father; ultimately, her mother) will bring on the character's experience of recreating herself and what she believes in.

Thus, the "woman's issue" in the novel will be focused with special consideration to the relationship the main character establishes with her mother. This theme will necessarily be seen in close association to the conflicts of a nation and to the growing alienation of individuals in regards to their environment. The loss of identity of the main character will be analogous to the uneasy risk of the loss of identity of a nation. The mother and daughter bond, can be seen linked to the dilemma of the Canadian wilderness, to the necessity of returning to one's roots and to recreating oneself.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>241</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

## 2. Surface and Breathe: Surfacing

## 2.1 On the Road

The first view the main character has of the place where she spent her childhood in the Canadian wilderness is oddly ridden with the feeling that she has not taken the necessary steps yet that should have led her there - though she says she is fine and feels nothing more than the usual familiarity with a location she knew so well, she has a strange sensation. As she says, "(I feel) as though I can't really get here unless I've suffered: as though the first view of the lake, which we can see now, blue and cool as redemption, should be through tears and a haze of vomit." The reason she is going back to her parent's cabin, in the company of her lover, Joe, and a couple, Anna and David, who are their friends, is to find her father who has mysteriously disappeared. Right from the start of the novel the main character, who has no name we can call her by, tries to maintain a cool distance from the past that insists on imposing itself. Thus, though the novel is expressed in the first person, similarly to The Bell Jar, the lack of a name for the protagonist disturbs the reader's expectations of identity formation and definition from the start. There is a disquieting element present in the fact that the name is not revealed, and one wonders at the importance

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>242</sup> Atwood, Margaret. <u>Surfacing</u>, Fawcett Crest, New York, 1993, p.12. All future references will be taken from this edition.

attached to a name, as if this small detail could ever give any real value to defining the features for a character. Besides, the detachment the narrator shows at the start is misleading, thus, name or no name, what one must pay attention to throughout the reading is to what is said about herself and her family and friends.

Nevertheless, the fact that the main character's mother's advice and presence are constantly on her mind is made evident to the reader from the start, a sign of the importance she will take on as the story progresses. Inspite of the rational distance, the main character is showing signs of unease - as David drives them through the countryside she keeps her hand on the door of the car, "so I can get out quickly if I have to," as she says; and she adds: "I've driven in the same car with them before but on this road it doesn't seem right, either the three of them are in the wrong place or I am."243 The sensation of displacement is a crucial factor for the gradual loss of identity the woman feels growing within her. What is actually happening is her slow awareness of the fragmented and alienated existence she has been leading up to that moment, a life she will question to the point of insanity on this trip home.

This realization will bring with it a growing uneasiness with language, a feeling she says she has always had, as we can observe when she remembers how "I discovered people could say words that would go into my ears meaning nothing."244 Everyday, normal language presents itself as a foreign element to her, as foreign as what she calls the "alien god", the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>243</sup> p.4. <sup>244</sup> Ibid., p.8.

figure of Christ, a symbol of civilized religion, imposed on her by others as a child. The uneasiness with language destabilizes the text as well, since as readers, we also become wary of its effect and implications in the novel.

Despite this foreignness, she has lived so far immersed in the general culture that will only accept what is conventional, in language, in religion, in relation to marriage, to the role of men and women and in its relation to nature. The feeling of strangeness has lived within her for quite a while, however, as she comes closer to her parents' house (and her childhood home), this feeling will rekindle and grow.

The narrative of the first part of the novel is clearly in the present, as if there were nothing behind the main character and nothing to look forward to. Nevertheless, the past begins to intrude - the memories of her childhood, the relation she had with her brother and parents rush in, pronouns are thrown around in the text loosely, without references, in a flow that will become more constant as the story develops. She is, however, still protected from feeling the pain of awareness by a certain numbness. The return to the familiar town brings nothing yet, though she feels logically that something, a twinge of nostalgia, perhaps, should be felt.

What does come to her mind are the many memories she has of her mother and father's presence. Her mother, long ago dead from an illness, is remembered as having resisted for quite a while against going to the hospital, afraid of what would be done to her there: "she must have been afraid they would experiment on her, keep her alive as they could with tubes

and needles..."245, which in fact is what happened when she did go. The reference to the hospital is a past echo of the hero's own experience, one in which she let those around her manipulate her body without protest. Thus, the memory of her mother's resistance is full of significance, especially in its reference to the morphine she had to take. The pain-killer does not seem to bring much relief - the mother says of the effect of the drug that "there were webs floating in the air in front of me"246; in other words, her mother is dead-set against the numbing, confusing state it leaves her in. There is also a curious description which transforms the mother's image into that of a bird, an animal mentioned many times in the novel: at moments birds remind the protagonist of how her mother was closely attuned to them; at other times, the birds appear in situations of suffering or death in the hands of predators. Her mothers diaries are also mentioned at this point, though they are disappointingly empty of any words that describe emotion. The protagonist refers to the anger she felt at seeing one on the bedside table in the hospital room - she slips it into her bag, later hungrily reading, thinking "there might be something about me, but except for the dates, the pages were blank, she had given up months ago."247 Thus, the desire to be spoken of, recognized and protected by her mother's words is present at the start of the novel, and this will be underlying the reasons for her journey home.

<sup>245</sup> p.21. <sup>246</sup> Ibid.

Many of the images which come up in <u>Surfacing</u> are evidently going to be associated to the title - in one memory, her brother's drowning in the waters near their house is seen from inside her mother's womb. The mother saves the brother from the water, dragging him out as if in a rebirth, while the protagonist sees herself living inside a water-environment like a fish or, as she says, a "frog in a jar". The adequacy of the right time and action for each situation is made clear here - though life is always a risk, at some moments survival is a question of being rescued from the water, at others, a question of remaining the right amount of time inside it. The real importance of these metaphors will grow as the hero remembers her past in the city where she lives and the more remote past of her childhood. Nevertheless, her mother is seen as being present at moments of decision in the lives of her children, as a rescuer, a savior. The protagonist describes her brother's rescue from the water as a special gift, one she would have appreciated for the secrets it would have brought her. Her mother is seen as responsible for acts which brought life together. She is remembered as being fearless in face of danger as well, saving her children from the possible attack of a bear by a mere motion of her arms and the yelling of the word "scat". The sensation left behind to the main character is that her mother was not only everlasting, but that she knew something special, had some magical connection to the world around her which she, the main character, must recover. The disappointment and anger she has stiffled inside her convey another feeling: that of expectation, a hope that after her mother had died,

"word of some kind, not money but an object, a token"248 would be passed on to her. Apparently, for now, nothing was left for her.

Running parallel to these images evoked by her mother are those that come to her in relation to her father. His rationality can be seen as being similar to that of Mr. Ramsay. He relies on reason to help him; though he is not an intellectual in the same sense Mr. Ramsay was, his instinct for survival passes through a set of rules and manuals he relies on: "he believed that with the proper guidebooks you could do everything yourself<sup>11249</sup>, and had an assortment of books written by authors all belonging to the literary canon:

> ... the King James Bible which he said he enjoyed for its literary qualities, a complete Robert Burns, Boswell's Life, Thompson's Seasons, selections from Goldsmith and Cowper. He admired what he called the eighteenthcentury rationalists: he thought of them as men who had avoided the corruptions of the Industrial Revolution and learned the secret of the golden mean, the balanced life, he was sure they all practiced organic farming.<sup>250</sup>

All the authors mentioned represent her father's values - reason over intuition, wellmeasured poetry and prose over the excesses of Romanticism. The gentle touch of irony on

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>248</sup> p.39. <sup>249</sup> p. 41.

the part of the narrator is in mentioning her father's confidence that they practiced organic farming. Besides being an ironic comment, it reveals a father's internal ambiguity: his socalled reason is helpful in only covering up his profound need for easy answers, ready-made, fool-proof and acessible. Nothing more romantic than that. The reference to organic farming is her father's way to associate to nature, trying to save it, though not very effectively, for his family's use. He has raised a family as far from the evils of culture and society as he could, planting a garden organically, relying on manuals to survive in the woods, giving his children the closest contact with nature he could. The protagonist recognizes her father's need to find a place exactly like the one on which they had lived: an island, a place where he could settle in the same way old settlers had done. The mistake was to believe this could actually be done in absolute isolation, or that protecting his family from the evils of civilization would give them absolute security. Despite her father's good intentions, by protecting them in wilderness he had left them to find for themselves a way to survive the evils of culture. At this, the protagonist expresses a lack of success - the only way found to defend herself was by becoming alienated and numb of feeling. As well, she has discovered the all-too-human characteristics of even those marvelous men of eighteenth-century rationalism which her father has relied on so much:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>250</sup> p. 41.

It astounded me to discover much later, in fact my husband told me, that Burns was an alcoholic, Cowper a madman, Dr. Johnson, a manicdepressive and Goldsmith a pauper. There was something wrong with Thompson also; "escapist" was the term he used. After that I liked them better, they weren't paragons anymore. 251

The discovery of the flaws in these men seem to make her feel closer to her father, as if their flaws could also be his. Thus, he loses his status of super-hero or god and becomes what he actually was: a common man, afraid of death, afraid of insanity, all the time protecting not only his family, but himself behind a shield of reason.

This approximates her to her father in more ways than one: she too is merely warding off insanity, she too would like to believe that she and her friends have found the golden mean: "we're the new bourgeoisie ... I'm glad they're with me, I wouldn't want to be here alone; at any moment the loss, the vacancy will overtake me, they ward it off."252 Though she happily plays the role of well-adjusted middle-class liberal professional, accepting what is "modern" and "in" so as to blend into what is accepted from her as modern woman, the underlying feeling of emptiness makes her as lost as Esther in The Bell Jar. Where the latter character had to confront an explicitly constraining society, the former has to deal with the appearance of liberation covering up the same old expectations as to what her role should be as a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>251</sup> p. 42. <sup>252</sup> p.43.

woman, what relationships between men and women should be and how she should respond to all this.

Thus, marriage is initially seen and defined in Surfacing as "two people linked together and balancing each other"253, another definition to add to the ones mentioned by Lily Briscoe and Esther Greenwood. It may appear to be quite a positive view, however, when the protagonist in Surfacing says that she and her ex-husband had "committed that paper act", the notion of crime, obscenity and disappointment are made evident. The idea given is that marriage is meaningless, as meaningless as the words that come with it such as "love", "committment", "dedication". She sees in Anna and David's relationship all the real strain these words contain. Anna cakes her face in make-up, getting up before David does in order to do so without his seeing her, certain that he would not like to see her without the mask. The protagonist sees Anna's face as "a worn doll's, her artificial face is the natural one", and feels the pressure there is in waking up and slipping into this doll face when she says "I glimpse the subterfuge this must involve, or is it devotion ... Maybe David is telling generous lies; but she blends and mutes herself so well he may not notice". 254 Marriage is like role-play and David and Anna play the part. Anna is not seen as a woman with possibilities for the future, as liberating herself from what Rosi Braidotti has called the feminine as an eternal mask. Anna's role in relation to the main character seems to be that of contrast - she plays

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>253</sup> p. 43. <sup>254</sup> p. 48.

the accepted feminine role in order not to lose her identity (which she has defined in the marriage), whereas, the main character has lost this mask of femininity (she will not make believe with words like love, marriage, etc.) and is in need of defining a new identity.

Marriage is, thus, in its more conventional aspects, not very different in the seventies than it was in the fifties or at the beginning of the century. It is in marriage that one most loses one's identity, or risks losing it, and this loss is directly associated to the wife's playing out her role as submissive and kind doll to the husband's role of protector. The main character's own failed marriage is revealed here, and with it the failure of language and rules. The idea of words having no meaning are made more evident when she recalls her husband's perfect image and his attempt to create a perfect moment when he says he loves her: "he said he loved me, the magic word, it was supposed to make everything light up, I'll never trust that word again."255 She has no reliance on the usual words that people trust and on the common rules that are followed in order to keep relationships going. When Anna tells her what marriage is all about, it sounds a bit empty, as if she were not speaking to anyone in particular, "but to an invisible microphone suspended above her head: people's voices go radio when they give advice."256 The protagonist's feelings about the subject of marriage are confusing at this point, and they become even more so when we are informed of a child she had, but of which she has no pictures. To her, this child does not exist, or as she says, "I

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>255</sup> p. 52. <sup>256</sup> p.53.

have to behave as though it doesn't exist, because for me it can't, it was taken away from me, exported, deported."<sup>257</sup> The "deportation" of the child makes her feel as if there were pieces of her missing, or as she herself says, as if her own flesh had been canceled. The necessity to forget this incident, as well as her married life, has become crucial to her survival, a necessity that is not given answer to in the survival manuals her father used to rely on.

Not only does the protagonist reveal the past and the truth of her experiences, but her companions begin to show their weaknesses, flaws and even cruelties as well in displays of behavior that will occur parallel to the her steady path to self-discovery. Joe, her lover, has demanded the one thing he could not ask for: that she marry him, that she declare herself "in love" with him. Since she is abandoning the accepted language of love, it is beyond her greatest efforts to give him what he wants. She feels sadenned not only by his anger and distance from her, but also by the fact that the easily defined and familiar borders in which she could circulate are eroding. When she attempts a truce, he rejects her, thus making the sought- for restoration of borders impossible. She begins to see Joe as nothing more than an object on the bed beside her, while traditional maxims swim through her head. Like Mrs. Ramsay, she is shown to be bothered by these meaningless words that people say without thinking, and sees no comfort in this conventional wisdom. In any case, the sense of desintegration and alientation from language grows more intensely after the conflict with

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>257</sup> p. 53.

Joe. Her feelings of enstrangement to language are expressed exactly when she states she felt as if she were in a vase, "or the village where I could see them but not hear them because I couldn't understand what was being said"258. Not only is the language spoken by others unknown to her, alienation towards this language (and in relation to her own feelings) makes her feel as if she were in a vase, or a bottle, like "frogs in the jam jar stretched wide"<sup>259</sup>, grotesque in appearance, a freak on show.

The language the narrator feels she must abandon, and that she has in fact abandoned partly, is identified with the presence of the Americans, who appear at every moment on the lake. Their talk and attitude enrage her, as she sees them take her group for Americans. Curiously, they discover that these intruders are not Americans, but as Canadian as they are. The question of identity is crucial here, as the narrator feels she has been tricked - language and appeareance are deceitful. She sees the intrusion of Americans as if it were a virus coming straight out of a sci-fi movie, body snatchers who made everyone look, think and talk alike. To her this is the essential point because, as she says, "a language is everything you do". Therefore, gradually the narrator will want as much distance as possible not only from the "Americans", but from any human, since all can become (and are showing signs of becoming) Americans. The destructiveness of these people has shown itself: dead animals, predatory hunting and fishing, the flooding of areas, destruction of lake and forest. The

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>258</sup> p. 126. <sup>259</sup> Ibid.

protagonist thinks of the cruelty inside every human as inherent, present since childhood, while to become cruel and primitive (we are reminded of <u>Lord of the Flies</u>) is an easy step. She is discouraged from finding a way out to her feeling of fragmentation in the recovery of her childhood.

David's paranoia and cruelty, and Anna's jealousness and resentment, especially when it concerns her marriage, come out in full as well. David's paranoia is seen, for example, in his belief that there is a conspiracy arranged by the US against Canada. David's position is interesting: he sees his country as the victim of a hidden plan, perhaps as a reflection of his own feelings of unease and displacement as a new man in a society that has shaken the traditional place and steady role of man as protector and provider. The narrator wonders at how David's theory would appear in the history books of the future, sensing that all the paranoic fear would be filtered out and transformed into "neutral" information, exactly as it had been learned by her in high school. Thus, the male vision of history is neutral, a series of dates, facts and biographies of important men who acted upon the events of their time. The questioning of this information is remembered as having been discouraged during high school, just like the words created to describe certain events (demarcation, sovereignty) were not questioned, merely accepted and understood as the right way to refer to something that had involved more than one side. She also remembers that questioning on the part of a female student was scoffed at more than when it came from a male student. The encouraged behavior would be to sit stiffly and stare straight ahead, alienating onself from the

environment and almost becoming invisible, acting as much as one could on the margins. As the protagonist recalls, in the margins of her history book she "drew ornaments, plants with scrolled branches ... I got so I could draw invisibly, my fingers scarcely moving."260 The image is clear - small movements, erasing one's actions or making them discreet, without feeling is the acceptable behavior for women - it was necessary to learn this in order to surivive.

David comes on to the narrator, playing at seduction as if it were a prerogative of his to act in this manner. At the same time, he patronizes her, saying she is a "good girl" for not "selling out" to the American who is interested in buying her parents' property. The sleazy attempts at seduction and the fatherly pat on the head bring out a reaction in Anna which makes her seem catty in the most stereotypical and expected behavior women could have in relation to other women: she turns her anger at David's behavior onto the protagonist, warning her that David is only acting flirtatious out of habit. She is surprised at Anna, noticing that "her voice was like fingernails"261, sensing a hidden rage against David - to her it is another relationship based on several feelings that people tend to call love. Anna's position in the narration is interesting in this aspect since her character represents features of a woman who cannot free herself from the depreciative image the male vision has created of females: she defines herself in relation to David, she is, as de Lauretis states, "a projection of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>260</sup> p. 116 <sup>261</sup> p. 117.

the male (form of sexuality), its complementary opposite, its extrapolation - Adam's rib, so to speak."262 David sees her and treats her as his dumb partner, as if they were in a Abott and Costello routine, and Anna goes along with the game as long as she can maintain her situation in the marriage. She has created her own set of explanations to justify her position. Anna explains to the protagonist that her husband's attempts to come on to her are nothing more than his way to get back at her: in other words, his affairs, his flirtatious behavior in front of her, are his way of hurting her and claiming domination. However, David has created his own theory to validate his behavior: as Anna says, "he says it's being honest. What a turd. When I get mad he says I'm jealous and possessive and I shouldn't get uptight, he says jealousy is bourgeois, it's a leftover from the property ethic, he thinks we should all be swingers and share it around."263 In this roundabout way, David has made use of "liberating" theory to justify his extra-marital affairs to his wife. Anna does not buy his "bullshit garbage", as she calls it, but, at the same time, she also needs to feel that his theory and his actions are not about himself or any other women. Thus, she warns her friend not to be fooled by his interest in her, since, as Anna says, "it's all about me, really."264 In this way, Anna can fool herself that even when David is after other women, all he really cares about is her. This ultimately is the excuse that can allow her to stay married.

<sup>262</sup> Lauretis, Teresa de. The Technology of Gender in Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1987, p.14. p. 117. p.118.

The narrator expresses a wish that Anna had never revealed these secrets of her marriage - it was worse than seeing the inside of a dead animal, bringing feelings of disgust. There is an evident desire to believe in a good marriage in the conventional style, but, evidently, the truths of these so-called good marriages are falling to pieces. Another important incident takes place after a fishing trip (in which shots of carrion were added to David and Joe's movie Random Samples). The protagonist witnesses David's smooth but threatening voice persuading Anna to take her bikini off in order for more shots to be added to his film. The narrator's sensations of fear are made even more evident during this event - it is suddenly possible that they will turn against each other: "they've used up everything, there's nothing left there now for them to take pictures of except each other, next it will be me."265 The camera is seen as a male weapon, an act of violence that can cause harm. This is mentioned by Leigh Gilmore when she refers to male desire being driven by a dynamics that reproduces a gaze of violence, that needs the anxiety of influence in order to create artistically 266. David tries to convince Anna she will be a star, and that her take will "go in beside the dead bird"267 they had filmed during a fishing trip. The narrator's careful observation of the whole scene gives it a tone of menace, and one can sense the unease and fear in Anna, though she tries to ignore her husband's pushy attitude. The action takes on a similarity to rape, which becomes

<sup>265</sup> p. 160.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>266</sup> Gilmore, Leigh. The Gaze of the Other Woman: Beholding and Begetting in Dickinson, Moore and Rich in Engendering the Word (Feminist Essays in Psychosexual Politics), Temma Berg et al, ed, U. of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1989, p. 91. <sup>267</sup> p. 160.

even more evident in Joe's words when he says "I won't take her if she doesn't want to"268. The filming of Anna's nakedness would truly be "taking" without consent, though David has yet another of his theories to explain his wife's reluctance: "It's token resistance ... she wants to, she's an exhibisionist at heart. She likes her lush body, don't you? Even if she is getting too fat"269. Thus, David has taken possession not only of Anna's body, but of her desire as well: he is able to create theories about a woman's behavior in order to satisfy his own wishes. The protagonist's feelings are stirred by this scene, she would like to stop the three from arguing and sees the situation as a silent war in which she particularly had never won. Her only defense in the past had been invisibility. Consequently, her only attitude is to sit quietly on the steps of the house and to watch. When David is finally able to coerce Anna into doing what he wants, the camera is seen by the narrator "like a bazooka, or a strange instrument of torture", it's noise a "sinister whirr"270. Anna is seen fragmented after she has taken off the top of her bikini, "cut in half, one breast on either side of a thin tree"271. The narrator's first thought, after the situation has calmed down, is to compare David to herself both cannot feel love and, consequently, do not suffer, while Joe and Anna, with all their weaknesses are at least lucky enough to feel, even if it means that this will bring suffering. Nevertheless, David's justification for his behavior is clear: to him, Anna is the one who

<sup>268</sup> p. 161. <sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>270</sup> p. 162.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>271</sup> Ibid.

humiliates since she has affairs. He is not jealous, but "she's trying to cut my balls off"272, as he later says to the protagonist. He is not showing any agressivity as he says this, only the reaction of a man who feels emasculated and saddened by the loss of defined parameters in which to act. His guilt at mistreating Anna is at the core of all the theories and explanations he has created.

The assertion of the male ego is present at many moments in the text. The presence of the domineering Americans and the companies that are exploiting the lush area is comparable to David's showing off of male authority, even if it is through joking. David and Joe's creation of Random Samples seems almost simplistic in its proposal, since it is nothing more than the title proclaims: samples of objects and situations they find amusing or of any interest. The project is a renewed proposal in art, however, in its lack of defined forms and central idea. The fragments, nevertheless, are symbolic of the culture these people live in the proposal is not a banner to defend within a planned set of ideas. It is more a symbol of how these people are torn apart by feelings of inadequacy and loss of identity. David scorns any professionalism in the making of the movie by making himself the director and Joe the cameraman, though neither of them have any experience in these activities: "David says they're the new Renaissance Men, you teach yourself what you need to learn,"273 reveals the protagonist. These men are facing the challenge of actually becoming new men in an era in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>272</sup> p.164. <sup>273</sup> p. 6.

which they have lost most of the references as to their roles in society. Joe and David have also realized their loss of identity and, in a similar attitude to the one the narrator's father had in creating a new world in the wilderness where he could believe in his role as provider, try to recreate a perception of the world around them. As Woodcock states, the movie they are producing "is an effort by two men who uneasily perceive the falsity of modern life, even though they are deeply immersed in it, and seek to exploit its discrepancies and incongruities in this film..."

David and Joe are caught up in the fragmentation/alienation they observe, finding pleasure in the scraps and pieces they pick up here and there, most having no relation to each other. The camera seems to replace the act of seeing, touching, feeling itself and becomes a sort of weapon, especially in David's hands.

Anna, on the other hand, is seen by the narrator as a representation of woman, one that has been constructed by the other's desire and gaze. The narrator's eye is that of the subject which de Lauretis refers to as being "at the same time inside and outside the ideology of gender ... conscious of that twofold pull, of that division, that doubled vision"<sup>275</sup>. Anna's existence depends on the mask she pulls out of her make-up kit, a much needed device she uses to keep David's eyes (the gaze of the subject) on her (the object of the gaze). The narrator sees her seated,

Woodcock, George. <u>Introducing Margaret Atwood's Surfacing: A Reader's Guide</u>, ECW Press, Toronto, 1990, p.44.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>275</sup> Lauretis, Teresa de. *The Technology of Gender* in <u>Technologies of Gender</u>: <u>Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction</u>, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1987, p.10.

Rump on a packsack, harem cushion, pink on the cheeks and black discreetley around the eyes, as red as blood as black as ebony, a seamed and folded imitation of a magazine picture that is itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere, hairless lobed angel in the same heaven where God is a circle, captive princess in someone's head. She is locked in, she isn't allowed to eat or shit or cry or give birth, nothing goes in, nothing comes out. 276

She considers Anna's position as that of frozen or cyrstallized woman, taken over by machinery since the shot forcedly taken of her. The place of the take, after the shot of the dead heron, only reinforces the idea that Anna has even less inside her than a corpse. She is like a shell, her soul sucked out from her and lost. The action of the protagonist is instinctive: she throws rolls of film that form the movie into the lake, all the images contained in them released. She sees "tiny naked Annas ...bottled and shelved"277, trying to rescue the woman as if she were the Sybil of Cumae, bottled up for eternity, but aging endlessly. The narrator expects a reaction to form on Anna's face (relief, joy at being freed from stasis), but the eyes that gaze at her are dull, expressionless. Prophetically, the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>276</sup> p.201 -202. <sup>277</sup> p. 202.

Sybil/Anna warns the narrator of the dire consequences her act would have: punishment for her subversiveness would certainly follow.

The father's disappearance, which is the reigning motive for the protagonist's trip to her home, is almost resolved for her with her searches through the island, carried out as well as she could, considering the size and complex vegetation of the place. She knows that not much more can be done except the official filling in of forms and the usual information one must give to whoever is in charge of those who have disappeared. The danger of staying any longer on the island and in her parents' house is felt, a danger which looms over her in an almost ghostly form - that of her (probably) dead father. She will only feel safe again back in the city, away from the wilderness that surrounds them, where "reason would defend me." As she looks out the window onto the activities of her friends, the past haunts her in the image of Anna lying in the sun in a bikini, a reminder of herself at sixteen; while Joe and David are out in the canoe in the same way her father and brother would have been years ago. She sees her own position in the kitchen as that of her mother, but cannot feel comfortable in it - on the one hand, her feelings are somewhat ambivalent (the anger at not really receiving anything of value from her mother), on the other hand, she has very little knowledge of what her mother actually did in the afternoons: "on some days she would

simply vanish, walk off by herself in the forest."<sup>278</sup> This idea creates an image of her mother as an almost magical figure, certainly full of mystery and wonder, and quite unreal to her. It is far from the feelings she has of herself, in any case, a woman who has chosen a very practical approach to her life.

Perhaps the word "chosen" is not exact however. She refers to her work as a commercial artist as one that "she found herself having." It was not in her plans to become exactly this kind of artist, but the obligation to sell her work became crucial in order to survive. She has a remote memory of trying to become a "real artist", an attempt aborted by a male voice (her husband) which appears telling her this idea "was cute but misguided." The authority of this voice is especially important as it brings with it her feeling of the impossibility of her development as an artist in a male culture and inside a system which emphasizes only what can be sold. This is clearly stated: "he said I should study something I'd be able to use because there have never been any important woman artists." The protagonist must admit that this is true - her feeling of being an orphan is thus doubled. Her mother is dead and whatever it is she might have left for her is lost; in the same way she feels a lack of "mothers" to back her artistic work and gives up even trying to establish herself as a serious artist. Virginia Woolf's words on the necessity of finding mothers to look back to seem to echo here.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>278</sup> p. 58.

However, in spite of the protagonist's idea that her work on the island is done, she will soon realize this is far from the truth. The ghost that haunts her - her father - has taken the form of "a guide in the personal quest she must undertake, and not until it is complete can she believe he is dead."<sup>279</sup> Thus, though she is ready to leave, she still has time to go through a stack of papers he has left with what appears to her to be unintelligible drawings. The discovery makes her afraid, as if she had discovered a dark secret: maybe he had not died, but had become insane from staying by himself too long. The possibility of this situation is made even more chilling to her as she silently prays for someone to help her get rid of her own feeling of isolation: the insanity that must have overtaken her father is sneaking up on her as well. Thus, logic and reason might not defend her after all.

The novel reveals the protagonist's first contact with water in the final pages of this first part. Initially, hiding in the outhouse as her companions negotiate their stay with Evans, the man who had taken them to the island on his boat, memories of how she and her brother tried to survive the rules of civilization and, at the same time, live by their parent's non-violence position come to her. Living by the arbitrary rules which were already imposed on her by her childhood classmates at parties was as challenging for her as was for her brother dealing with having been taught not to fight back even if provoked by others. One neede to learn to be crafty, trying to get out of playing games according to the rules, but as she

Woodcock, George. <u>Introducing Margaret Atwood's Surfacing</u>: A Reader's Guide, ECW Press, 1990, p. 40.

recalls, "being socially retarded is like being mentally retarded, it arouses in others disgust and the desire to torment and reform"280. Though she has lived this torment (and still does), she is able to critically see how destructive it is to live in a society in which either you are a winner or a loser, dominator or dominated. Her memories of the past are brought up by the swim in the lake she decides to take, bringing with it another memory, that of her mother saving her brother and the wish she had gone through that experience. Her mother's lack of an answer to her question of where her brother would have gone had he not been saved contrasts sharply with the certainty that her father would have given a rational answer. The mother simply says she has no idea where her brother would have gone, which is suspiciously received and "only convinced me that she had the answers but wouldn't tell."281 Thus, the protagonist is described as entering the water, remembering how avidly and enthusiastically she would have reveled in the swim years ago, opening her eyes in the water, staying until she could hardly bear the cold temperature. She muses "I must have been superhuman, I couldn't do it now. Perhaps I'm growing old, at last, can that be possible?"282 The image of submersion is going to repeat itself constantly and more frequently since the call of the lake will give her many of the answers she needs. At this point, however, comfort is neither found inside the water nor outside it, she would like to be out of the water but "being in the air is more painful than being in the water", thus, she "bend(s) and push(es)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>280</sup> p.83. <sup>281</sup> p.86,

(her)self reluctantly into the lake."283 The image of being a half-formed creature comes to mind, neither person nor fish, a foetus or a frog - in any case, something perhaps in formation is alluded to here, as the narrator will descend slowly into the past which will allow her to let go of the stiffling numbness she has lived in for such a long time.

<sup>282</sup> p.86. <sup>283</sup> Ibid.

## 2.2. Immersion

The water images mentioned before, associated to those of the protagonist gradually recovery of her memories are a necessary bridge to this part of the analysis. Immersion into water will initially bring pain, and a revelation of the great distance there is between herself and her feelings. This is expressed by the narrator in the division between body and head, as if there were two separate entities ruling life. She sees no reason why this separation should exist, but the fragmentation is sensed as being destructive: "I'm not against the body or the head either: only the neck, which creates the illusion that they are separate. The language is wrong, it shouldn't have different words for them ...if the head is detached from the body both of them will die." Along with the anxiety of the division body/head, she has the sensation that language itself does nothing to make this separation less critical. Words, after all, mark the difference (body/head, nature/culture, etc.) where there actually should be none. She sees this fragmentation as a direct result of the culture she lives in, one which had the power to destroy in order to submit, to fragment in order to control. The images related to this are abundant.

The decay of civilization is reflected in the deterioration of her ability to see, speak, understand and communicate in general. She is starting to suspect what she considers the truth about herself, that she is nothing more than a head without a body, able to reason, but

not able to feel. Thus, the desintegration of identity coincides with that of language for the narrator, in a similar way to what happened with Esther in The Bell Jar. The narrator expresses a strangeness in relation to what ordinarily would be familiar, when she says "the voice wasn't mine, it came from someone dressed as me, imitating me"285, as well as when she admits that "(she)'d allowed (her)self to be cut in two."286 She sees it as bitterly comical, but confesses: "I was the wrong half, detached, terminal. I was nothing but a head, or, no, something minor, a severed thumb, numb."287 She is reminded of a book studied in high school, Your Health, in which the only possibility of seeing naked bodies was in the pictures of people with deficiencies, black oblongs covering their eyes. The body of a woman, with all its functioning parts, was presented in the form of "diagrams, transparencies with labels and arrows, the ovaries purple sea creature, the womb as a pear."288 The body as an instrument under the surveillance of medicine, scientifically presented, seems to turn into something else: a monster, fruit, strange object, unrecognizable. The rationalization of the body is understood as that of feeling also - it is especially true of a woman's body. Love and sex is pondered on, the mechanization of the whole process as society goes from wanting these two things without taking risks (risk of losing, of disease, that responsibility brings) to fearing these risks to the point of paranoia. Thus, she recalls: "Sex used to smell like rubber

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>284</sup> p.89. <sup>285</sup> p.127. <sup>286</sup> p.129.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>288</sup> **p**. 90.

gloves and now it does again", while a woman "can pretend she's still natural, cyclical, instead of a chemical slot machine." Still she muses: "But soon they'll have the artifical womb, I wonder how I feel about that." Birth is seen similarly to what was experienced in The Bell Jar, only here there was no mere observation but a personal memory:

mit was too much to go through for nothing, they shut you into a hospital, they shave the hair off you and tie your hands down and they don't let you see, they don't want you to understand, they want you to believe it's their power, not yours. They stick needles into you so you won't hear anything, you might as well be a dead pig, your legs are up in a metal frame, they bend over you, technicians, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or snickering practicing on your body, they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar.<sup>290</sup>

The jar image associated to that of the woman's body and feelings treated with medical precision is a reflection of Esther's feelings in The Bell Jar. Esther and the protagonist of Surfacing face the same descent into insanity and fear, feeling, however, that there must be a better way out of this restricting situation. The reference to the body is essential at this point, since it is through this body that one can see culture, as well as biology, define and act. In Surfacing, the protagonist's gradual recovery of contact with her body define her

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>289</sup> p. 91.

recovery within herself and with the natural environment around her. Thus, dissociating her body from the neutral, scientific observation of male world determines the body's inscription both in its more essential biological functions and as a cultural arena. Within her body and in the contours of her body the protagonist will redefine her relation to herself and to the environment which surrounds her. She will also recover the memory of whom she is and where she comes from, defining the limits of her body and its specific characteristics.

Therefore, it is significant that the narrator's initial fear is translated into the feeling of "the absence of defining borders", as if her body could not be determined in its form, neither her mind as well, the danger of insanity lurking near. There is only an uneasy knowledge of the constant presence of her father, like a spectre or a deformed creature in every corner. She feels an urgent need to look for something that will distract her attention from the fear. While searching for old magazines, she finds scrapbooks of the drawings her brother and she would make on rainy days. The contrast between her brother's drawings and her own is worth mentioning. In his scrapbook one can find the typical monsters, soldiers, planes and wars of a young boy's imagination, which leads us to thinking that the narrator's brother had somehow broken away from their father's protective rationalism and was morbidly, but naturally, curious about the darker, uncivilized aspects of humanity. This is made more evident when one observes that the brother contains inside him a cruelty and sadism that are disturbing to the narrator: he enjoys trapping animals to watch them die. Nevertheless, as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>290</sup> p. 94.

Woodcock states, "it is the brother who always knowingly discovers and reveals the unpleasant aspects of life from which their islanded childhood had protected the two, and transmits them to his sister."291 The protagonist's first scrapbook contains nothing she herself had produced: there are only cut-out figures of women in several lady-like or motherly situations. She remembers the answer one had to give as a child to the question of what you would be when you grew up: a lady or a mother. Both were expected and nothing could be more acceptable. Thus, as the protagonist tells of the turning of the pages of this scrapbook, there seems to be no hope of finding a clue to what had gone so wrong, where she had lost all direction in life. The other scrapbook has idyllic pictures she had drawn of Easter eggs and rabbits, trees, flowers, sun and moon. Though in these pictures there is a clear attempt to avoid the heroic wars and monsters of her brother's albums, perhaps, one could say, to the point of denial of reality, the images drawn also allude to the possibility of a new beginning in the eggs and elements of nature. In the sun and the moon, repeated symmetrically in the corners of the pages, are not only the symbols of life itself in the constant cycle of day and night, summer and winter, birth and death, but also the light and dark side in everyone's nature. The elements in the main character's drawings indicate a possibility of a balance. Nevertheless, she will need to undergo a painful journey inside

Woodcock, George Introducing Margaret Atwood's Surfacing: A Reader's Guide, ECW Press, Toronto, 1990, p. 39.

herself and towards the reality of her life, present and past, to come out cleansed and whole again.

There are also important drawings her father has left, some which she had found and thought, initially, were the work of a lunatic. Now, it seems logical to her to look for clues among those drawings. As she analyzes them, she feels reassured at being able to interpret what they contain: figures of people in boats, antlered figures, numbers. However, the drawings she picks up after these are incomprehensible and she doubts her father had been sane when he made them. When she comes across a letter from a university scholar adressed to her father in which he is thanked for having sent photographs and a map, as well as some xeroxed papers of an article, she realizes the truth. Her father had been looking over the area for rock paintings, he had probably killed himself accidently in the search - thus, his rationality had turned against him and made him a victim of circumstance: "I had the proof now, indisputable, of sanity and therefore of death"292. Her feelings are unclear (is it grief or relief she feels?), but her fear of a dark secret of loss of sanity on her father's part is unfounded. The protagonist recognizes the location jotted down by her father on one of the drawings and decides she will go to the place and see it for herself - it will be the scene for a moment of immersion of great significance in the narration.

The concern the protagonist has in relation to her loss of feeling makes her look for clues in every corner and in every piece of past she can lay her hands on. She looks through the photo album, wondering if by looking at the changes that occurred in her throughout the years she would be able to rescue herself from her lack, from the void inside her. The album had been put together by her mother, carefully recorded in her handwriting. Pictures in which her mother appears young, single, then married and with Paul, the narrator's brother, as a baby come one after the other before her own pictures begin to show up. Her mother's figure, however, is the one she stops to look at the most:

> My mother in her leather jacket and odd long 1940s hair, standing beside the tray for the birds, her hand stretched out; the jays were there too, she's training them, one is on her shoulder, peering at her with clever thumbtack eyes, another is landing on her wrist, wings caught as a blur. Sun sifting around her through the pines, her eyes looking straight at the camera, frightened, receding into the shadows of her head like a skull's, a trick of the light.293

There is something magical, once again, in her mother's presence as she shows a special connection to nature, through her feeding of the jays. The secret, if there is one in her mother, cannot be seen by merely looking at her - her eyes actually hide away from the inquisitiveness of the camera, life tricking the onlooker into thinking there is nothing there.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>292</sup> p. 123. <sup>293</sup> p.128.

Nevertheless, as the narrator looks at the pictures of herself growing up, she sees the work that had been put into her by her mother's care in order to make her civilized - a necessary strategy for survival. She is not fooled, however. As she says of her mother, "I knew by then she was no judge of the normal"<sup>294</sup>. The memory of her mother is once more brought to her when she sees Anna wearing the same leather jacket of the picture, an incident perhaps alluding to the possibility of connections between women being necessary and crucial to their survival. She is reminded of a story her mother had once told her about her childhood: she and her sister had attempted to fly out of the barnyard with wings made out of an old umbrella. In the attempt, her mother had broken her ankles. Though it was comical in the way her mother used to tell the story, there was some eerie sensation of loss in it, as if freedom had been tried and had failed the two girls. The final pages of the album are incomplete, a space given to her by her mother, to fill in the blanks with whatever the protagonist desired: her own image, the end perhaps of the story of flying, only different.

It will be through nature, on a fishing trip which preceds Anna's take in Random Samples, that the protagonist will begin to understand more deeply certain truths about herself. The clutter of garbage in the natural environment, the presence of death in nature are the background for the protagonist's feelings about her own body and place in the world. She sees the garbage they encounter as a clear sign of the attitude of contempt these invaders (Americans?) have, a sign of their marking off of territory, as if posession meant

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>294</sup> p. 129.

necessarily destruction. The protagonist seems to act mechanically, picking up the junk others had left, lighting a fire for tea, preparing their lunch - she needs to exercise her emotions through action, as if these were dead, forgotten, all the sap dried out and this scares her:

I had wanted rescue, if my body could be made to sense, respond, move strongly enough, some of the red light-bulb synapses blue neurons, incandescent molecules might seep into my head through the closed throat, neck membrane. Pleasure and pain are side by side they said but most of the brain is neutral; nerveless, like fat. I rehearsed emotions, naming them: joy, peace, guilt, release, love and hate, react, relate; what to feel was like what to wear, you watched the others and memorized it. But the only thing there was the fear that I wasn't alive: a negative, the difference between the shadow of a pin and what it's like when you stick it in your arm, in school ... I used to do that, with pens, nibs and compass points too, instruments of knowledge... The insides of my arms were stippled with tiny wounds, like an addict's. 295

This flow of thought then leads to a memory of an actual incident in which she had been given anaesthesia, given a substance to take away pain. The pain however is still there, it is in the fear she cannot feel, for as she is reminded, there have been experiments to prove that rats prefer any sensation to none at all. Is it possible that she is even less brave than a rat?

Nevetheless, disconnection is so intense that it is the only feeling, one which brings fear. Like an addict who needs to inject feeling inside his/her veins, the narrator is dead on the inside as well. Like Esther in The Bell Jar she cannot see herself as she is, only as a negative.

Nature, however, does not allow indifference. Only those who are concerned more with the maintenance of a system which values profit, dominance and exploitation can look at it without seeing. The images of nature's power to explode right in front of one's eyes are frequent: decay, death, breathing plants and animals, all this is portrayed in detail here. Leeches "undulating sluggishly under the brown surface" of the water are joined with "gas bubbles from decomposing vegetation (that) burst with a stench of rotten eggs or farts "296. Though there is death in nature, it is not seen as cruel, but as a necessity: the decomposition of vegetation is expected and life will follow its course naturally. However, the useless death of nature is shown to be unforgivable: the stench of a dead heron is heavy on their noses. The image is one of a ritual sacrifice, but without any purpose:

> ... It was hanging upside down by a thin blue nylon rope tied round its feet and looped over a tree branch, it's wings fallen open. It looked at me with its mashed eye ...

> I couldn't tell how it had been done, bullet smashed with a stone, hit with a stick ... I saw a beetle on it, blue - black and oval ... Carrion beetle, death beetle. Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim, why didn't

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>295</sup> p. 132-133. <sup>296</sup> p. 137.

they just throw it away like the trash? To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill. Otherwise it was valueless; beautiful from a distance, but it couldn't be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it. 297

The connection of this useless death with the action of Americans, the predators, represents them as part of a system which cannot tolerate difference of any form of life which cannot be dominated. This American gaze is destructive, as destructive as the male gaze represented by David's camera which transformed everything, including his wife, into bits and pieces, samples of life instead of real life itself. It is evident that David wants a shot of the heron and he is sorry that the stench will not appear in the movie. His gaze feeds on the gaze of the first predator.

The protagonist is, thus, haunted by yet another image besides that of her father and mother: she sees in the mashed eye of the heron an accusation that follows her around: she should have buried the animal, out of respect for nature that had been violated. More than this, she feels as attacked as the bird she had just seen. David's joke (yet another one) on a woman's sexual organ's vulgar nickname takes the narrator to the image of the dead heron once again: woman seen as a part, named for an animal (beaver) which can be killed also. She senses that it is partly the fear of women and their bodies which brings up so much

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>297</sup> p. 137 - 138.

contempt and she wonders "what part of them the heron was, that they needed so much to kill it". She is reminded of drawings men had made on the walls of a tugboat cabin which she and her brother had gone to see years ago, they looked like plants, fish, clams. Her ignorance is cleared up by her brother's explanations as to what those drawings really represented. The shock she felt did not come from the drawings themselves, but from the possibility of detaching the sexual organs in such a way from the body they belonged to. Once more, fragmentation is feared, but she is reminded that drawings on walls (like those in caves) only represent what you are hunting for. The body's fragmentation is like its use as a neutral object of scientific study - in both cases (the jokes about sexual organs/the treatment of the body in its divided parts), the body loses its identity and its sense of worth. The same can be said of the feelings the protagonist has in regards to her homeland: the dissectation and selling off of the natural environment (for scientific/economic/speculative purposes) strips it of its identity, making the loss of identity double.

Thus, the past comes back to her associated to nature and to her father's drawings in the realization that she "would have to dive" in order to recover her father's memory, and ultimately, her own. The incident which describes her discovery of the location of the paintings her father had taken pictures of is filled with images of submersion and renewal. Her distance from humans is initially expressed when she says "I reached the cliff, there were

no Americans"<sup>298</sup>, in other words, her experience will be solitary, like the first steps of an initiation to a new life. As she prepares to dive, she has a vision of herself under the water, "my other shape ... not my reflection but my shadow, foreshortened, outline blurred, rays streaming out from around the head"299. The vagueness of her other self is represented in the distorted image, an image which evokes even a certain saintliness in the rays which come out of her head - is it sacrifice she feels she will face? Is she a new Christ, identified also in the dead heron whose position is one of crucifiction? She has already seen the dead heron as herself, attacked and now dead. She had seen the same cross image in the heron flying over their heads at the start of the narration. The mythic image of Christ is associated to death and renewal of life, a new possibility, a rebirth. Therefore, the protagonist's feelings are involved in this - she thinks of people's unwillingness to submit to nature, to suffer and admit their connection to nature. As she states, "we refuse to worship; the body worships with blood and muscle but the thing in the knob head will not, wills not to, the head is greedy, it consumes but does not give thanks"300.

Images of learning anew movements which we take for granted are also present: as she submerges, she feels awkward, tentatively stumbling, her body "remembered the motions only imperfectly, like learning to walk after illness"301. Her illness has been a long period of

<sup>298</sup> p. 168. <sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>300</sup> p. 167. <sup>301</sup> p. 169.

forgetfulness and mystification about her life which she will begin to recover in this first submersion. It is as Woodcock states: " 'I' is locked in protective and tightly controlled delusions at the beginning, and it is her dawning recognition of reality that plunges her into fear and crisis as the novel continues" One could say that the protagonist's defenses have begun to fall apart, her fear stems from this desintegration of defenses which, after all had defined the life she created for herself. The story takes us from this moment on through the protagonist's quest, a quest recurrent of so many others, in which there is a need for special knowledge, one that will allow life to continue. As Woodcock reminds us in quoting Margaret Laurence, this journey taken is seen as a descent into darkness, into the most inner recesses of one's soul One's soul One's experience in the underworld is recalled here, a descent which for the protagonist of Surfacing takes the form of madness, and, therefore, can be destructive, but which can also be a possibility of renewed power.

Thus, the first stage of the narrator's descent is likened to a death, a descent into Hell, where death lies, but it also brings in it images of another life, hidden to those who do not choose to see. Her several attempts at submerging deeper into the water are finally sucessful:

303 Ibid., p.63.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>302</sup> Woodcock, George. <u>Introducing Margaret Atwood's Surfacing: A Reader's Guide</u>, ECW Press, Toronto, 1990, p.61.

Pale green, then darkness, layer after layer, deeper than before, seabottom; the water seemed to have thickened, in it pinprick lights flickered and darted, red and blue, yellow and white, and I saw they were fish, the chasm-dwellers, fins lined with phosphorescent sparks, teeth neon. It was wonderful that I was down so far, I watched the fish, they swam like patterns on closed eyes, my legs and arms were weightless, free-floating; I almost forgot to look for the cliff and the shape. 304

As she floats in this feeling of bliss, she looks down, she is startled with the discovery of a body, a familiarity overtakes her as she sees it is dead. Her shock leads to fear as she pushes upwards, images of her brother, her father, a dead fetus explode in her head. Her quest for the "Holy Grail" had brought the truth to her mind, one which she had hidden from herself. The death she has faced is more than that of her father, it is also that of the child she did not allow to exist. Thus, she sees her fetus after the abortion, "suspended in the air above me like a chalice, an evil grail and I thought, Whatever it is, part of myself or separate creature, I killed it. It wasn't a child but it could have been one. I didn't allow it"305. She remembers seeing the fetus, but then corrects herself, she had never seen the dead fetus, it had been thrown away. Her images of the fetus are immersed in water, first a creature traveling the sewers, then going back to the sea, as a place of origin, the same place she herself goes back

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>304</sup> p.169. <sup>305</sup> p.170-171.

to on her quest. Memories of the past come quickly back to her mind. The bottled fetus is associated to bottled animals, decaying, destroyed in their potentiality. She did not have a husband in reality, but an older lover who had not accompanied her to the house where the abortion had taken place - he was too busy with his family. Nevertheless, a reality which was not hers had been faked: ring on finger, wedding, house and all. The guilt over the mutilation she had suffered had led her to create a life she could face and live with. This mutilation had been not only that of her body, but also that of her art - after all, she had been discouraged by this same lover from following a career in anything but commercial art. Thus, violence against creation is twofold: her child and her art are taken from her; the possibility of a future is robbed.

Her understanding of what her father had been after is complete now: not only had he been the scientist, observing and documenting the rock paintings as a hobby, but he had also seen in the Indian representations a sign that they possessed the truth about salvation. Therefore, her father had come to his own visions, which he recorded as drawings; visions which had come to him, in the narrator's words, as "true vision ... after the failure of logic" Her father had reached the point she was reaching, the quest for an inner truth had begun under the disguise of logic, which gradually eroded and led him to his death.

The protagonist's offering is in the form of clothing; she places her sweatshirt on the ledge of the cliff, an incident which indirectly evokes Esther's shedding of clothes into the

New York night. The image of clothes being peeled off as if it were an unecessary skin which should be removed for a new being to be born will repeat itself in the final stages of the narrator's trajectory as well. The body's gradual recovery is a symbol of her awareness, its transformation from object concealed and ignored to a higher significance of defining the protagonist's vision and desire for the future is made clear in the shedding of whatever is superfluous. As she looks up after her offering, she remembers Joe is with her. His presence beside her is crucial since she wonders if it will be possible for him to have this new vision, this recovery of feeling that she says "was beginning to seep back into me"307 like the tingling of a foot that's been asleep. Her movements and language appear slow and deliberate, the estrangement from language is growing as she expresses herself: "I touched him on the arm with my hand. My hand touched his arm. Hand touched arm. Language divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole"308. The feeling of unity which language forever keeps us away from, a loss which Lacan refers to as one of the first the individual faces, is sought after by the narrator through an attempt to escape the limits and laws which language imposes. Language cuts us off, or, as she says, it fragments us. Her only possibility is to try to escape the imposition of language as the only way to have access to the world. Though this will mean an almost total loss of self before her feeling of wholeness is restored, there is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>306</sup> p. 173. <sup>307</sup> p. 174. <sup>308</sup> p. 175.

no other solution. Her father's quest took him to death - perhaps her own quest will take her to a new life.

## 2.3 Revelation

The father's gift has, thus, been discovered and reasoned with, nevertheless, the protagonist feels it is almost urgent for her to find her mother's gift, since, as she says "the power from my father's intercession wasn't enough to protect me, it gave me only knowledge and there were more gods than his, his were the gods of the head ... Not only how to see but how to act "309. Thus, joining thought and action; observation, knowledge on the one hand, and direct interference in the world on the other, is at the basis of the narrator's quest. In a similar need to Lily Briscoe's as she completed her painting, the narrator feels she must reject expectations as to the adequate role she should have in society, ignore its demands that she behave consistently, that she be a socially well-behaved woman. Without the mother, the mother's gaze, the artist (and the woman) is, as Virginia Woolf had expressed, locked out and unwanted. She is alienated from herself by the very society which wishes to insert her in a role that is acceptable.

The insertion in society's rules and the price to be paid for accepting its dictums appears full-force to the protagonist at the same time she begins to restore her capacity to feel. She is reminded of the humiliation and pain she felt with her lover as she turns the "souvenir" ring she has on her left-hand finger. The ritual symbol of union between man and woman was to them simply an easier way to enter motels, to look at least "decent". Her memory of

him is god-like, unique - she felt constantly under his surveillance and critical gaze. She says, "for him I could have been anyone but for me he was unique, the first, that's where I learned ... he never wrote letters, all I had was the criticisms in red pencil he paperclipped to my drawings. C's and D's, he was an idealist"310. The truths of this older man, a professor, a mentor, are idolized, kept as relics of a wisdom she had considered superior to any she could ever achieve. The lover occupies this mentor position to perfection: he holds his truths to be above any questioning. She remembers his idealism led him to stating that "he didn't want our relationship as he called it to influence his aesthetic judgement. He didn't want our relationship to influence anything; it was to be kept separate from life. A certificate framed on the wall, his proof that he was still young"311. Life is alienated from love, or what was called love between them, while her existence was useful as proof of his eternity, it became his fountain of eternal youth.

The narrator's quest must take her to searching for her mother's legacy, the missing link which will restore the fullness of a gaze, the lack she has been led to believe in. As she watches Americans going off to the sacred place where she had dived, she feels empowered already, but not complete:

<sup>309</sup> p.183. <sup>310</sup> p. 178. <sup>311</sup> Ibid.

I had a talisman, my father had left me the guides, the man-animals and the maze of numbers.

It would be right for my mother to have left something for me also, a legacy. His was complicated, tangled, but hers would be simple as a hand, it would be final. I was not completed yet; there had to be a gift from each of them. 312

As language leaves her, she is able to perceive things through their forms and uses, looking at plants as possible means of survival, as an animal would, finding a sense in the body's connection to nature, its place in the cycle of life. Her mother's death is remembered, she was buried in the traditional form, in a coffin, which the protagonist knows her mother would have hated. She wishes she had stolen her mother from the hospital to let her die closer to the place she loved. In the image of her mother's death, she feels she could have recovered her earlier.

The scrapbooks hold the secret her mother had waiting for her. She barely needs any light to see what one of them contains; she recognizes its significance by touch, the one she was looking for is described as "heavier and warmer", it is the vessel of her mother's legacy: the gift is there:

...the gift itself was a loose page, the edge torn, the figures drawn in crayon. On the left was a woman with a round moon stomach: the baby

was sitting up inside her gazing out. Opposite her was a man with horns on his head like cow horns and a barbed tail.

The picture was mine, I had made it. The baby was myself before I was born, the man was God, I'd drawn him when my brother learned in the winter about the Devil and God, if the Devil was allowed a tail and horns, God needed them also, they were advantages.

That was what the pictures had meant then but their first meaning was lost now like the meanings of the rock paintings. They were my guides, she had saved them for me, pictographs, I had to read their new meaning with the help of the power ... First I had to immerse myself in the other language. 313

The vision of death which scared her beyond words when she found the truth about her father is abandoned here. Birth and rebirth are the codes to follow. God and the Devil are not on opposite sides - the inversion of symbols is necessary - what the Devil possesses are important instruments which any god should have as well. Her whole body is tingling with sensation as she prepares to immerse herself once more. However, the interpretation of the meanings of this guide she has found cannot be carried out with the use of the usual language, since that language has lost its meaning to her. Joe's chance for salvation, she feels, is only possible because there is a silence in him, "an absence of words" which can

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>312</sup> p.179.

enable him to overcome his old self, just as she is about to do now. The others, David and Anna, the Americans in general, are lost, "already turning into metal, skins galvanizing, heads congealing to brass knobs, components and intricate wires ripening inside"314. In other words, infertility, death and lack of feeling are predominant.

Sexuality takes on a different role, not one which needs words, frills and distractions for the protagonist. It is the body's language in its most basic form, transforming it into a center for possibilities. Joe, therefore, is the narrator's vessel for the future and her certainty as to what she should do appears before her. Her body indicates what she wants from him, yet she cannot have any physical contact with him inside the house: to her there are too many artificial interferences, the sheets, the smell of soap and wool. As they go outdoors, however, she must protect him from the forces she has already been made invulnerable to. Joe is described as walking through the woods blindly, stumbling, while she can swiftly find her way without needing any light. He is unprotected because he needs to grow more fur, according to the narrator, and he trembles in the cold night air. She speaks of her feet as being tentacled, her heartbeat can sense that of the rabbits, the sounds of animals are closely understood. When she chooses the spot to lie down on, the moon and the sun are on either side of her, correlated symbols of fertility, of the cylce of life, of initiation ceremonies. The moon rules over death transformed into life and life into death, thus its association to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>313</sup> p. 190. <sup>314</sup> p. 191.

Persephone who follows the same cycle in her comings and goings from earth to Hades. The sun contains a similar idea in the cylce of life/death/rebirth. The protagonist's rebirth is represented in her vision of both in the sky. She realizes Joe has adopted civilization's tendency to elaborate on the sexual act, romanticize it. She has no need for that and sees pleasure as redundant, since "the animals don't have pleasure"315. In her hurry she senses the past being rescued, and the possibility of renewal of life, forgiveness and the cleansing of guilt: "I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long, its eyes and teeth phosphorescent ..."316. In recovering her reproductive power she is able to face her guilt at having abandoned her child, having let it be killed by those around her who told her what they thought was best for her. The image of the lake is the enlargement of the image of her own womb, the phosphorescent fish she had encountered there come to her in the form of the fetus she is possibly generating inside her. She sees herself in the birthing process, one in which she will be the active subject, not letting others act upon her body. Like a cat having kittens, she creates an image of

> squatting on old newspapers in a corner alone, or on leaves, dry leaves ... the baby will slip out easily ... I'll lick it off and bite the cord, the blood returning to the ground where it belongs, the moon will be full, pulling.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>315</sup> p. 197. <sup>316</sup> Ibid.

In the morning I will be able to see it: it will be convered with shining fur, a god, I will never teach it any words.<sup>317</sup>

Hallucinatory though it may be, the narrator's vision enables her now to protect herself, to shed the vulnerability which before had made her become frozen to feeling.

The sadness she feels over her parents' absence is expressed in her crying out for them, willing them to come back. Her mother's jacket hangs loosely, echoing Mrs. Ramsay's shawl after her death, empty, forever smelling of leather and loss. The need for their return to her in any form possible is strong, but she must first go through a series of rituals that will allow her survival as a new human being, that will allow her to abandon the position of victim. The creation of rules follows a logic of its own, she listens to an inner voice that guides her along into what she should do. In the same way in which she released the images contained in the rolls of film, she begins to destroy all the images she had created as a child, the maps her father had made, her brother's drawings, the photographs that have held her mother locked in the album, image frozen; her own image, her father's books, everything she feels will lift the weight from her is broken or burned. The cleansing, therefore, is not only carried out through water, but also through fire, purification is a necessary step in her quest.

The final submersion she goes through entails a stripping off of her clothes again, as if she had shed a second skin. She lies down in the water, her hair spread around her,

<sup>317</sup> Ibid.

connected to the elements of sun, moon and water. She leaves the water and her clothes, conceived as a false body, in a symbolic rebirth in which she has achieved new perception about her potential. In this new vision, creation is a whole concept: she becomes fertile as an artist, fertile as a woman, fertile as a new human ready to act now that she has been able to reach this perception.

She has also understood the rule by which her dead parents abide: they cannot be where there are boundaries. Thus, she herself abandons the fenced in area of the house. Her transparency echoes the transparency of the picture her mother had kept for her, of the mother with the baby inside her belly: she visualizes herself as "ice-clear ... my bones and the child inside me showing through the green webs of my flesh, the ribs are shadows, the muscles jelly ..."

Her vision also leads her to seeing everything as liquid, fluid, not contained in words, identity not a question of being defined any longer by words. The multiplicity she expressed before is extended to her identity, not animal, not human, simply in process, a place, in Sherill Grace's words quoted by Judith McCombs, "where events happen, a place that is changed by events" As she sees herself in this way, the vision of her mother appears, standing before her, young, beautiful, hand stretched out, feeding the jays. Her mother looks directly at her, then through her, having sensed her daughter's fear,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>318</sup> p. 220.

McCombs, Judith. Atwood's fictive portraits of the artist: From victim to surfacer, from oracle to birth in Women's Studies, no. 1, 1986, p. 83.

knowing that "something is there (though) she can't quite see it"320. The courage which is in the protagonist arises as she faces the vision of her father, standing by the fence of the house, desiring to enter, desiring for reparation. However, her vision is transformed: what she sees as she looks more closely is not her father anymore but "the thing you meet when you've stayed here too long alone"321. The figure of a wolf, yellow eyes, is that of her father, what he has become to her. She is not frightened, since it does not threaten her anymore. Having seen madness at such close range, she feels strengthened, not destroyed.

The final vision of her rebirth is that of a fish jumping, her own fetus described as an idea of a fish which jumps from the lake. The text loses its grammaticality at this point, some loose phrases are placed as metaphors, ideas which burst forth without limits, without punctuation. As she returns to the location where she had seen her father and mother, the footsteps in the mud confirm to her what had taken place. As she gets closer, however, she realizes that those footsteps are nothing but her own prints. Her quest has closed full-cylce.

Thus, the novel places rescue through maternity, a sure presence that the future can be transformed, that there are options besides the ones society tends to offer. Women cannot have it all, this is the warning held on the one hand, to those who are torn between their art and their need for affection and families. The other warning that comes is contradictory, but just as perverse: one can have it all, so long as you stick to the perfection others demand

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>320</sup> p.221. <sup>321</sup> p. 227.

from you. Either way, Atwood's character senses there should be more options, and that maternity can escape the frozen picture society demands from women. As the woman protagonist makes her peace with her father and mother, she realizes the pain and sorrow they must have felt as they realized they could not keep their small paradise intact. Her mother's story is especially significant, since through her legacy the narrator realizes the importance she had in her life. She also comes to undersated her mother as having had a life beyond motherhood, though she was dedicated to protecting and raising her children. There were aspects in her mother's life, in her struggle to survive in the wilderness, which she only sensed had been essential - her lonely walks in the woods, her communication with nature - all these moments had vanished, but were her mother's legacy to the narrator as well.

The re-entrance into civilization is the next step she will take and she alludes to all those apsects of normal life which are at the basis of language: the definition of things through what they are not: "I'll have to live the usual way, defining them by their absence; and love by its failures, power by its loss, its renunciation"<sup>322</sup>. The feeling of absolute wholeness has left her, the gods which helped her through her passage are not present anymore, nor could they be. Nevertheless, she has discovered that her only means of survival is to hold on to a power within her that will not allow her to be a victim again. Though she knows a struggle to redefine her life is at hand, she sees no other alternative but to face this struggle, for now she has within her what she calls a time-traveler, a being who must be taught about the

future. It is necessary, therefore, that she live for it to live, and she has decided she will not allow any more death. More than this, she sees this new person as the first true human. Her life is possible once more because of this, her art can recover its importance to her outside the expected conventions. Joe's appearance on the island again, looking for her, calling out her unrevealed name, present another challenge to the narrator. She sees a possibility in him, another half-formed creature which needs to be trusted. He is not an American, at any rate, does not take on the domineering attitude which comes so easily for the American. Trust to her has taken on a new form, not dependent on the word love anymore, thus, she feels true renewal can occur. As she looks at his figure from the distance, hiding behind a tree, one wonders if she will go forward. The final moment is ambiguous, deliberately so, perhaps, but it offers a revelation: one's eyes must be wide open to reality. From there one can be whole and act upon the future.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>322</sup> p. 231.

## CONCLUSION

Virginia Woolf's <u>To the Lighthouse</u>, Sylvia Plath's <u>The Bell Jar</u> and Margaret Atwood's <u>Surfacing</u> initially present a common core in terms of subject: the three deal with the trajectory of three different women characters, all involved with art as central to their sense of identity, all facing moments of self-doubt in terms of their relationship to their artistic work which were made evident in varying degrees of mental change and/or breakdown, all of them discovering the necessity of redefining and recovering the role of other women, mother-figures or actual biological mothers, in their lives.

The three characters - Lily, in <u>To the Lighthouse</u>, Esther, in <u>The Bell Jar</u>, and the unnamed protagonist of <u>Surfacing</u> - are all in search of a way out of the stagnated, frozen or stiffling position they find themselves in the context of their society. The fact that they belong to three different historical moments is a crucial factor. Lily's place at the beginning of the century reflects the common notions of what expectations of women artists were at that time. Her choice for art as a locus of pleasure and creative potential, while disregarding the possibility of achieving this satisfaction through marriage and family life, reflects the times. She is expressing the utopic potential of the New Woman in Victorian society to overcome society's rules, but the irony at play is that this is done only by complying to the sentence given to women who defied the standard: if it were absolutely necessary, for

whatever reason, to be drawn out of the private sphere of the home (and it had become more and more a necessity for many women), especially if the need derived from a creative potential that yearned for an outlet, then so be it, but there was a choice to be made. A woman's personal life must often be sacrificed in order for her artistic, professional growth to occur. Thus, Lily Briscoe makes her choice and, in doing so, finds a way to join thought and action which, though contrasting with Mrs. Ramsay's similar intent inside the domestic circle, is able to satisfy her need for unity. It is, in any case, through Mrs. Ramsay's inspiring figure as mother, wife, housewife and woman, that Lily feels enabled to bring the many fragmented parts of her vision together.

Esther Greenwood's social and historical context is quite different from that of Lily's, nevertheless, she is at odds with the expectations in regards to her role as a young woman of the fifties, in much the same way as Lily is at odds with many of those general expectations of the beginning of the century. Esther must also define where she is going off to, however, the price to be paid seems to have escalated for young women over the 40 or so years which separate the two protagonists. In any case, the pressures placed on women have not subsided and the potential for change of the patterns of behavior and social mores in American society has never been a high point. Consequently, Esther's desire for realization through art as well as in family life seems to be blocked at every moment. Once more, the main character is at a crossroads in which it is significant to bring together not only thought and action, but body and mind, all of the very contradictory feelings Esther has of herself.

Severed from authentically engaging in experiences which mark any woman's life, such as sexuality and childbirth, discouraged from finding any real outlet for creative potential, the young woman of the fifties has been placed as an outsider in relation to those elements which can define her and help her grow. Thus, the roles Esther is expected to play constrict her vision of unity, while her sense of self is, even in the final instances of the novel, frail and tentative. Once again, it is the example of other women, serving as mother-figures or doubles, that plays a special role in Esther's development. Ironically, this is the only novel in which the biological mother of the character is alive and present. However, the presence of Mrs. Greenwood is not an enabling force or inspiration for her daughter but, on the contrary, sets Esther off on a search for a replacement, or perhaps, several replacements.

The basic problem with Esther's mother is not that she does not function outside of the context of the society in which she lives, for who does, but that she depends totally on the dominant culture's final word and in pre-set rules in order to act. It is also this final word by which she judges her daughter's capacities and role in society. This is possibly the reason why the final solution seems so ambiguous and we are left with the sensation that Esther's "cure" is not convincing. Esther's lack of support from her mother leads her to basically finding this support in the figure of her psychiatric doctor, Dr. Nolan, who is seen as role-model, an example to be followed. Her interest in Esther's feelings are authentic, but at times, she seems to be giving Esther the unreal hope of the modern woman who can have it all, as long as her potential lies inside the accepted norms of the time. Thus, the apparent

freedom Esther feels at the end of the novel is uneasily counterbalanced by doubt. This doubt will echo the American middle-class woman's struggle in the sixties. To be inserted in society in its capitalistic form of development is the general goal, not the real discussion of how changes in this society could take place in order for different social/cultural groups to legitimize their positions. Thus, the contradictions, gaps and small cracks inside the otherwise smooth ways things are run, are kept under check. The Bell Jar represents this well, as Esther struggles to deal with the issues of her time.

The context of <u>Surfacing</u> can be seen as the temporary culmination of a period of unrest. Since Canada is the background of this novel, the themes go beyond the struggle against male domination, or as an individual's definition of herself in the general context of patriarchy. It is the struggle not only of women which comes up in <u>Surfacing</u>, but the deep implications this struggle has in regards to the issue of American domination, of the corrosion of our natural environment, of the lack of new and unifying roles for women and men in a society which is losing its backbone. Thus, the narrator in <u>Surfacing</u> expresses how that destruction and fragmentation in the environment is reflected in and reflects the same fragmentation of the family and the individual, creatively and in personal relationships. This sense of falling apart is represented especially well in the protagonist's self image, of disconnected body and head. It is also represented, as with Esther Greenwood, in the growing difficulty of using known language to define herself and the world around her. The image of the mother this character in <u>Surfacing</u> has lost years ago to disease, comes up at

first underlying the search she undertakes to find her father. It is, as with the other novels, especially <u>To the Lighthouse</u>, through a need for a mother's legacy, that the main character is empowered to find her way in the world.

Language is expressed, in the three novels, as presenting growing problems for the characters. Lily's sensation of the wonder and the simplicity of words reflect the actual barrier and complexity they present in face of the ideal of plurality and innovation that Woolf herself spoke of, in the elaboration of art and, for women, in creating a language of one's own. For Esther, silence, in other words, lack of words or communication, present two sides, a form of resistence and a risk at the same time. Often, Esther resists others attempts to bring her under the pressure of their will by remaining silent. However, this silence ends up turning against her, as she often feels powerless to respond, or suffers physical abuse, or feels the unfamiliarity of words, as if they could not in any way help her overcome her difficulties. To a certain extent, Esther reflects Plath's own awareness of the ambiguities that surround her in society and in herself. Her poetry was precisely an expression of this angst and, at the same time, of her ironic vision. The same unfamiliarity is a feeling of the protagonist in Surfacing, whose gradual distance from words is the only way she can actually feel empowered. Though it characterizes her mental breakdown, it does not carry the negative connotation spelled out in The Bell Jar. The process of mental decline in both novels is a necessary step for recovery of self, however, Surfacing, perhaps due to the lack of intrusion of the outside world in the process of recovery, seems to present a much more

defined result, as if the protagonist were demonstrating greater control of the future. Thus, Atwood's character is not torn by ambiguities by the end of the narrative - she expresses a combination between thought and action which is seen in Atwood's work and life as well.

Thus, the Demeter/Persephone myth take on similar representations in the novels, with the heroine doubling as Demeter in the search for the gaze of the other woman, and Persephone in her passage through symbolic death and rebirth because of a mother's power to bring inspiration. The metaphoric rebirth of the characters is expressed in similar terms, as well, with references to the fluid, liquid elements in the rebirth, to the fragmentary, divided feeling of self evoked in images of animals dead either in bottles or out in the open, to the references to the closeness between love and death, to the vision presented in the three novels of the traditional marriage as possibly stagnating and limiting. The three point to ways out at different levels, either through self realization in art, through a recovery of self-worth or in the possibility of realization in both art and love, especially in the last novel, Surfacing, in which a child presents itself as another source for potential growth and promise for the future.

The protagonists of Woolf, Plath and Atwood also enact passages through water, which brings in it a revival of feelings long lost or forgotten, occluded by time, by the failure of memory. Either in the form of baths, of suicide attempts, of swims and dives in cold lakes, the main characters are constantly tying their memories of the past together through their experiences in water and around water. Lily's memory of Mrs. Ramsay's unifying power, for

instance, comes to her with the image of the woman on the beach, an almost concrete picture which brings her immediate joy. Esther's fragmented moments of the past are sewn together and enable a complete picture to form, while the suicide attempt evokes sensations of being wrapped up inside a mother's womb and of being brought back to life. Atwood's protagonist goes through several of these passages in water, until she peels away any form of protection, remaining open to the elements that surround her. This is the ultimate unity found in the novel and reveals the image of the mother and her legacy.

Narrative and ideology are revealed in their close connection in the stories analyzed. The search for the mother is at the core of these stories, it is the underlying and most significant myth these narratives offer in a renewed fashion. The Demeter and Persephone myth enables us to see narrative in a new light, enables female readers to see themselves reflected in a position other than that of the object. In this sense, the Oedipus narrative does not represent "everyman's passage into adult life", since it is a narrative which reflects only one side of the story. The myth of Demeter and Persephone, therefore, permits a renewal of positions and of the search for and passage into a new life.

The historical importance of the recovery of women's stories is made evident: the contexts in which the three narratives occur are pointed out because they function as background to a concern expressed explicitly, for instance, by Woolf and Plath: both at the beginning of the century and during the fifties, the authors are dealing with changes in society in which women, especially artists, are involved or, at least, should be involved. In

addition, the authors reveal the necessity of looking back and finding women artists who came before them as groundbreakers, besides the need for the creation of a network of women who could echo common or similar goals and concerns. Atwood is equally involved in the political and social events of her time and place and to her the issue of the writer's responsibility in regards to her work and what effects it can have is crucial.

Thus, these texts, while based on a common ground, inscribe a metanarrative which empowers women as a group, giving them a stronghold that can stand against the hegemonic traditional metanarrative that is culturally and historically given. It is in this sense that these narratives contribute socially, since they bring to light otherwise ignored stories and views of the world.

The mother-daughter bond can be read in different ways in the novels analyzed. The ritual of the daughter's search for identity, the ritual of fertilization and that of the cycle of life are reactualized in the narratives of Woolf, Plath and Atwood, however, the form in which the myth is shown varies. Woolf's daughter and mother represent art and its function in renovation, not only of women's roles in society, but also in its possibility of renewal in a world torn by war and greed, by a mode of life which distanced itself more and more from the values of life and beauty. In a utopic view, the cycle of life can go on in art, death and birth are brought together in this renewed vision represented in Lily's painting. Mrs. Ramsay's position is that of a link for all those changes taking place in Europe especially, for middle class, white, educated women, a link which Lily takes on and pursues in a completely

different form. Lily is, then, the woman of the future, a bridge between Victorian traditionalism and all the aspects of this traditionalism which needed to be left behind and the expectations for the future. A compromise is made in Lily's own terms, as she adopts some of Mrs. Ramsay's nurturing aspects, while finding a new role as an artist. Thus, she is the daughter that assumes the androgynous ideal which Woolf had referred to, though this position cannot be seen in the conventional form by which one usually understands the term, but as a mediation between two different ways of seeing the world. Mrs. Ramsay also offers possibilities that go beyond the maternal role, though they are not defined specifically. Her moments of being represent aspects which cannot be inscribed in the maternal, in her nurturing role. She is, at these moments, nurturer of herself, moving into the recesses of her own mind. The mother, thus, moves beyond this one and only position and becomes both mother and daughter, woman, friend, lover of others and of herself. To Lily, this is an enabling force which allows her to take one step ahead.

To Plath's representation of the myth one must add the context of the times and the individual characteristics of Esther Greenwood as well. She is a member of a society which presents more repressive, suffocating and pragmatic aspects, and which offers few outlets not only to women, but to all individuals who express a need and desire to stand out or differ. The mother/daughter bond is trapped in the conventional roles of the time, since neither mother nor daughter can find a source of power in each other. Mrs. Greenwood's role is apparently played out to perfection: she is *the* mother, the portrayal presented of her

by the narrator is ironic and cutting. Thus, because the characters of Esther and her mother are shown to be tied down to the expectations of their time (even if Esther is seen as rebelling against them), the novel remains somewhat unresolved to the very end. Rebellion is not sublimated into art because the insecurities of the protagonist cannot allow her to do that. Besides, there is a lack of an authentic positive female figure which can enable her to have a vision of possibilities. Thus, depression and attempts at suicide are ways for selfexpression. Insanity is a message that requires a response and a sign of the dilemma of women who would try to combine art and personal life. The fragmentation of these two aspects of life for women, proves to be destructive, and there seems to be little respite for the young woman dealing with these difficulties. The solution in The Bell Jar seems to point towards putting Esther back on the path to recovery by giving her self- esteem a boost and by treating her depression before it destroys her, but there is very little fresh air to breathe in. The mother is submitted to the dominant culture, she is not shown as having the instruments to go beyond the traditional mother role given to her. The mother-figure of Dr. Nolan apparently offers some way out (she is a young woman, professional), but her message is dubious: can a woman have it all? Only inside the system at hand? However, the system at hand offers few options. The vicious circle goes on. There is, after all, Plath's own story to deal with here, and her own position as author, mother and wife. The attempt made to prove she could have it all and be perfect was ultimately destructive for the poet. The underlying narrative in this case is historical, individual, biological and social. In regards to

the work of fiction, the idea is that the balance between life and death is precarious, and can easily be tipped in a destructive direction. The daughter is not able to find refuge in a mother's firm and loving gaze, and the ambiguities of the novel reflect this. One can sense that the fifties is portrayed as a time that finds women's control over life, over birth and over their own identity weakened. Ironically, the sixties would prove to be the moment of eruption of many of the claims women had staked for so long, at least, in practical terms: birth control, abortion, equal rights, etc. would be the banners of many groups of women during those controversial years.

The protagonist in <u>Surfacing</u> has the benefit and carries the cross of the cultural revolution that had taken place throughout the 60s and went on in the 70s. The theories of feminism were in full growth, thus the messages were clear: equality needed to be made as important as anything else. Birth control, possibility of abortions, live-in lovers, careers for women and general freedom for all has, however, turned sour in the workings of this novel.

The narrator begins with almost a sense of betrayal, so to speak, with the representation of the protagonist's selling out to the commercialism and to the individualism of her times. Responsibility as an artist and as a woman are put aside into a forgotten past along with the Canadian home in the wilderness and the family ties left behind. Having no other female figure to look up to (or even to look back to, initially), the protagonist submits to the dictums of her older, more experienced professor-lover. However, as recovery of the mother's memory and legacy are obtained, this protagonist is led to feel a potential which

had been forgotten. The situation of the white, middle-class university woman has certainly changed from that of the first two novels, but the figure of Anna, the friend, serves as a reminder of how women have crystalized into other forms. The woman as defined by man's gaze is present in Anna, while the narrative portrays in the protagonist a break with the rules of this crystalization as a form to survive and bring the many fragmented parts of the self together. In this aspect, the figure of the mother is essential. She is seen as being a mother associated to secrets, silences and solitary walks in the woods in which her children were not included. She is associated to bird-images as well - in life, as being in close contact with them and with the natural environment; in death as having suffered much more than her fair share, of having been captured in hospital rooms, drugged and controlled. The symbolic rebirth of the protagonist brings the mother back from the dead as well, rejuventated and full of promise. The workings of the myth in Atwood are the most promising in terms of possibilities: fertility is given importance to, art is also renewed, at least the potential is there, and the mother and daughter can find life in each other and in the possibiliy of the cycle of life. There is a utopic vision here as well, one which attempts to join art and life under the same umbrella in completely new terms, outside the phallocentric system and all its rules.

Thus, branching out from the mother, one can find images of women that rewrite the expected cultural representations of the mother, the daughter, the friend and the lover. In this way, these authors depict the potential for change in women's roles, without considering

the society and culture one has become accustomed to as the only norm. These narratives are actualizations of the Demeter and Persephone myth, illuminating issues regarding the various and multiple roles that are open for women

The reading of these narratives has also allowed one to review to what extent theory can be brought to new levels of study. It is certain that the contributions of feminist critiques to the discussion of the unitary subject of Western culture is unquestionable, and one of the greatest effects of feminist theory has been in its attempts to politically trace the lines of postmodern thought. This is emphasized by Rosemary Hennessy when she states that many feminist discourses stand at the forefront of discussions on postmodernism by making these more politically-oriented. She goes on to say:

(There have been) ways in which feminism can criticize and extend postmodernism - by asserting the primacy of social criticism and by rewriting postmodernism's attention to signification in order to attend to the ways social difference is historically and hierarchically constructed. Resistance postmodernism insists that social totalities like patriarchy and racism do continue to structure our lives and for this reason critical analyses cannot afford to turn away from them.<sup>323</sup>

Therefore, it is in the political and historical arena that a movement and a theory can find solid ground for establishing debate and possible change in standards which are considered

natural and unchanging. In this perspective, deconstruction and the several theories of feminism that revise theoretical models in their imbrication with norms defy the so-called unchangeable elements in several areas of knowledge and discourse. The idea that texts are constructed, that subjects are constructed as well, is crucial at this point in our studies of literature, culture and narrative in general.

In this sense, the study of Freud's theory must be above all placed within a historical vision, in the specific context of the XIX century and beginnings of the XX century, within the patriarchal boundaries which characterized the time and Freud himself, within the scope of his practice whose object of study were white, European, generally middle-class individuals. The effects of psychoanalysis are tremendous, as well as its contributions. One cannot deny the powerful ripples it caused in the way our culture has viewed the subject, from centered and in control as it was believed to be, to that of the subject who, possessing an unconscious, could not be totally and absolutely in control of his/her acts. On the other hand, its effect also extended to our views on sexuality, on the relations in the family circle and in society at large. These effects can be seen in both their positive and negative aspects. Though psychoanalysis aimed at studying the human psyche, the unconscious, as well as disorders pertaining to the unconscious, it also aimed at controlling the disruptive effects of this unconscious. If one considers Esther Greenwood's example, her experience under

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>323</sup> Hennessey, Rosemary. <u>Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse</u>, Routledge, New York, 1993, p. 3

treatment reflects the tendency, especially in the U.S, to control divergent behaviors. Her electroshock treatments, the medication she took, the institutionalization were all meant to direct her back to a pattern of behavior that would be acceptable in that society.

The theories that followed in psychoanalysis and beyond, especially feminist readings of Freud and Lacan, revealed some of the workings of this form of knowledge: that its narrative was that of patriarchy, that it focused on the middle class Western family, that it studied sexuality in terms of the individual, especially the male and apart from the associations of sexuality with changes in historical terms. Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous departed from the more traditional psychoanalytic basis and opened discussions on the subject, calling our attention to the exclusion of the female subject from theory, from texts, pointing to the blind spots or gaps which were formed by the avoidance of these discussions.

The contribution of these scholars lies in the emphasis given to the maternal aspects in an individual's development, to the critical view of the functionings of a male-oriented form of knowledge. The importance given to the question of difference reinforces these ideas, and necessarily brings gender to the forefront. It became evident, nevertheless, in the analysis of the three novels that there are possibilities open which go beyond the maternal metaphor as a simple mirroring of the mother/daughter relationship grounded on the biological. Though they posit the capacity of the imaginary or semiotic of transforming language and narratives, placing the maternal, the pre-oedipic, as a site of change, these theories do not always take into account what can be seen in the narratives of Woolf, Plath and Atwood: that the

maternal is not the only site of change, that the identities taken on by women can and should be multiple and extend beyond the maternal - in any case, it is evident that the rescue of the image of the forgotten mother is a must if this movement towards multiple identities is to take place. This woman is, after all, not definable by one or two roles alone, but by whatever processes are at play in the construction of a number of roles. Domna Stanton affirms that especially Kristeva and Irigaray tend to warn women "against trying to 'rival [man] by constructing a logic of the feminine which would still take for its model the ontotheologic' "324, but they often find in the maternal, or in the adoption of some goddess (in place of God), the solution to the contradictions in knowledge. In other words, by merely replacing one figure for another, the opposition between male and female, between binary oppositions would not be broken and, once again, expectations and definitions related to women in society would crystallize. How is this seen in the novels analyzed? As one recalls, Woolf's narrative in To the Lighthouse is deconstructive of these binary oppositions in the way it portrays Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay's marriage, and in Lily's adoption of androgyny as a position of mediation and change for the times. On the other hand, for Esther in The Bell Jar, the ambiguities of the character's feelings for the women who surround her does not allow for a satisfactory solution to the dilemmas she faces. Atwood's protagonist is able to break down not only the barriers of cultural codes and expectations in regards to a woman's role, she

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>324</sup> Stanton, Domna C. Difference on Trial: A Critique of the Maternal Metaphor in Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva in The Poetics of Gender, Nancy Miller, ed., Columbia U. Press, New York, 1986, p.162.

allows herself to recover creative potential as a woman (her fertility rite) and as an artist (she rescues the memory of whom she wanted to be as an artist). Her valorization of past and present experiences, allied to the necessity of redefining herself brings with it transformation and rebirth.

Thus, the exposition of the mother/daughter bond serves a useful and liberating purpose for the validation of voices and experiences that have long been supressed or forgotten. As a vision towards the future, the maternal can indicate a way out without, however, necessarily bringing along a fixed representation which runs the risk of falling into the sameness of the dominant discoursive practice.

Therefore, the maternal is a starting point which enables a vision of female difference apart from that which is established between man and woman. It indicates possible directions for studying differences between women and within women, a point made very clear by de Lauretis and Braidotti. When Stanton, then, points towards the replacement of the maternal metaphor for the metonymic practice, she reinforces de Lauretis and Braidotti's ideas. To Stanton, metonymy opens to indefinite explorations of other female functions which have not been approached yet, as well as placing feminist practice on a historical, context-bound basis. In this form, identity is a locus of action, a way for positioning onself in face of the seemingly immutable.

The experiences we have are part and parcel of whom we are, as much as our reflexive capacity to deal with those experiences. Narratives which represent this are enabling in the

sense that they construct meanings about women's lives without attempting to dictate modes of being or freezing individual women into pre-determined values. At the same time, these narratives point towards the future, towards a vision (better yet, visions) which enable women to push forward and act positively.

Therefore, rereading an old story is a crucial prerequisite for a new story to emerge. Hopefully, one that will lead to others.

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