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Reviving the Subject: a Feminist Argument for Mimesis in Literature

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of English

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

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by

Messina Lyle

May 2006

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Keywords: Feminism, Identity, Modernism, Postmodernism, Mimesis

## ABSTRACT

Reviving the Subject: A Feminist Argument for Mimesis in Literature

by

Messina Lyle

For centuries we have taken for granted Aristotle's assertion that fiction must encourage emotional identification by representing life realistically. With the development of a more pluralistic society, Postmodernist writers have come to question that assumption. Having repudiated our ancestors' notions of identity, these writers create stories whose sole purpose is to comment on other stories. However, as some feminist critics have shown us, we must each have an identity in order to have the collaborative society that is the Postmodernist's goal. Therefore, the notion that a story must make a sensory impression on us and stand on its own as a story in itself is just as valid today as it was in the past.

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## CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	4
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION .....	6
Aristotle and Plato .....	7
Aristotle Today .....	14
2. "I" AND "WE" .....	25
3. MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM .....	43
Modernism and Postmodernism .....	44
Art about Art Itself .....	47
4. INTO THE FOREST .....	59
Conclusion .....	70
WORKS CITED .....	72
VITA .....	77

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Aristotle's assertion that fiction must involve the reader emotionally by representing situations as they would be in real life had gone unchallenged until the Postmodernist movement began. The notion that fiction must present a self-contained world is based on the premise that we each have an identity and that writers each have their own style and worldview. Many Postmodernist writers have either rejected fiction that presents a self-contained world on the grounds that the idea of the individual identity is outmoded, or have rejected such fiction on the grounds that it can be mistaken for absolute truth and impedes the development of reader's critical thinking abilities—abilities that are necessary to counteract the cultural forces that would undermine identity. Whether because they believe that non-mimetic fiction ultimately strengthens identity or whether they believe that identity doesn't exist, some Postmodernist writers have turned their interest to stories that exist for the sole purpose of commenting on some aspect of our society—for example, our history, our cultural norms, patterns in our fiction, or stories that form the basis of our society.

However, as we will see in Chapter 2, feminists are discovering that identity is a prerequisite for community. We each need an identity in order to realize the Postmodernist dream of true community. In Chapter 3, I will argue that literature that appeals to the emotions—as literature should according to Aristotle—does not impede the reader's critical thinking abilities. Indeed, literature that engages both the mind and the heart is more likely to stay with the reader and affect the way he or she views the

world. Therefore, the idea that novels and short stories must have their own “identity” and make an impression on the reader is just as valid today as it always has been. This is not to imply that they may not reflect on some aspect of society at the same time: in fact, I will be focusing on stories that critique other stories, both when I discuss Postmodernism and when I analyze specific non-Postmodernist texts.

This chapter will be devoted to Aristotle’s ideas concerning literature and how authors have applied them over the years. Chapter 3 will focus specifically on how Modernist writers have incorporated his ideas and Postmodernist’s reasons for rejecting them. In Chapter 4 I will analyze Into the Forest in order to show how a novel can revise an older story and still stand on its own as a story in itself.

#### Aristotle and Plato

In the Introduction to his own translation of Aristotle’s Poetics, Gerald F. Else describes Aristotle as a “doctor’s son” with a scientific mind, a “conservative and conventional-minded . . . man,” “anything but a literary type” in spite of his enjoyment of the theatre and the occasional mediocre verses that he wrote (1). Therefore, it is ironic that the Poetics was considered to be the Bible for fiction writers for so many years. Even today, now that the rules outlined in the Poetics are coming to be questioned, the book is considered to be an important work for aspiring writers to read. Aristotle believed that literature could develop empathy and present readers with truths of human nature by representing reality within the limits of unity.

In the Introduction to another translation of the Poetics—his own—W. Hamilton Fyfe recounts the circumstances under which Aristotle’s work was written. He’d written it as a rebuttal to Plato’s arguments against literature. Though Fyfe describes the



definition of literature that Plato puts forth in the Ion and Phaedrus as a “conjuring of the soul,” he says that Plato took a much more negative stance toward literature in the Republic for political reasons (xv).

Plato felt that the ideal society was one governed by logic and the pursuit of truth at all costs, and that poetry—which he used to mean literature in general—did little to advance either one of those ideals. Fyfe summarizes Plato’s philosophy of literature in the following statement—“All the arts are ‘imitative,’ but the objects which they represent are not the deceptive phenomena of sense . . . but essential truths apprehended by the mind . . . and dimly descried in phenomena” (xiv). Therefore, poetry isn’t an adequate vehicle for the pursuit of truth. In fact, since it replicates the sensory world, which, according to Plato’s philosophy, is only a replication of reality itself, “it is three removes from truth” (qtd in Fyfe xiv). Plato also believed that in order to operate under a society governed by logic, one must suppress one’s emotions—for that reason, as well, poetry, which fed on emotion, was dangerous to the ideal society.

Without taking a position—at least for the moment—on whether Plato’s conclusion regarding poetry was correct or not, let’s accept as given two statements that he makes about poetry, both of which Aristotle would agree with—that poetry evokes emotion and that it replicates the sensory world. It is commonly assumed that poetry replicates the sensory world in order to assist the reader with what Coleridge calls “willing suspension of disbelief” (160, Schaper 31, 33, 34, 36, 37, 44). It is also commonly assumed that “suspension of disbelief” is necessary to evoke an emotional response to fiction. However, Eva Schaper argues against the latter assumption. Before

we move on to the ways in which Aristotle refutes Plato, let's pause to examine Schaper's argument.

Schaper begins with the assumption that "knowing entails believing" and that one must have beliefs about something in order to have an emotional response to it (31). Therefore, it seems illogical to say that one can react emotionally to a work of art that one knows isn't true, but to deny that we sometimes are moved emotionally by art denies our experience (31).

To explain this paradox, she posits the theory that an audience of a work should only pretend to be moved by it. She does not deny that our emotional response to fiction is slightly different from our emotional response to life events, but even so rejects the theory because our experience asserts that we can have all of the same emotions in response to fiction that we can in response to life (32). Another theory that she posits is that we only half-believe in characters that we encounter in fiction, but she rejects half-belief as "semi-delusion" (36). She also rejects the idea that we "follow a story with interest and attention, in a neutral state of neither belief nor disbelief," because the kind of emotional involvement that she is discussing is much deeper than just interest and attention (36).

The conclusion that she comes to is that our knowledge that a piece of fiction isn't real is actually a necessary condition for our emotional reaction to it, for that reaction isn't brought about by the prospect that the story is actually happening—it is brought about by the prospect that it could happen. Thus, she says, suspension of disbelief is not necessary for emotional reaction to take place.

Since the assumption that poets and literary theorists have had for centuries that literature should be mimetic had its basis in Aristotle's Poetics, one would think that Aristotle would disagree with Schaper, particularly since he believes not only that literature *does* appeal to the emotions, but that it *should*. However, a line in the Poetics indicates that he would agree with Schaper. That is the line in which he refutes Plato's claim that literature does not foster the pursuit of truth by saying that literature is actually the closest thing to a replication of truth that humans have invented because it shows not "what did happen but what is likely to happen" (Else Poetics 32), thereby separating the truths of human nature from human events. Having grasped those truths, the poet demonstrates them by recreating life through literature. This does not suggest that Aristotle believes that the purpose of fiction is to induce temporary insanity—or, as Schaper puts it, to make its audience like a "naïve backwoodsman who jumps onto the stage trying to stop the characters in some Jacobean drama, say, from perpetuating their evil designs" (34). Perhaps it isn't disbelief per se that one suspends when one sees a play or reads a novel—perhaps what one suspends is the unwillingness that one normally has to let something affect one emotionally when one knows it isn't true.

According to Aristotle, one rule that a poet should follow if he or she would write poetry that illustrates truths of human nature is that the actors in his or her plays must not be "active in order to imitate their characters but . . . include the characters along with the actions for the sake of the latter" ( Else Poetics 27). Of course, Aristotle was talking strictly about stage plays. Later I will be applying his rules to fiction. If we want to apply this rule to fiction, we can translate it to mean that an author shouldn't have his or her characters act and speak merely for the sake of demonstrating their personalities—but

rather an author should keep the character's personalities in mind when determining how to have his or her characters go about achieving the goal of the plot. This rule makes sense because in real life everything we do and say is for the purpose of achieving a goal of some kind. Thus fictional characters must behave in the same manner if their author would convince the reader that the story would have happened the same way in real life.

Aristotle lists plot as being of primary importance and character as being of secondary importance in dramatic literature (Else Poetics 27-28). It is easy to see why character is ranked as high as it is because characters are, after all, the agents of a plot. Because characters are the agents of a plot, it is important, as Aristotle says, that characters exhibit a "likeness to human nature in general" (Else Poetics 43) just as "[i]n character portrayal," as well as "plot construction, one should always strive for the necessary or the probable" (Else Poetics 44).

As well as disagreeing with Plato that literature does not foster a search for truth, Aristotle also doesn't agree that literature is dangerous to a society founded on logic. Aristotle agrees that emotion can be dangerous if not controlled, but he disagrees with Plato about how to control emotion. He feels that it is more practical to purge one's emotions in a controlled environment than to repress them, for, as Fyfe paraphrases Aristotle, "pent-up emotion is apt to explode inconveniently" (Intro xvii). Aristotle sees art as the ideal environment in which to purge that emotion.

When discussing emotion in literature, the two emotions that Aristotle focuses on are "pity and fear." He believes that the plots that best evoke pity and fear are those involving a protagonist who is neither too evil nor too virtuous, who passes "from good fortune to bad . . . because of some mistake of great weight and consequence" (Else

Poetics 38). Plots that fit this description facilitate the sort of identification with a character that makes it easier for a reader to respond emotionally to a story that he or she knows is not true, for, as Aristotle says, “pity is directed towards the man who does not deserve his misfortune” and “fear [is directed] towards the one who is like the rest of mankind” (Else Poetics 38). After all, if an unfortunate event befalls someone “who is like the rest of mankind,” then we know that that event could befall any one of us.

When Aristotle says that a character’s bad fortune should be caused by a mistake on his part and not by evil in his or her nature, the assumption he seems to be operating on is that characters who are too evil will invite our judgment and therefore make it harder for us to identify with them. However, his contemporaries required characters of greater heroic and moral stature to prevent their judgment than we do today. As Burroway puts it:

It might seem that the antiheroes, brutes, hoods, whores, perverts, and bums who people modern literature do very little in the way of revealing good moral purpose. The history of Western literature shows a movement downward and inward: downward through society from royalty to gentry to the middle classes to the lower classes to the dropouts; inward from heroic action to social drama to individual consciousness to the subconscious to the unconscious (124).

We should also bear in mind that a character’s evil nature and a mistake on the character’s part are not the only two ways that that character may fall into misfortune—he or she may also fall into misfortune through the evil action of another character, in which he would still arouse our pity.

Characters that exhibit a “likeness to human nature in general” (Else Poetics 43) not only facilitate emotional identification, but they also bring about events that are likely to happen in real life, as I said before. That is important for all characters in any plot no matter which characters the author intends the reader to identify with.

Hardison speculates on whether Aristotle's term "catharsis" translates as "clarification," "purification," or "purgation" (133). "Purgation" implies that the purpose of catharsis is to "drive [emotions] out" (133). The "many varieties of the purification theory," on the other hand, include Robertello and Castelveto's theory that dramatic literature "helped to harden . . . the emotions," as war hardens the emotions of soldiers (Hardison 136). Batteux and Lessing, however, believe that dramatic literature "purifies the spectator by increasing his sensitivity—still purification, but almost the opposite of the kind of purification found in Castelveto" (136).

Regardless of which interpretation of "catharsis" that Aristotle intended, we can see that narrative art can be cathartic in all three senses that I have just covered of the word. Narrative art can purge one's emotions, and it can also either increase one's sensitivity or—as complaints about violence in television would imply—decrease one's sensitivity. We think of that narrative art that desensitizes as being "entertainment"—which isn't the focus of this thesis—and we think of that brand of narrative art that enhances one's sensitivity as being "true" art. As well as *exorcizing* negative emotions, literature can also allow us to feel things that we would not have the chance to feel in our normal lives, to see what it feels like to be someone else, if only for a while, thereby *exercising* a positive emotion—empathy. This is another reason why literature promotes the development of a healthy society.

To recap, Plato believed that literature was harmful to the ideal society. To his mind, society should value truth and logic above all else, and, according to Plato, poetry dramatized events that weren't true and reduced one's powers of logic because it appealed to the emotions. Aristotle questioned Plato's emphasis on logic and claimed that

some emotions were worth cultivating for the good of society, and that other emotions were better purged than repressed. He also felt that literature *did* give us truth—truth about human nature. He saw that literature had the power—unlike nonfiction—to let us experience those truths rather than merely hear them. He felt that the best way that writers could do that—and also the best way that literature could expand reader’s powers of empathy—was to give the reader characters that he or she could relate to.

### Aristotle Today

Of course, as I said before, Aristotle’s ideas about the narrative literature of his own day can also be applied to the narrative art of the Modernist movement and all preceding literary movements. I’ll be focusing primarily on fiction for the rest of this thesis. In Writing Fiction, a textbook widely used for beginning creative writing classes, Janet Burroway expresses the idea thus: “Literature offers us feelings for which we do not have to pay. It allows us to love, condemn, condone, hope, dread, and hate without any of the risks these feelings ordinarily involve, for even good feelings—intimacy, power, speed, drunkenness, passion—have consequences, and powerful feelings may risk powerful consequences” (74).

Another idea of Aristotle’s that we have applied to modern fiction is that literature replicates truths of human nature. Nonfiction can merely *tell* us these truths, but the special thing about fiction is that it can let us experience these truths. For fiction to do this, according to Aristotle, “the emotional effects ought to carry across to the spectator without explicit argument” (Else Poetics 52). This idea, under Aristotle’s subheading “thought,” is echoed by John Ciardi’s statement that “Literature . . . is never only about ideas but about the experience of ideas” (qtd in Burroway 358). A common piece of

advice among creative writing teachers is “Show, don’t tell.” Humans are visceral creatures before they are spiritual creatures—therefore, if a reader is to fully internalize the ideas or truths of human nature illustrated by a literary work, those ideas must be embodied by “sensory detail” (Burroway 80, McClannahan 11) or detail that appeals to the senses, including the sensory experience of emotions. These “ideas must be experienced through or with the characters; they must be felt or the fiction will fail” (Burroway 74, qtd in Hood 6).

In her creative writing instruction manual Word Painting, Rebecca McClannahan gives an example of an idea—particularly an emotion—embodied by a work of literature. She juxtaposes descriptions of poems written by two of her former students, one that does not rely on sensory detail and one that does. The former poem contains phrases like “the anxiety of my being” and “the chaos of undefined modernity”; when McClannahan asked him why he had typed it in all caps, he replied, “I didn’t want anyone to miss the obscurity.” The latter poem was twelve lines long, eight of which were devoted to describing a button. In the last four lines the reader learns that the protagonist of the poem is sewing that button onto a jacket that her dead father is wearing as he lies in his casket (55-56). In this poem, a mere button becomes “the embodiment of a daughter’s grief” (56).

One thing that Aristotle says seems to contradict the importance of sensory detail at first, and that is that “pity and fear can arise from the spectacle and also from the very structure of the plot, which is the superior way and the mark of the better poet” (Golden 23). In other words, a play can evoke emotion more effectively through the plot than through the appearance of the actors and the stage. Because sensory detail is the



equivalent in fiction of “spectacle” (Golden 23) in a play, it would seem as though Aristotle wouldn’t attach much importance to sensory detail in fiction if he were alive today. But Aristotle isn’t discounting the importance of sensory detail—he’s just saying that plot should be of primary importance. For the most part writers and theorists agree that sensory detail cannot save a poor plot, but it can improve an already good one.

This brings us back to the line that I quoted earlier—Plato’s philosophy of literature as summarized by Fyfe: “All the arts are imitative, but the objects which they represent are not the deceptive phenomena of sense . . . but essential truths apprehended by the mind . . . and dimly descried in phenomena” (xiv). Based on the material that I have already cited, I would draw the conclusion that Burroway, Ann Hood, and Rebecca McClanahan would all disagree with this statement on two counts, as would Aristotle. First of all, they would disagree with the claim that the arts represent “essential truths” rather than “the deceptive phenomena of sense.” It isn’t that they don’t believe that literature represents essential truths, but they believe that it should do so *by* representing the phenomena of sense, including the sensory experience of emotion, not *instead* of the phenomena of sense. Also, in the statement that these “essential truths” are “dimly descried in phenomena,” they would disagree with the word “dimly” and say that, rather, the phenomena of sense is the most effective way to represent these essential truths. It is only through emotional identification with the characters and acceptance of the probability of the events that a reader can fully experience the idea embodied by the fiction.

Up to this point, mimesis has been the only rule found in the Poetics that I have discussed. The other one I intend to discuss is “unity” (Fyfe Poetics 33). Using paintings

as a metaphor for all art, including literature, Aristotle says that “the most beautiful pigments smeared on at random will not give as much pleasure as a black-and-white outline picture” (Else Poetics 28). He also says that “tragedy is a representation of an action that is whole and complete,” that “a whole is what has a beginning and a middle and an end,” that “beauty consists in magnitude and ordered arrangement,” and that even if a plot deals with a single hero the author must be selective about which events in that protagonist’s life he or she includes in that plot in order for it to have unity (Fyfe Poetics 31).

However, John Gardener points out in his fiction writing instruction manual that unity can be taken too far. “When all of a novel’s strings are too neatly tied together at the end,” says Gardener, “. . . we feel the novel to be unlikelike” (184).

The concept of unity needs no further explanation. At this point we have established that sensory detail, probable plots, and characters who act according to the rules of human nature are necessary for a reader to become emotionally involved in a story and to experience the truth or truths that it embodies. But how closely should fiction follow life in order for this to happen?

We have always been able to accept some deviation from reality in narrative art, but the demand for realism has become greater over time, with the possible exception of the genre called “magical realism.” Certainly it has become greater since Aristotle’s time, when audiences accepted the presence of a chorus onstage. In Shakespeare’s day the boundary between the “sublime” style and the “realm of everyday realities” was dissolving (Auerbach 312), and “the element of physical creaturalness” was appearing more and more in literature: “hunger and thirst, cold and heat affect[ed] tragic characters .

. . they suffer[ed] from the inclemencies of weather and the ravages of illness: in Ophelia's case insanity [was] represented with . . . realistic psychology" (Auerbach 313). As quoted before, "The history of Western literature shows a movement downward and inward; downward through society from royalty to gentry to the middle classes to the lower classes to the dropouts; inward from heroic action to social drama to individual consciousness to the subconscious" (Burroway 124). As a result of this downward and inward movement, narrative art has been able to capture the essence of a wider variety of people's lives.

However, the amount of sensory detail required to make a story come alive has varied from story to story in all time periods. Auerbach compares Odysseus with the Old Testament story of Isaac's sacrifice. He notes that in Odysseus Homer gives every conceivable detail not only of the scene of Odysseus's homecoming but of the flashback that interrupts that scene to relate how he got the scar on his foot by which his nurse recognizes him—without regard to which details are foremost in Odysseus's mind either in the homecoming scene or the flashback. However, in the Old Testament story we aren't even told where Abraham is or what he's doing when God addresses him—these details are left to the reader's imagination (Auerbach 3-9).

We have seen that the amount of detail required varies from story to story but haven't addressed the issue of the importance each detail should be given. One question that should be addressed is, in order to be mimetic, should a literary work replicate life as it is in all its details, as Odysseus does, or life as it is experienced—inasmuch as there is a perceivable difference? Someone once told me that when many children are first learning to draw a house they will draw the front, back, sides, and roof because, they insist, in real

life a house has four sides and a roof. It isn't until they get older that they learn to draw the house as it would appear to the viewer—to draw only the front.

Toni Morrison's novel The Bluest Eye might be considered non-mimetic by some because the plot isn't presented in anything resembling chronological order. Likewise, some might consider Tennessee Williams' play The Glass Menagerie to be non-mimetic. In a note at the beginning of the play, Williams himself writes, "The scene is memory and is therefore non-realistic" (1101). However, The Bluest Eye, by presenting events out of chronological order, does show us the disjointed reality of a young girl losing her sanity after her father rapes and impregnates her. Likewise, The Glass Menagerie reflects reality as it is experienced in memory. The dim lighting (1100) reflects the dimness of memory, and the spotlight on Laura even when she is not the apparent center of the action (1100) reflects the subjectivity of memory. In order to appeal to a reader's senses and emotions and involve him or her in the story, one need not draw the whole house, so to speak—it is sufficient to draw only the side of it apparent to the viewer.

Another important question to ask is whether stories about things that couldn't happen in real life—for example, science fiction and fantasy stories—can be mimetic.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge says that in his Lyrical Ballads "it was agreed that my endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (161). We can safely assume that Coleridge didn't mean "suspension of disbelief" (161) literally, in the sense of temporary insanity, but rather suspension of our tendency not to allow things we know not to be true

to affect us emotionally. As long as fantasy and science fiction writers keep this “semblance of” (Coleridge 161) the truths of human nature in their work by having their characters act according to the rules of human nature, their readers will be convinced that the story would have turned out the way it did if humans had magical powers, or were capable of time travel, or if whichever other fantastic circumstances that existed in the story were also true in real life, and thus the reader will be just as emotionally involved in the story as he or she would have been in a more realistic story.

However, anything that reminds the reader that he or she is reading a story does disrupt what Gardener calls the “vivid and continuous dream” (87) of fiction, thus preventing the reader from fully experiencing the ideas embedded in the story. As stated before, it is easier to shock a reader out of that dream today than it would have been in the past, though even today we aren’t distracted from the “vivid and continuous dream” of a novel by the sight of black marks on a page. Henry Fielding’s contemporaries could accept the essays that he interspersed throughout his novels, illustrating the facets of human nature that were the topics of those novels. But Modernist and contemporary Modernist<sup>1</sup> fiction writers have learned how to embody the ideas in their fiction more fully through the story itself, without the need for commentary—thus, most modern readers find commentary in fiction intrusive.

But if commentary destroys the illusion of fiction, then do all signs of an author’s presence do the same? Jean-Paul Sartre felt that fiction writers should “give the illusion that [they do] not even exist” (qtd in Booth 50) and create “novels that are not viewed as ‘products of man’ but as natural products like plants or events” (51). Sartre was more

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<sup>1</sup> I will use the term “contemporary modernist” to refer to literature after the modernist period that carries on the modernist mimetic tradition in order to distinguish it from that sort of “postmodernist” literature that rebels against that tradition.

tolerant of a guiding author's presence in earlier novels because the worldview of the society in which they were written was based on a divine plan. But now that we know that there is no order to existence, Sartre says, no hint of a guiding author should be permitted in literature (Booth 51). Rather, an author should include the minutest detail, including every word of dialogue between the characters (52).

Booth posits the question of whether Sartre means that an author shouldn't choose what to reveal, or that an author should conceal all signs of his or her having chosen what to reveal (52). Even Sartre himself confesses that the first interpretation "raises difficulties which nobody has yet resolved, and which, perhaps, are partially insoluble" (qtd in Booth 52). Booth feels that even when we view Sartre's theory as purely academic and not one to be put into practice, the assumption on which it is based—that "fiction should seem to be unwritten"—is invalid (52). As Booth paraphrases Jean-Louis Curtis, "all art presupposes the artist's choice" (53).

Sartre's approach to fiction also goes against Aristotle's concept of "unity." The modern worldview may not be based as much on the idea of a divine plan as that of our forebears, but no amount of cultural change can alter the fundamental human need for order and meaning. We already have life, so fiction that replicates life without imposing some order on it doesn't give us much. Fiction that does impose a degree of order on life gives us the meaning that we crave and makes sense of the ideas that it embodies. Just as fiction that is too unified can seem unlikelike, fiction without enough unity can seem pointless. Therefore, fiction should balance mimesis and unity—though that isn't to say that mimesis and unity are always opposite of one another.

Aristotle's ideas that literature can develop empathy and let the reader experience truths of human nature by representing life can be applied to fiction of today, as can his rules about unity. Before the postmodernist movement began, fiction became steadily more realistic over time but still adhered to Aristotle's rules of unity.

The idea that fiction, in order to be effective, must encourage emotional identification by representing life and character realistically—within the limits of unity—has been generally accepted for many years now. Though the requirements for unity have remained pretty much the same, the requirements for realism—at least in conventional fiction—have risen, as I mentioned before.

In particular, there is a relationship between the movement “downward and inward” in the “history of Western literature,” (Burroway 124) and the movement from authoritarianism to democracy in society. Gardener says that most literature was didactic in “authoritarian” societies of the past, when royalty was “revered as innately better than” the common people (82).

However, as society has become increasingly pluralistic, we have become more skeptical of authority and the notion of absolute truth. Two things have happened as a result of this. One is that we have begun to question notions that we had previously taken for granted—such as Aristotle's theories of literature. Postmodernist writers have begun to write fiction that intentionally shocks readers out of the “vivid and continuous dream” (Gardener 87) or never allows them to enter it in the first place.

The other thing that has happened as a result of our increasing distrust of authority and absolute truth is that as oppressed people such as women have gained more of a voice in society, they have also tried to find their voices in fiction. Feminist fiction writers and

literary theorists share Postmodernist's dreams of social revolution, and they have used their literature and theory as vehicles for that revolution. In order to do this, however, they have had to de-internalize patriarchy's misogynistic views of women.

In her review of Nancy Walker's book, The Disobedient Writer, Molly Hite defines the "disobedient writer" as "the woman who revises masculinist cultural scripts to arrive at an alternative vision" (382). Feminist dreams of social revolution have led novelists to write novels that revise masculinist cultural scripts—though not all of them use Postmodern techniques—and critics to explore never-before-considered interpretations of pre-existing novels. In this thesis I will be looking at a total of four novels—Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights, and Jean Hegland's Into the Forest. Gilbert and Gubar interpret Frankenstein and Wuthering Heights as revisions of Paradise Lost, Jane Eyre could be interpreted as a revision of fairy tale romances, and Into the Forest could be interpreted as a revision of Genesis and the story of Christ.

In the second chapter of this thesis I will shift the topic from mimesis to feminist literary criticism and chronicle literary women's journey to find their identity as that journey is manifested in past and present critical interpretations Frankenstein, Jane Eyre, and Wuthering Heights. In my third chapter I will examine Postmodernist writers' and theorist's rationales for abandoning mimetic literature in our pluralistic modern society. I will also take what we discovered in Chapter 2—that many feminist writers and theorists are exploring ways to achieve autonomy because that is necessary to realize their vision of a more collaborative society—and apply that to Chapter 3 as I show that Postmodernist writers' discounting of identity is not likely to further feminists' dreams of a more



cooperative society. The reader should not look for a direct connection between mimesis and feminist literary criticism, for they are connected not to each other but to Modernism and Postmodernism. Modernism supports the “vivid and continuous dream” whereas Postmodernism subverts it. As we will see in the next chapter, we each require an identity in order to bring about a more collaborative society, and Modernism embraces the concept of the individual identity while Postmodernism rejects it. However, even though there may not be a direct connection between mimesis and feminist literary criticism, there is a connection between mimesis and feminism, which is that fiction must portray a self-contained world in order to reflect the notion of identity and the goal of feminism is to give women the freedom to find their own identity. In my fourth chapter I will demonstrate how Aristotle’s rules for mimesis in literature are still valid in our pluralistic modern society in my analysis of Into the Forest.

## CHAPTER 2

### “I” AND “WE”

For the moment, let's make a brief digression from mimesis to feminist literary theory and examine how women sought their own identities within patriarchy. In Chapter 3, we will examine Postmodernist rationales for abandoning mimesis along with the concept of identity in light of the way that men have historically defined their identities in contrast to women's, and have thus been driven by fear to silence women's voices.

In the past, men didn't give a fair treatment either to female characters in the fiction that they wrote or to the women's fiction that they criticized, for in each case they imposed their own assumptions onto the text. As the feminist movement has developed, female critics have tried to remedy that by asking whether certain women's novels advance the feminist cause, as Jean Wyatt asks of Jane Eyre, and by proposing interpretations of women's novels as being mirrors of society for the purpose of showing how that society needs to be changed, as various critics have done not only with Jane Eyre but also with Wuthering Heights and Frankenstein. These critics disagree on which of these novels present a path to gender equality, however.

In A Room of One's Own, Virginia Woolf confesses to being “bored” by the “aridity” that “the letter ‘I’ . . . [cast] within its shade” in the fiction by male authors of her day (100). In “First Persons Plural in Contemporary Feminist Fiction,” Adelaide Morris traces the development of gender relationships in fiction from the time when man believed that his “‘I’ must unfurl like a flag across the landscape of his fiction” in order to drown out women's increasingly audible voices (11), to the time when women began to say “I” just as loudly, to the time when women moved beyond that and began a “shift

from 'I' to 'we' (17). In "Rewriting Genesis," Froula makes a remark that seems to back up the implications of Morris's study:

Adam's naming of Eve does not define her as a subject of human history and culture like himself but rather equates her identity with the maternal function. But what is most curious about this act of naming is not its enactment of Eve's subordination in culture nor even the reduction of her subjectivity from fully human being to maternity, but rather its narrative inaccuracy; for at this moment in the text Eve is not only not the mother of any living being, she is latest-come of all the creatures (200).

The fact that there was such a movement in feminist fiction as Morris describes—a movement beginning with women saying "I" just as loudly as men before proceeding on to "we" (17)—indicates that it is necessary for people to fully individuate themselves before they can become interdependent. Froula's statement shows how typical male/female relations bear out this idea, using Eve as a metaphor for all womankind and Adam as a metaphor for all mankind. Of course, women as a whole have accumulated much more experience and knowledge than Eve had when she was first formed from Adam's rib, including the experience of motherhood in all its variations, but nonetheless patriarchy has discouraged women from outgrowing that childlike, dependent state of Eve. Using the Genesis story to illustrate her point, Froula is showing us the irony of the fact that not only have men recreated women in their own image, but the very fact that they have done so has deprived women of the self-direction—or the "I," (Morris 11-23, 25) if you will—necessary to do the mothering and nurturing that men would have them do.

Paradise Lost is a good example of a work that reflects this attitude toward women in its portrayal of Eve. As Charlotte Bronte's character Shirley Keeldar puts it, Milton "tried to see the first woman, but . . . he saw her not . . . It was his cook that he saw" (qtd in Gilbert and Gubar 193). As Morris points out (11), Woolf's implication is

that patriarchy averts its eyes from any signs of an identity that women have other than that which it thrusts on them (100). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar use Harold Bloom's term "anxiety of influence" (47, 48, 50, 59) to describe the fear behind this excessive self-assertion—men's fear of their identity being imposed on. Living in the shadow of patriarchy, women have developed the opposite fear, which Gilbert and Gubar call the "anxiety of authorship" (49, 51, 56, 58, 59, 66, 73).

As Gilbert and Gubar point out, Mary Shelley's novel Frankenstein has both the subtitle The Modern Prometheus and an epigraph from Paradise Lost: "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay/ To mould me man? Did I solicit thee/ From darkness to promote me?" (qtd in Gilbert and Gubar 224). Thus it could be taken as either a retelling of the myth of Prometheus or of Paradise Lost. Gilbert and Gubar focus on the Paradise Lost interpretation, and later on I will also, but Frankenstein interpreted as a retelling of the story of Prometheus sheds quite a different light on the myth than does Mary's husband Percy's poem "Prometheus Unbound," his retelling of Aeschylus's play Prometheus Bound. In fact, it is worth noting in passing that the two works of the husband and wife could be interpreted as illustrations of the duality of anxiety of influence and anxiety of authorship. As the story leading up to Prometheus's punishment was well known among his contemporaries, Aeschylus didn't include it in Prometheus Bound, but, according to David Leeming, Zeus withdraws fire from Prometheus's beloved humans in the first place because he is angry at Prometheus for tricking him, and after Prometheus steals the fire back Zeus invents a rumor about Prometheus to avoid admitting the real reason for his punishment (175-177). In "Prometheus Unbound," Percy Shelley focuses on the injustice of Zeus's despotism, while in Frankenstein Mary Shelley chronicles the damage

that Victor's monster does as a way of demonstrating the consequences of usurping what belongs to the gods.

Charlotte Bronte and her sisters, Anne and Emily, were quite well aware of patriarchy's tendency to shout down women writer's voices. Indeed, that was why the three sisters took pseudonyms early in their writing careers—so that their work would receive a fair reception uncolored by gender. In her “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell,” published as a foreword to the second edition of Wuthering Heights<sup>2</sup> Charlotte reveals her true identity and her gender along with those of her sisters. She says, “We did not like to declare ourselves women because—without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called ‘feminine’—we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had not noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery, which is not true praise” (par 7).

The Bronte's fears turned out to be justified. Carol Ohmann introduces her article by demonstrating how the critics' attitudes toward the sisters' work changed after they revealed themselves to be female. Many critics “simply assumed without comment” that the Brontes were male and others drew proof of that assumption from their novels (907). Though many reviewers had called Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights “original” (qtd in Ohmann 908) before it became common knowledge that it was written by a female, afterwards a review “began by firmly placing it in a familiar class, and that class was not in the central line of literature” (908). This reviewer also, ironically, finds evidence in the novel that it was written by a female (908). This just proves that a reader adjusts a work

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<sup>2</sup> As I did not have access to the edition of Wuthering Heights that contains this “Notice,” I have chosen to use a version from the Internet.

of literature to his or her own expectations, which are based in part on the gender of the author.

In fact, Charlotte Bronte herself became a victim of what Ohmann calls “sexual prejudice” (909) after revealing her gender. For example, Richard Chase poses this question regarding Jane Eyre: “May not Bertha . . . be a living example of what happens to a woman who . . . in her insane suffragettism tries . . . to play the Hero, to be the fleshly vessel of the *élan*?” (qtd in Pell 19). This is a perfect example of a critic imposing the assumptions of the patriarchy onto a book to which they don’t apply. As Nancy Pell points out in response to Chase, “there is no evidence for Bertha’s ‘suffragettism,’ insane or otherwise” (410). In fact her madness seems like the only sane response to being “traded by her father . . . along with her dowry, to cover the Mason family’s taints of insanity and Creole blood with the honor and protection of the Rochester name” (410).

Ohmann discusses two critical articles on Wuthering Heights that were also based on patriarchal assumptions which were irrelevant to the novel. In the first of these articles, Mark Schorer claims that Emily Bronte started out “wishing to instruct her narrator, the dandy, Lockwood, in the nature of a grand passion” and ended up “instructing herself in the vanity of human wishes” (qtd in Ohmann 909). “Lockwood is instructed in the nature of a grand passion,” writes Schorer, “but he and Emily Bronte together are instructed in its final fruits: even roaring fires end in a bed of ashes. Her metaphors instruct her, and her verbs” (qtd in Ohmann 910).

One can surely understand the sarcasm in Ohmann’s response to this interpretation:

Now, according to Schorer, this is what Emily Bronte learned that she did not know before: she learned that man dies, that the world lasts longer than he does, that fires once lit sometime burn out, that rain is followed by shine, and storm by calm. None of these facts is hard to come by;

most children learn them without setting pen to a single extended original composition, and probably, Emily Bronte was 27 when she began Wuthering Heights. The critic has attributed to the novelist an extraordinary degree of naiveté (910).

Ohmann also takes issue with Schorer's claim that Emily lost control of the course of her novel midway through, a claim that he reinforces with his own word choice—"Her metaphors instruct her, and her verbs"; "[her] verbs *demand* exhaustion, just as [her] metaphors *demand* rest" (qtd in Ohmann 910). Many authors of both genders have claimed that at least some of their works have "written themselves," but Ohmann's complaint about Schorer's lack of evidence to support his claim that Emily lost control of her subject matter midway through the novel is no less valid for that. Schorer's "suppositions" about the development of Emily's novel "remain just that—suppositions," claims Ohmann. "He does not work to substantiate them" (910).

The "sexual prejudice" with which the Brontes have been faced is much more apparent in the second critical article on Wuthering Heights that Ohmann cites, which is Thomas Moser's "What is the Matter with Emily Jane?: Conflicting Impulses in Wuthering Heights." The Emily Jane of the title is, of course, Emily Jane Bronte. As Ohmann points out, the title is an allusion to a poem by A. A. Milne called "Rice Pudding":

What is the matter with Mary Jane?  
She's perfectly well and she hasn't a pain  
*And it's lovely rice pudding for dinner again!*  
What *is* the matter with Mary Jane? (qtd in Ohmann 910).

"Moser's title betokens, I *think*, affection," writes Ohmann. "But it also signifies condescension" (910). Most assuredly.

According to Moser, the "matter with Emily Jane" is that she never admits to herself the true subject of her novel (2), which is Heathcliff's "magical sexual power"

(16). He defines “a novel’s true subject” as being “the one that elicits the most highly energized writing” (3). The scenes that elicit this kind of writing are, according to Moser, the recurring scenes “involving Heathcliff, Cathy, and, in most cases, an ineffectual male” (5). Each one of these scenes is of a “dispute of some sort over entrance through a door or window. Heathcliff always wins, and the images suggest that the victory is a sexual conquest” (5).

However, these symbolic sexual conquests culminate in what Moser calls a “feminization” (15) of the novel “as Emily Bronte turns to her second generation of characters” (Ohmann 911). Cathy Heathcliff introduces this feminization as she “plays . . . the embattled champion of women’s rights castigating the dissolute male” (Moser 14). “In other words,” as Ohmann puts it, “Cathy protests when she is married against her will, deprived of her property, and struck, left and right, on both sides of the head” (911). Moser protests further at what he sees as Cathy’s emasculation of Hareton as she teaches him to read (15). He concludes that this tale of Heathcliff’s “magical sexual power” eventually degenerates into a “superficial stereotyped tale of feminine longings” (15).

Ohmann objects to Moser’s assumption that “what is masculine is desirable and admirable, just as what is feminine is undesirable, even contemptible” (911). She questions the unstated premise of Moser’s claims, which is that Wuthering Heights “is a masterpiece when it appears to celebrate this idea of masculinity,” but “it is trash when it does not” (911). Like Chase and Schorer, Moser has imposed the assumptions of the patriarchy onto the novel without bothering to back them up. Like Milton in his portrayal of Eve, he has imposed his own “I” (Morris 11-23, 25) on Womankind and failed to grant her hers.



In A Room of One's Own, Virginia Woolf posits a hypothetical sister of William Shakespeare named Judith who, though as talented as her brother, was driven to suicide by this very failure of patriarchy to grant her her "I" (Morris 11-23, 25). To revive this "dead poet," Woolf says, women writers must "look past Milton's bogey, for no human being should shut out the view" (114).

How have women been able to do this? "What strategies for artistic survival were they able to develop" in patriarchy? (Gilbert and Gubar 213). How have they been able to hold on to their autonomy, let alone see—and present—a way to transcend autonomy and achieve community?

This question has inspired feminist critics to look at seemingly anti-feminist works with fresh eyes. According to Gilbert and Gubar, two ways that women writers have been able to assert the injustice of their oppression in patriarchy have been by demonstrating the very limits of their experience in fiction—as Gilbert and Gubar claim that Jane Austen does in two chapters of Madwoman in the Attic, "Shut Up in Prose: Austen's Juvenilia" (107-145), and "Jane Austen's Cover Story" (146-183)—and by revising a myth on which that patriarchy is based, as Gilbert and Gubar claim that Mary Shelley and Emily Bronte do in Frankenstein and Wuthering Heights (213-247, 248-308). However, the unstated implications that I see in Gilbert and Gubar's interpretation are that Shelley and Emily Bronte don't offer a solution to women's oppression—they state the problem but don't solve it. However, as we will see, Gilbert and Gubar do believe that Charlotte Bronte gives women a role model for achieving and transcending autonomy and achieving a true union with another human being in Jane Eyre. In the following discussion I intend to argue that Carol Ohmann and Jean Wyatt would disagree

with Gilbert and Gubar's readings of the Bronte sister's works. Wyatt poses the question of whether Charlotte Bronte betrayed her own feminist principals by having Jane return to her "father figure" (205), Rochester, and concludes not that Jane and Rochester's relationship was equal after all but that Bronte was expressing the ambivalence that women feel about independence. Ohmann, however, believes that the younger Cathy and Hareton from Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights demonstrate how true solidarity defeats oppression (913), just as Jane and Rochester do according to Gilbert and Gubar (369).

Jean Wyatt acknowledges that Jane Eyre reflects the fairy-tale fantasies of romance that women have internalized from their patriarchal culture but asks whether it also inspires readers to strive for social change. Wyatt begins by posing the question of why such fairy-tale fantasies have endured in popularity in fiction despite feminist disapproval (201). Her answer is that romantic love fantasies have their roots in "traditional father-daughter relationships" (202). Rochester fits the role of Jane's father-figure perfectly—he even reminds her occasionally that he is "old enough to be [her] father" (qtd in Wyatt 202).

According to Wyatt, if Rochester is Jane's father figure, then his wife, Bertha, as Jane's competitor for Rochester's affections, completes the Oedipal triangle and plays the role of Jane's mother (204). Wyatt's explanation for how Charlotte Bronte disguises the "Oedipal dream" (205) of "eternal and exclusive union with the father figure" (205) is that Jane's journey from Rochester's upon learning of Bertha's existence is like a daughter leaving home (205). After she has left and found a new family among her actual blood relatives, she must in turn leave them to find a proper mate, which turns out to be "Rochester after all" (205).

On the surface, according to Wyatt, it looks as if Charlotte Bronte started off her novel with lofty feminist ideals, with her gutsy heroine and the egalitarian Moor House, only to forsake those ideals by having Jane return to Rochester. Despite the money Jane has inherited, Wyatt rejects the idea that Jane retains her independence after her return to Rochester (210). Her conclusion, though, is not that Charlotte gave up her dreams of autonomy for women midway through the novel, but that she was trying to articulate the ambivalence that even many feminists feel as they try to reconcile their fantasies of a father figure—which they have internalized from their culture—with their ideals of female equality.

Gilbert and Gubar have also looked at many seemingly anti-feminist literary works with fresh eyes and come to the conclusion that they are feminist texts in disguise. In the chapters of The Madwoman in the Attic entitled “Shut Up in Prose: Austen’s Juvenilia” (107-145) and “Jane Austen’s Cover Story” (146-183), Gilbert and Gubar argue that the limits that Austen placed on her subject matter were actually a covert critique of the limits placed on women and their imaginations by the patriarchy. In other words, she used her work as a mirror that she held up to her culture.

Another way that women have held up a mirror to their culture, Gilbert and Gubar theorize, is by retelling in disguised form a story on which their culture is based, or “revis[ing] masculinist cultural scripts” (Hite 382). Gilbert and Gubar see both Frankenstein and Wuthering Heights as being retellings of Paradise Lost (213-247, 248-308).

Frankenstein, according to their analysis, is, on the surface, a dutiful replication of the misogyny inherent in Paradise Lost, but beneath that surface is a subversion of that

attitude (213-247). In comparing Frankenstein to Wuthering Heights, however, Gilbert and Gubar state that “Shelley chose to repeat and restate Milton’s misogynistic story while Bronte chose to correct it” (252). However, in spite of this statement, their analysis of Wuthering Heights presents it, in my view, as a more overt critique of Paradise Lost than Frankenstein is, but not a correction of it, for it fails to present an alternative mode of gender relations other than that which exists under patriarchy.

The thing about Frankenstein that makes it seem on the surface to be a concession to Milton’s misogyny is that “Eve [is] . . . apparently exorcised from the story” (Gilbert and Gubar 189). There is no one character who obviously corresponds with Milton’s Eve, but the casual reader would probably suppose that Victor Frankenstein was God and the monster was Adam or perhaps Satan. The fact that Victor started to make an Eve and then destroyed her makes her omission seem even less like a mere oversight. But according to Gilbert and Gubar, there is no one character in Frankenstein that symbolizes God, Adam, or Satan, either—at least not throughout the whole novel (230). In their reading, all of the principal characters take turns acting the parts of God, Adam, Satan, *and* Eve, making Eve omnipresent in, rather than absent from, Frankenstein (230).

With his innocence, curiosity, and his “possession” (Gilbert and Gubar 231) of Elizabeth, Victor is clearly Adamic during his childhood and early manhood but becomes Satanic as that curiosity leads to a desire to become, in Milton’s phrase, “as Gods” (qtd in Gilbert and Gubar 231), precipitating his fall from innocence. The childbirth imagery in the scene in which he gives life to the monster hints that he then becomes not only God but also Eve (Gilbert and Gubar 232). The monster also has a period of Adamic innocence (235) from which he falls when he becomes aware of his “alienation” from

other humans (237). He then, like Milton's Eve, "languishes helpless and alone, while Adam converses with superior beings," suffering as Eve did "the Satanically bitter gall of envy . . . causing her to eat the apple in the hope of adding," as Milton put it, "what wants/ In Female Sex" (qtd in Gilbert and Gubar 239).

Aside from their "metaphysical intentions," one thing that Frankenstein and Wuthering Heights have in common is that they both develop through "concentric circles of narration" (249). "Isabella's letter, Zillah's narrative, and Heathcliff's confidences to Nelly function in Wuthering Heights much as Alphonse Frankenstein's letter, Justine's narrative, and Safie's history do in Frankenstein" (249-250).

As we will see, according to Gilbert and Gubar, Wuthering Heights actually contains two stories, told side by side, of a fall from heaven into hell. Isabella's fall is from Thrushcross Grange, which would conventionally be considered heaven with its "pure white ceiling bordered by gold, a shower of glass-drops hanging in silver chains from the centre" (271), to Wuthering Heights, which would conventionally be considered hell with all of the "dead . . . flesh and . . . instruments by which living bodies may be converted into more dead flesh" (261) that it contains (287). Catherine's fall is from Wuthering Heights, which "patriarchal Christianity calls 'hell'" (255) but is "eternally . . . delightful" (255) to her, to Thrushcross Grange, which she finds "rigidly hierarchical . . . and "'kind' as a poison tree" (255).

The story that Nelly tells Lockwood opens with Mr. Earnshaw setting off on a journey and asking Catherine, Hindly, and Nelly, "What shall I bring you?" (Emily Bronte 31). Catherine's wish for a whip, the strangest wish of the three, is the only one that is granted—she "gets her whip" (264) in the form of little Heathcliff, her double,

and, with that augmentation of her almost non-existent power within the family, “achieves . . . an extraordinary fullness of being” (264).

However, this Edenic fullness of being is soon to be taken from her. Frances’s death—literally of tuberculosis, but figuratively of that “social consumption” of “ladyhood” (268) foreshadows Catherine’s fate. When one of the Thrushcross Grange dogs bites Catherine’s foot, her profuse bleeding recalls the first menstruation of a young girl (272), suggesting, along with the phallic symbol of the dog’s tongue, that Catherine has been “catapulted into adult female sexuality” (272). But if so, then what is the significance of the foot injury, which has been used throughout literary history to symbolize castration? (272) Elizabeth Janeway suggests that women are by definition castrated—not just deprived of the phallus, as Freud would have it, but deprived of male autonomy (qtd in Gilbert and Gubar 272).

When Catherine is induced by societal pressure to relinquish her “whip” (264)—Heathcliff—she dies (Gilbert and Gubar 280). Heathcliff, as her double, according to Gilbert and Gubar, must then exact her revenge for her against the patriarch Edgar (296-297). At first glance the “weak” (280) Edgar seems a strange choice for a patriarch, just as the masculine Heathcliff seems a strange choice for a revolutionary agent against patriarchy. However, Gilbert and Gubar point out that Edgar does not need the power of brute force because he already has the power of the Word, in the form of “wills, testaments . . . all the paraphernalia by which patriarchal culture is transmitted from one generation to the next” (281). Heathcliff’s sarcastic remark, “Cathy, this lamb of yours threatens like a bull!” (Emily Bronte 105) suggests that Edgar’s effeminate exterior belies the masculine power that he possesses (281)—he may look like a lamb on the outside, but

his Word has the power of a bull's. Heathcliff, on the other hand, despite his masculine exterior, is actually symbolically female according to Gilbert and Gubar, "on the level where younger sons and bastards . . . unite with women in rebelling against the tyranny of heaven, the level where . . . flesh is female and spirit is male" (294). Despite his true "female" nature, Heathcliff is able to temporarily disrupt the rigid, hierarchical Thrushcross Grange because he recognizes that "to kill patriarchy, he must first pretend to be a patriarch" (297). Even Heathcliff is defeated in the end, however, and the widowed Catherine the younger marries Hareton, the rightful owner of the farm, and prepares him to reinstate patriarchy "by teaching him to read" (300).

It's rather ironic that for Moser, Edgar is usually the "ineffectual male" (5) who completes the trio with Heathcliff and Cathy in the quarrels over entrance through a door or window, and Heathcliff is the star of the novel with his "magical (masculine) sexual power," (15) while for Gilbert and Gubar Edgar is the "lamb that threatens like a bull" (Emily Bronte 105) and Heathcliff is symbolically female (294). It's also interesting that Gilbert and Gubar see Cathy's teaching Hareton to read as the act of a dutiful wife preparing her husband for his reign over the farm (300), while Moser sees it as an emasculation of Hareton (15).

That aside, one can see that Gilbert and Gubar's interpretation of Wuthering Heights presents a much clearer picture of the problems inherent in patriarchy than their interpretation of Frankenstein does—Catherine is deprived of her "whip" (264), or her "I" (Morris 17) and thus "castrated"—but it still doesn't present us with a solution to the problem. The idea that Hareton restores the patriarchy after Heathcliff disrupts it doesn't give us much hope for social change.

Gilbert and Gubar's interpretation of Emily Bronte's sister Charlotte's novel Jane Eyre is much more optimistic. Bertha's dying act is to burn down the house that she shared with the man she'd been forced to marry. Theresa Lloyd (RE: Jane Eyre) and Richard Chase (qtd in Gilbert and Gubar 368) agree that Rochester's loss of sight and thus independence due to the injuries he sustained in the fire could be interpreted as "symbolic castration". One could interpret what Lloyd and Chase call the "symbolic castration" (RE: Jane Eyre, qtd in Gilbert and Gubar 368) in the novel as the loss of the extra share of social status given to males, rather than an actual loss of the phallus. Rochester's injuries have ironically strengthened him, only now "he draws his powers from within himself, rather than from inequity, disguise, deception" (Gilbert and Gubar 369). Having withdrawn into Ferndean away from the "strictures of a hierarchical society," Rochester and Jane "can afford to depend upon each other with no fear of one exploiting the other" (369).

This goes against Wyatt's claim that Jane Eyre, like many other women, was torn between her dreams of equality and the fantasies of a father-figure that she'd internalized from her culture. The focus of Wyatt's definition of feminism seems to be gaining an "I" (Morris 11-23, 25) for women. In "First Persons Plural in Contemporary Feminist Fiction" Morris argues that autonomy is a necessary step, but only insofar as it is a prerequisite for community, and my analysis of Charlotte and Emily Bronte's works indicates, in my opinion, that they would support that stance.

Neither Charlotte nor Emily seem to see power for the sake of power as a good thing. Each one has created a character who has more than his share of power—and the masculine pronoun is operative here—but gets no joy from it. Rochester uses his



“outward dominance” to mask his “inward suffering” (Pell 412)—although Bertha is his “fellow victim,” she is also “the primary object of [his] rage” (413).

Likewise, Phillip Drew states that Heathcliff’s “power for wickedness *is* his punishment” and that “each act of wanton brutality is a further maiming of himself” (380). Perhaps Moser disliked what he referred to as the scene in which the younger Cathy “plays . . . the embattled champion of women’s rights castigating the dissolute male” (Moser 14) because it so clearly backs up Drew’s claims:

“Mr. Heathcliff, you have *nobody* to love you; and however miserable you make us, we shall still have the revenge of thinking that your cruelty arises from your greater misery! You are miserable, are you not? Lonely, like the devil, and envious like him? *Nobody* loves you—*nobody* will cry for you when you die! I wouldn’t be you!” (Bronte 263)

Another thing to keep in mind is that Hareton is the only one who *does* cry for Heathcliff when he dies. Drew points out that though both Heathcliff and Hareton were abused growing up, Heathcliff allowed his rage at that abuse to take over him and turn him into an abuser himself, whereas Hareton, being of stronger moral fiber, did not (376). Despite the similarity of Heathcliff and Hareton’s circumstances growing up, Hareton was the only one of the two who maintained a “we” (Morris 11, 12, 17, 19-21, 25). In my opinion Bronte seems to have intended for us to compare Heathcliff to Hareton and find Heathcliff wanting.

Gilbert and Gubar’s claim that Heathcliff tried to subvert the patriarchy only to be defeated by death and succeeded by Hareton, the rightful patriarch (300), not only seems rather fatalistic, but given Emily Bronte’s recognition of the destructiveness of power for its own sake, neither the claim that Heathcliff was out to subvert the patriarchy nor the claim that Hareton restored it seem to be accurate. Being of gypsy blood and the younger son—the *adopted* younger son, at that—of Mr. Earnshaw, Heathcliff may have been as

powerless as a woman—at least until he grew up and became wealthy and educated. Contrary to what Gilbert and Gubar say, power isn't inherent in a person—one can only have power if other people think that one does, so there is no distinction between having power and fooling others into thinking that one has it. Therefore, the only thing that made Heathcliff's power different from Edgar's was that Heathcliff's was more overt. Edgar stole Catherine's autonomy when he bribed her with the promise of financial security and social standing into marrying him instead of the love of her life, Heathcliff. Heathcliff in turn stole Hareton's rightful property as well as the younger Catherine's. If Catherine was deprived of her “whip” (264) at the age of twelve, then Heathcliff, as her double—so far from being the agent of social revolution—became, after Catherine's death, no more than a whip without a Catherine, an “I” (Morris 11-23, 25) without a “we” (Morris 11, 12, 17, 19-21, 25), wreaking senseless violence on the deserving and undeserving alike. In fact, Gilbert and Gubar do state that Catherine is Heathcliff's “soul” (295-296), and that he becomes animal-like without her (295-296).

The end of Wuthering Heights enacts neither “Hareton's oppression by the younger Catherine” (Ohmann 913), nor Hareton's mastery of the family and farm. As Ohmann puts it, “Together, Catherine and Hareton are ‘companions’ and ‘sworn allies.’ Theirs is a happy and successful win over mastery, tyranny, oppression” (913). Like Jane and Rochester, they have learned to depend on each other without fear of one exploiting the other. They, not Heathcliff, are the agents of revolution—and successful ones at that.

As Cathy and Hareton bring an end to Heathcliff's tyranny through their new friendship, Jane breaks the custom of primogeniture that had stood between her and Rochester and shares her inheritance equally with her cousins. This generous “gesture”

makes it all the more believable that she would choose of her own free will to devote her life to Rochester (Pell 418).

Through the medium of their novels, Mary Shelley and Charlotte and Emily Bronte all look past Milton's bogey, redefine their culture on their own terms, and thereby take back the "I" (Morris 11-23, 25) that was stolen from them. The Bronte sisters go Shelley one better and point the way to "we" (Morris 11, 12, 17, 19-21, 25).

As our society begins to move from "'I' to 'we'" (Morris 17), Postmodernist writers have experimented with ways to show that new way of thinking in their writing. Some have tried to portray what Jameson calls "the death of the subject" (657)—or the death of individuality that has supposedly happened in our new pluralistic, corporate society—by effacing their own identities in their writing. Others have used what Brecht calls the "alienation effect" (1088) to strengthen a reader's critical thinking skills and therefore help him or her resist those cultural forces that would undermine his or her identity. We will explore these approaches to writing in Chapter 3.

## CHAPTER 3

### MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM

The purpose of the preceding chapter was to discuss the “‘I’ to ‘we’” (Morris 17) movement in feminist fiction and not to discuss the mimetic techniques of that fiction, though I will reiterate here that Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre, and Frankenstein all maintain the reader’s emotional involvement by presenting not what did happen but what would happen in the situation portrayed in each one of the novels. All contain realistic characters that are easy to identify with. But not only do the three novels act as mirrors of human nature through the Aristotelian techniques of their authors, but they also act—on a more symbolic level—as mirrors of the society in which they were written. As we have seen through looking at these three novels, for a novel to reflect the society in which it was written does not preclude its presenting a solution to the problems of that society. It can suggest a solution or it can leave the solution to the reader. As we have seen, critics sometimes disagree on whether or not an author is suggesting a solution to the problem he or she is presenting.

There is no connection between mimetic techniques in literature and feminist literary theory per se, but, as we will see in this chapter, both are connected to the literary Modernist movement. The Modernist movement uses the Aristotelian rules of mimesis. We have seen that feminists need identities in order to bring about their vision of a more “feminine,” collaborative society, and the existence of the individual identity is one of the central tenets of Modernism, as we will see in this chapter. According to Frederic Jameson, however, the Postmodernist school of thought is based on the idea that the identity doesn’t exist and therefore the Modernist manner of creating a “unique, private”

fictional “world” (658) is no longer viable. “[A]ll that is left,” according to Jameson, is “pastiche,” or art that reflects on art itself (658).

### Modernism and Postmodernism

Before we can discuss Modernist and Postmodernist literature further, it is necessary to agree on a definition of what Postmodernist literature is and what distinguishes it from Modernist and contemporary Modernist literature.

Modernism began in the late nineteenth century as a movement to rebel against the “staid moralism” and “conventionality” of Victorian culture and art (Geyh et al. Introduction xvi). Oscar Wilde stated in “The Decay of Lying” that art could change one’s perceptions, and Ezra Pound urged his fellow artists to find new ways to express themselves through their art (qtd in Geyh et al. Introduction xvi).

The question of the relationship between Modernism and Postmodernism is still debatable (Geyh et al. Introduction xvi). This debate is complicated by the “protean nature of Modernism itself” (Geyh et al. Introduction xvi) as well as the even more protean nature of Postmodernism. It hasn’t even been firmly established that Modernism is the father of Postmodernism—it could have also emerged from the “avant-garde” movement that originated in Europe and coexisted—“and often overlapped” (Geyh et al. Introduction xvii) with Modernism. Critics have defined Modernism as “a complex but affirmative artistic movement that rose above (while combating) the diminishment of human consciousness that emanated from popular culture—even, as James Joyce does in Ulysses, while sometimes adapting its genres and language.” (Geyh et al. Introduction xvii). On the other hand, “[t]he avant-garde . . . explored the overtly political potential of public art in ways that did not suggest a position above popular culture so much as an

enthusiastic absorption of its anarchic possibilities” (xvii). This suggests that the avant-garde movement is the more likely progenitor of postmodernism. Not all of the works included in Postmodern American Fiction fit the definition of avant-garde that I have just quoted, but the number of them that do fit this definition of avant-garde indicates that it is a reasonably well agreed-upon definition of Postmodernism as well.

As the Introduction to Postmodern American Fiction states, “[i]f any one common thread unites the diverse artistic and intellectual movements that constitute Postmodernism, it is the questioning of any belief system that claims universality and transcendence” (xx). One of those belief systems is that laid down in Aristotle’s Poetics, particularly his rules about mimesis in literature. Playwrights who employ the “alienation effect,” (Brecht 1088), or “A- effect,” (Brecht 1089, 1091, 1092) not only dispute Aristotle’s idea that a play has to be mimetic to succeed but take action against the audience becoming emotionally involved in their plays. Brecht did this by filling his works with “reminders from the stage that one is watching a play” (Jacobus “Drama” 893), such as “placards announcing changes of scenes, bands playing music onstage, long, discomfiting pauses” (Jacobus “Drama” 893), direct address of the audience (Brecht 1089), and “speaking the stage directions out loud” (Brecht 1090).

The alienation effect is by no means confined to drama—many Postmodern fiction writers use it, too. John Knowles’ novel The French Lieutenant’s Woman contains many authorial intrusions in the style of the writers of the Victorian period in which this novel is set.

The titles of the sections into which Postmodern American Fiction is divided back up the author’s statement that Postmodernism questions “any belief system that claims

universality or transcendence.” (Geyh et al Introduction xx). The seven sections are entitled: “Breaking the Frame,” “Fact Meets Fiction,” “Popular Culture and High Culture Collide,” “Revisiting History,” “Revising Tradition,” “Technoculture,” and “A Casebook of Postmodern Theory,” the last of which obviously contains theoretical articles rather than fiction.

In the section entitled “Breaking the Frame,” Geyh, Leebron, and Levy write that, although Modernist and Postmodernist authors both experiment with technique, the goal of the Modernist’s experimentation is to hide the presence of the author and the goal of the Postmodernist’s experimentation is to make the author’s presence all the more noticeable (1). Thus, fiction that breaks the frame breaks the Modernist rule of authorial silence and erases the distance between author and reader. The section entitled “Fact Meets Fiction” is devoted to erasing the boundary between fact and fiction and the section entitled “Popular Culture and High Culture Collide” is devoted to erasing the gap between popular and high culture. “Revisiting History” is dedicated to examining history from a previously submerged viewpoint, and “Revising Tradition” is devoted to shedding new light on commonly accepted practices in fiction or traditional stories that have been passed down through the generations. The “Technoculture” section examines new ways of being human that technology has made possible. Thus, all six of the sections dedicated to fiction are involved somehow in exploring possibilities and questioning unacknowledged assumptions.

The purpose of this chapter is by no means to argue against experimentation but to argue against fiction that breaks the frame—which, I hope to convince the reader, is a failed experiment. Chapters two through six of Postmodern American Fiction contain

both mimetic and non-mimetic stories. The purpose of the alienation effect—for those authors in the anthology who use it—is to keep the audience from “sit[ting] back and be[ing] entertained,” as Jacobus puts it, and divert their attention to the story’s “thematic content” (“Drama” 893)—the boundary or lack thereof between fact and fiction or popular and high culture, the submerged view of history, or the flaws of the old story or fictional convention on which the author is putting a new spin.

### Art About Art Itself

My focus is on stories that re-tell older stories and use the alienation effect to call the reader’s attention to the discrepancy between the old story and the new, though many of the things that I will say about these kinds of stories could also be applied to the stories in any of the other five sections of Postmodern American Fiction. What Frederic Jameson calls “pastiche” (658) and what John Gardener calls “metafiction” “give[s] the reader an experience that assumes the usual experience of fiction as its point of departure, and whatever effect [its] work may have depends on [its] conscious violation of the usual fictional effect” ( Gardener 32-33). In other words, metafictional stories are “artistic comments on art” (33).

Metafictional stories can be written either for the purpose of critiquing conventions in fiction or on individual stories, usually stories that form the basis of our culture, so that in critiquing the stories we also critique our culture. Stories that exist for the sole purpose of revising other stories would strike many as being plagiaristic. However, John Barth states that many Postmodern writers do not see these kinds of stories as being “the product of a lack of originality, but rather as a celebration of the sheer volume of great



narrative that is readily available” in the information age (qtd in Geyh et al, “Revising Tradition,” Geyh, Leebron, and Levy’s words).

However, it seems pointless to write an “artistic comment” (Jameson 33) on another story just to celebrate the amount of narrative that is readily available when one could instead write a story that—even if it may revise a pre-existing story—also stands on its own as a story in itself.

To do so, however, does presuppose an individual identity. The notion that we each have an individual identity has taken a beating in the Postmodernist school of thought. Some Postmodernists believe that identity no longer has a place in literature on the grounds that it is an outmoded concept. Jameson says that the idea that individualism is dead in the “age of corporate capitalism” (657) is a popular one among the Postmodernists, and an even more radical position is that the individual identity “never really existed in the first place” (658).

One can either say that the identity never has existed or that it never has been culturally recognized, though one who wishes to say that identity existed once before cannot say that it no longer exists, that it disappeared into thin air—one who claims that identity once existed is stuck either with the claim that it still exists and is recognized or that it still exists and isn’t recognized. To say that identity has never existed negates free will and by extension personal responsibility. Therefore, it undermines social revolution because it denies our moral responsibility to respect one another’s rights.

Our modern, commercial-saturated society is subtly robbing consumers of their initiative as advertisers experiment with ways to coerce the public into wanting their products, and small-business owners are rapidly being replaced by cogs on a corporate

wheel. A case could certainly be made for the idea that identity is no longer culturally recognized.

However, it is important to remember Oscar Wilde's statement that art can change one's perceptions (qtd in Geyh et al, Introduction xvi). That is one of the central tenets of Modernism. Whether they were written in what we officially consider the Modernist period or not, The Madwoman in the Attic and all of the feminist critical articles that I discussed in Chapter 2 were written out of a Modernist assumption that art could change one's perceptions about women's roles. If art can change perceptions, then it has the potential to change society.

It is worth reiterating here that the concept of the identity is central to the Modernist school of thought. Earlier in this chapter I quoted Geyh, Leebron, and Levy's definition of Modernism as "a complex but affirmative artistic movement that rose above (while combating) the diminishment of human consciousness that emanated from popular culture." (xvii) Likewise, Jameson says that Modernism was based on a "personal, private style" (657).

The question remains to be asked whether art should be used to reintroduce the notion of the individual identity. Geyh, Leebron, and Levy state that during the Enlightenment and Modernist periods people took the notion of an individual identity for granted. However, this notion was primarily held by white male philosophers of the day, who "defined their own 'selves'" "in contrast" to "a host of female, racial, and ethnic 'others' as lesser beings, neither 'subjects' nor 'selves' in any philosophical or political sense" (Introduction xxv). I have discussed this definition of identity in Chapter 2.

The Postmodern repudiation of identity is partially on moral and political grounds, to ensure that we don't repeat that particular mistake of our forebears. Bressler paraphrases this view shared by many Postmodern thinkers in the following paragraphs:

I believe, like my forebears before me, that we, as a race of people, will see progress, but only if we all cooperate. The age of the lone scholar, working diligently in the laboratory, is over. Cooperation among scholars from all fields is vital. Gone are the days of individualism. Gone are the days of conquest. Now is the time for tolerance, understanding, and collaboration.

Since our knowledge always was and always will be incomplete, we must focus on a new concept: holism. We must realize that we all need each other, including all our various perspectives on the nature of reality. We must also recognize that our rationality, our thinking processes, is only one of many avenues that can lead to an understanding of our world. Our emotions, our feelings, and our intuition can also provide us with valid interpretations and guidelines for living (99-100).

Cooperation, tolerance, collaboration, holism—all of these are certainly admirable goals to work towards. But a wholesale repudiation of identity does not really bring us nearer to them. It does not really help women, but rather it harms them now that they are just beginning to discover their own identities. As the African-American theorist bell hooks puts it, "It never surprises me when black folks respond to the critique of essentialism, especially when it denies the validity of identity politics by saying, "Yeah, it's easy to give up identity, when you got one" (628).

Besides, the fact that men asserted their identity in the past by denying an identity to women doesn't necessarily mean that in order for some people to have an identity, others must do without one, that that is an unalterable fact of human nature. Individualism does not equal conquest as Bressler implies in his paraphrase of the postmodernist philosophy. We could co-exist just as well—or better—by allowing women to develop an identity of their own as we could if we pushed men down to women's level of identity-lessness. Identity is not a cup of sugar that might run out if we

try to give everyone their fair share. This, as I discussed in Chapter 2, is one thing we can learn from feminist literary critics and fiction writers.

But, Postmodernist theory being as diverse as it is, there are some theorists who would say that Postmodernist fiction doesn't hinder the development of identity but helps it, or at least helps female readers develop the tools to resist those cultural voices that undermine their identity. Two of those tools are the ability to think critically and the understanding of the subjectivity of truth. Proponents of Postmodern fiction point out that by discouraging the reader from becoming emotionally involved, Postmodern fiction encourages them to engage their rational mind in analyzing the work. They also point out that the reader of a non-mimetic work is less likely to experience the author's vision as absolute truth than the reader of a mimetic work.

According to Gardener, metafiction is one category of what he calls "fictional deconstruction." "All metafiction is deconstruction," says Gardener, "not all deconstructions are metafiction" (87). He calls deconstruction "the practice of taking language apart, or taking works of art apart, to discover their unacknowledged inner workings" (88). As culture is language of a sort, deconstruction can also be used to discover the hidden messages behind cultural practices.

Given the damage that our patriarchal culture can do to women who internalize its harmful messages, the ability to think critically and deconstruct those messages is essential for spiritual survival. Milton's bogey was passed down for many years not only through fiction but also through gender socialization. Eighteenth-century "conduct books" preached "selflessness" to young girls (Gilbert and Gubar 23). In the eighteenth century, "the aesthetic cult of ladylike fragility . . . obliged . . . women to 'kill'

themselves . . . into art objects” with “[t]ight-lacing, fasting, vinegar-drinking, and similar cosmetic and dietary excesses” (25). Even today our culture seems to have a fascination with dead or dying young women, such as Beth March from Little Women (25), Ophelia, and Sleeping Beauty.

Today women don’t receive much more encouragement to find their identities than they did in the past. Mary Pipher, a psychologist who has also studied cultural anthropology, notes that in rock videos oftentimes women’s “breasts and bottoms are photographed more frequently than their faces” (34). One of Pipher’s patients told of a dream she’d had about an old man and a goat coming into her room. The man cut her legs into pieces with his knife and fed them to his goat (31-32). Pipher asked her “what she thought the dream meant,” and her patient replied, “It means I’m afraid of being cut up and eaten alive” (32). Another patient said, “I’m a perfectly good carrot that everyone is trying to turn into a rose. As a carrot I have good color and a nice leafy top. When I’m carved into a rose, I turn brown and wither” (22). Many girls—including one of Pipher’s clients (158)—have begun to literally cut up their bodies. Also worth mentioning is Marge Piercy’s poem “Barbie Doll,” in which the protagonist “cut off her nose and her legs/ and offered them up” (546).

But even if deconstructive fiction does develop critical thinking skills in girls—and people in general—it still deprives them of the emotional involvement that traditional fiction provides them with. Deconstructive fictions only have the ephemeral interest of “intellectual toys” (Gardener 49). Conventional fiction is “play” (49) as well in that its characters aren’t real and the events it portrays never happened, but the emotions it elicits bear “on life, not just art” (49).

Of course, if Wuthering Heights and Frankenstein—and, as we will see later, Into the Forest—are revisions of “masculinist cultural scripts” (Hite 382), at least according to the interpretations that I am discussing, then they are “artistic comments on art” (Jameson 33) just like metafiction. If Emily Bronte and Mary Shelley can use their novels as a mirror of the patriarchy, then can’t Postmodernists who believe that the identity is no longer culturally recognized use their work as a mirror to show the negative effects of that lack of identity? In theory, yes, but if Postmodernist literature is non-mimetic, then it won’t be an effective agent of social revolution. Gardener says that if non-mimetic literature amuses us, we laugh “as we laugh . . . at ‘wit,’” and “[i]f we grieve” at it, “we grieve like philosophers” (90). It takes more than an intellectual response to literature to spur us to social change.

Terry Eagleton alludes to the position that I outlined in Chapter 1 that literature must replicate life through sensory detail: “Literature, we are told, is vitally engaged with the living situations of men and women: it is concrete rather than abstract, displays life in all its rich variousness, and rejects barren conceptual inquiry for the feel and taste of what it is to be alive” (196). Later he says that “[t]he sensuous textures of lived experience” which he had alluded to before “can be roughly translated as reacting from the gut—judging according to habit, prejudice, and ‘common sense’ rather than according to some inconvenient, ‘aridly theoretical’ set of debatable ideas” (200). This, Eagleton is saying, is how mimetic literature encourages its audience to think.

I would advance the view that one of those “debatable ideas” is the idea that our rational, critical-thinking side is the only side we need to develop—as important as it indeed is. Aristotle, according to Hardison’s interpretation, believes that “the emotions

are as much a part of the human being as the intellect” (Hardison 135). Therefore, Aristotle would agree with Bressler’s hypothetical postmodernist theorist that “rationality . . . is only one of many avenues that can lead to an understanding of our world. Our emotions, our feelings, and our intuition can also provide us with valid interpretations and guidelines for living” (99-100).

Granted, a hierarchical culture perverts the emotions and intuition of its oppressed peoples in order to keep them in their place—which seems to be why Eagleton discounts intuition as being no more than sloppy thinking—but that doesn’t mean that oppressed people can’t de-internalize their culture’s harmful messages and reclaim their intuition for themselves. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tartule tell of a woman who reclaimed her trust in what she called her “infallible gut” and left her abusive husband against the dictates of her culture (56).

Though the gut isn’t truly infallible, we shouldn’t put unlimited faith in rationality, either. Geyh, Leebron and Levy pose a question in their Introduction that has been raised by World War Two and other such relatively recent historical atrocities: “Were such dreams proof that the Enlightenment project, with its dreams of progress for humanity through reason and science, had failed? Or was it that we had failed reason by using its triumphs for irrational or evil purposes?” (xi).

Having said all of this, are we faced with a choice between fiction that develops the heart and fiction that develops the mind? Gardener wouldn’t say so. “All great literature,” he claims, “has, to some extent, a deconstructive impulse” (89). He supports this with Hamlet, which deconstructs the plot motif common in Shakespeare’s day of the ghost who “lays on the hero the burden of avenging some crime,” and shows the

consequences of the protagonist's blind faith that the ghost is right (89). Likewise there are many novels that revise older stories and still stand on their own as stories in themselves, such as Frankenstein and Wuthering Heights, which I discussed in Chapter 2, and Into the Forest, which I will discuss in Chapter 4. All three of those novels engage both the critical mind and the heart, as does Hamlet. In fact, one could say that about all great literature.

Closely related to the argument that literature that presents us with the “sensuous textures of lived experience” encourages us to react from the gut and therefore not develop our critical thinking abilities is the idea that mimetic novels, being so close to reality, encourage the reader to accept the author's vision as the absolute truth. Postmodernists find the idea of absolute truth distasteful, since history has shown what can come about when a segment of the population believes that they alone have possession of the absolute truth. This is an example of the “I” (Morris 11-23, 25) taken to extreme, which Postmodernists are so eager to avoid. Eagleton says of Brecht and other playwrights who share his philosophy that “[t]hey do not try to pass themselves off as unquestionable . . . but . . . ‘lay bare the device of their own composition.’ They do this so that they will not be mistaken for absolute truth—so that the reader will be encouraged to reflect critically on the . . . particular ways they construct reality, and so to recognize how it might all have happened differently” (170). Likewise, Jacobus says that Brecht “believed that realistic drama convinced audiences that the play's vision of reality described not just things as they are but things as they must be. Such drama, Brecht asserted, helped maintain the social problems that they portrayed by reinforcing, rather than challenging, their realities” (“Drama” 893).



Perhaps a reader could mistake a vision of the world portrayed in a mimetic novel as absolute truth—if that novel happens to be the only one he or she ever reads. The simple act of reading more than one novel encourages the reader to question the vision of any one novel. A common piece of advice to would-be writers is to read a lot and become familiar with many different writers' styles in order to develop one's own style. Likewise, experiencing many different people's worldviews through fiction can help one create one's own worldview.

As important as relativism is for creating the conditions in which women can find their identity, we also need to be aware that relativism can be used for irresponsible purposes. As Eagleton puts it:

One advantage of the dogma that we are the prisoners of our own discourse, unable to advance reasonably certain truth claims because such claims are merely relative to our language, is that it allows you to drive a coach and horses through everybody else's beliefs while not saddling you with the inconvenience of having to adopt any yourself. It is, in effect, an invulnerable position, and the fact that it is also purely empty is simply the price one has to pay for this. The view that the most significant aspect of any piece of language is that it does not know what it is talking about smacks of a jaded resignation to the impossibility of truth which is by no means unrelated to post-1968 historical disillusion. But it also frees you at a stroke from having to assume a position on important issues (144-145).

As the title of his book, Literary Theory, indicates, Eagleton is talking about literary theory, not literature. Eagleton, who favors postmodernist theory, goes on to say that not all relativistic Postmodernist theory assumes that position of invulnerability. That may be the case, but it's hard for me to imagine a kind of non-mimetic literature that does not adopt this practice of assuming no position, since literature that disrupts the vivid and continuous dream does not allow you to see the world from a character's point of view.

Then there is the question of whether or not the position that the search for truth is pointless is really revolutionary. Eagleton admits that this is not necessarily so in his discussion of Julie Kristeva's theory of the "semiotic" (188). Kristeva describes the

“semiotic” as a “pattern or play of forces which we can detect inside language, and which represents a sort of residue of the pre-Oedipal phase . . . the ‘other’ of language which is nonetheless intimately entwined with it” (188). Eagleton says that “the political correlative of Kristeva’s own theories . . . would appear to be some kind of anarchism” (190):

If such unending overthrow of all fixed structure is an inadequate response in the political realm, so to in the theoretical sphere is the assumption that a literary text which undermines meaning is *ipso facto* “revolutionary.” It is quite possible for a text to do this in the name of some right-wing irrationalism, or to do it in the name of nothing much at all (190).

Fiction that exists for the sole purpose of pointing out that there is no absolute truth is empty. However, by experiencing—emotionally and sensually—the world as experienced by many different fictional characters, one can develop one’s powers both of critical thinking and of intuition and empathy and develop one’s own truths. Women have historically been raised to be more “we” (Morris 11, 12, 17, 19-21, 25)-oriented than “I” (Morris 11-23, 25)-oriented but need their autonomy in order to enter into a true union with others. They will need both critical thinking skills and the “infallible gut” (Belenky et al. 56) to resist those cultural forces that undermine their identity so they can help realize the Postmodernist dream of a more collaborative society. Mimetic fiction can help them develop all of these things, whereas non-mimetic “intellectual toys” (Gardener 49) can only help them develop their critical thinking ability. The idea that the logical is to be prized over the intuitive is, in fact, one of the tenets of patriarchy that they must overthrow.

Barbara Walker calls Jean Hegland’s novel Into the Forest “the kind of book that can be enjoyed on several levels at once” (qtd in Hegland front piece). On one level it is an allegorical feminist revision of two Biblical stories. However, it does stand on its own

as a story in itself. On another level it is a tale of two young women's journey from "I" to "we" (Morris 17). I will focus both on its mimetic techniques and its symbolic meanings.

## CHAPTER 4

### INTO THE FOREST

Into the Forest is obscure enough to merit a brief plot summary. Set sometime in the future, the novel is about two sisters in their late adolescence, Eva and Nell, who have grown up on a farm and been homeschooled all their lives. A war has recently begun that has plunged their civilization into chaos, that has caused the electricity to go out—perhaps permanently—and that is quickly destroying all of humanity. Recently orphaned, the girls are trying to survive in a post-apocalyptic world. In the beginning of the novel the girls are still clinging to their modern-day dreams in the hope that the world they know will be restored to order. Eva, the elder, still practices her ballet in hopes of someday joining a troupe, while Nell still studies the encyclopedia in the hopes of being accepted into Harvard—for that reason, quotes from the encyclopedia are sprinkled throughout the novel.<sup>3</sup> By the end of the novel, however, the girls have forsaken the society in which they grew up—which may never be restored—and moved into the woods beside their farm along with the son to whom Eva has given birth in the interim.

The novel gives a clear picture of the effects of the war. Early on Nell mentions that due to the “frustration” caused by unemployment, “Schoolchildren were shooting each other at recess. Teenagers were gunning down motorists on the freeways,” and “Grown-ups were opening fire on strangers in fast-food restaurants” (16). Later, when the girls go grocery shopping with their father, the cashier adds the prices in his head, has a “tiny splinter of craziness in his brown eyes” (83), and keeps a gun in case any robbers

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<sup>3</sup> Hegland says in her acknowledgements page that she only quoted directly from one outside source, and the source that she mentions is not an encyclopedia. Neither are any of the other sources she mentions from which she got her “background information.” From this we can only conclude that the encyclopedia entries are fictional.

come. At first each time the electricity went out, “the clothes would flop wetly to the bottom of the dryer” (12), Eva’s c.d. player would stop, and she would “stumble out” of her dancing studio, “looking as though she had been slapped awake” (13). As the power became even more unreliable, they stopped “groping for the light switch whenever [they] entered a room,” put away their electrical appliances, and “rolled up the carpets which [they] could no longer vacuum” (13). They went from cooking on their gas oven during power outages to cooking over the fireplace when they ran out of gas, and they began using the creek in their yard as a refrigerator.

The novel appropriates stories other than the two Biblical stories that it revises—particularly stories from Greek mythology. For example, one of the motifs in the story is fire. Fire appears at both the beginning and the end of the story. At the beginning Nell, recalling the Christmas traditions of her family, writes in her diary about how “Mother would light the candles of the nativity carousel” (3). At the end of the novel, after having decided to move into the woods, the sisters burn down their house with the gasoline that they had earlier discovered stashed away in jars. The fire motif recalls the myth of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humankind. Fire is also the most primitive form of technology, which springs from humankind’s desire to remake the world in its own image. Thus fire seems to symbolize hubris—or, to use Bressler’s terminology, “conquest” (99) of nature, or, to use Woolf’s and Morris’s terminology, “I” (Morris 11-23, 25) taken to extreme.

Another motif in the novel is alcohol. In a recent flashback, Eva, Nell, and their friends have developed a ritual of standing in a circle and passing around a bottle of wine each time they go into town—before the family runs out of gas and can drive to town no

more. In one scene, Nell gets drunk, decides that she and Eva will recover the lost intimacy of their childhood by devoting their lives to ballet together, begins to dance, falls down and hurts her toe. She sacrifices a small amount of her dignity—a small amount of her “I” (Morris 11-23, 25)—out of a desire to get closer to her sister. In another scene Nell randomly grabs a bottle to hit Eva with during an argument. The bottle turns out to be full of Grand Mariner and the sisters drink it together and reconcile. The alcohol motif recalls the myth of Dionysus, the god of wine, and suggests that the Dionysian aspects of human nature are what bring us together.

In Nell’s memories of her mother lighting the nativity carousel, as the family stands around watching it turn, her father says each year, “Yep, that’s the story. Could be better, could be worse. But at least there’s a baby at the center of it” (3). Later on in the novel, when the girls discover the gasoline, they fight over whether to use it to power the generator so that Eva can practice her ballet to music again or whether to save it for an emergency trip into the city. This fight is resolved when Eva bets Nell the gas the baby is a boy, and wins. She ends up using the gas to burn down the house, and as she, Nell, and the baby, Robert aka “Burl,” stand around and watch the house burn down, Nell repeats their father’s words: “That’s the story . . . Could be better, could be worse. But at least there’s a baby at the center of it” (240-241).

Into the Forest could have been included in Froula’s “Rewriting Genesis,” seeing as Genesis is one of the two Biblical stories that it rewrites. Eva, of course, takes on the role of the Eve of a new race of humanity, as her name indicates. Nell’s quoting of her father at the end of the story isn’t the only instance of her taking on the role of Adam, the “man” of her new family after her parents die.

Soon after the girls discover the gasoline, a man passing through rapes Eva after she refuses his request to share the gas. One day soon after that, Eva starts crying at the memory of the rape while she is massaging Nell's back after they have spent the afternoon working in the garden. Nell then massages Eva's back to work free the emotions that Eva has been carrying around in her body, and the sisters end up making love.

Soon after that, Eva discovers she's pregnant. I intend to return to the scene where Nell tries to persuade Eva to abort the baby more than once over the course of this chapter, and for that reason I believe that it is worth quoting in full, or almost in full, here:

"You can't just stop a baby" . . .  
"Eva," I gasped. "You were raped."  
She flinched and grabbed her abdomen, as though she could protect it from those words.  
"That has nothing to do with it" . . .  
"But Eva, it's his baby."  
"Whose?" she asked sharply, and for a second I swear she had no idea who I meant. Then she scoffed. "That man's? Do you really think he could possibly make a baby?"  
She rocked forward onto her hands and knees, resumed her slow crawl beside the beans. "And even if that was when this started," she said, as she drew a weed from her path, its roots like white veins in the sunshine. "Even if it did start then," she repeated, lifting her eyes to hold mine, "how could this baby possibly be his?"  
"Well, genetics---"  
"Genetics!" She snapped the word out as though it were her rapist's name. "Genetics. Did it ever make sense to you, Nell, that a woman could be pregnant and carry a baby inside her for nine months and then nurse it and care for it and change its diapers, and a man could claim it was half his?"  
"Our father changed our diapers."  
"Then he earned his share in us. Besides," she pulled another weed, her voice strong, gentle, and as sure as I'd ever heard it, "how can this baby even be mine?"  
"What do you mean?" I asked.  
"It's its own person," she answered triumphantly (164-165).

This scene doesn't only express the idea that Burl can't belong to any other human being, but it also implies that Nell fathered Burl. Nell continues to play the role of the "father" when she later kills a wild pig to keep Eva from becoming anemic—which

according to their encyclopedia, would increase the “risk” of “labor difficulties, as well as postpartum hemorrhage” (195).

Incidentally, another thing that the scene I just quoted seems to suggest is that, if the Dionysian characteristics of human nature are what bind us, then, conversely, Apollonian rationalism and the technology that is based on it are what divide us. In fact, Eva’s reaction when Nell says that the baby half-belongs to the rapist seems to draw a parallel between technology and rape.

The question of how the present world would have turned out if it had been based on different creation myths is introduced early on in the novel. As Eva and Nell carry on the family tradition of lighting the nativity carousel after their parents have died, they recall a time when Eva, as a child, asked if Christ were a “he or a she” (9). Their mother had replied that Christ “was a he,” but “might just as well have been a she” (9). As the girls continue to watch the carousel, Eva says that she disagrees with her mother because if Christ had been female, “Things would have turned out differently, a long time ago” (9).

The second Biblical story that the novel revises is the story of Christ. Hegland does not give us the female Christ proposed at the beginning of the novel, but she does give us a Christ born of two women. Such an occurrence would have admittedly been no more or less miraculous than the Virgin Birth in the Bible. Thus Eva and Nell take on the roles not only of Adam and Eve, but Mary and Joseph.

The four scenes that constitute the fire and alcohol motifs also recall the myth of Christ. For example, both of the alcohol scenes bring to mind the Christian ritual of communion as well as the myth of Dionysus. The novel begins on Christmas day, and the



diary in which Nell narrates her story is a Christmas present from Eva—both of which bring to mind the memories of her mother lighting the nativity carousel. At the end of the novel, Eva proposes that they pretend it is Christmas day and also Burl's birthday, as long as she gets to use the gasoline however she wants, now that she has won it from Nell in the bet. Nell concedes graciously, assuming that Eva will use it for the generator. Her surprise is rather comical when Eva begins pouring it all over the house. Hegland's ending replicates her beginning, with fire and with the father's words in Nell's mouth, only this time the "baby at the center of it" (3, 240-241) is Burl, hopefully the future redeemer of the human race.

Finally, one of the quotations from the encyclopedia shows Burls to be Hegland's recreation of Christ:

The oldest use of the word "virgin" meant not the physiological condition of chastity but the psychological condition of belonging to no man, of belonging to oneself. To be virginal did not mean to be inviolate, but rather to be true to nature and instinct, just as the virgin forest is not barren or unfertilized, but instead is unexploited by man. Children born out of wedlock were at one time referred to as "virgin-born" (210).

The concept of "virginity" as it is defined in this entry brings us to the story that Into the Forest tells on another level—the story of Nell and Eva's journey from "'I' to 'we'" (Morris 17). Their parents highly value independence and autonomy and cultivate those qualities in the girls. "You're your own person" is a phrase repeated often throughout the book (42, 43, 133). The mother uses it when Eva decides to follow in her footsteps and become a ballerina, even though she was against it from the start ("Well, Eva's her own person" (29). The mother also uses it when the girls fight after Eva gives up playing in the woods with Nell. ("Eva's her own person, sweetheart. And like it or not, so are you" (31)). Eva repeats it when Nell decides to leave with her lover, Eli ("She's

her own person . . . Nell will go if she wants” (125)). Even Eli repeats it when Nell decides to return to Eva (133). Eva repeats it again, referring to the baby she is carrying, in the previously quoted passage when the girls are discussing whether or not to abort it (“It’s its own person”) (165).

The girls are tested three times to see if they can make the journey from “I” to ‘we’” (Morris 17). In the process each one faces the danger of losing her “I,” (Morris 11-23, 25) Eva when she is raped and Nell when she falls in love with Eli.

The first test they face is when their mother gets cancer. During the last winter before she dies, the mother leaves a boundary between the “virgin” forest and the tamed environment of the farm as she plants a ring of tulips in the yard. She asks the girls to help her, trying to create an opportunity for them to talk about her upcoming death, but the girls stayed inside, in the safety of the controlled environment of the house. “[The tulips] made a band of red that separated the tame green of our lawn from the wild green of the forest . . . They buried her in the cemetery in town . . . But I think she buried herself in that ring of bulbs, and now I wish I had helped her with her work” (47).

It seems significant that the tulips were red, since red is associated with blood, death, and “stop” from the traffic lights. The red boundary between the girls and the forest in which they played as children seems to represent a boundary that they have erected to hide their most authentic selves after the pain of their mother’s death. Soon after this the electricity goes out. Like any civilization would, Nell and Eva’s world descends into chaos when they lose contact with Mother, both their own mother and the Mother Nature represented by the forest, as well as their own true natures. The tulips then

go from being “like the flowers in a child’s drawing” (47) to being “a brilliant, worthless wall, separating us from the forest, dividing nothing from nothing” (149).

After his wife’s death, the father becomes distant in his grief, and Nell is angry that he isn’t there to comfort her. In what was to be the last few moments of the family’s lives together, she “[clings] to the power of [her] anger, the safety of having the upper hand” (Hegland 89). Then the father cuts his leg off on his chainsaw when a falling tree knocks him down, and he bleeds to death. The blood continues the red motif introduced by the tulips.

At first it looks like the girls are also going to fail the third test: to connect with each other. As children, the girls “were like a binary star, both of us orbiting a common center of gravity, each reflecting the other’s light . . . Later, our periods came at the same time each month, until Eva’s became sporadic because of her dancing” (101). Their struggle to re-establish the intimacy of their childhood has been going on ever since Eva became interested in ballet.

The encyclopedia entry on ballet quoted in [Into the Forest](#) is:

Ballet is a form of dance that developed out of the court spectacles of the Renaissance. Its characteristic movements emphasize a stylized and ethereal grace. In order to achieve this effect, the aspiring dancer must begin at a very early age to train his body to perform in ways that are not within the natural range of movements for the human body (26).

This entry makes it clear that Hegland is using ballet to symbolize the subversion of the natural, which is what technology and society are.

Eva was the first to eat of the “apple” of the subversion of the natural and the first to leave the Eden of the forest. At the age of twelve she became interested in ballet after attending a concert with their mother, who had been a ballerina herself before she married their father. Eva had to practice so much that she had no time to play in the

woods with Nell anymore, and Nell retaliated by “cut[ting] the ribbons off [Eva’s] first pair of toe shoes” (31). By the time their mother planted the red boundary of tulips between their farm and the forest, the girls had already long since abandoned the forest and, in a sense, each other. This seems to reiterate the idea that the subversion of the natural is what separates us.

The girls grow into late adolescence, their mother dies, and the war begins to tear their civilization apart. On their steadily-less-frequent excursions into town, Eva and Nell practice their ritual of communion with the wine bottle, standing in a circle with their friends. This is where Nell meets Eli, who introduces himself to her after seeing her dance drunkenly down the street.

The third time that Nell and Eli meet after this incident, Nell “longed to ask him, *Where were you last week? What do you do when you’re not here? Do you like my hair like this?* I wanted to tell him about my mother’s funeral, my latest breakthrough in integral calculus, what I had eaten for dinner” (69). He gives her a “crimson rose” (69) and that night she “[eats] one of its petals” and “tuck[s] another in [her] bra” (69). For the rest of the week Nell

studied calculus and memorized irregular French verbs and planned weddings and named babies. I outlined European history, read the *Illiad*, learned the Krebs cycle, and practiced writing Eli’s name. I held my breath for luck, wished on falling stars and four-leaf clovers (70).

With all of these details, Hegland perfectly recreates the world of a young girl falling in love.

In the inciting incident of the story, the girls have a moment of elation upon their discovery of the gasoline and smelling its “raw, sweet, headachy smell” (98), but that discovery ultimately drives the wedge farther between them as they argue about how to

use it. Later, Nell discovers a chocolate kiss and “ease[s] the silver foil” (103) off of it “as though [she] were teasing the petals of a flower open” (103). She justifies not giving it to Eva by saying to herself that “she shouldn’t have been so stubborn about the gas” (103). Eva gets even angrier upon hearing about the kiss. It’s worth noting here that the flower metaphor that Hegland uses to describe the kiss links it with the tulips that separate the girls from the forest and therefore each other, as does Hegland’s description of the flames on the candles of the Nativity scene as “petals of fire” (8).

Eli then seeks the girls out and stays with them a while, during which time he and Nell become lovers. The first time Nell takes Eli to the hollow redwood stump that served as a playhouse for her and Eva when they were children, she feels a “twinge of guilt” at the thought of “betraying” her sister (117) but justifies herself by remembering how Eva had stopped playing with her, just as she’d justified herself for eating the kiss.

With this tendency of both sisters to hold grudges against each other, the success of their relationship doesn’t look promising, but their attempts to break the ties that bind them always fail. Nell sets off with Eli, but in the end returns to Eva even though, as Eli is departing, she has to “bite” (133) her lips “until [she] tastes blood, to keep from calling after him” (133).

Soon after that, while the girls are drinking the Grand Mariner together, Nell asks Eva why she didn’t like Eli, and Eva says, “I did like Eli . . . But I didn’t like the way you liked Eli . . . That’s the best I can say it. It’s like you’re not your own person when you’re with him” (140-141). In that same conversation, the girls make a move toward re-establishing their “we” (Morris 11, 12, 17, 19-21, 25) when Nell tells Eva that she could use the gas for the generator if she really needed her music.

The rape happens just after that conversation. Hegland presents us with the scene in which the man asks Eva if she has any gasoline to spare, Eva says no, the man “twist[s] . . . her arm . . . behind her back” (144) and demands the gasoline, and they struggle, but she doesn’t dramatize the rape itself.

After the rape, Nell is plunged into despair alongside her sister. She goes outside to shoot herself, but the thought of Eva won’t allow her to go through with it: “Once again, my sister kept me from going where I wanted to go” (150). Nell is able to transcend her own pain and help Eva deal with hers in the scene where Nell massages her sister’s back: “*I love you, my hands said. “Remember that this is yours . . . This body is yours . . . No one can ever take it from you, if only you will accept it yourself, claim it again . . . Take it. Take it back”* (160).

After the birth Eva develops an infection, requiring Nell to care for both mother and baby. During that time Nell becomes quite attached to Burl, and she leaves again when she and Eva can’t share him after Eva has regained her health. She returns and apologizes to Eva, saying, “You were right—he’s your baby,” to which Eva replies, “No . . . I was wrong. He is his own” (231).

Finally, as the house burns down, Eva dances around it, “dance[s] the dance of herself,” “the dance that sloughed off ballet like an outgrown skin” (240). As they return for good to the wilderness in which they had played as children, Eva reclaims her “I” (Morris 17) for good and the sisters choose their relationship over the slim hope of the return of civilization, thereby passing the third test.

A mistake that the girls had kept making throughout the novel was thinking that they had to break away from each other in order to assert their own “I” (Morris 11-23,

25). Nell continually tried to break her ties with Eva, but her love for her sister kept bringing her back. Nell even appeared to feel some resentment about this at first, particularly when the thought of her sister wouldn't let her commit suicide: "Once again, my sister kept me from going where I wanted to go."

This is the mistake that so many male Enlightenment and Modernist thinkers have made when formulating their ideas about the self, and it is the mistake that many Postmodernist thinkers and writers would like to rectify. However, in trying to do this, they make the opposite mistake of thinking that one can have a "we" (Morris 11, 12, 17, 19-21, 25) without an "I" (Morris 11-23, 25). It is this mistaken notion that leads them to write fiction in which they abase their own identities and merely replicate what has already been written. It is impossible for any story not to be influenced by the stories that have come before it, but we will never run out of new stories to tell as long as new people are being born to tell them. Into the Forest, Frankenstein, Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre, and Hamlet may depend on the knowledge of other stories for their full appreciation, but at the same time they all stand on their own as stories in themselves.

### Conclusion

Like Plato, Terry Eagleton—as we have seen from material that I have cited—values logic and critical thinking over intuition. It's easy for a social revolutionary to understand why Eagleton discounts intuition because he has seen how intuition can be corrupted by the fear and shame experienced regularly by the second-class citizen. However, the fact that an oppressed group can internalize its culture's harmful messages and mistake those messages for the voice of its own intuition doesn't mean that they can't reclaim their true intuition for themselves. Aristotle believed that both logic and emotion

were needed to make a whole human. To disown one's "infallible gut" (Belenky et al 56) makes one only half a person whether one is pressured to do so by the patriarchy or whether one does so because one no longer trusts one's corrupted intuition to guide one in recreating society. Traditional mimetic fiction is considerably more effective in developing a reader's critical thinking, intuition, and empathy—all of which are necessary tools for a more collaborative society—than is fiction that employs the alienation effect. It is a good thing that the Postmodernists are questioning the assumptions about literature that we have held in the past, but some of those assumptions have stood up to questioning. To realize this dream of a more collaborative society, Postmodernists should take a lesson from feminist critics and writers that it takes an "I" (Morris 11-23, 25) to make a "we" (Morris 11, 12, 17, 19-21, 25).



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