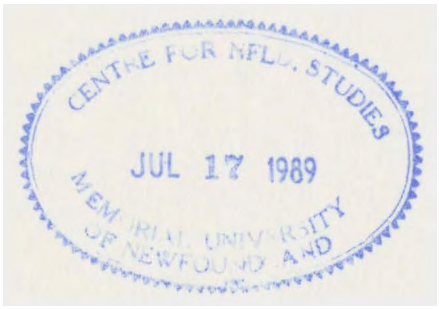
PATTERN AND IMAGE IN THE CONTEMPORARY FEMALE BILDUNGSROMAN

ANNE MARIE BUCKINGHAM


CENTRE FOR NFLD. STUDIES
JUL 17 1989
MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY
OF NEWFOUNDLAND

PATTERN AND IMAGE IN THE CONTEMPORARY FEMALE BILDUNGSROMAN

BY

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A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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July 1987

St. John's Newfoundland

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine pattern and image in the contemporary female Bildungsroman and to discover the reasons for the presence of the images of in/visibility and space in the novels. These novels include Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle (1976), Marilyn French's The Women's Room (1977), Doris Lessing's The Summer Before the Dark (1973), Alice Munro's Lives of Girls and Women (1971), Marge Piercey's Braided Lives (1981), and Verena Stefan's Shedding (1978).

In/visibility and objectification in the contemporary female Bildungsroman is predicated on the role of the heroine in patriarchal society. These images have removed her from her essential self and it is necessary for her to confront her own conditioning which has espoused the perception of herself as "object" and Other, before she can even embark on her movement to Bildung, much less achieve it. This study probes the areas of the heroines' experience which have resulted in such alienation from self.

Spatial imagery in these novels demonstrates that the heroines of contemporary female Bildungsromane are removed from self because they are not perceived as equal to men, and, further, are not viewed as active participants in their societies. Constriction exists at every level of growth -- physical, emotional, intellectual and moral. Each protagonist is defined by her perceived role in society. In

order for the heroine to begin her quest for identity, she must reclaim space that has been appropriated from her, and more importantly, proclaim that space valid. Positive images of space in the novels occur primarily when the heroine has reached Bildung; this space is a metaphor for the growth of self.

Narrative and language are used by authors of contemporary female Bildungsromane to attempt to transcend the stifling and limited choices allowed their heroines. The subversion and violation of form and content in these novels indicate that, even as the heroines lead an oppressed existence, transition is imbedded in the text itself. The circularity of the text and feminist ideology serve as paradigms for the positive development that is taking place. The deconstruction and questioning of language that has oppressed women is another strategy that is used as narrative subversion in the novels.

Finally, these novels indicate that the contemporary female Bildungsroman is a complicated sub-genre of the novel, one which stresses transition and change at every level. It succeeds in demonstrating a wider range of choices for heroines of contemporary novels, who work out their own individual definitions of Bildung.

ISBN 0-315-43319-1

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Roberta Buchanan, of the English Department, for her guidance, patience and insight in the preparation of this thesis. Without her help, it would not have been possible.

The research for this study has been made possible by financial assistance from the University, and I am grateful to the University and the Dean of Graduate Studies for this opportunity.

Thanks must also be extended to Dr. Patrick O'Flaherty for his kind intervention in many areas, and to Jeffrey Bursey, who provided me with much material and interesting discussion on my research.

I am also deeply indebted to my grandmother, Margaret Battcock, for her prayers, and to my uncle, Adrian Battcock, for his great support. Special thanks to my mother, Carmel Buckingham, for her warmth and encouragement throughout my period of study.

Last but not least, much thanks must go to Linda Kirby of the Folklore Department, who patiently and assiduously typed this manuscript, and without whose help, this thesis would not have been completed.

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Introduction

Most critics date the Bildungsroman from the time of Goethe's Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship. It has been termed a "novel of apprenticeship" or a "novel of development". The novel's protagonist moves through a series of experiences and comes to understand more clearly his/her self and place in the world. His or her "place in the world" is usually associated with the society in which the protagonist lives; he/she must come to recognize and adapt to social mores to achieve an equilibrium.

M.H. Abrams defines the Bildungsroman as "the development of the protagonist's mind and character as he passes from childhood through varied experiences and usually through a spiritual crisis into maturity and the recognition of his identity and role in the world" (Abrams 112-113).

Holman's definition, however, ascribes a decisively male sub-text to the genre:

> [A Bildungsroman is] a novel which recounts the youth and young manhood of a sensitive protagonist who is attempting to learn the nature of the world, discover its meaning and pattern, and acquire a philosophy of life and "the art of living." (Holman 39)

Standard examples of male Bildungsromane usually cited by critics include Goethe's Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship, Mann's The Magic Mountain, Dickens' David Copperfield, Butler's The Way of All Flesh, Joyce's The

Portrait of the Artist, Maugham's Of Human Bondage, and Wolfe's Look Homeward Angel.

The Bildungsroman embodies the Goethean model of organic growth, which is cumulative, gradual and total (Abel, Hirsch and Langland 5).

> Originating in the Idealist tradition of the Enlightenment, with its belief in human perfectibility and historical progress, this understanding of human growth assumes the possibility of human achievement and social integration...Clearly, successful Bildung requires the existence of a social context that will facilitate the unfolding of inner capacities, leading the young person from ignorance and innocence to wisdom and maturity. (Abel, Hirsch and Langland 5-6)

Northrop Frye terms the Bildungsroman as "human character as it manifests itself in society" (Frye 308). Implicit in such a definition is the assumption that the interests of the individual and the various impositions of society must somehow be resolved. The "successful" Bildungsroman is one in which the protagonist comes to realize his/her selfhood and is still able to live within the strictures of society. The individual's development is portrayed in diverse ways throughout the novel; each facet of the person is explored, revealing the physical, emotional, intellectual and moral self.

In Genre, Marianne Hirsch describes a model of the Bildungsroman:

> A generic definition of the novel of formation, like Guillén's definition of the picaresque, can do no more than to establish a central norm against which the individual work can be measured; it serves its purpose if it is flexible enough to account for national and historical change and narrow enough to remain critically useful. (Hirsch 296)

The "novel of formation" deals with one central character, a Figurenroman. In Hirsch's view, this character is essentially passive: "Unable to control his destiny actively, he is someone who gives shape to events without actually causing them" (Hirsch 296-297). Constructing a generic model of the Bildungsroman, Hirsch allows flexibility in the term without the necessity of applying her term to every novel studied. Similarly, she describes the essential aspects of the Bildungsroman without acclaiming any one novel as paradigm.

Hirsch elucidates the characteristics of this model. The Bildungsroman is both a biographical and social novel; society is viewed as the antagonist in the "novel of formation" and acts as an index of experience. It is, therefore, the conflict between a representative individual and the interests of society that is explored, although this experience is related in terms of that individual, the protagonist.

The protagonist's growth as an individual is gradual as he/she searches for a meaningful existence within the strictures of society. The character's confrontation with

these strictures is accompanied by his/her perception of such obstacles and his/her ability to come to terms with them (Hirsch 297-298). The chronological plot line generally works well as it simultaneously delineates the protagonist's inward journey:

> Growth is a gradual process consisting of a number of encounters between subjective needs and an unbending social order. Since it entails the consideration of various alternatives, the growth process necessitates errors and the pursuit of false leads. (Hirsch 298)

The Bildungsroman may be regarded as a novel concerned with the quest for self in the life of the individual, and, as Hirsch extrapolates: "Its projected resolution is an accommodation to the existing society. While each protagonist has the choice of accepting or rejecting this projected resolution, each novel ends with a precise stand on his part, with his assessment of himself and his place in society" (Hirsch 298).

The narrative point of view, whether in first or third person, is usually characterized by a tone of distinct irony and distance from the protagonist (Hirsch 298). Finally, the Bildungsroman is perceived by Hirsch as a didactic novel, one which lends knowledge to the reader through a vivid portrayal of the protagonist's experience (Hirsch 298).

The most recent study on the traditional male Bildungsroman is Jerome Buckley's Season of Youth. In most

studies on the "novel of development", the protagonist and the terms in which he/she is described are strikingly male-oriented (Abel, Hirsch, and Langland 7). Critics have imposed male values upon the Bildungsroman. This is commented on in The Voyage In:

> In Season of Youth, Buckley does consider the development of one heroine. A chapter on The Mill on the Floss entitled "A Double Life" subsumes Maggie Tulliver's development to that of the symbiotic brother-sister pair. Neglecting the social conditions that thwart Maggie's emergence, Buckley attributes her failure to become self-determining to hereditary weakness in her personality and to artistic flaws that stem from Eliot's alleged overidentification with her protagonist. Viewed, however, in the context of nineteenth-century social possibilities, Maggie's death is a logical and artistically valid consequence of her situation. (Abel, Hirsch and Langland 9)

The male Bildungsroman is thought to have come to an "absolute end", according to David H. Miles, because the genre has been exploited to its limits by male authors. Miles believes that Grass's The Tin Drum is the last male Bildungsroman because it features a plot which is parodic and a protagonist who is an antihero. It has been argued, however, that

> While the Bildungsroman has played out its possibilities for males, female versions of the genre still offer a vital form...Although the primary assumption underlying the Bildungsroman -- the evolution of a coherent self -- has come under attack in modernist and avant-garde fiction, this assumption remains cogent for women writers who now for the first time find themselves in a world

> increasingly responsive to their needs. (Abel, Hirsch and Langland 13)

As many critics have noted, the Bildungsroman usually describes the development of the protagonist from childhood to early adulthood, when some resolution between the individual and society occurs. However, in many female Bildungsromane, the development of self occurs only after the social milieu of the protagonist alters, as through marriage. Kate Chopin's The Awakening is clearly marked as an example of this Bildungsroman; it is only when the heroine's duties as a mother and wife are forcefully stressed by society that the need for individual development is sparked within her.

The Bildungsroman can be cited, then, as a genre which still allows a great deal of flexibility for writers who create female protagonists who have yet to come to terms with their society and reach satisfactory resolutions within that society.

The novels that will be examined in this study include Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle (1976), Marilyn French's The Women's Room (1977), Doris Lessing's The Summer Before the Dark (1973), Alice Munro's Lives of Girls and Women (1971), Marge Piecey's Braided Lives (1982) and Verena Stefan's Shedding (1978).

Chosen from Canadian, American, British and German examples, these novels depict a variety of female

experience, from the first stirring of adolescence (Lives of Girls and Women) to the onset of menopause (The Summer Before the Dark). While some are overtly feminist (The Women's Room and Braided Lives) others are not (Lady Oracle). Verena Stefan's Shedding, a German novel in English translation, was chosen because of its experimental style of language and the development of écriture féminine, which are revolutionary factors in modern women writers of female Bildungsromane.

Rising out of the neo-feminism of the 1970's and 1980's, these novels provide a fresh perspective on the traditional "novel of development" and new insights into contingent factors which affect the heroine's journey to Bildung.

Chapter 1

Seeking Passage to the Self: In/visibility and Objectification in the Contemporary Female *Bildungsroman*

With what real, invented, imagined words should we treat this body? This body, you said? The only body I know is the moored-body, the buoy, precious to sailors. Berth, anchor. With what ink should we conjure it up? In the depths of the sea they let it slide down. Immobility achieved at last, reunion. Woman's body ought to be thus at rest. Buried. Let us once more bury the moored-body there. Let us once more take refuge in the sea-womb. There, in the hollow of wave and belly. In a ball. In stone. In the family way. In the stone family of saints. Glass ball. Slow swell. And already there's the nausea of the wave. Swirl and sway. Remorse. Re-moored. Re-mort. At the heart of this surf of salt and blood. Precious and bitter waters. Depths. (Bosco 44)

Because traditional Bildung involves compromise with a society which does not recognize women as full human beings, it is difficult for a heroine of this sub-genre to achieve growth. The contemporary female Bildungsroman is inundated with images of in/visibility and objectification. Choice becomes arbitrary when the woman's own perception is deemed less valuable than the state of "being perceived".

Images of in/visibility and objectification in the novels operate under forces which are symptomatic of the societies in which the heroines live. The patriarchal bias against self-determination in women (frequently reinforced and/or rewarded) may become rooted in the protagonist's own thinking. Many of the women in these novels have become reflections of this external perception, mirroring society's attitudes, stereotypes, social mores and patriarchal impositions. If this external perception is psychologically incorporated, it may prove detrimental to the heroine's self-development.

The heroines of contemporary Bildungsroman have difficulty in recognizing a cogent self. They cannot see themselves clearly -- examining, evaluating and defining experience. They have been taught to depend on external perceptions of themselves. In many cases, success is postponed because the heroine is dependent upon the external representation of her self to gain validation. Attention which is focussed primarily on the physical self leaves

other areas of self suspended. Emotional and intellectual needs are neglected until the heroine comes to realize that her eyes alone may allow focus and certainty.

Much remains ambiguous and paradoxical in the novels, and it is impossible to discuss images of visibility and objectification without at the same time discussing images of invisibility. In most cases in this study, when a heroine feels invisible, she is not receiving affirmation of her physical being from others, and, therefore, feels nonexistent. When a protagonist feels visible, she notes that her physical existence is being acknowledged by others. Images of objectification in the novels seem to occur when women are valued primarily for their physical attractiveness so that they are seen as objects rather than full human beings.

Contemporary French feminist theory has focussed on the experience of woman as Other; set apart from the central social structure, her experience is peripheral and secondary. As a result, the Other is placed outside the realm of human speech: "To internalize Otherness is almost definitionally to be unable to speak in the language of the self...To experience being an Other is often to feel so schizophrenically torn, that not even a clandestinely authentic 'I' dares to speak" (Rabuzzi 176).

The internalization borne of this sense of deviancy may be destructive as it creates further parallels and

divisions. As Ruthven remarks: "The binary opposition between Self and Other manifests itself therefore in our value system as possession vs. lack, and becomes the generative matrix for a series of metaphors which constitute variations on the same theme (Ruthven 44). In this way, woman as Other inherits all of the characteristics which are opposite to those manifested in the male counterpart, who is considered Self. To his being strong, she would be weak, etc.

Objectification is a useful word for describing the externalization of Otherness, particularly as women are praised and valued for their physical appearance. An interesting study on women and the cinema has elucidated this:

> [In film] the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Mulvey 418)

For the protagonist in contemporary female Bildungsromane to both perceive and be perceived as Other is debilitating to the journey toward realization. For the heroine who embarks on self-quest to be cast as Other from the outset in a text which ostensibly chronicles a process of realization is both ironic and ludicrous. For heroes, as the traditional text has conveniently equated Self with a

male protagonist, this obstacle has been alleviated. The ambiguity of perception of the heroine as Other, as deviant and peripheral, illuminates the insecurity, the hesitation, the circularity of the text and the reason why many critics prefer to label Bildungsromane by women "failures" rather than, as Linda Howe has, "narratives of survival" (Howe, 177-184).

Even in a Bildungsroman of this century, men and women are treated differently in regard to education. In The Women's Room, the heroine Mira returns to college in middle age. Having just gone through a divorce, she becomes disoriented, confused and alienated in a place where she is surrounded by students who are years younger than her. On her first day at Cambridge, she recognizes that for her education is a privilege, not a right, in this patriarchal institution, and that, as a woman she would experience exclusion. This passage is strongly reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's treatise on education in A Room of One's Own. Mira thinks: "It was odd. Why? she wondered. Women were so unimportant anyway, why would anyone bother to keep them out?" (10). We are not told exactly what these places are, but the novel's title serves as an appropriate metaphor for both Mira's sense of restriction and her desperate need to find refuge in the washroom, a place for women. It is also striking that the word "Ladies" on the washroom door has been scrawled out, and that someone has roughly marked the

word "Women" over it, demonstrating the conscious desire to be viewed as equal while foregoing the inherent condescension of the term "Ladies".

In the corridor, Mira notices that in the ten minutes which have passed, the other students have dispersed. She thinks:

> It was these, that, passing her without seeing her, seeing her without looking at her, had driven her into hiding. For they had made her feel invisible. And when all you have is a visible surface, invisibility is death. (10)

Although Mira returns to scholarly life at an older age, she is unable to forget that she is a woman in a patriarchal institution. Mira, then, is forced to examine what she feels is alienating her: gender and age. The protagonist equates visibility in this context to visual response to her own being. She seeks an elusive assurance of her own existence and concludes that "Invisibility is death" (10).

This is not the complete saga of Mira's return to university. But occurring at the beginning of the novel, with its chronological place lying somewhere in the middle, it serves as a powerful reminder that a major obstacle facing a heroine of this genre is a marked lack of self-validation. Mira actually believes that her only valuable attribute is "a visible surface" (10). As she looks to

others for proof of her existence, she is then reduced to a mere response of approval or rejection in others' eyes.[1]

Images of in/visibility and objectification are dimensions of everyday life for the female in contemporary American society, like Mira of The Women's Room. Social conditioning is advocated through the media and consumer industries. In this way, a woman is taught to proclaim her being through the paraphernalia of popular culture. She becomes Other, a peripheral but necessary component of American life which reinforces the power structure. The more she becomes submerged in consumer-oriented society, the more she is viewed as a symbol of prestige and value, even while her role is impotent. As Mira reflects:

> She was living the American dream, she knew that, and she tried to get her mask on straight. She had her hair done at the right shop, and when they saw gray and advised dye, she let them dye it. She bought expensive three-piece knit suits; she had her nails manicured. She had a folder full of charge cards. (215)

The word "mask" in this passage connotes deception and illusion. The tone is fast-paced and the repetitive detailing of Mira's possessions and activities creates an atmosphere of conditioning and control. As Mira adopts her "mask" she also adjusts her mind to her role in society, ironically dubbed "the American dream" (215). Mira feels obligated to try to conform to the consumer society's view of what is attractive. She does not recognize this

early in the novel that the "American dream" is wholly superficial and contributes to self-doubt. Before she can achieve the integration of all aspects of self, the heroine must discard the banal conventionality of external perception, as such dupings of self are harmful to positive development. She must also transcend the images of ~~in/visibility and~~ objectification to even journey toward Bildung, much less achieve it. Despite convention, stereotype, patriarchal imposition and history itself, the self is the decisive factor in any movement at all. For a woman, such validation of existence has always come from her immediate physicality. It is not only, then, what a protagonist may be told by others about her positive characteristics, but that she feels compelled to decipher visual cues (from others' actions, gestures and looks toward her) to evaluate her self-worth.

As Mira discovers upon reflection, many women rarely have an autonomous sense of self. This is demonstrated in the way they look, move and act, not as if they were whole human beings, but as if they existed for a more worthy counterpart. (One can only infer that this counterpart is male). Mira moves forward because she recognizes herself in the women she sees. The language that she uses to describe the women she observes in the street reflects the way she acted with her husband, Norm, and indicates the levels of objectification that she can now perceive. Hips, arms and

necks are "borrowed pieces of porcelain" and "jewels that belonged to someone else", and movement was "...dictated by some outer music" (236). Women's actuality is strangely dependent: "Their bodies existed only in the eye and hand of the owner, even when he was not present" (236).

French transmutes objectification into the sexual politics of possession and female dependency, making it clear that the "American dream" is transparently a male one. The author also emphasizes that not only are women objectified, but that if their physical beings are unacknowledged, then they (women) feel nonexistent. As one writer notes:

> Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women, but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object -- and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (Berger 47)

The image of in/visibility necessarily incorporates a new dimension of realization. As education traditionally involves a compromise of self and society, another obstacle must yet be overcome by heroines of this genre. One critic writes that, "Of course, the hero of the education narrative will encounter problems, too, things like bullies, harsh discipline, lack of sympathy, poverty, hunger, lost love, and undeserved obscurity; little doubt exists that he will survive them to turn his experience into great Art" (Howe

177). But the heroine of the contemporary female Bildungsroman must resolve the dichotomy between objectification and self-realization in order to continue on her journey. In order to deal with the external world, she must gain passage to the Self.

In The Summer Before the Dark, Lessing's heroine moves through various stages of in/visibility. Kate Brown is given the opportunity to be alone for the summer as her family is away travelling. It is her first time alone since she was married twenty-five years earlier. She takes a position with a company called Global Foods as an interpreter, and later travels with a young man who eventually becomes her lover. In Spain, however, he becomes very ill, and she leaves him in the hands of capable people. Returning to London, Kate discovers that she has become afflicted with the same illness. She spends an indeterminate amount of time in bed, cared for around the clock by responsible hotel personnel. Finally she regains enough strength to be able to venture outside the hotel. By this time, however, she has lost a great deal of weight and no longer fits the image of the attractive middle-aged woman.

Lessing reveals gradually Kate's realization of her own worth in a society which values exteriors. Ironically, divested of her previous image, Kate is granted a vision which challenges her earlier perception of Self.

When she leaves the hotel, Kate enters a restaurant and sits down. However, she is ignored by the waitress and others. Unused to this treatment, Kate is overcome by feelings that are foreign to her: "She felt like a small child who has been told to sit in a corner and eat its food because it has been naughty, and then is forgotten. She was raging with emotions which stopped any rational thought" (188). Wanting to explore the phenomenon of in/visibility, Kate forces herself to confront what she sees as her questionable existence. Her movement into the street is an intense compulsion to present herself as visible. The confusion she feels at not being acknowledged is a direct affront to her person, and because of careful social conditioning, her femininity. But "Again, she might have been invisible" (198).

Still uncomprehending, Kate searches for the answer to her seeming invisibility. After she has gained some weight and feels healthier, Kate takes a room for the rest of the summer with a girl called Maureen. She borrows a dress from Maureen, makes herself reasonably attractive and goes out one evening. This time the response is different as Kate "walked home through a summer Sunday dusk, among the possibilities offered by men's eyes" (205). Kate becomes aware that society is founded on conditions of expectation and conformity to certain prescribed patterns. Close to understanding this, the heroine decides to manipulate the

external variables to test her hypothesis. Walking down a street past a construction crew:

> Kate realized that she was standing still, staring; had been for some minutes. The men took no notice of her.
>
> The fact that they didn't suddenly made her angry. She walked away out of sight, and there, took off her jacket -- Maureen's -- showing her fitting dark dress. She tied her hair dramatically with a scarf. Then she strolled back in front of the workmen, hips conscious of themselves. A storm of whistles, calls, invitations. Out of sight, the other way, she made her small transformation and walked back again: the men glanced at her, did not see her. She was trembling with rage: it was a rage, it seemed to her, that she had been suppressing for a lifetime. And it was a front for worse, a misery that she did not want to answer, for it was saying again and again: This is what you have been doing for years and years and years. (242)

Kate's rage stems as much from personal responsibility and perception as from societal impositions. Her dependence on the reactions of others for affirmation of her validity is so deeply rooted that the realization is both chilling and disconcerting. French describes a similar experience in The Women's Room; Mira's feelings of alienation arise from the same dependence on the visual process:

> She felt it was she, her person, that they were rejecting. She sat late at night with her brandies, realizing how all her life she had maintained ego by things like the butcher smiling when he saw her, complimenting her on her appearance; or the floor waxer looking at her with a glint in his eye...How do you stop doing that? How can one maintain oneself by such absurdities? How can one rid oneself of them? (The Women's Room, 339).

The dilemma here is clearly a result of internal perceptions. Such conflict is rooted in both the public and private spheres; the hierarchy demonstrated in the family structure is generally patriarchal and this becomes extended to public metaphor. Both are concerned with a definitive illumination of women's roles:

> This emphasis on presentation as the central aspect of a woman's existence makes her extremely self-conscious...She must observe and evaluate herself, scrutinizing every detail of herself as though she were an outside judge. She attempts to make herself in the image of womanhood presented by billboards, newspapers, magazines and television. The media present woman either in a sexual context or within the family, reflecting a woman's two prescribed roles, first as a sex object, and then as a mother. (Orbach 7)

If the conflict with such prescribed roles exists in the contemporary female Bildungsroman, then compromise with society will prove destructive to the heroine. Paradoxically, protagonists of this genre must then unlearn and deconstruct perception and behaviour to effect Bildung. The image of in/visibility in the novels concentrates more on a sense of self as object in the public sphere, because for these heroines even to be acknowledged visually is a proclamation of actualization. Men and women cooperate in the public sphere to maintain pretense; inevitably, an imbalance is effected when one party maintains a certain power, and another is compelled to seek validation from it. Lessing has commented elsewhere on visibility and the

individual identities that can be created from it. She says that an attractive young woman

> finds it very hard to separate what she really is from her appearance. Because you only begin to discover the difference between what you really are, your real self, and your appearance when you get a bit older which is the most fascinating experience...It's one of the most valuable experiences I've personally ever had. A whole dimension of life suddenly slides away and you realize that what in fact you've been using to get attention has been what you look like. (Henden 85)

Lessing illustrates the dichotomy of experience which Kate Brown must confront in her own middle age -- separation from roles of friend, mother, wife, lover, nurturer -- in order to achieve integration. She comes to understand that such roles do not define her -- that her real self exists in nebulous space, as elusive as the seal which inhabits her dreams, moving slowly, and with her help, persistently toward the sea, a healing force which reinforces the elements within her. For this, nurturing and support must be internal and autonomous, predicated on a sense of self that does not ignore past or present, but is allowed to sift, examine and develop experience so that the internal self may coalesce with external reality.

Kate Brown relies on external representations of her self to determine who she is. However, by playing games with power and impotence, visibility and invisibility she is able, for the first time, to reject the false values she has unknowingly adopted:

> Oh, it was all so wearying, so humiliating...had she really spent so many years of her life -- it would almost certainly add up to years! -- in front of a looking glass? Just like all women. Years spent asleep, or tranced...For the whole of her life, or since she was sixteen...she had looked into mirrors and seen what other people would judge her by. And now the image had rolled itself up and thrown itself into a corner, leaving behind the face of a sick monkey. (The Summer Before the Dark 178)

Kate recognizes that, like the monkey, she has been adept at imitation. One critic notes that Kate Brown "comes to believe that the only proper object of rescue is the self" (Spacks, 1972, 291). Lessing's heroine breaks the restraints of self-expression by discarding and, indeed, by consciously flouting what had previously defined her: a pleasing visual conformity to social expectation:

> Now that it was important to her, a matter of self-preservation that she should be able to make a statement, that she should be understood, then she would, and would not, do certain things to her hair: substance squeezed slowly through holes in her scalp like spaghetti out of a machine, the only part of her that felt nothing if it was stroked, pinched or handled...Now she was saying no: no, no, no, No! a statement which would be concentrated into her hair. (270)

The description of Kate's hair -- "substance squeezed slowly through holes in her scalp like spaghetti out of a machine" -- is "a repellent one" (Spacks, 1972, 291), but illustrates Kate's feeling that she is a product of society's molding. Like Mira of The Women's Room, she has been travelling on the consumer-oriented treadmill, using

popular culture as a yardstick by which to measure her being and assess her ultimate value. Her hair, which had been a sign of conformity to that world, becomes a symbol of Kate's rejection of those standards. As such standards are thoroughly conditioned through patriarchal culture, encoded from childhood, it is also necessary that Kate's communication of her new consciousness is visual and not verbal, because any verbal statement could not possibly penetrate this area of visual cues which is based on gesture, expectancy and reaction. Finally, by choosing a part of her that does not feel, she further demonstrates society's lack of power over her life.

In Lady Oracle, in/visibility is traced through Joan Foster's body. She is very obese in childhood and early adolescence but loses weight in adulthood when she learns that she must lose one hundred pounds to claim any money from her Aunt Lou's will. The exploration of the protagonist's feelings, her relationship with her mother, and the struggle between Joan and her mother to establish territorial rights over Joan's body are very revealing. If the frequency of the in/visibility image in the contemporary female Bildungsroman is rooted in society's emphasis on the necessity and value of female attractiveness, Lady Oracle demonstrates that such a lesson must be learned early.

One of the first glimpses we receive of Joan Foster in Lady Oracle is that of an overweight child who is looking

forward to her first part in a school play, where she will be dressed as a butterfly. However, because she is so overweight, the play's director, Miss Flegg, in a frenzy of imaginative creativity, decides to cast her as mothball, believing that Joan will be too ludicrously incongruous with the other slim butterflies. The feud between Joan and her mother seems to begin here, as Mrs. Foster sides with Miss Flegg in this decision, leaving Joan frustrated and alone, set apart at the outset of childhood by her appearance. The shame which Joan experiences follows her into adulthood at the memory of this play:

> It's hard to feel undiluted sympathy for an overweight seven-year old stuffed into a mothball suit and forced to dance; the image is simply too ludicrous. But if I described myself as charming and skinny, they would find the whole thing pathetic and grossly unfair. I knew this even when I was ten. If Desdemona was fat, who would care whether or not Othello strangled her? Why is it that the girls Nazis torture on the covers of the sleazier men's magazines are always good-looking? The men would find it quite different if they were overweight. The men would find it hilarious instead of sexually titillating. However, plump unattractive women are just as likely to be tortured as thin ones. More so, in fact. (Lady Oracle 48)

Here Atwood explores the variation of perception and reaction based on the quality of visibility. To be unattractive, even at ten, is to recognize the range of reaction to oneself and to attribute such behaviour to the way one looks. Moreover, Atwood deftly pinpoints the gains of materialism through women's appearance, as the

protagonist reflects on "the girls Nazis torture on the covers of the sleazier men's magazines" (48). This thought underlines that these women are objects of both sexual desire and abuse in the public eye, while patriarchy advocates this "ideal" as the apex of desirability.

Joan Foster's experiences as an overweight child and an obese adolescent are a direct result of how she is physically perceived. The heroine remains psychologically unconcerned because her weight is an overt signal to Mrs. Foster that Joan maintains complete control over her own life. When Joan overhears a conversation between her parents that leads her to believe that she was not a planned child, she questions the validity of her own existence. She also emotionally retreats from her own mother as her weight becomes an area of contention between them. Joan overeats from a feeling of guilt and responsibility which is disguised as rebellion: "I ate to defy her, but I also ate from panic. Sometimes I was afraid I wasn't really there, I was an accident; I'd heard her call me an accident. Did I want to become solid, solid as a stone so she wouldn't be able to get rid of me? What had I done?" (76).

Lady Oracle probes the family structure and the influence of images of women in popular culture. As Mrs. Foster embraces the values of society, Joan rejects them by not conforming. Thus, she rejects the role-models of society and those of its microcosm, the family, by flouting

her mother's intentions. With Lady Oracle in mind, one author writes that:

> In overfeeding herself, the daughter may be trying to reject her mother's role while at the same time reproaching the mother for inadequate nurturing; or she may be attempting to retain a sense of identity with her mother. Popular culture abounds with evidence of the symbolic value that food and fat hold between mothers and daughters. (Orbach 20)

Joan's mother desperately tries to make Joan lose weight in Lady Oracle. Triumphantly, Joan continues to gain weight, buying colorful clothes, which further emphasize her large figure. This further humiliates her mother and on one occasion, reduces her to tears. Joan reflects that, "I had defeated her: I wouldn't ever let her make me over in her image, thin and beautiful" (86). This seemingly contradictory aim underlines the depth of the struggle between Joan and her mother; Joan gains weight to demonstrate ultimate control regardless of the effects her actions have on her own life.

And Joan Foster does suffer the consequences of obesity among her peers. In high school, girlfriends regard her as a confidante and a buffer for unwanted male attention. She is assigned to miscellaneous committee work but is not invited to mixed-couple parties. She is viewed as an asexual being because of her size: "Though immersed in flesh, I was regarded as being above its desires, which of course was not true" (93).

Joan Foster achieves in/visibility through her obesity; she is not perceived as desirable, noteworthy or valuable by the society she lives in, and indeed, even by her family. From in/visibility, however, there is a degree of freedom to be found, which is why the protagonist is obsessed by a need for anonymity and division of experience for most of the novel. Because her appearance is not praised as valuable at an early age, Joan has the opportunity to grow in other areas, and develops a need to keep these areas separate and private. She eventually becomes a romance writer under Paul's influence in London and is compelled to use a pseudonym for her writings. Joan describes her early experiences of anonymity with a poignant mixture of sorrow and glee. When she went to Adult-rated movies with her Aunt Lou, she recalls that:

> ...no one ever questioned my age. I was quite fat by this time and all fat women look the same, they all look forty-two. Also, fat women are not more noticeable than thin women; they're less noticeable because people find them distressing and look away. To the ushers and the ticket sellers I must've appeared as a huge featureless blur. If I'd ever robbed a bank no witness would have been able to describe me accurately (79-80).

Losing weight, Joan becomes more visible, that is, more noticeable in her conformity to images of the patriarchal machine. She suddenly possesses a face, a verifiable identity. She is also threatened with responses to such

visibility and like Kate Brown in The Summer Before the Dark, she is unsure of her own response:

> It was on these bus trips that I first discovered there was something missing in me. This lack came from having been fat; it was like being without a sense of pain, and pain and fear are protective, up to a point. I'd never developed the usual female fears: fear of intruders, fear of the dark, fear of gasping noises over the phone, fear of bus stops and slowing cars, fear of anyone or anything outside whatever magic circle defines safety...So when I shrank to a normal size, I had none of those fears, and I had to develop them artificially. (139-140)

It is interesting that Joan's increased visibility is aligned by Atwood with a necessary cultivation of fear. Images of women who conform to popular culture are not powerful or self-sufficient ones, and as Joan has no experience of never being self-sufficient, she finds herself suddenly vulnerable in her new body. This question is also addressed by Orbach:

> When women are thin, they are treated frivolously: thin-sexy-incompetent worker. But if a woman loses weight, she herself may not yet be able to separate thinness from the packaged sexuality around her which simultaneously defines her as incompetent. It is difficult to conform to one image that society would have you fit (thin) without also being the other image (sexy female). (Orbach 13)

When Joan Foster unexpectedly publishes a book of poetry, inspired hypnotically by Automatic Writing, she is further cast into the public eye. In fame, the heroine is without protection or disguise. Atwood uses various

focuses, refractions of viewpoint and narrative to encompass the whole of Joan's existence. As one critic writes: "The narrative itself is mise en abyme in this self-reflexive (specular) novel, an eternal braid of narrative with narrative. Atwood plays with the notion of distorting mirrors, convex and concave, foregrounding here the central issue of the novel, that all reflections are distortions, all mimetic representations lies" (Godard 17).

With this emphasis on representation Atwood, as in Tricks With Mirrors, attempts to go beyond the mirror, beyond the images and façades in Lady Oracle. Joan Foster confronts a sharp schism between how she is perceived in the public view and her perception of self. Between these two selves it appears that no reconciliation can be effected:

> I felt very visible. But it was as if someone with my name were out there in the real world, impersonating me, saying things I'd never said but which appeared in the newspapers, doing things for which I had to take the consequences: my dark twin, my fun-house mirror reflection. She was taller than I was, more beautiful, more threatening. (252)

Joan Foster feels threatened by what the public image of her has created, and the division of selves within her is further compounded. However, anonymity is crucial to what she believes her real self to be. As she has precariously woven her way through many roles, it is this public figure which is the most dangerous to her because it threatens the survival of her alternate selves. Unfortunately for Joan,

reality and fantasy have chosen to intersect. Trying to escape this situation, Joan creates another hoax by faking her death so that she can leave Canada and build another, less visible life. This "death" for Joan is an absolute act of self-preservation, even if it more ironically reflects the masks, roles and lies which have so strongly characterized her life after losing weight. Anonymity is essential to her for the perpetuation of illusion. As Lady Oracle is primarily concerned with the representation of self, in Joan Foster we see the confusions and contradictions of popular culture reach the breaking point. As Freiburt states:

> Through the metaphor of Joan's life, then, Atwood suggests that women must begin to imagine themselves capable of doing and being whatever they would like. They must no longer look into the mirrors which society holds up to them as reality. They must no longer barter reality for a pseudo security, for in the end there will always be death. (Freiburt 31-32)

In the contemporary female Bildungsroman, physical references are guideposts to change and development. Because of patriarchal conditioning and popular culture, which both emphasize female attractiveness, women have been denied a natural relationship with their own bodies. To reclaim the physical self as valid, therefore, constitutes a major aspect of Bildung, as this powerfully reflects the reclaiming of the essential inner self.

In Shedding, perhaps more than any other novel discussed here, the concentration on the physical self is a metaphorical guide to the inner changes which are occurring. The title itself indicates a receptivity toward transformations, as "shedding" means to cause to flow, to pour out, to radiate, to spread, diffuse and scatter. Its most seminal meaning in this novel is to cast off a natural growth (such as hair) which in Shedding refers to Stefan's freedom from cultural attitudes and expectations.

At the start of her journey, Stefan is quite alienated from her physical being. She believes that her quest is problematized by her appearance:

> In some way it all related to my body. It was complicated, too. I dragged around its lifeless parts. It did not measure up to standards. it didn't look youthful. It didn't have a good figure. (5)

The isolation from self is indicated by Stefan's reference to her body's negative characteristics; her self-hatred is rooted in the fact that her body does not conform to the idealized conception of beauty in her society. The language that she chooses highlights this disparity. Instead of saying "I", Stefan uses the pervasive objectification of woman's being: "it". At this point, her perception is dominated by social stereotypes: "Initiation rites and models moved in on me from all sides" (6).

Stefan is also displaced from her body by her ignorance. She believes that she will not become pregnant the first time she has intercourse (9). She is also unaware of the internal functionings of her body, never having thought much about the female organs (11). Also, because of the position of her genitalia, Stefan feels distanced from her sexual organs, which are both hidden and mysterious: "The vagina -- a dark opening. What was behind it? Were there pearls in the depths of this body, coral reefs?" (12)

It is therefore somewhat paradoxical that Stefan's choice of vehicle toward Bildung is originally the physical self. She attempts to lose her virginity because she believes that sexuality is a means to decreasing barriers, increasing intimacy, and providing unity in the self. She embarks on a series of relationships with men in order to find this harmony, but quickly senses the failure of sexuality to provide complete affirmation of self. Instead, it is a substitute for other needs such as warmth and affection. Sexuality is also a camouflage for difficulties in communication. In this period of indecision Stefan testifies that "Beneath the surface of my skin, new cracks were forming. I noticed them at once, but did nothing about them" (22). She is forced into the uncomfortable awareness that she has made a wrong choice but is learning from that; change is not yet evident, but imminent.

Stefan's awakening lies in the growth of her feminist consciousness, which is a product of experience and pain rather than an imposed philosophy. As she becomes increasingly involved in the women's movement, she becomes aware of the sexual politics which permeate her relationships with men. She finds a sense of wholeness at "Bread and Roses" meetings which show that the women's issue is not divorced from the women themselves, but grows out of them. She realizes that instead of finding wholeness through sexuality, she has become even more fragmented: "I must first of all reach myself. I had set out to conquer the world, and every step of the way I had stumbled over men" (32).

Stefan continues to live with her lover, but finds herself continuously removed from the sexual act, setting an analytical distance so that she may probe her desperate sense of alienation. She begins to understand that sexuality, too, is culturally-defined, and male-female relations are saturated with the same stimulus/response mechanisms of genital sexuality which deny true intimacy between two people. (Stefan criticizes heterosexuality for being dominated by attention to genitals -- clitoris, vagina, penis -- thus, sexuality is divorced from intimacy because it relies on touch for arousal of the other.) Stefan begins to see that intercourse, as we know it, is rather an "act of desperation" which relies heavily on

culturally-learned behaviour and overemphasizes orgasm as its primary goal. Stefan finds this both dehumanizing and mechanical.

She withdraws from traditional relationships, taking the first step toward reclaiming her own needs and desires by deciding to focus on the self, and removing herself from the degenerative patterns produced by conditioning:

> Cutting the umbilical cord took a long time. The couple structure proved to be a monolith, solid and impregnable. I wanted to rid myself, once and for all, of this obsession with being half a couple. This meant capturing one's own shadow, crawling into another skin, first shedding the old skin -- it would not come off by itself. The imprint seems indelible. To try to erase it, one would have to counteract the brainwashing. (66)

Stefan's text seems to reflect French feminist psychoanalytic theories. Her text fits the type of writing often called écriture féminine. These theorists "promulgate a somatic theory of writing, exploring the connection between sexuality and textuality by looking to the labia as the source of a distinctly feminine writing, thus countering that dominantly phallocentric myth of writing as an erectile and ejaculatory activity" (Ruthven 19). This "writing off the self" focusses on the creativity of the natural feminine principle which becomes inscribed in the text when the fundamental self is given license to speak. Theorists of écriture féminine include such writers as Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous.

The basic tenet of écriture féminine is that as women reclaim their writing, the power to speak, so they will reclaim their bodies and essential selves. The emphasis on the physical self in Shedding illustrates that it is a script of self-healing, in which the impositions of society are peeled off as skins, leaving the passage clear to the fundamental self. Inhibitions and teachings are deconstructed so that the prose becomes not only an account of Stefan's journey, but the very self moving on that journey, effecting transformations and speaking of them through the text, which results in a powerful rendering of experience.

When Stefan begins a love relationship with another woman, she rejects standard designations and value judgments of her body, renouncing the superficial cognition of patriarchy:

> This part of my body which is called clitoris is not my focal point, my life does not revolve around it. It is not that I want to minimize its importance, it is just that I do not want to be limited again to only one part of my body.
> I am beginning to see myself for what I really am. (91)

Stefan's passage into Bildung is permeated by a tone of joy and fusion as she celebrates all aspects of her physical being. She looks at the whole physical self instead of at parts which have been targeted for external approbation and comes to enjoy the self-knowledge which her body

communicates to her, especially through menstruation.[2] She has a dream in which she sees herself as an old woman and her response to this older self is that she is beautiful, which proves a significant departure from Stefan's earlier self-image. Ironically, Stefan realizes that her body, which did not measure up to society's standards, has helped her toward Bildung, because she was not allowed to be further influenced by social conditioning. As Stefan has returned her perception to her self, so she has reclaimed her vital physical being. As Cixous comments:

> By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display -- the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. (Cixous 284.)

As we have seen, in/visibility and objectification are negative images in the contemporary female Bildungsroman which inhibit the heroine's movement toward positive development. They are rooted in societies which place the protagonists in precarious positions by forcing them to question their own existence without the presence of external affirmation. Of course, external reinforcement is necessary to further positive internal reflection, but the emphasis placed on female attractiveness is reductive to the human being who must experience growth at all levels. However, the heroines of The Women's Room, The Summer Before

the Dark, Lady Oracle and Shedding have illustrated relocation of consciousness through the gradual and sometimes painful process of questioning, re-examining and re-perceiving the attitudes and expectations they have unknowingly incorporated. The heroine of Lady Oracle perceived such attitudes by the time she is ten; she is more dismayed by the reality of visibility as she reaches adulthood, still intrigued by fantasy and role-playing, having created a fertile inner world by virtue of her prior invisibility. Yet the transition to, and acceptance of reality is a painstaking one for her, one she finally achieves when even a fantasy world eludes her.

Kate Brown of The Summer Before the Dark also sheds the roles she has been taught to inhabit by carefully voyaging through psychological territory. "We are what we learn" is a sensitive motif of the novel, and of Kate's internal journey. In middle age, she learns that the self is an intact and individual entity, one which cannot be fashioned through the dispersion of self into roles convenient to others. By refusing to play the games her society demands of her, she gains a valid identity of her own.

Mira, of The Women's Room, manages to come out of hiding and participates in a full university life, but not before questioning her own responses and fears regarding gender and age, and not without transcending the general notion that women are "unimportant". This novel is about a

heroine who chronicles the collective experience of all women and is important in illustrating the conditioning which a patriarchal society has imposed on them. The images of in/visibility in The Women's Room are refracted through the novel in the experiences of other women. These provide full integration because each woman's story conveys a different perspective on the experience of in/visibility. As Mira is the character through which we hear these stories, she herself is representational, but the emphasis given in/visibility is French's statement that such questions still need to be asked. And answered.

In Shedding, Stefan creates new perceptions and ways of being through écriture féminine, and moves from fragmentation to wholeness by writing the self. The tone of self-love and celebration which dominates the close of the novel differs greatly from her self-hatred at the beginning, and indicates that the self, body and perception itself have indeed been reclaimed and united.

The heroines of these novels have succeeded, through realization and rejection of social designations and definitions, in locating identity in Self rather than Other, and in doing so, have transcended at least one of the barriers in the contemporary female Bildungsroman.

Chapter 2

Spatial Imagery in the Contemporary Female *Bildungsroman*

> Imagine (I said) a mother shutting her door, and the children knowing she is behind it; why, the very thought of it is outrageous to them. A woman who sits staring into space, into a country that is not her husband's or her children's is likewise known to be an offense against nature. So a house is not the same for a woman. She is not someone who walks into the house, to make use of it, and will walk out again. She <u>is</u> the house; there is no separation possible. (Munro, 1968, 60)

> Some women marry houses.
> It's another kind of skin; it has a heart,
> a mouth, a liver and bowel movements.
> The walls are permanent and pink.
> See how she sits on her knees all day,
> faithfully washing herself down.
> Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah
> into their fleshy mothers.
> A woman <u>is</u> her mother.
> That's the main thing. (Sexton 48)

Images of positive and negative space pervade contemporary female Bildungsromane. Recent discussions of space have illustrated that men and women have different responses to individual space. It is in the disparity of such perceptions that this chapter is founded, and the necessity of space for human growth to occur. In contemporary novels by women, space conjures up images of restriction, confinement and limitation. Much has been said on the alignment of public space with male perception and private space with female perception. One author notes that: "Public space means politics and spatial mobility, also formal education; private space means domesticity and spatial constrictions, and informal education. In other words, public and private space are metaphors" (Stimpson 15).

Feminist critics have examined the image of enclosure and escape in the writings of nineteenth-century women and conclude that such imagery is more personal than that of men, and reflects "the literal reality of their own confinement" (Gilbert and Gubar 87) as opposed to metaphysical transcendency. Furthermore, this confinement is illustrated in houses and bodies, and even in the text itself, where women, "Recording their own distinctly female experience...are secretly working through and within the conventions of literary texts to define their own lives" (Gilbert and Gubar 87).

The existence of similar images in contemporary female Bildungsromane indicates that the division between male public and female private spheres does create obstacles for heroines of this genre. The external traversing of a landscape, after all, is analogous to the movement across the landscape of consciousness which expresses learning and growth. This has never proved a problem for the male protagonist of the Bildungsroman who, in spite of his difficulties with society, is assured access to the unknown regions so necessary for development.

This is not the case for his female counterparts, who are dislocated from their societies, and, in many instances, from each other. As women, they perceive themselves as outsiders, and as repressed by society, which is patriarchal. This disruption is noted in the language which protagonists of this genre use to describe women. In The Women's Room, women are seen as "outlaws"; in Shedding, as "alien", in The Summer Before the Dark as "prisoners or slaves", in Lives of Girls and Women as "exiles or spies", and in Braided Lives as "misfits". The frequency of references in the novels to heroines who are "stranded", "trapped" and "shackled" in "traps", "pits", "cages" and "caves" facilitates the realization that escape is a fundamental necessity for even partial growth to occur. The heroine must recognize such constriction as oppression and expand in order to allow development. This expansion

involves a degree of isolation and alienation, as the narrator of The Women's Room explains:

> ...the old categories come flaming up, looking better than ever, although in need of revision: a good life is one in which no part of the self is stifled, denied or permitted to oppress another part of the self, in which the whole being has room to grow. But room costs something, and no matter what we choose, we are never happy about paying for it. (308)

The heroine must effect internal metamorphosis, a revolutionary shift in consciousness to move toward Bildung. She must realize that she is trapped before she can allow the parameters of self to expand, reflect and choose. Realization of her position in society, patriarchal definitions assigned to her gender, and the imposition of such societal values in her own mind are signposts to need and desire, which, if unvoiced, cannot facilitate change. Such awareness is usually the first perceptible movement toward psychological restructuring; therefore, the underlying meaning of these images is essentially positive. Rich's comments on criticism are equally applicable to the heroine in fiction:

> Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched, we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. (Rich 35)

Historically and socially, the division between public and private space has been connected to gender. Women of

middle and higher classes were considered caretakers of the private sphere, which includes the family and home conditions. This was also true of women from the lower classes, but these women may have attained some measure of equality by having to work outside the home. With the rise of industrial capitalism, men dominated the public sphere, moving out into the world of paid employment, business and recognized power.[1] Women's power, by comparison, became limited, segregated and trivialized because it was unseen and silent. Their personal time, space and freedom to work, then, were considered interruptible and unimportant. The existence of images of restriction in contemporary women's writing supports the premise that such associations still exist, and, as Gubar and Gilbert have noted, seep into the texts themselves (Gilbert and Gubar 87).

Jane McGroarty has drawn definitive connections between popular conceptions of house and home, and perceptions about women. Apart from being a physical dwelling, the home has become a symbol of woman herself. This author identifies eight metaphors for house and home which are associated with women. First, there is home as symbol of the self -- this for women who are fulfilling the traditional domestic role (McGroarty 182). Home may also be seen as woman's body, which is invested with the roles of mother, protector and nurturer, and is subject to linguistic allusions which reinforce this association: "The 'empty-nest' syndrome

tells us that woman's body is the home, a diologic entity to be pitied when reproduction time is over" (McGroarty 183). The metaphor of home as castle establishes the male's authority and inviolate space (McGroarty 184). Home is also identified as moral domain; the woman's responsibility for instilling moral values in the children and being herself a paragon of virtue is taken for granted (McGroarty 184-185). Home as machine for living is concerned with all domestic tasks that must be done in the house; the kitchen is isolated as the room which women have largely been identified with. As the author states: "The machine metaphor denies the experiences of living having to do with emotion, memory, growth and changing relationships, proposing reliance on functionalism as the sole standard" (McGroarty 185). Other metaphors for home -- as museum, theater and boudoir -- are concerned with roles which are played within the home, and focus on woman acting as collector, hostess and seductress (McGroarty 186-187).

The identification of these associations indicates the cultural assumptions that society has imposed upon women, which are imbedded in our very language and perception, and have further repercussions in creating schisms within woman's own consciousness. Indeed, no compromise seems possible with a society that has alienated women from its center, and removed them once again by causing them to question their own validity by virtue of that dislocation.

The choice to defy patriarchy and reclaim space, however, is coupled with the risk of ostracism: "...contemporary female Bildung is not a socially sanctioned, culture-oriented, predestined, essentialist process...[but] of necessity anti-social, defiant, lonely, ambiguous, and often resolved only by an anguished existential choice" (Braendlin, 1983, 78).

In Shedding, Stefan originally attempts to explore her self through sexuality and travel. The heroine sets out in the world to experience herself in the bilinear mode of physical movement and her own physicality, but comes to realize that both are constricted by society. A woman traveling alone is placed in a situation of fear and potential danger. Parodying the male hero of the Bildungsroman, Stefan reveals the alienation which affects heroines of this genre: "...I couldn't shake off a persistent and unmistakable sense of uneasiness. I found myself in alien territory. I had sneaked in, unseen; I had dared to proceed on my own -- what would happen when men noticed me?" (15) The heroine feels furtive and strangely victorious, but simultaneously understands the temporary nature of her position. The "alien territory" is the public sphere, and the use of such words as "sneaked" and "dared" reveals the heroine's feeling of dislocation.

Later, fully comprehending the dangers of hitchhiking through Europe alone, unable to find a woman to accompany her, and knowing that a male companion would expect sexual

compensation for his presence, Stefan becomes frustrated at the patriarchy which oppresses her. The distance between her and the public world widens: "Why couldn't I travel without fear of being molested, why was this direct access to the world closed off to me?" (16) The protagonist is prevented movement in society by her gender. In order to travel she must have a protector; to have a protector she must sacrifice something in return. Through either patriarchy or an individual male, then, she renounces her safety or sexual choice.

Stefan is forced to experience her world in a displaced way. A year later, she meets a man named Dave who becomes her new lover and "protector". Although she is in love with Dave, Stefan sees that within this relationship, her essential freedom and autonomy are being repressed, because she is only allowed to experience things in a symbiotic way:

> To have a middleman, a mediator between me and the world...But he was the one who decided when I could go out with him, he opened and closed the doors to the world...He is not about to do anything to change this condition, his penis is at stake. (21)

Stefan knows that there is something fundamentally wrong with this relationship, which is further sanctioned by society: "A woman alone can hardly survive if she is not willing to disown her self" (20). This renunciation of self is detrimental to the heroine who has embarked on a spiritual and psychological quest. However, Stefan's

understanding of the sex roles which permeate this relationship marks the beginning of her movement away from prescribed responses and traditional formulae.

The "law of nature" is a term frequently found in the novels and further illustrates the division between men and women; biologically, psychologically and physically. The violation of such a law (which is usually cited by men) constitutes the reference to its female violators as "lawbreakers". This term is convenient in the enforcement of repression, constriction and separate domains, and of course, the division of labour. Patriarchy is adept at ensuring the understanding of this term by women. In The Women's Room, the omniscient narrator comments on the oppression which women feel:

> We understood that the laws were all for THEM, that the setup of society was all for THEM, that everything existed for THEM. But we didn't know what to do about that. We half believed there was something terribly wrong with US. We crept into our holes and learned to survive. (321)

The "law of nature" divides men and women on the basis of biological destiny. It is largely responsible for the privatization of women's lives. Men are viewed as stronger, more powerful and able to move within the larger public sphere because of their greater ability to protect themselves. Women have been classically dubbed "the weaker sex", and the associations given this disparity are negative and confining. In the preceding passage, the narrator

states that the women whose lives she is recounting recognize their own helplessness at the pervasive conditioning granted to their position within society.[2] The "creeping into our holes" illustrates adherence to strictures which engender submission, conformity and silence to an outward locus of power. The images of constriction split and double. It is both external (patriarchy) and internal (social conditioning). The choice which escape involves underlines the paradox and irresolution contained in such images.

French's ironic narrator later portrays the vacillation between imaginative hope, a vision of freedom from imposed structures of thought, and the realization that such hope is tempered by the reality of conditioning and actual strictures. Any attempted movement will inevitably be checked by conformity and repression:

> Yes. That was what happened: everything opened up, anything seemed possible, and then everything closed up, dilation, constriction. It will get you in the end...If there is dilation and constriction, then there has to be dilation again. Either that or death. Law of nature. If it isn't it ought to be. (673)

Here the discrepancy between vision and reality is highlighted. "Constriction" and "death" become synonymous terms. "Dilation" is equated with "possibility", a positive image of liberation and growth. "Dilation" is also a gynecological term used in childbirth. Significantly, it

also means to write or to speak at length on a subject. In this way, then, French advocates the necessity of re-birth for women and for their writing, and she consciously inverts the "law of nature" associations to indicate the opening of possibilities for women instead of closure in their repression. The deceptively casual insertion of the sentence "Either that or death" indicates the absolute necessity of space for survival and growth.

This term also surfaces in The Summer Before the Dark. While lying ill in a London hotel, Kate Brown has a dream. This dream interrupts the pattern of the "seal" dream sequence, temporarily diverting her responsibility toward it, and metaphorically away from her own self-nurturance. Kate receives two letters from her husband Michael. She is suddenly overwhelmed by a need for him which overshadows her dissatisfaction with the marriage and his many affairs with other women. The intensity of her reaction, however, assures her that she is still very sick, so she attempts to quell her desires by sleeping. She dreams that she is in a small village where the townspeople are dancing gaily to loud music. She dances with the young King on a raised platform, and is then cast aside. Grief-stricken, Kate runs away. The villagers chase her, catch her and:

> ...put her in a pit that was framed with wood...and she could not get out of it. She shouted out that she was unjustly imprisoned, unjustly deposed, and the king, his face turning sharply from smiles to anger, came swiftly across

> the snow...to stand over the pit and chide her for her lack of generosity, her niggling and critical spirit, her failure in communal feeling, but above all, for her lack of understanding for the laws that governed life: it was necessary for the king to dance with one woman, one girl, after another, until every one of them had been singled out, and had danced with the king on the raised platform in the eyes of the village. (159)

Kate is chastised for "her lack of understanding for the laws that governed life." Her dream enunciates the precept that her space must be enclosed and marginal; her relationship to the king is peripheral to his omnipotence. As a metaphor for her marriage, Kate's dream illuminates the disparity in moral space between her world and her husband's. Relegated to the private sphere, her care has been for the home and family, a lifestyle in which she is not perceived as independent but disseminated, "as if little bits of me are distributed among my family" (271). Kate Brown exists for others and displays the appropriate characteristics associated with her position as wife and mother. She is loving, nurturing, self-denying, self-effacing, patient, tolerant and perennially smiling.

The "raised platform" of the dream, then, on which the king and all the women dance is the public sphere which provides space and freedom for a man who is perceived as powerful and can afford to imprison whom he desires. The "pit" symbolizes Kate's position in the marriage. Her sudden unwanted freedom from it, by accepting employment for the summer, coupled with her psychic evaluation of her

responsibility to self prompted by the "seal" dream sequence, allows her to place it in its proper perspective of injustice and repression. The flagrant portrayal of the king conducting his affairs "in the eyes of the village" indicates the moral and social license that is granted to Michael, despite the fact that he is married. Lessing deliberately places great emphasis on the negative reactions of others to Kate's affair with Jeffrey Merton to illustrate the great distance in moral space between genders.

Conditioned as their mothers were, and unsure of how to proceed with the persistent ambiguity which overshadows any sense of themselves as autonomous, the heroines of these novels are taught early to recognize the places they may inhabit and where they must not trespass. Lives of Girls and Women provides a sharp focus on the circumstances which shape conditioning, as it follows the growth of its heroine only into late adolescence.

Del Jordan grows up in a small town in northern Ontario called Jubilee, and aspires to be a writer. Her experiences lead her to believe, however, that this is not a profession for women, and the confrontations with the narrow people of her family (excluding her mother) and her town perpetuate this belief. When Del goes to visit her two eccentric aunts and Uncle Craig, she is struck by the great respect and solicitude which her aunts exhibit for the work her uncle is doing on compiling a history of his town: "When I read,

years afterwards, about Natasha in War and Peace, and how she 'ascribed immense importance, although she had no understanding of them, to her husband's abstract, intellectual pursuits,' I had to think of Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace" (32). Del is trained to believe that there is an unquestionable, unalterable disparity between the work of men and women, and that men's work, whatever it may be, is infinitely more important:

> They respected men's work beyond anything; they also laughed at it... And they would never, never meddle in it; between men's work and women's work was the clearest line drawn, and any stepping over this line, any suggestion of stepping over it, they would meet with such light, amazed, regretfully superior laughter. (32)

Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace have apparently embraced the "law of nature", which grants importance and validity to the work of men. The implication persists that women's work is trivial, mundane and unworthy of mention. The metaphor of the "line" in the preceding passage indicates the inviolability of these assumptions which divide the sexes. The use of the adjective "clearest" illustrates the power which such assumptions exert on behaviour. Del Jordan is puzzled by these divisions. The constant emphasis throughout Lives of Girls and Women on the intellectual constriction of women portrays a society which adheres to such disparities of perception and experience, and, even

more detrimentally, is advocated as a way of life to be silently accepted.

Later, Del, who has reached her adolescence, reads an article in a popular magazine on the difference between male and female modes of thought. This article is written by a New York psychiatrist who is a follower of Freud. Del, who believes the article is about sex, reads the study:

> He said that the difference between the male and female modes of thought were easily illustrated by the thoughts of a boy and a girl, sitting on a park bench, looking at the full moon. The boy thinks of the universe, its immensity and mystery; the girl thinks, "I must wash my hair".
> ...I felt trapped, stranded; it seemed there had to be a choice where there couldn't be a choice. (177-8)

This passage indicates the conditioning which women have received through similar media for years. It is appropriate that the writer of the article is a disciple of Freud, whose theories on women are still a subject of controversy. This type of propaganda is particularly dangerous because of the terms in which it is couched. It is ostensibly a "scientific" article which is related by a male authority figure. This article tells young women that their space is valid only in its degree of proximity to the male counterpart, who is naturally endowed with greater vision and higher thought. The woman's importance lies in her success in luring the male. Her thought is relative; his is transcendent. Del, who wants both to love and to reflect on the universe, is confused by this polarized

thinking. Although there is nothing faulty in her perception, the external imposition of patriarchal "authority" results in an assessment of alternatives, "where there couldn't be a choice". If internalized, such assumptions can prove devastating to the heroine on self-quest.

The acceptance, then, of the division of men and women into separate spheres causes a handicap for the heroine of the contemporary female Bildungsroman and constricts her. Del Jordan maintains free will and independence as an adolescent and is able to renounce the falseness of such precepts. She does not allow herself to become conditioned by fear or reservation, refusing to recognize that gender divisions have any impact on her.[3] Deciding that her life is her own, she rejects advice from her mother and aunts that to be a woman means to perpetually carry fear:

> ...I felt that it was not so different from all the other advice handed out to women, to girls, advice that assumed being female made you damageable, that a certain amount of carefulness and solemn fuss and self-protection were called for, whereas men were supposed to be able to go out and take on all kinds of experience and shuck off what they didn't want and come back proud. Without even thinking about it, I had decided to do the same. (173-174)

The positive development we see in Del Jordan does not happen to the heroines of the other novels. This may be due to the fact that Del's development is, in part, a preparation for her embarkment into her "real life", while

the heroines of the other novels are older, and trapped in the web of those very real constrictions. A woman does not have the freedom to move alone in the world as a man does; she is hampered by culture, conditioning and the threat of danger at every turn. Great emphasis is placed on the fact that the protagonist is female, and therefore violable.

Rage is expressed in Shedding at these restrictions. Again and again Stefan is confronted by obstacles to her individual freedom. She is verbally assaulted about her body while walking down a city street (3). For her to explore her sexuality, she must obtain contraceptives, and virtually become a patient to do so. She is subjected to lectures on morality by her doctor, who refuses to give her birth control (7). She stands on a corner and is handled by a man, who comments on her hair to his friend as though she were public property (15). Stefan's independence is constantly denied for no better reason that the fact that she is a woman, in possession of a woman's body: "A woman, still an alien, and still up for grabs" (31).

Stefan learns that even the position of a female body is dictated by "civilized" society, and is qualified by the term "ladylike". To rail against this norm is to forego acceptance by society:

> The master of the world sits opposite me in the subway...To my right and my left, male legs, firmly planted. Women are supposed to keep their legs together...The appropriate muscles are to be tensed all day long. I close my eyes...To cast

> off this repressive posture! To act as though I could sit unhassled with legs relaxed...
> Day and night, countless times I am infringed upon. This is not my world. (31)

The implications for the heroine who moves into public space as a "full member of the world" are resonant. Because she is viewed as not belonging there, she thus becomes public property.[4] That a woman feels either privileged or alienated in public is symptomatic of a society in which, either protected or attacked, she is still "property".

The physical constriction which Stefan discusses in Shedding and the public discomfort which results from it are advanced further in Braided Lives. Apart from the social pressures which physically repress women, the female body itself is a constriction -- as, in pregnancy, the heroine can become imprisoned by her own body:

> To become literally a house, after all, is to be denied the hope of that spiritual transcendence of the body which, as Simone de Beauvoir has argued, is what makes humanity distinctively human. Thus, to be confined in childbirth is a way just as problematical as to be confined in a house or prison...the confinement of pregnancy replicates the confinement of society. (Gilbert and Gubar 88-89)

Because of the paradoxical social order which condemns both unwed pregnancy and abortion, a heroine is caught between her parents and her boyfriend if she becomes pregnant. As a woman, she is denied her own moral code, because such a position denies any "right" choice. Jill

Stuart of Braided Lives learns this dichotomy after her mother discovers that she is pregnant by her boyfriend, Mike. He is invited by Mrs. Stuart into their home so that they can discuss the marriage which must take place. Each attempts to prove his/her greater possession of Jill's affection and life. Jill is not consulted on the matter, and, watching them, she thinks, "They talk of love, love but mean power, and they look alike" (166). Both Jill's mother and boyfriend fight for territorial rights over her; their narrow visions of her cripple her attempts at autonomy.

As Jill is pregnant, she feels completely trapped by her own body. She realizes that she cannot bear the child because she wants to return to university. She wants to get an abortion, but her mother, fearing that her husband will find out, urges her to abort herself. Mrs. Stuart gives Jill instructions for the procedure and Jill complies. Her thoughts before the abortion are pervaded by a sense of failure and self-betrayal:

> I thought I was projects, accomplishments, tasks: I am only an envelope of guts. This is what it is to be female, to be trapped...My body can be taken over and used against my will as if I were a hall to be rented out. (175)

In The Women's Room, French compares pregnancy to the life of a soldier, dominated by rigorous training and severe physical discomfort. However, at least the soldier has some time to reclaim a sense of self apart from the discipline he

undergoes. The pregnant woman does not find reprieve for nine months. There is a complete loss of control over one's own life and identity. As French says: "The condition and you are identical: you are no longer a person, but a pregnancy" (69). All responsibility for the woman is focussed on nurturing the unborn child, which leads to associations of house with mother imagery, as McGroarty has pointed out. The home in this image is seen as an extended symbol of the womb, and fosters characteristics of protection and self-sacrifice.

The perpetuation of divisive mythologies stunts a heroine seeking Bildung. The necessary shift of consciousness may be delayed by encountering these mythologies in the minds of other women. For example, when Del Jordan of Lives of Girls and Women goes to visit her old friend Naomi, who is planning her wedding, she learns halfway through the visit that Naomi is pregnant. Naomi tells Del that she has tried, unsuccessfully, to induce miscarriage and has reluctantly decided to go through with the wedding. Meanwhile, she tells Del the difference between men and women in the area of sexuality:

> "My mother says it's the girl's fault...It's the girl who is responsible because our sex organs are on the inside and theirs are on the outside and we can control our urges better than they can. A boy can't help himself," she instructed me, in a foreboding, yet oddly permissive, tone of voice, which acknowledged the anarchy, the mysterious brutality prevalent in that adjacent world. (132)

"In that adjacent world" conjures the tacit sexual license which is perceived in the male world, coupled with the freedom from responsibility which that implies. As Naomi passes on theory and mythology given to her by her mother, it is already being incorporated into her own life as reality.

Unlike Naomi, Jill Stuart of Braided Lives refuses to surrender her future for social approbation and aborts herself, a decision which carries with it its share of agony and blood, but consequently leads to her commitment to feminism, contraception and legalized abortion.

Emotional constriction is also pervasive in the contemporary female Bildungsroman. For women, relegation to another sphere has resulted in deprivation of self-nurturance. As lovers, wives and mothers, they have been socially conditioned that their function is to give, sacrifice, and deny themselves. Taught to be altruistic and supportive, they may fail to decipher signals of manipulation and pressure that rob them of their essential selfhood.

An important chapter of The Women's Room deals with the character of Lily. Lily was physically abused by her father as a child and escapes into marriage with a man who is equally adept at emotional cruelty. Her husband, Carl, discovers that Lily's major weakness is her enjoyment of sex, which he finds strange in a woman, and he withholds it

to manipulate her. Lily does not like to clean the house, and, on this basis, her husband has her committed twice to a mental institution. This story reflects the experience in actual institutions. Chesler discusses women who have been institutionalized because of depression, and who are later readmitted by their husbands. She reports that:

> ...the rehospitalized women had refused to function "domestically" in terms of cleaning, cooking, childcare, and shopping...Further, the husbands who readmitted their wives expressed significantly lower expectations for their total human functioning. They seemed more willing to tolerate extremely childlike and dependent behaviour in their wives -- such as incessant complaining and incoherence -- as long as the dishes were washed. (Chesler 50).

When Mira visits Lily in the asylum, she realizes that Lily has spent her whole life trapped and afraid, literally unable to escape the physical and emotional tyranny of various men. She cannot see any humanity in her husband, as she tells Mira: "Carl, who knows what he is? It's as though he put me in a box and inside it was all the colour and the passion and sex, and then he spent the rest of his life holding a hose over the box, putting me out" (332).

Lily's "madness" has been externally constructed. She has been victimized by the abuse she has received and the conscious stifling of her self by the male world. As Mira leaves the institution, she realizes that both she and Lily are repressed. As Lily is within the asylum, so Mira is trapped by the patriarchal institutions of society which

victimize her to ensure her cooperation. She thinks: "Actually, Lily and I aren't so different: she's inside those gates, I'm inside these...In Russia they put you in insane asylums if you disagree with the state: it's not so different here. Keep the natives quiet" (335). Lily, who has disrupted the rigid pattern of the social order by refusing to be a "good wife", suffers the price of not submitting to patriarchy by being labelled "insane" and removed from society. The "gates" French refers to connote patriarchy; women are trapped and confined as long as it exists, no matter where they are. They are particularly limited if they have been indoctrinated to the point that such precepts have been internalized in their own personal ideologies. Lily is an "outlaw" because she has defi(l)ed the social structure.

The last passage of The Women's Room is broken up on the page sentence by sentence to demonstrate Mira's relocation of her self in direct opposition to cultural concepts:

> Maybe I need a keeper. I don't want them to lock me up and give me electric shock until I forget.
> Forget: lēthē: the opposite of truth.
> I have opened all the doors in my head.
> I have opened all the pores in my body.
> But only the tide rolls in. (687)

The author's original statement that if room is finally achieved by a heroine, then a price must be paid is echoed in Mira's removal from society and portrayed in her

persistent characterization of herself as a "madwoman". The price that she pays is isolation from society, shown in the statement that "only the tide rolls in". Her experiences, however, have led her to find "truth", an unstructured view of the existing reality. Such a process has involved much personal sacrifice and torture. Mira's vision is collective Bildung for all women, and, as women's consciousnesses are still undergoing revision and change, this is not yet possible by the close of The Women's Room. Ironically, society itself will have to be changed to accommodate the full growth of its heroines.

Del Jordan of Lives of Girls and Women also breaks the emotional restraints that are placed upon her. In a chapter entitled "Baptizing", Del and her boyfriend, Garnet French, go swimming. He jokingly tells her that he is going to baptize her in preparation for their marriage. When they are in the water, he grabs her and continually pushes Del's head below the surface of the water, urging her to surrender and agree to the baptism. Although at first it seems like a harmless, playful incident, Del experiences a dramatic shift in perception, leaving her taken aback, then amazed:

> Suppose in a dream you jumped willingly into a hole and laughed while people threw soft ticking grass on you, then understood when your mouth and eyes were covered up that it was no game at all, or if it was, it was a game that required you to be buried alive. I fought underwater exactly as you would fight in such a dream, with a feeling of desperation that was not quite immediate, that had to work upward through layers of incredulity. Yet

> I thought that he might drown me. I really thought that. I thought that I was fighting for my life. (235)

Drowning is a metaphor for emotional murder and loss of control. The "baptism" in this case is a ritualistic preparation for marriage, an initiation ceremony into one way of life, "a game that required you to be buried alive". Del fights against Garnet's implicit assumption of such power over her life. Garnet uses love as the vehicle to dominate her, and Del transforms the apparently playful scene into one tinged with foreboding, violence and defiance, incredulous that Garnet actually believes he holds such power over her. Del uses the analogy of a game in which one's eyes and mouth are covered with grass to describe her experience with Garnet. Through this analogy, she conveys her sense of being denied her own personal vision and power to speak because of Garnet's demand for dependence and submission.

Del's ability to act decisively against this manipulation ensures her Bildung in spite of the narrow confines of such emotional misuse. The "baptism" scene becomes for her a realization of the necessity for self-preservation.

Emotional constriction, then, is an important aspect of spatial imagery in the novels. It suggests the dynamics of relationships in which the heroines are involved and expected to compromise some aspect of themselves. By

recognizing this, and by refusing to compromise what is essential to their full growth, the heroines transcend the strictures of emotional manipulation, understanding that compromise is reciprocal, but dominance is not. They refuse to give up their emotions and accept relegation to a submissive sphere, reclaiming their own emotions as valid, and therefore not subject to power-play.

In contrast to these negative images, there are also positive dimensions of space in the contemporary female Bildungsroman. These images suggest the possibility for growth in the heroines' consciousnesses and for the reintegration of all aspects of self: physical, intellectual, emotional and moral.

The protagonist of Shedding explores her being originally through her sexuality, believing it to be the most valid method of really knowing another person, and, therefore, herself. However, after much disappointment and disillusionment, she finds that selfhood cannot be built on dependency or traditional coupledom. She must create new perceptions of her own, sensing that personal revolution involves, "...among other things, foregoing traditional relationships which are based on stereotypes" (77). She wants to liberate herself from prescribed patterns of behaviour, but finds this process difficult: "Access to women has been blocked off. When we try to find the way to our selves, our hands and feet are shackled...This

prettifying concept, conditioning" (72). This image inverts the space motif: not only do women lack room for outward growth as full members of the world, but because of this are hindered in mapping the unknown territory of their selves. The journey inward is limited by the way women have been taught to view themselves, as helpless, passive, doomed to stasis in a world that has removed them from their most fundamental identities, and, therefore, chained, trapped and shackled.

In the process of relearning, Stefan's heroine envisions a utopian world that is not subjugated by stereotype and powerplay, a world of persons like her, who are willing to change to reach the fullest potential of themselves as human beings:

> I tear down my own dwelling in order to be free. It had been my home for many years. The wind already whistles through the slats, the wind of an unfamiliar emptiness, of a room where the game is played without rules, a room without old, without new people, a room sparsely populated by fabulous creatures who want to become new human beings. (67)

The re-teaching of a self that is a product of social conditioning and stereotypical indoctrination involves knowing that "Security, safety and social acceptance crumble" (67). Stefan tears out all of the concepts which have been imposed on her mind, as difficult and challenging as the process proves to be. She understands that the overturning of mythologies must be undertaken by both

genders and all generations to ensure freedom and individuation for all people. The "room" which is dismantled represents Stefan's own mind, which is finally open and clear. The "wind" is the pure, cleansing force of her motivation, ridding her of indoctrination and making a new existence entirely possible. The "game" of society no longer has rules; the "fabulous creatures" represent Stefan's buried selves, uninfringed by despair and endowed with strength through the denial of categorization and traditional values. There is a sacrifice involved in social dislocation, but the heroine bravely resolves to center on self rather than popular perception. In choosing personal space over external constriction, Stefan integrates all aspects of self. By renouncing mythology for truth and society for self, she distances herself from the limitations which affect her progress.

Later, Stefan becomes intimately involved with another woman, and moves closer to a sense of herself through sexuality than she ever has before. This relationship is characterized as being sharing and autonomous unlike the submissive and dependent affairs Stefan has previously had with men. Early in the relationship, Stefan and Fenna are very attracted to each other, but are unsure of how to proceed, both sexually and emotionally:

> We found ourselves in empty space. We didn't want to imitate, we wanted to create new ways and means of behavior drawing on our selves and the untapped

> reserves of eroticism lying between us. The expanse of unexplored territory had a stupefying effect. (74)

"Empty space" is Stefan's metaphor for the absence of expectation founded on old behavior patterns. The "shedding" of old perceptions includes the structured and mechanical stimulus/response sexuality between men and women. Without the basis of conditioning to inform her, Stefan moves closer to real sexual and emotional intimacy with another woman. This precedent has not been set in patriarchal society and exists outside of conformity to its expectations. Annis Pratt calls the lesbian novel the new-space novel for precisely this reason:

> ...when the rules of the sex-role game are suspended, when the characters are allowed to break through the grid of depersonalizing sexual politics without the fear of being abnormal, new territories of human possibility are achieved. This same phenomenon occurs in the lesbian novel when the strength to be different, to search for a new world without gender restrictions, frees the heroes to move into a new space. (Pratt 106)

Shedding proves to be a new-space novel, because Stefan's descriptions of her affair with Fenna are related in spatial terms; she has moved into a new arena and is desperately obsessed with identifying the sense of wonder and freedom that she feels. When she and Fenna become sexually involved, the experience is again conveyed in terms of space: "We were at one and the same time helpless and grateful in barren unmapped territory" (83).

The heroine of Shedding discovers a measure of her self through lesbian love, and regains much of her dormant sexuality.[5] As Stefan says of her newfound sexuality: "Genital solemnity, where is your sting?" (92) Stefan's choice places her outside the social structure but grants her limitless space and freedom, and is therefore a positive and transcendent one:

> Just as in the lives of its characters, the structure of the new-space novel itself revolves around epiphanic moments, or peak experiences, of erotic or metaphysical vision or both of a better world beyond genders, beyond sexual politics; the material of characterization, plot, imagery and detail focuses upon the heroes' struggle out of patriarchal marginality toward a new hub. (Pratt 109)

Positive space is also necessary for the creative mind to produce. Jill Stuart of Braided Lives writes much poetry and sees her writing as a major focus of her life. When she visits her boyfriend's uncle's house in the country, she reflects on its peace and beauty and relates the setting to her work: "Work is a room where every object has a significant place, a room where I can have what I want or at least name what I have and name what I want...The silence of this place enters me through my ears and gives me enormous mental space to fill with words" (242-45).

Virginia Woolf recognized the necessity of space for facilitation of the creative process in A Room of One's Own. Space is freedom, the freedom to move, write, speak and

choose, as Jill says "What I want" (242-243). The centredness which women artists must have on their work is not universally accepted. As we have seen with Del Jordan's aunts in Lives of Girls and Women, the value granted to men's and women's work differs greatly. One critic argues for the construction of a women's poetics, because women's work is perceived as second in importance to that of men and this tension may be recorded in women's writing:

> Just as women's colonized lives are fundamentally invaluable, so is women's work perceived as interruptible...This phenomenon contributes to the structure of women's artistic labour just as it does to their household labour, and it also contributes to a consciousness that is aware of contingency, that perceives itself bound to chance, not in total control. Such an awareness has obvious ethical and aesthetic implications. (Donovan 103)

Later in Braided Lives, Jill Stuart achieves her own space to think and write by renting a tiny apartment and working at various odd jobs. This assures her autonomous creativity and independence as she cherishes for the first time singular possession of objects and, more importantly, the time she spends alone. The chapter which marks her achievement of independent space is aptly entitled, "A Life Alone is Not Necessarily Lonely".

Similarly, when Kate Brown of The Summer Before the Dark finishes her stint of employment at Global Foods, she is unsure of how to spend the rest of her summer. She has been granted unexpected freedom, as her family is away

traveling. She entertains the thought of visiting her friend Rose in Sussex and helping her with the children, but realizes that her idea underlines the cowardice she feels at her own unasked-for independence. Thinking about this in her hotel room, she undergoes a startling shift in perception:

> In her room, before going to sleep, she looked at its neatness, its indifference to her, and thought that yes, this was much better than her large family house, than Rose's house, full, crammed, jostling with objects every one of which had associations, histories, belonged to this person or that, were important. This small box of a room, that had in it a bed, a chair, a chest of drawers, a mirror -- yes, this is what she would choose, if she could choose...she dreamed. (34)

The unassuming space which has been temporarily granted Kate provides her with time alone and is instrumental to her process of development. The room is "indifferent" to her; it does not ask, demand or entreat. It is a sanctuary which provides the initial nurturing of Kate's autonomy. It is her first time alone in twenty-five years. She is removed from the family and the people who place pressure on her to do or be certain things to them. Kate is afraid because she is displaced from her role and function as wife and mother, as she reflects," -- she was conscious of her emotional apparatus working away in a vacuum: the objects of her emotions were all elsewhere, they were not present to react with or against her" (39). The room's "indifference" and "unimportance" to her enable Kate to examine herself without

contingent pressures. There is no proliferation of possessions which have pasts, and Kate cannot be reminded of being a possession herself. The mirror in Kate's list is important because it, "provides Kate with a reflection of herself, this time without the social approbation that had been so much a part of her life up to this point" (Berets 119).

At this point, Kate does not recognize that she possesses the ability to choose, but it is important that the possibility of choice takes root in the solitude of this hotel room. The physical space in itself is not notable, but the underlying values which "This small box of a room" represent indicate the movement of Kate's consciousness away from habit, fear and restrictions toward an exploration of her own desires and needs. When she falls asleep, her first dream occurs -- the dream of the seal for which she feels consuming responsibility to nourish and rescue, which she must take to the water that will revive it. In this dream she finds the seal among the rocks on a hillside: "It moaned, and she knew she had to get it to water. She started to carry the seal in her arms down the hill" (35). This dream is Kate's propellant toward Bildung. It is clear that the external space allowed her enables the nurturance of self. By recognizing the possibility of choice, she is drawn into the process of choice itself. This is achieved not through the selfless giving of her being to others, but

through solitary revaluation of her elusive but most essential identity.

Spatial imagery in the contemporary female Bildungsroman emerges at every level of the individual's growth and emphasizes the obstacles that the protagonists must overcome to achieve integration of all aspects of self. Space is indispensable to the achievement of this goal. Yet the possession of space by a heroine who recognizes its necessity in her life entails some sort of price, as the society she inhabits makes strong distinctions between men and women. Adherence to or rebellion against such precepts exact its own payment. Donovan comments on the harassed woman who

> ...is forced into a schizophrenic response: either she can remain identified with her body which has been objectified as a tool for male purposes, in which case she denies her mind and her spiritual self; or she can deny the body and consider the mind the real self. The latter entails an autistic withdrawal from the everyday public world, a silent living within.. (Donovan 102)

A choice is necessary to the heroine of contemporary Bildungsromane, but why should she choose or deny any aspect of her most essential self simply because the externally imposed definitions of patriarchal society have been placed upon her? But such a division is resonant in its deeper implications --- even by not choosing, a heroine, as woman, is still displaced in society. Adherence to social values

will not ensure personal freedom. Paradoxically, the choice of space over constriction involves pain, loneliness and some form of ostracism for the heroine, but independence, autonomy and self will have been attained in the process. Such choice is active and positive, even with its undertones of agony and loss, and involves reflection, re-examination, revaluation and movement. Space is necessary and has a definitive impact on the achievement of Bildung. The protagonists come to choose their own physical, intellectual, emotional and moral parameters, and recreate themselves by escaping from repression at every level. They may be ostracized, but become self-defined "outlaws", "aliens", "exiles or spies", and "misfits", and are no longer "prisoners or slaves". They are no longer dislocated from themselves.

Chapter 3

'The Tomb of the Word': Language and Narrative in the Contemporary Female Bildungsroman

I was born to repeat myself.

You hear me, I'm croaking of repeated déja-vu, déjà-read, déjà-said. I obliterate myself a thousand times a day. Clichés and damn words. Desire to be grass. Pedantry in the mind. The sentences, the key words of the early hours escape me. Turning sour on the spot. Already seen a thousand copies. That's what I'm fated to go through. Every time. Always repeat. This obsession to start from the beginning to the end here and now the totality so often heard, repeated in the same terms. The spoken words unwound endlessly down to anguish (stranglehold) saturation of the totality. The cosmic hold of Parmenides freezes me.

Get in touch with elusive reality.

The tomb of the word shuts me in. No hold. Have done with God's judgement said Artaud: the judgments of fathers. I say to the letter the non-existence and the non-movement. (Theorêt 55-56)

Narrative and language in the contemporary female Bildungsroman are worthy of consideration because they provide insight into the woman writer's difficulty in presenting realities, which is further problematized by the conventions of the text and of language itself. No one word can be representative of a certain structure or theme within this genre, of course, but examination of narrative strategies and treatment of language can help us to locate revolutionary shifts in the heroines' perceptions which lead them toward change. Much of this is effected through violation, subversion of, and experimentation with traditional forms to render texts that are surging, specular and distinct. In this genre, self-consciousness and self-analysis are seen as processes of transition. Narrative and language are used in an attempt to transcend traditional forms.

In The Women's Room and Lady Oracle, the quest for self and the movement from fragmentation to wholeness are products of this struggle with language and form. As the representation of reality is examined, the demarcations between reality and art, fact and fiction, self and role are eventually exploded, resulting finally in integration. These novels will be dealt with sequentially, as similar strategies are employed in both.

The Women's Room is fraught with disruptions by a narrator who is distant, ironic and castigating toward the

central protagonist, Mira. These interruptions, which are contained mainly in separate chapters, generally provide a commentary on the action, and more particularly on the character of Mira. This voice first intrudes in the third chapter: "Perhaps you find Mira a little ridiculous. I do, myself" (11). In this narration, the tone is self-conscious, complicitous and reader-directed. This is nonetheless contained by the emphasis given to Mira's story. The narrator indulges in much self-reference, which leads us to believe that she is an important part of the main narrative. It is not until the closing pages of the novel, however, that we learn that this narrator actually is Mira, speaking from an older, more experienced and infinitely more cynical point of view. This bipolar development is important to a full understanding of the nature of Mira's self-quest.

More infrequently, these interruptions are found within the main narrative, which is the narrative of Mira's experience and growth. The effect of this is much more powerful and jarring. It disrupts the sequence of events and suspends the action. Often in these passages, the tone is melodramatic because the content is abstract, philosophical and ideological, offering vivid comparison with Mira's narrative of tedium, detail and dry reality. The line between these two worlds is clearly emphasized by the narrator throughout the novel: "When your body has to

deal all day with shit and string beans, your mind does, too" (67).

The two narratives of Mira and the narrator are not linear. The narrator is self-reflective and obsessed with an accurate reconstruction of the past. She emphasizes validity, authenticity and truth at every level of her examination. The result is a dual focus of development, then: a past third-person Mira moving into the present, and the older first-person narrator who attempts to place the past in a structured perspective. The narrator is further hindered by writing and memory, with all the ambiguities and contradictions they contain; the inevitable reliance of memory on subjective perception rather than objective reality. The disjunction between the two selves is apparent in the narrator's appraisal of her past self: "There's Mira with all her closed doors, and here's me with all my open ones, and we're both miserable" (11). At this stage, past and present selves are unaligned. It is only when we reach the close of the novel that we see that Bildung has been achieved by the realignment of past and present, role and self, through memory, extensive self-examination and the cruel dissection of experience.

In this way, The Women's Room is equally concerned with the development of the narrator, dislocated not only through time and memory, but suspended on the bridge between fact and fiction.

The novel begins with Mira's return to college. We first see her hiding in the bathroom there. She is thirty-eight years old. This episode is comprised of two chapters. The next two chapters introduce the narrator, who tells us that she is a professor, free for the summer, who reflects on Mira's position and decides to adapt a summer project of writing about the past, "to try to let the voices out" (18). We also learn that she is considered a madwoman who walks the Maine beach, and who has discarded "the image" (15). Chapter 5 reverts back to Mira's childhood, chronologically charting the events of her life, until she merges into the person of the narrator at the close of the novel.

The narrator reveals that she is a college professor who teaches "Fairy Tale and Folklore" along with Grammar and Composition. A great deal of the narrative in the novel focuses on fairytale, fiction and myth, which, while providing cultural perspective, is subverted to reveal alternate realities. As the narrator says of Mira: "What's to fear, after all, in a silly woman always running for her mirror to see who she is? Mira lived by her mirror as much as the queen in Snow White" (17). French points out that Mira's dependence on external approbation is rooted in conditioning through cultural stereotype, and results in feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness. The mirror must be renounced and the reflections proclaimed as inauthentic for any development to occur.

French has been criticized for her pursuit of realism at the expense of style, her concentration on matter rather than manner:

> Such loose writing suggests strongly that all that counts is subject matter, the nature of Mira's oppression as a miniature of women's oppression; that the artfulness of the narrative must be secondary. This is pure ideology, reminiscent of the arguments for social realism, and it sounds curious coming from an author who has written on James Joyce, Ulysses: The Book as World. In order to write about women, why must she discard everything she learned while obtaining a Ph.D.? (Karl 426)

Karl's criticism is well-founded until one realizes that he has not pinpointed the identity of the narrator, whom he describes as "unnamed" (Karl 426), and seems to mistake for French. The narrator's self-consciousness and apologies, even as she begins by stating: "Writing is hard for me. The best I can do is put down bits and pieces, fragments of time, fragments of lives" (The Women's Room 18) may be "intended to undercut criticism" (Karl 426), but I would argue that it is rather French's subversion of traditional form through the narrator's relentless insistence that the text is a record of reality and its fiction only a model of perception for the women trapped in that reality. By recording personal doubts and insecurities about the writing process itself, the narrator more effectively conveys this, as well as encouraging empathy, response, and immediacy on the part of the reader.

The feminist ideology which dominates The Women's Room is responsible for the proliferation of smaller narratives within the novel. Mira is invested with the responsibility of being representative, as the presence of a collective consciousness is predicated on shared experience.[1] In this way, the text becomes fuller, the quest motif richer, and the movement toward Bildung more purposeful. As one writer states:

> French's novel establishes a long narrative pace. An unhurried if strident set of tales about women's lives comprises the fabric of the novel. That many of the details of separate stories repeat each other is one of the most impressive ways of connecting the lives: even women as different from each other as Mira and Iso and Val have had similar experiences. No segment of culture is safe from the abuses of power-economic, physical and emotional power. (Wagner 294)

French, then, achieves this end in The Women's Room, even as her narrator expresses doubt about the long-term effects of the characters' special bond: "Would they all, when they came together in the future, mesh in precisely that way, feel the grace of connection? Such grace could not be arranged or forced or even hoped for; there was no structure capable of creating it" (545).

The narrator examines traditional fictions to probe the area between art and reality. Devoting time to Virginia Woolf and Arnold Bennett, she concludes that Bennett's work is closer to the stuff of reality because of his emphasis on the necessities of life, those "grimy pounds and pence"

(64). The story of Shakespeare's sister is subverted by the narrator to a baser level than Woolf's: she is raped, becomes pregnant, and must use the genius she has for words to manipulate the man she marries. The narrator justifies her cynical point of view by alluding to Mira's problems with money, family, home: those nasty details --

> I love Dostoyevsky, who doesn't harp on them but suggests them. They are always there in the background, like Time's winged chariot. But grimy details are not in the background of the lives of most women; they are the entire surface. (66)

As the novel progresses, the narrator realizes that she has presented a very one-sided account of Mira's marriage. She tries to rectify this by concentrating on Norm, but the material is inaccessible. Direct insight into the narrator's identity is given when she says, "One problem I have is that Mira didn't know much about what Norm felt through those years" (101). Her focus is too subjective and she is unable to give him a voice. Although she can endow him with a physical description, she cannot grant his character validity. Because of her difficulty, she becomes defensive:

> You think I am making him up. You think, Aha! A symbolic figure in what turns out after all to be an invented story. Alack, alas, I wish he were. Then he would be my failure, not life's. I'd much prefer to think that Norm is a stick figure because I am not much of a writer than because Norm is a stick figure...So maybe the problem is just that we don't know each other very well, men and women. (283)

When we realize that the speaker is Mira, the implications of this passage become much more powerful. The division between art and reality is refracted into a split between men and women. This subjective account, however, is honest, and reflects the narrator's conscious need to create a woman-centred epistemology which discards man-made fictions. French explicitly subverts traditional fictions by emphasizing the women characters in her novel. "Norm" as the name of Mira's husband is further revealing in its prototypical connotations. The question of this split becomes more general as the narrator later asks, "What is a man anyway?" (287) and moves to the heart of the feminist dialectic. These passages are digressive and their function is purely comparative, emphasized sharply by the narrator: "I guess I should get back to the story...Yes. And for every story I'm telling you, I'm leaving out three" (291). The lives and characters of the women in this novel are intertwined, dynamic and multidimensional. The men, by comparison, are separate, one-sided and static.

The narrator compares her own effort at writing to art, which provides no aid for her. By demanding validity in her account, she questions the closure inherent in art and breaks form through self-consciousness, self-reflexiveness: "I think I would not feel so bad about it if it had ended differently. Of course, I can't talk about ends, since I am still alive" (207). By questioning the closure and stasis

which characterizes art, the narrator allows us to see that this writing is a process, a transition, just as Mira's development does not cease because the text ends. The narrator mistrusts art because it is orderly and provides no essential knowledge on how to deal with life. It lies: "You can believe the first four acts, but not the fifth" (210); "The problem with the great literature of the past is that it doesn't tell you how to live with real endings" (211). The closure of art, then, functions as a removal from reality. For the woman writer, this can prove detrimental to the development of her heroine. Returning to the novel's opening, the narrator says:

> Because I was on my way to saying that Mira had lived all her life in fairy-tale land and when she went through the doorway, her head was still full of fairyland images, she had no notion of reality. So if you want to stand in judgement on her you have to determine whether her reality was the same as other people's, i.e. was she crazy? (13)

The narrator does not reject art but the implicit assumptions of any medium which perpetuates myth in order to displace reality and oppress women. As she later says, "The assumption that the men are the ones who matter, and that the women exist only in relation to them, is so silent and underrunning that even we never picked it up until recently. But after all, look at what we read" (289). In her novel, French rejects such assumptions. By using myth, fairy-tale and classic works of art and subverting them to alternate

realities in present-tense narratives, French emphasizes that the real and the symbolic are indeed connected, through tradition, memory, perception and action. Her account ends, but only because she is finite (627). She rejects the lies, closure and stasis of art. Her own account attempts to imitate reality by the narrator's involvement with the text, recording the difficulties of writing and ambivalence about where "truth" actually lies. It is still an imitation of reality, but the novel's resolution is open-ended, emphasizing further the themes of process and transition. French's main contention is that hope must be found in the reality of other women who lend support and encouragement, not in escape fantasy which perpetuates cycles of dream and disillusionment. The Bildung of this novel is one of realization and isolation, but French maintains that a realistic autonomy must dominate the closure of art:

> I wanted my life to be a work of art, but when I try to look at it, it swells and shrinks like the walls you glean in a delirious daze. My life sprawls and sags, like an old pair of baggy slacks that still, somehow, fit you. (210)

> I planned my death carefully; unlike my life, which meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it. My life had a tendency to spread, to get flabby, to scroll and festoon like the frame of a baroque mirror, which came from following the line of least resistance. I wanted my death, by contrast, to be neat and simple, understated, even a little severe, like a Quaker church or the basic black dress with a single strand of pearls much praised by fashion magazines when I was fifteen. No

> trumpets, no megaphones, no spangles; no loose ends, this time. (Lady Oracle 3)

These passages from The Women's Room and Lady Oracle indicate the similarity of focus in these novels on the division between art and reality; in both passages, the way in which the narrators describe their lives indicates this tension.

French's narrator describes her life as unkempt and chaotic, using the words "sprawls" and "sags" to illustrate what she sees as the shapelessness of her existence. Atwood's heroine follows a similar thread, by using words such as "spread", "scroll" and "festoon" to characterize the similar formlessness of her life. Both use clothing as metaphor. French's heroine describes her life as "an old pair of baggy slacks"; Atwood's Joan Foster wears "the basic black dress with a single strand of pearls" to characterize the creation of her fictional death. These images of disorder, lack of control and distortion reflect the narrators' fascination for art, which is controlled, ordered and enduring. French's narrator seems to have resolved this conflict within herself; Joan Foster, however, is still intrigued by the prospect of "no loose ends", with the promise of order that it holds.

Lady Oracle opens with Joan Foster in Terremoto, Italy. We learn that she has faked her own death in Toronto and is now hiding here. Joan's time in Terremoto comprises the

chronological end of the novel. Her past, from childhood until her fictional "death", comprises another section of Lady Oracle. As Joan is a Gothic romance writer, another section of the novel is taken up by her present manuscript called Stalked by Love, which provides a sub-plot to Lady Oracle. The principal characters in this Gothic are Redmond (the hero), Felicia (Redmond's wife), and Charlotte (the heroine). As Joan writes these Costume Gothics under the name Louisa K. Delacourt, they function as employment, an outlet for Joan's fantasies, and literary convention within Lady Oracle. As a Gothic writer, she also sees herself as a kind of "fairy godmother" (31) who provides her readers with an escape from reality. This sub-plot, as literary convention, also serves to mirror cultural stereotype, in a way similar to the use of fairy-tales in The Women's Room. One critic writes that:

> Among the narratives of romance and the romance of narrative, the Gothic remains to this day a major organizing grid for female consciousness. It is a form of sexual feudalism: the masochistic powerlessness of the generic female confronted with the no-frills, cruel-but-tender male. (Duplessis, 44)

The differences in style, language and content in the main narrative and Gothic sub-plot are quite striking. Joan is an unreliable narrator who oscillates between matter-of-factness, role-playing and indecision. The Gothic sub-plot is pervaded by archaic language and melodramatic action.

The link between plot and sub-plot is that Joan usually invests one of her characters with her own physical characteristics. This becomes important later in the novel when all divisions between plot and sub-plot break down.

As in The Women's Room, references to cultural stimuli foreshadow divisions between perception and receptivity to fantasy. Joan constantly compares her person to creations of popular culture. All reaction becomes an affectation rather than natural response. For example, remembering a Walt Disney movie she had seen when she was eight, Joan begins to cry. Although her sadness is rooted in the isolation and loneliness she feels in Terremoto, Joan thinks: "I never learned to cry with style, silently, the pearl-shaped tears rolling down my cheeks from wide luminous eyes, as on the covers of True Love comics, leaving no smears or streaks" (5-6). The act of crying is displaced from Joan's own emotions and reactions, influenced primarily by a cultural symbol in her mind.

The heroine's first crisis of identity arises when her mother tells her that she was named for Joan Crawford, who was everything that Joan is not, including thin: "Did she give me someone else's name because she wanted me never to have a name of my own?" (38) A further refraction is revealed in the fact that Joan Crawford's real name was Lucille LeSueur; this extended inauthenticity shames Joan for years.

Throughout the novel, various images cluster in Joan's mind as reflections and result in the indistinction between role and self. There are references to the Little Mermaid (of the Anderson tale), the Fat Lady of the circus, Moira Shearer of The Red Shoes, and various characters from her own Gothic novels. Suspended on a kaleidoscope of projections, fantasies and realities, Joan Foster feels that she must create alternate roles for herself. Her alternate selves consist of the Fat Lady, who blossoms out of Joan's adolescent obesity; Joan Foster, wife and poet of Lady Oracle; Louisa K. Delacourt, Gothic romance writer, and later, as all distinctions fade, even her mother, who hovers close to her every attempt at autonomy.

Atwood uses mirrors, corridors, mazes, changing body images and internal reflections to develop the fantasy lives of her heroine. These refractions function to violate the static polarities of the text and emphasize the difference between art and reality, death and life. Terremoto, as the setting for Joan's escape, after the creation of her fictional death, is romanticized by her as the Other Side, and becomes a term for conventional plots as well as for death. As Joan reads a romantic novel, she enviously thinks:

> I longed for the simplicity of that world, where happiness was possible and wounds were only ritual ones. Why had I been closed out from that impossible white paradise where love was as final

> as death, and banished to this other place where everything changed and shifted? (286)

As Joan is "hooked on plots" (312), she longs to live in the world of art, without pain and confusion, and the inevitable mutability of things. In Terremoto, however, she begins to change her point of view as, even having created her own death, reality remained the same and life went on without her. There she was suspended, and she thinks: "The Other Side was no paradise, it was only a limbo" (311). This suspension proves medicinal, however, as the heroine begins to gain a greater understanding of her nature, realizing that by escaping into fantasy she has been living vicariously through her roles: "It struck me that I'd spent too much of my life crouching behind closed doors, listening to the voices on the other side" (340). In Italy, when her attempts to disguise herself fail and the village people begin to get suspicious, Joan realizes that her efforts at fantasy have failed her here. As these distinctions fade, so do the divisions between Joan's writing and reality.

When Joan tries to finish Stalked by Love, she encounters more difficulty. The structure no longer fits; the form has become entangled with the reality of Joan's own experience:

> "My darling," he breathed hoarsely. Strong arms lifted her, his warm lips pressed her own...

> That was the way it was supposed to go, that was the way it had always gone before, but somehow it no longer felt right. I'd taken a wrong turn somewhere; there was something, some fact or clue, that I had overlooked. (334)

The "fact or clue" that Joan has overlooked in her writing is that the creation of such standard texts are defeating her. As Godard writes:

> The consolations of art and the happy endings of life are ultimately sterile and uninteresting to Joan. She resists the temptation to closure they offer, changing stories, changing identities in a continuous effort to avoid the grave, in a process that extends story within story ad infinitum, like the face in the mirror. And one of the secrets it contains is that the tale's apparent closure is a paradox...Life and death, mobility and closure are contained within it. (Godard 32)

When Joan tries to write again, she enters the plot as Felicia, who is cast as villainess in Stalked by Love. As Felicia possesses Joan's physical characteristics of red hair, green eyes and white skin, the two merge and become one. She enters the maze and encounters Redmond's former wives, who have been trapped within it. Within the conventions of the Gothic plot, she actually meets her various personae. She describes two of them as looking very much like her. The others are the Fat Lady and her mother. They are dead, trapped in the "central plot" forever, mere creations, roles without substance, perpetuated only by the machinations of the heroine's own imagination. This scene

functions to unite the polarities and multiplicities that have been refracted through the text.

When Joan/Felicia asserts that she is Lady Redmond, the first woman significantly replies: "But every man has more than one wife. Sometimes all at once, sometimes one at a time, sometimes ones he doesn't even know about" (342). Through this symbolic statement, Joan is able to see that her response to reality was based on keeping the polarities of her essential self separate and distinct.

While trying to go through the door to escape, Joan encounters Redmond, who she now realizes is a killer; if she dies she will remain at the center of the maze forever, eternally banished to the conventional plot. Now, "Cunningly, he began his transformations, trying to lure her into his reach" (342). Redmond assumes the characteristics of Joan's father, the Royal Porcupine, the Polish Count, Fraser Buchanan and Arthur, before his face turns into the death mask. Her creation has gone out of control. As he reaches for her throat, Joan withdraws, and acts on her survival instinct, predicated on the reality of necessity, not romanticization:

> It is fitting that Joan's story leads her at this point through the maze to the one man who has managed to put together the fragments of her story. Everything converges from the moment she gives herself up to multiplicity. When she sees herself playing the role of the many wives of Redmond, she gains the power to kill him. (Godard 21)

Opening her eyes, Joan hears real footsteps approaching her cottage in Terremoto and finds herself hitting a man over the head with a Cinzano bottle. She discovers an active, immediate reaction in her reflexive aggression which opens up a new area of self-discovery for her. One might argue that this is Joan's first act of confrontation rather than escape in the entire novel.

Joan's perpetuation of roles is caused in Lady Oracle in part by her need to assuage others and to make them happy. When her husband Arthur points out that Joan's "politics were sloppy" (90), Joan retreats behind the façade of his perception of her. In the process, her own self becomes obscured: "What he didn't know was that behind my compassionate smile was a set of tightly clenched teeth, and behind that a legion of voices, crying, What about me? What about my own pain? When is it my turn? But I'd learned to stifle these voices, to be calm and receptive" (90). Arthur also tells Joan that her mind is not disciplined (12), while the Polish count tells her the mystery of being a woman lies only in the body (166). Arthur tells her that she has no goals (212); the Royal Porcupine asserts that she is a threat to men (270).

Despite these peripheral judgments in Lady Oracle, however, there are references by Joan to her own basic unkemptness and untidiness. Quite early, her mother excuses her from household chores: "On the few occasions I'd

attempted it, the results had not pleased her" (51). When she later marries, she admits: "I wasn't at heart a kitchen-tidier, and he [Arthur] was disappointed later when he found this out" (170). Similarly, when she later alludes to cooking for Arthur, she says: "Being a bad cook was much easier than learning to be a good one, and the extra noise and flourishes didn't strain my powers of invention" (211-12). In Terremoto, when Mr. Vitrioni comes to visit, Joan realizes that her bed is not made, clothes and underwear litter the cottage, and dirty dishes lie in the sink and on the table (11). These allusions, somewhat incidental to the narrative of Joan's growth and experience, then, are significantly magnified in the last sentence of the novel: "It did make a mess; but then, I don't think I'll ever be a very tidy person" (345). These marginal references to Joan's disorder, which signal reality over the art which has "no loose ends" (3) and her subsequent acceptance of her untidiness, demonstrates affirmation of her real self. As Joan embraces chaos and unpredictability, which symbolize life, she views a future full of possibility. By accepting limitations, and therefore reality, Joan may discard the conventional plots that have failed her. Godard writes that:

> The worlds of fact and hallucination, autobiography and fiction, kept apart at the beginning of the novel(s) have become intermingled by the end. These and the subject/object division, the author/character separation, the

> male/female distinction, which the patriarchal tradition would view as polarities are in [these] novels by women shown to be aspects of the same thing, multiple and fluid, as they tend to run into one another. 'Every woman is many women; just as every story is many stories. (Godard 24)

Language is used as symbol in Doris Lessing's The Summer Before the Dark, and is integral to the process of psychic relocation in its heroine, Kate Brown. It functions as an essential part of the narrative, providing a parallel to the reality/theatre motif which Lessing weaves throughout the text.

As the novel opens, the narrator tells us that Kate Brown is going to grow old. It is assumed that this refers to a mid-life crisis, although this is never explicitly stated. Biological imagery in the novel supports this premise, as Lessing uses animals and physical illness as representations of reality and affirmation, symbols of inner growth and consciousness.

In The Summer Before the Dark, the tension between acculturation and biology is implicit in Lessing's handling of language. The heroine, Kate Brown, is prototypical. The biological aging of her body is inevitable, and the inner change she experiences parallels this transition with peculiar power and force because it, too, is contingent on instinct rather than learning. Much in the novel concerned with Kate's movement toward Bildung is elusive and impressionistic, as filled with silences as it is with

words. Ruthven has written on the difficulty with language that faces women writers, and articulates the problems of an area which has traditionally been male-dominated. He says:

> What a feminist linguistics must show is that language, in addition to being a prison in this general sense, is specifically a women's prison; and that linguistically speaking, women are doubly disadvantaged in being (as it were) prisoners of the male prisoners in the prison-house of language. (Ruthven 59)

For women, language is inadequate to identify reality, specifically, their reality.

The Summer Before the Dark is divided into five chapters -- "At Home", "Global Foods", "The Holiday", "The Hotel" and "Maureen's Flat". These chapters are external signifiers which accompany the delineation of Kate's inner journey. The structure is circular; Kate returns to the place from where she set out: Home.

The novel opens with the sentence: "A woman stood on her back step, arms folded, waiting" (3). The use by the narrator of "a woman" to describe Kate illustrates the narrator's distance, and, more significantly, the distance of the heroine from herself, which is emphasized through such oblique reference. What Kate thinks about is language: "She was letting words and phrases as worn as nursery rhymes slide around her tongue: for towards the crucial experiences custom allots certain attitudes and they are pretty stereotyped" (3). Through all of Kate's reflections,

the narrator persistently refers to the position of her body. As Rubenstein says, "Ironically, what has been most characteristic of her life, her 'passivity, adaptability to others' sweeps her into a series of choices through which she acknowledges those elements of her personality and gains more control over her own identity" (Rubenstein 203). In this first scene, Kate's body and her attitudes toward language identify her state of receptivity.

In this first chapter, Kate is described as mother and wife, passive, adaptable and for whom all areas of choice are predicated on external preferences. Her clothing is "all exquisite tact" (10), suitable for her age and position. Thinking again about language, she reflects that: "The truth was, she was becoming more and more uncomfortably conscious not only that the things she said and a good many of the things she thought had been taken down off a rack and put on, but that what she really felt was something else again" (4). Kate is trapped in a certain role, and like the language that characterizes her role, uses cliché, convention and stereotype to identify concepts and experience. Hovet and Lounsberry suggest that: "As in The Golden Notebook and earlier novels, Lessing here suggests that we must doubt the very language in which we think, speak, and remember, for it is fashioned by inauthentic role conditioning" (Hovet and Lounsberry 42). Kate's ability to recognize her own self-deception, however, constitutes a

positive receptivity toward change even as, paradoxically, she is unable to articulate her sense of this: "Choose? When do I ever choose? Have I ever chosen?" (9)

For the first time in twenty-five years, Kate Brown is separated from her husband and children when she is offered a summer job at a coffee company called Global Foods by her husband's friend, Alan Post. Ironically, her job is translating between business people from different countries. She first begins by translating Portuguese, "the language of her youth and initial social conditioning" (Hovet and Lounsberry 41-42). That she is at first worried about appearing well-groomed and competent, that she turns "...her inner adjustments of manner away from being Mrs. Michael Brown" (26), demonstrates Kate's sensitivity toward roles and convention.

At Global Foods, Kate observes the machinations of the business people, who are attractive and well-dressed. The interpreting process itself strikes Kate as a reflexive process; "She would be like a kind of machine herself: into her ears would flow one language, and from her mouth would flow another" (28). Lessing presents translation as a totally dependent form of language, in which the translator is an automaton.

Lessing also explores the power of visual cues throughout the novel -- posture, gesture, clothing, movement, touch -- to render the most immediate impressions:

"And what authority even the creases in a suit can convey worn by a man whose decisions are of importance to people hauling sacks of coffee on a hillside thousands of miles away" (30). Kate wonders if the countries' representatives have ever been hungry as there are no visible signs of poverty. In the superficial world of this international organization, people fit into prescribed roles, and the discrepancy between affluence and poverty is thickly disguised.

At Global Foods, Kate begins to notice that gestures communicate a variety of messages. She watches the officials alter their gestures and body movements to flirt with one another. Kate involves herself in this subterranean communication by changing her clothes and hair, discovering in the process that certain movements serve to make her either attractive and noticed, or invisible. The heroine is startled by this revelation and thinks: "This is what it must feel to be an actor, an actress -- how very taxing that must be, a sense of self kept burning behind so many different phantasms" (50). Ironically, Kate's own sense of self has been buried under a conventional disposition which follows her into her job at Global Foods. The adjustments of hair, clothing and position suddenly evoke an image of her younger self, in a white dress, sitting on a veranda. She wonders if that self had been "sympathetic", "a warm personality" (50). Kate then

realizes that those qualities have been formed out of the discipline of being a wife and mother. Lessing's use of the wife/mother role, which seems to embody and affirm admirable characteristics, demonstrates that these are destructive to the self-quest because they are rooted in convention, servitude and the denial of truth.

Moving away from language, then, as the primary indicator of validity, Kate uncovers further deceptions. Her own role of self-sacrifice is extended into the commercial, capitalist society, where stereotypes of the wife and mother functions are used as sales techniques. The process of movement and reflection is related in terms of past and present. As Kate views events in the present, they provide cues to retracing memory with an acutely aware perception. For example, when she thinks of a past flight she had taken to the United States, she remembers the stewardesses and thinks: "Never during her entire life had this thought come near her: the monstrousness of putting up a girl to be a target for public love -- drum majorette, airline advertisement, hostess -- for months, or for years" (62). It is "monstrous" because it reinforces sex-stereotyping and encourages societal attitudes which deny self-fulfillment in women.

When the conference of Global Foods moves to Turkey, Kate meets Jeffrey Merton. When the conference ends, she continues on to Spain with him. Here she is further

distanced from language, as she does not understand Spanish. She therefore travels closer to a new understanding of communication through the recognition of external, visual cues which propel her intuitive journey to the recesses of "the burning self" buried in consciousness and disguised as role. In a hotel one night, she hears two men talking and leans out through the window. Although she cannot understand the language, she realizes as she sees them that they are speaking business: "Yet she had not heard one word that told her this. Their voices were those of men talking about money; their bodies talked risk and gain" (95).

Reviewing her life as wife and mother, and comparing this with her younger self, it seemed to Kate that she had "acquired not virtues but a form of dementia" (103). Like Stefan in Shedding, she must confront her "false memory", the tendency to slot experience into conventional patterns.

> Kate thus finds language ineffective, indeed damagingly deceptive, in the public world. She begins to question the value of language in her personal life as well...She gradually discovers that the "love-talk" and other verbal conditioning have been so pervasive that they have determined not only her dress, make-up and behaviour, but the language of her private thoughts as well. (Hovet and Lounsberry 42)

As she returns to London, Kate becomes very ill and lies in a hotel bed for several weeks. Not completely recovered, she returns to her home and sees her friend Mary across the street. Although Mary sees her and stares, it

soon becomes evident that she does not recognize Kate, who has lost much weight, and is supposed to be elsewhere. Kate is incredulous. It is significant that Mary is described as wearing clothing uncommon to her, wearing "a straightly set and sensible hat" (164). Kate realizes that "...nothing of what she was seeing now was true of Mary, who was in disguise" (164). Because Mary does not recognize Kate and looks down on her, she assumes a relationship to her that is very different from her usual self. Kate reacts to the knowledge, that, because of a few arbitrary facts, she is suddenly anonymous to her best friend: "Far from being saddened by it, she felt quite drunk with relief that friendship, ties, 'knowing people' were so shallow, easily disproved" (168).

The same night, Kate attends the theatre to see A Month in the Country, wanting to explore this phenomenon and see people "dressed up in personalities not their own" (168). As Lessing uses language in The Summer Before the Dark as a metaphor of unreality, in this section the metaphor is extended into the microcosm of the theatre, where role-playing becomes almost superfluous to the larger images of daily unreality which the heroine observes.

At the theatre, Kate behaves in a bizarre manner, prompted by a combination of her illness and her observations. Ironically, as the actors assume their roles, Kate abandons hers. She creates a disturbance by shouting

at the actors, commenting on the action, and quite loudly declaring the whole scene nonsensical. Kate sees the play as a parody on the acting she sees in reality: "A joke. Like her own life. Farcical" (172). Moreover, when she surveys the audience, Kate finds that the people have all turned into animals. Lessing binds here the tensions of convention and biology, and ironically subverts them to demonstrate role-playing, deception and spiritual poverty. The image is a powerful one as Lessing draws attention to the ludicrously well-groomed heads of these animals that "would keep a dozen families alive for months" (172). In The Summer Before the Dark, hair and its grooming become a symbol of conformity to convention. The animals are "masks", and in her hysterical but visioned condition, Kate sees in the popular play and the affluent crowd the roles which are projected into the theatre. As Poznar comments: "The world as Kate comes to understand it is a theater, a stage on which figures perform their appointed roles. The conditioned reflexes of a new liberal age are so pervasive that the unreal has become real" (Poznar 57).

Recognizing stereotype as acting, Kate becomes attuned to her own feelings toward language and silence. Her decision to reclaim herself as inviolable, uninvadable, is expressed through her hair, a visual signal of her non-conformity to acculturation. She leaves a wide band of grey, rejecting any perceived dissent. It has been noted

that "Kate's widening band of grey is thus an assertion of truth over falsehood, an assertion of the truth of aging and physical death over the pretensions to perennial youth" (Hovet and Lounsberry 49). Kate's movement away from language is marked in her choice to make a statement visually.

Having abandoned most language as ineffective, Kate retraces areas of language and words that have held certain fixed meanings for her. When Maureen leaves a note in the apartment for her signed "love", Kate:

> ...tore up the note and said, Shit to that! using the word her children used, and Maureen used, but which she never had. She appropriated it, feeling it was her right: What a con! What a bloody great stupid game! What a load of shit...
> All her children shat, shitted, shit, in every sentence, like the workingman's fuck, fucking, fucked.
> Now she had said shit without knowing she was going to.
> So much for a word. (221)

As Kate moves from inauthentic responses to language, its power over her becomes negligible. Therefore "shit", a word which constitutes a violation of her former role, is said unconsciously and reflexively. Instead of responding conventionally and smiling indulgently at the word "love" on the paper, Kate rejects pretense and language which bind her to a certain role.

This affirmation of self is also echoed in Kate's silences. Withdrawing from responses such as sympathy and

self-giving, Kate must also be attuned to forms of deception and falseness. When Maureen speaks to Kate about her fears regarding marriage:

> Kate sat down and kept silent. She was thinking that she had indeed made a long journey in the last months. Before it she could not have sat quiet, while a girl her daughter's age wept with misery because of her, Kate's power to darken her future. Kate, at the other end of what she suddenly was feeling was a long interior journey, would have been "sensible", made balanced remarks of one kind or another, attempted consolation, because she still believed that consolation could be given. Yes, that was where she had changed. (226)

In The Summer Before the Dark, then, all reality is subverted by the triteness of language which results in removal from and inaccessibility to the truth, which may more significantly be communicated non-verbally. It is the heroine's receptivity to external cues which allows her to transcend false meanings and fixed definitions to move beyond her role to Bildung.

Verena Stefan's Shedding, an autobiographical novel which recounts her intense journey to self, also deals with language. She searches for a proper language to articulate her experiences, a woman's language which would elucidate her thoughts, dreams and physical being. She finds standard language too limited, too loaded with signifiers connoting traditional judgement, too male-defined. As Friedan comments on Shedding:

> By accepting vocabulary that implies the values of the system that creates it, women limit the possibilities of their own development and experience. Stefan tries to break through this barrier, rejecting alienating words and building new connections and associations to describe her experience. (Friedan 314)

The internal change which Stefan undergoes is reflected in four chapters of Shedding. These are called "Shadow Skin", "Withdrawal Symptoms", "State of Emergency" and "Gourd Woman". The first three chapters outline Stefan's young self moving out into the world, relationships and places, and her experiences in a love relationship with another woman.

Feminism in this novel helps Stefan to define her relation to the world and is indelibly inscribed in the process of awakening. Stefan comes to locate her self through individual thought rather than popular perception. By experimenting with a fluid style -- based on poems, dreams, sketches and memory -- Stefan's changing vision and gradual self-acceptance is incorporated into the text itself. As she adapts new ways of living, new methods of seeing, pushing tenaciously against inhibition and restriction, the text recounts the reality of that search in her writing. Style supports self-quest.

Early in the novel, the protagonist walks down a street in Berlin and passes an open tavern. As she approaches, a drunk man leans over the railing and verbally abuses her body. The heroine is incensed and infuriated, but has no

means of attack, no opportunity for retaliation. Her anger seems inexpressible, which leads to further frustration:

> To be able to strike back just once instead of having to pile up layer upon layer of indignation within myself. What use is the typewriter now? Letters are small dark signs, alien beings which creep about in disarray. I sweep them from the table...Perhaps he is still talking to the others about my breasts, while I sit on the floor and spell. (3-4)

Stefan's words resound with the feeling of dispossessing language, unable to articulate her own strong anger, which is turned back in despair upon the self. However, this feeling marks the beginning of her journey, as she must learn to align emotion with authentic language. Her beginning to spell marks the start of her journey, which is to be worked out in Shedding. The ambivalence that she feels at undertaking such a pilgrimage is reflected in the pattern of letters she weaves, a disconnected sequence which at first appears confused and disjointed:

```
W       H       E                       N
W       I                       L       L
T           H       E   D   A               Y
    C               O       M                   E
W       H   E                   N
W           O   M               E               N  (4)
```

Eventually we see that the letters, scattered except for their fusion in the middle, come to spell the words: "WHEN WILL THE DAY COME WHEN WOMEN" (4). The diffusion of the letters reflects what Stefan sees as the present

dislocation of women from each other, and the need to join together in order to recreate language and effect an operative articulation of woman's reality. It is a message of revolt against self-directed anger, inexpressiveness and silence while simultaneously elucidating a vision of autonomy and equality for women. The silence which comes from Stefan's anger explodes in this series of letters, and has serious ramifications for how her self-quest is worked out in the fabric of the text. As Abel comments on this type of writing:

> The silences that punctuate Mrs. Dalloway reflect the interruptions and enigmas of female experience and ally the novel with a recent trend in feminist aesthetics. The paradoxical goal of representing women's absence from culture has fostered an emphasis on "blank pages, gaps, borders, spaces and silence, holes in discourse" as the distinctive features of a self-consciously female writing. (Abel, 1983, 184)

Language erects frameworks for experience, education and self-knowledge, but is itself limited by its own imprecisions.[2] As difficult as it may be at times for language to encapsulate experience, as Ruthven points out (Ruthven 59), for women writers that frustration may be twice as debilitating. Stefan expresses the difficulty in relating to men through language. In a relationship with Samuel, Stefan tries to communicate her interests, goals and needs, but this becomes increasingly futile. Her lover is disinterested in feminism because he does not think that it directly affects him, although Stefan displays interest in

his political goals. In a poem Stefan illustrates the situational dynamics of their relationship:

> I worry about you
> You're getting further and further off the track
> Again we are talking about Feminism
> Weren't we going to talk about us
>
> You mean more to me than
> anything in the world. (41)

This poem is in Samuel's voice, and Stefan juxtaposes these statements to demonstrate that, for him, feminism is an ideology divorced from her essential being. That it is treated so casually and separately by him indicates his disinterest and lack of commitment to an equal relationship. The last line of this passage probes the subterranean territory of the conflict, the subtle emotional blackmail, and the implied sacrifice of self that it involves. Because Stefan by this time is exploring alternatives to traditional relationships, due to her involvement in the women's movement, she is able to pierce the ambiguity of such conversations and reach the reality beneath. For her to remain in this relationship with Samuel would require tolerance and submersion of self. Language is not helpful because of their different perspectives, and as Stefan says, "I lead a different life, speak a different language" (54).

To Stefan, language, in some cases, serves to obscure experience -- particularly woman-centred experience. It is useless at containing horrific violations of self. While she is travelling, the heroine meets and makes a date with

an American for a movie. Later, she is raped by him. Her thoughts following this assault focus on the triteness of the word used to encapsulate it: "A word is roaming around in my brain. I keep trying to apply it to the preceding evening, but it doesn't fit. The evening oozes out from under it, a puddle of brown. The four letters r a p e drown in it" (19). Perhaps language will never achieve articulation of the reality of this experience; all words become overwhelmed and inadequate in the process.

Disruptions in the sequence of traditional fictional structures occur throughout Shedding, which is infused with dream, poetry and poetic prose. Many of the poems in the novel provide the only clue of an older, reflective self who comments on the experiences of the younger protagonist, serving much the same function as the narrator in The Women's Room. In one section, as Stefan recounts how she got a gall bladder infection, she does so in two separate accounts, which exist side by side on the page, with only a slight margin between them. For purposes of clarity, it is necessary to provide the visual significance of this passage in the text:

> A year later I'm driving through Berlin with Dave, whom I've been in love with for a few weeks. We have met by accident, he gives me a ride. I've just come from the ear doctor, I have an abscess and it hurts. It is summer, I am wearing a dress.

On the way we decide we'd like to go to bed with each other and go to his place. A gentle summer breeze wafts through the open window onto my legs as we lie there, our energy spent. That's how I must have gotten a bladder infection.

On the way he keeps looking over at my bare knees, finally reaches over, touches them and asks, would I like to come home with him? (don't ever go home with a strange man! --but this is different. I love him!) I nod, we drive to his place. Something goes wrong, his penis slips out of me. Dave gets angry. My ear aches (Does that little bit of pain matter, if he wants me!) I try very hard to position myself correctly until he gets his orgasm. A gentle summer breeze wafts through the open window, icy, onto my legs. That's how I must have gotten a bladder infection. (19-20)

The difference between these two accounts is the insertion of the word "love" in the passage to the right. The word "love" in this version becomes a reason for the man's treatment of Stefan, and a reason for her denial of discomfort, her denial of self so that his needs can be met. The account at the left, although shorter, demonstrates mutuality, even in the absence of the word "love". There is no tension of perceived powerplay between Stefan and Dave. This technique is very useful because it portrays the rationalization of memory, and Stefan's effort to obtain the reality of her experiences outside the traditional responses she has been conditioned to feel. Stefan then goes on to

analyze such responses, and how detrimental they can ultimately be to self-quest:

> Love can be a means of camouflaging brutality for awhile. Love is often nothing more than layer upon layer of dependencies of every kind, for example, the dependency brought about by the need for a man's approval...Love is perpetually mistaking being desired for being violated. (20)

Stefan sees love as a dangerous rationalization and dependency; she, in effect, by switching the lens through which her responses have been viewed, approaches the word from a different angle, seeing it as an excuse for the truth, instead of the truth itself. Essentially, she revolutionizes, re-creates the word upon which insecurity and need for approval have hinged in her own mind. When her boyfriend compliments her on not being possessive, Stefan thinks, "No practice, no prior history in speaking, no demands. Being able to speak, mute wish" (21). Because of silence, conditioned responses, and various rationalizations, women have denied their own needs and desires. By examining the language on which such responses are predicated, Stefan, like Kate Brown of The Summer Before the Dark, is able to reach authentic feelings instead of conditioned reflexes of the mind.

Although previously attempting to find her self through sexuality, Stefan, through her process of awakening, confronts the contradictions and betrayals of self inherent in her relationships with men. She withdraws from a

relationship and enters a feminist workshop: "For me it was a question of rewriting my own falsified history" (49-50). Stefan comes to understand that language in her relationship was itself a device of power and sexuality could no longer serve as a reason for obscuring her essential self. Their conversations had become mere "Orphan's talk" (60), because of the words' standard meanings and empty repetitions. Change has occurred within Stefan -- she sees convention and stereotype as oppressive, language used to locate experience as dead. Language which reinforces this schism is particularly dangerous. Stefan consciously withdraws, and ironically learns to voice language which had previously been impossible:

> When I finally opened my mouth the patterns were
> there in my mind: of all the things I learned to
> express, the most difficult was the word no.
> Its predecessors had been:
> Actually, I didn't
> you know, I think that
> I merely meant to say
> what I meant was
> do your understand what I mean? (55)

The fragmented sentences in the above passage denote Stefan's earlier confusion and indecision. The powerful articulation of the word "no" indicates Stefan's present refusal to sacrifice her desires to another to receive approval or to appease.

The experimental style of Shedding focuses on reclaiming ideas and experience. Words are infused with new meanings that explode conventional definitions. Stefan

searches for a new language that is definitive, precise and encapsulating. The writing process is the site for the re-examination of language, the focus of re-construction. This is difficult for Stefan because in her movement from conceptualization to awareness, forms instilled in her consciousness must be re-endowed with energy and strength. The effect of this effort leads the reader into concrete awareness of the writing process itself, as it is worked out in Shedding. Just as language has obstructed her relationships with men, so it hampers effective communication of the journey she has taken into the depths of self: "...I must create new words, must be selective, write differently, use concepts in a different way. Every so often a word breaks out of my walled-in brain" (106). Stefan wants to use words in a way so that the reader experiences a flash of recognition, a reborn awareness of the reality of her own being. In this way, the simultaneous experimentation with forms in Shedding may prompt identification in the reader.

As she enters an affair with another woman in "State of Emergency", Stefan loses language to discover her body on her own terms in a relationship unpredicated by traditional terms. Words and definitions lose their original power as Stefan searches for wholeness unsplintered by language, culture or convention. This chapter is pervaded by a tone of fullness, warmth and connection, as Stefan locates her

body's significance to self. All aspects of Bildung are synthesized in her acknowledgement of her physical being as a crucial part of self. The chapter ends with a poem to the heroine's lover in celebration of self and wholeness, merging them with the revolutionary power of writing itself: "Painting and / writing to some extent offer tangible guidelines, / it is only because of these that we can survive, / that we can attempt to transcend / the tragically restrictive means of communication open to us" (111). Artistic endeavour in Shedding is a critical aspect of the quest motif. She concludes by telling her lover, Fenna, that this poem is a more concise and effective means of relating her feelings. Verbalization of her emotions would have taken many hours. Although language is largely ineffectual, and, for women, insufficient, we must use any means we can find to enunciate our realities, "...not perhaps to capture / our longings but to communicate them / not perhaps to live but to suspend / merely surviving / for a few hours" (112). In Stefan, then, we are able to view her metamorphosis from silence and spelling to determined articulation of the fundamental self.

The last chapter of Shedding, "Gourd Woman", is quite different from the rest of the novel. It centers on a character called Cloe and is told from the third person point of view. It is a fictional account that proves a significant departure from the previous first-person

analysis. However, the tone of self-love, reflection and wholeness is carried over from the preceding chapter, "State of Emergency". This chapter illustrates Stefan's Bildung; having achieved it, she is able to displace the character of Shedding into a fictional Cloe. The creation of a fictional self also demonstrates further artistic experimentation. Aligned with the rest of the novel, this chapter pinpoints the unity of body, mind and imagination in the writing process itself.

The most important function of "Gourd Woman" is to authenticate the reality of change, transition and metamorphosis, as much in the heroine as in the novel itself. Although the main character is different, Stefan demonstrates that the focus is the same, as we see Cloe laboriously working on language, writing and communication. The journey has thus come to an end; the circle is complete. Cloe thinks: "These numerous processes of assimilation and alienation must evolve in such a way that the signals emerging from my head and going into the typewriter correspond as closely to the original experience, though in another form" (116). Even as her character speaks, Stefan innovates these forms. The dynamism and fluidity of Shedding support the elusive and impressionistic stages of change, turning the text into a concrete articulation of Stefan's journey. This is eloquently iterated by the protagonist's fictional character at the close of the novel,

as her remarks on writing become applicable to each heroine on self-quest:

> She didn't believe the claim that a book was "finished" only when each printed sentence could be expressed in one way and no other. A book a process a piece of life, Cloe said to herself -- all changeable. (117)

In this way, narrative and language in the contemporary female Bildungsroman are used by modern women writers to illustrate the difficulties of traditional texts, popular and classical images, and language itself. In The Women's Room and Lady Oracle, French and Atwood introduce self-conscious narrators to explore the problems of the writing process, subverting convention and violating stereotype to render singular accounts of their heroines' lives. In The Summer Before the Dark, language functions as symbol in a similar endeavour, breaking down deception and falsehood in self-reflection as well as social circumstances. In Shedding, Stefan emphasizes the development of her heroine as a process, attempting to revolutionize the focus and meaning of language, moving it closer to the reality of experience. These texts all achieve the process of the protagonists' development through refraction in language and narrative. By defying convention, they demonstrate the problems inherent in woman's confrontation with both writing and society, and, as a result, are able to more forcefully delineate their heroines' movement to Bildung.

Conclusion

> This is a journey, not a war,
> there is no outcome,
> I renounce predictions.
> (Atwood, 1974, 75)

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.
> (Eliot 48)

As this study has focussed on in/visibility, spatial imagery and narrative and language, the question must be raised that if so many social constrictions exist along the heroine's path, can Bildung ever be achieved? A "successful" Bildungsroman is one in which the individual and society come to some sort of compromise. In most of the novels examined here, no such harmonic resolution seems to occur. Indeed, the heroines must rail against the social norm to obtain some measure of individual peace, and/or become isolated and alienated from the societies in which they live. Such endings have prompted much criticism from authors who see them as invalid and unsatisfactory. Are they unsatisfactory or unsatisfying? Pratt describes the contemporary Bildungsroman as a novel about a heroine who is "destined for disappointment" (Pratt 29) and Linda Howe calls these novels "narratives of survival" (Howe 177-184).

The resolutions of these novels, then, are the focus for much discussion on the validity of the contemporary

female Bildungsroman as a genre, when it appears that, because of such contradictions, Bildung is quite impossible. Linda Howe, for example, criticizes Braided Lives for what she views as its heroine's questionable journey -- and castigates the choices allowed to its heroine:

> Her affairs with men and women only prove her essential selfishness, for Jill uses people to fill her own various needs: different needs, different people. She uses the death of her cousin to end an engagement to Howie, whom she has known since childhood and loved through 300 pages. Poor Howie goes down without a struggle before her consuming need for independence. After all, Jill has survived her parents, Detroit, a threatened shotgun marriage, self-induced abortion, rape, her cousin's death; she is not about to lose it all for marriage! She will be alone, to do her own thing, to explain herself to no one. (Howe 180-181)

Howe grants us the salient pieces of information which comprise the plot of Braided Lives, but the light cast on them is aspersive and mocking. Moreover, this interpretation of the novel is faulty. Jill does not "use" Donna's death to break off her engagement; she does so because Howie insists that she not be involved in feminist activities after marriage. Jill feels responsible for reporting the doctor who performed the abortion from which Donna hemorrhaged. Marriage to Howie would again result in constriction and inhibition of the beliefs that Jill has come to hold and value. Howe's analysis is also suspect because it expresses many of the objections that have already been voiced in the novels by a watchful and critical

patriarchy. Key phrases in her criticism include "essential selfishness" and "consuming need for independence," as though such characteristics are in violation of the norm, and, in a woman, essentially unadmirable.

More criticism is levelled at French's The Women's Room, a novel which candidly espouses feminist ideology. Indeed, the feminist dimension in this novel, as in Piercey's Braided Lives, acts as a catalyst for movement, as women of Mira's generation gradually gain the strength and courage, through the support and acceptance of other women, to locate their faulty perceptions and change their lives. Feminism, in Mira's experience, has given her license, for the first time, to look at herself released from the trappings of the role by which she has been taught to define her being. Karl finds fault with French's treatment of feminism because her "women abdicate power in favor of personal peace; and yet acquisition of power over themselves is what they want" (Karl 427). Karl believes that French's view is too subjective, and that the novel, from a feminist perspective, solves nothing:

> What is incredible about such novels is that their authors settle for so little for their female protagonists. Their women, once freed of some of their doom, do not move out into the larger world and use their newly discovered power, the way their authors have. On the contrary, they seek out that small world -- the "women's room", in another sense from French's -- as a haven. (Karl 424)

Here Karl refers to the Mira who is self-exiled at the end of The Women's Room. Admittedly, on the surface there appears to be no "satisfactory" resolution. Mira has removed herself from society, lives on the beach at Cape Cod, and, by her own admission, is considered a madwoman. She, too, has rejected marriage as an option. Is this, too, selfish and a sign of consuming independence? The circularity of the text does seem to indicate stasis: we find the same woman on the beach at the close of the novel as we did at the beginning. But is it the same woman? The narrator and heroine have merged, showing that consciousness has been relocated and exists in different space. The close of the novel indicates an active mind which is still dissatisfied, still questioning, and, in many ways, still on self-quest. The last sentence of the novel, "But only the tide rolls in" (687) demonstrates that, at this time, Mira's self-examination has gone as far as it can go and that she has finally laid her ghosts to rest. She says: "It is over. It is time to begin something new, if I can find the energy, if I can find the heart" (686). Thus, the circularity of the text is a metaphor for the rediscovery and realignment of the fundamental self, a self which has been divorced from and assigned value by social impositions.

Lessing's The Summer Before the Dark receives similar criticism for its resolution, which involves Kate's return home to her family after a summer alone. In fact, because

of its ending, this novel has been called a satire (Cederstrom 131-145), as the only physical sign of Kate's internal transfiguration is the wide band of grey in her hair, which she refuses to dye. Kennard also objects to the use of such an image to denote Bildung:

> For all the feminist arguments against dismissing images as trivial because they are associated primarily with women or women's lives, there is surely some irony involved in expressing Kate's new life through something symbolic of the imprisoning domesticity of the old. The Summer Before the Dark, then, is finally "a confused statement", confused, in part at least, because Lessing has no alternative yet to some form of the two suitors convention. (Kennard 161)

This analysis is completely implausible because it assumes that Kate Brown's self-quest is predicated on the two suitors convention, that is, that her husband and Jeffrey Merton are the crucial variables in her movement to Bildung. Although they have integral significance in her self-realization, their roles are somewhat peripheral to the magnitude of the dream sequence and Kate's own intense self-exploration. Rather, their importance lies in the heroine's gradual awareness of the roles that, as a woman, she is forced to re-enact daily, both in public and private life. It is fitting that Kate Brown returns home with a wide band of grey in her hair, as her reclamation of self is not expressed to strangers, but to the very family which has chosen to define her by her roles as wife and mother. The Summer Before the Dark, finally, is not "a confused

statement" (Spacks, 1972, 369) because as the narrator's description of Kate at the beginning of the novel was through oblique reference (as an attractive middle-aged woman, a wife and mother) the description of the heroine at the close of the novel is as Kate Brown, illustrating that Kate has achieved Bildung.

While Bildung is the acknowledged goal of these novels, its precise meaning is complex and problematic. Swales, however, explains that Bildung is "...a total growth process, a diffused Werden, or becoming, involving something more intangible than the acquirement of a finite number of lessons" (Swales 14). Thus, Bildung may be seen as a culmination of intense experiences which leads the heroine to a heightened sense of self.

Duplessis emphasizes that traditional nineteenth-century endings for heroines included either marriage or death, and that it is the goal of twentieth-century women writers to expand the options for women in society (Duplessis 4). Pratt argues that the resolutions of contemporary female Bildungsromane are not "failures" because of the isolation which they involve; rather, that the heroine "is radically alienated by gender role norms from the very outset" (Pratt 36), which concurs with the negative images of in/visibility and space already examined.

In many ways, the contemporary female Bildungsroman is a novel which accents the value of transition, metamorphosis

and mutability in the life of the individual. The text itself is a script of the growth process, and the resolution supports this claim. Friedan examines the course of the heroine's journey in the female Bildungsroman -- from the removal from family, to errors in choice, and finally to the rejection of love and marriage as possible alternatives -- and concludes that:

> The female literary figure who unsuccessfully traverses this path shatters upon realizing her inability to break away; those who do succeed make choices which irreparably sever their bonds with the social structure and propel them into a life without role models, a "conclusion" that is merely another step in the process of development. (Friedan 306-307)

As the resolutions of these novels, then, are steps in the development of their protagonists, they cannot be cited as "failures" because their endings have not yet been written. Duplessis compares the nineteenth-century romance plot and contemporary writing by women and concludes that modern works reject and subvert the choices available to the heroine while questioning the values of the system which advocates such choices, and that these resolutions ultimately challenge the stasis and finality of the text:

> Writing beyond the ending means the transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative. These tactics, among them reparenting, woman-to-woman and brother-to-sister bonds, and forms of the communal protagonist, take issue with the mainstays of the social and ideological organization of gender, as these appear in fiction. Writing beyond the ending...produces a

> narrative that denies or reconstructs seductive patterns of feeling that are culturally mandated, internally policed, hegemonically poised. (Duplessis, 5)

In this way, as we have seen in the examination of narrative and language, the resolutions of contemporary female Bildungsromane are themselves transitions, openings which allow the next wave of choices to present themselves. In Lives of Girls and Women, the character of Del is traced from childhood through adolescence, until the close of the novel when she prepares to move outward into the larger world, having successfully rejected the stereotypes of gender. The heroine of Lady Oracle comes to recognize the various schisms of self that she has consciously perpetrated, and, as she prepares to return to Canada, renounces her multiple roles for the essential self. Similarly, the close of Stefan's Shedding focusses on the character of Cloe, who is bathed in a light of self-love and who attempts to reclaim power for women through the deconstruction of language. She emphasizes transition as the novel closes, indicating that as her character's development has not ended, neither has the novel which casts her as its heroine. Much of the criticism which deals with the resolutions of these novels focusses on the heroine's next goal as a primary indicator of the value of her growth process. It is the grand finale, if you will, to her experiences of victimization and powerlessness and,

as Karl advocates, it is her responsibility to move into that larger world and conquer it in some distinctive way. The heroine, then, is viewed as representative of all women, and while this is inarguably true of Mira in The Women's Room, the focus for any discussion of the Bildungsroman should be the protagonist's individual development. The heroine's journey to Bildung, which has been so difficult to achieve in terms of the images examined here, and the attendant factors of her class and value in patriarchal society, is "perhaps the most heroic one of all" (Edwards 49). The emphasis on plot as an indication of success has also been addressed by Swales:

> Compared with the major exemplars of realistic fiction, the plot of the Bildungsroman, of course, always tends to feel somewhat feeble and half-hearted. But in the context of its own narrative implication, the allegiance to story in the Bildungsroman, however tentative, is quite remarkable... It allows the novel to concern itself with a definition of experience which precludes any simple sense of finality, of "over and done with". Of course, the notion of a goal still has a place within human affairs. Yet, ultimately, the meaning of the growth process, of the Werden, is to be found in the process itself, not in any goal whose attainment it may make possible. The grasping for clarity and losing it, the alteration of certainty of purpose with a sense of the overriding randomness of living, these are seen to be the very stuff of human experience and such meaning and distinction as men [sic] are able to attain. The Bildungsroman, then, is written for the sake of the journey, and not for the sake of the happy ending toward which that journey points. (Swales 33-34)

Not only are the heroines of contemporary Bildungsromane in conflict with their societies, but, because of the position of women in the patriarchy, they have been conditioned to alienation from their essential selves. Swales comments that "The obstacles facing them have to do with the terms and parameters of human cognition" (Swales 165). The lack of closure in these novels indicates that there is no "ending" because women's lives are still in transition and that the choices available to them are steadily increasing, while simultaneously emphasizing the forces which have resulted in such alienation. In this way, then, these resolutions exist in a continuum, a kind of extended dialogue in which the voices reverberate the quality and depth of women's experience. By placing emphasis on the individual these authors portray their heroines searching out their own "satisfactory" conclusions. The imposition of criticism which denounces the contemporary female Bildungsroman because of the open-endedness of its resolution only serves to reinforce the premise that conventional standards and value judgements must indeed be subverted and even violated for women to reach Bildung. Once the self has been reclaimed as valid, only the world is left to conquer.

Endnotes

Chapter 1

[1]The disparity of perception between woman and society is explored by Gornick and Moran. Gornick stresses that this disparity is rooted in the Self/Other dichotomy and that because of the pervasive social perception, a woman in patriarchal society is "only a collection of myths" (83).

[2]Davis comments that women have been alienated from their bodies in literature as well as in reality and that menstruation has long been considered forbidden in literature. Stefan demonstrates that "writing off the self" means appropriating the power to both speak and feel every area of woman's experience.

Chapter 2

[1]See Tuchman on the economic history of separate spheres for men and women, as she examines the implications that such divisions have for contemporary women writers.

[2]For a distinctive interpretation of women's perception of and response to powerlessness, see Janeway, who notes that it "has been a constant and profound part of their lives, not chosen but assigned" (326).

[3]Bailey's discussion of the masculine image in Lives of Girls and Women argues that the strongly emphasized differences in experience between men and women in the novel rather serves to strengthen Del's androgynous nature and foster her creativity (113).

[4]Nager and Nelson-Shulman examine the variables which affect a woman in public, from body language to actual harassment, and conclude that a woman in public is treated by men as though she were invading inviolate space (144-149).

[5]For further reading on lesbianism in both traditional and contemporary literature, see Cook and Faderman.

Chapter 3

[1]See Abel (1981), as she points out that such friendships and female bondings in contemporary women's novels are used mainly as a means for "representing alternative female life choices" (414).

[2]As language has been culturally and historically appropriated by men, women's experience has been largely male-defined. For further reading on the effects of language on woman's role in society, see Lakoff and Spender.

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