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Re/Reading the Heterosexual Love Story:

Three Canadian Women's Texts

by

Philippa Brush

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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Transports	0709
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Pathologie végétale	0480
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Biologie	
Généralités	0306
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Chimiothérapie	0992
Dentisterie	0567
Développement humain	0758
Enseignement	0350
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Loisirs	0575
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Médecine et chirurgie	0564
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Pathologie	0571
Pharmacie	0572
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Chimie agricole	0749
Chimie analytique	0486
Chimie minérale	0488
Chimie nucléaire	0738
Chimie organique	0490
Chimie pharmaceutique	0491
Physique	0494
Polymères	0495
Radiation	0754
Mathématiques	0405
Physique	
Généralités	0605
Acoustique	0986
Astronomie et astrophysique	0606
Électronique et électricité	0607
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Météorologie	0608
Optique	0752
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Matériaux plastiques (Technologie)	0795
Recherche opérationnelle	0796
Textiles et tissus (Technologie)	0794

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Psychobiologie	0349
Psychologie clinique	0622
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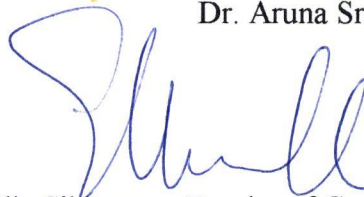
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ABSTRACT

This study outlines ways in which the heterosexual love story - the romance - has been dismissed or misread by critics. I suggest critical strategies for considering the heterosexual love story, its ideologies, and the power relations it articulates. Using critics of popular romance, such as Tania Modleski, alongside critics and theorists such as Teresa de Lauretis, Michel Foucault, and Jean E. Kennard, I demonstrate how the heterosexual love story represents the fictional endorsement of compulsory heterosexuality, and how the power relations of heterosexual relationships under patriarchy are reproduced.

With reference to Marian Engel's *Bear*, I demonstrate how engrained the conventions of "romance" are, examining specifically the conflation of male desire with violence. I use Audrey Thomas' *Latakia* to illustrate the importance of form in any articulation of the heterosexual love story. My reading of Jane Urquhart's *The Whirlpool* highlights how performance can offer women ways to escape the patriarchal gaze.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page	i
Approval Page	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
Table of Contents	v
CHAPTER ONE	
Cultural Contexts, Literary Texts.	1
CHAPTER TWO	
Deconstructing "Heterosexual" Critiques: Marian Engel's <i>Bear</i> .	23
CHAPTER THREE	
The "best revenge is writing well"?: Audrey Thomas' <i>Latakia</i> .	60
CHAPTER FOUR	
Acting Out (Of) The Gaze: Jane Urquhart's <i>The Whirlpool</i> .	96
Works Cited or Consulted	131

Cultural Contexts, Literary Texts.

Literary critics often neglect critical examination of the heterosexual love story - the romance - and either pigeon-hole it as popular culture (and therefore invaluable), or dismiss elements of romance in other works as unseemly intrusions in the central project of a literary text. Typical of this dismissive attitude is George Woodcock's article on James De Mille's *A Strange Manuscript Found In A Copper Cylinder*, in which he speaks of the text's "forced and therefore false sentiment through the intrusion of the theme of romantic love," and complains that the "epic flavour" of the earlier chapters is lost once De Mille reverts to the Victorian sentimentalism of romance (175). Even feminist critics who are making a conscious effort to reclaim writing for women, and genres for feminist writing, seem to find the challenge of romance and the love story an impossible obstacle to overcome. Anne Cranny-Francis, for example, in *Feminist Fictions*, dismisses the love story as

the most difficult genre to subvert because it encodes the most coherent inflection of the discourses of gender, class and race constitutive of the contemporary social order; it encodes the bourgeois fairy-tale. It also encodes the anger and frustration of all those whose lives are devalued by that negotiation ... and it sets them at each other's throats. (192)

The problems associated with the romance are clear, as Cranny-Francis articulates them. The heterosexual love story is so deeply embedded in the ideologies of patriarchy that for her, and many others, it is irretrievably lost as a site of questioning or subversion of the dominant order.

However, work has been done on the heterosexual love story as it appears in popular culture, principally examining the phenomenon of the popular romance novel. Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* deals largely with the readership of romance novels: why women read romance, what they take from it, and how it informs their thinking, their expectations, and their relationships. *Reading the Romance* looks at the success, in popular culture, of the romance novel from a

sociological perspective, examining the means of production, the institutions which support the publication and distribution of romance novels, and the lives of the women who read them. Radway's research was undertaken in a small town, which she refers to throughout as "Smithton," and with a group of women who take their advice on which novels to read from one woman, whom Radway calls "Dot." Through extensive and detailed questionnaires, and in group interviews, Radway attempts to establish the reasons behind these women's frequent and repetitive consumption of popular romance novels, and to determine how the women's lives are influenced by what they read. Through this detailed and valuable survey, Radway points to the enormous influence that the romance has on the lives of so many "ordinary" women. She concludes that to dismiss the heterosexual love story and its influence is to ignore the realities of thousands of women, and to overlook the way in which the conventions of romance have become so ingrained in our society as to function often without question or investigation.

Tania Modleski, in *Loving With a Vengeance*, examines popular Harlequin romances as well as Gothic romance and television soap opera. She points out the lack of critical work undertaken on the heterosexual love story, and the ways in which it has been dismissed:

The complexity of women's response to romances has not been sufficiently acknowledged. Instead of exploring the possibility that romances, while serving to keep women in their place, may at the same time be concerned with real female problems, analysts of women's romances have generally seen the fantasy embodied in romantic fiction either as evidence of female "masochism" or as a simple reflection of the dominant masculine ideology. For instance, Germaine Greer, referring to the idealized males of women's popular novels, says, "This is the hero that women have chosen for themselves. The traits invented for him have been invented by women cherishing the chains of their bondage".¹ But this places too much of the blame on women, and assumes a freedom of choice which is not often in evidence - not in their lives and therefore certainly not in their popular arts. (37-38)

¹Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971) 176.

Romance is figured as a feminine text, as women's fiction, giving the opportunity to blame women for both the content and the informing ideology. Modleski expands this, importantly, by trying to explain the critical hostility or shyness towards romance which has prevented it being taken seriously as a genre. Referring to what she calls "feminine texts," Modleski points to how they have been used as a standard of inferiority, and suggests that "feminist critics seem to be strenuously disassociating themselves from the seductiveness of the feminine texts" (14).

Modleski makes an important point when she identifies this reluctance to deal with, among other things, the heterosexual love story, pointing to the derisive mockery which frequently accompanies the dismissal of "popular feminine narratives" (14). Mockery of the romance distances the feminist critic from accusations of complicity in the project of the ideology which informs the heterosexual love story, and, simultaneously, allows a certain degree of self-congratulation and what Modleski identifies as "a kind of self-mockery, a fear that someone will think badly of the writer for even touching on the subject, however gingerly" (14). What Modleski points to is that romance novels address real issues and tensions in women's lives - how to survive and maintain one's dignity in a society which tries constantly to degrade women's perceptions of themselves:

Their enormous and continuing popularity, I assume, suggests that they speak to very real problems and tensions in women's lives. The narrative strategies which have evolved for smoothing over these tensions can tell us much about how women have managed not only to live in oppressive circumstances but to invest their situations with some degree of dignity. (14-15)

Both the writers and the heroines of these novels are, according to Modleski, forced to act defensively, to defend their positions, and to react constantly against the pressures at work on them.

Jean E. Kennard, in her 1978 text *Victims of Convention*, examines one way in which the heterosexual love story functions outside contemporary popular culture

by taking as her examples works by nineteenth-century English authors, including Jane Austen, the Brontës, and George Eliot. Her concluding chapter deals, briefly, with more contemporary novels which do not fall into the category of popular romance. She concludes broadly that the structure of heterosexual romance (as she characterizes it) cannot work for such contemporary novels, since the emphasis is no longer on marriage as the conclusion and resolution of the love story, and marriage or a heterosexual relationship functions more often as the starting point.

Kennard's study is useful for a critical reading of contemporary texts as she identifies an important literary convention: the definition of the heroine's development through a male partner. She characterizes the heterosexual love story as functioning around one very highly constructed and consistent convention, which she refers to as the "two suitors convention" (13). She argues that the heroine in nineteenth century romance was generally offered a choice between two suitors, one "good" and one "bad," in order to demonstrate some development in the character of the heroine through the process of having to choose between them. The heroine's move towards maturity and her development as a character is defined in relation to the two men, one of whom she will marry to bring the novel to a conclusion: "maturity is seen to consist of adjusting oneself to the real world which is synonymous with becoming like the right suitor" (12). Although Kennard herself points to the problems associated with the convention, and its inherent sexism, and argues that the structure cannot work in contemporary novels, I believe that some awareness of the convention has not outlived its usefulness for a resisting reader of the heterosexual love story. Kennard's literary analysis is important in that it points out one of the central characteristics of the heterosexual love story: the development of the female protagonist is defined through, and subsumed by, her relationship to a man (or to men). An individual woman's development is constructed, defined, and

limited through the conventions and (hetero)sexist structure of the heterosexual love story.

It is the purpose of this study to bring together literary analyses such as Kennard's, examinations of popular romance such as Modleski's, and the ideological implications of literary conventions, in order to offer more nuanced readings of the heterosexual love stories in contemporary texts. The heterosexual love story is characterized for the most part by the various ways in which relations of power are articulated within the texts, and by the ways in which those power relations privilege men over women. The woman is placed in the role of passive object - something to be admired, loved, (mis)treated, and eventually claimed - and the man is placed in the role of active subject - powerful, masterful, in control, yet still possessing, incredibly, an "almost feminine sensibility," as he acknowledges the "preeminence of love and the attractions of domesticity" (Modleski, 17). The power relations which are explicitly articulated in the heterosexual love story are not merely a fictional construct designed to make for good reading. They both reflect and embody the power imbalance inherent in and essential to the ideology of patriarchy, glamourizing it under the guise of writing about "true love" and "true romance."

What is important for a feminist critic of the heterosexual love story is an examination of the ideology which informs that romance, the ways in which that ideology manifests itself, and the ways in which it stays hidden. The subject matter is explicit - falling in love, finding the "right man" - and reflects the very essence of the ideology in question. The heterosexual love story - the fictional depiction and validation of heterosexual "norms" - functions as a text in which patriarchal ideology concerning relationships between men and women is most concentrated and most often left unexamined.

The ideology of the heterosexual love story supports, encourages, and endorses the institution of compulsory heterosexuality through its insistence on love

and marriage as the ultimate goal and the most desired outcome, especially for women. Mariana Valverde, in her book *Sex, Power and Pleasure*, defines compulsory heterosexuality:

With women increasingly defined and evaluated according to their heterosexual market value, and with marriage viewed neither as an economic partnership nor a parenting project but as a glorious romance, the stage was set for the social institution that had come to be known as "compulsory heterosexuality".² This institution is not located in any downtown skyscraper or in any government department, but it is so pervasive in today's society that it resembles the proverbial water of which fish are unaware.

Sexism creates femininity and masculinity as we know them, since our gendered egos are constituted by psycho-social conditioning. *Compulsory heterosexuality refers to the ideology and social practice that pushes properly gendered women and men into couples and makes them believe this is a free choice.* (82-83, my emphasis)

The heterosexual romance goes straight to the heart of compulsory heterosexuality. It articulates, in fictional terms, the ideology which demands heterosexuality as the basis of the social structure and, more than that, insists on monogamous, heterosexual (married) couples as the norm. It constructs monogamous heterosexuality as the only acceptable choice, while not allowing any actual freedom to choose by oppressing those who refuse to make the "correct" choice.

Central to the heterosexual love story is a struggle for power. The very terms of the relationships point to that, at the same time as they efface and deny it. In popular romance, the hero is (stereotypically) powerful, assertive (if not aggressive), and masterful; the heroine is defenseless in the face of all this, and she is swept away by an attraction which is far too strong to resist:

He bent over her and started to kiss her, beginning at her throat and working downward, evoking delicious sensations that again quickly became so intense that she held on to his shoulders with both hands and felt pleasure spiraling through her body until *even her perception of herself was swept away* and she felt boundless and pulsing, helpless to stop the tide of feeling that swept

²Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (New York/London: Norton, 1986) 23-75.

over her and left her only after an ecstatic moment that went on unendurably, past all boundaries shattering in its impact.³ (Radway 153, my emphasis)

What is important to notice is that "even [the heroine's] perception of herself was swept away." The woman is left out of control, under the power of - and therefore, at the mercy of - a strong and (aggressively) determined hero. It is at this point that the power relation becomes increasingly, and alarmingly, problematic. A woman cannot be active as a sexual subject if the first time she kisses her romantic hero she loses her own perception of her self and her subjectivity. This disintegration of the heroine's subjectivity is essential to the ideological project of the heterosexual love story, which exclusively figures men as sexual subjects, and leaves women with little to be except objects of the male gaze, and male desire.

Frequently, in romance novels, male desire - and the power it brings with it to deny female subjectivity - is equated with violence or brutality, be it physical or emotional. Certainly, this destruction of female subjectivity is violent in itself, but the violence often takes a more recognizable, concrete form:

There was an odd, disturbing look on his face that flicked tiny tremors down her spine, sent sharp warning signals along her nerves which she was rash enough to ignore. *He enjoyed taunting and teasing, but it would mean little.* Possibly a spell of bad weather had stirred a devil in him. Many men looked for scapegoats when overworked.⁴ (Modleski 42, my emphasis)

As this male power is linked so firmly with sexual encounters, confusion arises as to the nature of male sexuality and its relation to violence. As Modleski puts it, "male brutality comes to be seen as a manifestation not of contempt, but of love" (41).

Power is figured as the link between sexuality and violence, confusing and eliding the two in a way which leaves women (heroines *and* readers) unsure as to where one stops and the other begins. More often than not, the heroine is confused as to the hero's intention - whether it is violent or sexual - right until the moment he chooses to express it:

³Leigh Ellis (Anne and Louisa Rudeen), *Green Lady* (New York: Avon, 1981) 43.

⁴Margaret Pargeter, *Hold Me Captive* (Toronto: Harlequin, 1976) 54.

"For an instant she thought he was going to hit her and then, fearfully, realized that he was going to do something very different".⁵ If hitting and kissing are so "very different," one wonders how the heroine could possibly mistake one for the other, even "for an instant." The novels perpetuate ideological confusion about male sexuality and male violence, while insisting there is no problem. (Modleski 43)

Romance does this by having the hero stop short of *actual* violence, usually replacing it with an embrace, neutralizing female anger, and making male hostility bearable, in both the text and in the minds and lives of the readers. But this, in itself, highlights a disturbing motive of the ideology of the heterosexual love plot: "the very fact that the novels go to such extremes to neutralize women's anger and to make masculine hostility bearable testifies to the depth of women's discontent" (Modleski 58). By counteracting women's anger, the heterosexual love story reinforces a power relation which leaves a woman helpless at the whim of a powerful man. The heroine has no control over whether the hero will hit her or kiss her, or whether he will subject her to emotional brutality before finally "realizing" the true extent of his feelings for her. A power relation under which women give up or are denied their selfhood, and in which male violence is confused with desire, is articulated explicitly in the heterosexual love story, and it is one which, firmly and decisively, leaves women powerless and without control over their own subjectivity.

Michel Foucault, in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, characterizes power as a shifting series of relations - one which is mobile, and unequal. He suggests that power is not a single and monolithic institution, but a series of interconnected, shifting, and mobile relations throughout the structure of the social order: "power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations" (94). He maintains that power is not oppressive, but is instead a productive force, enabling the accumulation of knowledge and meanings: "Rather than equating power with oppression, Foucault

⁵Sophie Weston, *Goblin Court* (Toronto: Harlequin, 1976) 130.

sees it as productive of meanings, values, knowledges, and practices, but inherently neither positive nor negative" (de Lauretis, *Technologies* 16). As Teresa de Lauretis goes on to point out, part of the limitation of Foucault's construction of power is that he fails to consider the exercise of power as gendered, as a means of gender oppression and a way of legitimizing gendered violence.

The heterosexual love story offers important examples of the extent to which power *is* gendered. As the previous examples have shown, the heterosexual love plot typically characterizes women as powerless and men as being in well-established positions of power. Contrary to Foucault's model of constantly shifting power relations, romance's power structure is rigidly fixed, and any attempts at transgression of the roles prescribed by the conventions of the heterosexual love story are treated within the text with either contempt or derision. Female anger or anxiety at male brutality is either neutralized, as discussed earlier, or is a source of amusement or arousal for the controlling hero:

"You don't sound sorry," said Lucy militantly, taking exception to the appraising look.

"I mean," he explained carefully, "that I'm sorry you're so - er - jumpy."

"Oh!" It was a squeak of rage. She whisked out of his hands. He was shaking with laughter.⁶ (Modleski 47)

Female anger is reduced to a "squeak," and the hero does not apologize but rather expresses regret that the heroine is "so ... jumpy," suggesting that she is over-reacting. All this is then a source of amusement, as he laughs at her.

One of the principal ways in which male power is manifested - frequently, but not exclusively, articulated in the heterosexual love story - is through the power of the male gaze; the gendered way of looking, through which the male spectator constructs the femaleness, and therefore the subjectivity, of the female object of that

⁶Sophie Weston, *Goblin Court* (Toronto: Harlequin, 1976) 7.

gaze. John Berger identifies this idea, in his text *Ways of Seeing*, with specific reference to the representation of the female body in the visual arts:

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.

And so she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman.

She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another.

Men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated. To acquire some control over this process, women must contain it and interiorize it. That part of a woman's self which is the surveyor treats the part which is the surveyed so as to demonstrate to others how her whole self would like to be treated. ...One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object - and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (Berger, 46-47)

Berger is referring directly to the visual arts, and specifically to the European tradition of the nude in painting, but his comments also have relevance in the examination of the heterosexual love story, as well as other texts. The female protagonist is frequently surveyed by the hero, by other fe/male characters, and ultimately by the reader. The emphasis is firmly on the woman as a sight, *something* to be watched, surveyed, and treated accordingly.

Foucault also emphasizes the importance of the gaze in an interview with Jean-Pierre Barou and Michelle Perrot titled "The Eye of Power," in which they discuss Foucault's concept of panopticism - control through a central gaze. This is borrowed from the nineteenth century English philosopher, Jeremy Bentham, in

order to refer to the ways in which the gaze can be used to control, to discipline, and to instill in those under the gaze a self-regulating mechanism which effectively limits their own behaviour, ensuring their complicity in the system which aims to control them. Perrot quotes Bentham directly when he says that "[i]t is necessary for the inmate to be ceaselessly under the eyes of an inspector; this is to lose the power and even the idea of wrong-doing" (*Power*, 154). This demonstrates the power of the gaze as a means of control; those who are oppressed by it not only become complicit in that control, but are conditioned to such an extent that they lose even the will to question or subvert the power which controls them. Foucault takes this further:

Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising surveillance over, and against, himself.
(*Power*, 155)

If we can adapt Foucault's argument from one concerning prisons and asylums, to one which deals with the condition and oppression of women in a patriarchal society, then it helps to explain Berger's concept of the divided self. Women have so interiorized the male gaze that they have effectively become their own overseers, controlling their behaviour within bounds of what is appropriate, and constructing themselves in relation to male expectations and demands. Women have constantly to watch themselves, to consider how they will appear to other (male) observers, and how acceptable they will be under that gaze. Not only do women oversee themselves, they also become complicit in the surveillance of those around them, as the panoptic gaze "[immerses] people in a field of total visibility where the opinion, observation and discourse of others would restrain them from harmful acts" (*Power* 153). Panopticism demands both the surveillance of and surveying from those it controls, so women must both watch and be watched, dividing themselves into surveyed and surveyor, to use Berger's terms (47).

Modleski addresses this idea of women participating in male surveillance through her discussion of the "divided self" (37). She sees the escapism frequently linked with romance reading as being indicative of the transcendence of the divided self, obliterating the consciousness of the self as physical presence, and concentrating instead on the heroine, who is the focus of both the hero's and the narrative's gaze within the text (37). The idea of being able to "disappear," which is frequently used in the advertising of popular romance novels, reflects - according to Modleski - the longing to erase consciousness of the physical presence, and concentrate on the role as "surveyor". This connects with the idea that the subjectivity of the heroine must be effaced for the heterosexual love plot to fulfill its own expectations. Not only does the subjectivity of the *heroine* undergo this process of violent disintegration, so must the sense of self of the *reader* during the act of reading. Romance positively encourages its female readers to believe in the possibility of transcending the division of the self which they experience under the patriarchal gaze. Women use popular romance novels to escape from the continual and divisive sense of themselves as surveyor and surveyed, escaping from the reality of their lives into a fictional world which allows them to "disappear."

By reading the heterosexual love story uncritically, women participate in what Modleski refers to as the "ideology of love" (37), which promises so much, and provides only powerlessness, brutality, and traditional roles. Women are encouraged, by romance, to value their own powerlessness. Even the very act of reading is constructed as a moment of self-forgetfulness, an escape:

A television commercial for Harlequin Romances shows a middle-aged woman lying on her bed holding a Harlequin novel and preparing to begin what she calls her "disappearing act." I can't think of a better phrase to describe at once both what is laudable and deplorable in the appeal of such fiction. In one sense, of course - and this is the aspect critics of popular romances have spent most energy discussing - women should stop vanishing quietly behind the scenes and start making themselves more visible. This is unlikely to happen so long as they continue to feel the need to "escape" into

what the commercials call "the wonderful world of Harlequin Romances." For this world, very like the real one, insist upon and rewards feminine selflessness. (Modleski 36)

Power and control are the last things which romance encourages a woman to exercise. The emphasis is firmly on powerlessness, on giving up control, and letting oneself be "swept away." Traditional readings of romance are, by their very nature, complicitous with the informing ideology: the novels demand the reader relinquish power, just as the hero demands control over the heroine.

The question then arises of female complicity in the ideology of the heterosexual love story. Modleski points out that the heroines of romance can only find happiness through self-subversion, by betraying themselves, desiring that betrayal, and participating openly in it (37). Certainly, the heroines of popular romance, although they might (now) start out as strong, independent, career-minded women, usually end up (willingly) reasserting the patriarchal myth of romantic love, and (freely) giving up what power they might have had, in order to again reassert the patriarchal order by marrying the hero, assimilating his values and the values of patriarchy as her own. But what of the readers of romance? By reading the heterosexual love story, are they automatically complicitous in the ideology which informs and constructs its plot and power relations, and endorses compulsory heterosexuality?

In Foucault's analysis of power, he identifies certain characteristics, including the concept of power as mobile and multi-faceted addressed earlier. Another important point Foucault identifies is the concept that power is maintained from below:

Power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix - no such duality extending from the top down and reacting on more and more limited groups to the very depths of the social body. One must suppose rather that the manifold social relationships of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production, in families, limited groups, and institutions, are the basis for wide-ranging

effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole. These then form a general line of force that traverses the local oppositions and links them together; to be sure, they also bring about redistributions, realignments, homogenizations, serial arrangements, and convergences of the force relations. Major dominations are the hegemonic effects that are sustained by all these confrontations. (94)

The sustaining of a system of oppression demands, in Foucault's argument, the complicity and active participation of those it oppresses. Patriarchy as a "major domination," a "hegemonic effect," would then be sustained by the complicity of women in the local, daily confrontations they encounter in this shifting matrix of power. If this works in the examination of women's complicity in their own oppression under patriarchy, the heterosexual love story would seem to serve as a prime example. Traditionally characterized as "women's writing," and predominantly read by women, the heterosexual love story is, in fact, a genre which is informed by and reasserts the male ideology of patriarchy. This ensures that the myth of romantic love - which serves to isolate women as objects in a male gaze, renders them powerless before an aggressive male "lover," and presents marriage as the only desirable outcome - is perpetuated and, somewhat ironically, characterized as feminine.

What is important in Foucault's construction of power, for this argument, is his linking of power with resistance. Although he fails to elaborate this and provide an adequately gendered concept of resistance, he does make the point that just as power is multiple and shifting, so there must necessarily be many and varied points of resistance to counteract those points of power:

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power... [The existence of power relations] depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network... there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that

are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. (95-96)

This presence of multiple and essential points of resistance allows subversion and re/reading even at the point where the ideology of patriarchy seems most deeply entrenched. It is from within this network of power relations that Foucault claims points of resistance function, and feminist critics can use these in order to subvert and undermine the conditions and ideology of power as oppression which supports patriarchy. If every power relation implies the necessary presence of a multiplicity of points of resistance, then even the text which seems most heavily imbued with the ideologies of patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality embodies the potential for a resistant reading, and for subversion of the very power relations which characterize it.

What is important, de Lauretis suggests, is the willingness to contest the terms, wrestling language and metaphor from the grip of patriarchy, and allowing reading to be an act of resistance - a political act, and one with social consequences:

The point seems to be, one must be willing "to begin an argument," and so formulate questions that will redefine the context, displace the terms of the metaphors, and make up new ones. But language ... is more than a game. The argument begun by feminism is not only an academic debate on logic and rhetoric - though it is that too, and necessarily, if we think of the length and influence that formal schooling has on a person's life from pre-school to secondary and/or higher education, and how it determines their social place. That argument is also a confrontation, a struggle, a political intervention in institutions and in the practices of everyday life. That the confrontation is itself discursive in nature - in the sense that language and metaphors are always embedded in practices, in real life, where meaning ultimately resides - is implicit in one of the first metaphors of feminism: the personal is political. For how else would social values and symbolic systems be mapped into subjectivity if not by the agency of the codes (the relations of the subject in meaning, language, cinema, etc.) which make possible both representation and self-representation? (*Alice* 3-4)

I intend to include the heterosexual love story in de Lauretis' "etc." in order to make it evident that the link between social practice and the articulation in fiction of the ideology of compulsory heterosexuality is one which should not be ignored. As a

genre which deals so exclusively with the relationship on which compulsory heterosexuality - and, by extension, patriarchy - is founded, yet also as one which can be read so effectively against the grain of the ideology which informs its texts, the role of the heterosexual love story in the construction of (female) subjectivity must then be of primary interest to feminist theorists and critics.

Any reading which refuses to accept unquestioningly the values articulated by the informing ideology, allows a level of resistance which functions within the discourse it subverts:

Strategies of writing *and* of reading are forms of cultural resistance. Not only can they work to turn dominant discourses inside out (and show that it can be done), to undercut their enunciation and address, to unearth the archaeological stratifications on which they are built; but in affirming the historical existence of irreducible contradictions for women in discourse, they also challenge theory in its own terms, the terms of a semiotic space constructed in language, its power based on social validation and well-established modes of enunciation and address. So well-established that, paradoxically, the only way to position oneself outside of the discourse is to displace oneself within it - to refuse the question as formulated, or to answer deviously (though in its own words), even to quote (but against the grain).
(*Alice* 7)

De Lauretis encourages feminist critics to undertake the archeological project of unearthing dominant discourses in order to uncover and make known the foundations which support them. Displacing oneself within the discourse of patriarchy implies not an avoidance of, but an engagement with patriarchal ideologies. As women, we are so constructed by the discourse of the dominant patriarchy, as well as being excluded from its ideology and history, that we are in an ideal position to engage with it critically. Our position as *excluded* from the discourse allows a distance, another point from which to view the social construct we aim to unearth. Our position *within* the discourse of patriarchy, as essential props of its construction, allows an inside perspective which complements the perspective gained through exclusion. As women, we can unearth patriarchal

ideologies from the *outside*, and undercut those same ideologies from *inside* the discourse which constructs them. By claiming the act of reading as an act of resistance, we are starting to unearth the foundations of the discourse, to undercut the claimed certainties on which they are alleged to rest, and revealing the heterosexual and patriarchal society of Western culture as a construct, and a construct of language; a very real source of oppression, but not an invincible one.

Reading critically - unearthing and undercutting - involves an active participation on the part of the reader. As Catherine Belsey suggests, the active reader constructs her own meaning in a text, rather than simply consuming the product which is presented: "the meaning is to be produced by the reader, not consumed, ready-prepared by the author" (135). An important element in any reading which seeks to resist the ideology of the text seems to be the concept that meaning resides with the reader, and is constructed through the act of reading. With reference to the work of Barthes and Macherey, Belsey argues that the full responsibility for meaning is removed from the author, allowing an exchange between the two separate acts of reading and writing:

No longer the accomplice of ideology, no longer parasitic on an already given literary text, criticism constructs its object, produces the work. In consequence the author loses all authority over the text: "the work that the author wrote is not precisely the work that is explicated by the critic".⁷ And this is so because the distinct *practices* of writer and critic are inscribed in distinct discourses in a relationship of relative autonomy. (Belsey, 138-139)

If the reader can claim so much authority, such an active role in the construction of meaning, the way is then open for feminist re/readings of texts which have previously been dismissed or derided as too strongly imbued with the ideology of patriarchy to provide room for subversion or critical examination. The heterosexual love story can now be a text which encourages a constructive and critical process

⁷Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, Tr. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1978) 7.

from the reader, not simply a product to be consumed by women readers as part of a "disappearing act" (Modleski 34).

Judith Fetterley asserts that the dominant strategy for reading has, historically, been a male reading, isolating and excluding female readers, subjecting them to a process of "immasculation" and leaving them with a reading which is gendered male:

Though one of the most persistent literary stereotypes is the castrating bitch, the cultural reality is not the emasculation of men by women but the *immasculation* of women by men. As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny. (xx)

Patrocínio Schweickart highlights the importance of taking control of the experience of reading, and by doing so acknowledging this "immasculation," taking it into account in the act of reading, and in the meaning that is constructed by the reader from the text:

But what does it mean for a reader to take control of the reading experience? First of all, she must do so without forgetting the androcentricity of the text or its power to structure her experience... a crucial feature of the process of immasculation is the woman reader's bifurcated response. She reads the text both as a man and as a woman. But in either case, the result is the same: she confirms her position as other. Taking control of the reading experience means reading the text as it was *not* meant to be read, in fact, reading it against itself. Specifically, one must identify the nature of the choices proffered by the text and, equally important, what the text precludes - namely, the possibility of reading as a woman *without* putting one's self into the position of other, of reading so as to affirm womanhood as another, equally valid, paradigm of human existence...
...The problem is that within patriarchal culture, the experience of immasculation is paradigmatic of women's encounters with the dominant literary and critical traditions. (132)

Even texts which are considered "feminine" (to use Modleski's term) are read by women as "masculine" or "immasculated" readers. To resist is to take control, and subversion of the informing ideology of the heterosexual love story cannot take

place until it is read by resisting readers, who are willing to engage the text and construct their own meanings by reading against the grain.

For Belsey, constructing the meaning of a text involves attempting to locate the point of transgression at which the text's formal constraints conflict with its project, or to locate other points of contradiction within the text - moments of transgression which allow an examination of the ideology which characterizes them as transgressive:

The aim is to locate the point of contradiction within the text, the point at which it transgresses the limits within which it is constructed, breaks free of the constraints imposed by its own realist form. Composed of contradictions, the text is no longer restricted to a single, harmonious and authoritative reading. Instead it becomes *plural*, open to re-reading, no longer an object for passive consumption but an object of work by the reader to produce meaning. (104)

Although Belsey refers specifically to classic realist texts, her arguments stand equally well for the heterosexual love story. Locating the contradictions within the text is a vital part of constructing and beginning to undermine the ideology which informs the heterosexual love plot. For example, Modleski's reading of the elision of male sexuality and male violence locates a central contradiction of the heterosexual love story: that male violence and sexuality are very different, but that it is sometimes impossible to tell them apart (42-43).

For a feminist critic, any attempt to read the romance, the heterosexual love story, must involve an act of resistance, reading against the grain of the patriarchal ideology which so strongly informs the texts in question. A useful term with which to characterize this is the concept of the "resisting reader," which is outlined by Judith Fetterley in her book of that name: "the first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader" (xxii). However, being a resisting reader does not simply entail a more detailed reading of the text, but an equally detailed reading of the *reader*, an examination of the ways in which our own

reading is informed, constructed, and guided by the cultural expectations we bring to each text. As active, resisting readers we must engage in what Adrienne Rich calls "re-vision":

Re-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering a text from a new critical direction - is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves... A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see - and therefore live - afresh. (*Lies*, 35)

To understand these "assumptions in which we are drenched" is especially important for critics of the heterosexual love plot. So much criticism has dismissed the heterosexual love story - on the unquestioned basis of those very assumptions - as irrelevant, functioning merely as "love interest," and as something fairly harmless and slightly distasteful. Belsey refers to this internalization of certain ideological conventions, which often go unquestioned and unrecognized, as "literary competence" (34). The assumptions which underlie the heterosexual love plot are so deeply ingrained in our literary conceptions as well as our social ones, that to examine them with a critical eye demands an examination of ourselves, our conceptions of heterosexual relationships, and our understanding of power relations.

My project, then, is to demonstrate how the heterosexual love story can be re/claimed for the purposes of feminist criticism, and how - through a resistant and active reading strategy - the romance can be used to expose and subvert the ideologies of patriarchy which inform the heterosexual love plot so strongly. Examining "literary" texts, rather than texts from popular culture, as examples of the heterosexual love story, demonstrates the extent of these conventions. It allows those conventions to be problematized in texts which are classified as being outside popular culture, and does not allow the dismissal which so often accompanies the more explicit articulation of the heterosexual love story in popular texts. By virtue

of the fact that the love story is so embedded in patriarchal ideology and the institution of compulsory heterosexuality, it is an *ideal* point from which to deal with the questions of power relations which play such an enormous role in the construction of patriarchy. Instead of being irredeemable through the fact that it is so tightly bound up in (hetero)sexist ideology, the heterosexual love story can present a series of texts for examination and criticism which deal directly, and in great detail, with the institution which most supports and underlies the social order - compulsory heterosexuality. To dismiss the love story, the romance, as so many critics seem inclined to do, seems to be missing an important opportunity for a reading which both resists and undermines patriarchal ideology. Where better to begin, than right inside the genre which most reflects the oppression of women - economic, sexual, and social - and which takes as its subject matter the social institution which supports and perpetuates the stereotypical and heterosexist structure of the patriarchal society which feminist theory (and practice) seeks to critique?

The three texts I have chosen to illustrate a new reading strategy for critics of the heterosexual love story present three very different interpretations of the conventions of romance. Marian Engel's *Bear* offers a parodic analysis of the power relations at work within heterosexual relationships, foregrounding the implicit inequality and the violence which helps to support and reinforce that imbalance. In the case of Engel's text, an examination of the critical reception is vital, as the critics demonstrate the strength and ingrained nature of the assumptions which govern the reading of heterosexual relationships. Audrey Thomas' *Latakia* presents a relationship in which the protagonist Rachel, while consciously desiring to write herself out of an oppressive relationship, repeats and reinforces the values and assumptions of the heterosexual love plot, even as she tries hardest to reject them. Jane Urquhart's *The Whirlpool* creates a Victorian world in which, again, the

protagonist is trapped - in the gaze of a young poet - and attempts to break out of the roles both her admirer and her husband have prescribed for her. All three texts sit on the boundary between popular fiction and "literary" texts - most notably *The Whirlpool* - encouraging a use of the criticism of popular women's romance to address the questions raised by the novels, as well as the application of more "literary" criticism and theory.

Deconstructing "Heterosexual" Critiques.

The "critical shyness" which Tania Modleski refers to in relation to academic attitudes to women's popular romance, and which was identified in Chapter One as typical of critics faced with other articulations of the heterosexual love story, tends to produce a critical reaction which effaces the importance of the heterosexual love plot and rarely deals with it adequately. While there is a great deal of critical material concerning Marian Engel's short novel, *Bear*, very little of it problematizes the issue of heterosexual power relations in the novel or deals, in any useful way, with the heterosexual love story and its associated conventions. Two critics, Margery Fee and Coral Ann Howells, seem to come closest to dealing with these issues, although neither fully explores the significance of Engel's version of the heterosexual love plot. Fee's article, "Articulating the Female Subject: The Example of Marian Engel's *Bear*," comes very close to problematizing compulsory heterosexuality and heterosexual power relations, although Fee does not use the critical language associated with romance and the heterosexual love story in her discussion of *Bear*. Howells does begin to discuss the text in relation to romance; however, her two articles on the text are more valuable because of their discussion of the role of the reader, of multiple readings, and of Lou as reader. I hope to give more attention than either critic does to the power dynamics and the assumptions governing compulsory heterosexuality, in order to offer a reading of *Bear* which emphasizes the value of Engel's text as an examination of heterosexual power relations, and to develop a reading strategy for *Bear* which is informed by the arguments presented in Chapter One. This will allow a far more nuanced reading of not only the text but also of its critics, since part of the project of re/reading the heterosexual love plot is to re/read the critical reception of the text. Reading the critical texts in relation to the primary text can tell a resisting reader a great deal

about the conventions and assumptions of the heterosexual love plot and compulsory heterosexuality, and the ways in which those assumptions have influenced reading strategies.

Most of *Bear*'s critics seem to agree with Fee when she writes that *Bear* is a "novel where the issue of sexuality is crucial" (21). In fact, this may well be one of the reasons for the difficulties experienced in defining the text. Books about women's sexuality, in which the representation of female sexuality is central, are - or traditionally have been - romances, heterosexual love stories. Readings of the various critics of Engel's text reveal that it deals with female sexuality in a way that those critics seem to have found difficult to reconcile with the tradition of romance, and they have consequently struggled to redefine the novel. The critics have a tendency either to leave the question of heterosexual power relations unproblematicized, or to read the text as an example of the reversal of those power relations, or as a vision of a perfect version of heterosexuality.

Howells' 1986 article, "Marian Engel's *Bear*: Pastoral, Porn, and Myth," reflects the critics' struggle to define Engel's text in its title. She discusses the novel in relation to these three traditions, claiming that it has elements of all of them, and eventually comes to describe the novel as "pornographic - soft porn certainly, but arguably women's porn" (1986, 109). She is one of the few critics who makes the link between *Bear* and popular romance, when she claims that the novel is "different from yet allied to ... Harlequin or Mills and Boon romances" (1986, 109). In a later article, which she identifies as an extension of the earlier one, Howells describes the text as an "erotic wilderness fantasy" (1991, 73), which reflects Fee's assertion that the "Great Canadian Novel" is being parodied, along with the heterosexual love story (20). For other critics, however, the issue of female sexuality seems to be more threatening, and the novel is described not as erotic fantasy, but as a "book

about bear-fucking" (Symons 11), and as "mere titillation" (15), rather than a serious exploration of female sexuality and the conventions of the heterosexual love plot.

What most of the critics seem to agree on, however, is the structure of Lou's relationship with the bear. An example of the dominant opinion can be seen when Fee asserts that by making Lou's lover a bear Engel was able, to some extent, to bypass the inevitable contradictions of heterosexuality:

But the novel, finally, cannot solve the contradictions that come with the attempt to split eroticism from sexuality and (hetero)sexuality from (male) power, and thus, in De Lauretis' terms, becomes "oppositional." Power is male. These cannot, at least in twentieth century Canada, be split, except in social isolation. Many novels solve the problem by finding the perfect man for the heroine. Engel is not so sanguine; how can men be perfect in a patriarchal culture? Hence the bear. (21)

The implication is that by having a relationship with the bear, Lou is allowed to step outside heterosexuality and, by extension, outside the power relations which, as Fee points out, construct power as male, and do not allow its separation from heterosexual relationships. Fee suggests that as Lou is distanced from patriarchy's power structures, she is able to explore the potential within heterosexuality:

Outside the power struggles implicit in all human relationships, she can discover what heterosexual love might be like if it were reciprocal and equal, and more important, that she herself possesses the ability to project this "ideal" love. (24)

Aritha van Herk expands on this, in her "Afterword" to the 1990 McClelland and Stewart edition, when she writes that the novel "broke through what was, until its publication, a hegemonic male/female dichotomy" (143). The bear is figured as a substitute for the compulsory heterosexuality which is endorsed by patriarchy, and the relationship is viewed as being an "exploration separate from the structured and power-defined male/female relationships of the world. They are both freed from their chains and can take pleasure in their natural desires" (147). The idea that the relationship functions away from the power structures of heterosexuality - in a

"world untouched by man-made rules and roles" (Hughes 96) - is stated explicitly by van Herk: Lou is freed from the chains which have held her back - presumably the inequalities of patriarchy - and she is free to explore her "natural desires." Howells suggests even more than this distancing from conventional power structures:

Not only does this novel expose the hidden dynamics of women's romantic fiction, it also turns upside down the power fantasies of conventional male-oriented pornography, for here it is not the woman who is tamed and transformed into a sex object, it is the bear. (1986, 109)

This suggests a more subversive and more resistant reading of Engel's text. Howells is not merely highlighting an absence of heterosexual power structures in the relationship between Lou and the bear; she is suggesting a way of reading which would allow this (alleged) absence to subvert and expose the conventional structures which underpin them, using as examples women's romantic fiction and male-oriented pornography.

Critics have tended to read Lou's relationship with the bear very much in those terms; Lou is freed from conventional power relations, and enters either into a "perfectly balanced animistic exchange" (Pratt 171), a relationship in which power is no longer gendered and is equally distributed, or into a relationship where the balance of power lies with *her* and she is read as adopting a "male" role. Central to the assumption of Lou's and the bear's (supposed) equality is the notion that the relationship somehow liberates Lou's female sexuality, and allows the development of her sense of herself as a sexual subject: "The bear, it seems, allows her to give her eroticism free play" (Fee 24).¹ What is important to note, before agreeing with Fee, is that she describes the bear as "allowing" Lou to fully explore her eroticism. Lou is not acting autonomously, even in Fee's description, and needs the bear's permission - or his help - in order to discover her erotic self.

¹Howells make a similar claim: "The animal with his own vitality gives the woman something she needs: the free expression of her sexuality uninhibited by any male expectations of what a woman should be" (1986, 110). The same point applies to this as to Fee's comment, and the element of permission, or allowing, is - for Howells - the bear's gift to Lou.

Lou is frequently cast in the role of sexual initiator by critics of the novel, as her sexual relationship with the bear is characterized as one in which she has control, and occupies the power position. Howells states this view explicitly in the first of her two articles on the text:

[Lou] is the one who takes all the initiatives, asserting her own wishes and instructing the bear in ways to give her sexual pleasure with his licking and later his dancing. It is always her gratification which comes first, for she continually emphasizes the bear's indifference and lack of sexual responsiveness although, womanlike, she wants to include love in the relationship. As she says, "He served her" [118-119]. (1986, 110)

Lou is placed very firmly in the power position, despite her "womanlike" insistence on introducing love. The relationship is not one between sexual equals; it is one in which the gratification of one partner is paramount, and the other partner is described as frequently indifferent and sexually unresponsive. Lou's relationship with the bear is often described by critics as a seduction, with Lou cast as the seducer.² Patricia Morley describes Lou as a "woman in the Canadian woods who takes a bear for a lover" (154), ascribing the decision and responsibility for the relationship to Lou, making her the initiator, and putting her in the dominant power position. S. A. Cowan extends Lou's (alleged) literal seduction of the bear into something broader, and more widely metaphorical, with reference to Lou's "fantasy which degraded the wilderness when she tried to seduce it" (89). Not only is Lou described as seducing the bear into a sexual relationship, she is accused of trying to seduce "the wilderness," and degrading it through her actions.

Other critics have tended to focus more on "love" than on sexuality or eroticism, reinforcing the suggestion that *Bear* can be read for its presentation of the

²In one case, Lou's relationship with the bear is described as a "sexual assault on a caged bear" (Symons, 6), and later as a sexual assault on the only living member of the Carys (7). Like several other critics, Symons is assuming that Lou is in a dominant power position which would allow her sexual activity with the bear to take on the implications of an assault. This gives Lou credit for more power than she can actually claim, or than the text allows. It puts her in a position that, as a woman in a patriarchal system, she cannot occupy.

heterosexual love plot, despite the critical reluctance to identify it in that way.

Elsbeth Cameron suggests that Lou's "summer sojourn teaches her what love is" (89), and this is echoed by Lynne Hughes, in the chapter in her thesis on *Bear* and another of Engel's works, *Joanne*:

A new definition of love and her relation to it becomes evident to Lou on the island... The bear introduces Lou to a new meaning of love, characterized by honesty, passion, and pure feeling; it is free of pretense and conventional poses which have been customary for Lou. (98)

Again, the idea that Lou and the bear are functioning outside the conventions of heterosexuality is very strongly stated, but it is identified in terms of love and not of power or sex. The nature of this "love" is firmly identified by many critics as undeniably reciprocal, and as a perfect, new kind of love: "In the quiet house-shrine, by lamplight and firelight, their animal natures loosen and merge and out of sheer respect and kindness Bear learns to tongue Lou" (Montagnes 71). Anne Montagnes' image of Lou and the bear seems to owe a great deal to traditions of women's popular romance, and affirms the degree of reciprocity that many critics read in *Bear*.

The newness of the love Lou experiences is certainly reinforced in the text itself, when Engel writes that Lou "knew now that she loved him, loved him with a clean passion she had never felt before" (118). The romantic ideal of experiencing a love which is 'nothing like you have ever felt before' is made explicit here. One of Lou's other relationships is used as an example of how she had not previously understood what love meant - "She had felt uncomfortable when he said he loved her, felt it meant something she did not understand" (118) - and the emotions she has for the bear are contrasted with that as they are presented as something she can understand and with which she can feel comfortable. The distinction between the two seems to come partly from the fact that Lou felt uncomfortable being *told* that she was loved, and that she feels more comfortable, and more in control, when it is

her decision and she is with a partner who *cannot* tell her, or even show her with any certainty on her part. After their first sexual encounter, Lou reflects on what she has done and we read that "she felt loved" (94). Lou is not *told* that she is loved, as in previous relationships, and we know that the bear cannot feel the human emotions she ascribes to him; he is throughout, a blank screen onto which Lou may project whatever she chooses. This is reflected in the bear's apathy towards Lou and to her attempts at intimacy. She repeatedly fails to arouse the bear (111), and as they dance to the radio, he seems indifferent to her: "He did not reciprocate her embrace. He stood very still as she moved her body as close as possible to his. Then he yawned" (114). There is certainly no reciprocity of the sort some critics seem to suggest, and it is partly this lack of reciprocal feeling which enables Lou to feel so at ease in the relationship. Love brings with it its own demands and expectations, and so if the love is only coming from her side she is not, necessarily, restricted by any demands that a partner's love might impose on her.

Many critics focus on the bear's attack on Lou, when the bear finally gets an erection and Lou attempts penetration (for the second time), and use it to try and negotiate or explain the power relations between Lou and the bear. The most common reading of the bear's action is that he is reinscribing the natural taboo line separating humans and animals, re/stating the "inviolability of the natural order" (Howells 1991, 73). As an example, Donald S. Hair suggests that "the bear releases Lou into her full human identity by marking the limits of kinship, and finally separating animal from human" (38). Ronald Labonte suggests the attack shows Lou that the bear really is, as Homer repeatedly warns her, a "wild critter" (*Bear* 74), and marks the "denouement of the bear as myth versus the bear as animal" (187), thus bringing Lou's mythologizing of the bear firmly back to the reality of the situation. Hair emphasizes that while it is important that Lou breaks the taboo of bestiality, "the re-establishing of the taboo is equally crucial" (38), and that the bear's

wounding of Lou does just that in an inevitable and vital ending, with Lou reborn into her own humanity, and carrying the wound as a "birth-mark" (39).

Other readings of the bear's attack also acknowledge that the weal on Lou's back reflects a line that she has crossed, but they differ about the significance of the bear's action and its symbolic motive. Cameron suggests that while Lou has seen the bear as the "perfect lover, giving and receiving without limits" (89), the attack reminds Lou of the impossibility of her relationship with the bear, and that in attempting penetration, she has crossed a taboo line:

Immediately thereafter, Lou realizes that she has gone too far: "She had broken a taboo. She had changed something" [122]. In believing she can make her ideal a reality, Lou has misunderstood the purpose of the ideal in human experience. (91)

The bear, and penetration by the bear, is figured as the "ideal" and Lou is being reminded that the "ideal" is never achievable.

Howells relates the bear's attack directly to the issue of power relations. She suggests that the wounding may put them in a position of equality, whereas previously Lou had been the dominant partner:

The behaviour of the bear in this story presents ... [an] enigma, with its indifference to the woman's initiatives and its final assertion of power as it tears her skin in *an indecipherable gesture which she is free to interpret as she pleases*. She can see the gash as a way of making the relationship more equal, for if the bear strikes back it removes her feeling of guilt at exploitation (the Rape of the Countryside surely hovers behind this version), just as it reminds her of her transgressions and restores her to sanity. But the bear's action is as neutral as a flood or a snowstorm, and next day it retains no memory of the previous night. *It is this moral neutrality which cleanses the woman of guilt so that finally she chooses to read the indifference of nature as benign*. However, that is her response and it *reflects more about herself as a reader* of nature than about the bear or the landscape. (1986, 108, my emphasis)

What is important about Howells' analysis of the bear's attack on Lou is that it emphasizes the importance of *reading*; Lou is free to interpret - to read - the bear's action as she pleases, as it is conducted with the same neutrality and indifference that

has characterized the bear's actions throughout the text.³ By allowing Lou to read the bear, Engel gives the reader a licence to read in the same constructive and resisting manner. Who can know what the bear's motive was for the action, or whether indeed there was a motive? Lou constructs one interpretation, and the reader must then necessarily construct his or her own. Throughout the summer, the bear has been a blank screen onto which Lou "had discovered she could paint any face ... that she wanted" (72); there is no reason why that should be any different when he attacks her. After the attack Lou "could see nothing, nothing in his face to tell her what to do" (132), so she - and the reader - must construct her own reading of the situation, and her own interpretation of the bear's action.

Fee suggests two other possible readings of the bear ripping Lou's back.

Firstly, she suggests that Lou sees the attack as some kind of punishment:

Lou only temporarily regards the act as punishment for allowing her eroticism free play; rather, she regards it as a punishment for contaminating eroticism with sexuality. For her, the act ultimately draws a line between the two. She has gone "too far" and that is "aggressive" and "extreme" [122 & 132], because she has introduced a dominant "male" sexuality into a relationship that should remain erotic only... The scar is not a "mark of Cain," finally she rationalizes, because she and the bear are not really equals; since he is an animal, she had not exploited him, although she has used him as the kind of mirror that women have conventionally provided men: a surface on which to project fantasy. Thus she can convince herself that this relationship is free of domination and that eroticism and sexuality can be separate. (24)

The introduction of a "dominant 'male' sexuality" into the relationship seems to involve the privileging of intercourse - of penetration - over eroticism, which is presented, in contrast, as female and non-penetrative. Again, the issue of Lou reading the bear emerges, as he is the blank screen onto which Lou projects her fantasies. What is awkward about Fee's argument is that she claims Lou can excuse

³This is, after all, Lou's second attempt at achieving penetration with the bear. Following her first attempt, Engel writes that "nothing happened... He was quite unmoved" (122), highlighting the bear's indifference to Lou's sexual advances.

herself of any guilt at exploiting the bear with the rationale that she has only been using him in the way men conventionally use women, and that as he is an animal she could not be exploiting him anyway. Certainly the power dynamic is different - or it would be with a man, rather than a bear - but does the repetition of unequal power relations, merely swapping sides, really subvert the structures which support them?

Fee's second reading of the incident has more to do with Lou's reaction to the bear's erection:

Patricia Monk has effectively analyzed the novel from a Jungian perspective, and comments on this episode:

the blow falls when she is 'offering herself' to him, in the posture of a female animal. Since this kind of passive self-offering seems to have characterized her earlier [disastrous] human sexual relationships, it becomes clear that the punishment is for the relapse into passive behaviour. (33)

Monk sees the clawing (and its scar) as a permanent reminder to Lou of what she has been learning from the bear: to enter into relationships with men as an equal... That the bear takes a male role during the clawing, however briefly, means Lou can no longer project her fantasies on him. (24-25)

The attack then becomes a punishment for passivity, or what Symons refers to as "a fine masochistic grovel by Lou" (6). Lou adopts a conventional *female* role, so that the bear takes a conventionally *male* role, asserting his own power and eliding sex and violence in a way that brings to mind Modleski's argument that the heterosexual love plot perpetuates "ideological confusion about male sexuality and male violence, while insisting that there is no problem" (42-43). Modleski claims that this is part of an ideological project which aims to neutralize female anger and efface the very real threat of sexual violence against women. Fee, in her reading of the bear's violence, assumes that the power relations of heterosexuality are being *reintroduced*, which necessarily assumes that they have been absent up until that point. The bear's attack works as Engel's version of the moment Modleski identifies when the heroine cannot tell if the hero will hit her or kiss her (42); it is a moment when the reader is expecting an erotic encounter, and is instead presented with a very violent scene. In

Fee's readings of the bear's action, there is none of the moral neutrality Howells suggests; the bear is *punishing* Lou, for one of two possible reasons.

In light of the critical uncertainty about where power lies within Engel's text, it becomes important to turn to *Bear* and undertake a resistant and constructive reading of the power relations involved in the text, as well as of the critics' reactions. As I have shown, much of the criticism of the novel reads the relationship between Lou and the bear as one of equals, or one in which - for the most part - Lou dominates, taking on a "male" role. I would like to propose a reading of the text which suggests that the power relation is unequal, but that Lou is *not* the dominant partner and that the power dynamics of her previous relationships are not discarded. I will argue that her relationship with the bear perpetuates and reinscribes the power dynamics of heterosexuality under patriarchy, rather than somehow functioning outside it.

Fee provides a good starting point for this reading of *Bear*, as she discusses Lou's frustrated attempts to imagine a relationship in which neither partner dominates:

Power relations are first acculturated through learning that male dominates and female submits. Even in the apparently unrestrained eroticism of her relationship with the bear, the categories of human sexual relations determine her feelings. She, herself, has internalized the distinctions implicit in patriarchy, and reproduces them faithfully, however inappropriately, all alone in the wilderness. (24)

Fee, however, fails to fully explore this claim. Assumptions Fee makes elsewhere in her article show that she is writing as much within the same confines and constructions of patriarchy and power that she highlights as restricting Lou. Power relations are constructs, learned ways of behaving, and the power structure essential to the maintenance of compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchy depends on the dominance of the male and the submission of the female. These power relations, and the categories which they serve to enforce, come to seem "natural" because they

been so thoroughly internalized. Lou has internalized them, and we, as readers, are reading with those same internalized values, within that same system - a system which reinforces male dominance and female submission.

Fee points out that Lou reproduces the power relations of patriarchy, "however inappropriately" (24), during her time on the island, and during her relationship with the bear. Other critics also point to this, although perhaps not so consciously; Cameron talks of how Lou "abandons order and reason to *let the relationship with the bear happen to her*" (91, my emphasis). This places Lou in an incredibly passive position; she is giving up the fundamentals of her work - order and reason - so that she may allow a relationship to happen *to* her, to be acted out upon her. This does not, under any circumstances, constitute a reversal of conventional heterosexual power relations. One of the central features of women's popular romance is that it is the man who is the active partner, and the woman must wait to be asked, or told, and this is reinforced in Engel's text. The morning after Lou's first sexual encounter with the bear, she reflects on the events of the night before:

She woke in the morning. The weather was like silk on her skin. Wisps of guilt trailed around the edges of her consciousness. She felt as if she had neglected something. What didn't I do?

Oh dear, what did I do?

I was reading Trelawny, getting high on Trelawny, feeling I knew Cary, feeling I had tracked down the mentality, then I ... the bear.

Sweet Jesus, what a strange thing to have done. To have done to one.

She tested herself, pinching her conscience here and there to see if she felt evil. She felt loved. (94)

Again, the emphasis is on the bear's actions, rather than Lou's. She reflects that it was a strange thing to have done, but then quite rightly corrects herself; it was a strange thing "*to have done to one*", putting the responsibility for action onto the bear, and making her own role passive.

Reading the text's description of the encounter, Lou is remarkably passive. She is masturbating, having been lying next to the bear while she was reading, and

the bear comes to her. There is nothing to suggest that she is actively seducing the bear, in the way some critics have claimed, as the bear comes to her without invitation:

"Oh bear," she said, rubbing his neck. She got up and took her clothes off because she was hot. She lay down on the far side of the bear, away from the fire, and a little away from him and began in her desolation to make love to herself.

The bear roused himself from his somnolence, shifted and turned. He put out his moily tongue. It was fat, and, as the Cyclopaedia says, vertically ridged. He began to lick her....

He licked. He probed. She might have been a flea he was searching for. He licked her nipples stiff and scoured her navel. With little nickerings she moved him south.

She swung her hips and [made] it easy for him.

"Bear, bear," she whispered, playing with his ears. The tongue that was muscular but also capable of lengthening itself like an eel found all her secret places. And like no human being she had ever known it persevered in her pleasure. When she came, she whimpered and the bear licked away her tears. (93)

Lou certainly makes it easy for the bear, but it is he who initiates the encounter. She lies down to masturbate, but she moves away from him to do so; it is not a provocative act, principally because at that point she does not consider him sexually, or as a potential sexual partner. But the fact that she is trying to make it easy for him also reinforces the degree of her passivity in their sexual relationship; the bear is the initiator, and Lou merely facilitates. It is being done *to* her, not *with* her.

As I have already discussed, Howells characterizes Lou as the sexual initiator in the relationship, and claims that the sexual encounters are carried out under Lou's control and at her request. The sexual encounters in Engel's text suggest that this is not the case and that Lou is, in fact, far more dependent on the bear and his whims than Howells' reading would imply. On several occasions, it seems that the bear is more in control, and that Lou fails in trying to assert her own wishes, and cannot

instruct the bear.⁴ Lou may well be the only partner who is receiving any sexual gratification from the relationship, but she is far more dependent on the bear than Howells would suggest:

Sometimes the bear half-ripped her skin with his efficient tongue, sometimes he became distracted. She had to cajole and persuade him. She put honey on herself and whispered to him, but once the honey was gone he wandered off, farting and too soon satisfied.

"Eat me, bear," she pleaded, but he turned his head wearily to her and fell asleep. She had to put a shirt on and go to work. (115)

There are times when the bear gives Lou sexual pleasure without her having to ask, and with no effort on her part. On other occasions, Lou has to try and tempt the bear to satisfy her sexually, because he has no interest in doing so. She cannot be in control if she has to "cajole and persuade" the bear; her efforts fail, and he wanders off, "farting and too soon satisfied". The relationship between Lou and the bear seems little different from many (unsatisfactory) heterosexual relationships at this point; the man rolls over and goes to sleep, or wanders off (farting) having been satisfied himself, and having failed to satisfy his female partner. Lou's actions are dictated by the whim of the bear - she "had to" put on a shirt and go back to work, as she can get no satisfaction from the bear, even though she desires it.

Many critics suggest that Lou's relationship with the bear is vastly different from her previous relationships, and from her relationship with one lover in particular, who forced her to have an abortion and who was "petty and demanding" (118). Certainly Lou's time on the island with the bear gives her time to reflect on past relationships, and to achieve some of the emotional distance and analysis that

⁴Symons extends Howells presentation of Lou as being in control sexually with the bear, as he claims that Lou also tells Homer "set speeches about how *she* expects a man to treat her if he is to have the joys of her body etc." (7). Quite where he would place those "set speeches" in Engel's text remains a mystery. His concern, too, about Lou's "set speeches" suggests a difficulty on his part (which informs his reading) with female sexuality and eroticism, which is more than adequately supported by the rest of his article.

retrospection allows. Yet, she compares those relationships to the bear throughout and, on at least one occasion, it does not reinforce the bear as an ideal partner:

The weather became very hot. He lay in his den, panting. She lay on her bed, wanting him, but it was not his time. She thought of her year as a mistress, waiting for her exigent man to come home hungry not for her but for *steak au poivre*, how she had wanted him always in the afternoon, and never dared to ask. How it might have been different, but...

Out on the river, water-skiers buzzed like giant dragonflies. It was too hot to work upstairs. She lay naked, panting, wanting to be near her lover, wanting to offer him her two breasts and her womb, almost believing that he could impregnate her with the twin heroes that would save her tribe. But she had to wait until night fell before it was safe to see him. (121)

The memory of her "year as a mistress" is brought about by her not being able to be with the bear in the afternoon as she wishes. She had "wanted [her lover] always in the afternoon, and never dared to ask," and she is in the same position with the bear. She cannot have the bear because it is "not his time," even though it is *her* time, in that she wants him there and then. Again, Lou's position is an extremely passive one, emphasized by her physical position; she is left, "naked, panting," lying on the bed, "wanting to be near her lover," but having to wait until he chooses to come to her. She has to wait until it is "safe," just as she must have had to wait for the right moment to see the man whose mistress she was.

The language Lou uses in her sexual encounters with the bear also highlights a convention of the heterosexual love plot which reinforces the dominant position of the man. The imagery she chooses - or society has chosen for her - is extremely violent. As Modleski points out, the heterosexual love plot's conflation of sex and violence and, more specifically, of *male* sexuality with violence and brutality, is used to confuse and efface the very real difference between sex and violence. Modleski points to the highly conventional nature of the language which is used to articulate this conflation, and the language Lou uses to talk "lovingly" and "erotically" to the bear demonstrates just how deeply engrained these heterosexual conventions are:

"Bear," she would say to him, tempting him, "I am only a human woman. Tear my thin skin with your clattering claws. I am frail. It is simple for you. Claw out my heart, a grub under a stump. Tear off my head, my bear."

But he was good to her. He grunted, sat across from her, and grinned. Once he laid a soft paw on her naked shoulder, almost lovingly. (120)

Through that use of conventional language, Lou puts herself in a very vulnerable position. Even to say that kind of thing to a human male would be encouraging a dangerous association of sexual arousal with physical violence, but her words remind the reader that she is with a wild animal and therefore putting herself in very real physical danger, although more by her actions than her words. Lou is "tempting" the bear, almost as if she is testing him, and he passes that test - he is "good to her" - although the potential is certainly there for him not to be. By presenting Lou with a lover who is a wild animal, rather than a man, Engel's text calls the attention of the resisting reader to the literal threat of the violent language customarily used to describe and enhance eroticism. Lou is tempting him, sexually perhaps, but also literally. He could literally tear her head off, and it would not be an uncharacteristic action for a wild creature. To some extent, the violence of the language of the heterosexual love plot, although intended to be read metaphorically, is often made literal and characterizes the depiction of heterosexual relationships, and Engel is highlighting this through her choice of the bear - a dangerous wild animal.

The bear makes love to Lou while she is menstruating, and it is then that the understanding of the danger she is in is made explicit:

"Bear," she cried, "I love you. Pull my head off." The bear did not, but her menstrual fever made him more assiduous. She was half afraid of him, but drunk and weak for danger. (111)

Lou's menstruation may well make the bear "more assiduous," but it also presents Lou with a very literal danger. As she realizes after the bear's attack on her, the bear is a wild creature and the smell - and in this case, the taste - of blood could provoke him to act violently, and could put her in danger of losing her life (133). Lou's

repeated plea to the bear - "Eat me" (115) - is meant, one would presume, in the colloquial sense of cunnilingus, yet in this case the danger of a literal interpretation is very real; the bear could, quite easily, *eat* Lou, or at least kill or maim her. Here is an opportunity for a resisting reader to examine the text in a very different way; the power relations of heterosexuality are not being reversed, and Lou has not escaped from them. She is faced with those power relations on a far grander scale than ever before. Lou's relationship with the bear is not a more perfect version of heterosexuality; it is a conventional heterosexual relationship written larger than life. The conventional and figurative language of heterosexuality is exposed by being given the possibility of a literal outcome, and the implicit violence of the language is foregrounded and, in a resistant reading, subverted. As Catherine Belsey points out, in *Critical Practice*, making metaphorical or figurative language literal allows a more constructive reading: "To give the metaphor literal significance ... is to defamiliarize it, to isolate it for contemplation" (100). Engel's literalizing of the "eat me" metaphor encourages the resisting reader to deconstruct and subvert the conventional meaning associated with it.

Lou's relationship with the bear is full of contradictions and paradoxical moments, which the text does not always fully explain, as she explores and never fully rejects the variety of prescribed heterosexual roles available to her. Lou's feelings for the bear vacillate between a desire to mother him, to care for him and improve his life - "What a mother I am, she thought" (51) as she brushes him after their first swim - and a kind of worship, putting him in the role of a god, of someone/something she must serve:

She loved the bear. She felt him to be wise and accepting. She felt sometimes that he was God. He served her. As long as she made her stool beside him in the morning, he was ready every time she spread her legs. He was rough and tender, assiduous, patient, infinitely, it seemed to her, kind. (118-119)

The contradiction between the bear being God, and him serving her, is not explained or accounted for. It is left as a sort of paradox. This claim that he serves her is followed soon in the text by the passage quoted earlier, in which Lou lies on the bed in the afternoon, wanting the bear but unable to be with him as it was "not his time." He may well serve her, but only when he chooses; similarly, she should not have to "cajole" or "persuade" him if he were truly serving her.

What also helps to indicate that the bear does not simply serve Lou is her claim that "as long as she made her stool beside him in the morning, he was ready every time she spread her legs." The conditional nature of their relationship is reflected in her memories of her relationship with the man who was "petty and demanding." His "love," too, was conditional:

... he loved her as long as the socks were folded and she was at his disposal on demand; when the food was exquisite and she was not menstruating; when the wine had not loosened her tongue, when the olive oil had not produced a crease in her belly. (118)

Lou's lover stays with her as long as certain demands are met: "He stayed when she was domestic, subservient, physically appealing, and sexually inclined" (Hughes, 86). In light of that, it comes as no surprise that Lou complains men deny women's eroticism, and that women are then relegated to the status of little more than domestic help:

... what she disliked in men was not their eroticism, but their assumption that women had none. Which left women nothing to be but house-maids...

She cleaned the house and made it shine. Not for the Director, but because she and her lover needed peace and decency. (112)

Despite her concern at women being nothing but house-maids, Lou proceeds to clean the house for herself and the bear, putting herself, again, in the position she identifies as prescribed by the conventions of heterosexuality and its unequal power relations. Again, one is reminded of her previous relationship, in which her lover's socks should be folded and the food should be exquisite.

The relationship with the bear is not so different in that respect. In order to secure his attention - at least when he chooses to give it - she must take Lucy Leroy's advice to "shit with the bear" (49). This is not something Lou enjoys. It is described as a "humiliating act" (50), at the very thought of which she has to "[restrain] herself from shuddering" (49). Just as her previous lover demanded a degree of order and cleanliness in return for his "love," so Lou must humiliate herself every morning to secure her relationship with the bear. Women humiliating themselves in order to maintain relationships is nothing new, and certainly offers no subversion of the conventions of the heterosexual love plot. Engel's choice to dramatize this through the trope of Lou having to shit with the bear every morning foregrounds the nature of relationships within compulsory heterosexuality, in which even a woman's bodily functions must be subdued or controlled according to male needs and desires.

Many of the critics deal with Lou's encounter with Homer Campbell in parallel with her relationship with the bear. Certainly, Engel points to some degree of parallelism between the two relationships through the use of similar language to describe Lou's sexual encounters with both of them. After dancing with the bear, Lou lies down next to him and Engel tells the reader that "he excited her" (114-115). When Lou goes to Homer and they have sex, Engel uses the same phrase: "He excited her" (126). The reader is invited, through the repetition of that short phrase, to read Lou's encounters with these two male figures in relation to one another. Some, like Cowan, read this contrast as ironic: "while coitus with Campbell has not been accompanied by love, love with the bear cannot be accompanied by coitus" (86). Whereas the relationship with the bear is characterized, fairly consistently, as being one in which Lou learns the value of erotic love, her one sexual experience with Homer is frequently read as an example of a realization on Lou's part that intercourse without love can be satisfying, physically if not emotionally:

[Lou] learns that erotic love is more important than genital sexuality: she says to the bear, "I don't care that I can't turn you on, I just love you" [111]. She proves to herself that sexuality and eroticism are distinct, and do not necessarily go together, by having sex with Homer. She concludes that, although it was good "to have that enormous emptiness filled ... she felt nothing with him, nothing" [126]. Erotic love without sex may be frustrating, but equating sexual desire with erotic love (as she has done in the past) is far more dangerous and self-destructive. (Fee, 24)

Fee suggests that Lou is learning important lessons from the bear about sexual relationships, and that to fully understand both sides of the equation she must have sex with Homer, in order to show herself that sex without love does not necessarily have to be a degrading and unsatisfactory experience; "From Homer Campbell she learns that a sexual experience between two humans can be mutually satisfying, even if loveless" (Cowan, 81), and that sex can be "friendly but empty" (Montagnes, 71). Yet Engel tells us that Lou "went home and cried" (126), which suggests that while the sex might have been good, the whole experience was not necessarily as satisfactory as many of the critics would have us believe.

The emphasis of many critics seems to be that Lou is experimenting with Homer, trying out some new-found sexual confidence, or that it is some kind of learning experience, which is contrasted with what she learns from the bear. Morley reads Lou and Homer in a similar way to Fee, but she extends her argument to consider why Lou chose to go to him:

The local storeowner . . . with whom Lou has sex once, satisfies a physical need without touching her emotional and spiritual loneliness. Lou likes the cheerful little man with the very false teeth and the jealous wife. She seeks out Homer after the bear has failed her physically and she has seen herself in the mirror as filthy and subhuman. (155)

As a reason, Morley offers the explanation that Lou has seen her self as "subhuman," and that the bear has "failed her." Morley also suggests that Engel uses a "beast-lover" as an "original device for underlining the difference between physical sex and love" (156), and if this is so, then it would appear that Engel uses Homer in much

the same way, by contrasting him with the bear. It is suggested that Lou has sex with Homer because she needs to reaffirm her own humanity - to have the line drawn between her and the animal she sees herself becoming - and this reading echoes the interpretations of the bear's attack offered by many critics. Both events are emphasizing the line between human and animal; on the first occasion Lou draws the line by going to Homer, and on the second the bear draws the line in blood on Lou's back.

Cameron offers another explanation when she claims that Lou is able to approach Homer because she has grown and developed to the point where it is possible for her to take the initiative:

Lou's second encounter with Homer is an index of the distance she has travelled towards integrating this love into her experience with men. Although fulfillment eludes her, she has abandoned the passivity she resented earlier and can approach him on her own terms. (90)

This suggests that sex with Homer is not simply a learning experience, but a measure of how much she has already learnt. I would take issue with the claim that Lou approaches Homer "on her own terms," as Homer has already laid out the terms very firmly when he approached her first, as they were clearing the basement:

"I like you. And you're living here all alone. You like to drink, I thought, well, she probably likes to screw and what's all that wrong with it? You're a modern woman, after all." (109)

Lou's approaching Homer is not a measure of how much she has abandoned earlier passivity (as it is questionable if she *ever* abandons it altogether), but is a delayed response to his earlier advances. There is no risk in going to Homer - she knows that he likes her and that he wants to have sex with her. An extension of Cameron's argument is Symons' claim that Lou simply had sex with "poor Homer" out of "desperation" (7), and that in the end, Homer is simply "used": first by Engel as a "literary utensil," to tell the story of the Carys; secondly, by Lou when she "uses him as an appendage to fuckage" (7). Symons seems to ignore the fact that "poor"

Homer is cheating on his wife by having sex with Lou, under an explicitly stated and self-conscious double standard. When Homer approaches Lou for sex she reminds him of his wife and that "If a guy can, she can," to which Homer responds: "I'd kill her" (107). Lou does seem to use Homer in one way, but he is not unwilling, and she is certainly *not* in the power position. When he first approaches her for sex, she has trouble reminding herself that they are at least equal and that she is, in one sense, his employer:

She stood and faced him. They were the same height. She was younger, he was stronger. She liked him, but she did not like what he was doing. Taking, she thought, advantage . . . She knew they were equal but she did not feel they were equal . . . (108)

She is still wearing one of the old dresses they found in the basement, and she wants to pull the rank she feels she can while she is dressed up. Yet, as is plainly stated, he has a physical advantage in the situation, which could potentially make questions of rank quite irrelevant.

Lou's relationship with Homer seems to be a great deal more contradictory than much of the criticism would allow. Lou likes Homer, he is good to her, and she is pleased to see him after long periods alone with the bear, as she is "glad of human company" (74). His suggestion that they have sex is not unpleasant to her, and she cannot easily explain her own reluctance:

She thought, I could take him into my bed and send him off at dawn through the reeds and the kingfishers. I like him. He's hard, he's tough, he'd be good at it. I could hold him. Maybe he'd even hold me. It would be human. God knows, there might be something country boys know I never heard of. But it went against some grain in her. (109-110)

But at least she is acting on how she *feels* in this instance. This can be compared to the analysis of her relationship with the Director of the Institute: "She had allowed the procedure to continue because it was her only human contact, but it horrified her to think of it. There was no care in the act, only habit and convenience. It had become something she was doing to herself" (93). Going against how she feels, Lou

has continued her relationship with the Director, and now she can trust how she feels enough to say no to Homer. Lou even thinks that having sex with Homer "would be human" (110), reflecting the fact that sex with the Director was otherwise her "only human contact" (93), and that she is involved in sexual activity with an animal at the time, yet she still rejects Homer, at least temporarily. When she does have sex with him, it is, on one level, the same as with the Director; it is convenient. She does not love Homer; it is still sex without love. Yet sex with Homer seems more successful, and does not leave her feeling used, or as if it was "something she was doing to herself" (93).

Reading from a point of view constructed through the ideological structures of power outlined in Chapter One, the reader can see that, with Homer, Lou repeats a pattern from another of her previous relationships. Homer is a married man, and Lou has been a mistress before (121). When he first approaches her, when they are unpacking the trunks they find in the basement, she uses his wife as an excuse for not having sex with him:

As she leaned to its mystery, Homer pinched her behind.
 "Don't," she said.
 "Engaged elsewhere?"
 Her heart flopped. "You are," she said.
 "Oh, hell, Babs and I . . . twenty-four years. If a guy can't . . ."
 "If a guy can, she can."
 "I'd kill her."
 "Then keep your hands off me." (107)

Yet later on, she goes to Homer, seemingly unconcerned that he is married. This is also problematized by the fact that Lou is also, really, "engaged elsewhere": she has been sexually satisfied by the bear, claiming to love him. She has to hide that activity from Homer, even though he hints at knowing she is closer to the bear than she lets on:

"You stink of bear."
 "I guess I do. There's no way of living with him except living close to

him." She stared at Homer's hairless ears and thought of his hairless body. Shuddered.

"People get funny when they're too much alone." (128)

The question of smell becomes important as Lou juggles Homer and the bear. Lou has to hide her smell - the smell of the bear - from Homer: "She went to Homer's as seldom as possible now and only after swimming, in case the bear's smell carried on the air" (120). Before she goes to have sex with him, she washes very carefully, trying to restore her body to something which looks human:

She warmed water and washed her hair and her face in the basin. She brushed her teeth and retched at the toothpaste. She found lipstick and a comb and stuff to put on her eyes. She found a clean checkered shirt. (125)

In all her sexual relationships, Lou must prepare herself to play a role, putting on the appropriate costume for whichever role she must play. For a bear, you must shit with him; for a man, you must be clean and make up your face. Engel's choice of words points to the artificiality of this process through the language Lou uses; she finds "stuff to put on her eyes", almost as if she has forgotten what is necessary to play this role. Yet Homer can *still* smell the bear on her, although it does not stop him from having sex with her. When Lou returns to the island, the bear "smelled man on her that night and would not come to her" (127). Both Homer and the bear smell the other on Lou - each male recognizing the trace of the other on the body of the woman they both have sex with - another example of the ways in which Engel's text draws parallels between the two relationships. In both cases, Lou has to prepare her body to make it acceptable for her lover, be it Homer or the bear.

There are certainly elements of *Bear* that point to its construction as a romance, and as a fairly conventional articulation of the heterosexual love plot. In her book, *Inescapable Romance*, Pat Parker, although dealing principally with poetry, identifies various features of romance which can be useful in a reading of the heterosexual love plot in *Bear*. Most obvious of these in *Bear* are what Parker refers to as remoteness and entrancement. It is important, and characteristic, Parker

claims, that romance takes place in a remote setting, somewhere excluded from the everyday lives and environments of the hero/ine. Hughes identifies this when she discusses how Engel's heroines frequently have to undertake some "abandonment of [their] accustomed place" (76) in order to learn and/or grow. Also important - and frequently intertwined with remoteness - is the sense of entrancement, which leads many romances to take on a dreamlike character.

Labonte identifies both the sense of remoteness and of entrancement in his review of *Bear*, linking it to the idea of dreaming and fantasy:

Bear is unique among Engel's fiction; it is, above everything else, a dreamscape. A variety of elements combine to create a world of myth and archetype: the remote island Lou must travel to; the [octagonal] house that is not only out of time but out of place; the incongruous presence of the bear; Lou's gradual recession into the fantastic through her erotic relationship with the bear. (186)

He characterizes the text as a "dreamscape," suggesting later in his review that "it is conceivable that Engel dreamt the story and, because dreams appear to be pregnant with meaning, saw fit to record and publish it" (189). While this later comment belittles Engel's craft as a writer, and denies her deliberate motives and reasons for writing the novel, Labonte does speak to an important element in *Bear*; he addresses the quality of entrancement which Engel seems to be very purposefully emphasizing as Lou arrives at the island. As Homer tells her about the island as they approach it in a small boat, Lou is "more interested in the magical forms around her" (21), suggesting that the island - the remote setting of romance - has a quality of magic which Lou can appreciate and that Homer has perhaps come to take for granted.

Labonte identifies various elements of the text which contribute to this sense of a "dreamscape," and these serve, too, as examples of remoteness and entrancement. He particularly mentions the "remote island" and "the [octagonal] house that is not only out of time but out of place" (186), highlighting place and

setting as vital to the atmosphere, and the project, of the text. The house is certainly out of place on the island:

A house like this, [Lou] thought, in these regions was an absurdity; too elaborate, too hard to heat, no matter how much its phrenological designer thought it good for the brain. To build such a place in the north, among log houses and sturdy square farmhouses, was colonial pretentiousness. (36)

Yet its very absurdity alerts the reader to a more symbolic function for this "classic Fowler's octagon" (21). Hair deals with the house in some detail, and reveals that Engel began with the house when she was writing the story:

The fact that the house is central may perhaps be traced back to Engel's first concept of the book. It was, she told an interviewer in the *Toronto Star*, to be a short story for an erotic anthology to be published by the Writers' Union of Canada:

"I thought, 'All pornography takes place in an isolated palace,' so I built my isolated palace - the white octagonal house - then in walked a bear. I don't know where he came from, just from somewhere in my psyche.

"Well, it was no good as a pornographic story, but the idea was too good to waste, so it became a novel."

The "isolated palace" of pornography represents the fulfillment of sexual desires, its isolation providing the freedom to act out such desires without the usual social or moral restrictions. The "white octagonal house" retains the character of its pornographic predecessor, but goes considerably beyond it to suggest the fulfillment of desires that are wider in scope and more admirable in character. (35)

It is interesting that Engel identifies isolation - remoteness - with pornography, suggesting a similarity between pornography and romance, or the heterosexual love plot. Hair associates this remoteness with freedom from moral and social restrictions, and it seems to hold true with *Bear*; Lou certainly becomes involved in a relationship which violates social norms, as she breaks the taboo surrounding bestiality. This strange and inappropriate house provides her with a setting for her relationship; the "isolated palace" in which this "women's porn" (Howells 1986, 109) can take place. Montagnes, in her review of the novel, refers to the house as a "quiet house-shrine" (71), giving an almost mystical air to the house, by ascribing

religious or spiritual overtones. Certainly Lou, when she cleans the house, seems to have a similar attitude: "She cleaned the house and made it shine ... because she and her lover needed peace and decency" (112).

Engel again reinforces Lou's sense of remoteness, not through the geographical location as before, but rather through the way her relationship with the bear affects her perceptions of the world around her:

She knew now that she loved him. She loved him with such an extravagance that the rest of the world turned into a tight meaningless knot, except for the landscape, which remained outside them, neutral, having its own orgasms of summer weather. (117)

Lou's love for the bear has further distanced her from the rest of the world, not only geographically but emotionally. The rest of the world means nothing to her when she is with the bear; it is either a "tight meaningless knot," or, like the landscape, it is "outside them, neutral." This is reminiscent of the assumption often implicit in the heterosexual love plot, that the loved one (the hero) becomes the whole world to the heroine, and is the only object of her attention and affection. That Engel describes that exclusivity of Lou's love as "such an extravagance" suggests a reading which is not entirely sympathetic with Lou's declarations of love. Again, she is seen acting out the roles which characterize the heterosexual love plot under patriarchy, fulfilling the expectations which go along with it, and validating those assumptions through her complicity in their repetition.

Hughes sees the world of the island and the octagonal house as a place of great significance for Lou in terms of her personal development; one which Lou acknowledges in her sense of being reborn (Engel 19) as she arrives at the island:

She gratefully senses that she is leaving her small and bleak world to enter a different and enchanting one, where she will undergo an undeniable and irrevocable change. (Hughes 94)

This, again, attributes magical properties to the island, making it a remote place that Lou must enter in order to undergo the change she needs. Hughes reads Lou's

postcard as evidence of an almost psychic awareness on Lou's part that the island will be a significant place for her. Hughes goes on to suggest that Lou is affected by the island because it represents and entails a "return to the world of emotion where she regains a natural and primitive sense of being" (94). Other critics share the view that Lou's time on the island and her relationship with the bear are indicative of some sort of return to a more "primitive" and therefore emotionally authentic way of being and of interacting. Cameron goes so far as to suggest that Lou's relationship with the bear is allegorical, and imbued with more than literal significance. Pointing to Lou's desire to conceive twin heroes with the bear, she comments that "considered in this way, Lou's relationship with the bear takes on allegorical significance. Through it she makes contact with a deeper level of reality than any she has known, a pre-history involving the sources of life itself" (86). Other critics refer to the text as both "earthy and mystical" (Morley 154), and Michelle Gadpaille links attempting to write about bears with the articulation of visions (154). Certainly there seems to be a desire among critics to read *Bear* as some sort of mystical or magical text.

However, Engel's text rejects, quite explicitly, that kind of mysticism. When Lou first meets the bear, she very firmly identifies him as "real":

Bear. There. Staring.
She stared back.

Everyone has once in his life to decide whether he is a Platonist or not, she thought. I am a woman sitting on a stoop eating bread and bacon. That is a bear. Not a toy bear, not a Pooh bear, not an airlines Koala bear. A real bear. (34)

Lou also denies mysticism when she very carefully catalogues the notes she finds in Cary's library concerning bears, although more out of her own interest than for any professional reason. When she is ordering these notes, she rejects, quite firmly, the idea that there might be some deeper significance to them:

She spent the rest of the night making similar cards for the other slips of paper, though she could not assign accurate times and dates for the finding of them. She wondered, as she did it, why she was doing it, if she was trying to

construct a kind of *I Ching* for herself. No: she did not believe in non-rational processes, she was a bibliographer, she told herself. She simply wanted the record to be accurate. (71)

Lou is determined not to believe in "non-rational processes"; she is, after all, a bibliographer, and it is her job to catalogue the contents of the house. Earlier, when the notes first start appearing, she ironically comments on the mystical possibilities they hold: "Perhaps when she was very old she would return and make a mystical acrostic out of the dates and titles of these books and believe she had found the elixir of life" (52). Mysticism, and other "non-rational processes," seem to be firmly rejected by Lou, and perhaps by Engel.

But this rejection is not so unequivocal when it comes to the heterosexual love story. Lou has a tendency to wander off into fantasies about her and the bear, reflecting the content of the notes, and adding further to the reader's sense of Lou's romantic entrancement. Lou promises to stay with the bear through the winter - "I won't ever go away. I shall make strange garments out of fur in order to stay with you in the winter. I won't ever, ever, leave you" (113) - despite the fact that rationally she knows he will be hibernating through the winter,⁵ and that she does not have the practical skills necessary to survive. She wakes every morning, expecting the magical transformations of romance, and projects that longing on to the blank screen of the bear: "She wondered if he, like her self, visualized transformations, waking every morning expecting to be a prince, disappointed still to be a bear" (89). As Cowan points out, Lou also fantasizes about conceiving the bear's child/cub, inspired by one of the notes she finds: "*The offspring of a woman and a bear is a hero, with the strength of a bear and the cleverness of a man*" (99). Lou wants to - and almost believes she can - conceive with the bear, and produce a hero (121). At the very end of their relationship, Lou acknowledges that what

⁵It is not that Lou does not know that the bear will need to hibernate. Not much earlier in the novel, after Labour Day, Lou refers to the bear's preparations for the winter: "She knew that he was growing a plug of fat in his anus against hibernation" (131).

passed between them "certainly . . . was not the seed of heroes" (136), but that instead she had had a brief sense of herself as human, and had come to a knowledge of "what the world was for" (137). Cowan deals, too, with Lou's tendency to fantasize impossible resolutions to her relationship with the bear, and the mystical or magical associations of Lou's fantasies:

Although rationally Lou would know that her natural mate is man, not a bear . . . she has succumbed to the spell of Cary's notes linking [wo]men with bears in folklore and mythology, especially the Finnish legend that "*The offspring of a woman and a bear is a hero, with the strength of a bear and the cleverness of a man*" [99] Lou's fantasy of entering a world of magic in which she might become the Chosen Vessel to bear a hero reveals [an] . . . inclination to self-apotheosis. (85)

She attributes Lou's desire to mate with the bear to a tendency to "self-apotheosis," and views her inclination towards this as an example of how she has succumbed to the "spell" of the notes dealing with human relationships with bears through folklore and mythology. To suggest that Lou is under some kind of "spell" implies a state of entrancement; a state in which perception is altered and in which one behaves in a manner unlike one's normal behaviour. To almost believe she can carry the bear's offspring - these "twin heroes" - can be read as an example of Lou's romantic entrancement and, by extension, an example of her acculturation of the assumptions of the heterosexual love story rather than her freedom from those constructions.

Cowan goes on to explain the ending of the novel as Lou's recognition of her own fantasy, and her own delusion that she could actually live out that fantasy:

She still loves the bear, but the recognition of his wildness and sanctity transcends the sexual fantasy she had earlier indulged, a fantasy which degraded the wilderness when she tried to seduce it. (89)

It is as if Lou is waking up from a dream, from a state of entrancement, and realizing the sanctity of the wilderness - the line between her as human, and the bear as wild animal. Lou is having to face the impossibility of imposing her definition of herself as human, as constructed for her under patriarchy, on the natural world. Lou's

reaction to the end of her time with the bear supports this reading, after the bear has been taken away to see Lucy, and as she prepares for her own time on the island to end: "She stood in the doorway of the bear's old byre and inhaled his randy pong. Really, she thought, really" (140). Lou's reaction seems to imply that she can no longer believe in the love story which she has been attempting to construct throughout her summer on the island. Whereas previously the smell of the bear was "very sweet" to her (120), it is now no more than a "randy pong". Her "really" implies a very 'civilized' reaction to the bear and to their relationship, and reminds the reader of the voice of the Devil which she dreamt earlier: "It wasn't very witty . . . to commit an act of bestiality with a tatty old pet" (123). The issue becomes, not morality, but what is "witty." As Lou points out, the morning after the bear's attack, "something was gone between them, though: the high, whistling communion that had bound them during the summer" (134). That "high, whistling communion" is the state of entrancement in which Lou has been during their time together on the island. Now that it is gone, there is nothing to do but leave. Hair sees this as an affirmation, rather than an ending, and emphasizes how it reinforces the cyclical nature of experience: "the separation at the end of the novel is not the collapse of . . . wholeness, but the affirmation of it" (40). Lou is completing a cycle which began with her arrival at the island, and is synchronized with the changing of the seasons - she arrived with the spring, and she leaves as autumn begins. A resisting reading, reflecting the arguments of Chapter One, can see this not as the continuation of a cycle, but as the deconstruction of the assumptions of the heterosexual love story by a woman who comes to realize their inherent limitations, and their constructed nature.

Hair identifies other characteristics of generic romance which he reads in *Bear*. He discusses the importance of metamorphosis - a "process which is

conventional in romance" (42) - and allies that with the changes Lou observes in her own body through the course of the summer:

The consumption of flesh is, after all, the ultimate metamorphosis, and this act, rather than the putting on of fur, is the best indication of Lou's change. As often happens in this novel, its basis is in the eroticism of the earliest idea of the story. Eating is slang for cunnilingus, and Lou's plea to the bear, "Eat me," is the sort of thing one might find in pornography. But here it is part of a far more comprehensive pattern. (44)

Hair seems to be suggesting that Engel is combining elements of prose romance - the more "literary" form - with the conventions of pornography, the male-oriented version of the heterosexual love plot. Through a resistant reading, Engel's genre blending leads to the conventions of both becoming destabilized, and revealed as ideologically constructed rather than "natural." Fee also points to Lou's physical transformation, but she relates it to popular romance, the female version of the heterosexual love plot: "Magical fat loss is straight out of popular romance, implying at the level of mass fantasy, a potential for a 'satisfactory' sexual relationship that is denied at other levels of the text" (25). Again, male pornography and women's popular romance are shown as being strikingly similar in their conventions and assumptions, underlining their essential similarity in terms of gender roles and expectations.

Howells points to another convention of the heterosexual love plot, which supports a reading in which *Bear* reasserts the power relations of heterosexuality. She identifies, quoting Anne Barr Snitow,⁶ the phenomenon of the "undersocialized hero" in women's popular romance:

What is perhaps most interesting about these romances are the undercurrents which threaten to subvert those carefully structured fictions: the fascination with wild men or wolf men ("undersocialized heroes" as Snitow calls them) with their strength and size and hairiness, and the heroine's fantasies of violation. *Bear* seizes on these subversive elements and makes them the

⁶Anne Barr Snitow, "Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different," *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, Eds. A. Snitow, C. Stansell, S. Thompson (London: Virago, 1984) 269.

main text instead of the subtext, so that the "undersocialized hero" becomes a bear, and the heroine recognizes that to be ravished is a consummation as devoutly to be wished as to be feared. (1986, 109)

The bear is occupying a highly conventional and identifiable role, literalizing that role in order to expose the convention, and the implications and assumptions which accompany it. Annis Pratt also makes reference to this convention when she discusses the "green-world lover" of archetypal myth (173). Instead of an "undersocialized hero" Pratt describes the "green-world lover," who is an "alternative to societally acceptable suitors, husbands, and lovers . . . a wholly marginal, eccentric outsider" (173). She claims that they are "necessary to women precisely because women are unnecessary as complete beings in society" (173), and that these relationships enable women to "[complete] their eccentric and marginal relationship to culture" (173). By bringing this fascination out of the subtext, and writing it as the main text, Engel has not, as Howells claims, necessarily turned the power dynamic upside-down along with it (1986, 109). She has, however, revealed and made literal a very real danger in this sexual fantasy of "wolf men"; the very literal threat to Lou's safety, which is now the main text of the novel, and his final act of violence, highlight a danger in fetishizing male violence and entertaining the fantasies about "violation" which the heterosexual love plot so strongly endorses. In Engel's text, the subtext is more the bear as man, rather than the hero as animal which is more usual in romance. This allows a reading of *Bear* which sees the bear not as a perfect replacement for a man, but a disguised version of a man: it is not, surely, a coincidence that the only one of Cary's notes which is repeated is the Norwegian legend which calls the bear, "*the old man with the fur cloak*" (53, repeated on 101). Engel's bear is a man - a romantic hero - in a fur cloak, rather than a wild animal in the guise of a romantic hero.

Critical readings of *Bear* do seem to focus on the idea that Engel's text is one which subverts conventional expectations and deals with the question of sexual

relationships and the power relations which characterize them in new and subversive ways. Van Herk characterizes the text as breaking through a "hegemonic male/female dichotomy" (143), and suggests that the text "rejects the simplicity of human sexual opposition, and instead enters the animal presence of sexuality inside the human" (144), and many other critics seem willing to agree with that reading. As I have argued, it is equally possible to read *Bear* as a reinscription of those power relations - that (questionable) "simplicity of human sexual opposition" - and that the hegemony of male and female is not broken, but reinforced.

One interesting possibility is to read the novel as essentially parodic; to read for the subversion of the conventions and power relations of the heterosexual love plot *through*, rather than despite, their re/presentation. This would allow reading for subversion through irony, and Howells suggest that this technique is one familiar to women writers:

As feminist critics have pointed out, women writers claim their textual space by disruptive tactics, subverting conventions of realism by shifts into fantasy or romance, by mixing genres so that one code is superimposed upon another. Through such split-level discourse they create a doubled vision which is also a characteristically feminine entertainment of simultaneous alternatives. This is exactly Engel's method in *Bear*, with its breaking down of genre boundaries between pastoral, pornography and myth as she revises Canadian wilderness narratives through the mode of female sexual fantasy. (1991, 72)

Howells argument implies that Engel's choice of genre is, in itself, subversive; that writing within the heterosexual love plot, in order to revise realism or wilderness narratives, demonstrates a disruptive tactic which is characteristic of women writers, and which creates something "characteristically feminine" in that it allows "simultaneous alternatives" and the imposition of several options/readings on the one text. The critical attempts to name and classify the text identified earlier attest to this. Engel is - according to Howells - mixing genres, superimposing the

conventions of different forms, and subverting them all through a strategy of textual disruption.

The parody which some critics identify in the text also supports Howells' view that the subversion in the novel is textual. Howells herself reads the text as a subversion of the conventional power positions of male pornography, and claims that the medium is parody:

Bear confronts what one Canadian feminist describes as the "dominant cultural discourse and its male point of view which denies female sexuality"⁷ by working explicitly within the genre of male pornographic fantasy, but telling the story from the woman's point of view where the Other is no longer female but male. Interestingly, when Engel enters on this forbidden territory she displays a certain defiance (and defensiveness?) by inventing a scenario which is almost parodic: the male is not a human but a bear. Such figuring is a witty conflation of sexual and wilderness fantasies. (1991, 73)

Howells seems to be implying that the parody is limited through a defensiveness which would not allow Engel to create a male human figure who could be handled in a way reminiscent of the objectification of women in male pornography. Fee suggests that Engel wrote about a bear because "how can men be perfect in a patriarchal culture?" (21); to subvert or deny the power relations of patriarchy would need a man untouched by its constructions, which is not possible, "hence the bear" (21). Fee also sees the novel as parodic - specifically of the "Great Canadian Novel and the Gothic Romance" (20): "Engel writes parodically in the sense Linda Hutcheon gives to parody as 'ironic playing with multiple conventions ... extended repetitions with critical difference'" (26).⁸ There is enormous similarity between this reading of parody and Howells' reading; both stress the importance of Engel's playing with a multiplicity of conventions. Yet Fee also claims that "[a]t one level, it is still [a] 'pornographic' spoof that turns the bear into a female wish-fulfillment

⁷Shirley Neuman, "Importing difference," *A Mazing Space/Amazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*, Eds. Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli (Edmonton: Longspoon Press, 1986) 392-405.

⁸Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985).

fantasy: a tame phallus" (25). She argues that while Engel confronts the colonial mentality and the male literary tradition successfully - the "powerful Other ... that is not individual, but institutional" - she "cannot, finally, debunk the patriarchy" (20), as the resolution which would allow that is not possible because of the "equation of sexuality, voice, and power, and the rejection of them all as male" (26).

Readings of *Bear* which present the text as an example of female sexuality finding a means of expression unfettered by the "man-made rules and roles" (Hughes, 96) of patriarchy, do the text a disservice. They impose a reading on *Bear* that does not reflect the text itself. The text can be read as a subversive re/presentation of those rules and roles, but it does *not* provide an example of a relationship which functions outside them. By imposing the codes of the heterosexual love plot - of pornography and women's popular romance - on a relationship between a woman and an animal, Engel's text emphasizes the strength of those conventions, and the way they limit and constrict ways of behaving even when they should have least effect. The bear functions outside patriarchy, yet the relationship with Lou retains its structure because the rules and roles of patriarchy are so deeply ingrained within her.

Patrocínio Schweickart suggests that it is part of the duty of the feminist critic to enter into some kind of ethical pact with the female author:

The feminist reader speaks as a witness in defense of the woman writer. Here we see clearly that gender is crucial. The feminist reader takes the part of the woman writer against patriarchal misreadings that trivialize or distort her work. (130)

This kind of injunction to feminist readers is easy to uphold in the face of criticism like Scott Symons' article, in which his sexist and highly offensive reading of what he describes as a "book about bear-fucking" (11), is so obviously informed by a fear of what female sexuality means (that women can and do experience erotic fantasy, and that they are quite capable of asserting themselves sexually) and an "understanding"

of female sexuality which stems from a rigid and bigoted patriarchy. What is more problematic is the kind of article which claims more for the text than can be admitted. Many critics *want* to read the text as subversive in a particular way; in a way which is positive, which provides them with a model of "what heterosexual love might be like if it were reciprocal and equal" (Fee, 24). This desire is quite understandable; there is such a lack of positive and optimistic models for heterosexuality which genuinely reflect equality, mutuality, and reciprocity, that the possibility of a text which offers that leads to misreadings which distort the work, but not necessarily through a reading which is negative or unfavourable. *Bear* does expose the power relations implicit in the heterosexual love plot, but it does *not* offer a positive or optimistic alternative.

The "best revenge is writing well"?

As I have argued, Marian Engel's *Bear* exposes and problematizes the traditions, conventions, and reading strategies typically associated with the heterosexual love plot. Audrey Thomas' *Latakia* also deals with these conventions and, like *Bear*, encourages the resisting reader to deconstruct and subvert the text and to actively question the assumptions around which it is constructed. In *Bear* the reader is encouraged to read against the grain through Engel's displacement of the human lover by a bear, which draws the resisting reader's attention to the attitudes and actions of the woman in a way which is unusual in the presentation of the heterosexual love story. We can learn a new way to read heterosexual love, as we read Lou "reading" her strange lover. In *Latakia*, the construction of the text sets up multiple levels of readership and addresses the (intended) reader directly, emphasizing the role of the reader in the construction of meaning within the text, and the inevitable relationship between writer and reader.

Thomas constructs her text as a letter from Rachel, the protagonist/narrator, to her absent ex-partner, Michael; it is a love letter, "albeit the longest love letter in the world" (21). Thomas' text exemplifies a tradition identified by Linda S. Kauffman in her book, *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fiction*. Kauffman examines a tradition of "amorous epistolary discourse" (18) which she locates as beginning with Ovid's *Heroides*, and continuing to the present day. She articulates a distinct pattern in novels which are constructed in this manner, as letters to an absent beloved:

Each epistle repeats the pattern: the heroine challenges the lover to read her letter, rages against the forces that separated them, recalls past pleasures, speculates about his infidelity, laments his indifference, and discusses the sole act that engages her in his absence: writing. (17)

The beloved is necessarily absent in Kauffman's model, usually having abandoned the heroine, allowing her a retrospective (and often angry) perspective on their relationship, and *Latakia* certainly fits that tradition. Rachel is writing to Michael, after their relationship has ended and Michael is in Africa with his wife, Hester, and she examines and analyzes their relationship in some detail in the ways Kauffman identifies.

Another characteristic Kauffman deals with is that this format of "amorous epistolary discourse" (18) necessarily entails a multiplicity of narrative roles for the heroine:

"The narrator is present as source, guarantor, and organizer of the narrative, as analyst and commentator, as stylist (as 'writer')".¹ I have these multiple narrative roles in mind when I refer to the "doubleness" and the "duplicity" of discourses of desire, for the heroines are frequent commentators on the complexities of style and, concurrently, analysts of the subtleties of feeling. They simultaneously analyze their illusions about the beloved and create new ones by writing; the act of writing itself is one means of creating the illusion of presence. (Kauffman 24)

Rachel is certainly a commentator on her own style, as well as on her own relationship, and the fact that she is a writer by profession makes this explicit from the start. As well as analyzing her own feelings and her emotional involvement in the relationship, Rachel is very conscious that she is *writing* to Michael, and for Michael as reader. Her recollections of and reflections on the relationship then become the text:

The heroine's discourse is meant as a performance to be spoken, a letter to be read; she utters her desire in the absence of her beloved. The narrative consists of events reported by the heroine to the lover; it is oblique and elliptical because we frequently see only the repercussions of events that, like the love affair itself, are never narrated. Other acts of communication are enacted rather than reported in the narrative: the heroine's writing reenacts seduction, confession, persuasion, and these constitute what "happens" in the text. (26)

¹Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980) 167.

As Pauline Butling points out, in *Latakia* the reader is never shown/told the event which has lead to Rachel's present situation: "The key scene is missing: the scene when Rachel, Hester, and Michael have their big fight which ends the ménage-à-trois is not played out, only referred to in other contexts" (108). The narrative does not *need* to repeat that event; after all, the supposed reader (Michael) was there, so he knows what happened. Rachel also plays with the illusions she held about Michael and their relationship, in the way Kauffman suggests, and those she destroys are replaced, in part, by a new illusion concerning how Michael will react to the letter he will (one imagines) soon read.

Kauffman deals too with the consciously fictive nature of such letters, and the acknowledgment by the heroine that everything she writes necessarily then becomes a fiction, and that she is consciously dramatizing the events of the relationship. The heroine "sustains the fiction of a conversation with the beloved in her letters, while simultaneously revealing her awareness of the fictiveness of the endeavour It is a consciously staged utterance, addressed to the absent beloved; yet (paradoxically), simultaneously dramatizes his silence, the heroine's alienation, and the metonymic displacement of desire" (25). The intensity and profoundly personal nature of the love letter, of the articulation of desire, is combined with a consciousness of the process of fiction-making, and the artifice and conventional structures of any articulation of desire. By choosing the letter format, the structure of the conventional novel can be undermined or questioned, and at the same time the format also highlights the conventions which govern the presentation in novels of the heterosexual love story. Placing this highly personal narrative - its intimate nature emphasized by the fact that it is a (love) letter - into the highly public genre of the novel, suggests an undermining of both genres. As Coral Ann Howells suggests, when dealing with *Bear*, one textual strategy utilized by many women writers is the superimposition of one genre upon another, in order to disrupt the text

and claim a textual space for women (1991, 72). Thomas seems to be employing that textual strategy by juxtaposing the letter (the private) and the novel (the public).

The significance of the duplicity of the narrative and the multiple roles of the narrator is extended further by Kauffman. The narrative is characterized as moving constantly between various emotions: "it vacillates between vengeance and nostalgia, defiance and desire" (26). Through this, the text becomes transgressive; not only is the text transgressing the boundaries of genre, and questioning the roles constructed for and by gender, it is itself a revolt and an act of defiance. The text is then a "revolt staged in writing" (Kauffman 18), reminding the reader of Rachel's final claim that "the best revenge is writing well" (Thomas 172). Texts of this nature, Kauffman claims, allow heroines to "expose the double agents of their repression: traditional representations of woman and stereotypical concepts of gender" through a "quiet, stealthy work of undermining,"² carried out by miming the dominant images the culture disseminates" (23). Certainly the format of "amorous epistolary discourse" (18) allows an undermining of the conventions of the heterosexual love plot, as it takes that (failed) love story as its context. Rachel, as she relives and reinscribes the events of her relationship with Michael, begins that process of undermining through some of the analysis she undertakes of her own role in the relationship, and her complicity in the ways it oppressed her.

The very act of writing is also important to Kauffman in that it provides a way for the abandoned heroine to take some measure of control over her situation; it provides an outlet for her anger at being abandoned and the medium in which to "[transform] the ordeal of abandonment into a passionate vocation that might be called the vocation of iterative narrative" (25). The abandoned woman is able to transform herself from "the archetypal Woman Who Waits into the Woman Who Writes" (25), and this process of claiming the role and authority of authorship is vital

²Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta, Maria Velho da Costa, *The Three Marias: New Portuguese Letters*, Trans. Helen R. Lane (New York: Bantam, 1976) 23.

to the text's transgressive potential. The heroines of these heterosexual love stories "transform themselves into artists, taking control of the production of writing to challenge not just men's representation of them but - particularly as it relates to gender - the fundamental tenets of representation itself" (22). Ways of representation and, by extension, ways of being are reconsidered and deconstructed. This is especially important in light of the examination of the heterosexual love plot's erasure of female subjectivity discussed in Chapter One. The conventions of the heterosexual love story demand the erasure of the heroine's sense of her self, of her subjectivity, as she is "swept away" and becomes little more than an object in a male gaze. In this process of writing *her* version of the relationship, the heroine "[transforms] herself in the process from victim to artist" (26) and, through that, reasserts the subjectivity which has previously been denied her by the restrictions and conventions of the heterosexual love story and compulsory heterosexuality.

The reader is offered, within *Latakia*, an additional challenge to the conventional articulation of the heterosexual love story in the text's reworking of the "two suitors convention" proposed by Jean E. Kennard. While the most substantial portion of Kennard's text deals with English novels from the nineteenth century, in her conclusion she moves into the twentieth century and addresses this convention in relation to more contemporary novels. She concludes that the two suitors convention no longer satisfies the requirements of the novel, since the emphasis is now on the relationship itself and not on the search to find a marriage partner. She does, however, point to variations within this convention, and how an understanding and awareness of this literary tradition can enhance the reading of contemporary novels.

Readers aware of the "two suitors convention" are alerted to a special use of that pattern in *Latakia*, by a remark Rachel recalls Michael making during their three-way relationship:

You sat down on the edge of the bed. "If I were to write a novel about this," you said, "I would begin with the sentence, 'This is a tragedy about a man who loved two women.'" (65)

Michael draws their relationship in terms of a novel and, more specifically, a tragedy - a genre frequently employed for the articulation of the heterosexual love story.

Michael's hypothetical opening sentence has an air of the nineteenth century about it, and sets up a scenario in which Michael is the centre: "This is a tragedy about a man." Within Kennard's framework, it is the woman who is always central - Jane Eyre, Maggie Tulliver, etc. In *Latakia*, the gender roles within the convention are reversed; Michael takes the central place - in his own version and within Rachel's narration - and Rachel and Hester are relegated to the two peripheral roles.

A significant emphasis in Kennard's text is that the choice the heroine makes becomes not one between two individuals, but between two different social orders. By choosing the "right suitor," the central figures in Kennard's examples choose to reinforce the dominant social order - they are married and the structures of mainstream Victorian society are upheld. In *Latakia*, while the convention is turned on its head by putting Michael in the role of the heroine, the emphasis on the symbolic nature of the choice is not only maintained but made explicit:

What I think has been the hardest thing for me to get through my head is that you have not chosen between two *individuals*, each of whom you love, but between two ways of life and two ways of relating to a woman. You tried the conventional way and, obviously, found it dissatisfying - at that time - so you found me. But you are still too self-centred and weak-egoed to ever be able to make it with someone who insists on mutuality. So, for a while, last fall, you wanted both *modes*, not both people, and the idea of the ménage à trois was your refusal to acknowledge this or take responsibility for it, as well as our refusal, Hester's and mine, to insist that you grow up. (43)

Michael does not, as Rachel points out, choose finally between two women, but rather between two ways of life. He initially rejects the conventional role offered him through marriage with Hester, for the more unconventional relationship - the affair - he can have with Rachel. The ménage à trois seems to represent for Michael

the negotiation of the middle ground within this contemporary version of the two suitors convention. What emerges from the novel, and through the progression of the relationship, is that this attempt at negotiation of the middle-ground is ultimately unsatisfactory and unworkable, and that only a choice of one of the two options can work. It is made unworkable through Michael's abdication of responsibility; Michael does not want to make a choice, he wants to have both choices always available to him.

The epistolary format of the novel also permits the highlighting of Rachel's subjectivity - she is, after all, writing this relationship - which contributes to making the ménage unworkable, from the point of view of both Rachel and Hester. The arrangement necessarily demands the erasure of their subjectivity in ways which place them as objects in relation to Michael's masculine/male subjectivity, and which allow them to realize that they are being exploited without allowing them the necessary agency to break out of that exploitation. Only in Rachel's retrospective letter - in her written re/examination of this finished relationship - can she begin to re/claim her own subjectivity, as part of the process of transformation from "victim to artist" (Kauffman 26). As Michael's writerly interpretation of the situation quoted earlier suggests, Michael assumes that he is the subject in the relationship, and Rachel and Hester are merely two women/objects *he* loved. Rachel's assessment of Michael's aims when he entered the relationship with her reflects this subject/object relation, and double standard by which it was necessarily characterized:

You were married - I had not intended to break up your marriage. You had some crazy idea at that point that I would be faithful to you alone, while you remained "faithful" to Hester *and* to me. (128)

As Ellen Quigley suggests in her article "Redefining Unity and Dissolution in *Latakia*," the three-way relationship is entirely defined by Michael. Rachel ingests his definition of her, allowing him to define her through the relationship, as well as to define the form of the relationship itself:

Rachel refuses to pursue her own interests and, instead, supports Michael's power by incorporating his own negative desires into her own, even supplanting her own with his. The entire relationship between Michael, Hester, and Rachel becomes defined by Michael's terms, which dissolve the unity of any female-identified definition. *Latakia* is full of references to the anonymity of male-identified and -defined women: "Like the moon, our symbol, we are supposed to bask in reflected light. To walk in someone else's shadow is light enough . . ." (47). (Quigley, 204-205)

Michael is figured, indirectly, as the sun in the passage quoted by Quigley, and Rachel and Hester as moons, a highly conventional representation of female desire/chastity, reflecting Michael's light (his desires, his wishes, his fantasies) while having none of their own. Michael is both the source and the centre; Rachel and Hester are merely satellites. Rachel and Hester are only allowed to be defined as sexual in relation to Michael, and only when he chooses. Even Rachel's masturbation is described in relation to him:

Once you wrote and asked me to pull down my panties and put my hand between my legs and think of you, imagine your fingers there... A manipulator is precisely that. Do you remember what I wrote back? I can't type so I don't have a copy, but it was some pun about "Dieu" and "Mon doigt" or "Doigt de Seigneur," or something. (20-21)

Rachel's masturbation is only mentioned on this one occasion, and this is significant because Michael is asking her to masturbate and, one could assume, imagining her masturbating. Even when she is alone, away from Michael, she is still under his sexual control - his manipulation - and her position is still that of object, rather than subject.

In her retrospective narrative, her letter to Michael, Rachel explores this question of definition - of who was defined by whom, and how conflicting demands on and definitions of Rachel both angered and threatened Michael. In this way, the epistolary format allows Rachel (and, through her, the reader) to engage in a deconstruction of the heterosexual love story. At one point, Rachel theorizes about

social conditioning, blaming the socially-endorsed expectation that women should find their sole definition through their men:

A man's first love is never his woman, but his work. That is what he is taught; that is how he defines himself. What is *left over* goes to his wife and family, although even his close friends may come further up the scale than they do. When you came into my life, I already had work that I loved, close friends. It drove you crazy. A "wife" was not supposed to be like that. A "wife" was not supposed to have such definition. (85)

Michael's definition of a wife is based on a system and a set of values in which a woman is economically, socially, sexually, and emotionally defined by her husband, and not one which allows for even the possibility of equitable heterosexual relationships. That Rachel can find self-definition outside their relationship, and from sources which pre-date her involvement with Michael, in his mind undermines his supremacy in relation to her, and threatens to subvert the position of power he wishes to maintain. At times, Rachel herself seems to accept as appropriate a social norm which demands female definition always be relative: "Women are supposed to define themselves through the men they love: wife of the Prime Minister, mother of the priest. Wife of the rising young novelist" (40), at the same time as she is, in practical ways, subverting that expectation - infuriating and angering Michael by her other external sources of definition. She recognizes the presence and the power of that same expectation, that it is a socially sanctioned and accepted practice, and that it is what women "are supposed to do," yet she cannot fulfill it in her own life.

One important challenge Rachel does make to the heterosexist assumption implicit (and frequently explicit) in Michael's attitude that heterosexuality (male/female sex rather than the institution of compulsory heterosexuality) is the only viable option, is expressed, significantly, through humour. Rachel jokes, somewhat pointedly, that "the real laugh on you, Michael, would have been if Hester and I had got it on in Athens!" (87). Not only would the joke have been on Michael, Hester and Rachel relating to each other sexually would have had the potential to

completely subvert the basic premise of their *ménage à trois*; that is to say, the assumption that Michael is the only sexual subject, with Rachel and Hester functioning sexually only with, and in relation to, him, would be completely destroyed. Even by speculating about a lesbian/bisexual possibility within the *ménage à trois*, Rachel establishes herself and Hester as sexual subjects, with the potential to move beyond their roles as complementary yet essentially interchangeable sexual objects.

Rachel's challenge to heterosexism and female sexual objectification comes only in the guise of humour, deflecting its very real subversive impact by relying on irony, and identifying the challenge as outside the real scope of possibility. Even the fact that Rachel constructs any relationship between herself and Hester as an act which would have been a joke on Michael suggests that she is still, in some very basic way, defining even this potential assertion of female sexual subjectivity in relation to him; it would have been an act calculated to have an effect on Michael, not one performed for their own pleasure. Since the comment is made in retrospect, as a reflection on what might have been - "The real laugh on you . . . would have been" (87) - the immediacy of the threat of subversion is removed; the comment is made on a situation which has long since passed, and reflects a scenario which is, at the very least, unlikely to occur again. Rachel's retrospective narration changes the nature of the description; the possibility of actual (physical) subversion of the oppressive power structure of the *ménage à trois* is removed, and the subversion is confined to recollection, and to Rachel's writing. It is important to remember that while the epistolary form offers agency in the moment of *writing*, it does not offer the opportunity for direct action. As Quigley points out, Rachel is writing from a "position of revitalized unity" (208), at a moment outside the relationship and necessarily distanced from it; the "conflicts which are essential to romance are not, therefore, present" (208). It is much easier to manage conflict, to subvert

convention, and to deal with an oppressive relationship while keeping one's subjectivity intact, with the benefit of distance - spatial and temporal - and with the luxury of retrospective analysis. Rachel seems too caught up in and entranced by the relationship while it is happening for that kind of remark to have been made - her subjectivity had been so effectively repressed that such a move would have been unthinkable - or it would perhaps have been too dangerous to make that kind of comment, while keeping Michael's "love" was still a concern.

Rachel's retrospection does, however, allow her to question a number of ways in which she was objectified by the relationship. She begins to examine just how she was tied to Michael, to such an extent that she was powerless to do things which she would have done without a second thought outside/before their relationship:

Why do women always feel that they are being, or have been, acted upon? I could have got out of the situation at any time. I had some money; I was not afraid to travel in Europe alone; I had a book to write. I could even go home if I wanted to. You were the one who had committed yourself, not me. And yet I felt that you were "doing all these mean things to me," when really you were just seeing how much you could get away with, just putting yourself first, like any normal child. I probably deserved everything I got. (70)

Rachel is questioning her role as object, her position in relation to Michael who keeps "doing all those mean things to [her]." Yet, frustratingly for the reader who is hoping for Rachel's ideological growth, the conclusion she reaches - "I probably deserved everything I got" - merely highlights her feeling of complicity in the oppression she suffered. By claiming to have "deserved" the treatment she received, Rachel puts herself in the conventional role of a woman within an unsatisfactory heterosexual relationship, blaming *herself* for the relationship's failure. This certainly offers no subversion of the conventional roles prescribed by the heterosexual love plot.

Rachel continues to question, but it is all in retrospect; she can question the relationship, and the power dynamics which characterized it, only once it is "over":

Is there always one who loves more than the other? Is there always the one who kisses and the other who is kissed? When I was not yet yours, you were mad about me. As soon as you knew I loved you, you began to use that power to "control" me. (89)

Love infers a degree of power. When Michael's desire for Rachel is unrequited, he is "mad" about her; she is in a position of some power over him, as is demonstrated by her comment to the group when he tries, repeatedly, to seduce her (27). Tania Modleski points out that it is a characteristic of popular romance that the hero is discovered to have been obsessed with the heroine before their relationship, and that this is often read by women who read romance as a way of "'evening things up' between men and women, even when they seemed most fervently to embrace their subordinate status" (16). It is highly questionable as to whether this has the desired effect or whether it ever can, but what Modleski stresses is that readers of the heterosexual love story frequently do read the hero's obsession as an equalizing gesture, so the assumption that it is a way to "even up" gender relations remains a convention of the heterosexual love story. This is reflected in Rachel's observation that while Michael had fantasized about her prior to their relationship, she had not had similar fantasies about him, and this seems to be important to her:

So - I had always, even before the kiss at the elevator, found you an attractive man, but as I generally don't fancy husbands, I had never fantasized about sleeping with you. Or not consciously. A couple of other fellows, yes, but not you. Looking back now, I wonder why I called your bluff that day, why I brought it out into the open. Of course now I know that you had been fantasizing about me, even thinking about me when you masturbated, although you said that you could never actually imagine what IT would be like. (33)

Michael could think about Rachel while he masturbated, yet he could not imagine having sex with her, and "what IT would be like." This gives Rachel some sort of control over the situation; it is Michael who wants to initiate the relationship, who

has been fantasizing about Rachel and, at this point, it is Rachel who has the power of veto. Once she abandons that she must, conventionally, abandon any other forms of power which she might have had within the relationship; once the decision has been made, she must give herself over completely, as she has entered into a relationship governed by certain conventions, one of which is the erasure of female subjectivity.

Once Rachel has declared her love for Michael - "It was a lie when I said it and yet as soon as I said it, it was true" (45) - the power relation is reversed through Rachel's use of the conventional language of the heterosexual love story. Rachel gives up power as soon as she says the words, "I love you," as by using this conventional language, Rachel is taking on all the other conventions that accompany it. The power of language is shown as working both ways; the "best revenge is writing well" (172), as language gives Rachel the power she needs to assert herself after the relationship ends, but language is also the means by which she abandons power as the relationship starts. Rachel recognizes that it is she who has *given* Michael this power, not he who has taken it: "What *power* you had over me, that I could accept an arrangement like that. What power I gave you" (19). The control Michael exerts over Rachel is emotional - intangible - but it surfaces in the way that their practical, day-to-day relationship functions. When he walks away from her in Rome, she is left stranded, having given Michael responsibility for passports, hotels, etc.:

You had the maps, all the Italian money, the keys to the pensione, whose name I could not even remember! How casually (because I knew you liked being in charge) had I handed over all responsibility to you. (93)

Rachel gives Michael control - literally and figuratively - because she knows it is a position he enjoys. He did not *take* control; she *gave* it to him, handed it over "casually," which reflects the conventions of the heterosexual love story, where the heroine abandons herself to the hero and "chooses" - simply through her agreement

to participate - to give up her own subjectivity to become an object in relation to the dominant male.

Throughout the novel/letter, Rachel raises the question of her own complicity in the oppression she experiences in the relationship with Michael and Hester. Michael Foucault claims, in *The History of Sexuality*, that the complicity of the oppressed is vital to the oppressor; that only by neutralizing the multiple, everyday confrontations which a power structure necessarily produces, through the complicity of those at the bottom of the pile, can the hierarchy remain intact. He points to various discourses which help maintain complicity, and literature is among those used to ensure and naturalize compliance.

This certainly seems to reflect the role of the heterosexual love story in relation to compulsory heterosexuality, as illustrated in *Latakia*. Rachel frequently points to her own complicity and, on occasion, the complicity of Hester, in the maintenance of this triangular relationship, with Michael at the apex. In his handling of the relationship - of his relationships with both women - Michael depends on being in control, on being the one who makes the decisions, and on not being questioned:

And yet, we all knew it was just a game, that you would make the rules and we would keep them. That was the kind of women we were, and you knew that too. In fact, you counted on it. (153)

Michael's assumption that he decides the rules is only possible because, as Rachel says, he knows that both Hester and Rachel will "willingly" keep the rules he enforces. This emphasizes, again, the strength and importance of the complicity of both women in the power structure which keeps them oppressed and defined - socially and sexually - through Michael: "Hester's his wife . . . I suppose I'm his girlfriend, although sometimes it seems the other way around" (158). The two positions have become interchangeable just as, to some extent, the two women are basically interchangeable in Michael's eyes; both are equally powerless, and function

only as objects in relation to Michael, the subject. Even the name of the street where they stay in Aghia Sophia - "Odos Anonymous" (107) - highlights this tendency to define oneself in relation to another person; as Quigley points out, "it is more than ironic that Rachel's street is named 'Odos Anonymous' . . . [which means] definition of self by other" (Quigley, 205). Rachel's disastrous negation of her own self in favour of the objectification imposed on her by Michael is reflected in her very surroundings, in the street name.

Quigley claims that *Latakia* succeeds in challenging, among other things, the "distribution of sexual power between men and women" (219) and that this is made possible through "Rachel's search for a self-defined life and Thomas' insistence on a self-defined structure" (219). I would question the breadth of that assertion, and argue that while the text, and its active readers, may well challenge the allocation of heterosexual power Rachel does not, during her time with Michael, challenge the conventional power structures on which their relationship is founded. In her retrospective narrative she does examine those power structures and question the power dynamics which characterized their three-way relationship, but within the actual time frame of the relationship - which is quite different from that of the text - those power structures are reinforced, rather than challenged. Quigley's claim that Rachel is searching for a self-defined life is also problematic. Rachel *had* a self-defined life, before her involvement with Michael, and it is their relationship which destroyed her definition of self that is the focus of her narrative. Her position at the time of writing - her convalescent state - is a *return* to self-definition, rather than a discovery. Her children and Robert will be arriving soon, she is writing again, and she is no longer defined and imprisoned in an objectified role within an unequal and oppressive relationship; she will be spending time with her family and her friends, as well as writing, all of which are factors she pointed out as threatening to Michael when he desired that she be defined only through him.

Whenever Rachel asserts her previously self-defined subjectivity within the time-frame of the relationship, problems arise. When Michael is placed in what is a conventionally female position within heterosexual relationships, he becomes very uncomfortable and angry. When he hears someone describing him as "the fellow who lives with Rachel" (152), he becomes very sorry for himself, realizing that he is being defined only in relation to her:

You heard her say, "Isn't that the fellow who lives with Rachel?" You used this as an example of the kind of thing that you had to contend with...

You didn't like it, you said, it made you feel as though you had no identity of your own. (152)

Rachel loses her temper with Michael when he complains about this. Any threat, however small, to Michael's role as the defining (male) centre of the relationship is intolerable to him. The implication that he does not define Rachel, and that others may see him only in relation to her, deconstructs the subject/object relation on which his power is based, subverting it and demonstrating its precarious nature. When Rachel makes love to Michael, rather than letting him make love to her, he is torn between his enjoyment and a recognition that the subject/object relation is again under threat:

Do you remember the first time I made love to you? Later, I suspected that it might have been the first time that a woman had actually ever made love to you. You said afterwards that you weren't sure you liked it, that you felt like an object, not a man. I told you that women liked to be the initiators too, like to actively show their feelings. (63)

Michael is aware of a shift in his power relationship with Rachel, once she becomes an "initiator." What is interesting is that Michael is articulating a position in which many women find themselves - defined through their male partners, and objectified within their sexual relationships - but about which many women remain silent/silenced. The power relation has been reversed, even if only momentarily, and at the expense of Michael's considerable discomfort. Rachel's recollection of their sexual relationship makes the point, for the resisting reader, that a woman may have

to lose her subjectivity through the very act of entering into a heterosexual relationship which operates under the rules of compulsory heterosexuality.

Michael's need/desire to be in control sexually is reflected in his choice of women. Rachel points out that Michael chooses to be with women he could physically overpower, and who therefore reinforce his sense of physical superiority:

Small women . . . may not be able to keep up with you when walking, but you can put up with that because they offer no physical threat. You could overpower either of us in a couple of minutes, unless we knew judo or karate. Most men can, physically, overpower most women. A big man like you must be very aware of that. I suppose you would say that you like your women to be "feminine," not "fucking Amazons." And we, of course, are taught from infancy to "look up to" men, to be the "little woman." (137)

Michael's physical superiority reinforces his sense of his own authority and, in a very real sense, places him in a position of (physical) power. That the "hero" be taller and stronger than the "heroine" is the assumption in almost every fairy tale and has been absorbed, from that tradition, into the conventions of the heterosexual love story.

Michael's desire for power over Rachel and Hester is complicated further by his desire to function within a mother/child relationship with one or both of them. The demands he makes on the time, commitment, and emotional resources of both women reflect his desire to be "mothered," to receive the kind of full-time attention that only babies and small children can realistically expect. His description of "a good wife" infuriates Rachel because it is so child-like and so demanding:

"You aren't a good wife to me," you said.
And I, exasperated, asked, "Well, what's your definition of a good wife then?"
"A wife is someone who is always there when you need her."
"No," I said, "that's the mother of a child under five." (39)

In *Latakia*, to be 'child-like' is not to be innocent, pure, or unworldly. It is rather to be demanding and manipulative, wanting the mother's exclusive attention. Michael, for all that he maintains a position of (sexual) power, still demands that he be "mothered"; he demands that he be the centre of attention, the sole point of focus,

and that Rachel and Hester define themselves entirely in relation to him and his desires. If Michael can know that he is getting all the attention, from both Rachel and Hester, then his power over both women is assured; by expending all their energies on "mothering" Michael, how can Rachel and Hester define themselves in any way except in relation to him?

Rachel realizes this when Michael comes to live with her and her children. Her daughters relate to him best when they treat him as they would an older brother, rather than someone on a level with, or in a relationship with their mother. While they are arguing about who should cook Sunday dinners, Rachel realizes that Michael sees her as a mother, not as a partner: "It dawned on me then that you had become my oldest child. I was a Mother. Mothers cook Sunday Dinners, ergo" (52). Michael has placed Rachel in the role of mother without her consent, forcing her into a position which denies any possibility of their having an equitable, mutual, and adult heterosexual relationship. His definition of perfect wifehood/motherhood does not allow for equality, or for any female definition outside those two conflated roles.

What makes this desire of Michael's even more disturbing is that he does not simply want to be a child in relation to a mother - be it Hester or Rachel - but that he wants to be an *only child*, to be the sole focus of the mother's time, emotion, commitment, and definition. His "example of a woman who really loved her man" is Frieda Lawrence, a woman who gave up her children to be with her husband: "Hadn't she left her children behind and so (in your eyes) proved it?" (53). Michael makes this point even more explicitly in one of his letters to Rachel, which she quotes in her own narrative:

In one of the letters you wrote, you said, "You talk of being 'totally committed' to me but, my love, you have three children. Circumstances tower and crash. Love does not conquer all." (132)

A permanent relationship with Michael would demand Rachel's total commitment, at the expense of her relationships with her children. To Michael, love seems something which is limited - which should be limited - to one person, and to one kind of love. The idea that Rachel has other commitments, that she has children who cannot simply be disposed of, is not part of Michael's plan for/fantasy about their relationship:

"Well, even if we try it," I said to you that night in Aghia Sophia, "it won't be a *ménage à trois* for long; when we go back home, it will be a *ménage à six*."

"I've never considered living with your children again," you said.

"Then what are we talking about?" I said. "What on earth are we talking about?" I began to cry. (117)

Michael is determined to preserve his role as the only child of two mothers, two women who define themselves completely and exclusively through him. That Rachel has other sources of definition outside her relationship with him - principally through her children and her writing - "at first irritated and then overwhelmed [him]" (39). But his jealousy is not specific; it is directed at anything which makes a demand on Rachel, and which threatens his exclusivity and seems to undermine and subvert this desired position of only child, who is adored and indulged.

Hester fulfills this role of mother far more "successfully" than Rachel, partly due to the fact that she has no (real) children of her own: "She is the wife as mother (your mother) and because you have chosen to be childless . . . all her maternal instincts can be directed towards you" (73). Hester sees her relationship with Michael as parallel to Rachel's relationship with her children - something which infuriates and angers Rachel, as she makes a distinction between loving children and loving adults:

One of the things Hester said during our big blow-up in Athens was that she guessed she loved you the way I loved my children and I yelled at her, "But he's about to be thirty years old!" The way you love an adult is *not* the way you love a child and, for the first time, in the midst of my anger and frustration, I was afraid for you, afraid of Hester's "love." (43)

Hester is willing to indulge Michael's desire for a mother, to love him as she believes one would love a child, and to sacrifice herself completely to him. Rachel is right to be afraid of Hester's love as it serves to perpetuate the infantile and self-destructive cycle of need/desire within which Michael is acting. If he is indulged in his demands, he will never reach a point where he can mature enough to participate in a mutual and equitable heterosexual relationship.

Hester's devotion and commitment to Michael, as well as being compared to a mother's love, is also characterized in terms of a dog and its master:

She pointed out your great affection for dogs . . .

"Of course. It's easy to give someone else's dog a hug or a play-wrestle and then confess how fond you are of dogs. He's not interested in anything or anyone who ties him to some kind of responsibility."

("Except you," I added in my head. "Except you. And you came back to him, good, faithful dog-wife, as soon as he whistled. All kicks forgotten. All those cold nights outside." I couldn't say it to her, Michael, because it was just too cynical, but that's what I was thinking.) (86-87)

Rachel characterizes Hester as the dog who remains completely faithful to her master, despite all the ill treatment and neglect he inflicts on her. The complete devotion of the faithful dog exemplifies the complete attention Michael demands, and reinforces his own position of power by placing him in the role of master.

Yet the image of dog and master is not left unproblematicized, and Hester cannot be dismissed so easily. Later in the narrative, Rachel returns to the image of the dog, but reverses the power relation in a way which subverts Michael's previously implied position of power:

I once heard a friend who was having a hard time with the man she loved, say to him, "I just want to follow you around like a dog." Our imagery gives us away . . .

[Hester] said later that she did not differentiate as far as love was concerned. Love was love, whether for an adult or a child or even an animal. I told her I thought that was crap, but later when I thought about love - and I think about it a great deal - I wondered if she wasn't right. If what we call "love" isn't based on some kind of reward/punishment thing. I saw *you* (not just your ego) as the dog and Hester as the master, the one with the food and

the pats, the one who had the power to kick you out and let you in again.
(109-110)

This time the roles are reversed. Hester is in the position of power, and what gives her that power is the ability to bestow or withdraw her affection. That Michael should crave and demand affection puts him, in this analogy, not in a position of power, but one of vulnerability. Hester is willing to give him the kind of exclusive devotion he requires, but she still has the power to withdraw that same affection. Even when Hester is described as a master satisfying a dog's (Michael's ego's) every need, before he can even whimper (40), she retains a degree of power. Hester's devotion is not shared with others - unlike Rachel, who has a commitment to her children - but it still remains Hester's prerogative. Hester's power is based, however, on a willingness on her part to abject herself before Michael, and for his sake. Within this unequal relationship, Hester's only chance for power is through abjection, through debasing herself and devoting herself completely to anticipating Michael's every need. Through this, Michael comes to need Hester, which gives her an enormous amount of power, a power which is much greater than Rachel can ever have within the limits of that relationship, as Rachel is constantly struggling (even if it is just inside her head) to force Michael to change his expectations.

Hester's "power" - the power of the mother in a patriarchy to exploit her husband's/child's dependence - remains a strong undercurrent throughout the narrative. The epistolary form allows Rachel to reassess and rewrite the situation, in turn allowing the reader to understand the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality works to make women complicit. Hester is, as Foucault suggests, one of those at the bottom of the power structure whose complicity is vital to the maintenance of that structure. At times, the extent of this power through complicity is made more explicit as Rachel realizes how little power she has in relation to Hester's more covert and manipulative influence over Michael. Certainly, from Rachel's perspective, Hester seems to have a remarkable degree of control. Michael will

change his/their plans for her, skimp financially when he is with Rachel so that he can enjoy himself with Hester, and make decisions in relation to Hester and her wishes. When the issue of pregnancy comes up - when Rachel thinks she might be pregnant - it is Hester who makes a decision about the situation and issues an ultimatum, and Michael who has to explain this to Rachel:

"What you are really saying is not that Hester wants a child, but that she doesn't want *me* to have one."

"You've got three!"

"A child of yours."

"Yes."

I took in this information. You suggested that perhaps, next year, when Hester was well and truly pregnant, I might be allowed to have a child by you as well. I thanked you very much, fuming. Hester arrived with the eggs. (156)

That Hester can control Rachel, as well as Michael, is testament to the extent of her power. She can decide who has children and when. Rachel commented earlier in the narrative that "poor Hester was going to be Mother to us all!" (134), but the difference is that with Michael Hester seems to be the indulgent mother, whereas with Rachel she becomes more of a disciplinarian, making decisions about behaviour, limiting Rachel's options, and deciding what Rachel can and cannot do. She is, through the power granted her through her abjection, taking on the role of the patriarchal mother, which gives her power over the lives of other women - in this case, Rachel - just as Michael can act in a very paternal way towards Rachel. Hester uses, very effectively, the power which is delegated to her within this inequitable and oppressive patriarchal relationship.

Rachel's complicity, and that of Hester, is pointed out on several occasions and certainly supports Foucault's claim that any power structure is held up from the bottom. Even though Rachel claims to have come to a new, clearer understanding of male power - "For the first time in my life, I really understood the politics of male chauvinism, the conscious (or often unconscious) use of the power bestowed by

genitals and the System" (24) - she continues to operate within that "System," and does not try actively to subvert the power which she recognizes as "bestowed by genitals." Throughout the narrative, Rachel repeatedly returns to the conclusion that she is somehow to blame for the problems between (all three of) them, and that "[she] probably deserved everything [she] got" (70). Yet even in her admissions of guilt, there can be read some measure of subversion. Her most explicit and definite statement of culpability comes when she states, "Perhaps I am, after all, the real villain(ess) of the piece" (131), although she undermines that later, blaming Michael and speculating how she "[got] from [her] as villainess to [him] as villain" (132). Quigley deals with this passage at some length, suggesting that it is somehow affirmative, highlighting the ascendance of the feminine over the masculine:

This fragment [of *Latakia*] simultaneously reveals Rachel's strength and her subordination: she is the villain(ess). Masculine linguistics continually subordinate women by adding suffixes which alter, not only the gender of the word, but also the connotation of the word - often a difference in power or serious application, or at least patriarchal usage has made it that way. Thomas, or the narrator, since both are writing this love-letter/novel, emphasizes feminine subordination by placing the female suffix in a grammatically subordinating parenthesis. The rhetoric of this fragment [131-132] uses a structure that argues against male-definition in the estrangement of and amplification from traditional components of deliberative oratory. She posits a case: "Perhaps I am . . . the real villain(ess)." But in presenting the facts of the case, she ends up proving Michael is the villain, or that female subordination is the villain but Michael is still the cause of female subordination. This is not just traditional refutation, since her entire argument is turned on its head at least twice. A kind of female logic is posited in place of male logic and linearity. (Quigley, 218)

I would certainly agree that Thomas is very aware of the effect of using the female suffix, in that it highlights the subordination of the female by a system which necessarily privileges all that is male. I would take issue, however, with the claim that Rachel ends by proving that Michael is the cause of female subordination. He is certainly the cause of the subordination of two women - of Rachel and Hester - so, yes he is, on a very basic and specific level, the cause of their subordination within

the relationship, and the narrative. It would seem more accurate, though, to see Michael as a *symptom* of female subordination - of patriarchy - rather than its cause. On several occasions Rachel refers to the social conditioning which causes them to act as they do. If patriarchy has prescribed the way women can behave, it has equally prescribed what are acceptable behaviour patterns for men. Rachel highlights her own subordination, even at the moment she puts herself in a position of blame, yet she realizes and acknowledges in the course of her narrative that Michael is a villain too; they are both culpable, and Hester too, so there can be no simple good/evil ascription of the role of villain - each of them is simultaneously villain and victim, although in different ways, to differing extents, and with different consequences.

What is evident is that Rachel frequently blames herself for the way the relationship works out, and Michael is more than willing to participate in that blaming process. When Rachel has problems with the ménage à trois, with the way in which - even in her absence - Michael privileges Hester, and with his staggering lack of sensitivity, Michael turns it back on Rachel and makes it a problem with her behaviour rather than his:

I put my arm around you and told you I was sorry. You told me I was a fucking bitch but was forgiven nevertheless. However, I would have to learn to control my jealousy of Hester or we could not possibly live in Greece together, even for three and a half months. (151)

By making everything Rachel's fault - by making her a "fucking bitch" - Michael takes upon himself the power to forgive, to absolve her, and to 'advise' her as to the correct behaviour which he expects in future. On another occasion, Michael again takes a very paternal and disciplinary attitude with Rachel as he tells her, "Don't question me, woman, just accept what I say" (143). There are echoes here of the stereotypical parental claim that s/he knows best, and that the child should not question their authority but rather submit to it without fuss. In both these examples,

it seems that Michael is acting as a father figure, and Rachel is being placed - firmly - in the position of a naughty, willful child.

On other occasions - notably but not surprisingly near the beginning of their relationship - Michael treats Rachel with a great deal more respect. In fact, as is conventional within the heterosexual love story, he treats her with exaggerated respect, idolizing her in a very typical and identifiable way:

I have made up a new verb, Michael - "pedestal-ize" . . . You pedestalized me, my dear, as all Romantics do to their women, and so there was no place to go but down. I kept telling you that I had feet of clay, but you wouldn't listen. You believed in "the marriage of true minds" and forgot that that guy also wrote "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun." When enlightenment came (which always occurs when two people actually live together), you were terribly disappointed. Hester who, because of familiarity, had been knocked off her pedestal, was quickly put back on. A little chipped and cracked perhaps, a toe or two missing, but that just added to poignancy, like that row of headless sculptures we saw at the Forum in Rome. (45)

Michael is characterized as a "Romantic," the capital R suggesting the literary movement, although with the sense of the sentence suggesting the more popular usage of the word. With reference to the sonnets of Shakespeare, the flaw in Michael's "romantic" vision is exposed; he wants only the perfection, the "Romance" and does not like to cope with "Reality" when it presents itself in the guise of everyday life: "In our ménage, Romance and Reality were always bumping heads" (24). Again referring to Shakespeare, Rachel also suggests that what Michael wanted with her was a "hopeless, doomed, star-crossed, passionate AFFAIR" (87), showing how Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is used as an archetype of the perfect romance. Yet that story ends with the hero and heroine both dead; the relationship is "romantic" but it is also ultimately impossible, the only resolution being death.

A great deal of Rachel's narrative refers to the roles which the three of them find themselves playing - apart from those which emerge from the mother/child relationships which Michael attempts to instigate. These roles frequently find themselves in conflict with reality, as does the role of "Romantic" into which

Michael is placed, demonstrating their incompatibility with functional and realistic heterosexual relationships. Michael's desires/expectations for his relationships are firmly grounded in a highly traditional view of heterosexuality and marriage, and is one which is implicated in the institution of compulsory heterosexuality:

Do you know what you wanted, Michael, what maybe you still want?
Someone loyal and helpful to whom you can dedicate your books: "To
Hester, without whose loving help . . ." "To my wife," or simply, "Once
again, to Hester." Someone to whom you could look back on in old age (for
I'm sure you would outlive that kind of woman) and say, with tears in your
eyes, "There's no other word for it - she was a saint"

... You still want/need the traditional roles: Man of the House and
Little Woman. Underneath the blue jeans and beard, I see a nineteenth
century gentleman . . . who is determined to lead a very structured life.
(42-43)

Rachel comments that Michael both desires and requires those traditional roles if he is to create the structure he would like for his life. True mutuality would mean too much of a sacrifice for Michael, as he is too firmly rooted in traditional roles to give them up. What makes this more complex is the realization that the modern exterior is in fact the role Michael is playing - and which Rachel and Hester participate in - and that the "traditional roles" are the "reality" for their ménage à trois: "We had all pretended to be modern and liberal and really, we were all old-fashioned and jealous and possessive" (128).

As Quigley points out, Michael is a "patriarchal hero with the traditional romance role of masculine penetration and dissolution" (214) - he is the hero who arrives and turns the heroine's world upside-down. Michael comes into Rachel's life, interferes with her work, "disrupts the initial solidarity between Rachel and her daughters" (214), and demands that she change herself completely to fit in with his desires: "I was to adjust myself to you in every way" (24). What Rachel is doing, by writing her letter - and the book she refers to in that letter - is trying to decipher her reasons for allowing herself to be treated in such a way, and for enduring the relationship:

The book I am working on now is about you and me (of course) - or it started out that way. I began it in an attempt to discover how I could have violated my own moral code (there's the American in me again) in that particular way. (30)

Rachel's "moral code" seems to be concerned with remaining an individual, and retaining a sense of her own subjectivity. What makes her violate her own code is that the codes and conventions of compulsory heterosexuality are so strong and so institutionalized that to stand up - alone - to those codes is so difficult as to be almost impossible. Certainly, Rachel's relationship with Michael violates any possibility of retaining her own subjectivity as she has to define herself in relation to Michael - and indirectly to Hester - throughout the relationship. Rachel sees herself as "one of those Impressionist painters who cheerfully sacrificed the subject, as subject, to a study of the changing effects of light" (30), and evidence from their relationship certainly points to that being an accurate assessment.

Pat Parker's assertion that one of the conditions of romance is a sense of remoteness can be seen to be as true of *Latakia* as of *Bear*. Michael and Rachel leave behind their normal setting, their everyday lives, and travel together: "always moving East, of course, and farther into landscape and language which was more 'Other'" (122). By setting their relationship away from their "real" lives and, significantly, on a journey by freighter, where they are "utterly 'at sea'" (50), this sense of remoteness is reinforced. Yet even though Rachel and Michael are geographically distanced from their accustomed setting, the conventions and assumptions of their culture remain with them and continue to define them and their actions. This highlighting of those conventions and assumptions through their transplantation into a remote setting encourages a subversive reading of those conventions in *Latakia*. The remoteness the characters experience may appear to give some distance from the culture which has constructed them, but the experience of remoteness is, in one sense, merely geographical. It may well allow a certain

freedom from inhibition that would not be possible within a more usual setting, but the assumptions, the codes, and the conventions all remain.

The sense of remoteness is again emphasized by the differences Rachel and Michael encounter in language; even the alphabet is different, and for two people who earn their living and define themselves through writing, this would impose a profound sense of dislocation. This reaches a peak in Latakia, when the map they are given is not even in a script they can read. As Rachel so explicitly uses Latakia as a metaphor for the relationship - "It became a private metaphor for any situation in which . . . you were in over your head. In the end, it became a metaphor for you and me" (167) - it can be assumed that the journey towards Latakia can also be read metaphorically. The journey farther East ("of course") is moving them farther and farther from everything which is familiar; from a familiar literal environment, away from their own language, and into unknown territory - both literally and metaphorically.

Language comes under further scrutiny when Rachel contemplates the meaning of "love." She presents the question of meaning as an insoluble paradox:

"All Cretans are liars." I remember this as a problem from some far-off course in philosophy or logic. It is said by a Cretan and, therefore, what do you do? An irresolvable problem. Here is another one:

I HATE YOU
I LOVE YOU

EVERYTHING ABOVE THIS
LINE IS TRUE

It's all so bloody complicated, isn't it? (29)

By equating love and hate, and positing their simultaneity as an "irresolvable problem," Rachel is deconstructing the meanings of both "love" and "hate." She claims, later in the text, that one of the things which her relationship with Michael

taught her was that she could experience both love and hate simultaneously, and that while the paradox was irresolvable, it was not impossible:

I learned that I could love someone and hate him at the same time and this has led me to ponder the whole nature of what we call "love." Sometimes I think I fell in love with you because I was at last ready to fall in love again and you just happened along. Like taking any streetcar or hailing an expensive cab when you're tired and have been waiting a long, long time. Just to get going, to get moving. Sometimes I think the very thing I hate in you, your egotism, was what I fell in love with. Then, of course, there was all the delicious erotic tension of a moral dilemma - the letters vowing that we would never, could never, see one another again. Letters which, more often than not, were delivered by (trembling) hand. (44)

Rachel learns that love and hate are not mutually exclusive, but rather that they can be indistinguishable in the heterosexual love story. This reflects one of the characteristics of popular romance highlighted by Modleski - the tendency of the hero to be arrogant, egotistical, and hateful, yet still attractive to the heroine. Modleski develops this with her claim that the heterosexual love plot perpetuates a confusion between male sexuality and male violence (42-43), which would support the idea that love and hate are also conflated and confused within the terms of the heterosexual love plot. The fact that erotic tension in their relationship was heightened by the exchange of these "letters . . . delivered by (trembling hand)" in which they vow never to meet again, points again to the novel's construction. This is not an isolated letter; much of their relationship has been conducted through letters, and there can be no guarantee that this will be the last. This calls into question whether or not the relationship is, or ever can be, really "over."

Later, Rachel reflects on the meaning of "love" with considerable disgust and self-loathing at the effect it had on her:

How silly, how contemptible that woman in the Hotel Cleo seems to me now. Without dignity, without pride - the very worst kind of emotional parasite, utterly denying the strengths she very well knew she had, wanting to say, "Look, I'm helpless, poor me. You must rescue me." A part of me stood away from that creature and sneered; this was not love, it was some

horrible perverse negation of will. And for whom? An egotist, a bully, a man who only had the power over me I chose to give him. I *loved* him? Loved? (101)

Rachel identifies "love" - or what she then thought of as "love" - as a "horrible perverse negation of will," a renouncing of all that is important - her will and, with it, her subjectivity. She deliberately chooses to ignore the strengths she very well knew she had and to throw herself on the mercy and, through that, under the control of a man about whom she can say nothing favourable. This exposes the power of the phenomenon which is referred to as "love" - the central focus of the heterosexual love plot - and the conventions which surround it; it can make a woman give up her self-respect, ignore her own strengths, and debase herself for a man whom she identifies as egotistical, bullying, and mean. Yet the critics who comment on *Latakia* still consistently refer to Rachel's relationship as a "love affair." Despite the highly self-conscious examination and subversive deconstruction of "love" and the multiple meanings and usage of the term which occur in *Latakia*, Bridgitte D. Bossanne, for example, can still describe the novel as "Rachel [putting] down on paper the story of her now terminated love affair and [reflecting] on its meanderings" (218).

The kind of detached analysis which Rachel attempts is only possible with the benefit of hindsight, and is highlighted by Thomas' conventional use of the letter format. While Rachel is involved with Michael, the relationship cuts out any possibility of self-conscious examination and analysis. Bossanne, in her article "Audrey Thomas and Lewis Carroll: Two Sides of the Looking Glass," discusses Thomas' use of the past as a device to enrich the present of her novels, allowing retrospection and the benefit of hindsight:

In her fiction, past and present counterpoint each other; the past (that is, all that has happened to the character up to the moment of narration/utterance) feeds the present, as it were, making it more meaningful or more dramatically void It serves prescriptively to teach Thomas' female protagonists about the deluding nature of the past. (Bossanne, 217).

Retrospection, a detached analysis of past experiences, is important - especially for Rachel - in that it highlights the way in which her past has been deluding her, how she has been deceived by events in her life. Parker writes about entrancement, as well as remoteness, as a feature of romance, and Rachel's retrospective narrative implies that her relationship with Michael fits this model; while Rachel was with Michael, she claims not to have been in her right mind and was, in some way, entranced by her relationship, and by the emotions associated with being in "love":

Although I love you in some very real way, I do not miss you. You - or our relationship - got in my way. The intense electric glare of the first months, and then the long dark shadows of the last, kept me from seeing anything. And a writer writes with his eyes. Who said that? Gertrude Stein. It's true. We were never in Greece when we were down here together, or in Athens or Delphi or Meteora with Hester. That great lump, the Relationship, the PROBLEM, blotted everything else out, some kind of awful eclipse of sensibility. I can't afford that kind of involvement. (21)

While the entrancement Parker talks about does not seem necessarily threatening or dangerous, Rachel's version of this distancing from reality is far more sinister. She writes of an "awful eclipse of sensibility," of the relationship obscuring her ability to perceive situations clearly, and to discern what is harmful to her. By exploring what entrancement can *really* mean, its harmful and truly alarming nature is revealed, and the convention undermined, once again by being exposed to "reality." Rachel uses a far more sinister and violent image to illustrate the same process later in the text when she writes again about falling in love:

It's almost as though we have some kind of pre-frontal lobotomy when we women "fall in love." Eros' flaming arrow is really a scalpel which severs one part of ourself from another. And then, there we sit waiting for the words, "Rise up and follow me." (109)

This violent medical image, which takes as its metaphor a process used in the treatment of severe mental illness, underlines the extent of the psychic damage that occurs when women "fall in love." It is more than entrancement, it is severe and irreparable brain damage. To lose a part of one's brain suggests the erasure of

subjectivity which is such a distinctive characteristic of the heterosexual love story. Being in love - being hit by "Eros' flaming arrow" - is a psychologically dangerous business, and the very explicit medical image Rachel uses makes that perfectly clear.

Rachel continues the medical allusion, using illness as a metaphor for being in love. Examining her present position, Rachel characterizes her state at the time of writing as one of having recently recovered from an illness: "I still feel I'm convalescing from you, Michael, body and soul" (57). The relationship is something constricting or debilitating, rather than liberating; it is something which needs to be escaped from or recovered from rather than something which should be embraced: "Your "octopus-love," another name I have for it. Suffocating, devouring, ruthless. My octopus-need" (103). "Love" is something which suffocates, eats up those who embrace it, and is ruthless in the pain it inflicts; there is no reference to the conventional picture of love in this kind of description, and there can be no apparent reconciliation between the two.

Michael's state of mind within the relationship is also characterized as one of entrancement, although his symptoms are temporary and by no means as severe. His entrancement is referred to several times, implicitly, by Hester, as she tries to excuse his behaviour, or explain it away: "each anecdote would end with some excuse or other - 'He was confused,' . . . 'He's a Romantic,' . . . 'He was stoned'" (115). By equating being a "Romantic," with being intoxicated, and with being confused, she places Michael's behaviour firmly within a context which implies that all three states mean that he did not know what he was doing, and his behaviour is therefore excusable.

This entrancement is seen as incompatible with "reality," with the day to day business of "real" life, undermining the convention which is reinforced in the heterosexual love plot that values entrancement as an ideal state which is to be desired. While Rachel acknowledges that passion and "romance" are exciting and

exhilarating for a while, she is more interested (certainly in retrospect) with what happens when "real" life intrudes, how a relationship can endure everyday life, and what happens when the two come into conflict:

I've told you before that there were times when I actually believed we might end up killing one another. That's exhilarating for a while, that kind of "passionate intensity," but what we both knew was that it wore us out, it got in the way of our "real" life, which is our work. (113)

This points to one of the problems Kennard identifies with the use of the two suitors convention in the twentieth century-novel. The novel now tends to deal not with the quest to marry but with the negotiation of relationships after the bond has been made (be it marriage or another kind of relationship). The kind of "passionate intensity" which characterizes the *beginning* of a relationship - and with which so many novels which focus on the heterosexual love plot *end* - cannot be sustained, and is revealed as necessarily temporary and ultimately unfulfilling. It wears Rachel and Michael out and cannot be viable as a way of life. What is important, Rachel comes to realize, is the ability to live together day to day, to respect each other, and to realize that while passion is exciting and tempting, it is no way to live. Passion simply obscures the things which constitute "real" life, the ordinary and mundane realities of living; it does not remove them, it simply pushes them to one side, pretending they did not exist, or are not important: "Affairs have nothing to do with washing up or toilets or making beds" (87). Rachel comes to value the maintenance of a balance between passion/romance and reality, and this leads her to comment, somewhat cynically, "Who was it that said Prince Charming probably chose Cinderella because she was the only one who could do housework?" (87).

Thomas demands, in *Latakia*, that the reader confront this conflict between "Romance" and "Reality." This is what makes the novel so subversive, and so profoundly disturbing. Thomas encodes this confrontation into the form of the text, and makes the conflict between the conventions of the heterosexual love plot and the

"reality" of many heterosexual relationships under patriarchy integral to the structure of the novel. In *Critical Practice*, Catherine Belsey suggests that a central goal of criticism should be an attempt to locate the point of transgression within the text, the point where the ideological project of the text transgresses the formal limits within which it is constructed. The point of transgression then comes from the conflict between the constraints of the narrative form - in the case of *Latakia*, the heterosexual love story, structured round the love letter - and the ideology of the text (104). In this contradiction between the text's project and its formal constraints, Belsey identifies a "gap," which she links to the split in the Lacanian subject. She comes to refer to this as the "unconscious" of the text, referring back to Freud for her choice of term (107). It is within the text's unconscious that the text comes to implicitly criticize its own ideology, by not allowing the contradictions which it embodies to be resolved (109). Belsey goes on to stress the importance of an active reader foregrounding those contradictions, and how this process will allow the text to be read radically and not simply dismissed - the fate of so many texts which focus on the heterosexual love story.

In *Latakia*, the contradiction comes in the conflict between the formal constraints of romance, and the powerful subversion of the ideology of romance which Thomas presents to her readers through Rachel's letter to Michael. The conflict is heightened through Thomas' choice of form. As discussed, Thomas places *Latakia* within a highly identifiable literary tradition of "amorous epistolary discourse" (Kauffman, 18); she employs a genre characteristic of the fictional articulation of the heterosexual love story. With that genre, and with the heterosexual love story, come numerous reader expectations - what Belsey refers to as the reader's "literary competence [which] depends specifically on the *experience* of reading that has permitted the internalization of the conventions which

characterize particular literary discourses" (34).³ The heterosexual love story demands closure and resolution; it requires a happy ending which confirms the values of compulsory heterosexuality. It is conventionally the presentation of the resolution of disorder into a unified and highly idealized union. The love represented is perfect; it is ideal love.

Thomas' ideological project in *Latakia* is to present a relationship which is far from ideal, and which highlights the emotional brutality and the violent erasure of female subjectivity which is an undercurrent in conventional presentations of the heterosexual love story. What makes *Latakia* such a powerful and disturbingly subversive novel is that it takes this damning exposure of the "reality" of some heterosexual relationships, and places it within the narrative form which conventionally effaces that pain and violence, which - as Modleski claims - neutralizes female anger by confusing male desire with male brutality. The conflict between form and content serves to highlight, alarmingly, the gap between desire and violence; between the idealized version of "love" which the heterosexual love story endorses and promotes, and the reality of compulsory heterosexuality for many women. *Latakia* is an angry novel; it is a powerfully angry indictment of the constricting and emotionally destructive roles constructed for women within the heterosexual love story, the fictional discourse which serves to perpetuate compulsory heterosexuality. The novel is disturbing because it so thoroughly denies the reader's expectations of romance; there is no closure, no resolution, and the reader is denied any kind of ideal. In a manner reminiscent of *Bear*, *Latakia* does not offer alternatives to the oppression and objectification of the heterosexual love story; it instead exposes the violence, the emotional trauma, and the brutality which are hidden beneath the ideal, offered over and over again to the reader in so many versions of the romance. *Latakia* does not show how Rachel has grown beyond the

³The term "literary competence" is taken from Stanley E. Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: the Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1972) 406-407.

conventions and constructions of compulsory heterosexuality. She is still obsessed with the way patriarchy defined her relationship, and is able to write her revenge but not to escape from the system which oppresses her. Similarly, this "novel" is not a new genre, but reflects a highly traditional collision of genres where, through the conflict between the *formal* project of the text and its *ideological* project, *Latakia* powerfully and disturbingly subverts the conventions of the heterosexual love story. Although *Latakia* does not make any new ground in the conventions of women's writing, it does not simply "unearth" the old conventions; it blows them out of the ground.

Acting Out (Of) The Gaze.

Jane Urquhart, in her novel *The Whirlpool*, provides her readers with a framing narrative, published elsewhere as a short story,¹ which tells of Robert Browning's last days in Venice and ends with his death. This frame narrative, while seemingly unconnected to the main body of the text which takes place in Niagara Falls, in the summer of 1889, in fact establishes the critical context within which the novel can be read. It provides a backdrop against which the story of Fleda and of Patrick (the young poet who watches Fleda from the woods) is to be considered.

There are immediate points of parallel. Browning becomes obsessed, in his last days, with Percy Bysshe Shelley and, more specifically, with Shelley's death by drowning. Browning idealizes Shelley as the archetypal Romantic poet, with even his death reflecting the values of Romanticism. Browning deeply envies Shelley the "drama and the luxury of a death by water" (237), as he contemplates his own impending death. Yet, within the larger novel, the reader is to be presented with another "death by water," that of Patrick in the whirlpool near Niagara Falls. The gruesome descriptions of Shelley's waterlogged corpse foreshadow Patrick's being pulled from the river and taken to the undertaker's funeral parlour. For both corpses, the emphasis is on the beauty and grace that a watery death allows them. Browning imagines Shelley's corpse floating in the ocean before being washed up on the sands:

Limp and drifting, the drowned man looked as supple as a mermaid, arms swaying in the current, hair and clothing tossed as if in a slow, slow wind. His body was losing colour, turning from pastel to opaque, the open eyes staring, pale, as if frozen by an image of the moon. Joints unlocked by moisture, limbs swung easy on their threads of tendon, the spine undulating and relaxed. The absolute grace of this death, that life caught there moving

¹Jane Urquhart, "The Death of Robert Browning," *Storm Glass* (Erin, Ontario: Porcupine's Quill, 1987) 40-52.

in the arms of the sea. Responding, always responding to the elements.
(236-237)

In the main plot of the novel, Patrick's body is dragged from the whirlpool by the Old River Man almost as if it were being born of the river: "the body was being drawn forward from its centre, the rope looking like a thick umbilical cord, the limbs trailing loosely, slightly behind the torso" (226). When his body is taken to the funeral parlour, the description reflects the beauty Browning imagines characterized Shelley's death:

The young man was beautiful. Maud had not been prepared for that. The drowning had hardly affected him except to place a thin, hardly noticeable film across his eyes. But that was merely death. The rest of him was undamaged, perfect. He was like a dead child. (232)

The two young poets, Shelley and Patrick, are set up to be compared to each other. Browning idealizes Shelley, who has drowned; in a similar way, Fleda idealizes Patrick as "the poet" who also meets his "death by water" (237), in a suitably Romantic parallel to Shelley's death.

Urquhart places the literary tradition of canonical Romanticism as the frame to the main text; the reader is made aware of how Fleda and Patrick both define themselves in relation to this Romantic tradition, and consequently some examination of the ideals and values of Romanticism aids a greater understanding of the subversion of the heterosexual love plot which is presented between Patrick and Fleda. Anne K. Mellor presents an interesting summary of the attitudes towards gender in relation to the heterosexual love story embodied in canonical Romanticism in the chapter entitled "Gender in Masculine Romanticism" of her book *Romanticism and Gender*. Mellor outlines an attitude to love which defined it as the "ultimate, even transcendent, human experience" (24), and which did not allow for the possibility of mutuality and equality: "when we look closely at the gender implications of romantic love, we discover that rather than embracing the female as a valued other, the male lover usually effaces her into a narcissistic projection of his

own self" (25). This narcissism is usually, Mellor suggests, characterized as a search for a "soul mate" (27), but it is a search which focuses only on the male lover and requires the female only as a reflection of himself:

the love [the Romantic poet] feels is but self-love: he ignores her human otherness in order to impose his own metaphors, his own identity, upon her, to render her but a clone (or soul mate) of himself. What he most deeply desires is absolute possession of the beloved; but since this desire is never realizable in life, his quest always fails, leaving him frustrated, forlorn, sinking, trembling, expiring, yet still yearning for his impossible ideal. (27)

This description of the Romantic poet in love provides a critical framework and a tradition within which to read Patrick, the poet of the Niagara Falls story, and his idealization of Fleda in the ways Mellor identifies.

Mellor also provides a way in which to read Fleda's resistance to this idealization, and the inevitability of the outcome - her disappearance and Patrick's death. Mellor suggests that the assertion by a female character or principle within the canonical Romantic tradition of independence or of difference could only be viewed as evil, and therefore the only reaction can be to eradicate what is female, or overcome it. Fleda's resistance - her assertion of her humanness and her difference, her subjectivity - means that when Patrick cannot overcome his idealization of her, he must ultimately meet his death in the whirlpool, the symbol to which he turns when resolution with Fleda proves impossible. Mellor claims that among the few options open to female characters are silence (which Patrick initially demands of Fleda), and the abandonment or murder of the male lover. Fleda rejects the option of silence, insisting on her own voice, and through her continued resistance to his control, forces Patrick to embrace the whirlpool and his Romantic "death by water" (237). The tradition of Romanticism outlined by Mellor provides the context within which the resisting reader of the heterosexual love story can read the "relationship" between Patrick and Fleda, and sets the stage for Urquhart's discussion of Romantic/romantic love, and the implicit power relations which characterize it.

The principal way in which the negotiation of heterosexual power relations is made obvious in *The Whirlpool* is through the discrepancies between the perception of roles and of relationships; the ways in which the characters can be seen to behave, and the ways in which other characters perceive them. As Teresa de Lauretis, quoting Wendy Hollway, explains in *Technologies of Gender*:

since all discourses on sexuality are gender-differentiated and therefore multiple (there are at the very least two in each specific instance or historical moment), the same practices of (hetero)sexuality are likely to "signify very differently for women and men, because they are being read through different discourses." (15)

What is presented in *The Whirlpool* is a situation where a relationship is constructed and read very differently by the characters involved, making any *actual* relationship impossible, and highlighting the incompatibility of conventional stereotypes and constructions typical to the heterosexual love plot, with functional and equitable heterosexual relationships.

As de Lauretis points out, available theories of both writing and reading are based, firmly, on "male narratives of gender . . . bound by the heterosexual contract" (*Technologies* 25). The ways of production, and consequently the conventions of the heterosexual love plot (among other cultural narratives), are constructed within a male-centered and male-defined frame of reference (*Technologies* 17), which defines the subject as male, and objectifies all that is female. What makes some re/writings of the heterosexual love story subversive is their insistence on the heroine as subject, as an active influence within the story, and as capable of constructing her own version of the cultural script which defines and limits her actions. In *The Whirlpool*, we see a woman - Fleda - who constructs her own heterosexual love story, and we are shown the impossibility of any resolution as she comes to realize how her own construction is ultimately incompatible and unworkable in relation to those of others; to those of David, her husband and a military historian with a particular (and peculiar) fondness for Laura Secord, and of Patrick.

One of the most important and defining examples of male power in *The Whirlpool* is the male gaze, used to construct, limit, and define Fleda's female role, isolating her as an object of scrutiny, an ideological construct, and effacing her subjectivity. Just as the discourses and practices of heterosexuality are gender-differentiated, so ways of looking are constructed differently according to gender, and function as markers of the different ways in which "male" and "female" are constructed within a patriarchal society.

In *Technologies of Gender*, de Lauretis examines the gaze with regard to narrative cinema, and its relation to spectatorship. She argues that the male gaze constructs the female body in a very specific way, as "image, as the object of the spectator's voyeuristic gaze" (13), objectifying it, denying the possibility of female agency and subjectivity, and making the "female body . . . the primary site of sexuality and visual pleasure" (13). De Lauretis goes on to identify the female body under the male gaze as "fixed in the position of icon, spectacle, or image to be looked at, [bearing] the mobile look of both the spectator and the male character(s)" (44). She addresses some of the effects of this objectifying gaze in *Alice Doesn't*:

representation of woman as image (spectacle, object to be looked at, vision of beauty - and the concurrent representation of the female body as the *locus* of sexuality, site of visual pleasure, or the lure of the gaze) is so pervasive in our culture . . . that it necessarily constitutes a starting point for any understanding of sexual difference and its ideological effects in the construction of social subjects, its presence in all forms of subjectivity. (37-38)

Woman is constructed as the "bearer of the look" (*Alice* 7), the static focus of the gaze, and yet also (paradoxically) implicitly more active as she is constructed as luring the gaze. Women are caught in the contradictions between those representations of woman and the reality of women's lives and experiences, and in contradictions even *within* those representations of woman. The roles imposed on women are so contradictory, yet so pervasive and powerful, that there is a constant

negotiation between these conflicting demands, and between women's various roles as both subject and object. Under the male gaze, women must remain still, they are figured as objects and their subjectivity is denied, yet they are also constructed as drawing out the gaze - a necessarily more active role.

Certainly for Patrick, Fleda's stillness under his gaze is of the utmost importance. He describes her as being like a "woman in a painting" (39); she is passively caught within a work of art, immobilized within a frame for Patrick's viewing pleasure. At his very first sighting of her, Patrick invests Fleda with a kind of mythical status, suggesting that she "had been dropped into the middle of the scene for decorative purposes, or to play a part in a legend" (39) and, later in the text, Patrick's need to see Fleda as an immobile object is expressed far more explicitly:

He realized that in his imagination, his fantasy, she was completely still. The woods moved around her like part of her nervous system or electrical impulses suddenly becoming visible outside her brain. Even though he had seen her walk (shoulders in a straight line) towards and then away from him, the idea of any activity taken as a decision on her part did not connect with his vision of her. The first image. She, reading, slowly turning pages; not moving as the forest moved around her. The first image. He held to that. (97)

Patrick sees Fleda as an extension of the forest, of the Romantic landscape for which his fervent dedication to the nature poetry of the English Romantics has prepared him. True to Romantic literary tradition, he sees her as a point of stillness within that landscape, rather than a subject involved in the inevitable action of her forest setting. Later, he cannot tolerate the idea of her not being there, because "how could this portion of the forest exist were she not in it?" (57). He constructs Fleda in relation to the forest, and cannot imagine her indoors, "could not imagine this woman occupying rooms" (55), by doing so negating a large portion of her life and experience. It is as if Patrick wants her to exist only for him, and only within the parameters which suit his construction of "the woman." By constructing Fleda as

"the woman," and by his insistence on maintaining this construction, his image of her, Patrick consistently denies her reality as *a* woman, and effaces the facts of her life. He manufactures a completely anonymous picture of her, which effaces the possibility of her own subjectivity.

This immobilizing aspect of Patrick's gaze finds some parallel in a story told to Maud, the undertaker's widow, by Sam, the new undertaker. Sam tells her about a young woman who was married on her deathbed, the parents laying the wedding dress over her body in order to perform the ceremony before she died. Maud's reaction to the story shows the constricting and limiting nature of the sort of construction which seeks to define women as static objects, dressing them up in order to fit them into a role rather than dealing with the situation itself:

Maud carried Sam's story around with her for the rest of the day, thinking about costumes. Lord, she thought, they are always dressing you up as something and then you are not yourself anymore. This young girl, frozen, immobilized bride, coerced into it and then dead and unable to ever grow beyond it. Anecdotally, she would always be the bride, the one who was married and buried in the same breath. (149)

Patrick would like Fleda to be immobilized, like the young bride of the story, frozen and coerced, and caught forever, anecdotally, as "the woman in the forest," as the young girl will forever be "the bride." This demand for a heroine who remains still - often as she is unconscious or sleeping - is a common feature of the heterosexual love story, as Tania Modleski points out:

Along with making the heroine young, the novels often place her in circumstances where she can work on the male's sexual desires and yet not be held responsible for "the consequences." One of the authors' favourite devices is to make the heroine sick, or even unconscious It is hard not to laugh at this near necrophilia, but it does reveal the impossible situation of woman: to be alive and conscious is to be suspect. (51-52)

Through this juxtaposition of Patrick's desire for Fleda's stillness with this story of a dying woman, immobilized by her illness and coerced into marriage, the reader can explicitly see how the conventions of the heterosexual love story are being

subverted. By being made literal - by having a dying woman taking part in the marriage that is typically the conclusion of the heterosexual love story - the convention becomes so bizarre and so unnerving, that it serves to highlight the disturbing nature of Patrick's desire for Fleda's immobility and silence, and therefore undermine it.

But Patrick does not only demand perfect stillness from "the woman." Having seen/discovered Fleda for the first time, he dreams of "faceless women, shadows of leaves moving on their white skin" (55). Just as Fleda's reality is unimportant to Patrick, so the faces of the women in his dreams are erased; they are simply "women," and any differentiation is unnecessary. In the heterosexual love story, the erasure of the heroine's subjectivity, is essential, as I have discussed in relation to *Latakia*. If a woman is to be swept away on tides of feeling, or to hold mythical significance, she must necessarily be objectified, as any assertion of her subjectivity is merely an impediment to the abandonment of the self under the terms of the heterosexual love plot. No individual and subjective opinion, voice, or action can be tolerated, as its expression would undermine and ultimately subvert Fleda's position as object of the male gaze, and Patrick's fantasy of "faceless women" (55).

As well as denying Fleda agency, movement, action, and subjectivity, Patrick also tries to deny Fleda a voice; he silences her by ignoring her questions, by answering her curtly and with no expression of interest, or by leaving before she can respond to his own cursory comments. He delays having to meet her in order to preserve his illusion that she should not have a voice, as it would be inappropriate for "the woman" he has constructed:

He didn't want her to have a voice, did not wish to face the actuality of her speech, how words would change the shape of her mouth, stiffen the relaxed bend of her neck which he had seen when he watched her read. One more step on his part and she would leave, forever, the territory of his dream and he would lose something - some power, some privacy, some control. (98)

Patrick wants to leave Fleda with no means of expressing or of asserting herself; she must have no name, no face, no movement, and - most importantly - no voice. Fleda eventually challenges this aspect of Patrick's behaviour as she finds it is, not surprisingly, not allowing them to form any kind of relationship, and is making their encounters difficult and unsatisfactory. Fleda is trying to construct their relationship within the terms of *her* fantasy of "the poet," and the "demon lover" - which is itself something of an act of resistance - and Patrick is determined to maintain his

Romantic vision of "the woman," who is distant and silent:

"But you haven't allowed me . . . you would never allow me . . ." she began.

"No, I haven't, have I," said Patrick, interrupting her.

"I would try to talk to you . . . and you would stop me . . . I can't even say how . . . but you would do it and I would be stopped."

"I was afraid."

"Why were you afraid?"

"It has to do with untrustworthy connections."

"I am untrustworthy, then, even to speak to?"

"I spoke"

"Not really . . . you would want to talk to me and then silence me."

"Yes," he admitted. (180)

Patrick does not deny his attempts to silence Fleda, and to deny her even the right to speak. He readily admits to that having been the case, yet puts the onus on Fleda as an "untrustworthy connection." He blames Fleda, making the woman responsible for that which silences her. Patrick feels that Fleda cannot be trusted to coincide with his construction of how he desires her to be; that Fleda having a voice reflects her betrayal of the roles in which he imagines them both.

One way in which women can subvert the controlling power of the male gaze is through performance. By actively performing as subjects within the roles prescribed under patriarchy, by parodying them, and by consciously re/examining the construction of those roles and images, women can subvert and undermine the discourse of male power which constructs them as objects, even from their position inside that discourse. De Lauretis explains this in terms of cultural texts, principally cinema, although with much wider applications:

Like the female reader of Calvino's text [*Invisible Cities*], who reading, desiring, building the city, both excludes and imprisons herself, our questioning of the representation of woman in cinema and language is itself a re-presentation of an irreducible contradiction for women in discourse. (What does speaking "as a woman" mean?) But a critical feminist reading of the text, of all the texts of culture, instates the awareness of that contradiction and the knowledge of its terms; it thus changes the representation into a performance which exceeds the text. For women to enact the contradiction is to demonstrate the non-coincidence of woman and women. To perform the terms of production of woman as text, as image, is to resist identification with that image. It is to have stepped through the looking glass. (*Alice*, 36)

This reading of the possibilities open to women under the male gaze, constructed within patriarchal discourse, offers the potential for subversion, for a subversion of the gaze, and a chance for women to step outside their roles as their own overseers, constructing and controlling instead a performance directed against that surveillance. It would certainly seem to be a powerful method for undermining the strength and controlling power of the gaze, if Patrick's reaction to the idea of Fleda's performance is anything to go by: "He imagined the woman, aware of him watching, possibly even performing. The idea filled him with horror" (188). To know that "the woman" is performing for him, when what he desires is to watch her when she is most unaware of scrutiny, unaware even of herself, revolts Patrick and destroys his idea of the woman as the passive object of his gaze, an object over which he has complete control. John Berger discusses the concept of male spectatorship being equated with ownership in his discussion of the nude in European art (52), and Patrick, too, seems to imagine a degree of ownership and, through that, control which is bestowed upon him through his voyeurism.

Patrick craves a picture of Fleda which he can believe is totally innocent of observation, an ingenuous picture to which only he has access:

Now, Patrick understood that, like a child at play, observed, but not conscious of observation, the woman would reveal sides of herself to him

that she had revealed to no one else. He would experience her when she was whole, not fragmented into consideration of self and other. (107)

Yet, instead of watching a woman innocent of his gaze, Patrick is watching Fleda constructing herself as she believes he would like to see her. He believes that he is watching a woman who is innocent of the constant self-surveillance which Berger identifies, whereas in fact he is watching a woman who is not only watching herself, but also watching him. He cannot possibly control her performance - even though it is directed towards him, and he is its only audience. Any action on Fleda's part is unthinkable for Patrick, her performance becomes an act of violence, a betrayal, and a highly subversive act, even though her motivation is not *deliberately* subversive, endorsing as it does the whole concept of women being constructed both for and under a powerful male observation.

Fleda, many times, claims to feel Patrick watching her, and to be aware of his scrutiny (151, 194). She seems to enjoy it, as it (initially) fits so well with her conception of "the poet." She first discovers his observations when she has cut her hair, and he attempts to collect the hair as it lies on the ground:

Then she saw Patrick and stopped.

The poet, darkly dressed, his back bent, collecting her discarded hair; stuffing first the pockets of his trousers and then his jacket with it, moving from place to place, chasing the strands that were beginning to be carried away by the wind.

Gradually Fleda understood that he had watched her before, and often, and the knowledge both frightened and delighted her. "How wonderful this is," she whispered to herself as she moved quietly away so that he would not see her. "To think that he looks at me." (144)

Fleda's combination of fear and delight reflects Modleski's argument that part of the ideological project of the heterosexual love story is to perpetuate confusion between male violence and male sexuality (42-43). While it may delight Fleda to know that "the poet" is watching her - from a purely romantic perspective - it is also frightening and very concerning that a man is prowling in the woods, spying on her. It is both an invasion of her privacy, a violation, and a very real physical threat. To be

isolated, in a forest, under the watchful eye of an unknown man who is obsessed with you is a situation which is neither safe nor desirable. Yet, the conventional conflation of male desire and violence is so complete and so strong that Fleda reacts to the desire without even stopping to consider the implicit threat to her safety.

It is the delight Fleda feels which guides her reactions. She begins to construct herself for Patrick, to perform for his gaze - thinking that it will please him:

He is out there somewhere, hidden. Now, without even a glimpse, without even the faintest rustle of branches, I can feel his scrutiny.

I've even begun to dress for him. I have a new skirt - pale blue silk with white braid. David says it's ridiculous that I should want to wear it here in the woods. How I love it, though, and the way the sun touches it. Nothing is ever military enough for David or illusive enough for Patrick. (175)²

Fleda dresses for Patrick, and begins to imagine how she will look - how the sun will touch her dress. Yet she is also aware of an inadequacy; she can never live up to the expectations implied in the construction either Patrick or her husband have created for her. To try and fulfill the expectations associated with either construction would prove impossible; they are constructed images, so they cannot function to define the realities of a woman's life.

While Patrick is constructing Fleda from his point of distant surveillance, she becomes aware of his attention and begins to turn the gaze round, to watch Patrick as he watches her. This reflects a phenomenon which Judith Butler identifies as "scandal" in the introduction to her book, *Gender Trouble*:

For [the] masculine subject of desire, trouble becomes a scandal with the sudden intrusion, the unanticipated agency, of a female 'object' who inexplicably returns the glance, returns the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position. (ix)

²In the novel, Fleda's personal thoughts and observations - her diary - are always italicized. I am replicating this in my text in order to indicate Urquhart's emphasis on Fleda's fantasy process, which is a performance of her constructed subjectivity, which develops into a more resistant subjectivity through this performance.

A "scandal" occurs when the one-way focus of the gaze is reversed, turned back on itself, reversing the subject/object relationship, and by doing so calling into question its arbitrary nature. It is an act of violence, tearing apart the patriarchal construction which has previously defined the terms. Fleda returns Patrick's glance, reverses the gaze, and it is -certainly for Patrick - "scandalous." His reaction to her admission of watching him watching her, is so violent and extreme that it is as if it is he who has been violated:

"... I KNOW how you are thinking. I know," she finally blurted out, "that you have been watching me ... wanting something. Why else would you watch me like that? You WANT to be close to me!"

Patrick began to shake. He felt that his privacy, his self, had been completely invaded. He was like a walled village that had been sacked and burned, just when it was feeling most secure, when it was full of provisions and all the people and livestock were safe behind the drawbridge. How *dare* she? he thought as if she, not he, had been the voyeur.

"You're wrong," he said coldly, "I've never watched you." (181-182)

Patrick's whole sense of self, based on his relation to this construction of "the woman," has been turned on its head. His fantasy of detached and distanced watching, of observing and constructing in isolation and anonymity, has been destroyed by Fleda demanding he recognize that she knows about his gaze, and - by implication - has been returning it. She is no longer the passive object of his gaze, the image or icon of his construction; she is a subject, and Patrick has been cast - at least momentarily - in the role of object, and of image.

On one occasion, Fleda more directly returns the gaze and watches Patrick more directly while he is unaware of her presence. When Patrick arrives at the tent during the "Mighty Moose" attempt on Niagara Falls, he believes he is alone, not realizing that Fleda is watching him from inside the tent:

I could see him approaching even though he was a long, long way off. . . . I am trying to get this right so that I will remember. Looking through the window, looking through the mesh of netting that covers it. I knew he didn't see me

I saw him leave the tree and take a few steps forward. He looked directly at the tent but he couldn't see me because the netting hid my face.
(129)

In a direct reversal of Patrick's fantasy, it is Fleda who is observing, and it is Patrick who remains unconscious of her observation, open completely to her scrutiny, and unaware of her gaze, like "a child at play" (107) - the way in which he wishes to observe her.

The precarious nature of Patrick's position as subject, and the ease with which Fleda can turn the relationship around is reflected in the way in which Patrick is left exposed under *Fleda's* gaze. When he comes to watch her, early on in the text, he believes she is not there, but suddenly she emerges from the woods, and it looks to Patrick as if she is watching him:

Patrick froze. He was now standing, unprotected by greenery, and she was coming closer and closer. Very, very slowly he returned to the crouching position... She was so near now that there was no need for the glasses. His inclination was to bolt, run right out of the woods, back to the farm, onto a train. Vacate the province. Leave the country. (57)

Patrick is left "standing," and "unprotected," at her approach; he is instantly vulnerable in her presence, and his instinct is to flee the place, to leave and never return. On a later occasion, Fleda's sudden appearance again surprises Patrick, and this time he does make to leave, to run away:

After five minutes of hard climbing, he looked through the grey sheet of rain towards the summit. He was astonished to see the woman standing there under a black umbrella, apparently watching him. He began, once again, to climb, slipping now and then on the steep path which had become, almost immediately, unreliable with the change in the weather. He took his time reaching the top, and when he did, it was with a combination of disappointment and relief that he discovered she had disappeared. (81)

It is hard to tell if Patrick's vision of Fleda, in this instance, is real or if he only believes he has seen her standing on the summit watching him. It is unclear also if he is climbing to reach her, or to escape her. The ambivalence of his reaction when he reaches the summit - the combination of relief and disappointment - continues the

ambiguity. Patrick does not want to deal with the reality of Fleda, yet he wants desperately to hold onto his vision of "the woman," and to know everything he can about the image he has constructed.

Not only does Patrick attempt to construct Fleda through the power of his gaze but Fleda's husband, David, also has roles in mind for his wife and tries to restrict her to those. In *The Whirlpool*, we again see the subversion of the two suitors convention as explicated by Jean E. Kennard, as Fleda is positioned in relation to David and Patrick. Fleda is not offered a choice strictly between the social values which each man represents, assimilating those of the "right suitor," and the dominant social order, and rejecting those of the "wrong suitor," but rather between the images both men have constructed of her; she is given the opportunity to perform and, through performance, deconstruct and reconstruct those images.

As I have argued, Patrick has constructed Fleda as "the woman," a poetic figure, silent and still in the midst of a Romantic landscape, the distanced object of his attentions. The ways in which David has constructed Fleda are more complex, and less focused on a single image. David imagines two different personas for his wife, in relation to different roles. Sexually, he pictures his wife as Laura Secord, asking her to wear a specific dress, in order for him to be aroused:

"... I left [the dress] at the hotel." She shifted in her chair, turned a page of the book. "Besides, I'm bored with that outfit. If you want to play dress-up with me, why not something a little more glamorous? It doesn't take long for a muddy little calico dress to become boring. Why not silk or velvet? The whole thing makes me decidedly uncomfortable. I hate the way you look at me in that dress."

"But why, for heaven's sake, it's simply research . . . you know it's the subject of my next paper."

"So that explains why every time you want me to dress up as Laura Secord you get that look on and say" - this in a whining voice imitating his own - "*Fleda, I'm bored.*" She finally looked up from her book. "Did it ever occur to you," she asked him, "that you married me precisely and only because, in some odd way, I remind you of Laura Secord?" (50)

His construction of her in this way is quite explicit - asking her to dress up, although denying that she reminds him of Laura Secord - and Fleda reacts against this, questioning it, and challenging David to admit the truth - that his obsession with Laura Secord is not "simply research." David admits, later on, to Patrick that Fleda does in fact remind him of the Laura Secord who came to him in a dream. encouraging him to study Canadian military history:

My wife is very much like Laura Secord. I think that may be one of the reasons I married her, though God forbid she know that. It's not that she has the pioneering spirit or anything like that, but physically she resembles the Laura that came to me in my dream. (86)

Fleda already knows - or at least suspects - that David married her because of her resemblance to Laura Secord, but this construction is made more complex. Fleda does not necessarily resemble the *real* Laura Secord, but rather a figure in David's dream who represented Laura Secord; a dream-woman, who was herself an image and a construction.

David gives Fleda a copy of Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* - a book of poetry dedicated to Patmore's wife, extolling domesticity and wifely virtue - as "*a sort of guarantee*" (34) that she shall have her house in the forest. Fleda is interested in the book, in "the poet's perception of the perfect wife, his belief in matrimony as the heavenly ideal" (33), yet at the same time she is a resisting reader, and deconstructs the evidence of the text, preferring instead to create her own image:

Fleda reached for this now and, flipping past the title page, turned to a reproduction of a portrait of the poet's wife by Rossetti. The Angel that had inhabited the House did not fare well under the harsh lines of the steel engraving, and Fleda secretly felt she looked more like a siren than an angel. She had constructed her own private, imaginary version of the woman's appearance, and decided to hold to that now, despite this other, more ordinary evidence. (33)

Fleda is, through this, resisting the construction of the "angel in the house," by constructing her own image of the woman, and rejecting the one offered to her. Patmore's presentation of his wife - the Rossetti engraving - does not coincide with Fleda's "private, imaginary version" of the woman in the poetry, so she resists it, constructing her own image through her reading.

Later in the text, David presents Fleda with an impossible choice between the roles of "angel in the house" and Laura Secord:

He eyed her closely. "Who would you rather be, if you had a choice, Patmore's wife or Laura Secord?"

"Since it seems very unlikely that I shall have the opportunity to be either, I find that question impossible to answer. The Americans are quite well-behaved these days, there is absolutely no point reporting their activities to the military hereabouts As for Patmore's wife," Fleda gestured to the canvas walls around her, "I have no house to be an angel in." (52)

Fleda resists making a choice, resists identification with two roles which are equally inappropriate for her - one a historical figure, the other an ideal of perfect wifedom. When David presses Fleda for a decision, she chooses Patmore's wife, although he continues in his construction of her as Laura Secord, and she rejects this role of "angel" as soon as she is alone: "She knew that she had lied. She didn't ever want to be Patmore's wife, Patmore's angel. Not now, not ever" (54). Much later in the text, Fleda defines herself, taking her definition from one of Browning's poems:

Obdurate: Hardened in evil; insensible to moral influence, unyielding, relentless, hard-hearted, inexorable.
Nobody's angel. (106)

Her personal identification as "*Nobody's angel*" is in direct opposition to David's definition of her, and is a moment of self-definition, a rejection of both roles offered to her by him.

Unlike the conventional ending one might expect from a heterosexual love plot - one in which the heroine is united with the "right suitor," and the "wrong

suitors" is left alone - in *The Whirlpool*, Urquhart presents an interesting subversion of the convention as the two suitors side against the heroine:

In a subtle shift of alliance, [Patrick] had entered David's territory, cunningly, as if he had been there all along. Fleda was isolated, other, driven to remote corners of the acre, taking long, desperate walks along the bank overlooking the whirlpool, while they talked and talked, excluding her. (195)

Their "alliance" leaves Fleda isolated and alone; her "poet" has sided with her husband, as they discuss military history, politics, and the Americans. At the end, the heroine has gone, one "suitor" is dead, and the other is left alone, mourning his wife's disappearance.

Just as Fleda resists Patrick's gaze and his construction of "the woman," so she uses performance to resist and subvert her husband's gaze and the dual roles he attempts to impose on her. Fleda is forced to escape her objectification and her isolation - her exclusion from the convention - as the house her husband promised her is rapidly taking shape around her. Soon, she *will* have a "house to be an angel in," and then her rejection of that role will not be possible. What is interesting about Fleda's decision to leave, is that she bases her journey on that taken by Laura Secord - "she followed Laura Secord's route but she carried with her no deep messages" (234) - actively performing the role and participating in the identification she has so strongly refused throughout. She is, in part, accepting David's construction, but at the same time she is making it her own by performing within it. She is both re/reading and re/writing the story into which David tried to place her. She is taking the role offered through her husband's gaze and re/forming it to fit her own purposes. Fleda rejects the heroism, the bravery of Secord's mission, the patriotic, political motive, and instead provides her own rationale for the journey, writing her own version of "Laura Secord," just as David constructed his version of "Laura Secord" through his dream:

I think about Laura Secord living for sixty more years in the same house, dreaming of one long walk she took in the wilderness, telling the story, over and over to herself, to anybody else who would listen.

Nobody understood. It wasn't the message that was important. It was the walk. The journey.

Setting forth. (219)

She is constructing herself out of the roles made available to her by her "two suitors," subverting the convention and through that coming to realize what *she* feels is important about Secord's journey, resisting any forced identification with constructed roles which do not suit her. Again, her action is subversive through the fact that it is performative; Fleda is taking what is initially a very constricting role, which for David is principally sexual, and making it her own and, most importantly, making it her means of escape.

But Fleda resists in other ways too. Taking on a conventionally male role within the construction of the heterosexual love story, she constructs Patrick as "the poet" in a way similar to his construction of her as "the woman," both dealing in stereotypes and not in specifics, emphasizing once more the artificiality of their "relationship" and their incompatibility. She has heard about him before they actually meet, just as Patrick has watched her, and she has already constructed an image which she believes she recognizes as soon as she sees him:

I saw him leave the tree and move a few steps forward. He looked directly at the tent but he couldn't see me because the netting hid my face. Suddenly I regretted that my forest did not have more pines for him. Even though I had never seen him before, I knew exactly who he was. I recognized him. He looked injured; injured and beautiful. (130)

He is the poet she has constructed for herself in her mind, partly through her reading of the poetry of Robert Browning, and his physical presence matches her construction so well that she can claim to recognize him without ever having seen him before. It reflects Browning's construction of Shelley as the perfect Romantic poet, presented in the frame narrative, and foreshadows Patrick's "death by water" (237), the "drama and the luxury" (237) of which Browning so envies Shelley.

Patrick fits so perfectly into Fleda's fantasy of "the poet," that he soon becomes part of her emotional life in a way she had always hoped for:

She was standing where the kitchen should have been, her body immersed in a transparent pantry cupboard, when Patrick took up a final, permanent residence in her mind. The poet. Released from boundaries, from rectangles, basements, attics, floors and doors, she felt free to allow him access, whatever form that access might take. Every cell in her body, every synapse in her brain, demanded the presence of the poet in her life. As if all the reading, all the dreaming, had been one long preparation for his arrival. (142-3)

It as if she has been waiting for "the poet" to come, so his arrival is not a surprise, but rather a completion. Patrick arrives to step into an existing fantasy of Fleda's which she has had since childhood. She spends a great deal of time examining her fantasy in a way which reveals a certain degree of self-awareness not often associated with the heroines of the heterosexual love story:

I want him to come out of the forest; to speak to me and I want him to continue to watch me.

Sometimes I want him to touch me

Perhaps I've always waited for the demon lover to leave the maelstrom and enter my house, through some window while I slept on . . . innocent and unaware

Interesting that the demon only attacks architecture. In the woods it is knights, dragons, and ladies who are eventually set free.

Perhaps you have to be lodged in order to be dislodged.

*"Savage I was sitting in my house
late, lone*

*Dreary, weary with the long day's work
Head of me, heart of me, stupid as stone."*

R. B. The Householder

Dislodge: to remove, turn out of position.

Perhaps the knowledge comes at the moment of departure. (176)

Fleda comes to "dislodge" herself, turning herself out of the positions into which she has been forced. Yet in contrast to her self-awareness and her examination of her own fantasies, Fleda adopts a very passive role in relation to the "demon lover" she desires and constructs. This "demon lover" enters her house, while she "slept on . . .

innocent and unaware." It is important to note that Fleda need not leave her domestic setting (the house in which she is to be an angel) and that instead the "demon lover" enters that house, not at her request but while she sleeps, and she is unaware of his arrival. Through this, her fantasy can bring about the "spiritual marriage of romance and domesticity in her life" (30) which she was searching for earlier in the novel, even though she must later come to realize that it is a double trap, rather than a desired resolution. The image of the unconscious or sleeping heroine is explored by Modleski, and as we saw earlier, fits well with Patrick's desire for Fleda's immobility. Fleda becomes an unconscious heroine in that she imagines herself asleep as her lover crosses the threshold of her house, yet she is a very *conscious* heroine in that she examines her fantasies closely and works actively to bring about the reconciliation of those fantasies and the figure on which she has placed them. She is trying to work her way out of a position of constant surveillance, and into an active subject position which will allow her a measure of control over the roles in which she places herself. Fleda is conscious in that she is deliberately constructing a fantasy for herself, addressing her own desires in a very deliberate and self-conscious way.

The Whirlpool presents the reader with a heroine who is herself both a reader and a writer, allowing her to use those roles to subvert the other roles imposed upon her, and highlighting the importance of active and resisting reading. Fleda's choice of books - guided in part by her husband - and her keeping of a diary have very specific purposes in mind, and she states these very clearly. Her books are important to her in that they are part of an attempt to reconcile seemingly contradictory aspects of her life:

Under her arm, near her heart, she cradled a copy of Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads*, *The Ring and the Book* by Robert Browning, and Patmore's *Angel in the House*. She had brought the books along in order to read them in a spiritual setting; a setting that she hoped was about to cause the spiritual marriage of romance and domesticity in her life. (30)

Fleda is using the books - and the setting in which she plans to read them - to try and reconcile the reality of her domestic life (as wife and housekeeper - the "angel in the house") with the "*strange passions*" (34) she finds in Browning, and her more Romantic ideas of spirituality, focused on the whirlpool, on poetry, and ultimately on the idea of the poet. This is mirrored in Patrick's division of Fleda into "the woman" whom he has constructed as a perfect image, and "the housekeeper" who is married to David, who keeps a house, does shopping, and has a "real life." What is interesting in the light of Modleski's argument, is that Fleda uses reading to try and reconcile these two elements of her life, rather than to try and escape from the duality.

Just as Fleda's reading is an attempt to reconcile seemingly contradictory aspects of her life, so her diary serves to try and divide her life into event and response. Fleda uses the diary to distance herself from the events of her life: "she kept a diary, and this, combined with her compulsive reading, had proved to be the perfect device for distancing synchronized response" (31). Just as Modleski suggests reading of the heterosexual love plot allows an "escape" from the reality and pressures of "real life," so Fleda also consciously uses her diary to distance her responses from the events which produce them. In *Loving With A Vengeance*, Modleski refers briefly to the way in which "feminine narratives" encourage their female readers to read not only the text, but the characters, and through that, to believe that they are learning to "read" people:

As we shall see, it can even be said that soap operas train women to become, like women in the home, "ideal readers" - not of texts but of people. The necessity of "reading" people, especially men, is tacitly acknowledged in the other two types of narratives as well. In both Harlequins and Gothics, the heroines engage in a continual deciphering of the motives for the hero's behaviour. The Harlequin heroine probes for the secret underlying the masculine enigma, while the reader outwits the heroine in coming up with the "correct" interpretation of the puzzling actions and attitudes of the man. In Gothics the heroine, in the classic paranoid manner, broods over the slightest

fluctuation in the hero's emotional temperature or facial expression, quick to detect in these alterations possible threats to her very life. (34)

This "reading" of men, by both the heroines and the readers of the heterosexual love story, suggests a concern with interpretation and analysis of situations and relationships. In *The Whirlpool*, the reader is encouraged by Urquhart's textual strategies, and by her characters' fantasies, to actively "read" the characters, to construct meaning (as a resisting/active reader), and to interpret actions and speech metaphorically.

David gives Fleda Patrick's book of poetry, not as a guarantee like *The Angel in the House*, but in an attempt to encourage Fleda to read Canadian poetry rather than the British Romantics of which she is so fond. David is very deliberate in this, which is reflected in his conversation with Patrick:

It's poetry she mostly reads . . . the Brits . . . Wordsworth, Coleridge, that sort of stuff. And Browning. She's mad about Browning. She reads far too much Browning, if you ask me. It's unhealthy. Why, I ask, now that I think about it, isn't she reading *you*? Why not something Canadian? Of course, why didn't I think of it, she'll have to meet you. You'll have to meet her. (86-87)

Although David is literally referring to Patrick's poetry, the reader is encouraged to take his suggestion more widely, implying a reading of Patrick, rather than simply of his verse.

Fleda refuses to read Patrick's poetry, despite her husband's insistence that it would be more patriotic than her usual reading, preferring to read the man instead, and to read Browning in order to learn more about Patrick - or, rather, her (and Browning's) version of the ideal Romantic poet: "*Reading Browning. Learning Patrick*" (151). Perhaps the act of resistant and constructive reading, and of choosing what and who to read, is a way for female subversion of the male gaze; Fleda is, perhaps, constructing her own (female) version of the gaze, as she reads not only texts but people as a resisting reader, with an active role in the construction of

meaning. She constructs Patrick as part of David's gift to her along with the books he gives her, and reads Patrick as another text of which she is, in part, the author:

As she was returning from the whirlpool later that afternoon, she thought about her husband's gifts to her. Books and books and now, finally, the poet himself in the flesh. (144)

Fleda sees Patrick on a level with her husband's other gifts to her, with the other texts he has given her. It is clear that Fleda sees Patrick as someone to be read, and this also allows the reader a certain license in reading him. Certainly Fleda recognizes her own desire to read Patrick's words and actions metaphorically, allowing and encouraging the reader to do the same. She is reading the texts (literal and figurative) which she needs in order to read/write herself out of the roles imposed by the gaze(s) of the two men who desire to control her.

However, Fleda's desire to interpret is not left unproblematized. When she is in her entranced state, in her "foggy dream of Patrick" (157), Fleda's reading of Patrick is characterized as a "terrible urge to interpret," which is so intense that "even the most ordinary conversation became allegorical" (158). This reading of character, of action and speech, is taken to extremes as what should be "ordinary" becomes potentially allegorical or full of metaphorical significance. In her diary, Fleda reflects on the difficulty she is having distinguishing between the real and the imagined; between the literal and the figurative; and between what is really being said and the metaphorical meaning she ascribes, all too easily, to it:

It is becoming more and more difficult. How much of this am I imagining and how much is real? Does he intentionally make metaphoric references to his own behaviour . . . looking for Ladies' Tresses? (151)

Fleda's reading of Patrick becomes so intense that she starts to ascribe meaning to everything he says, and - more than that - *intentional* metaphorical significance to his words. This allows the resisting reader to pick up on the significance of the characters' words and actions, and the allusions and metaphorical references they

make; it allows a reading of the coded language of the heterosexual love plot, as the characters within that story are themselves having to read that language, and the conventions it encodes.

Despite all his efforts to maintain Fleda as a distant object of his gaze, Patrick is forced, over time, to acknowledge the fact that Fleda does have a life outside her refuge in the forest, and that she is not just "the woman," but *a real woman* - one who eats and sleeps and buys groceries. Patrick is certainly reluctant to admit this about her, but Fleda's insistence on her own subjectivity and her own active reading of their relationship makes it impossible for him to ignore it completely; Fleda does not simply sit passively under his gaze, but actively works to construct her own meaning, and to assert her own reading, providing a resisting reading and encouraging the external reader to do the same.

Patrick's first realization that "the woman" has a life beyond that which he watches in the woods comes during a conversation with his aunt and uncle, about a lecture David is to give, in which they reveal that "the woman in the forest" is, in fact, David's wife:

Patrick felt as if everything around him had suddenly jerked into focus.
 "She should be having babies and minding house," his aunt continued.
 . . . Patrick wasn't listening. He was trying to absorb the information
 that the woman in his mind had a flesh and blood husband. Something a little
 more tangible than the ring he had seen resting on the cover of the book.
 (71)

What makes Patrick's reaction significant is that the discovery that "the woman in his mind" has a husband makes no essential difference to his construction of her. He tries to absorb the fact that she has a "flesh and blood husband," not that she herself is "real." She remains "in his mind," a construction and an image, related to the "real world," but not part of it. Despite all the evidence of her reality and of her life, Patrick continues to efface Fleda as an individual, preferring rather to retain his carefully constructed image of her, which exists only for and through him. He

constantly re/invents and re/constructs Fleda, despite all the evidence of her life, making her again and again the woman of his fantasy:

Walking back to his uncle's farm, Patrick felt the woman close to him again. Alone, with his imagination set free, he disregarded all he had seen and heard, and allowed the woman and the whirlpool to combine. By the time he reached his room he had completely reinvented her. He could hardly wait to return to the woods where, hiding once again, he could watch her in the pure and uncorrupted state he had carefully constructed for her. (128)

She is a construction of Patrick's imagination, and his effacement of her real life, of all he has seen and heard, is not only conscious but deliberate. The way in which Patrick is so aware of the deliberateness of his construction of Fleda rejects the conventional heterosexual love plot which demands its characters are completely caught up in their actions, and go about the relationship more unselfconsciously.

When Patrick realizes that there is a reality behind "the woman," he befriends David in order to learn more about Fleda. Yet he still, initially, refuses to consider the realities of her life as relevant to the construction he maintains and has constantly to re/invent. It is as if he tries to continue to refuse to make the connection between the factual and his fantasy, between Fleda and the romanticized image he desires and prefers:

"But your wife," said Patrick, on the verge of declining the invitation, "she won't be expecting us."

"She's not there," replied the major, as he searched for his walking stick. "Even *she* has to occasionally go into town. You know . . . provisions. This is her afternoon to shop in Queenston."

Shop. The word sounded mundane, factual, almost impossible in terms of the woman as Patrick wanted her. (99)

The realities of everyday life do not fit with Patrick's desired conception of "the woman" as he persists in holding such a highly romanticized image of her, a mythical, idealized vision of a woman who inhabits the landscape he values so highly, and who does not need to concern herself with mundane realities such as shopping and preparing food.

Patrick begins to try and discover as much as he can about Fleda, visiting the places he imagines her frequenting during the winter in town. Despite the fact that he is attempting to discover something about the more mundane aspects of her life, and divorcing her (at least geographically) from the whirlpool, he still retains a considerable sense of her as a mythical figure. Her life in town becomes remarkable to him precisely because it represents the containment of something mythical within the realm of the everyday. Patrick becomes so obsessed with Fleda that he cannot get her out of his thoughts and spends the time he is not watching her, trying to reconstruct what her life in town must have been like:

He strolled casually up and down the wooden sidewalk that bordered the street outside the hotel, attempting to reconstruct *her* walking there, picturing her boots on the planks when they were covered with snow, or darkened by rain, or blanketed with maple leaves. He thought about the rocking chairs on the verandah. Had she ever sat in them? Did her mind slip down to the whirlpool as the furniture rocked under her weight? Had she read there? Who, if anyone, had she spoken to? (108)

In *Loving With A Vengeance*, Modleski identifies a characteristic of popular romance as the heroine believing, and wanting to believe, that the hero is obsessed with thoughts of her, so that he thinks of her all the time. What Modleski describes as a "very potent feminine fantasy" (16), is interpreted - in popular romance and by its readers - as being a move towards greater equality:

The man, whether he is plotting the woman's seduction or, as in soap operas, endlessly discussing his marital woes with his coworkers at the hospital, spends all his time thinking about the woman. Even when he does seem to be indifferent to her, as he frequently does in *Harlequin Romances*, we can be sure he will eventually tell her how much the thought of her has obsessed him. Thus, women writers have always had their own way of "evening things up" between men and women, even when they seem most fervently to embrace their subordinate status. (16)

Patrick certainly spends his time obsessed with thoughts of Fleda. Whether or not Patrick's obsession with Fleda is a move towards "evening things up" between men and women is open to debate, as it was with Michael and Rachel in *Latakia*. It

would seem that Patrick's obsession, this continual watching, and his desire to learn everything about Fleda (even to become her), is more sinister than egalitarian. His desire to know everything about her, to have this "utter comprehension" (107), becomes the only thing which interests him.

Patrick still remains concerned with his image of Fleda as "the woman in the forest," more than with the reality of her life, even when he is trying to learn more about her life in town. When he visits the hotel, and tries to imagine her there, it is in relation to the whirlpool, and assumes an intention to leave the confines of the town and return to the forest:

Had the sills been painted, were they dusty, was the glass clean? He recalled the view, the landscape he was now briefly part of, but nothing of the opposite side of the windows - could not even say with certainty whether or not there were curtains. Perhaps these details were unimportant. It was the woman's enclosure there and her looking out that mattered. (109)

The details of Fleda's life are unimportant to Patrick, and he considers them only in relation to the image of her that he has constructed. It is Fleda's "enclosure" in the hotel that is significant for Patrick; her containment, and her "looking out." Just as he prefers to contain Fleda within the safety of his fieldglasses (126), so he can best - and most safely - imagine her *other* life as contained within a room, looking out but still confined.

Patrick is forced, as the text progresses, to admit his own failure; he cannot fully know and possess Fleda from his distant viewpoint, and he cannot learn about her without getting close to her. Patrick's desire to control Fleda through his gaze and through his imaginative construction of her, is very strong. This is not only reflected in terms of silencing her, and restricting her movement, but also Patrick's claims that he knows what Fleda is thinking, how she will react, and where she will be at any given moment, is very strong. He wants "to capture her somehow, to put her back where she belonged in *his* story, back inside the fieldglasses where he could control the image" (126), implying that Fleda has already escaped "*his* story" and is

insisting on writing her own, resisting Patrick's controlling gaze and becoming an active and resisting subject.

Once this failure on Patrick's part - the impossibility of his vision and construction of "the woman" - becomes apparent, he begins to actively conflate Fleda and the whirlpool, investing in the whirlpool those qualities he demanded from Fleda, and turning to the whirlpool as he realizes the impossibility of any successful resolution (in his terms) of the relationship with Fleda, the actual woman who lives and functions in the real world. The conflation of woman and whirlpool is so complete, as he transfers his Romantic aspirations from one to the other, that at times it is hard for him to know which he is talking about:

"You have gotten close to the whirlpool," Fleda said suddenly, after breaking a long stick in two with her foot. "I've seen you. You have looked right at it from the very edge of the shore."

"I haven't," said Patrick, "been anywhere near its centre. That I can only see from a distance ... or through the glasses, which is merely an illusion. What do you think exists at the centre?" Once again Patrick was unsure if it was the whirlpool or the woman he was talking of. (180)

Patrick watches both the woman and the whirlpool, through the safety of his field-glasses - "which is merely an illusion" as he has discovered by watching Fleda - distancing himself from them both, and constructing them both through his gaze. In his search to know Fleda, he crosses the line and he tries to know her completely by entering her consciousness:

He could not, for the life of him, imagine the woman in the forest buying stamps. Who would she be writing to, about what? Still he went through the motions, *attempting to become her* in the act of pushing mail across the counter. (108, my emphasis)

He crosses, explicitly for a moment, the line between attempting to know her, and becoming so immersed in his construction of her that he tries to actually become her, to truly reach her centre.

Just as he tries to immerse himself in "the woman" he constructed, so Patrick wants the total immersion that swimming the whirlpool would provide:

Submerge. To place oneself below and lose character, identity, inside another element. It was this quiet diving that attracted him, holding his breath for long periods, his eyes open, finally surprising himself when the weird landscape of Spook Island burst out at him when he surfaced.

There was never anything to see under there, the fine soil of the bottom clouding the water. Never anything to see but soft brown and shafts of sunlight penetrating this from the world above.

The world above. That's where he lived all the time now. Patrick had not swum for years. He remembered the liquid envelope, the feeling of total caress. Nothing but water and certain winds could touch him like that, all over. (81)

It is this feeling of complete immersion, of "total caress," that Patrick craves, reflecting the absorption of one into the other which Mellor identifies as typical of Romanticism, the absorption of male into female necessarily leading to death. In trying to come to an "utter comprehension" of Fleda, Patrick tried to become fully submerged in his construction of her. His immersion, and death, in the whirlpool is merely a substitute, on a literary level, for immersion in "the woman" he created but could never fully possess. Fleda's resistance of the role of "the woman," her insistence on her own constructions, and on the realities of her life and her subjectivity, drive Patrick to turn for solace to the whirlpool, where he meets his death. He rejects the reality not only of Fleda but also of other women, his own wife included, and chooses to escape into the whirlpool, where he eventually meets his death:

It was early morning. Fleda would be waking now inside the tent, her limbs unfolding from sleep like a flower. In Ottawa, his wife would be unfolding too. All over this time zone women would be awakening, opening up to the day. They filled his brain now. *There was something in him that wanted to embrace them all, and then there was something else, stronger, which turned towards denial . . .*

Patrick listened, choosing the vacuum, letting the peace of it hang in his mind. Behind him the bank, the path leading to the top, the woman a hundred yards to the right of that. Beyond her, a path that led to the road and eventually to the strange child. *Patrick chose the vacuum, the*

neutrality. The softness of the water and the sound it makes, the places it goes. All decisions having been made thousands of years ago. (221-222, my emphasis)

Patrick's Romantic sensibilities and constructed expectations cannot be sustained within the reality of human relationships, and the only choice left to him, as he is unwilling/unable to abandon his ideas and images, is to withdraw completely from reality, in a suitably dramatic and Romantic gesture, reminding the reader of Browning's envy of "the drama and luxury of [Shelley's] death by water" (237).

Fleda's resistance forces Patrick to embrace the whirlpool which leads to his death; the reader is presented with a woman whose subversion of the controlling power of the male gaze is so powerful and so absolute that the only choice for the man who tried to control her is death. However, Urquhart also presents the reader with another woman who is the central character in a subplot which also explores and problematizes the question of the male gaze, and the concept of panopticism introduced in Chapter One. Through Maud, Urquhart shows a woman who has been so successfully subdued by the power of the gaze that she continues in a pattern of self-surveillance even after the principal instigator of her oppression, her husband and his parents, are dead.

The main body of the novel opens with a detailed description of the rituals of mourning which Maud undertakes following the death of her husband, partly out of respect for the dead, and partly in order to preserve her social position as wife, and now widow, of the town's undertaker:

In Niagara Falls, Canada, the undertaker's widow, Maud Grady, was forced to wrap herself in real Courtauld crape. No cheap, comfortable imitations for her; she felt duty bound to set an example. The perfect symbol of animate deep mourning, she wore crimped crape for two full years, adding, when the first months had passed, some jet beads and a small amount of fringe to her costume. Much of her average day was spent organizing the paraphernalia of bereavement. (22)

Her choice of a mourning outfit is prescribed by the role she must fill in the eyes of the town, by the example she feels she must set. There is no-one directly telling her

she must encase her body in this painful fabric; in this matter, she is her own overseer. Just as Foucault suggests, in his examination of panopticism, the surveyed becomes so accustomed to the constant surveillance of the overseer, the "inspecting gaze," that s/he "will end by interiorizing [the gaze] to the point that [s]he is his[/her] own overseer, each individual thus exercising surveillance over, and against, himself[/herself]" (*Power*, 155). Maud continues the surveillance of the male gaze and the social role it constructs even after her husband's death, at a time when she could be most free.

Even the clothes she feels obliged to wear reinforce the role to the extent that they leave their marks on her body:

The smallest bit of moisture, fog, or even minor amounts of perspiration would cause the colour of the fabric to bleed through to her skin until, some nights when she undressed, her body looked as if it had been the victim of a severe beating... She decided to let the black marks on her skin accumulate. Who would know? Who would care? She would fix it later, if she survived. (22)

The black crape, symbol of her role as the respectable widow of the town's undertaker, marks her physical body, just as she has been psychically marked by the years of constant surveillance and construction under a male gaze. She still has those marks too, as she continues to act out the role prescribed for her through her husband, to continue his business as he would wish it, and to live the life she endured while he was alive.

Within this subplot, it is her child who offers Maud a way out of this continued self-surveillance. While Maud is caught within her rigid and ordered life, continuing as she had before her husband's death, the child presents a challenge to the patriarchal order through his disruption of the link between signifier and signified as he finally begins to speak. While the child is initially silent, refusing to speak and participate in the role of the "normal child," once he begins to use language it is in ways which challenge the arbitrariness of the link between word and object, and

highlight the artificiality and the performative nature of the roles prescribed by society.

First, the child uses words without paying attention to the conventional meaning or association. This infuriates Maud, his mother, and fascinates Patrick:

... Patrick searched his pockets for something to give to the boy. He finally decided upon a nickel, which he placed in the flat centre of his palm as he reached over the fence.

"Onion," said the boy.

"Nickel," said Patrick.

The child was not to be moved. He retaliated with the word "shovel."

"No," said Patrick patiently, "nickel . . . this is a nickel . . . for you."

The child stroked his toy and ignored the coin. "Salad fork!" he sang as the trolley, making a great deal of noise, rolled by. "Ri-ver." (110-111)

The child's seemingly random choice of words and word/object associations disrupts the expected order, and point to the constructed nature of naming and of conventional meaning. As the child uses language more and more, he begins to imitate the people he hears around him, the people who visit the funeral parlour, as well as his mother and Sam, the undertaker. As a consequence, his imitations are frequently performances of grief and mourning:

"O my God, my God!" he wailed in a shrill woman's voice. "What am I going to do? What am I going to do?"

He had made a tiny burial mound out of the garden dirt. The chief mourner, he was a woman hysterical. The sound of pure female grief filled the garden coming, it seemed, from each direction until Maud covered her ears to be through with it.

The child was rocking back and forth by the little toy grave, sunlight and shadow dancing all over the grass. (155-156)

By taking on these roles at will, the child is highlighting the constructed nature of the roles prescribed by society, even in the moment of grief. As this continues, Maud becomes able to recognize who the child is imitating, his imitation is so exact.

Maud's life since her husband's death has been a model of order; even the possessions of the corpses the Old River Man fishes out of the river are neatly

catalogued. The child completely dis/orders Maud's house one day, re/ordering every object within seemingly random categories, some of which Maud cannot even recognize:

Maud looked around the room and noted, as she now feared, that its profusion of bric-a-brac was undeniably altered. Objects had been grouped, together, classified somehow, though it was difficult for Maud to determine the criteria for these new configurations. Her domestic geography had been tampered with, her home had become a puzzle. (204)

At first this concerns Maud, but then it becomes almost a game; guessing the category of classification, trying to decipher the pattern. It becomes threatening when Maud realizes that the child has also sorted and classified the cupboard in which she stores the possessions of those drowned in the river, but once she faces the dis/ordering of the child, it finally releases her from the controlling surveillance of her dead husband and the tyranny of the order under which she has been living:

Now the child had caused all the objects that surrounded her, all the relics she had catalogued, to lose their dreadful power. He had shown her what they really were: buttons, brooches, tie-clips, garters ... merely objects. (215)

By pointing out the ordinariness of the objects which have controlled and frightened Maud for so long, and by highlighting the arbitrariness of the conventions within which social roles are prescribed, the child gives Maud the strength to realize what is ultimately important; Maud's final act in the text is to stroke the child's hair - "His hair, when she laid her hands upon it, felt warm, soft, alive" (215) - showing affection, for the very first time, to her son. Maud moves from a realm of death, from the black prison of the mourning crape, the constant death and bereavement of the funeral parlour, from the dead children whose hair she arranges, to a realization that her own living child is the "possessor of all the light" (215), and that she should cling to life and light.

Maud presents the resisting reader with a model against which to read Fleda, inviting parallels and contrasts between the two women. While Fleda has escaped to

the woods, Maud is enclosed in the town funeral parlour, as well as within the "suit of crumpled armour" (22) she wears in mourning for her husband. Fleda actively resists the roles laid out for her through the gaze of both David and Patrick, while Maud remains under the gaze of her dead husband and the expectations of society until the child points out to her the arbitrariness of the conventions which confine her. For Fleda, the only way to escape is to write herself out of the story by actively performing within one of the roles offered to her by David; for Maud, her escape comes through her child and the decision to focus on life rather than on the more "appropriate" focus for the widow of an undertaker: death.

The subplot which focuses on Maud emphasizes the power of the panoptic gaze, and provides something against which to measure the strength of Fleda's resistance. Fleda's refusal to be constructed through the gaze of two men, writing her own resisting performance as her means of escape and self-definition, becomes all the more powerful when compared to Maud who is controlled and defined by her dead husband, until her child points out to her the constructed nature of the life she is living. The active reader is presented, in *The Whirlpool*, with multiple layers of resistance, with examples of submission to convention, with a historical and cultural context in which to place the conventions and attitudes which characterize the heterosexual love plot, and with an active subversion of the roles which prescribe and limit gender relations within compulsory heterosexuality. By comparison, by contrast, and through this multiple layering, Urquhart offers the resisting reader a rich and complex subversion of the conventions and assumptions of the heterosexual love story.

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