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Private Lives““

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Abstract

Carol Shields started writing in the 1960s, which places her at the centre of second wave feminism, a time in which being 'feminine' was problematic and was seen as the origin of all women's problems. Shields's female characters have often been accused of staying in the domestic sphere and thus seem reminiscent of the 19th century: being primarily feminine, oppressed, blind, and not interested in joining the feminist chorus, whereas contemporary writers such as Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood were actively trying to change society's perception of women through their literary output. My main concern lies with Shields's representation of femininity, her subtle feminism, and the trajectory of growth of her female characters throughout her 30-year long career as a writer, concentrating on her three published collections of short stories: *Various Miracles* (1985), *The Orange Fish* (1989), and *Dressing Up for the Carnival* (2000).

Exzerpt

Carol Shields fing in den 60er Jahren, Mitten in der zweiten feministischen Welle, an zu schreiben, in einer Zeit, in der das Wort „feminin“ als Hauptursache aller Frauenprobleme galt. Shields weibliche Charaktere wurden schon oft beschuldigt, sich auf eine für das 19. Jahrhundert typische hausfrauliche Sphäre zu beschränken und demnach „nur“ feminin, unterdrückt, blind und desinteressiert an den lauter werdenden feministischen Stimmen ringsum zu sein, wie sie etwa zeitgenössische Schriftstellerinnen wie Alice Munro und Margaret Atwood erhoben und dadurch versuchten, die gesellschaftliche Wahrnehmung der Frau durch ihre literarischen Werke zu ändern. Mein Hauptaugenmerk liegt auf Shields Darstellung von Femininität, ihrem subtilen Feminismus und der Entwicklung ihrer weiblichen Charaktere während ihrer 30-jährigen Karriere als Schriftstellerin, wobei mein Fokus vor allem auf ihren drei veröffentlichten Kurzgeschichtenbänden liegt: *Various Miracles* (1985), *The Orange Fish* (1989), and *Dressing Up for the Carnival* (2000).

key words

Canadian short story, epiphanic story, Eros, female agency, female body, femininity, Individualist feminism, identity, third wave feminism, work

abbreviations used:

short stories from *Various Miracles*:

“Taking the Train” – TtT

“The Journal” – TJ

“A Wood” – Wood

short stories from *The Orange Fish*:

“Today is the Day” – TiD

“Sailors lost at Sea” – SIS

“Good Manners” – GM

“In Sickness and Health” – SH

short stories from *Dressing Up for the Carnival*:

“Next Best Kiss” – Kiss

“Dying for Love” – DL

“New Music” – NM

Carol Shields’s address at Hanover College in 1996 “Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard”:

Shields NH

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For my sons Simeon and René – dream BIG

1. Introduction

Being absorbed into the fictional world together with the appreciation of the insights we gain, the style, and the importance of the underlying themes, gives us the whole experience of a literary work. (Van Schooten 23)

Starting a thesis with a direct quote might seem a bad idea in the first place, but there is a reason why it is exactly where it is, and how it has acquired a certain personal validity as the introduction of this section. Van Schooten's and Oostdam's remark summarizes the least of what I have always gained from my reading experiences: a time-out from my surroundings and a dive into someone else's story, depicted through sometimes meaningful, at other times rather colloquial language, but always vivid enough to engage my fantasy driven imagery-centre in the brain. Reading was, is and will always be a very personal activity, an experience that cannot easily be shared with someone else, because every person reads differently.

[...] every act of reading is a complex transaction between the competence of the reader (the reader's world knowledge) and the kind of competence that a given text postulates in order to be read in an economical way – meaning a way that increases the comprehension and enjoyment of the text [...]. (Eco 42)

Umberto Eco's definition of the complexity of the act of reading reiterates Rosanne G. Potter's 2001 remark on "readers who are equipped to read", readers who "speak the language; have the reading-comprehension skills to handle most of the vocabulary and most of the syntactical demands of the text, and are not distracted from the reading process" (616). Both critical statements engage in a more analytical and less romantic discussion of what reading is. I would argue that reading is often no more than a way to relax and escape reality. However, fourteen years ago I was confronted with reading material that did not fit into any one of my reading categories because it defied every assumption I had had about my personal reading until then. At university, reading becomes a symptom indicative of the literature student; thus, it is quite an achievement when a book stirs the student out of his or her compulsory stupor.

I was first introduced to Carol Shields's works in 2001 because she was on the list of suggested readings for a lecture at the University of Innsbruck where I

still studied then. Reading her short novel *Swann* (1987) I felt irritated, puzzled, restless, uncomfortable – adjectives that I usually do not apply to my reading. Normally, every novel, short story, or poem had had at least one appealing characteristic, one peculiarity that had made the text personally pleasurable and readable. It was intriguing to react to a text in such a vehement and contradictory manner. Why was Carol Shields's short novel a problem? Could I have avoided this reaction or was this intended by the text and by the author?

Thus, in 2001 I set out to read through most of Carol Shields's written work and have reread it several times to date, concentrating on her various novels and short stories, in order to find the cause for my reaction and make sense of it. This thesis tries to clarify the reasons for both my annoyance and my astonishment with Shields as a female author writing about the lives of female characters in her very own way for over 30 years. In addition, and due to the nature and content of my questions, I found that an analysis primarily based on a feminist and post-feminist reading of her short stories would be the most appropriate approach to delineate the changes in Shields's depiction of women over time.

The theoretical background of literary critics within the feminist and post-feminist tradition such as Annis Pratt, Sidonie Smith, and Samantha Holland will form the basis of this thesis. Especially critics from the 1970s to the 1990s misread and misunderstood Carol Shields's female characters, labelling their lives as ordinary and irrelevant because they did not charge the streets with angry paroles or fight patriarchal structures openly and aggressively. However, I want to argue that Carol Shields developed a subtle yet effective way to criticise social injustice inflicted on women during her writing life, her criticism becoming more apparent and obvious in her later works.

Carol Shields started writing in the 1960s, which places her right at the centre of second wave feminism, a time in which "'femininity' was constituted as a problem" and "feminine values and behaviour were seen as a major cause of women's oppression" (Hollows 2). Shields's female characters have often been accused of being only that: feminine, oppressed, blind, and not interested in joining the feminist chorus. While "[m]any feminists were eagerly attempting to change every aspect of their lives" (Hollows 3), Carol Shields was accused of keeping her characters in the domestic sphere reminiscent of the 19th century. Very much in

line with Betty Friedan's 1970s project *The Feminine Mystique*, my main concern lies with Shields's representation of femininity, her increasing feminism, and the trajectory of growth of her female characters.

In chapter four I will give a short biographical survey of Carol Shields's writing career and in chapter five I will supply an overview of the role of the short story and of feminism in her writing. The main characteristics of Shields's short stories I will delineate in chapter six, in chapter seven and its subchapters I will finally focus on the actual depiction of women in Shields's short stories. On a scholarly level, I want to show how Carol Shields managed to stay true to her ideals and her "Self" and write about women's lives with all their domestic routines, their daily struggles and joys, and still draw a progressive picture of women making choices for themselves without fear of society's response, being worthy individuals and ultimately being third wave feminists before this literary and cultural movement had even been classified in social history.

So far, there have been a number of literary critics who have ventured out to prove that Carol Shields's oeuvre is far from domestic, among them her very good friend Blanche Howard, but also Coral Ann Howells, Dee Goertz, Marta Dvorak and Simone Vauthier. Two rather extensive collections of critical essays have been published to date: *Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction* (2003) and *Carol Shields – The Arts of a Writing Life* (2003). In 2008, Alex Ramon published his comprehensive collection of essays on Carol Shields's fiction titled *Liminal Spaces – The Double Art of Carol Shields* in which he reassesses several of her works in the light of auto/biografiction, narrative technique, and "otherness" to name only three of his approaches.

Carol Shields and her written work appears in many critical essays. Especially her novels have been widely acclaimed and analysed by literary scholars, foremost in Canada and the United States, and some of her short stories, such as "Mrs Turner Cutting the Grass", from her collection *Various Miracles* (1985), have triggered a number of interpretations that have been published. However, there have not been any broader studies or comparisons of Carol Shields's female characters across her 30 years of writing and publishing. I believe that a thorough analysis of her fictional women would shed an additional light on her artful crafting of feminine / feminist stories during a time when women's roles

in society were radically challenged and pulled down by women writers across the world.

2. The Literary Tradition in Anglophone Canada

Canadian literature, in English and French, has been the subject of many studies – foremost since the 1970s, a decade in which literature written by Canadians increasingly found its way across borders into the neighbouring United States, but also into Europe and Japan, among other countries (New 14). This border-crossing movement of literature and the resulting interest in its distinctive historical, textual and thematic features triggered the worldwide establishment of Canadian Studies organizations (New 1). The critical output from these at first national and then international organizations, the result of research at Canadian Universities and of their literature departments and the successive publication of literary anthologies enables scholars to trace back a tradition, which is comparatively short by European standards but nevertheless significant in regard to its influences, its development, and its ensuing international successes.

Während noch im Jahre 1922 der kanadische Kritiker Douglas Bush sarkastisch angemerkt hatte «No one reads a Canadian novel unless by mistake» und der Romancier Hugh MacLennan 1960 einen Essay über seine Erfahrungen mit amerikanischen Verlegern mit dem Titel «Boy Meets Girl in Winnipeg, and Who Cares?» versehen hatte, hat sich das Blatt in den letzten Jahrzehnten gewendet. Zum ersten Mal entstand nicht nur ein abgeschlossenes Korpus von Texten, sondern auch ein homogenes Lesepublikum und eine darauf bezogene professionelle Literaturkritik. (Pache 523)

As Pache mentions in his introductory essay, Canadian literature was not relevant on an international level until the second half of the 20th century, a fact that was sarcastically commented on by various Canadian authors due to the lack of recognition of literature penned in Canada. What follows is a brief outline of the relevant historical and cultural background that has influenced the development of what can be referred to as Canadian Literature. The first 200 years of Anglophone Canada's literary tradition will be outlined, pointing out the importance of the short story genre, its successes and drawbacks. Then, Canadian Literature since World

War II will be shortly analysed with a special focus on the relationship between Modernism and Postmodernism in Canada and the resulting new literary dimensions of the short story.

The beginnings of a distinctive Canadian literature in English can be dated back to the first, mainly British visitors and a few brave settlers in the first half of the 17th century. Among the then fashionable Jacobean poetry being published in Britain, a number of down-to-earth reports of the hardships in an often hostile Canadian climate started to appear (New 4). These sometimes fairly short reports may be viewed as the very first short stories produced on Canadian soil. Representatives of this genre were Samuel Hearne (1745-1792), an explorer for the Hudson's Bay Company, whose *[A] Journey from Prince Wales's Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean* written in 1795 and posthumously published, and Sir John Franklin (1786-1847) who wrote the *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea* in 1823 while exploring this region for the British Admiralty, among others (Löschnigg 15-16).

[...] so basiert die frühe kanadische Literatur auf einer dokumentarischen Tradition [...]. In zahlreichen Tagebüchern, Expeditionsberichten und autobiographischen Darstellungen legten die ersten Reisenden – Entdecker, Pelzhändler, Landvermesser – ihre Erlebnisse und Erfahrungen in unterschiedlicher Kodierung als *odyssey*, *ordeal* oder *quest* [...] dar. (Pache 528)

One of the most frequently quoted authors of the "Exploration and Travel Literature" genre of the first half of the 19th century is Susanna Moodie, who wrote *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852) – an at times unmistakably ironical but nevertheless exact account of life and its hardships in the still very much unknown and unexplored Canada (Pache 531). Susanna Moodie's sister, Catherine Parr Traill also ventured into writing down her experiences as the wife of an early settler on Canadian territory in *The Canadian Settler's Guide* (1854).

Die Berichte dieser (literarischen) Pionierinnen legen den Grundstein für die zentrale Rolle weiblicher Autoren in der kanadischen Literatur. Ihre Darstellung gespaltener Identität sowie der Affinität von Weiblichkeit und Natur eröffnet Motivbereiche, die bis heute bestimmend für die kanadische Literatur geblieben sind. (Löschnigg 19)

Until 1867, the founding year of the Confederation, Canadian literary works reflected European social and literary conventions, its fashions, and concerns. With an increase in local publishing ventures taking root around Canada, writers started to use the local scene as a source of inspiration and progressively published their “fanciful tales set in Europe and the Orient in periodicals side by side with realistic sketches of Canada and political and moral commentary” (New 6). With their eyes turned towards their own country, writers began introducing native words alongside with borrowed words from French, adaptations of English, regionalisms and vernacular cadences into their literary works, making the use of this specifically Canadian vocabulary legitimate and establishing it as an important part of Canadian literature (New 2).

The foundation of the Confederation brought along a sudden but welcome interest in the “growth of a national culture” (New 7). However, this mostly intellectual movement did not bring forth any concrete ideas or definitions of what the words “Canadian” or “Canada” might mean to the citizen:

In Kanada fehlt die Revolution – nicht nur als historisches Ereignis, sondern auch als kollektives Bewusstsein eines radikalen Bruches mit der Vergangenheit und als Ausgangspunkt einer umfassenden Hinwendung zur Zukunft. Crèvecoeurs Frage «What then ist he American, this new man?», gestellt in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), wurde in Kanada nie aktuell. Im Gegenteil: gefragt wird nach dem Schicksal des alten Menschen in einer neuen und fremden Umgebung. (Pache 521)

The Canadian literary output in the late 19th century was dominated by poetry and short-fiction writing by a group of authors known as the “Confederation Group”, among them poet Bliss Carman, who “sought plainer ways to record the beauty and reality of the Canadian landscape, and used natural imagery as a language of spiritual inquiry” or Duncan Campbell Scott who “introduced psychological realism into narrative form” (New 8).

Duncan Campbell Scott (1862-1947) cleared the way for the Canadian short story with the publication of his short story cycle *In the Village of Viger* (1896), a collection of stories that uses features of the local colour stories but breaks with their usually idyllic setting and adds psychological depth to the characters (Löschnigg 30). However, the short story did not take hold of Canadian writers until the first half of the 20th century. Authors such as Morley Callaghan, Sinclair Ross

and Raymond Knister among others led the short story towards its first climax as a recognized subgenre of prose fiction and ultimately made the publication of an anthology of Canadian short stories possible.

Knister, dessen eigene Geschichten («Peaches, Peaches», 1925), meist handlungsarm, aber bildlich evokativ sind, publizierte 1928 die erste Anthologie *Canadian Short Stories* [...]. Knisters Anthologie enthält u. a. Erzählungen von Roberts, Leacock, Scott und Callaghan. (Pache 554)

Due to World War I, the literary landscape in Canada changed dramatically not only because of the many creative people who were lost in the war (such as John McCrae), but also because it brought a definite change in „attitudes towards empire and nationhood [...] as Canada moved towards equality within the Commonwealth” (New 8). Up to World War II, Canadian literature tried to come to terms with the increasingly difficult times not only as a factual reality but also by trying to use the upsurge of concerns and ideals as a new basis for the works of many authors, such as Irene Baird, Morley Callaghan, and E. J. Pratt (New 9) among others, promoting these values “in a more discomfoting, rebellious, critical fashion” (New 9) than before.

Portraits of immigrant life, analyses of Canadian economic class structure, class conflict in urban surroundings and the socially and institutionally constrained lives – particularly of women – were the top themes of writers of all genres. Specifically, the short story suffered from this change in perspective upon life in general and slowly withdrew from the literary landscape only to be rediscovered as a literary medium at the beginnings of the 1960s (Pache 554).

[...] the short story encapsulates the essence of literary modernism, and has an enduring ability to capture the episodic nature of twentieth-century experience. (Head 1)

During the years of the Second World War, Canadian writers tried to establish Canada and its literary subjects on a worldwide scale. By turning a critical eye towards the state of affairs in the world and an even more critical approach to the economic, political and social situation within Canada, some prose writers, such as Sinclair Ross in his novel *As for Me and My House* (1941) and his short stories “The Lamp at Noon” (1938) and “The Painted Door” (1939), tried to work out a new set of values useful for the individual to connect with the community.

Ross' Kurzgeschichten [...] entstanden in den 30er Jahren, zählen aber heute noch zum Kernbestand der kanadischen *short story*, nicht wegen ihres formalen Anspruchs, sondern wegen ihrer Thematik: der harte Kampf der Farmer in den Prärien gegen die Elemente, aber auch gegen das Zusammenbrechen menschlicher Beziehungen. (Pache 554)

Other writers, such as Mordecai Richler in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959) approached their topics with a raw, satirical and ironical attitude (New 10). These changes in attitude were not only visible in the genres of the novel or the short story, the new wind that was blowing in literature was also felt by Canadian dramatists.

Drama experienced a sudden upsurge due to the development of radio, play societies and the Little Theatre Movement. Radio dramatizations were becoming increasingly popular and ultimately helped reintroduce the short-story form into the Canadian literary landscape (New 11). The Montreal Story Tellers, for example, among them John Metcalf, Clark Blaise, and Ray Fraser, promoted the reading of the short story even further by presenting their own works in high schools and community groups in Eastern Canada (Gadpaille 102). As one of the most used travel-companions states: "Canada has produced an impressive body of writing. Most of it has appeared since the 1940s. [...] Canada seems to produce writers who excel in the short story [...]" (Lightbody, ed. 29-31).

During the 1960s, several government support programs for the arts were established and thereby made texts and paperback books more easily and cheaply available to the public. Professional societies, such as the Writers' Union of Canada, popular festivals and the interest of an international scholarly audience helped foster Canadian literature even more.

[...] Hood gehört, gemeinsam mit Clark Blaise, Ray Fraser, John Metcalf and Ray Smith, zur Gruppe der *Montreal Story Tellers*, die von 1964 bis in die Mitte der 70er Jahre durch Lesungen vor Publikum – eine in Kanada noch höchst populäre Form der Literaturverbreitung – öffentliches Interesse für *short stories* weckten. (Pache 555)

The major literary subjects which designated the final arrival of Modernism in Canadian literature were political justice, the nature and source of violence, the realistic depiction of the craft of writing to assert its importance within the world

order and, of course, feminist issues, presented by writers such as Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro (New 12-13).

Als Prototyp der modernistischen *short story* in Kanada kann das umfangreiche Werk von [Alice] Munro gelten, das ähnliche thematische Schwerpunkte [wie Mavis Gallant] aufweist: Herkunft und Entfremdung, Probleme sozialer Schichtung, vor allem auch die weibliche Sexualität als Erfüllung und Bedrohung. [...] Im narrativen Diskurs wird die scheinbar chaotische Welt neu geordnet und mit oft komischer Pointe versehen. (Pache 555)

Towards the 1980s, Canadian literature profited from an increasing influx of English-language-speaking emigrants from the United States and from the Commonwealth, gaining several prominent literary figures, such as Bharati Mukherjee and Michael Ondaatje. These newcomers were able to introduce “other dimensions of ethnic sensitivity, stylistic versatility and comic insight to modern Canadian writing” (New 14), which is still recognizable in today’s Canadian literary output.

Während sich die moderne *short story* gelegentlich als anfällig für nationale Abschottung erweist, ist die postmoderne Spielart unverhüllt kontinentalistisch und hat Einflüsse zeitgenössischer Amerikaner wie Barth. [...] Hassan, Pynchon [...] rezipiert. Der postmoderne Text legt in Kanada wie überall die Techniken des fiktionalen Erzählens offen, statt sie zu verbergen, und sprengt überkommene Gattungsgrenzen. (Pache 555)

Many authors redirected their interests towards the short story as a literary medium with which to experiment, replacing realism by non-realism and parody in the narration. Although many new influences could be registered in Canadian literature, modernist and postmodernist techniques co-existed, and still co-exist, in literary works, especially in the short story.

In der Gleichzeitigkeit moderner und postmoderner Ansätze, wie sie in der zeitgenössischen *short story* besonders ausgeprägt ist, spiegelt sich einerseits die für die kanadische Literatur charakteristische “Verspätung”, andererseits aber auch die allgemeine Situation des Genres und eine generelle Unsicherheit über die weitere Entwicklung. (Pache 555-556)

It might be this impossibility to “pin down”, to clearly outline and give a standard definition of the short story genre that almost automatically links it to postmodernist writing and vice versa. The late twentieth-century postmodernist

focus on the subjective world, on personal experience and the individual consciousness tinted with a sense of cynical indifference furthered this pairing between the short story genre and the literary movement. As Valerie Shaw mentions in her *Critical Introduction*: “[...] the twentieth-century short story arises precisely out of a sense that life can only be rendered in fragments and compressed subjective episodes.” (Shaw 43)

The result of this combination of modernist/postmodernist writing, of the rediscovery of the short story genre’s flexibility as the fitting medium to respond to and thereby comment on modernity and of the core preoccupations of Canadian literature – “the embedding of individuals in relationships, the concomitant constraint this exercises on individuals, and, above all, the social identity of individuals” (Corse 2) – is a prolific literary output, most notably by many Canadian women writers.

When Sarah M. Corse develops her ideas on Canadian literature in *Nationalism and Literature – The Politics of Culture in Canada and the United States* (1997), the main aspect she observes are that “the general argument is that Canadian literature is more likely to be written by women and to focus on women’s experience [...]” (Corse 82). The general prevalence of women authors who write about the female experience in Canada can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when Susanna Moodie and her sister Catherine Parr Traill triggered off this development. Therefore, it should be considered a valid statement when women’s writing in Canadian literature is termed a “tradition”.

The upsurge of the feminist movement in the second half of the twentieth century is a principal component that flows into the distinctive tone of the literature that was and still is produced in Canada. In order to get a clearer picture of this relationship between feminism and literature in Canada, the following chapter briefly summarizes the nature, history and development of the feminist movement in Canada and debates the question whether literature is able to serve as an artistic outlet for the multi-layered dimensions of the women’s movement.

3. Feminism in Canada

Feminism is an ideology and a social movement that first emerged in medieval sacred commentaries, autobiographical journals and diaries (New *Feminism* 353), such as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's poems on the double-standard that designates male-female relationships throughout history (Watkins 6-7). However, it took another four hundred years to find a loud enough voice and slowly spread throughout the industrialized world in the late nineteenth century – a reaction to the numerous restrictions imposed on women by a patriarchal system and its male leaders.

After the Industrial Revolution, traditional society felt a subtle shift, a generally uncontested “separation between the public and private spheres” (Kerber 9), where men occupied their positions in the public sector while women obviously had to restrict their lives to the privacy of their homes. The more capitalism developed, the more women were forced to disappear in their homes:

With the development of capitalism, cities, and industry, a public sphere dominated by men and male activities developed and expanded. Women generally became restricted to the private sphere of household and family, and had limited involvement in political, economic, or even public social life. While some women were involved in more public activities, in the nineteenth century there were movements to restrict the participation of women in public life – for example, factory legislation and the family wage. (Powell 131)

In the late nineteenth century not only female voices such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton's and Susan B. Anthony's, but also male voices like John Stuart Mill's in the English Parliament, started to articulate their unwillingness to accept these restrictions in regard to the current legislation which reinforced gender-thinking and the strict differentiation between male and female that affected all aspects of women's lives.

The real changes in legislative matters regarding women and their rights came much later, when “The Woman Question” (Parkman 303) took hold of public discussions and debates in Britain and the United States, enquiring whether gender should be considered a factor in granting or limiting rights, whether gender was innate, biological or socially constructed and whether the family structure was a variable or not. Many of these questions still have no satisfactory or finite answer,

but the political and social developments in the industrialized world show that these concepts have been worked on and are a basic concern in our society.

Since 1976 when Marvin Zuker and June Callwood proclaimed that “The Law is Not for Women!” legal reform has been high on the agenda of Canadian feminists, as it was for earlier generations of feminists. (Pedersen 118)

The legislative answer to feminist questions in Canada took almost a century of women’s outrage and discussion, resulting at least in formal equality. In 1897 “a wife employed outside the home was allowed to retain her wages” (Burt 214). In 1918 women in English Canada were finally allowed to vote in federal elections, in Quebec it would not be permitted until as late as 1940. Amendments in the Canadian Criminal Code in 1969 finally legalized the sales of contraceptives and of abortions. Formal equality between women and men was included in the Canadian Charter of Rights under the 1982 Constitution Act, Section 15, which originally states that

every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability

and specifically notes in Section 28 that

Notwithstanding anything in this Charter, the rights and freedoms referred to in it are guaranteed equally to male and female persons.

Feminism can be seen as a movement that engulfed the industrialized world in three waves, the first one obviously includes the activities of the suffragettes and the granting of the vote to women in the late nineteenth century. The second wave is broadly located around the 1960s and 1970s, when feminism was concerned with the questions of equal employment opportunities, access to education and abortion, and the freedom to express women’s sexuality, among many other aspects (Snyder-Hall 255).

What fifty years ago could not have been mentioned in a social group – sexual and reproductive happenings and experiences – are now spoken of without inhibition. These changes are in part a product of (1) woman’s progressive sexual and economic emancipation; (2) the all-pervasive

influence of Freud's views and discoveries; and (3) the exposure during the World Wars of millions of American youths to cultures and peoples whose sex codes and practices differ greatly from those in which they had been reared. (Kinsey VIII)

As mentioned in the Introduction of the Kinsey Report, these questions would not have been regarded as worthy of an answer half a century earlier, but they did find the right platform in the 1960s. Women's sexual liberation was one of the key concerns during this decade, an issue that was also reflected in the literary output of the time, as is shown in Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (1966), a novel that rebelled – in form as well as in theme – against all established cultural values (Löschnigg 76).

The beginning of the third feminist wave is historically set in the late 1980s and early 1990s and it stretches well into the 21st century because many theorists maintain that feminism is still an ongoing intellectual and social process. The characterization of goals and aims of this third wave would be too expansive to summarize in one single definition. There are a great number of subjective and ambiguous meanings to consider when analysing what is referred to as post-feminism. A broad consensus of feminist critics and theorists agree on the fact that the unifying aspect of early feminism evolved into a very private and individual matter.

In looking closely at the research about young women's attitudes towards feminism, a picture emerges of a commitment to feminist principles of equality and justice, and a grappling with the neoliberal context of choice and individualisation, but a sense that ideas such as structures (patriarchy), unequally positioned social groups (women, men) and organised responses to these circumstances (the women's movement) no longer have the purchase they once had. (Harris 477)

Feminism itself can be divided into three main categories: liberal, Marxist, and radical feminism. These allow for an ever-expanding number of sub-categories, such as cyber-feminism, eco-feminism or gender-feminism, to name just three. The followers of the latter, the genderist feminists, for example, emphasize gender differences and see them as positive, thereby curiously contradicting feminists around the world from within their own rows (Treanor 3). Journalists, who are constantly confronted with social developments, sometimes have a more general and straightforward view of historical occurrences and see

them in a wider perspective. Dutch-born writer Renate Rubinstein, for example, sees gender feminism as a natural and historically foreseeable evolution of thought within radical feminism:

[In de radikale feminisme] wordt niet de gelijkwaardigheid van de beide geslachten, maar juist de anders-geaardheid benadrukt. [...] De inferioriteit werd eerst omgezet in gelijkwaardigheid [...] en daarna in superioriteit [...]. (Rubinstein 23)

own translation: [In radical feminism] it is not the equality of the two genders that is emphasized, but most notoriously their difference. [...] Inferiority is first turned into equality [...] and then into superiority [...].

The common denominator of all present day feminists is their foregrounding emphasis on the fact that equality between women and men has only been reached on paper and that there are still many changes to go through, most notably, of course, the change in the predefined and for centuries inculcated roles of societal behaviour in women but also in men.

Feminist writers and theorists, both female and male, have consistently played a major role in contributing to the spreading of the feminist ideology and its concerns. Through their fictional and non-fictional literary contributions, they have outlined the questions posed in feminism and sometimes its possible answers to a broader readership.

The feminist writers of the 1960s were part of feminist groups and political and social agitation. Currently, many of the feminist writers are involved in or closely associated with women's groups or social reform activities. (Gingrich 2)

Modern influential writers in Canada include Marie-Claire Blais in Québec, Daphne Marlatt, Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood in English Canada, among numerous others. Due to her consistent literary output and the themes and motifs presented in her works – her underlying pattern subsumed by Pache under the term “Emanzipationsfabeln” (554) – Margaret Atwood enjoys international renown as a postcolonial and more specifically as a feminist writer in twentieth century Anglophone canons (New *Feminism* 51). Feminist critics and theorists repeatedly quote from her oeuvre including *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which are among the most notably committed works

in examining male-female relationships, the woman's Self and her victimization within a clear political, social and cultural background (New 50).

[Margaret Atwood's] writings are to varying degrees concerned with the historical framework for the individual that emerges in the generic definition of [her] texts, and the writings run between the positions of a liberal humanist identity and the ideologically defined subject called into being by social pressures. (Hunter 197)

There are numerous Canadian writers who focus on the depiction of women's lives, some of them taking a more radical stance than others, some joining Margaret Atwood's rather satirical and sometimes cruel language while others prefer a more celebratory tone to envision their characters in their everyday surroundings. However differentiated their style and techniques may be, all (Canadian) women writers have one basic characteristic in common:

Wie jeder weiß, stehen in den gesellschaftlichen Auseinandersetzungen die verschiedensten Waffen zur Verfügung: das geht vom Streik bis zum blutigen Bürgerkrieg, vom Einsatz wirtschaftlicher Mittel bis zu den Parlamentsschlachten. Die Frauen jedoch sind von alledem nahezu ausgeschlossen. SO ist es ganz natürlich, dass sie sich auf andere [...] Hilfen stützen, um ihren Konflikt voranzutreiben. Und da ist an erster Stelle der literarische und publizistische Kampf zu nennen. (Hildebrandt 18)

The unifying element, the sheer act of writing about women's lives, is forever present in many if not all female Canadian writers, all of whom have found their own voice to recount their experiences as a woman that transforms into "the writer's naming, making concrete words out of vague, suffused feeling" (Wagner-Martin 70). Among these writers, Carol Shields stands out as both an acclaimed "women's writer" (Ellen 1) and, more importantly, as a recorder of women's lives. Despite the negative criticism that accompanied her throughout her writing and publishing career, Shields did not stop penning down those extraordinary but little noticed events in life that make it more valuable, presenting the reader with some surprising moments of insight.

The following chapter is a brief biographical survey and an outline of Carol Shields's life as a woman and as a writer of fiction – a woman who never saw herself as a feminist but felt her way into recording the feminine.

4. Carol Shields – A Biographical Survey

Carol Shields prefers the use of a gentler language than, for example, Margaret Atwood to paint a vivid picture of “ordinary people who outwardly lead unremarkable lives” (Irwin 1057), specked with accurate domestic observations. As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, writers who today are internationally known as “Canadian writers” were not necessarily born in Canada. Carol Shields is one of these prolific authors. She was born in Chicago, Michigan, in 1935 and spent her childhood between what she herself liked to call the “trinities of her childhood” (Ellen 2): church, school and the library:

[...] it was mainly the books of my mother that I read, four of them in particular, two of which were Canadian (not that I noticed at the time) [...] *Anne of Green Gables*, *A Girl of the Limberlost*, *Helen's Babies*, and *Beautiful Joe*. (Hammill 115)

Some of the most influential authors Carol Shields read when she was growing up were T.S. Eliot, Graham Greene, Virginia Woolf and Jane Austen, and even though these writers might be an indicator for a certain tendency to the non-conformist, Shields was rather the opposite. As she more than once pointed out in interviews: “When I was young, if you weren’t soft, feminine and sweet enough you wouldn’t get the man, the big house and the holidays. That was what we grew up with and we bought it.” (Ellen 2)

The lack of communication within her family, especially the silence surrounding her father who was a sweet-factory manager, fostered her reading habits and later she developed this into one of the main recurring themes in her writing – communication, misunderstandings, and silences. Shields talks about her parents and the obstacles her generation had to overcome:

I think the saddest thing about my parents’ generation was that a lot of people lived their entire lives without having a proper conversation. [...] There was so much that was taboo, so many areas that were never explored. [...] I didn’t feel it as a void because I think that void was of its generation. But I did realise that my life was going to be very different. (Ellen 2)

On a college exchange trip to Britain in 1956, Carol met Don, a Canadian and her soon afterwards husband who was an engineering student at the time.

Only a year after they had met they married – as was expected of a young woman at the time – and moved to Canada. Carol Shields had five children, and although “the progressive spirit of the age” (Ellen 2) did not pass her by entirely, Shields became a “typical woman, a typical housewife, a living statistic” (Ellen 2). Nonetheless, she was not in the least frustrated by this stereotypical domesticity.

This rather ordinary and inconspicuous background allows critics to establish a direct connection with Shields’s writing, which has mostly been described, classified and above all criticized as exactly that: domestic, ordinary and conventional. Geoff Hancock summarizes his opinion of these writers in the following comment: “Fiction, after all, is simply a way of looking at the world and making sense of the world. [...] too many Canadian short fiction writers are focussing on petty bourgeois characters with tiny domestic problems.” (Hancock 176)

Alice Munro should probably be mentioned at this point, as her fiction has often been compared to Carol Shields’s works – or rather the other way around – because Munro offers an “effortless but actually word-perfect style”, a continuous “use of family history to inform the contemporary domestic situations”, she presents “the quotidian nature of her characters and their plights”, and she manages to “[eliminate] nonessential detail to permit a novel’s worth of substance to comfortably fit into a short story’s confined space” (all quotes Hooper 29).

Both Shields and Munro seem to have many parallels in their writing, however, where Shields lets her characters move freely across Canada and even the world, Munro stays true to her Huron County region in most of her short stories and has been called a writer who takes up regional themes (McClelland 1). Another distinct feature of Munro’s stories is her predilection for family histories and a sense of historical connectedness between characters separated by generations, a characteristic missing in most of Shields’s short stories, but not in her novels.

Munro never betrayed her own style despite the initial criticism of being “domestic”; Carol Shields did not let the derogatory critical statements silence her either. She commented on this type of criticism: “When men write about ‘ordinary people’, they are thought to be subtle and sensitive. When women do, their novels are classified as domestic.” (Ellen 3) Such commentary could be looked upon at the time as the harmless ramblings of a middle-aged woman writer, however,

Shields's observational gifts paired with her subtle and innovative use of language turned the tables on her critics.

Contrary to many of her contemporary women writers, Carol Shields started writing and publishing her work late in her life. After her children were grown, she gradually "woke up to politics, to feminism, to writing" (Ellen 3). One reason why writing became so important to her was her mounting irritation with the general literary output that depicted women as "either bimbos or bitches" (Ellen 3):

I was astonished. I had no idea women thought like that or women could be anything other than what they were... It did change the way I thought about myself. I did begin to do a graduate degree part time, thought about doing some writing. It gave me courage. (Levy 2)

Carol Shields won several poetry prizes before completing her master's degree in English literature from the University of Ottawa and before publishing her first novel *Small Ceremonies* at the age of 40 in 1976. A regular stream of creativity from then on made her produce several more novels, three collections of short stories and of poems, a number of plays and numerous works of literary criticism.

Among Shields's most prominent and internationally acclaimed works are her novels *The Stone Diaries* (1993), short-listed for the 1995 Booker Prize and the first Canadian work to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction that same year, and *Larry's Party* (1998), winner of the 1998 Orange Prize for women's fiction that was adapted into a musical by Richard Ouzounian in Toronto in 2001. Some of her lesser-known novels include *The Box Garden* (1977), *Happenstance* (1980), *Swann* (1987), and *The Republic of Love* (1992). The enormous success of *The Stone Diaries* also influenced the publicity of her other books as "five of Shields's earlier novels and short story collections were re-issued by Vintage Canada in new editions" (York 1038).

However, it was *Larry's Party* and the issued reviews that gave her the image of a radical feminist - an image she did not know how to cope with because she did not see herself as such. The impossibility of seeing herself as a participant in the general literary subversion of the feminist movement made her realize that "[people] suddenly expected me to make great statements. I'd always been interested in feminism but I didn't feel I could speak for anyone." (Ellen 3)

Her last novel, *Unless* (2002), is probably the closest Carol Shields ever got to being a feminist addressing female issues such as the awakening of the protagonist to the knowledge that women are excluded from many sectors of society (literature, most notably) or the general idea of women's awakening to their often subdued and subjugated existence. The anger displayed in this work sheds some light onto the last years of the writer's life (Morrison 1).

After she was diagnosed with breast cancer, she tried to keep up with her teaching at the University of Winnipeg and her writing. She published a collection of short stories, *Dressing Up for The Carnival*, in 2000, her biography of Jane Austen in 2001 and the above mentioned novel. Writing kept her going, because she loved to "[have] one foot in one world, and the other in the real one" (Ellen 4).

In her last few years, as she dealt with illness, [Carol Shields] as co-editor with her good friend Marjorie Anderson, of **Dropped Threads** and **Dropped Threads 2**, she provided a wonderful forum for women writers, both professional and amateur, to explore all the gaps that remain in the discourse of women, and she made no apologies for her feminism. (Sellers 1)

Carol Shields died on July 16, 2003, of breast cancer after a long struggle in her home in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, leaving the literary world with a varied oeuvre that covers the most important genres of our times. Although her novels are better known and recognized by a wider public, her collections of short stories are no less accomplished in language, artifice and themes. As Morrison said in one of his essays, Shields will be remembered not as the "bard of the banal" but as the "elegist of the everyday" (Morrison 2), an apt description of the writer's forte, which in combination with her concern for women's lives made possible the creation of three astonishing collections of short stories.

5. The Short Story and Feminism in Carol Shields's Writing

In the previous chapters, I have tried to establish Carol Shields as the prolific writer that she was in all major genres and briefly noted the role that feminism played in making her realise her own potential as a woman (writer). The current chapter draws a picture of her use of the short story as the most appropriate medium to write about particular themes. It also outlines her rather eclectic approach to feminism and how this particular movement influenced her style.

Carol Shields's early ventures into the domains of short fiction in the 1970s were two volumes of poetry: *Others* (1972) and *Intersect* (1974). Poetry turned out to be the ideal medium to express her thoughts "in snatched moments" (Levy 1), given that at the time of writing these poems she was a mother of five children busy with writing an MA thesis on Susanna Moodie.

Irma Hildebrandt's assertion that a woman's domain was considered to be the home, even in the midst of second wave feminism, that a writer's working place is (mostly) at home, and that therefore writing is easily associated with something especially women do, nicely fits Carol Shields's coming of age as a writer (Hildebrandt 15).

In 1992, Shields published *Coming to Canada*, another volume of poetry, which has been characterized as being "less impressive than her fiction, although marked by the same appealing sensibility" (C. Rooke qtd. in Ramon 22). Constance Rooke mentions a "sensibility" concerning Carol Shields's fictional style, which is also pointed out in a more general context by Irma Hildebrandt, who reiterates that women have one of the most important prerequisites for becoming good writers – their sensibility – and as they are bound to stay at home for at least two or three years after they have had children, women are more likely to pick up writing:

Vielleicht gehört es zu den Geheimnissen der wachsenden Resonanz schreibender Frauen, dass sie besondere Fähigkeiten mitbringen, einen [...] dialogischen Prozeß (sic) zwischen Leser und Autor in Gang zu bringen. Ich meine Fähigkeiten, die sich aus der Tatsache ableiten, dass Frauen nun einmal [...] stärker an Fragen des Menschen als an Fragen der Sachen interessiert sind. Wer auf dem Felde der menschlichen und mitmenschlichen Problemlagen kundig und sprachgewandt ist, bringt schon daher wichtige Voraussetzungen fürs Schreiben mit. (Hildebrandt 17)

Although there are still literary critics who argue that women's lives and especially their writings are sentimental, emphasising the negative connotations attached to the word, there are still enough critics and, of course, readers who consider that "not everything that evokes emotion is bad" (Wagner-Martin 15).

Carol Shields uses both her subtle understanding of human nature and her observational skills to extract the emotional and, why not, the sentimental that resides in the mundane and ordinary throughout her writing, especially in her short stories.

An idea will come to me [...] and the short story seems the ideal form to direct it toward. The idea may be too slim for a novel, too playful to sustain over a long trajectory, but it nags at me until I find a home for it. (Garner 22)

Her short fiction writings were published in three collections of short stories: *Various Miracles* (1985), *The Orange Fish* (1989), and *Dressing up for the Carnival* (2000). These short stories were written in, as Dominic Head put it, the "'slice of life' Chekhovian tradition", portraying "twentieth century life, and the experience of modernity" (Head 16, 36). However, not only urban modernity becomes visible in Carol Shields's stories. Her views on women and their role in society need to be considered in relation to the developments of the feminist movement and her personal approach to it.

Given that Canadian literature has always had a tradition of emphasizing the "interpersonal connection" and "social identity" (Corse 76) of its characters, one could argue that Shields simply followed traditional mainstream Canadian writing.

Human connection, it is implied, is the only truly meaningful aspect of human life. Although it may be fraught with difficulty, peril, and heartache, connection is, in the end, the only true measure of a worthwhile life. (Corse 76)

This particular thematic issue of human connection is latent in her short stories, but Shields's depiction of women in her short fiction and her own comments on feminism's influence on her writing render it impossible to end the discussion here. Carol Shields finds surprisingly simple words when she points out that "[Feminism for me is] simply an acknowledgement that women are human" (Ellen 2).

Irma Hildebrandt argues that the writing of short fiction has a tradition of being characterized as a “female thing”, a fairly broad definition in which Carol Shields can obviously be included. Literary criticism of her short fiction works and the writer’s own commentaries provide us with enough material to assert that the influence of feminism is visible in her short stories, even though she does not consider herself a feminist writer. In other words, Shields displays and reflects upon one of the most incisive social, ideological and political movements of the 20th century in her short stories. Therefore, my analysis will focus on the depiction of women in selected stories and on why they have a lasting effect on the readers, not just from the feminist point of view but also more specifically from the female and feminine point of view.

I’ve been witness to this huge change for women in the second half of the 20th century [...]. They say you write the same novel over and over, and the idea of women being fully human has always been a preoccupation [of mine]. (Levy 1)

This statement corroborates the thesis that Carol Shields’s primary concern in her literary output lies with the picture that is drawn of women. She does not want to join the numerous feminist writers in their struggle to depict women from a skewed angle, making their female characters sad participants in lives that seem tortuous and full of sadness. Shields wants to give as complete a picture as possible, of women and their everyday struggles, and a faithful and realistic account of women’s lives in the late 20th century, with their gaps, silences, and disappointments, but also with joys, wonderment, and accomplishments.

6. Main Characteristics of Carol Shields's Short Stories

Carol Shields, as I have already pointed out, published three collections of short stories during her lifetime between 1985 and 2000, which comprise approximately 55 individual stories, depending on whether the publication is British or Canadian. This chapter and its sub-chapters present a framework in which the most common characteristics of Shields's short stories are presented. Three specific stories will serve as means of exemplification to analyse Shields's use of structure, language, setting, narrative perspective, characters and themes to create an overview of her unique stories of seemingly ordinary people getting on with their everyday lives.

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* gives the following definition of the short story:

[It] is a fictional prose tale of no specific length, but too short to be published as a volume on its own [...]. A short story will normally concentrate on a single event with only one or two characters, more economically than a novel's sustained exploration of social background. (Baldick 204)

This seems an over-simplified and almost needy definition. I want to add Jorge Luis Borges' clarification that the short story form's "indispensable elements are economy and a clearly stated beginning, middle and end" (Borges 237-238) and Hanson's point that "short fiction does not deal exclusively with private emotion [but] it can shed the weight of social commentary which seems inherent in the novel form" (Hanson 165). The sum of these three individual definitions provide argumentative grounds from which to move towards the more specialized analysis of Carol Shields's short stories in the subsequent chapters.

The length of a short story is essentially of no meaning – except to categorize the written work in terms of genre and sub-genre – and a discussion of length in Carol Shields's stories would not reveal any significant details relevant to the analysis itself. For the sake of completeness, I will mention that the shortest of her stories consists of four pages ("The Metaphor Is Dead – Pass It On!" in *Various Miracles*, 1985) and her longest story consists of twenty-seven pages ("Hazel" in *The Orange Fish*, 1989). Shields, as obviously many other short fiction writers, makes her stories as long as they need to be for her to be satisfied with the

depiction of the event(s) and character(s). As Robert M. Luscher mentions in his essay on Chekhov's short prose:

In his letters, Chekhov reiterates the short story's necessary incompleteness: 'Long detailed works have their own peculiar aims, which require a most careful execution regardless of total expression. But in a short story, it is better to say not enough than to say too much.'" (152)

As far as a short story's "single event" (Baldick 204) and its "one or two characters" (Baldick 204) mentioned by the Oxford Dictionary are concerned, Carol Shields apparently deviates from the norm. More often than not she lets several characters go through a number of events in the course of one single story, most remarkably in her last published collection of short stories, *Dressing Up for the Carnival*, that starts with the sentence: "All over town people are putting on their costumes." (Shields Carnival 1)

The "in medias res" opener of the first short story in the collection sets the reader into the right frame of mind to absorb the following description of twelve characters, an apparently arbitrary assembly of very disparaging characters and scenes. The fragmented structure of the story reinforces the intended effect of jumping from one character to another, from one minimalistic life-story to the next. The reader is confronted with twelve lives that have nothing in common – at first glance – and that are only held together by the opening sentence and the title of the story.

This technique of "unexplained juxtaposition" (Wright 126) of scenes in a common place such as a town square or a park immediately reminds the reader of Virginia Woolf's *Kew Gardens*, Virginia Woolf being one of the major influences in Carol Shields's writing. At this point, then, it is important to take into consideration several other authors who influenced Shields's work, especially in terms of structure, in order to give a more complete picture of one particular characteristic that emerges in most of her short fiction: the fragmentariness of her stories.

The fragmentary narrative employed by Shields, as argued above, could have been inspired by the modernist technique used by Virginia Woolf – splitting one or two events into several sequences and breaking up the unity of the plot in order to depict more accurately the "fragmentation [...] of the world, with a concomitant focus on 'being' [...] rather than 'becoming' that characterizes the plot

of the Romantic and the Victorian novel” (Ferguson 191). On the other hand, this technique easily fits the postmodern use of disjointed structures to better illustrate the fragmentation of the human identity in the late twentieth century (New 896). Both movements share this characteristic, although postmodern writing focuses more intensely on the story characters’ self-reflexion and their interior lives.

The publication dates of Shields’s collections of short stories place her works in a postmodernist context, however, the modernist influence of writers such as Virginia Woolf shines through in most of them and must also be considered in the commentary. Shields thus unifies two movements that some critics consider radically opposed while others see in them a smooth development (New 895). The fragmentariness in Shields is not only visible in the structural frame of the story but it is also visible in her characters and their identities.

The postmodern discussion has created plenty of theoretical fog, but it has opened up certain forms to a kind of playfulness in language and structure. [...] I love stories that sprawl, that include little side-stories, that go off on random journeys and that end, sometimes, not with a dying fall or a resolution, but a sudden jetting-off into space. (Garner 1)

In view of Borges’ opinion that a short story needs a “clearly stated beginning, middle and end” (Borges 237-238), the question is what exactly these typical characteristics of a modern short story are and whether they are applicable to Shields’s works. Jorge Luis Borges’ argumentation is true for the anecdotal short story, in which an Aristotelian action is presented (Leitch 130). Carol Shields, however, should rather be considered a writer of epiphanic stories, a tradition represented by modernist writers such as Anton Chekhov, James Joyce, and Stephen Crane.

The epiphanic story [...] adumbrates a fictional world not by developing a plot involving purposive agents but by unfolding particular sensations or emotions and proceedings to a climactic revelation that does not necessarily take the form of a complete overt action. (Leitch 130-131)

Leitch’s definition of the epiphanic story corresponds to Hanson’s comment on the redundancy to include a “social commentary” in the short story genre. The modernist short story is considered by many a vessel to transport not a linear plot but foremost the sensations, emotions, thoughts, and fairly often a transcendental moment for one or more characters. In the tradition of the modernist short story

writers such as Morley Callaghan, who found more relevance in “fragmentary reflections on his characters’ inner worlds rather than extraordinary external events, and points out the significant in the everyday” (Nischik 198), Carol Shields says about her own stories:

I love to find a way to match the form with the material or, in other words, to construct a container that is, at once, both story and vessel. [...] A good story is one I am happy to be inside of. Sometimes its surfaces are enough. (Garner 1)

The epiphanic short story form in its modernist context suits Carol Shields’s purpose of creating written works that lightly touch upon an array of topics, events, and characters that have a deeper meaning only revealed to the reader who looks beyond the surface. As has been mentioned in chapter 2.2, after WWII Canadian literature slowly adapted postmodernist strategies to suit the Canadian literary concerns of the time, often combining the more traditional realism with modernist and postmodernist characteristics (Nischik *History* 348). In her short stories, Carol Shields features this combination of various literary movements:

But it is particularly in her short-story collections [...] that Shields proves herself to be not only a realist-modernist writer, but one also open to postmodernist experimentation, with the publication of her first short-story collection marking a turning point in her oeuvre. (Nischik *History* 348)

The last point worth making in this brief overview of general characteristics in Shields’s short stories would be closure. As Leitch points out, the ending of an epiphanic short story is not easily categorized as a closed or open ending because it is left to the reader to put the finishing touches on the interpretation of a story’s unwritten ending,

[...] because the ending is a textual locus where the collaboration between writer (or text) and reader is particularly active, it is also a place that generates great possibilities of disagreement. The controversy about open and closed endings reveals that what some define as “closed” appears as “open” to others, while more recently, degrees of closedness (or openness) have been taken into consideration. (Vauthier 115)

Simone Vauthier appears to agree with Leitch’s general assumption that the ending of a story is both a functional device in the sense of Todorov’s theory of

narrative contiguity and substitution, and a personal assent of the reader towards the story's ending (Vauthier 115).

Carol Shields, as Simone Vauthier observes in her essay, uses both types of narrative in her creation of short stories. On the one hand, the reader finds stories which from the outset are written towards the closing moment(s), whereas there are almost as many stories that, written as narratives of substitution, do not offer the reader an ending, or a resolution for that matter, but rely on the "sense" of closure to be satisfactory enough (Vauthier 116-117), which is also very much in line with Roland Barthes' theory of the "text lisible" or open text (Baldick 123).

Furthermore, Carol Shields's moments of closure are often emphasized by a metafictional device used to remind the reader of the "figural valence [of the story] and of the figurability of the world" (Vauthier 121). Finally, the reader is always confronted with the fragmentariness of the stories that towards the ending or closure, draw a picture of unity through Shields's skilful use of language, of "tracing complex emotions to a closing cadence" (Hunter Brown 316). In the short story "Home" (*Various Miracles*, 1985) it is the intentional repetition of the title that "frames the narrative, pulls all threads together [achieving] a pretty firm closure" (Vauthier 129), a closure reached by circularity.

In no time it's over; the tourists, duly processed, hurry out into the sun. They feel lighter than air, they claim, freer than birds, drifting off into their various inventions of paradise as though oblivious to the million invisible filaments of connection, trivial, profound, which bind them one to the other and to the small planet they call home. (Shields "Home" 169-170)

Carol Shields finds closure without writing a definitive ending – by not giving the reader the expected answers or one clear resolution, yet providing the reader with the above mentioned "sense of closure". This sense of closure is only effective when combined with the right choice of words, sentences, with the right stylistic tools, which will be briefly analysed in the next chapter.

6.1. Style: Making and Connecting through Language

Carol Shields's style is often described by critics as "too domestic, too measured and calm, too nice" (Ellen 1). Other critics feel that Shields's "specialty has been the subtle ying and yang, the eternal 'ding-dong' [...] of the human condition" (Ellen 1). The hidden question here is whether the readers can identify with her characters, extrapolate the events and the induced feelings and apply them to their own experiences, whether the readership can immerse itself into this microscopically detailed world laid out before it, in short: it is a matter of whether her style connects with the reader or not.

Again, Chekhov's influence on Carol Shields's writing needs to be emphasized, particularly in regard to her choice of exploiting language itself "to express more sharply states of feeling and subtle changes in emotion" (Hunter Brown 316), which enables her to create a narrative that suits her "natural comic mode" (Wachtel 2) and reflects the "spontaneity of the human spirit" (Wachtel 2). Chekhov's emphasis on the significance of lending literary language the necessary emotional quality was positively adapted by Shields during her writing career.

The stylistic analysis of Carol Shields's short stories focuses on the process of "making" (Howard and Allen 89), on the writer's creation of stories on the one hand, and the reader's "making meaning" in the broader sense suggested by Miall and Kuiken in their *Literary Response Questionnaire* that I have already mentioned in the Introduction, and on the "connecting" of the reader with the character(s) / text / writer by means of language, as is put forward by Umberto Eco in his essay "Author, Text, Interpreters" in 2011.

The first part of my analysis will concentrate on the importance of language as a tool, briefly covering a description of Carol Shields's choice and use of vocabulary, of punctuation and of sentence patterns. The second part deals with the evocative imagery, the metaphors, the gaps and silences of human communication, and its effects on her characters and on the reader.

In order to simplify this process, three specific short stories – one from every collection – will be quoted to exemplify my line of argument. This method serves two purposes: not only does the analysis outline the basic features of "making and connecting", but it also reveals possible changes Shields's style underwent in the

course of the fifteen years that lie between the first and the last published collection of short stories.

The stories I will be discussing are “Fragility” from *Various Miracles* (1985), “Hinterland” from *The Orange Fish* (1989), and “The Next Best Kiss” from *Dressing Up for the Carnival* (2000). There are several reasons to choose these three stories. First of all, they show an almost even share of dialogues and inner monologues, which are long enough to lend themselves to the intended analysis of language as a tool for the writer as well as a tool for human connection. Second, these stories have a common denominator, because all three are an assembly of scenes or episodes that move towards a turning point in the relationship of three couples. This common denominator also allows us to trace the general stylistic change in Shields’s work on a smaller scale.

Finally, there is no better way of studying and dichotomizing the various forms of human connection and communication than through the model of couples or romantic relationships in these stories. The couple in “Fragility” is first introduced while getting on a plane from Toronto to Vancouver in search of the perfect house to move into after their handicapped son died a few months earlier. In “Hinterland”, the couple is spending a second honeymoon in Paris because their previous two visits to the city were too short for them to find out how the true Parisians live. “The Next Best Kiss” is a collection of scenes in a couple’s last weeks spent together before breaking up on an argument.

Carol Shields’s vocabulary seems to adapt to the story about to be told. Depending on the subjects, the language is formal, sometimes old-fashioned, often picturesque, or colloquial. The levels of formality and informality therefore vary in the three stories presented. Most of Shields’s short stories allow for a smooth reading because of the natural flow of the dialogues that are interspersed with many inner monologues and short descriptions of character(s), setting(s), and event(s).

One of the most astonishing characteristics of her vocabulary use is the surprising and unusual combination of particular adjectives with nouns to intensify the sensations and feelings that she is trying to get across through the stories. The “common-enough errand” (“Fragility” 94) of a “house-hunting expedition” (“Fragility” 94) takes a couple to visit a “divorce house” (“Fragility” 96). There is an

emotional level of implied meanings in these few expressions. The tediousness of the effort and the difficulty of the task that lies ahead of the couple is marked by the word “expedition”, and the bad vibrations the couple senses when entering the first house, the divorce house, not only highlight the theme of the story. They also trigger a response in the reader and establish a connection between what is happening in the text and the reader’s own experiences in similar situations in real life.

The second story, “Hinterland”, also builds on the readers’ empathic capacity and experience:

For the first ten days the sun gives out a soft powdery haze. Then it starts raining, little whips of water dashing down. Beneath their hotel window the streets are stripped of their elongated shadows and stippled light; this is suddenly a differently ordered reality, foreign and purposeful, with a harsh workaday existence [...]. (“Hinterland” 69)

The brief light-heartedness of the couple’s holiday, symbolized by the at first still sunny setting in “Hinterland” sharply contrasts with the settling in of “greyness”, the dreary and at the same time busy atmosphere in which the story then progresses, verging on urgency towards the end and already hinting at the laziness and insecurity that has crept into the protagonist couple’s relationship. Again, feelings are conveyed through the special attention paid to the choice of words that manages to elevate a non-assuming description to a higher level of empathic reading.

“The Next Best Kiss”, on the other hand, goes one step further in terms of vocabulary. The story is full of formal words that are combined, almost juxtaposed to ordinary words, presenting the reader with the most challenging and at times hilarious word creations and images, such as “hyperverbal compulsion” (“Kiss” 185) and “glottal thermometer” (“Kiss” 185).

‘We’ve probably said farewell to the world of sermons and to the clenched piety of holy pilgrimages,’ Todd said in his lecture, question marks hovering over his words like a jangle of surprised coat hangers. (“Kiss” 187)

Shields’s technique of combining inanimate nouns with adjectives that denote feelings or human traits, is a common technique in literature, but she developed her own style in combining formal words with informal, ordinary words

and domestic, creating an unusual mixture of abstract and concrete language rendering the stories more emotionally charged and making her work recognizable.

Punctuation is not necessarily a vital point of discussion in a thesis paper, however, it is part of Carol Shields's style – as it is part of any other writer's style, especially in the twentieth century – and therefore it should be briefly mentioned. Shields's long and winding sentences need punctuation to achieve the highest possible effect in the reader and to allow the latter full understanding of the story's meaning. In a 1996 interview, Carol Shields explained her predilection for long sentences and the logical advantage of punctuation:

I love to make long sentences. [...] I adore punctuation. I realize it's not as important to the rest of the world, and I'm always nagging at my students about commas [...] but punctuation is a kind of tool; it's something else that you can bring to your writing. It allows you to make those long sentences. (Rabinowitz 2)

Punctuation is a tool she uses to give her sentences a natural flow despite their length. Two of her most efficiently used punctuation devices are the dash and the three dots. In order to stress and accentuate the silences and the gaps of human narrative, her stories are sometimes saturated with dashes and the three dots that signal the speaker's voice trailing off in a conversation.

"Oh Lordy," Ivy said and bit her lip. "Of course not. It's only –"
"I know," I said.
"Maybe we can talk Robin and Sara into taking their holidays on the coast next year. Sara always said –"
"And we'll be back fairly often. At least twice a year."
"If only –"
"If only what?" ("Fragility" 95)

The pauses and unfinished sentences in the dialogue above are a perfect example of punctuation as a tool. The conversation, rendered with everything that is left unsaid makes the reader feel the hesitation and insecurity of the speaker(s) in addition to creating a truthful depiction of the reality surrounding the story itself and the readers' own reality – all of us have, at least at some point in a conversation, been in the uncomfortable position of not knowing what to say next or how. Thereby, Carol Shields again resourcefully connects the text with the reader and vice versa.

Another unusual characteristic of Shields's writing are the comments in parenthesis that can also be found in her stories and that remind the schooled reader of stage directions in a drama or screenplay. Obviously, these comments do not share the primary function of stage directions used in theatre – of establishing the setting and directing the actors in their performance. However, they are important asides that either clarify a character's opinion of a situation, of another character's personality or a conversation. They are often included to provide the reader with some additional information the author feels is necessary to understand the story and its development.

Sandy presented an afternoon seminar, "Diatribes and Discourse in the Twenty-first Century," prophetic in its pronouncements, spacy, brilliant (she hoped), loaded with allusive arrows (Lacan in particular), and followed by a vigorous Q - and - A session [...]. ("Kiss" 186)

Instead of disrupting the narrative flow, the comments in parenthesis smoothly blend in. One reason for using this technique is that the reader does not have to stop to take the comments in separately from the rest of the narrative.

The same can be said of the dialogues in Carol Shields's stories. The number of dialogues and their length roughly depend on the topic of the story and on the meaning that is to be conveyed to its readership. Essentially, the dialogues consist of easy prose, realistically depicting ordinary conversations in everyday language, which sometimes wear the slightest touch of irony or humour either in the utterances themselves or in the manner the conversations develop.

Instead of snow-capped splendour, we see a kind of Jackson Pollock dribbling white on green. [...] "It looks a little like a Jackson Pollock," Ivy says in that rhythmic voice of hers.
"Did you really just say that?" ("Fragility 93)

The humour but also the candour depicted in this small scene are typical of Carol Shields's work. In this particular scene, the husband is absent-mindedly making a connection between what he sees from the window of the plane and a painter's work, when his wife puts his thoughts into words and speaks them out loud. By making the husband ask whether she had just said what he thought he had heard, Shields establishes a strong connection between these two characters

and shows the invisible bond that exists between them without any long and winding explanations, descriptions or additional scenes.

On the other hand, the situation evokes a feeling of recognition in the reader – everyone has been through the strange experience of hearing somebody else speak out loud a thought that had just formed in his or her mind, linking the text and the characters to the reader's personal experience yet again. Carol Shields's humorous approach regarding people and their relationships is often more direct, as can be observed in the following example taken from the story "The Next Best Kiss":

"He talks in clauses, Sandy. You're not supposed to *talk* in clauses. And especially not with semicolons intervening. I can hear those semicolons coming at me. Little squash balls hitting the wall." (186)

Not only do the words used by the speaking character create a humorous frame for the conversation. The way the speaker utters the words also adds to the reader's sense of being a witness to a funny exchange between two good friends, a situation a reader can relate to, connecting him or her to the text again, this time by means of humour and irony. To underline this aspect, Shields uses words written in italics to further emphasize the humorous intonation and to denote the stress of the sentence.

The deceptively funny or more light-hearted stories are analogized to those with a more dramatic or rather sombre touch to them by way of topic or theme. The dialogues in these stories tend to be sparse and show many gaps because the narrative depends more strongly on the descriptions and inner monologues. In "Hinterland" the dialogues are kept to a minimum and the utterances in the conversation are very short to emphasize the husband's lack of interest in what his wife says:

"[...] – what will you remember?" [...]
"The tapestries," he says finally.
"Which one?" She eyes him closely. [...]
"Which one?"
"All of them," he says. (79)

The brevity of the questions and answers in this dialogue creates a sense of urgency that is not lost on the attentive reader. The exchange is short and

superficial, however, it is indicative of the protagonist couple's relationship – husband and wife do not have many things left to talk about and the wife is the one eager to make an effort by engaging her husband in a conversation but fails. The minimalistic dialogue here recurs in many of Shields's stories, demonstrating that although little is said in a conversation, communication takes place on many different levels; it is the absence of communication – the silences and gaps mentioned – that often carries a deeper meaning and is sometimes more telling than a longer conversation.

It is not surprising that Carol Shields also relies on descriptions and interior monologues to expand on the subtle nuances of human communication. The collection of thoughts or the use of a "controlled" stream of consciousness technique are significant parts of her stories. For want of a better word to describe her technique, I use the term "controlled" to point out that, even though these sections represent the characters' thoughts, Shields, unlike Virginia Woolf for example, uses punctuation to separate individual thoughts to emphasize the abruptness when they occur in a character's head one after the other: "Perhaps there was [some connection]; the cooler half of her brain bleeped this possibility. Human tissue. Tearing and bleeding. Sudden intervention." ("Kiss" 189)

There is a sense of control hovering over this short succession of thoughts caused by the use of full stops between them, instead of semicolons, commas, or no punctuation at all. The implied finality of a full stop exemplifies the control that either the female character herself involuntarily or the narrator purposefully exercise on the thoughts. A somewhat more "Woolfian" example of Shields' stream of consciousness technique is found in the story "Hinterland":

[...] everything outside the minute, *this* minute, falls away, [...]. Newspapers, books, shifts of allegiance. Minor cruelties, [...]. Meg emerging from the house one winter day, fastening her coat. Inca sculpture and lost phone numbers; a brief flirtation with a very young woman, how it came to nothing; snowbanks; trees; Jenny returning early from camp with rash on her back; Jenny bringing Kenneth home for the first time [...]. (85)

In the story, the main male character is innocently looking at a museum's art display when he is urged to leave the building with all other visitors because of a bomb threat. The thoughts that cross his mind while running for the door reflect

the urgency of the situation in that they resemble or imitate the clichéd images of a person's life passing in front of his or her eyes before dying.

All three stories share an underlying current of insecurity, instability, and urgency that often creeps into a relationship on different symbolical levels. In "Fragility" this is depicted by the juxtaposition of the title and the narrated event, the search of a new home for the protagonist couple after losing their son to cancer – a fragile situation. Here, Carol Shields uses the image of the house with its suggested meanings of safety and stability to emphasize the fragility and frugality of feelings and, in the end, of life itself through their "willed flight from the memory of their child's death" (Smith 1).

"Hinterland" shows a couple moving within the greying spaces of their relationship symbolized by the greyness of Paris' weather and their "separate visions of their individual and shared vulnerability and mortality" (Smith 1). This instability is highlighted by the husband's inability to properly communicate with his wife and the character's retreat into his own little world reflected in the short story's title.

One uncomfortable silence also leads to the next in "The Next Best Kiss". The situation intensifies until the couple realize that their urgency to talk is an expression of their insecurity in regard to their feelings for each other and their unstable relationship.

As can be inferred from this short overview, human communication on all levels plays a central role in Carol Shields's short stories – in fact in her writing in general. Thoughts, gestures, silences, gaps, single words, entire conversations, body language, all of these terms designate but single fragments of our communicative ability which Shields put together in her short stories to illustrate the external and internal struggles people go through in their everyday lives. The connection achieved through the stories between the characters and, on a metafictional level, between the reader and the characters and the narrated events further accentuate the importance of communication to understand human nature.

[The stories reveal] a fuzzy understanding with clarity and power, [...] bringing to the reader – as the best fiction can – a fully comprehensible story of the human struggle to comprehend. (Orozco 2)

The readers' understanding of the stories, the unique communicativeness of Shields's language and style, and the sense of *knowing* (own emphasis) that lingers on when the reader has finished a story lead to my next assumption: Carol Shields engages her readership by presenting her stories in such a realistic way that it is hard for the reader not to relate to the event(s) presented.

6.2. Universality and Verisimilitude

In the introductory paragraphs of this chapter, I have already pointed out that the unexplained juxtaposition of scenes is one of the most predominant features in Carol Shields's short story writing. The postmodernist technique is further enhanced by the universality of the settings and characters.

The sometimes over-emphasized importance of a story's culturally coded significance is relegated to a less prominent position in Shields's short fiction in order to allow the reader's immersion into the events taking place, regardless of the setting or any other characteristics that might have a pre-existing coding in the reader's mind.

[Universality is] the quality in a work of art which enables it to transcend the limits of the particular situation, place, time, person and incident in such a way that it may be of interest, pleasure and profit [...] to all men at any time in any place. [...] The writer who aspires to universality therefore concerns himself with, primarily, aspects of human nature and behaviour which seldom or never change. (Cuddon 1015-16)

Shields's stories keep the reader's focus directed at the events presented in them, a characteristic trait of the epiphanic story, without allowing too much space for digressions into descriptions of settings and characters. This does not mean that setting and character descriptions are irrelevant: the descriptive passages are used to add to or starkly contrast with the overall atmosphere of the stories. However, they are brief and only a means to an end – they are included to further the connection with the reader and convince him or her of the text's verisimilitude, of the story being "real".

[Verisimilitude] is lifelikeness, the degree to which a text convinces its reader that its action, characters, language, and other elements are credible

and probable. The term is sometimes used synonymously with “realism” [...]. (Childers 315)

Verisimilitude in its definition is, thus, a literary term that renders yet another supportive argument for Shields’s (neo-)realistic and modernist writing mode. The essence, the fundamental messages of her stories, their intellectual, emotional, and sensory experiences are conveyable to the reader because of the works’ verisimilitude and universality – everyday situations are depicted by ordinary people in places that are not crucial to the story’s reality.

6.3. Short Story Settings

Shields uses a wide range of country settings for her short stories – North America, Africa, Europe, Asia – the entire world seems to be a suitable surrounding for the development of her short prose. This kind of universality is achieved by Shields’s foregrounding of the communicative element in her works, thereby giving the numerous settings a lesser part as they serve merely to underline the atmosphere.

This collection [of short stories] allows us to feel ‘for a moment that rare satisfaction of stepping outside [our bodies] and entering a narrative that belong[s] not to any one of [us], but that [is] shared equally. (Thomas 2)

The lack of emphasis on the setting also stresses the significance of human communication in the stories. However minimalistic the description of the setting turns out to be, Carol Shields still makes use of it to some extent in order to create the corresponding atmosphere for the story being told.

As has already been mentioned in chapter 6.1, the story “Hinterland” is set in Paris, a city generally associated with the much (ab)used cliché of sunny love and romance. This culturally coded association is contradicted within the first two pages of the story by the description of a grey, windy, and rainy holiday spent almost in complete silence by the protagonist couple. The contrast between the reader’s expectations of the setting, and therefore of the anticipated events that are to take place, in addition to the actual setting reinforces the feeling of helplessness the couple faces regarding their relationship and which is also

reflected in their involuntary participation in the bombings taking place during their stay in Paris.

The settings in the story “Fragility” revolve around several houses the protagonist couple go to see on their search for a new home. Even though these houses are briefly described, it is not so much their actual architectural shape or layout that is foregrounded by Shields. It is rather the “vibrations” (“Fragility” 96) the couple perceive in each house and the glimpses they take at the stories that fill these houses as former homes of other people that are of special importance to Shields.

“I can’t help it,” Ivy is saying. “It just doesn’t feel like a lucky house. There’s something about – “

Marge Little interrupts with a broad smile. “I’ve got all kinds of interesting houses to show you. Maybe you’ll like the next one better.”

“Does it have good vibes?” Ivy asks, laughing a little to show that she’s only half-serious.

“I don’t know,” Marge Little says. “They don’t put that kind of info on the fact sheet.” (Fragility 97)

Marge Little’s comment on “fact sheets” makes the prominence of feelings, vibrations, guessed-at lives and overall atmosphere stand out even more from the story.

In “The Next Best Kiss”, the story is primarily set in Sandy’s, the main female character’s apartment, where she spends most of the summer with her new boyfriend and her daughter. However, the setting is only mentioned whenever Shields sees the need to visualize the distanced feeling and the silence that creeps into the otherwise very talkative protagonist couple’s relationship. No detailed description of the apartment is given. The reader only deduces the fact that the couple is staying in an apartment that has a bedroom and a kitchen because either they are having a conversation in bed or the main male character is cooking dinner. As their relationship deteriorates, the setting, or rather the distance of the two characters within the setting of the apartment and the silence, become more relevant.

This discussion took place on their last night together. For hours afterwards they lay silent on Sandy’s bed, neither one of them really sleeping [...]. They moved politely around the apartment, two civilized adults, [one of them] attaching his E-mail address to the fridge with one of Sandy’s rubberized fridge magnets. (“Kiss” 204)

The story, again, emphasizes the need for communication by describing what happens when there is nothing left to say between two people. In “The Next Best Kiss”, Carol Shields arranges the setting as an element that adds spatial distance to the couple’s felt estrangement.

After exemplifying Shields’s use of setting in her short stories, it becomes apparent that the focus of a closer analysis must lie on the people that crowd her works. The most interesting element in Shields’s oeuvre is the way she makes her characters transport the meaningfulness of the ordinary to her readership.

6.4. Short Story Characters and Narrators

The characters in Carol Shields’s short stories are easily recognisable as belonging to the North-American white middle-class who try to come to terms with their individual (often domestic) lives. The author, therefore, is “evoking the fears and concerns of ordinary people” (Wachtel 1), a feature for which Shields has been widely criticized. Very much in line with the modernist short story, she does not overemphasize characterization and external action but highlights the internal conflict of her characters.

The balance Shields achieves in writing about male and female characters and their lives is important. Although many of her characters are female, she does not obliterate the male characters. There is a continuous sense of equality to all of her stories in regard to the significance of the individual characters and the events these characters live through, no matter whether they are female or male.

This literary egalitarianism is also reflected in the stance she expresses in her narrative perspective. At this point in the analysis, I must admit to the difficulty of the task of separating the story characters from the story narrators in Carol Shields’s short fiction. As Valerie Shaw notes in *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (1983):

Many short stories make it very difficult to maintain any clear-cut separation between ‘narrators’ and ‘characters’: there are numerous examples in which narrative method and character are virtually one and the same thing [...]. (115)

For this reason, I have opted for writing about characters and narrators in one chapter – although one could write page upon page on them separately. It is important to remember that one of Shields's major concerns as a writer of short fiction was to write about communication and its (mal-)function in her characters' daily lives. This theme is directly linked to the importance of creating a sense of reality, of verisimilitude in her stories, something that can only be transported to the reader through personal story-telling, in narratological terms through character-bound and / or external focalizers.

First person narration appeals to many short-story writers because it provides a natural means of focusing elements which might otherwise seem disparate. Verisimilitude and concision can be attained at one stroke [...]. (Shaw 114)

Carol Shields alternates between first person, or character-bound focalization, and omniscient, or external focalization techniques in her three collections of short stories. There is a total of 37 short stories written by Carol Shields in my collection editions with an external focalizer that are written in the third person. However, there are only 18 short stories told through a character-bound narrator or focalizer. Ten of the latter follow a female focalizer / character, only five are written from the perspective of a male character, and three stories cannot be labelled as being told neither by a female nor by a male focalizer / character because there is no mention of gender, family status or any other hint at the identity of the focalizing character.

Carol Shields's stories in which an external focalizer, that is "an anonymous agent situated outside the fabula" (Bal 119), takes the reader through the events can be classified into two slightly different types. On the one hand, there are the stories in which multiple scenes and characters are briefly described by an - at first - superficial, objective, omniscient and external focalizer / narrator. On the other hand, there are those stories in which the narrator is omniscient but even though he or she would theoretically have access to all the characters' inner lives, the focalizer / narrator stays more with one character and leads the reader through the events of the story while they unfold around this character.

It is also possible for the entire story to be focalized by EF [external focalization]. The narrative can then appear objective, because the events are not presented from the point of view of the characters. The focalizer's bias is, then, not absent, since there is no such thing as 'objectivity', but it is unclear. (Bal 120)

Both "Hinterland" and "The Next Best Kiss" are examples of short fiction written with an external focalizer who follows one character more closely than other characters appearing throughout the narrated events. The narrator in "Hinterland", for example, follows the husband, Roy Sloan, more closely than the female character, Meg Sloan. Statistically seen, the narrator spends twelve pages with Roy Sloan and his thoughts while he walks through Paris, whereas only two pages are dedicated to Meg Sloan: "He feels he can say anything, no matter how rambling or speculative, and be understood. She listens and nods." ("Hinterland" 77)

This story has a framework built through the external focalizer's depiction of the couple's life as "the Sloans", husband and wife going on a late honeymoon to Paris, sharing some of the minor event developments, but then going separate ways for most of the time, with a special focus on Roy's visit to the museum. In "The Next Best Kiss", the external focalizer concentrates on the main female character, Sandy. The introductory paragraph is already very telling: "Todd and Sandy had been friends for just a few weeks, and Sandy knew they were about to say goodbye to each other." ("Kiss" 185)

The entire story revolves around Sandy as the main character, although the narrator could use the privilege of looking into the thoughts of all the story's characters and presenting the reader with more than one point of view regarding the varied incidents. The main female point of view, however, predominates.

As already mentioned, Carol Shields also makes use of character-bound focalizers as narrators of her stories. In "Fragility", for example, the story of the house-hunting expedition is told from the husband's point of view:

We are flying over the Rockies on our way to Vancouver, and there sits Ivy with her paperback. I ask myself: should I interrupt and draw her attention to the grandeur beneath us? ("Fragility" 92)

The opening paragraph of the story already sets the standard of what is to come in terms of narrative perspective. The focalizer and narrator is the main male character; he uses the pronoun "we" as often as the pronoun "I", the latter obviously

being the pronoun expected in a first person and character-bound narration. However, the husband switches to the familiar and very intimate “we”-mode during most of the story, which is a strong contrast to the unsettling and for the protagonists emotionally intrusive and unsettling proceedings on their search for a new home.

[...] the thought that we will soon be able to live within sight of these mountains fills us with optimism. [...] Vancouver is going to be an adventure. We’re going to be happy here. (“Fragility” 98)

The long-standing connection and the extreme closeness between the two characters become almost tangible to the reader by means of this narrative technique. No matter how many times the male character switches from “I” to “we”, the overall impression that lingers on is that, as a couple, the two characters are strong enough to face anything. Thus, an ordinary and almost self-evident trait of a strong relationship is subtly highlighted by Shields’s focalizing the narrative from within the story, by using a character-bound internal focalizer.

If the focalizer coincides with the character, that character will have a technical advantage over the other characters. The reader watches with the character’s eyes and will, in principle, be inclined to accept the vision presented by that character. [...] Such a character-bound focalizer [...] brings about *bias* and *limitation*. (Bal 118-119)

Readers might assume that a character-bound focalization is more subjective than an external focalizer because they feel the connection between the character and themselves more intensely than when the narrator is only a story’s outside agent. This assumption is, according to Mieke Bal and her focalization theory, wrong, due to the fact that focalization always implies a certain interpretation of events. (Bal 121) Carol Shields seems to have a preference for external focalization, a narrative technique that ensures a certain distancing from author and text / events, although “[...] there is never a doubt in our minds which character should receive most attention and sympathy.” (Bal 119)

Carol Shields’s use of narrative techniques such as focalization, ensures that male and female characters alike contribute to the ends she envisioned for her stories. She manages to put her male and female characters on the same level by specifically not concentrating on the female stories – a characteristic trait not only

of her short stories but also of her various novels, most notably of *Larry's Party* (1998). This strengthened her image as an author primarily interested in people, not in pre-defined social roles as people belonging to one gender or the other. Carol Shields's thematic preferences, therefore, cannot be reduced to such simplistic terms as love, hate, war, women – the basic idea of her writing was to paint a sometimes unusual but complete picture of ordinary people in not so ordinary situations, an idea that will be dealt with in the next chapter.

6.5. Themes - Ordinary Lives?

A theme is, by definition, an abstract idea that “emerges from a literary work's treatment of its subject matter or a topic recurring in a number of literary works” (Baldick 225). Carol Shields noted in an interview in May 2000 that she wasn't “aware of any overriding theme” in her stories but that she noticed they “are often about the stability or instability of personal identity” (Garner 1). As Clara Thomas observed in her critical essay on the author's short story “Mrs. Turner Cutting the Grass” in 1995:

The story's theme encapsulates the three elements that have become Carol Shields's trademarks: her celebration of the astonishingly extraordinary behind the most “ordinary” of facades; the sturdy reliability and actual beauty of the daily, the “quotidian” that all her works celebrate; and the amazing entanglement of dailiness with fate, coincidence [...]. (Thomas 97)

These three basic ingredients – encountering the extraordinary in the ordinary, the depiction of apparently insignificant moments of beauty in our daily lives, and the sometimes not so subtle influence of chance on everyone's life – indeed can be considered the red thread running through Carol Shields's writing career, most visible in her fragmentary collections of short stories. Shields's additional focus on the importance of communication enables the reader to establish a connection with the text in order to live through that one special “moment of insight” (Head 18) with the character(s). The theme that presents itself in Shields's works, sometimes directly but most of the time indirectly, is, thus, life

itself with its “highs, [...] lows and some breathtaking surprises [...]” (Thomas 99). The writer herself comes to the conclusion that

[I seek in my writing] those... transcendental moments when you suddenly feel everything makes sense and you perceive the pattern of the universe... I’m very interested in looking for those and recording them and finding language to record them. (Goertz 233)

Carol Shields does not seem to have a problem to write about either men or women. Both genders are represented in her writing and she slips into the male narrative point of view just as easily as into the female one. She treats both genders without the almost emblematic feminist and post-feminist bias in regard to the representation of male characters in women’s literature after the 1960s. With the publication of *Larry’s Party* in 1997, a novel written entirely from the main male character’s perspective, she made a very courageous move by focusing on a man’s life while being a female author often accused of writing domestic stories: “Men are portrayed as buffoons these days and I was trying not to do that [...]. I wanted to talk about this business of men in the world.” (Kanner 1)

Shields’s non-judgmental take on male narratives and her distanced recreation of female narratives underline her thematic concern with life as a unifying and communicative experience full of happiness but also misunderstandings and silences for men and women alike. However, it must be noted that, even though Carol Shields offers her readers short but memorable glimpses into the minds of both male and female characters in her stories, her writing still has a proffered tendency to select women’s lives as the central point of the narrative around which the stories unfold. This literary concern has been termed “world (re)building” (Johnson 217), a concern she definitely shares with fellow Canadian authors of the (post-) feminist and the postmodern movement, such as Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro.

The depiction of women’s lives in Carol Shields’s collections of short stories leads to a unique picture drawn from her very particular views on feminism. The narratives of her female characters are embedded in common enough situations. Her protagonist women have relationships on various levels: with their relatives, their friends, sometimes even with strangers, but always with their own Self. They dwell in a varied range of jobs: from housewives and mothers to scholars

presenting seminar papers within an international setting. Her characters work, sleep, eat, feel, communicate and are women who basically embody a sense of femininity in a society in which feminism is indelibly linked to all women, regardless of their own opinion towards it.

The analysis in the subsequent chapters focuses on the facets and stages in a woman's life as they are presented in a selection of Carol Shields's short stories - with a special interest in women's communication in the feminist and post-feminist era and how the writer reconciles the fact of being a feminine woman without necessarily being a feminist and being a feminist without giving up femininity.

As there are innumerable definitions of feminism and freely shifting concepts of femininity, especially when viewing the term across three decades of writing, I would like to narrow down my argumentative basis as follows.

First wave feminism has been critically limited to being primarily "concerned with women's suffrage" while second wave feminism has been defined by its "radical reconstruction or elimination of sex roles and the struggle for equal rights" (*both quotes in* Alfonso, Rita and Jo Trigilio 8). Third wave feminism, roughly placed within the 1990s and often referred to as post-feminism (with or without the hyphen), has been described as going through an "individualisation of concepts such as choice, power and independence" (Harris Anita 475) while still trying to adhere to the feminist dictum of "social justice activism" (Harris 475). This move towards self-definition and -responsibility, individualization of ideals and the diversification of choices for women is often termed *Individualist feminism* (Harris 476), or I-feminism, in feminist academic circles. I suggest that Carol Shields was an I-feminist before I-feminism was coined as a critical term associated with third wave feminism, a branch of feminism that respects women's choices and their individualism.

It would be almost impossible to give an accurate overview of the countless definitions and connotations of the idea of femininity throughout its history, especially when seen in connection to feminism. According to the Cambridge Dictionary Online, being feminine is "having characteristics that are traditionally thought to be typical of or suitable for a woman", whereas the Collins Cobuild

Dictionary matter-of-factly states that the concept of femininity “means the qualities that are considered to be typical of women”.

I would like to focus on the notion of femininity anchored in third wave feminism, when “young women [...] seem[ed] to be experiencing femininity and reacting to its exhortations in another way - they seem[ed] to be reclaiming it, taking it on - in contrast with the predominant androgyny of the earlier wave” (Alfonso 14). Placing the concept of femininity or the feminine within third wave feminism, and more precisely, linking it to Individualist feminism, I would like to treat femininity as an individually adaptable notion for every female character in Shields’s short stories, which means that every woman decides for herself what femininity means and to what end the concept might be used.

7. Carol Shields’s Depiction of Women

7.1. Agents and Witnesses of Parallel Stories

Throughout history, humanity has sought to understand the world by imposing an outrageous number of categories in which men and women, children and the elderly, healthy and sick people meddle, trying to find a Self by juxtaposing it to an “Other” and vice versa, allowing for binary oppositional systems to take control of our planet’s eternal “struggle to define” (Capetillo-Ponce 122).

This need for structuring society into dichotomies is considered a patriarchal convention that started long before Pythagoras, one in which woman is the Other of man, in which masculinity is socially constructed as the norm by which social ideas about humanity are defined (Zevallos 2), or as Simone de Beauvoir put it in *The Second Sex* (1949):

Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. [...] She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other. (qtd. in Sargent xii)

As a result, second wave feminists “called for [...] the overthrow of patriarchy” (Hollows 4), sensing that if patriarchy was overruled, women would be

able to define themselves from within their own “Self” and not as the opposite of man, as the “Other”. Many feminist fictional works deal with the definition and re-definition of woman as an individual possessing “[an] essential Self [that is] a ‘free’ agent, exercising self-determination over meaning, personal destiny, and desire. Neither powerless nor passive, it assumes and celebrates agency.” (Smith S. 8)

In second wave feminism this agency of fictional and real women came with the realisation that “the personal is political” (Hollows 4), that women all around the world had faced the same problems in their private spheres and were now ready to speak up publicly. This principle of sharing stories and the ensuing female bonding would become a strong basis from which 3rd wave feminism in the 1990s developed and moved one step further, “[seeking] to reunite ideals of gender equality and sexual freedom, of accepting a woman’s choices [and of] deep respect for pluralism and self-determination”. (Snyder-Hall 255)

Again, I argue that Carol Shields unites both second and third wave feminist maxims in her three collections of short stories even though third wave feminist ideals had not been articulated yet as such when *Various Miracles* (1985) and *The Orange Fish* (1989) were published. By presenting an analysis of one short story from each of her three collections, this chapter seeks to show that Carol Shields was ahead of her time in presenting her female characters as capable of agential acts and of making choices without losing the readers’ respect when her women choose to be feminine or feminist, or both.

The first story is called “Taking the Train” (*Various Miracles* 1985), a story about a long-lasting friendship between two women who are very different but connect nevertheless or because of their dissimilarities. The second story, “Today is the Day” (*The Orange Fish* 1989), features a crowd of unnamed women planting blisterlilies along the highway, adhering to an age-old annual tradition. The third story, “Dying for Love” (*Dressing Up For The Carnival* 2000), presents three women, Beth, Lizzie, and Elizabeth, who, though far apart in setting, are going through the same hardship as their love lives have been thoroughly disturbed by their lovers’ leaving and one husband’s inability to love and now they have to cope with the loneliness thrust upon them.

Gweneth McGowan, a Disraeli scholar, and Northie McCord, a recently widowed mother of a teenager, are the two main female characters in “Taking the

Train". The reader gets to know Gweneth, the character with whom the external focalizer stays throughout the story, when she takes a plane to Calgary in order to visit Northie after winning the Saul Appeldorf Medal for her academic work. Upon meeting at the airport, both women confide in their shared past and memories to reactivate their friendship saying that "[m]emory was the first bag they reached into on their infrequent meetings." (TtT 154)

Vidal states that "[p]ersonal identity [...] resides in the continuity of memory and consciousness" (Vidal 950). Therefore, one could argue that as friendships between women often rely on shared memories, these also help build and stabilize a person's social identity and Self, connecting the past, the present, and the future "of one being through memories caused by experiences" (Olson 78), experiences which ultimately strengthen a friendship. "Taking the Train" is replete with past experiences, shared and individual ones, that are exchanged, talked through, and re-lived by Gweneth and Northie.

The two women moved the lawn chairs into a last remaining patch of sun and sat talking about the past, about what they had been like as girls of sixteen and seventeen. They'd done this before, but it seemed to Gweneth that they'd never done it so thoroughly – it was as though they were obliged, for the sake of the future, to rescue every moment. (TtT 157)

Even though the two women share quite a number of memories, they could not be more different: while Gweneth is a scholar, single, and childless, Northie is a housewife, a widow, and a mother. The juxtaposition of the two female characters and the focalizer's preference for Gweneth's feminist character could lead to the conclusion that her perspective and her way of life is better than Northie's. However, Shields does not include a value judgment on neither of the women's life, treating their individual memories with respect, making their disparate choices seem admirable and right for them.

While Northie admits that when she married with a peace button on her dress "I was trying to say I hadn't capitulated just because I was marrying [...]" (TtT 155), Gweneth confesses that "[she doesn't] have anything to show! [...]" (TtT 155). Here, both women seem apologetic for being too feminine and too feminist respectively, and although there is a slight regretful tone in their expressions, these excerpts are part of their memory-sharing episode, an activity often accompanied by such "what if..."

speculations that are dismissed as trivial as fast as they arise in the first place, but that are still an important ritual in female conversations.

They also share the experience of finding solace in reading through a volume of an encyclopaedia in turbulent times: Gweneth read through volume 5 in her puberty, Northie read through volume 15 after her husband died. Both women were able to find a way to cope with trouble and grief with the help of the encyclopaedia's structured pages, putting their thoughts in order, and showing them a next possible step in their life: Gweneth discovered Disraeli and her scholarly interest in this field of study (TtT 156), Northie ventured into growing mustard plants and producing her own mustard (TtT 157), one woman stepped into the public sphere, one stayed in the domestic sphere, but both women attained relief in their own way, sharing a similar experience. Again, there is no value added by the author to either of the women's management of grief.

Shared memories and experiences enable the women to "[fall] into a loop of silence that only very old friends can enter easily" (TtT 155) on the one hand, and to handle their friendship with sincerity, as when Gweneth says: "I don't think comfort is what you and I are able to do for each other. It wasn't in our syllabus [...]" (TtT 158) and with little white lies when she tells Northie that she's sorry she does not have any children (TtT 158), on the other hand. However, the reader soon realizes that, again, the two women are not as different as they might think they are, because Gweneth's brief flashback to the publication of her thesis and her motherly feelings for it, her realization that she "[talked] about her research like a mother, and [indulged] in a mother's fond praising, defensive and faultfinding by turn" (TtT 159), bring her even closer to Northie, uniting them in their motherhood, yet again in their separate and very distinct ways.

"Taking the Train" ends with Gweneth's sudden memory of a very traditional image of women folding a tablecloth after dinner "moving in and out, in and out, as skilled and graceful as dancers" (TtT 160). The thought is triggered by the feeling of an invisible bond that connects her to Northie and Gwen, Northie's 15-year-old daughter, listening to the chorus of a Bruce Springsteen song, "holding on to this wailing rag-tag of music for all we're worth, and to something else that we can't put a name to, but don't dare drop." (TtT 160) Gweneth's romanticized image of a domestic scene combined with the modern version of female bonding, of three

very individual female characters who choose their own way of life, this juxtaposition is not just there for effect, but foreshadows what third wave feminism would create: strong, independent women who are not afraid of feminism's plurality because they have realized that they possess their individual memories to build their "Self" and their shared memories to fortify their relationships and ties with other women, as "both individual and collective narratives are central to the self" (Green 100).

Just as "Taking the Train" features an all-female cast made up of three women, "Today is the Day" presents an uncounted number of unnamed female characters, with the exception of one Sally Bakey who has obviously earned the right to be named because she is something of a legend in the village where the story is set. The story's narrator is an omniscient third person narrator, and although on a first impulse I would suppose that it is a female focalizer, as a second thought one could argue that, as Shields does not shy away from a male perspective, the narrator could as well be a boy/man closely observing the scene from an omniscient point of view. The story starts with the typical "in medias res" technique: "Today is the day the women of our village go out along the highway planting blisterlilies." (TiD 61). The story's setting is completed by the short mentioning of smells and combinations of colours, but the village itself is never named in the story.

"Today is the Day" presents a stark contrast to "Taking the Train" because there is no actual dialogue reproduced in the story, there are only hints at the women's conversations while they fulfil their task of planting the flowers.

They talk quietly to each other, but in a murmuring way so that you can't make out the words; all you hear is a sound like cold water continuously falling, as if a faucet were left running into a large and heavy washtub. (TiD 61)

Where Gweneth and Northie connected by talking almost incessantly to each other about their past experiences, the connecting element in "This is the Day" seems to be the muteness of the women, their shared silence while working, and the few words that are left of "the old secret language of which, sadly, only eight verbs and some twenty nouns remain" which "they string together inventively, weaving a stratagem of potent suggestion overlain by a wily, votive grammar of sign and silence." (TiD 66)

The silent communion of the women and the witnessing of this communion by the narrator and reader give the story an air of complicity, as if an invisible thread is woven around all women present: reader, narrator (if she is a woman), and the story's female characters, united both as agents and witnesses at the same time. The physicality of working together alongside the highway, planting flowers, adds to this quiet process of creating: the women are (re-)creating the long past beauty of fields full of flowers, but they are simultaneously bonding through the intimacy of a language only these women seem to know and understand.

The solemnity with which the few scenes in the story are described, the ritualistic details that are given when the women "[bend and pat] their bulbs into place, then [stand] upright and [place] their hands on their hips, taking a moment's rest" (TiD 64), when the older women take off their wedding rings to put them "on a length of common kitchen string that is securely knotted to form a necklace" (TiD 64), the spreading of blankets between the trees to "sit, talking, eating with their legs tucked up under them" (TiD 65), and their "[resetting] their rings on their fingers" (TiD 66) could be seen as a celebration of the moment, of the day, of the significance of women's silence in history, a silence that does not always separate but that has a uniting quality.

Carol Shields was very much aware of the limiting quality of language for women across the centuries and mentioned this in her address at Hanover College in 1996:

Ironically, the real world is often shown as fragmentary, a sort of secondary lesion of the senses, interrogated on every side by technology, unwilling to stand still long enough to be captured by definition. And language, our prized system of signs and references, frequently appears emptied out or else suspiciously charged." (Eden 24)

In "Today is the Day", all of the women participating in the ritual, young and old, are described as talking with hands and feet, gesturing, and making noises in order to be understood in those short instances of actual verbal communication taking place, "[maintaining] strategies for successfully managing interactions with each other" (Coupland 2). However, there is one female character who has a name and who is able to speak freely.

Sally Bakey, an old woman who lives alone in a cabin and "has a foul smell" (TiD 63), is the one who found a preserve of wildly growing and multiplying

blisterlilies growing in a meadow. She is also the only female character with a name in the story who is applauded for her “[shouting] obscenely at passers-by” (TiD 63). Somehow there is a connection between her finding the flowers and the ability to speak her mind, even though that means, by the description of how the villagers talk about her derisively, that she is looked down upon by many, but not by the women.

She is accepted within their circle without hesitation and she “can be heard singing [...] a song she invents as she goes along – except for the refrain that is full of ritual cunning and defiance.” (TiD 64). Her defiance could be interpreted on two different levels, first on a personal level, because she chooses not to fit into the village’s social structure, and secondly on a more universal level, because she is inventing her own song, finding her own voice as she “goes along”, defying patriarchal language systems by infusing her language with new symbols and signs of her own choice and creation.

Again, ritual plays an important role in this short story because the female characters’ actions are repeatedly referred to as happening in the same order every year. The most interesting scene, of course, is the final scene, when the narrator follows all of the women on their way home in the late afternoon, which is when “they revert to their common tongue” (TiD 66), when they leave their secret language behind:

All that is ordinary and extraordinary about the day converges the minute they cross their separate thresholds. Necessity and order rush together, providing a tent of calm while they go about preparing the simplest of suppers, envelopes of soup and soda crackers, or plain bread and jam. (TiD 66)

Carol Shields offers the reader the idea that her female characters speak two different languages while hinting at the two separate lives that many women live by conforming to social roles, represented in the story by the “common tongue”, and keeping their private conversations, their inner Self hidden within a “secret language” that includes comfortable silences and gestures, a language that is like a shared memory between these women. The empowering quality of that language and its potential of growth is implied in the last paragraph of the story in Sally Bakey’s “controlled” stream of consciousness:

An onion trying to be a flower. A long sleep in the frozen ground. Misgivings. Dread. Unbearable pressure. Cracked earth. The first small faintly colored

shoot, surprised by its upright shadow. A hard round waxy bud. Watchfulness. More than watchfulness, a strict and willing observance. (TiD 67)

Sally is depicted as the guardian of this almost lost but (re-)nascent language, she is the one female in charge of keeping the “onion” safe until the time has come for it to bloom, and Sally’s own marginalization from the village’s everyday life symbolizes the feminist lack of a language capable of expressing women’s lives in literature and reality. Shields is possibly hinting at the “agency dualism” that surrounds women’s lives “where a presupposed structural model of social life [seems] to leave little scope for human agency at all” (Coupland 1), and in this case I would argue that it gestures at the lack of female agency.

In “Dying for Love” the omniscient third person narrator introduces the reader to several short scenes of three women’s possible biographies, women who live far apart from each other but who are actually united by their dealing with the same problem: they have been abandoned by their lovers and they are facing desperation, absence, and a damaged Self.

The first woman presented through the narrator is Beth who has been in a relationship with Ted for almost five years, a period that “gives time to study and absorb and take on the precise rhythms of another person’s breathing pattern and to accommodate their night postures” (DL 41). Beth has been left by Ted for Charlotte Brown, a skinny dancer who “is so thin it breaks your heart” (DL 42). Beth introduces the female body as a trope into the first third of the short story, the body that is “under a dual scrutiny, observed both by others [through the clinical gaze] and with its ‘own’ eyes” (Coupland 3). In this case, it is Ted who owns the “clinical gaze” as “[Beth’s] weight problem [was] one of the issues between [them]. He has an unreasoning fear of fat, though from a certain angle his own face looks fleshy and indulged.” (DL 42)

Beth is in a rather self-destructive mode when the reader meets her, drinking hot milk even though she hates it, trying to “convey the impression that she was about to rush off to meet friends in a restaurant” (DL 43) out of embarrassment for her loneliness when Ted is discussing “domestic details” (DL 42) with her in his new girlfriend’s presence, and living with her “insomnia” (DL 44) even though a colleague at work offers her sleeping pills “[to] keep [herself] from falling apart” (DL 44).

Eighteen-year-old Lizzie “in Somerset” (DL 45) is the second female character introduced by the narrator shortly after she has been left by Ned and the reader meets her pregnant in a “small rented [room]” (DL 45). Lizzie is of “country stock, and knew the signs” (DL 45), which means that she knows that she is pregnant, but her naivety and youth is underlined by the mention of her falling for Ned’s “foolish compliments”, his “[hint] that her pretty ways fell somehow short of full womanly expression” (DL 46), and her “small breasts, over which Neddie had sighed with disappointment, or so she fancied” (DL 45). Again, the imperfect body as the site of an imperfect identity is thrust at the reader without further comment. Lizzie is left lying to the lodging house keeper about her “husband’s” whereabouts and the next rent that is due “counting off days” with “[a] series of pictures [tripping] through her head, joining the pink flowers on the wall and receding into a continuous blur of grief.” (DL 46-47)

The third female character fighting her “period of despair” (Ramon 150) in this short story is called Elizabeth, and her part of the story is the shortest in length and the most feminist. She “has been married for twenty-five years, and is still married, to a man who no longer loves her” (DL 49) The older and more experienced Elizabeth uses her imagination to summon up an invented lover for her husband because “an honest spasm of betrayal” would be more bearable for her than “this slow airless unassuageable absence” (DL 50). Elizabeth has also come to realize that her body, “this disintegrating quilted envelope would accompany her to the end, and that she had lost forever the power to stir ardour.” (DL 49)

The fact that the three women share the same name, Elizabeth, Beth, and Lizzie, is no coincidence. In addition, these female characters are portrayed as pertaining to three different age groups, one adolescent (Lizzie), one in her late twenties after her first serious relationship with a man (Beth), and one in her late forties or early fifties after having been married for a long time (Elizabeth). The episodes connect through the narrator’s overly emphasized and dramatized worry for the three women uttered in the introducing paragraph for every character, they connect through the trope of the body as “an unstable phenomenon” (Coupland 8) within the identity discourse, and most of all they connect through the last scene in which all three women are shown trying to commit suicide.

Beth is thinking of taking her colleague's sleeping pills with a bottle of gin, Lizzie is standing on a bridge and on the verge of throwing herself into the river aggressively flowing below, and Elizabeth has a plastic bag over her head. They all decide against their plans, they realize that "[life] is a thing to be cherished" (DL 44), "loneliness might even be useful" (DL 48), but it is the older Elizabeth who pins it down on a feminist maxim:

A tragic narrative, unbearable, except that the recurrent episodes – of ecstasy, shock, loss, and lament – are similarly, cunningly, hinged to a saving capacity for digression and recovery [...]. [A woman] has the power to create parallel stories that offer her a measure of comfort." (DL 50)

The creation of "parallel stories" is a feminist strategy for escaping conventions and "confronting the challenge of relinquishing previous stages of self-definition" (Ramon 150). Lizzie, Beth, and Elizabeth choose to live and to change their narrative of loss into a narrative of possibility, an agential act demonstrating the empowerment gained from having to deal with a situation that was not expected by any of them but that was meant to happen in order for them to develop their "parallel story", a story of survival and of reinvention.

All three short stories presented in this chapter feature female characters who display different degrees of creativity regarding self-invention, survival, and agency by not conforming to certain pre-defined roles or clichés, by not doing what everyone expects them to do, and thus affirming the value of their own lives, disregarding the reactions of their surroundings. Carol Shields's short stories "[highlight] that testimony is not only an epistemological but also an ethical and political act that appeals to witnesses to respond" (Rizzuto 9). In this case it is the reader who is selected as the witness to the story of these three women's lives.

7.2. Work and Personal Fulfilment

Many contemporary narratives [...] pretend that people don't work. You may have noticed that novelistic events tend to happen on weekends or during off-hours. We may be told that so-an-so is an architect, but we never see her at her drafting table designing shopping malls. (Eden 32)

Carol Shields was always preoccupied with the fictional characters' lack of a working and a domestic life and the resulting limited and incomplete representation of their lives that are vital to develop the narrative, but where bits of the character's Self are lost if they are not mentioned. Thus, Shields made it almost into a mission as a writer of women's fiction to let her characters, male and female, move around their lives as realistically as possible, including the much criticized domestic elements, but also the realm of work. In the case of her female characters, work is often an indispensable part of their lives and identities, a vessel to escape pre-definition, and an opportunity to discover new facets of their Self.

This concern with a "productive occupation, not only earns a living and fills time but also contributes to self-definition and shapes social identity" (Cott 19). Here I should mention that Carol Shields does not often venture out of her comfort zone of her white, middle-class upbringing and life as a writer and teacher at university, hence many of her female characters are either writers, scholars, or editors, a fact that could be construed as a point of critique when it comes to defining her qualities as a feminist. However, I would argue that she is not the only (feminist) writer who stays with what she knows best, which in turn makes her oeuvre so convincing, a fact that many female literary critics and writers have also pointed out in the last four decades, arguing that "[t]here's a female subject matter just as there's a Chinese subject matter, or an Indian subject matter, or whatever, because you have to write about what you know." (Todd 84)

In this chapter I will be taking a closer look at the influence of work in Shields's female characters by comparing "Sailors Lost at Sea" (*Various Miracles* 1985), "Hazel" (*The Orange Fish* 1989), and "Invention" (*Dressing Up for the Carnival* 2000) to each other. "Sailors Lost at Sea" is the story of a female poet and her daughter who have moved to France for one year in order for her mother to complete her newest collection of poetry and to find her family's French roots. In "Hazel", the main character is a woman in her early fifties who has recently lost

her all-controlling husband and who re-starts her life by accepting a job demonstrating kitchenware in a department store. The short story "Invention" features yet another woman in her late fifties or early sixties who has built her own empire by selling crocheted steering-wheel muffs changing the course of her life permanently.

Shields's "Sailors Lost at Sea" (SLS) is narrated from the point of view of the fourteen-year-old daughter who, having moved from Manitoba on her mother's Canadian government grant, feels displaced in the new surroundings, a small village in Brittany called St. Quay. The story starts when H  l  ne, the young main character, has just walked into an abandoned church and is locked in, which prompts many different and disparate trains of thought, musings, and moments of exasperation with her feeling trapped – not in the church, but in St. Quay. She introduces her relationship with her mother as somewhat tense and reveals that they speak to each other "more like a pair of elderly sisters than a mother and daughter" (SLS 32). Her mother's work as a writer of poetry is mentioned at the beginning of the story. It is depicted by H  l  ne in an ambivalent way and mentioned at the same time as her being a foreigner in a strange little village:

[H  l  ne] was regarded with envy and awe by the girls in the village school in St. Quay. [...] It was a fact that only two girls in her level had ever been to Paris [...] and a surprising number of them had never been even as far as Rennes. Also impressive to these girls was the fact that H  l  ne's mother was a poet, a real poet, who had published three books. (SLS 29)

The paragraph this quote is taken from revolves around the idea that a working mother is somehow an absurd idea that sets the other girls' imagination on fire, because their own mothers "were the wives of fishermen" (SLS 29). Some of the girls' mothers do seem to have a job as "shopkeepers" (SLS 29), but H  l  ne's mother has a far more glamorous occupation because she is a published writer of poems, no less. H  l  ne is constantly asked "how her mother was getting on with her poetry" (SLS 29), a question she is very much tired of having to answer, especially since she notices that her mother's "poems were not coming easily" (SLS 32). Her sense of displacement is additionally intensified by the entire village's whispers of "Ah, les Canadiennes!" (SLS 30) whenever they are spotted moving about St. Quay.

Hélène's involuntary entrapment in the church triggers memories, in which the reader is informed about her own and her mother's lives in Canada and about more recent events that have taken place in St. Quay, interspersed with comments on her present contemplations in the church. Instead of worrying of how to escape her confinement, "the feeling of powerlessness made her calm and almost sleepy" (SLS 35). The reader is confronted with short fragments of Hélène's life as the daughter of a poet who always carries one or more notebooks with her in case an idea comes up unexpectedly, or she hears some scraps of "local lore" (SLS 33) she thinks could be helpful as ideas for her writing, the writing down of which Hélène regards as an excuse "to make up for the lack of poems" (SLS 33).

Hélène has rather strong opinions on various people who crowd her own life and her mother's. The longer the girl is locked in the church, the more vehement her judgment is. Carol Shields plays with the cliché of the dreamy poet, making Hélène describe her mother as having had the "good fortune" (SLS 32) to be awarded the money to go to France, as if there had been no previous effort or any kind of merit in her mother's achievement. The biased focalizer, Hélène, makes the reader see her mother through her own judgmental, almost disappointed, but foremost defiant (because of puberty) eyes, saying that her mother was caught up with "imagining the blond sunniness of [a festive day to honor sailors who had been lost at sea]" (SLS 31) she had heard of in the village, that "[love], or something like it, was always happening to her" (SLS 35), and that "her mother had childish notions about the magic of places" (SLS 33).

Her mother had a way of making too much of things, always seeing secondary meanings, things that weren't really there, and her eyes watered embarrassingly when she spoke of these deeper meanings. It was infantile, the way she went on and on about the *fond* of human experience. (SLS 33)

Even though Hélène does not consciously realize it during her captivity in the church, she resourcefully makes use of her imagination to think up several different rescue scenarios, a tool she shares with many adult women, creating alternative narratives for herself. These narratives take her one step closer to her mother, the poet, as her mother uses this technique, too – in her poetry and in her day-to-day life. The protagonist ventures into one single, very sarcastic commentary regarding her mother's likely reaction to her death in the church,

realizing that “her mother would stop writing poems [and] would sink into the *fond* and her mouth would sag open [...]” (SLS 40).

The epiphanic moment in the story is marked by Hélène's lighting up the church's candles with some matches she carries in her bag, "[the] stillness of the flames [seeming] of her own creation, and a feeling of virtue [striking] her, a ridiculous steamroller" (SLS 41). The story ends without handing the reader a resolution or closure, we are left with the protagonist's settling in for the wait until her rescuers come to get her. It is true that the trope of the working woman is not very strong in this story, especially because it is told from the daughter's point of view, but the combination of the poet, her daughter, and the journey they are on is a perfect depiction of Annis Pratt's "green world archetype" as described by her in *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* in 1981, a female archetype that takes refuge in nature and in the margins of society:

At the adolescent stage [...] her appreciation of [her surroundings] is retrospective, a look back over her shoulder as she confronts her present placelessness and her future submission within a male culture. Visions of her own world within the natural world, or naturistic epiphanies, channel the young girl's protests into a fantasy where her imprisoned energies can be released." (Pratt 16-17)

Hélène's imprisonment in the church releases her energies, as Pratt says, and she ventures into different narrative strands for her Self and her mother. However, because of her age, she does not realize that her and her mother's journey is only possible since her mother is a published poet supported by the Canadian government. They are given the opportunity to "create" new and alternative narratives for themselves only because Hélène's mother was able to choose to write poetry for a living, an unusual employment but still a job with which to sustain her small family. The notion of achieving selfhood through self-imposed "creative solitude" (Pratt 125) is especially true for Hélène's mother and highlights the importance of gainful employment even though the poet herself is not the main character of the story.

The second short story's protagonist is Hazel, a woman who has recently lost her husband Brian to heart failure, a husband who "mistreated a woman" and then always "[felt] the need to do something nice which [Hazel had to] accept" (Hazel 34). Recovering quickly from the shock, she "had taken a job demonstrating

kitchen ware in department stores" (Hazel 36), a turn in her life that made her "numb with shock. Shock and also pleasure." (Hazel 36)

She was fifty years old and without skills, a woman who had managed to avoid most of the arguments and issues of the world. Asked a direct question, her voice wavered. [...] At ten-thirty most mornings she was still in her dressing gown and had the sense to know this was shameful. [...] Yet someone [...] had seen fit to offer her a job. (Hazel 36-37)

The reader accompanies the female protagonist on her journey to selfhood in which she fights off all manner of adversities and finds new courage to confront society and its expectations from a fifty-year-old widowed woman. The first person to disagree with her on having a job is her dead husband's mother, a woman in her eighties living in a retirement center, who thinks that "[really], there is no need, Hazel. There's plenty of money if you live reasonably." (Hazel 37) The next person to advise her against taking the job is her best friend Maxine Forestadt, "a demon bridge player, a divorcée" (Hazel 37), whose argument is that she is not "the type [for] this eight-to-five purgatory, [...] what's the point?" (Hazel 37) However, Maxine at least understands that Hazel has an "urge to assert" (Hazel 37) herself.

Then, of course, Hazel's two daughters have their say on the matter. Her older daughter Marilyn, who is a pathologist, reminds her of the fact that her late husband "would not have approved" (Hazel 38) and describes her mother's new job as "flogging pots and pans, it's so public" (Hazel 38). Her younger daughter Rosie who is married to a journalist says to respect her decision to find herself a job, but she adds that she still thinks that there is a "need to lie fallow for a bit and not rush headlong into things" (Hazel 38), masquerading her disapproval of her mother's decision with fear of seeing Hazel hurt.

However, Hazel is a stubborn woman and keeps on track, starting to work for "Kitchen Kult", facing smaller and bigger adversities as she goes along, such as having to get up early, asking herself "[how] was she to live her life" (Hazel 39), or reading city maps which "caused her headaches" (Hazel 39) because of her "trouble with orientation" (Hazel 39). Hazel is sent to twelve department stores on a "revolving cycle" (Hazel 39), with Peter Lemmon at her side for two weeks to introduce her not only to the best way to present her products, but also to the secret of how to gain an audience's confidence. As time goes by, Hazel literally warms up to her occupation which is a "diversion" at first (Hazel 42) but turns into the

surprising realization that “she could perform miracles” only through “rivers of words”, “[dealing] out repetitions, little punchy pushes of emphasis, and an ever growing inventory of affectionate declarations directed toward her vegetable friends”, making her feel “exuberant, like a semi-retired, slightly eccentric actress” (Hazel 45).

After three months of work, Hazel has come up with a routine of working during the day and retiring to her bed with a book at night. While she reads, she has brief moments of insight and lets the reader take part in her realizing that she is keeping herself busy “to fill the vacant time left to her [...] tucking in around the edges those little routines – laundry, meals, errands [...]”, while missing the company of someone who could share these small moments in her life where she “[imagines] various new endings or turnings for herself” (Hazel 47). Even her mother in law admits now that she would not have minded earning some extra money to spend on herself during her married years, telling Hazel that “[you] feel differently, I suppose, when it’s your own money” (Hazel 48).

Then, one day, Hazel is summoned to Kitchen Kult headquarters because she is the top sales person of the running quarter and is therefore awarded a brooch, a regular salary, and an adjusted commission from that point on. This is the moment when she fully comprehends who she can be, “leaving behind her cut-out shape, so bulky, rounded and unimaginably mute, a woman who swallowed her tongue, got it jammed down her throat and couldn’t make a sound” (Hazel 51). The reactions to her promotion are predictable and Hazel is prepared to face them. Peter Lemmon suggests that “some privilege had been carelessly allocated” (Hazel 50) and her older daughter Marilyn “[gives] a shout of derision on seeing the company brooch pinned to her mother’s raincoat” (Hazel 51).

However, her younger daughter Rosie compliments her on the “waterless veg cooker” (Hazel 51) she sent her, telling her that it “fulfils a real need, nutritionally speaking” (Hazel 51), indirectly admitting that she is surprised at how well her mother’s decision to take a job has turned out. Her best friend Maxine first mentions that Hazel seems to have lost some weight due to her stressful job, but then concedes that she “[looks] more relaxed than the last time” (Hazel 52) she saw her. Maxine even ventures into telling her that she is thinking about taking on a job herself, prompting Hazel to set up an interview appointment with Kitchen Kult

that results in Maxine's employment and Hazel's promotion to "Assistant Area Manager" (Hazel 55).

Marilyn is the one character who cannot bring herself to congratulate her mother on this, while every other character has come to terms with the idea of Hazel staying on in the job and her being good at it, but this is because Marilyn has started seeing Peter Lemmon on a regular basis and she is appalled when he is terminated from the job and her mother is given his position in the company – she feels betrayed for the sake of Peter.

In the end, it is Hazel's humanity and sympathy with Peter's situation that makes her lose everything she fought so hard to achieve. Intending for Peter to get another chance at Kitchen Kult, she speaks to the boss and bargains for his return, not thinking that she is putting at risk her own employment. Hazel does not understand how her pride could have misled her judgment, eventually reverting to her old mute, self-effacing, and timid Self, sitting at her mother-in-law's bedside thinking:

It is an accident that she should be sitting in this room [...] how did all this happen? How did we get here? Everything is an accident, Hazel would be willing to say if asked. Her whole life is an accident, and by accident she has blundered into the heart of it. (Hazel 59-60)

Even though the short story ends on a rather negative note, the atmosphere is one of wonderment, not of submission, and wondering at one's life could be seen as yet another opportunity to bring about certain changes to improve it. The circularity of the short story is underlined by "the sheer contingency of existence itself" (Ramon 99), which reflects Hazel's final understanding the "accidental nature of hers and other lives" (Ramon 99), the connectedness of everything and the narrative possibilities given to her as a woman who chose to use words to be good at work but who could just as easily have remained silent and unfulfilled.

"New Music" (NM) is a short story about an unnamed couple, of how their disparate lives accidentally intertwined on the tube in London when they were in their early twenties, but it is also about the woman who, after getting married and having children, is writing the last sentences to her biography on a composer called Thomas Tallis, on how she tries to settle back into her family's daily routines, and finally gives in to her publisher's request to write about another composer, William Byrd and the "new music that's overtaken the house" (NM 153).

The story is alternately focalized by the male character and by the female character, although it is narrated in the third person from an omniscient point of view. The story's main male focalizer character does not seem to think highly of himself as he describes himself as having his head "crammed with different stuff: equations, observations, a set of graphs, the various gradients of sands and gravels, his upcoming examinations, and the fact that his trousers pocket had a hole in it" (NM 144). However confusing the narrative perspective might seem, the main female character is the true protagonist of the story.

The woman in her early years is depicted as a phenomenon, at least to the curious eyes of the man observing her, who "had never before seen anyone 'read' music in quite this way, silently, as though it were a newspaper" (NM 143) and who amazes the man with her self-possession and assurance when she says that she likes the classical composer Thomas Tallis better than William Byrd because he is considered second best compared to the latter – a comment that makes the man fall in love with her.

In the next sequence of the story, they are already married, they have children, and the woman has been writing on Tallis's biography for almost four years.

Imagine a woman getting out of bed one hour earlier than the rest of the household. What will she do with that hour? Make breakfast scones for her husband and three school-age children? Not this woman, not scones, banish the thought. [...] No, this woman works at home – at a computer set up in what was once, in another era, in another incarnation, a sewing room." (NM 145-146)

The direct juxtaposition of the past and the present, the linking of the sewing room as a woman's working place of a different era and the same room as the working place for a woman in present times, traces an arch between women in the past and the present, but it also separates the two by acknowledging the enormous difference between their lifetimes.

As the scene unfolds, the narrator mentions several stereotypical plot-situations that appear in literature when a woman is depicted in the act of writing, wondering which one we are just witnessing: the woman is either writing a letter to her mother, complaining about something in written form, or putting down the wretched words in her suicide letter. Carol Shields's judgmental footnote of these literary clichés is a strong outcry not to use them, underlined by her female

character's meaningful occupation – the finalization of a biography that has taken her four exhausting years to write and which ends with “the burnished, heightened, blurted-out word ‘triumph’” (NM 147). This “triumph” is twofold: first because Shields makes her protagonist create something worthy, second because she does not resort to one of the above mentioned stereotypical representations of woman.

The process of writing the biography is portrayed as a long and draining process, “listening to Tallis’s music itself” (NM 147) during the first eight months, “waiting for the magical atoms of musical matter to come together, one and one and one, and give shape to the man who created them” (NM 147-148), it describes the hardships of the biographer when confronted with the lack of concrete or exact documentations of a life, and the guessing and deducing that often needs to be done.

However, this would not be one of Carol Shields’s short stories, if there were no domestic details flung at the reader in short, poignant lines. The female protagonist’s children are first said to “miss her rhubarb crumble, [...] the feel of ironed clothes and clean sheets and socks sorted into pairs.” (NM 149) The husband “misses waking up beside her in the morning” (NM 149) and has become used to her calling out to them that “[t]here’s cornflakes” (NM 149). Then the tone of the story changes, the biographer has finished her manuscript and descends into the kitchen staring

as though [her husband and three children] are strangers who have entered her house sometime during the last four years and are now engaged in a mystical rite around this small smudged appliance [the toaster] (NM 149).

The woman is taken aback by the sudden rushing in of familial domesticity, it seems, but, as the story goes on, she easily slips back into her role as a mother and wife as she cleans the house, stays in bed longer, goes to the ballet with her daughter, and tidies out her two boys’ bedrooms - to their utter relief. Yet, something keeps turning up at the back of her head, because

[she] has gone back to listening to Tallis in the afternoons [...] and as she listens something like a kite string reaches down and pulls at her thoughts, which are not quite ready to be thoughts. It might be that she’s putting her own heart beside itself, making comparisons.” (NM 151)

When her husband first met her, she had mentioned that she liked Thomas Tallis over William Byrd because he was second best, because he had not received as much recognition for his oeuvre as his pupil did later on. The thought that she had chosen her husband because he was second best is very present by the end of the story, when she decides to take on the challenge of writing a biography about the more famous and renowned composer William Byrd, making “[the] system of temperament in the family [shift] once again” (NM 152). Her decision to write about the apparently better composer carries a double meaning, as she starts “looking at her husband lately with an odd, assessing, measuring clarity” (NM 153), possibly admitting to herself that she settled for second best, although she might have been able to do better in her life.

The change is especially noted by her husband who “finds himself opening his ears to the new music that’s overtaken the house” (NM 153), a sign that his wife is reconsidering her situation as she writes the new biography. Again, there is possibility and choice in the circular narrative, the hint at a re-writing of a life story, of sorting out and “[disentangling] from wifely behaviour” (Pratt 67), ending somewhere beside and not within the “enclosures of the family and household” (Pratt 67) by means of rewarding work.

In all three short stories, Carol Shields makes sure to portray the main female characters with their flaws and (self-) doubts. My point is that Hélène’s mother, Hazel, and the unnamed biographer share and make use of one of first and second wave feminism’s biggest achievements: they have the possibility of choosing where, when, and how they work, knowing that it might not be a good idea, but nevertheless taking that risk in order to fulfil their quest for selfhood, gaining experience, self-sufficiency, and getting to know themselves better, uncovering, again, sides to their Self that would remain hidden without their venturing out into the working world.

7.3. Eros and the Body

“If we are our bodies, and our bodies are themselves elements in the discourse of the Self, then what is the relation between identity and embodiment?” (Coupland 6) This question is asked and later explored in Justine Coupland and Richard Gwyn’s Introduction to their collection of essays *Discourse, the Body, and Identity* published in 2003. This line of inquiry has been forever present in literature, philosophy, and in social sciences in general among other fields of studies.

It was René Descartes in the 16th century who, contrary to his contemporary John Locke, “defined mind quasi-corporeally” (Coupland 6), who literally bound the mind to the body, connecting identity to the mind and therefore to the human body. He triggered discussions about mind and soul being confined to the human body, the innumerable possibilities and problems of interaction between body and mind, and the resulting difficulty of a non-objectified identity in a consumer oriented society. Descartes nurtured Michel Foucault’s idea that the body is “the ultimate site of political and ideological control, surveillance and regulation” (Coupland 3), Jean Baudrillard’s “re-writing of the body” or “synthetic narcissism” (Coupland 5), and Erving Goffman’s theory that “the body mediates the relationship between self-identity and social identity” (Coupland 2) in the course of the 20th century.

The female body as subject and/ or object became a concern in second wave feminism, which included or was later identified as the “sexual revolution” of the late 1960s, and basically focused on the following: the tearing down of women’s traditional sexual (and therefore social) roles, the option to control their fertility themselves by means of the newly released contraceptive pill, therefore allowing women to separate sex from procreation, and a more general “celebration of single life and sexual exploration” (Klotz 1). Thus, the female body and its identity-shaping characteristics entered the literary landscape more prominently, but as a trope that lacked, yet again, the proper language to be talked or written about, especially from the female perspective and when it came to “sexualized portrayals of the body” (Roy 117).

The representation of women’s (bodily) experiences is present in many of Carol Shields’s novels, but also in most of her short stories, as she admits that

sensations are easily dismissed as unnecessary because they are hard to describe:

The people who appeared in realistic fiction were seldom allowed the full exercise of their reality [...]. Realistic fiction passed too quickly through the territory of the quotidian and dismissed as though they didn't exist those currents of sensation that leak around the boundaries of vocabulary. (Shields NH 34)

The sexual act as such does not play a prominent role in Shields's writing, but the body as a site for sensations that shape a character's identity and a character's relationships is central to her writing. In this chapter I will take a closer look at the following three stories, "The Journal" (*Various Miracles*), "Good Manners" (*The Orange Fish*), and "Eros" (*Dressing Up for the Carnival*), in order to determine to what extent Carol Shields uses the representation of the female body to criticise "social strictures governing women's bodies" (Roy 127) and how she seeks to "reunify consciousness with our living, breathing forms" (Johnson 208).

In "The Journal" (TJ), Harry and Sally's story is told from an omniscient third person narrator. The married couple is in their forties, they are from Oshawa, Ontario, and they are parents of two small children. They have gone traveling through France where no one could "possibly track them down" (TJ 175), shedding their daily routines, and trying to find a way to reconnect in mind and body, to their own Self and to each other. "Good Manners" (GM) features Georgia Willow, a "stern, peremptory social arbiter" (GM 131), a woman with a story that has made her so observant and obstinate when it comes to showing her good manners - always. The third short story, "Eros", portrays Ann at a friends' dinner party having flashback episodes of when she was growing up, observing small erotic exchanges of the adults that surrounded her when she was still unaware of her own sexuality, flashbacks that are prompted by the rather matter-of-fact conversation about sexuality at a dinner party.

The couple in "The Journal" is introduced only by their first names, Harold and Sally, and the reader is told that when they travel "Sally keeps a journal, and in this journal Harold becomes *H*." (TJ 171) Harold is a "supervisor in the public school system" (TJ 175), a man with a "mild, knobby face" (TJ 171) and a "natural dignity of one who says less than he feels" (TJ 172). The reader does not get any

more physical descriptions of the two, the only aspect or body related comment concerning Sally is that “[when] she chews, an earnest net of wrinkles flies into her face” (TJ 174). Their holiday in France makes Harold feel relaxed and happy, but also “resentful that he can’t live the rest of his life in this manner” (TJ 172). Harold feels somewhat intimidated by Sally’s journal and sometimes keeps his commentary to himself “for fear she’ll write them down in her journal” (TJ 172).

The couple’s absence of a physical relationship is introduced when they retire to the first hotel bedroom on their journey. The scene is short and the situation described in quick remarks by the narrator, making the situation an awkward moment not only for the two characters but also for the reader:

Their room is small, the bed high and narrow and the padded satin coverlet not quite clean. Between coarse white sheets they attempt to make love, and almost, but not quite, succeed. Neither blames the other. Sally curses the remnant jet lag and Harold suspects the heaviness of the bedcovers [...]. (TJ 173)

The couple’s helplessness and disappointment can be felt through these simple lines – rather than romance, there is expectation in the air, and a faint shimmer of hope that, as they are in a foreign country and a foreign bed, it will work, but they both resort to muteness instead of talking, to blaming irrelevant factors. The days pass by, they travel to Dijon and it is constantly raining, when Harold “reaches for her hand” (TJ 174) in a moment of sweetness, the only other bodily contact shown, and “after yet another night of sexual failure”, they are both “anxious to appreciate [the château]” (TJ 174) they visit the next day. There is no further comment on the couple’s mood or thoughts on their inability to have sexual relations with each other, it seems a reported fact, nothing to worry about but it is also somehow disturbing, especially since this time the reader does not know whether they exchange some comforting or distracting words afterwards or not.

Harold is excited about a story revolving around a legend from the 19th century, “an exuberant epoch that produced and embraced the person he would like to have been: gentleman, generalist, [...] a calm but sceptical observer [...]” (TJ 174). The reader has been able to collect quite a number of details about Harold’s character, imagining him as a gentle, patient, and introverted person. Surprisingly, the only thing we know about Sally is that she constantly writes comments into her journal, comments that are unfinished sentences which the

narrator puts in parenthesis and ends on three dots, leaving the reader to the task of finishing the sentence with what he or she has just read about the day's events.

Another remarkable feature concerning Sally's observations is that they are always about something Harold has said, lamented, felt, or other, never about her own thoughts or feelings, there is no mention of her "Self" visible anywhere. She has more in common with a mirror, reflecting her husband's emotions, than with a living being with an identity of her own "a man and his wife [as] one, but only in the sense that the man was the "one" – his desires, needs and interests subordinated hers" (Pratt 42). Her absence from the short story is indicative of her self-effacement in her marriage.

Then the mood of the story slowly changes as the sun shines again and the couple moves to yet another town and a different hotel. Without much additional information of the hotel, Shields's narrator plunges into a page-long final paragraph that consists of Sally's and Harold's "rare [moment] of sexual extravagance that arrives as a gift perhaps two or three times in one's life" (TJ 175). The sexual encounter itself is not explored any further, but the reasons for their finally succeeding are enumerated and defined more closely. In this paragraph it is Sally who now surfaces as a character who "transcends herself, becoming S., that brave pilgrim on a path of her own devising" (TJ 175), her regaining of control of her own body and desire, equalling the regaining of her own voice.

One would expect a bitter note on marriage itself at the end of this short story, a blaming of female social roles for the loss of words and voice in general, but it ends on a positive comment by Sally, in parenthesis of course, that says: "H. and I slept well and in the morning..." (TJ 175), that typically leaves the narrative without closure but with a sense of potential and possibility, especially with Sally's newly found voice which she will hopefully use to reinvent herself and her marriage - because the one does not exclude the other in Carol Shields.

Georgia Willow, the main female character in "Good Manners", is described as a stern woman who has tutored women in propriety and educated manners for over thirty years in which she has relocated from Montreal to Toronto and has come to settle in the West of Canada after an ugly divorce.

Promptly at three-thirty each Tuesday and Thursday, neatly dressed in a well-pressed navy Evan-Picone slub silk suit, cream blouse, and muted

scarf, Georgia Willow meets her small class in the reception area of the MacDonald Hotel and ushers them into the long, airy tearoom [...] (GM 131)

She has specialized in teaching people how to behave when food is served, on how to confront “[the] classic olive pit question” (GM 132) for example, she imparts lessons “devoted to hand-shaking, door-opening” (GM 132), and holds seminars “on the all-important *langue de la politesse*” (GM 132), because she is convinced that “[manners] are the means by which we deflect evil” (GM 132). At first glance, Georgia Willow seems to be a woman who is trapped in the fifties, who cannot cope with the fact that times have changed, but reading through her arguments why manners are so important, one should start wondering what exactly happened to her when she was younger that she must hold onto decorum and artificiality so tightly.

The protagonist does not “illustrate her philosophy with personal anecdotes” (GM 133) because “she is not one of those who spends her time unpicking the past” (GM 133). The hint at a past that needs resolving complicates the reading of the story – it would be very easy to read it concentrating on the third person narrator’s slightly ironical take on the protagonist and the general focus on the artificiality of social behaviour. However, Georgia Willow is allowed the benefit of “experiences that refuse to dissolve [that occasionally] press their way forward and demand to be heard.” (GM 133)

The reader is then exposed to two flashbacks, one when Georgia Willow was ten years old and the second one when she was twenty-three years old. At the age of ten, she is innocently playing in the backyard of her parents’ house when her neighbour Mr. Manfred, an older man who likes offering her peppermints which she refuses, comes to her garden fence and starts whispering grotesque fantasies into her ear while “he grasps a tube of pink snouty dampish flesh” (GM 134) in his left hand. The girl knows that what has happened is “something inadmissible [...] A dangerous proposition has been placed in her hand [...] but etiquette demands that she first translate it into something bearable.” (GM 135) Aged ten, Georgia Willow resorts to educated manners to confront her neighbour’s sexual depravity and handle the situation at the garden fence, her attempt at incomprehension guarding her from the full realization of what has just happened.

The second flashback presents Georgia at the age of twenty-three on a train where she meets a man called F. Scott Fitzgerald with whom she ends up having her first sexual relations in a hotel room two days after meeting him, hoping for love. Her disappointment and shame at finding out that she “has never had [his love]” (GM 136) and the man’s feeble apologies enveloped in “[the] syntax of culpability” (GM 136) make Georgia ask for forgiveness to him, “[courtesy demanding] that she rescue him and [saving] herself at the same time.” (GM 136) Once again, her awareness of good manners, which to her “are the first-aid kit we carry out on to the battlefield” of life (GM 132) saves Georgia from a direct confrontation with an awkward situation that could cause her pain or suffering.

Both her recollections clarify why she is so adamant about preserving good manners – this is the only way for her to cope with the physical and verbal transgressions on her body and mind of both episodes that have marked and influenced her life so thoroughly. Georgia has hidden her Self behind the mask of a well-mannered woman, not allowing her feelings, thoughts, and fears take over, her longing for love and “human attention” (GM 137) marked by “having to ask and then having to be grateful” (GM 137). The woman in her sixties acknowledges that her once simple views on life and love were complicated by men, Mr. Manfred, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and her now ex-husband. Georgia Willow has not been raped by either, but her traumatized state is made visible through her continuous need of propriety and the “language of good manners” (GM 136) that surfaces every time she is in danger of losing her Self to a situation, equating men’s treatment of her to psychological rape.

Not only is the feminine Eros discouraged, but its opposite, rape, is proffered as a substitute. The event of “rape”, in that it involves the violation of the Self in its psychological and physical integrity, thus becomes central to the young woman’s experience [...]. [...] in many instances the damage is permanent. (Pratt 24-25)

Georgia Willow’s early encounter with crude sexuality performed by her neighbour, the rejection of a man she was anxious to keep and a husband who apparently grew tired of her niceties, made her hold onto the superficiality and artificiality of pre-formed words, a language she made her own but that does not include the right words for her to talk about her body, her needs, and her Self.

In the short story "Eros", Carol Shields combines two taboo topics in one, as she lets her dinner party characters talk openly about human sexuality and desire while Ann, the divorced female protagonist and focalizer, has recently had a mastectomy and chemotherapy. The general discussion is divided into those guests who say that "[people] don't grow to adulthood without knowing they're sexual animals" (Eros 206) and Alex, a maker of mediaeval instruments invited for Ann's sake, who seems very opinionated on the issue and counters that "[more] people than we think are locked in a circle of innocence" (Eros 207).

Ann feels compelled to "restrain [Alex] from making a fool of himself" (Eros 208), and instinctively puts her hand on his wrist. His reaction is to take her hand and put it in his lap, where she "found her hand resting against human flesh, the testicles laughably loose in their envelope of fine skin, and a penis, flaccid and small, curled up like a blind animal." (Eros 208-209) While the discussion is still going on, Ann sees herself in the situation of having to make a decision: does she want her hand to stay in Alex's lap or not? Does she want to agree to this bodily contact or not? Carol Shields is very clear in pointing out that Ann has a choice and a voice by including her protagonist's following line of thought:

She made a motion to pull her hand away from Alex's lap, but he pressed his fingers more firmly on hers. The thought came to her that these were the same fingers that constructed intricate lutes and lyres and handled small, probably beautiful tools. Her consciousness seemed to divide and to divide again, and then soften. (Eros 209)

Ann's conscious decision not to withdraw her hand from Alex's lap and see what would happen next is a small agential act that stresses her ownership of body and mind – her personal development is advanced enough for her to stay true to her Self even though she takes a seemingly eccentric decision regarding her dinner party neighbour.

The party scene is interrupted by one of Ann's memories of her childhood, when she found out that the adults around her, her cousin Sandra and her husband and even her parents, had an existence of their own and that there was something invisible happening between men and women around her: "It' was a charged force, not that she could have described it as such, from which she herself was excluded [...] But that was all right. She liked it that way [...]." (Eros 211) The realization and artless acknowledgment of this invisible existence of sexuality and desire between

humans around Ann seems to have accompanied her through her childhood and youth, as she remembers more instances in which Eros, or desire, presented itself for her to see and feel without actually being a part of it.

At the age of nine or ten, Ann gets to witness her Uncle Ross's kissing her Aunt Alma's nape on a hot summer night, a private moment unusually shared with the entire family who was about to eat, the moment when Ann "felt her whole body stiffen into a kind of pleasurable yawn that went on and on. So this was it. Now she knew." (Eros 213) At that instant, Ann's body seems to respond to the idea of Eros, to the eroticism of this light exchange and the ensuing bout of desire, but still in a very childlike way.

Her puzzlement with sexuality and desire increases as she grows older, being poked "between the legs" by boys with a tree branch, kissing a boy for the first time as part of a game, and wondering "what was there, packed into the crotch and how it felt" (Eros 214) when observing boys in shorts. However, she never feels threatened or suffocated by the latency of sexuality of others or her own, as she admits that she touches herself "[high] up on her inner thigh. [...] Making a little circle with her thumb" (Eros 215) and is not ashamed of it. Even after marrying, when her husband and Ann playfully explore their bodies, as she kept to her early resolution that "the body is a temple [to keep] sanctified for the man you are going to spend your life with" (Eros 215), she delights in the eroticism of "kisses and shy touches" (Eros 216) rather than the "sticky, bloody puddle on the bedsheet" (Eros 216) after their first time, and sees the sexual act with a rather unromantic and sober gaze, as something that can heal or blame the other.

Once she made the mistake of telling Benjamin that she found something faintly hilarious about sex, about how a man's penis suddenly blew up and wanted to stick itself in a woman's vagina; it was so ungainly, such a curious and clumsy human mechanism. (Eros 217)

Ann's pragmatism and honesty about the mechanics of sexuality do not make her blind towards the erotic in the small gestures in her marriage, but reassure her in saying what she wants, never being blinded by an overly romanticized version of what actually was "something chemical" (Eros 216). It is the prospect of reliving a moment of sexual relief, of "perfect happiness" (Eros 220) in which "[everything] could be forgiven and mended" (Eros 219) why she does not retract her hand from Alex's lap at the dinner party. She knows that nothing will

come of it as she has recently had her mastectomy, but she keeps that special moment of being “part of the blissful, awakened world” (Eros 220) to herself, mourning the absence of her breast and of her body’s wholeness at the same time as knowing the words for her Self, as it once was, very well, but insecure of how to speak of her body now it has been harmed.

When comparing the three short stories, especially the main female characters, to each other, there is a path of progression, of increasing openness in them. Where Sally’s self-effacement in her marriage inhibits her sexual relations with her husband, Georgia is fearful of being disappointed and hides her sexual Self behind a mask of educated manners, while Ann openly analyses the mechanisms of eroticism and sex. I would argue that Sally and Georgia share the same vocabulary when it comes to their own body, as they both do not know how to talk about themselves – Sally reports on her husband’s doings and Georgia camouflages her feelings with niceties.

However, I would say that the levels of consciousness on which these two women are operating are different: Sally does not realize she is missing the words for her Self, whereas Georgia is very much aware of what she is doing with the patriarchal vocabulary she uses to protect her Self from the outside world and from men. The next level of consciousness is represented by Ann, who definitely knows her words for her own body and her experiences as long as her past is concerned, but who has to find an entirely new set of words to make up for the absence of a part of her body and the threat of humiliation or exposure.

Carol Shields moves the narrative toward embodiment (Johnson 208), unifying the conscious, the mind, with the body, making erotic and sexual encounters the linking bit between the two binaries, and the resulting space as a place where the female Self can expand on its own language. Shields “[develops] ways of managing this life, reconnecting mind and body, sense and sensation, past and present, me and you.” (Johnson 221)

7.4. Feminine or Feminist?

In order to understand the basic question of this thesis which I am using as the headline to this last chapter of analysis, I will have to digress briefly, and point at the multiple definitions and images of the terms 'femininity' and 'feminist' available. Society has seen many different femininities and feminisms transported and culturally transmitted by "standardized visual images" (Holland 10). Who does not remember the image of women burning their underwear in public spaces at the height of second wave feminism? Who does not have an image in their head when the term "Victorian woman" comes up in a conversation or a text?

We all have stereotypes and clichés stored in our heads, prefigured roles and behavioural norms that tend to break down and simplify our surroundings and the changes society goes through. The elusiveness of the terms feminine and feminist is linked to many issues, but it seems that appearance and behaviour play the most prominent roles when trying to define the terms. Why, otherwise, would a woman with long hair be considered feminine and a woman with short hair more feminist? As the set of norms for female interaction and performance in society is forever in flux, especially today, the definitions for feminine and feminist should be regarded as "fragile, shifting and never complete" (Holland 8), hard to pin down to one or two aspects, character traits or behavioural norms.

I would like to define the term feminine as everything unconscious and pertaining to the female body, its shape, but also its gestures, body language patterns, and its individual processes of interaction with other human beings. The term feminist I would like to locate in the mind and it includes every conscious act of creating and re-creating the Self (inside or outside of patriarchal structures), it includes agential acts, choice, and the use of the right language to feel whole as a woman.

The three stories I will use to show how locating femininity in the body and feminism in the mind works in Carol Shields are "A Wood" (*Various Miracles* 1985), "Times of Sickness and Health" (*The Orange Fish* 1989), and "Absence" (*Dressing Up for the Carnival* 2000). The first story, "A Wood" (Wood), is told by an omniscient third person narrator who accompanies the Wood siblings during the preparations to a violin concert Elke Wood is giving later on in the story. "Times of Sickness and

Health” (TSH) features Kay, a woman in her fifties, who reminisces about her life so far and slowly uncovers her family’s past to the reader. The third story, “Absence” (Absence), confronts the reader with an omniscient third person narrator witnessing the troubles of a nameless female writer who is missing a letter on her keyboard.

Elke Wood, a young composer of classical music, is the main female character in the short story entitled “A Wood”. She is first introduced to the reader from her two brothers’ alternating points of view. While her brother Stanley, a luthier, stands in awe of her talent playing her own compositions with the violin alone in a rehearsal hall, her brother Ross “had begged her not to dress [in a peasant skirt]. It made her look like a twelve-tone type. It made her look less than serious” (Wood 109). Apart from criticizing Elke’s dressing apparel, he also doubts that she will be ready for the concert because she had been away to study in Paris the preceding summer. The reader also gets to hear some of the siblings’ dead father’s favourite sayings, such as “[a] Wood asks more of himself than he asks of others” (Wood 109) or “[a] Wood values accomplishment above all” (Wood 110), comments that probably put all his children under an extreme amount of pressure.

The first searching notes of the song were spirited from the instrument. Elke heard each note as a reproach. [...] The song was coarse and coppery, not as it sounded when she wrote it. Why did she write it? How could she expect substance to come out of nothing? (Wood 110)

While Elke rehearses her own composition she feels the instrument digging into her flesh, giving it a particular mood as “the bow seemed malicious and sharp” (Wood 110). As the scene develops, Elke realises that her brother Stanley is in the audience and she hopes “he hadn’t brought Ross” (Wood 110), situating her closer to one brother. When they go to a restaurant some time later, it is Ross who tells her that she should drink only one glass of red wine because “it was more calming for her” (Wood 110) and then go straight home to sleep, while Stanley “watched her closely, thinking how regal she was” (Wood 111). Stanley seems extremely fond of his sister, he admires her talent, and he openly speaks about his feelings, but Ross is “brusque and demanding” (Wood 111) with her, making Elke feel “overwhelmed” (Wood 111), thus deciding that “[she] would have to invent strategies to keep them out.” (Wood 111)

The next scene revolves around the two brothers discussing a dream Elke told them at the restaurant, choosing one “that they would most likely understand” (Wood 112), telling the reader that her brothers are either very simple-minded or just too realistic to fathom her dreams. During the course of this conversation between Stanley and Ross, several things happen: the reader realizes that Elke is in psychiatric therapy and both her doctor and her brother Ross do not believe in her really having these dreams where she only “[reinforces] her image of herself as a victim. [...] You might say she’s greedy for guilt [...]” (Wood 112-113), Stanley repeatedly ventures that he also has dreams, but is silenced by his brother’s finishing argument that “Woods don’t dream [...]” (Wood 112). The fact that Ross speaks to his sister’s psychiatrist without her knowing and their ensuing infringement of medical confidentiality display the level of control Ross is exercising over his sister and makes the reader think of Elke as a helpless, frightened, and dependent young woman.

As the short story develops a faster pace and the narrator focus changes more quickly between the three characters, we are informed that not only Elke feels guilty about her father’s death in an accident. Stanley thinks it was his fault because he had not reminded him to take his heart pills, and Ross thinks it was his fight with him shortly before he ran out into the street. They all try to live up to their father’s expectations: Ross by taking control over Elke’s every decision, going so far as to “examining her wardrobe” (Wood 115) and buying her new clothes for the big concert himself, probably thinking that by looking after her appearance and bodily health he is caring for her like a father. Stanley, in turn, wants to ease her mind by repeatedly slipping her “little notes” (Wood 114), wanting her to “be proud of them” (Wood 117) the night of the actual concert, and by “[guarding] Elke’s good luck” (Wood 117) with silence.

Elke Wood is aware of the fact that her two brothers mean well, but she feels suffocated because of their over-protective behaviour. She does not read Stanley’s notes any longer, she teases Ross by answering to his questions whether she had slept well the night before the concert with one of their father’s sayings: “Woods always sleep well.” (Wood 116) She even has to “persuade [them] to let her eat supper alone” (Wood 118) the night of the concert.

This is the point where the short story takes an unexpected turn. Elke is roaming the “labyrinth of rooms” (Wood 118) beneath the stage when she stumbles upon a room full of costumes “for the Saturday matinee performances of fairy tales” (Wood 118) that are “lovely enough to enchant the most disenchanted of children” (Wood 118). She does not lose any time thinking about what she is doing, she puts on “Rapunzel’s gold-green gown” (Wood 118), adds the golden necklace that has been in the Wood family for centuries, and picks up her instrument to go on stage.

Under the surprising folds of the costume [...] her body felt cool and determined. [...] A hand pressed on her spine between her neck and her waist, between her shoulder blades, an encouraging, insistent pressure. [...] Elke bent her neck to show that she was ready, then followed the angle of her head out onto the stage. (Wood 120)

At this point, in refusing to wear her brother’s choice of clothes but approving of the Wood necklace, Elke regains agency over her mind and body, and they are connected because her body language mirrors her mind-set, her decision to stand tall for herself and leaving both her brothers’ control behind her make her become whole by the end of the story, giving herself permission, allowing her Self to surface “[with] a slight nod to the notes, to the audience, to herself, to whomever might be watching” (Wood 120), finally acknowledging her Self in body and mind.

The symbolism hidden behind Elke’s choosing a dress closely related to the fairy tale *Rapunzel* is also significant, as it is “[an archetype] expressing the repression of powerful women” (Pratt 174) and “a psychological expression of an extraordinary stirring of the unconscious” (Emma Jung qtd. in Pratt 174). Carol Shields invests Elke’s putting on this dress with an additional symbolic meaning that turns around the standardised image young girls and women have of the “doctrines of femininity” (Holland 11) that are created through fairy tales: Elke, as our heroine, takes her life into her own hands and does not wait for her princes (brothers) to save her, adding feminism and therefore the mind to the femininity of Elke’s gender.

In “Times of Sickness and Health”, the short story revolves around Kay, a fifty-year-old childless woman working at a museum, who jumps between memories of her childhood, her failed marriage, and the sickness and death of her parents. The circular story starts with Kay’s fragmented memory of a ballet recital when she was five years old where she “watched [the older girls] hard, baffled by

their ease and earnestness" (TSH 140) but always asking herself what she was doing there. She especially remembers how humiliated she felt at being degraded to "the role of a flower girl" (TSH 140), and although she did what she was told she felt "doomed and powerless" (TSH 140). Kay is retelling her memory of the recital to her weekly talk circle where she finds relief from feeling lonely even though she has friends and her sisters whom she can talk to. She seems to be in control of herself, describing the people she likes talking to as "liberal, educated people, nurtured from the cradle on communication skills [with] no need for [...] organized embarrassment" (TSH 153) such as "unctuous welcoming remarks [or] forced joviality" (TSH 153).

Judging by this description, Kay would seem a very down to earth woman who knows what she wants and does not waste time with unnecessary small talk. However, as the short story jumps from one memory to the next without chronological order, the reader is confronted with other sides to the protagonist's way of thinking and interacting. The next scene circles around her first meeting Philip Halliwell, a "very tall, good looking man with exceptionally blue eyes" (TSH 144), the doctor who took care of her sick father in hospital and to whom she got married after a two-week courtship at the age of twenty-five.

It was a secret marriage because she was still a student, working in the field of early English manuscripts. She lived in a women's residence and held a prestigious scholarship which would have been jeopardized, or so they reasoned. (TSH 142)

A couple marrying after just two weeks of knowing each other is not to be considered very reasonable, as she herself states that "[she] did not trust Philip Halliwell, [she] had fallen under his spell" (TSH 142) because one day he mentioned to her that she looked tired, "especially her eyes" (TSH 144). Her father managed to recover well enough from his sickness so he could walk around the neighbourhood. Kay's most vivid memory of this time is how her father's clothes which "hung loosely on him, looked clownish and poor" (TSH 145) and the nagging question why her mother did not do anything about "those miserable clothes" (TSH 145). Her father's body is a reason to feel ashamed for Kay.

Her father's partial recovery makes the couple's postponed honeymoon to Sardinia possible. Kay is depicted as "a tall, loping, solemn girl with a head full of roughly filed facts and opinions" (TSH 146) who despite of all these remarkable

and basically attractive feminine features is ignored by her husband. Not even the photographs she has kept from her honeymoon “seem to bear [any] relation to the two of them or what they hoped to find there” (TSH 146). Her entire honeymoon is overshadowed by her husband’s obsession with the fact that they were given the same room number in all three hotels they stayed in. The only vivid memory she has is of a butterfly that comes to rest on her knee during a picnic at the beach. The butterfly reminds her of her father’s book on butterflies, and as she enjoys its “ephemeral grace” she “[holds] perfectly still, wondering what this creature made of the roundness of her knee” (TSH 148), sensing that the beauty of the moment must have an effect on her own beauty, a spell that is enhanced by her husband’s considerations that this might be “the world’s rarest butterfly” (TSH 148).

The last strand of Kay’s story concerns her mother, her Auntie Ruth, her two older sisters, Joan and Dorrie, and her “ninety-five per cent” (TSH 152) gay friend Nils Almquist. Surprisingly, these recollections include many instances of feminine stereotypes regarding the relationship between mother and daughter and siblings, and also typically female conversations. Kay is described as a girl who grew up appreciating pieces of advice, considering it “a sign of courtesy to seek counsel” and admiring its “crafty balance of consolation and hoarded up responsibility” (TSH 143). Kay believes in the practical power of short prayers to find lost things or the effectiveness of a simple utterance such as “[happiness] is capability” (TSH 144) to guide her through the days. The stereotypical feminine trait places her performances and interactions in a very traditional normative order (Holland 8).

Kay’s Auntie Ruth is remembered by her because of her prolonged visits to their house every summer that “had an effect on Kay’s mother; they made her girlish” (TSH 149). Her Aunt and mother would spend hours talking, sewing together, and going through shared memories on the porch of the house until Kay’s mother was diagnosed with lung cancer and her Aunt refused to visit her because she had a horror of hospitals. Kay, in her role as a daughter, is torn between hurting her mother on purpose when she tells her “harshly, tossing it off” (TSH 150) that she does not remember how her mother and Aunt had sewn the dresses for the recital, but on the other hand promises her mother on her death bed “[she] would have nothing to do with Auntie Ruth” (TSH 150).

The three sisters, Joan, Dorrie, and Kay have a good relationship and Kay feels “fortunate in having sisters” (TSH 151). She refers to Joan as “white-haired, heavy in the hips, already several times a grandmother” and to Dorrie as “equally sympathetic [but with] a different style” (TSH 151). Her sisters help her through the rougher times during and after her marriage with Philip, offering advice and listening to her when she recounts the only body-focused scene:

He forgets I exist. Who I am. He looks at me but sees the wallpaper. He’s courtly in the wrong way, like a man on automatic pilot. Even in bed – [...] Even then I feel him slipping away. His arms around me, yes, but his head’s somewhere else. We might as well be in different rooms.” (TSH 152)

What is striking in this paragraph is that Kay is very much aware of her own existence, of her Self, but as she is not consciously recognized or perceived by her husband, their body contact is rendered superfluous and does not have the same effect on Kay, endangering her own perception of her Self. When her husband leaves her for good, she feels “a sense of lightness [stealing] over her [...]. She felt like getting up out of a sick bed, all her bones stiff but still in working order.” (TSH 152) The relief she feels not only engulfs her mind, but her body reacts in just the same way. Her marriage has made her forget her bodily Self, but she knows that it is still there and can be mended in time.

The short story comes full circle when Kay is back in her talk group, still recounting her ballet recital memory, remembering not just the humiliation, but also her immediate reaction when the applause came: “She had been tricked. [...] But she stared straight ahead and willed herself to hold steady for a few seconds longer. Already she knew she would recover.” (TSH 155) Kay’s initial powerlessness and helplessness during the memory of the recital has now turned into an activator that made her get through her horrible marriage, her parents’ sickness, and other smaller disappointments throughout her life.

Her question at the beginning of the short story of “how [children] bear [and] survive their early ignorance” (TSH 141) is answered in the end, by her own story, by reasserting her capability of dealing with disenchantment by asking herself existential questions over and over again to keep focused. The general absence of her body in the narrative could at first be interpreted as common insecurity, but it could also point at the feeling of fragmentation that is present throughout the story, symbolising the division of mind and body in a culturally constructed Self.

The last story, "Absence", features a third person narrator who focuses on an unnamed woman writer having troubles with her keyboard as "one of the letters [...] was broken, and, to make matters worse, a vowel, the very letter that attaches to the hungry self" (Absence 103). The writer decides at once that she "would work *around* the faulty letter" (Absence 103), not giving up and believing in her own creative ability to make something out of nothing. She starts negotiating sentences, trying to reformulate them in her head without having to use the letter "I", but "[whole] parcels of grammar [...] seemed all at once out of reach" (Absence 104), "[vocabulary] had shrunk to a square yard" (Absence 104), and not even the "[seeking] out synonyms" (Absence 104) helps. The woman stops repeatedly in her search for the right way to construct a sentence, growing frustrated by the missing letter.

Always the word she sought, the only word, teased and taunted from the top row of the broken keyboard, a word that spun around the centre of a slender. One-legged vowel, erect but humble, whose dot of amazement had never before mattered. (Absence 104-105)

The woman's existence, her Self, and every other woman's existence is questioned here, as her body starts aching, freezing over, almost becoming immobile because of her powerlessness at having to settle "for those other, less seemly vowels who [...] showed altogether too much teeth" (Absence 105), afraid that the "I" will be swallowed and obliterated by the other vowels. As the day goes on, she starts thinking of more useful things to do with her time, such as doing the vacuuming or preparing a meal, but she still refuses to give up. Suddenly, "her arm [falls] heavy on the table" (Absence 106) and she "[becomes] the walls and also the clean roof overhead and the powerful black sky" (Absence 105), the woman and her "I" have vanished, disappeared into universality, becoming everything around her, "object and subject sternly fused" (Absence 107).

The last line of the short story, "'A woman sat down and wrote,' she wrote" (Absence 107) parallels one of Emily Dickinson's palimpsests, a circular motion symbolizing universal truth, a truth revolving around itself. The writer's creative process was interrupted, then altered, and then, after a partial surrender, new courage was found in the stubbornness of the universal Self, refusing to give in to desperation, but finding new ways to describe what had to be said. The act of creation mirrors the creation of the female Self, it hints at the fear of using a

“feminine masquerade” instead of “appearing to be authentic” (Holland 45), at the denial of the body and its re-appropriation (Holland 32), at the loss of power and one single agential act to regain control.

The short sequences in this woman writer’s life story who is willing to try and write about another woman’s life story in fragments and against all adversities is the epitomized “women’s struggle to emancipate” (Howells 194). The unity of body and mind is well delineated in that her fight with finding the right words is accompanied by frustrated movements of her body, emphasizing the feeling Carol Shields is trying to transport to the reader, the unity of femininity and feminism, protesting against the possibility of losing the Self, the “I”, forever.

The three women, Elke, Kay, and the female writer in these three very different stories are feminine and feminist at the same time and there is no contradiction in that, as both terms are socially constructed and do not necessarily reflect the multiple femininities and feminisms existing in society. Seen from an Individualist feminist vantage point, all women are individually feminine and feminist, and the only differences that need to be taken into account are the differences of “ethnicities, class, age, body size” (Holland 9). Carol Shields allows these women to be feminine and feminist in different degrees and on different levels without judging whether one way is better than the other, but recognizing that there is not one single way to find the right balance for brain and body, to be feminine and feminist simultaneously.

8. Conclusion

When I set out to write this thesis thirteen years ago, my general aim was to prove Carol Shields's talent and creativity at describing the ordinary in such a way that it seems extraordinary. Since then, this specialty of hers has been highlighted by many critics and by even more of her contemporary writers. Searching for another possibility to still assert Shields's uniqueness, I stumbled upon various factors: her wide-ranging female characters who seemed so dissimilar at first glance but showed more than just one parallel after a close reading, her fragmented and fast-paced story lines, the acts of agency and of witnessing so important to the field of life writing, the lively descriptions of domesticity and the working world, the idea that only a unified mind and body can make a person feel whole and authentic, and the lack of a language to express the female Self and the muteness that often takes over a life. These aspects place Carol Shields and her writing, particularly her novels and short stories published before the 1990s, within third wave feminism years before the term was coined and its temporal frame decided upon.

I could have concentrated my analysis on her novels, however, I decided to focus on her three collections of short stories in order to put emphasis on the parallels between the three collections, but also to illustrate the growth of her female characters from one set of short stories to the next, as the collections were published some years apart from each other, in 1985, 1989, and 2000. In addition, the growth of her fictional women reflects her own growth as a woman writer of fiction in many ways, as she became more open and accusing in her later works.

I would argue that, just as her female characters, Carol Shields was on a quest to expose "the power politics of gender" (Howells 196), and as her protagonists found their individual balance and identities, Shields also found her own voice with which to be accusing and critical of the changing requirements of society in general, and of women in particular. Her own voice, "[which] cannot finally be amputated from her texts" (Eden 164), is a strong feminist but also feminine voice, an Individualist feminist voice that never condemns the female character for her choices but rather encourages her and her individualism.

Defining one's Self mostly happens by opposing it to an Other, as Zuleyka Zevallos stresses, it is human nature (Zevallos 1). However, it is slightly different for women because of our culturally and socially inherent need to communicate and relate. Carol Shields's short stories, her narrations of women's lives, specifically concentrate on the female need of connecting with other human beings to achieve a sense of Self, but she also stresses the struggle of women across the world to find the right words to actually be that Self. Thus, the search for an individual identity is very prominent in Carol Shields's work, and it is further emphasized by the use of the body as a frequent trope to symbolize this struggle.

Carol Shields became an expert in making the reader see, feel, touch, and empathize with her female characters. Sympathy and empathy generally play an important role in literature to build a bridge of understanding between the literary work, the reader, and the story the author wants to transmit. As Molly Abel Travis states, this empathy "is created through the reader's close identification with the narrator and / or characters in a process that allows us to transcend differences" (232). Carol Shields connects the text with the reader, the text with the author, and thus the author with the reader, a connection that is paramount for the success of her narratives, but also one of the main features of life writing. Shields "expects us to select among possible readings, to participate in the collaborative project of this [text] and of reality in general" (Johnson 220).

Carol Shields and her characters move between categories, making it difficult to define both. Stating that Shields was a writer pertaining to the feminist movement would be too narrow a definition to fit her style and her topics, just as maintaining that she was a writer of domestic narratives would not apply to her. Her female characters cannot be defined by either being feminine or feminists, they are between categories, moving, rearranging, and creating their Self and their own narratives, tending towards one or the other alternately, always individually.

As Judith Butler concludes in her essay "Performative Acts And Gender Constitution" published in 2004:

Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds. (Butler 910)

Even though femininity and feminism are social constructs, Carol Shields and her women protagonists have managed to navigate between them with power, control, and strength while holding onto being authentic and finding a way to transport meaningful accounts of realistic lives of women who discovered the choices they had in life, never being judgmental about other women's choices.

Not that this is much of a handrail to hang on to – she knows that, and so do I – but it is at least continuous, solid, reliable as a narrative in its turnings and better than no handrail at all. (DL 51)

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